



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Slovenia political briefing:**

## **Slovenian politics in 2020: Government changes amidst the Covid-19 epidemic**

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# **Slovenian politics in 2020: Government changes amidst the Covid-19 epidemic**

## **Summary**

*In 2020, the political developments in Slovenia were marked by two main topics: the change of government and the two waves of the Covid-19 epidemic. The new Janša government which was formed after the resignation of Prime Minister Marjan Šarec, faced the first wave of the Covid-19 epidemic with taking to harsh public lockdown measures, even tightening some of them in the autumn second epidemic wave. The public criticism of the government was strengthened after the discovery of the indications of several corruption scandals, connecting high-level government representatives with the irregularities in the purchasing of medical equipment. Political opposition organised with a proposal for the vote of no confidence in the Constitutional Arch Coalition (KUL). After the leadership change in one of the coalition parties, DeSUS, the party left the government, leaving the political situation very unstable due to the weak parliament majority of the current government and a strong opposition.*

## **Resignation of Prime Minister Šarec and change of government**

After a crisis related to the proposed abolishment of the supplementary health insurance system, the extra-governmental partnership between The Left and the Šarec coalition split, causing serious turbulence in the government coalition. After the Minister of Finance Andrej Bertoncelj announced his resignation on January 24, Prime Minister Marjan Šarec followed by announcing his resignation on January 27, effectively ending the mandate of his minority government. In the following month, several scenarios were debated, most prominently the early elections or the formation of the government with a new coalition majority. The latter was realized, especially due to smaller parties DeSUS and Modern Centre Party, not being willing to risk a downward turn in the snap elections. After both of these parties facing strong opposition within their leadership and their memberships – before the 2018 elections they were both strongly against coalition with Janez Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party – they nevertheless agreed on joining the coalition. The fourth coalition partner, New

Slovenia, was easier for Janša to negotiate with, since its new president, Matej Tonin, was much less critical to Janša's political position than the previous NSi leader, now Member of European Parliament, Ljudmila Novak. The formation of the government was happening at the same time as the Covid-19 epidemic was starting – the first case being reported on March 4 and the epidemic then being officially announced on March 12. The worsening of the health situation, the hearings of the ministers and the voting process were shortened, with the new government under Prime Minister Janez Janša being sworn in on March 13. The power relations in the government became more evident with the distribution of ministers' positions: most important (Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Environment) were kept by the Janša's Slovenian Democrats, except for the Defence Ministry given to Matej Tonin, president of New Slovenia and the Ministry of Economic Development, given to Zdravko Počivalšek, president of the Modern Centre Party. President of DeSUS, Aleksandra Pivec, kept her position as a Minister of Agriculture, while Ministry of Health was also given to DeSUS' Tomaž Gantar.

### **Political responses to the Covid-19 crisis and the related corruption scandals**

The new government had to immediately focus on solving the COvid-19 epidemic crisis. When they took over, the epidemic situation was rapidly worsening, but most of the cases were still imported from other countries, notably Northern Italy, where a large number of Slovenians went for ski holidays of the previous weeks. The local spread started with the spread in a few primary schools and then, most worryingly, with the spread in and around the nursing homes in different Slovenian regions. Universities stopped lectures on March 9 and schools were closed on March 16. The new government reorganized the management of the epidemic, establishing the Emergency Response Unit, a joint body of the government and medical experts, and choosing a new government PR representative, Jelko Kacin. The choice of Kacin, Minister for Information and government representative during the 1991 independence war (when Janša was Minister of Defence) and the complete centralisation of the government contact with the general public sent clear signals that the epidemic would be dealt with in a more military manner, a move that was soon criticized by media and the general public alike. Infectiologist dr. Bojana Beović, coordinator of the expert group became the other communicator, with the exact relationship between the government and the expert often not clearly presented to the public. A change was made in the leadership of the National Institute for Public Health. After its former director, Nina Pirnat stepped down few days after the new government began its

mandate, the acting director was laced there, only to be removed few weeks later after expressing his doubts of several government measures in public. The position was then given to Milan Krek. Along with the strongly authoritative approach of the PR representatives, the measures largely followed those in other European countries, progressing through subsequent stages of lockdown of public life. General response to lockdown was good and the measures proved effective, flattening and reversing the epidemic curve in a month, with exception of several seemingly more arbitrary measures that were widely criticized, notably, the limitation of movement to the municipalities. In the second lockdown the measures were implemented with a delay, especially the closing of borders with the neighbouring Croatia, where the epidemic was strong during summer months. The borders only being closed just before the summer holidays ended, the influx of infections inevitably caused the start of the second wave for epidemic, that worsened in October with the measures progressing to full lockdown in few weeks.

### **Corruption scandals and the protest movement**

As the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic continued, lack of necessary medical equipment – notably personal protective equipment and ventilators for mechanical breathing – became one of the most pressing problems. The new Janša government decided to give the task of the large-scale purchases to the Agency for Commodity Reserves, which later proved to be understaffed and not well equipped for dealing with such extensive complex purchases. The government decided to not buy the equipment directly from producers or suppliers abroad, but to perform all the purchases through intermediary companies in Slovenia. What was allegedly a preventive measure, then turned out to be a worrying potential for corruption. Some material that was shipped like that, disappeared completely due to fraud, some of it was inappropriate or without necessary certificates, but most notably – as subsequently leaked by a whistle-blower Ivan Gale – the selection of intermediary companies was often done under political pressure of high government representatives. Among those, Gale's testimonies exposed Minister of Economic Development, Zdravko Počivalšek, and several right-wing politicians, e. g. former Member of European Parliament Lojze Peterle and the president of Slovenian People's Party Marjan Podobnik.

The alleged corruption cases, currently under the revision of the Court of Audit, caused a wide protest movement. First organized "from the balconies" during the strictest lockdown, the

protest then moved to bicycles and became known as the Cyclist movement, meeting every Friday evening around the parliament, protesting against the corrupted purchases and expressing their support to Ivan Gale, later widening the scope of the protest to the criticism of government's measures. Most notably, their protest is directed against what is seen as a progressively authoritarian style of leadership and the political pressure on national media and other public institutions, where Janša's government has been replacing the leadership structures for the past few months. During the second wave of the epidemic and the subsequent lockdown, the protest movement stopped with the Friday cyclists' gatherings, while continuing the protest activities with different means (protesting in cars, protest Christmas decorations etc.).

### **Constitutional Arch Coalition and changes in DeSUS**

In October, the political opponents of the current government, joined under a new initiative of Jože P. Damijan and a group of public intellectuals. Damijan, a well-known economist, called for a wide coalition of political parties against the irreversible shift towards illiberal practices and autocratic leadership model they see happening under the leadership of Janša's Slovenian Democrats. Damijan soon got support from the Social Democrat's president Tanja Fajon, Marjan Šarec List president Marjan Šarec, Alenka Bratušek of Alenka Bratušek Party and Luka Mesec, president of The Left, who organized a joint press conference in support of what was now called Constitutional Arch Coalition (KUL). They addressed especially the three coalition partners, DeSUS, New Slovenia and Modern Centre Party, to join their initiative to prevent the harmful effects of the policies of the leading coalition party.

In DeSUS, the changes did start to take place after the change of leadership in early December. After its former president, Aleksandra Pivec, was forced to step down due to a series of corruption scandals she was involved in, the late November election brought back the previous president, Karl Erjavec and we expected turn in DeSUS political position. With Pivec being more sympathetic to Janša's policies, Erjavec – in negotiation with some of the DeSUS parliament members – managed to revise the orientation of the party and initiate a decision of the party leadership to leave Janša's coalition, which was done on December 17. Erjavec also proposed the vote of no confidence for Janša, where he will probably try to propose himself as an alternative Prime Minister. This change in the opposition strategy was agreed to also by the rest of the Constitutional Arch Coalition, but so far still lack support of several parliament votes.

## **Conclusion**

The changes and shifts in an otherwise already turbulent political year were additionally worsened by the Covid-19 epidemic crisis. After the new government seemed to manage the first wave of the epidemic with considerable success, this was tainted by a number of large-scale corruption scandals in the purchases of medical equipment and measures that were seen as move toward a more authoritarian and less democratic state. With a delayed response and the much less successful management of the second wave of the epidemic, the public response is progressively critical also beyond the established protest movement. With the opposition initiative being only few votes away from the successful vote of no confidence, the political situation in the upcoming period will most probably continue to be very unstable.