



Weekly Briefing

Slovenia political briefing:
Disagreements and attempts to stabilize the government coalition
Helena Motoh

Disagreements and attempts to stabilize the government coalition

Summary

During the Covid-19 crisis, many developments led to a destabilisation of the government coalition. On the one hand, the leading government party, the Slovenian Democratic Party, engaged in several ideological debates, both on national and international level which some of the coalition parties had difficulties settling with. On the other hand, the corruption scandals which especially involved the leader of Modern Centre Party, also changed the power relations in the coalition and led to serious criticism among that political party membership. At the end of the month, Prime Minister Janez Janša and the Slovenian Democratic party failed at the attempt to form the “partnership for development” with the opposition parties but tried to settle the disputes with the parties within the coalition by agreeing on some of their program priorities.

Destabilisation of the coalition

In Early April, Slovenia was listed by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, as one of the countries where journalists are being threatened and mistreated due to their reporting on the government measures against Covid-19. She mentioned a smear campaign that targeted a Slovenian journalist who wanted information about the government measures as an example of how government misuse the Covid-19 pandemic as an excuse for repression of critical media. An immediate response was, as it was subsequently discovered, prepared in coordination between the Government Communication Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who sent it to the Council of Europe – although the main protagonists, including the Minister for Foreign Affairs Anže Logar, subsequently denied their authorship of the contents of the letter. In the letter, Slovenian media is portrayed as suffering from an unhealthy continuity with the media system of the Yugoslav period, which ended almost three decades ago. It lists the alleged interventions of left-wing governments in the media spheres, while understandably not mentioning similar attempts by the right-wing governments. This highly politicized document was commented in media as being a repetition of a similar document which was distributed to the foreign media representatives in 2008 by

current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Anže Logar, when he was the Head of the Government Communication Office during the first government of Janez Janša. Coalition partners responded with criticism about the solo-action and the fact that a government letter was not coordinated with other coalition parties apart from the leading Slovenian Democratic Party.

A similar event happened when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was submitting a report on the rule of law in Slovenia to the European Commissioner for Justice, Didier Reynders. The report itself was coordinated and agreed on on the government level. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Anže Logar, however, added a letter to the document, which was not agreed upon on the level of coalition and it included strong accusations of the situation in Slovenian courts, especially pointing out the alleged remains of the communist period. This solo action of the Slovenian Democratic Party top level representative again caused a lot of dissatisfaction among other coalition members, but apart from the warnings no action was taken.

Despite repeatedly expressed warnings against the Slovenian Democratic Party focusing on ideological issues, which it pledged not to do as a prerequisite of DeSUS and New Slovenia to enter the coalition with Janša, it seemed that the president of the leading party does not seriously take into account their complaints. In another not previously coordinated move, on May 11th Prime Minister Janez Janša published a pamphlet text with the title “War with the Media” on the official pages of the Slovenian government. In it, he was talking about the war with the critical media. In the text he admiringly mentioned US President Donald Trump and praises his decision to use direct twitter-style communication with the public in countering hostile media responses.

Apart from the critical responses in media, professional organisations and the general public (also fuelling the growing protest movement), the political parties of the coalition and opposition commented on these developments. Coalition parties tried distancing themselves from the Slovenian Democrats positions and criticized the fact that these statements were not sufficiently coordinated with coalition partners. Comparatively, the response of New Slovenia was the weakest, while two other parties, SMC and especially DeSUS were more pronounced in voicing their dissatisfaction, but no drastic measures were taken.

Reactions in DeSUS and SMC

Slovenian Pensioners’ Party, which has the most left-oriented membership of all four coalition parties, struggled the most with the Slovenian Democrats’ actions, especially dining

it hard to justify remaining in the coalition despite the clearly ideological moves by the leading government party. Aleksandra Pivec, the president of DeSUS responded critically by saying that their party distances itself from the personal views and beliefs expressed in the statements. Since the coalition was based on an agreement that ideological topics and divisions will not be brought up, she expressed the intention to reflect on whether to stay in coalition or not in case such ideological attacks continue. As many media reports interpreted, this strong position was most probably intended to calm the growing dissatisfaction within their political party rather than threatening the leading government party. Ever since DeSUS joined the right-centre coalition of Janez Janša, there was a growing criticism in the party especially on the level of local committees. Even before these latest developments, they have already demanded a meeting of the party convention, but it could not be organized due to the Covid-19 limitations on the movement between municipalities. The compromise solution to the imbalances within the party was offered by the president Aleksandra Pivec, namely, she stressed that the emphasis of DeSUS will be to reemphasize their priorities from the coalition agreement. Most importantly, this would be the establishment of the demographic fund made out of state-owned capital and, correspondingly, a national demographic office, which would focus on the issues of the aging demographics in Slovenia.

Apart from that, Pivec also tried to consolidate the power structures in DeSUS by reorganizing its leadership. Surprisingly, her closest collaborator, party secretary Nina Stankovič, was removed from office and was replaced by an acting secretary Damjan Stanonik. According to media analysts it is unlikely that DeSUS would leave the coalition. The party has continuously been in government for the last decade and a half, and being in opposition might seriously damage its already weakened voters' base. Apart from that, without DeSUS the government would still function, counting on the support of the opposition extreme right-wing Slovenian National Party.

Compared to DeSUS, which has – despite a rather weak presence of its Health Minister Tomaž Gantar – gone through the Covid-19 epidemic without much damage to its public reputation, the corona Modern Centre Party suffered much more negative publicity. Most of it was due to their president Zdravko Počivalšek, the Minister of Economic Development, who was involved in several alleged corruption scandals related to the medical equipment purchases. Its position to criticize the actions of the leading party was therefore not as strong. The reactions to the solo actions of the Slovenian Democratic Party, however, split the membership base of the Modern Centre Party and caused a lot of criticism within. Ten members left the local committees in the coastal towns of Koper and Ankaran, while the dissatisfaction with the

leadership of the party and its relation to the SDS-led policies spread among its members of the parliament as well. Two members of the parliament, **Jani Möderndorfer** and **Gregor Židan** left the Modern Centre Party parliamentary group, joining the opposition groups of Marjan Šarec List (LMŠ) and Social Democrats (SD), respectively.

Janša's reaction: Partnership for development

The leaving of two Modern Centre Party MPs changed the relations within and outside the coalition. In the coalition, the rather strong representation of Modern Centre Party among the Ministers could now be questioned by the New Slovenia (NSi), who initially got a smaller number of ministries. In the parliament, the coalition now only has a support of 46 votes, although it can conditionally rely on the votes of the two minorities' representatives and four Slovenian National Party votes. In order to secure a stronger support and perhaps also in an attempt to improve his image in public in the light of current protest movement, Prime Minister Janša made a proposal to the opposition parties to join the so-called Partnership for development, a reference to a similar arrangement between coalition and opposition parties during his first government term. The proposal was rejected by all opposition parties except for Slovenian National Party of Zmago Jelinčič.

Conclusions

Several uncoordinated actions of the leading government Slovenian Democratic Party caused a lot of dissatisfaction among the coalition parties' membership, but despite the strong reaction in the parties, the response of the leaderships of all three government parties was rather weak. The dynamics within the SMC and DeSUS were calmed by leadership and membership changes, while the government was temporarily consolidated. The failure of Prime Minister Janša to construct a partnership with the opposition nevertheless resulted in a clearer articulation of the support of Slovenian National Party.