



Weekly Briefing

Slovenia Social briefing:
Growing intolerance in Slovenian society - recent events
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Growing intolerance in Slovenian society – recent events

The common patterns of intolerance in Slovenia against people who are perceived to be different either by ethnicity, language or religion – which were partly related to the particularities of the Yugoslavian history – started changing with the so-called immigration crisis in 2015. Despite the virtual absence of real »threat«, due to the fact that Slovenia served as mostly only a transit country for the arriving migrants, the anti-immigration rhetoric became one of the key political topics, especially on the right side of the political spectrum. A recent discovery of a paramilitary unit training in the North-East of Slovenia and the choice of a state secretary for national security led to a lot of public debate about these topics.

History and background

In the time of SFR Yugoslavia, the commonly occurring expressions of intolerance were often directed towards the people from other parts of the country, in particular those who had come to Slovenia as work migrants from Croatia, Bosnia and other republics of the federation in the 1960-s and 1970s. Despite the common country, the prejudice was often directed to the lack of fluency in Slovenian language and to the allegedly differing cultural patterns. Another target group for popular intolerance was the Roma, especially in parts of Slovenia with bigger Roma population. The patterns were partly re-stabilized in the 1990s during the Balkan war, when a large number of war refugees came to Slovenia from Croatia and Bosnia.

The refugee crisis in 2015 was a turning point in the changing of traditional intolerance patterns, although there were some previous trends pointing at the same trajectory (e. g. the opposition against the building of the mosque in Ljubljana). In summer 2015 the migrant corridors started changing from the sea route to the land route. A growing number of migrants took to the so-called

Balkan corridor, where Croatia and Slovenia became the point of entry to European Union and Schengen Union respectively. Between October 2015 and March 2016, when numbers were the highest, around 500,000 people crossed Slovenia on their way to Austria. The government's struggle to cope with this new phenomenon and the atmosphere of panic which surrounded these events, contributed to the general fear and growing prejudice against the arriving people. Most of the prejudice was pointing at religion (due to the fact that most of the migrants were from Muslim countries), cultural patterns (often the headscarves) and the perceived terrorist threat, due to the simultaneous reports about the Islamic State atrocities. The political parties and factions also started to develop upon this fear, spurring the prejudice to get a wider support, while the opinion polls shifted visibly towards the right.

In June 2018 election the migrant issue again became one of the key topics and a focus in the public debate, especially when Frontex and other organizations started to trace a changed Balkan route going through Albania.

The cover of Demokracija journal

The end of August issue of right-wing Demokracija journal featured a cover, which was a digitally altered photograph of a white-skinned woman with a revealing cleavage with a larger number of darker-skin hands grabbing at her. The title underneath said "Along with migrants the culture of rape is coming to Slovenia". The cover was then reported to the relevant Inspectorate for media by the Journalist Association of Slovenia for promoting racism and intolerance. The General Police Administration also refuted the claims of the journal cover that migrants are the proponents of sexual violence. Out of 374 rape crimes in the last 8 years a great majority of them (334) were done by Slovenian citizens and the remaining 40 mostly by citizens of countries of the former Yugoslavia. The citizens of countries which are now the origin of migrant arrivals only conducted 4 of those crimes and even those before 2015 migrant arrivals.

The case of the Demokracija journal also pointed at another structural issue in the Slovenian legal system. The Article 297 of Criminal Code («Public Incitement to Hatred, Violence or Intolerance») defines the criminal nature of an act according to several criteria. Whether certain act is a crime according to the Article 297 and how severe the crime was, is judged by the status and position of the person, by the scope and reach of what was said or written, and the relative position of the group or individual which was targeted. In practice these regulations often prevent an efficient persecution of intolerance crimes.

The training of a paramilitary group Styrian Guard

In the first days of September, several photographs and a footage circulated online, which showed training of a group of masked militia men with weapons in a forest setting. The only unmasked member of the group was the president of an extreme right political party United Slovenia, Andrej Šiško, who was also a candidate at the previous presidential elections. Andrej Šiško responded by explaining that the military was a voluntary defense unit »Štajerska varda« (Styrian Guard), formed after his proclamation of an independent Land of Styria in June last year.

Šiško's highly contradictory definition of the alleged Land of Styria as being a parallel legal system, which is based on the right of self-organization and is unrelated to the Republic of Slovenia, provoked a big public controversy about his ideas and the correct handling of this act. His recurrent reference to the Land of Styria, of which the Styrian Guard was supposedly the defense force of, caused a great majority of the institutions to label his attempt as an unacceptable paramilitary formation which attempts to undermine the state sovereignty and public order in Slovenia. There were several hints that the group would organize an armed protest against the newly formed government. In the few days before Šiško was held by police, he participated in an anti-migrant demonstration held in the South-Eastern town of Metlika and tried to present himself as an informal leader of similar attempts all over Slovenia. The Šiško Styrian Guard was

commented in media to be related to his ambitions on the local elections, which will be held in autumn this year. The police investigation also uncovered a link between the right-wing Slovenian Democratic Party and Andrej Šiško's Guard. One of the key organizers of the training event, who had the task of recruiting the participants, was a member of Slovenian Democratic Youth, the young faction of Slovenian Democrats.

The selection of the new State Secretary for National Security Damir Črnčec

In the past week, the new Prime Minister of Slovenia Marjan Šarec, caused a great upheaval with the selection of the new State Secretary for National Security. In sharp contrast to his previous views which were decidedly against any intolerance, the selection of Damir Črnčec as the new State Secretary was seen as a shift towards the political right and the anti-immigrant rhetoric. Črnčec was the previously the Director General of the Intelligence and Security Agency at the Ministry of Defense and under the government of Slovenian Democratic Party president Janez Janša he became the Director of the Slovene Intelligence and Security Agency, being also one of the most avid supporters of Janša during his court trial in 2014. He was known for openly making racist and anti-immigrant remarks in public and especially in social media.

This selection was widely criticized and seen by Slovenian media as a reversal of Šarec election program, which went opposite to the views previously expressed by the New State Secretary. A petition started, which warned against the dangers of the introduction of extreme intolerance and racist views into the state security institutions, especially in the environment of growing intolerance and populism in Europe. As of now, despite the wave of criticism Prime Minister Šarec refuses to give up his choice and resorts to claims of the alleged professional excellence of the new State Secretary and his long experience in state security institutions. Apart from the public discontent, the selection also endangered the new government's position. Current government was formed as

minority government with the agreement of support from an extra-government party The Left. After the selection of Črnčec, The Left refuses to sign the already ratified agreement of support.

Conclusion

At the backdrop of rising populist politics all over Europe and the growing forms of intolerance against other minority ethnicities and religions, Slovenian recent developments are seen as a worrying sign of a shift in society which can have unpredictable outcomes. Especially before the upcoming local elections, where local patriotism is traditionally a vehicle of obtaining public support, it can be expected that new phenomena like this could take place. With the recent events the new government might also be forced to profile its positions on the topic, especially because the rest of the government partners, political parties which are further to the left on the political spectrum were critical of Šarec's turn. The government position might be crucial in the following mandate, because the role of the state institutions in treating these social phenomena is of paramount importance.