



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Slovenia social briefing:**  
**Government tightens measures against public protests**  
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# **Government tightens measures against public protests**

## **Summary**

*After the »cyclists« protest movement temporarily stopped their protests, which have been going on every Friday since spring, due to the second wave of the Covid-19 epidemic, another type of protests against the government was organized in early November. Contrary to the Friday protests, these were openly advocating for violent rebellion against the government and were also met with an unprecedented level of extreme police measures. In the latest »corona package« of government measures, an additional sanction was proposed to counter the protests, namely, draconically high penalties for public protests were introduced. At the end of November, the Friday protests were organized again, but this time in cars due to the anti-Covid-19-measures. The reaction of the police, however, was rather severe, causing a lot of public criticism and scepticism about the reasons behind their response.*

## **Background: the development of the cyclist movement**

After Janez Janša's new government was sworn in in mid-March, the critical movement started forming against its policies in early April. First few protests, organized on Friday evenings, were done by people protesting from their balconies by banging pots and pans in a type of a casserole protest. Few weeks later, when the epidemic situation partly improved but the ban on public gathering was still in place, they moved to the streets, but protested by cycling through the centre of the Slovenian capital. First protests gathered several thousand people and smaller groups of »cyclists« gathered in other Slovenian towns as well. The movement initially had two symbols, a wheel and a whistle (both often depicted using pictures of two famous archaeological artefacts from Slovenian territory, a Neanderthal whistle and a Neolithic wooden wheel). Later the use of the symbol of the bicycle inside the contour of Triglav mountain became more common, alluding to the similar symbol of the resistance movement against the Fascist and Nazi regimes during the second world war.

The protests movement grew stronger and more focused after the corruption affair with the purchases of medical equipment was discovered though the information provided by the whistle-blower Ivan Gale, an employee of the Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for

Commodity Reserves. It also started organizing though a Facebook page opened in support of Ivan Gale. The protests were continuing all through the summer, gathering every Friday, with varying police measures, ranging from blocking out the streets and squares around the parliament to more violent arrests.

When the second wave of the epidemic started in mid-October and the lockdown measures put in place, the protesters announced to temporarily stop the Friday protests from Friday 23rd of October onwards for safety reasons. In November, few singular actions were organized by a smaller group (the lockdown measures initially allowed for the gathering of up to 10 people), but later most of the activities moved online.

### **The violent protest on November the 5th**

In Early November, during the strict lockdown measures (and against them) various groups on social media started calling for another protest, with open calls for violence against the police. The organisers of the protests were allegedly associating themselves with the Anonymous Slovenia group, while the appeal was later joined by a number of corona-sceptic and conspiracy theorists' groups. The cyclists' movement distanced themselves from this and appealed to the members of their Facebook groups not to join the protest which was openly provoking violence. The information spread through social media that the protest will be infiltrated by several extremely violent groups, whose intention was to provoke police violence and generate state of emergency. As this violent protest was announced for Thursday, November the 5th, the slogan used by the cyclists to advocate against it was »Thursday is not Friday«. The police were also preparing for protests with the highest level of measures, including a water cannon.

Soon after the protest began, although the total number of people was very small, the violence indeed started. A small group of protesters started provoking the police by the throwing of granite pavement blocks, torches and bottles. The protest, which started in front of the parliament, moved in few groups to the neighbouring streets, with the police then chasing after the groups on horses and by using the water cannon to stop the attacks, which was only successful after few hours of violence. Several people were injured, including members of police force and a journalist, who was severely beaten in the attack. While the protest was still going on, the Minister of Interior Aleš Hojs made an unusual decision to go see the situation himself, surrounded by security guards and police – in what was criticized in media analyses as an unnecessary and potentially risky move.

As it became clear in retrospect, the violent protest activities were organized by a very small group of violent individuals who seemed to have a rather predetermined and clear strategy to provoke police violence. Despite the police investigation going on for three weeks now, the identity of these has still not been revealed.

### **Higher penalties for protests in the new Anti-corona package**

When the new, already the sixth »Anti-corona package« (PKP6) – a package of measures to address the Covid-19 related crisis, was being prepared, the additional sanctions for public protests were included among other measures. The government initially proposed a penalty of 1000 to 10000 euros for individuals who participated in protests which could potentially present a health risk for general public, while the organisers of protests could be sanctioned with up to 15,000 euros.

The proposal was met with criticism from the opposition, law experts and the general public. Even the coalition partners of the leading Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party were sceptical of the draconic measures proposed. Modern Centre Party proposed a partial change of the proposal, eliminating raising the penalty for an individual who participates in the protest. Amnesty International Slovenia appealed to the parliament not to adopt the proposed measures, saying that the penalties are disproportionate and do not pursue a strategy to guarantee better public health, which should have been done by empowering the individual and with better government communication. Legal experts warned that such changes would require a change in the system of legal sanctions, especially the Penalty Code. They also warned about the incomparability of this sanction to sanctions for other life-threatening crimes, such as driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, which is currently sanctioned with only 1200 euros penalty.

Despite the criticism, the parliament majority eventually adopted the proposed sanctions in a partial form, keeping the draconic penalty for protest organisers, only slightly reducing the height of the penalty. The 6th anti-corona package, which was adopted in the parliament on November 25, now determines a penalty of 1200 up to 12,000 euros for an individual who organizes the public gathering of people when it endangers the public health during the time when public gatherings are prohibited due to the danger of the spread of the contagious disease.

## **Protest in cars**

Following the adoption of this measure and due to the fact that the second wave of the epidemic is still not decreasing, the cyclists' protests restarted, but in a different way. Just before the adoption of the new sanctions, the organisers called for a new type of protests to start on Fridays. To prevent the spread of Covid-19 and to follow the government regulations, the protests are to be organized in cars, driving through the city centre. In response to the call, the police already announced that they will sanction the participants for illegal public gathering, although they were not able to provide a clear explanation as to how the gathering in cars could pose a threat for the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

This protest did happen in the evening of Friday the 27th of November. Few tens of cars were circling around in a wide circle in the streets around the parliament, honking horns and displaying protest messages. The police, equipped in anti-riot equipment, blocked several streets around the parliament and tried to stop the protest by randomly stopping participant cars and asking for licences and IDs, checking if they violated the government measures by having left their municipality and eventually penalising them with a fee for hindering the traffic, which amounts to 40 euros. As the footage later revealed they also had instructions to target the alleged organisers of the car-protest with specific information about their licence plates and car type. Car-protests are now being scheduled for the coming Fridays as well.

## **Conclusion**

With the growing criticism of the government measures and the progressive displays of police violence, as well as with an experience of violent protest organised in unclear circumstances in the beginning of November, the future development of these events is very unpredictable. The attempt of the government to stop the protests while stopping the spread of the epidemic provokes additional unrest and could potentially lead to more serious violence. While the cyclists' movement is explicit about staying within the limits of the Covid-19 prevention measures, other protest initiatives may result from the growing police repression measures with unpredictable results, both for the public health and the functioning of the democratic state.