




Weekly Briefing

Slovenia political briefing:
Changes at the far right of the political spectrum
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Changes at the far right of the political spectrum

Summary

In the last few years the right and far right of the political spectrum was mostly occupied by one of Slovenia's oldest and strongest political parties, the Slovenian Democratic Party, which started as centre-right political party but was increasing leaning towards populism and extreme right rhetoric. Although several prominent members had left the party in the two decades and some even established their own political parties, none of them went further right compared to the political positions of the original party. In the last month, two former members of SDS established a party which emulates the extreme right populist political positions of the Lega of Matteo Salvini in Italy. It is still unclear what shifts this move might cause on a wider political scene, especially before the May European Parliament elections.

Background: Political shifts in the history of Slovenian Democratic Party

Following the example of the Polish non-communist trade union Solidarność in early 1980s, an alternative trade union Neodvisnost (Independence) was formed following a big strike in Litostrojj factory and – in relation to that – the political party called Social democratic union. First head of the party was France Tomšič, who was soon replaced by a former dissident and political émigré Jože Pučnik. In 1990 they became part of the Demos coalition together with a large number of diverse parties, whose common aim programme was the change of political system. In the 1990–1992 period of Demos coalition government, the former social democratic part of the party with France Tomšič started to criticize the shifting political preferences of the party and in the next few years the party disintegrated into several different factions. In 1993, Janez Janša, a former communist party member, a convict in the 1988 JBTZ political trial and Minister of Defence in 1990–1994, became the party president and remained that until today.

Under Janša, the orientation of the party started changing. The biggest shift was the removing of Janez Janša from his ministerial position after members of special army unit breached their powers by arresting a member of police. Seen by critics as a dangerous precedent, the parliament voted against the Minister Janša and in protest, Social democratic party left the coalition. In the second part of the 1990s, Janša's Social democrats (SDSS) became increasingly liberal in their economic programme and changed their name into Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS). Immediately after Slovenia joined the EU, SDS also ran for the

European parliament as part of the conservative European People's Party. In the election year 2004 (apart from the European Parliament elections there were also national parliamentary elections) it also became clear that despite another political party which clearly advocated the catholic values (New Slovenia – NSi), SDS was getting more and more explicit support from the Catholic Church opinion makers.

SDS as leading government party (2004–2008 and 2012–2013)

SDS was the leading government party two times. In their first government term (2004–2008) they composed a coalition with the catholic right wing New Slovenia, right wing Slovenian People's Party (SLS) and the Democratic Pensioners' Party (DeSUS). The first term was marked both by liberal economic reforms (lowering taxation and lowering the progressive tax scale) and conservative social reforms, while also trying to establish government control over the media, especially the National Press Agency, main newspaper Delo and the national TV and Radio station. In their second government term (2012–2013) they formed a coalition with Citizen List (a party of a former SDS member Gregor Virant), New Slovenia, Slovenian People's Party and DeSUS. Economic recession marked the policies of the government, which responded according to its liberal economic orientation by speeding up the privatisation of state owned companies, lowering budget expenses in drastic austerity measures especially in public sector and social transfers. They soon encountered a series of strikes, but it finally stepped down due to the accusations directed at its president. The Anti-corruption committee assessed that Janša (along with the main opposition leader Janković) have possessions and incomes which they are unable to clarify a source of. A series of anti-government protests in the beginning of 2013 cause the government to fall apart. Just before the next pre-term elections in 2014, SDS president Janša was convicted at first instance in a corruption court case for having accepted bribe from Patria military equipment company for SDS party in 2005 while being Prime Minister (the court case became time-barred in 2015).

Members who left SDS

Due to the radicalisation of the political views of the SDS, but also in relation to the leadership style of its president, many prominent members have left SDS during the last decades. Some of them also established their new political parties, most of them moving closer tot he centre of political spectrum, with some exceptions going further right. Already in the first decade of Janša leading SDS, some key early members of the party were pushed aside or out, notably Ivo Hvalica. Parallel to the shifting of the SDS towards the right wing, party broke its alliances with coalition partners from the first Demos government and their leaders. After a

minister in first Janša government, Gregor Virant, decided in 2011 to leave SDS and establish his Citizen List, this caused a great upheaval in SDS, where even members closest to Janša were pushed aside for their links with Virant, most notably Miha Brejc, former vice president of the party. Peter Jambreč, the first president of the Council for the Republic (a civil society organisation of SDS members) was pushed out after expressing criticism of SDS' election results in 2011. The long term Minister of Foreign Affairs in many consecutive governments, Dimitrij Rupel, who re-joined the Slovenian Democratic Party in 2004, left the party after being pushed away and not named a member of Janša's shadow cabinet. Žiga Turk, another one of the leading members and former minister of Education, Science and Culture, left in 2013. Another wave of disagreements followed in 2016, leading to former Member of European Parliament Romana Jordan leaving the party. Even some of Janša's close supporters during the Patria trial left the party that year, most notably Vera Ban and Damir Črnčec. Youngest SDS member of parliament, Andrej Čuš, left in 2016 as well.

Although a lot of former SDS members stayed in politics, either in their own new political parties or shifting to other parties, most of them politically moved towards the centre or centre-right, while often being critical of the populism and autocracy of SDS leadership. With the exception of the Movement for children and families, these divisions were causing SDS to move further right and closer to the traditionally extreme right domain of Slovenian National Party. They started to use strong anti-immigration rhetoric and 2nd world war revisionism as part of the core programme, while some media even reporting about some SDS members allegedly associating themselves with extreme right identitarian movement and neo-Nazi groups.

The establishment of DOM party

In this regard, the recent events on the extreme right wing of the political spectrum in Slovenia are extremely atypical. The new political party was established by two former SDS members on its first congress on April 6. Both Bernard Brščič, who was elected president, and Lucija Ušaj Šikovec were previously already known for publicly expressing their extreme antiimmigrant views, Ušaj Šikovec, who is a practicing lawyer, currently even being put under disciplinary action by the Bar Association for the hate speech in her recent Twitter posts. The name of the new party, »DOM – Domovinska liga« (HOME – Patriotic League) clearly follows their most evident role models, the Italian Lega of Matteo Salvini, while they also express their closeness with Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the views of politicians such as the French Marine Le Pen and US President Donald Trump. They also

expressed their intentions to join the alliance of right and far-right parties in the European Parliament, the Europe of Nations and Freedom group.

There were initially many speculations in media that the establishment of a new right wing party might be a strategy of SDS to position themselves again closer to the centre, to be able to get some additional support where they have been losing since they started leaning towards the far right populism. It is also fairly evident that the new party will not be able to get a very big share of votes and therefore seriously endanger SDS position, so the theory about a satellite party might therefore be likely. On the other hand, however, the reactions of SDS in such occurrences are often more emotional than tactical and in this case the establishment of DOM was also received with sharp criticism in the SDS. The relation between the two parties and the potential alliances in elections will doubtlessly become clearer in the next month, before and after European elections. Competition that can be expected between the new party and the traditional far-right Slovenian National Party, which was often complementary to SDS policies, is another factor in this regard.

Conclusion

Similar to political landscapes in many other European countries, the profiling of the right wing parties is also happening in Slovenia. The establishment of the far-right DOM – Patriotic League by two former members of right wing Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) will doubtlessly cause some shifts at the far-right part of the political spectrum, perhaps enabling SDS to move from the far right towards centre-right to get stronger support. The real motivations behind this new party and the current and potential alliances with SDS are yet unclear.