



Weekly Briefing

Slovenia external relations briefing:


Yearly overview

Gašper Pirc

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

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Summary

In 2021, life in Slovenian society was still predominantly steered by the immediate effects of the COVID-19 crisis. Due to the rapid rise of new cases of the disease in the second half of 2021, the new measures were put in place to curb the epidemic; however, the new regulations were met with heavy, sometimes even overly aggressive (organized) opposing. The social tensions in Slovenian society of 2021 were catalyzed by the general mistrust in the current government and medical experts, and the lack of transparent communication between the government, medical institutions, the police, and the society at large. Nevertheless, the social tensions appear to be slowly receding and there is a reason to believe that after the parliamentary elections in spring 2022, the relationship between politics and people will additionally improve.

Background: Slovenian presidency of the Council of EU and its performance as a member of the international community

At the beginning of 2008, Slovenia took over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union for the first time in history. That came at a critical time for the future organization of EU since less than a month before the presidency was officially handed to Slovenia, the Treaty of Lisbon, the agreement that became a constitutional cornerstone of the contemporary organization of European Union, was signed by the member states of the EU. The presidency was thus marked by the attempts to have the program of the future European Union discussed and ratified by the member states. The stipulations of the Treaty of Lisbon came into full force on December 1, 2009.

Otherwise, the Slovenian presidency succeeded in giving a new impetus to the field of knowledge and innovation with the introduction of the so-called "fifth freedom – a free flow of knowledge" and the "Ljubljana process", the aim of which was to establish a closer cooperation between participants in the European Research Area. An important contribution to the EU's high-tech development was the agreement on the implementation of the European satellite radionavigation system Galileo. During the presidency, important decisions on fostering

creativity and innovation through education, family-friendly scientific careers and the role of culture and creativity in the Lisbon Strategy were also taken.

Among other notable endeavors, additional attention was given to strengthening the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy with the the commitment to the gradual implementation of the agreed common principles on flexicurity as one of the appropriate approaches to addressing the challenges of the 21st century, including demographic change, accelerated technological progress and the process of globalization. In terms of statewide international cooperation, a network of Stabilization and Association Agreements was concluded with the countries of the Western Balkans, in particularly with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The network consolidated and accelerated the integration process of the Western Balkan countries, thus contributing to the strengthening of stability and the comprehensive development of the region. As it will be clear by the achievements of the recent presidency, many of the focal points remained *pro tanto* similar in regards to the presidency in 2021.

Over the years, Slovenia has proven to be a relatively stable and productive member of the European Union.

The escalation of the COVID-19 crisis in 2021 and the opposition against the measures

In the second half of 2021, Slovenia has taken over the presidency of the Council of the EU for the second time since joining European Union. While the presidency was marred by the somewhat unusual correspondence between Slovenia's Prime Minister, Janez Janša, and the Europea media that covered the presidency, some very important meetings were held and there has been a general sense of diplomatic achievement.

Slovenia's presidency came at the very tense time when the COVID-19 epidemic has still been rampant and Europe has been on the brink of a larger energy crisis. Among the top political priorities of the Slovenian presidency were assessing the resilience, recovery and strategic autonomy of the European Union, questioning union of the European way of life, the rule of law and equal criteria for all, the work towards a credible and secure European Union, capable of ensuring security and stability in its neighborhood, and a pursuit of an ambitious neighborhood policy towards the East and the South, reaffirming the EU-perspective of the Western Balkans.

Among other achievements, Slovenia hosted EU-Western Balkans Summit which was conducted on October 6 in Brdo pri Kranju. As the productive relationship and the enhanced

EU engagement with the Western Balkans is one of main goals of the political agenda of Slovenian presidency of the Council of the EU, the summit was one of the critical events during Slovenia`s mandate. The summit was hosted by the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and chaired by President of the European Council Charles Michel. The European Commission was represented by Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell, High Representative/Vice-President for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement. The summit focused on the manners of realization of the output of the EU's engagement in the region through the almost €30 billion Economic and Investment Plan announced by the European Commission in 2020. Additionally, the summit investigated the possibilities of closer cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans on their path towards the EU, EU assistance to the region for COVID-19 and post-COVID recovery, regional cooperation, as well as enhancing the regular political dialogue and cooperation on core security issues. The summit also featured the plenary session with the representatives from the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the World Bank and the Regional Cooperation Council.

At the summit, the region`s European perspective and commitment to the enlargement process, based upon credible reforms by partners, fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of own merits was thus reaffirmed. In the summit`s declaration, it was agreed that the Economic and Investment Plan will be put forward, bringing concrete deliverables of the EU`s engagement in the region, and set out shared EU-Western Balkans priorities for the coming years to advance together towards more innovative, greener and digital economies. The participants at the summit also committed to enhancing cooperation on core security issues to keep citizens safe.

Altogether, during the presidency 219 events took place in Slovenia, 32 of them at the ministerial level, half of which were conducted in a live setting. Slovenia chaired 42 ministerial meetings of the EU Council and chaired 1,413 meetings of the institution's working groups. It is expected that around 64 million euros was spent on the presidency. In the so-called trilogues or negotiations between the Council of the EU, the European Commission and the European Parliament, the Slovenian Presidency managed to find agreement on 21 legislative acts, which is considered a great success.

An important priority of the Slovenian presidency was in strengthening the resilience, and 22 recovery plans were approved during the Slovenian Presidency. Several important steps have

been taken in the fields of health and digitalization - the agreement of members on acts on digital markets and services and the end of the triologue on the enhanced role of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the recast of the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). Among the successes, the Prime Minister also emphasized the agreement on the continuation of mobile roaming, the common position for the Glasgow Climate Conference, the conference on the future of Europe, the agreement on key features of the European sports model and conclusions on Croatia's Schengen border readiness.

While there appears to be a general agreement that the presidency was mostly successful, there have also been some disappointments, especially in regards to the lack of progress on the question of migration and the issues with (political) communication, particularly in the relationship between the Slovenian government and the European media and EU officials.

The turbulence in social and political communication in Slovenia

There has however been a specific issue that heavily affected the Slovenian Ministry of Justice and the judicial affairs in Slovenia in general and was actively discussed in European media. Ever since May 2021, the government – in particular, the Prime Minister Janez Janša – blocked the appointment of the delegated Slovenian prosecutors to the EPPO - a new EU body designed to recover misspent EU funds.

The Slovenian government has finally decided to nominate two delegated prosecutors for the European Public Prosecutors Office (EPPO) on November 19. The appointment of Tanja Frank Eler and Matej Oštir was at first deemed only a "temporary" proposal, the Slovenian government said in a statement. The two candidates still have to be officially selected via the national nominating procedure.

On November 24, Eler and Oštir were finally officially appointed as delegated prosecutors by the EPPO, with their 5 years long term in the office starting on December 1, 2021.

The EPPO head Laura Kövesi has been critical of the government's interference with the nomination of the candidates. "Slovenia, a member state of the EU, is interfering with the function of an EU judicial body. This sets a very dangerous precedent," Kövesi told MEPs and a Commission representative in October. "We have to work as if our office does not exist in Slovenia," she said. On Thursday (18 November) at the autumn meeting of the Federal Criminal

Police Office (BKA) in Wiesbaden, Kövesi went as far as to say that Slovenia is "sabotaging" the work of the EPPO.

The members of the Constitutional Arch Coalition (KUL) were also critical towards the Prime Minister`s actions in regards to the nomination of the delegated prosecutors, seeing it as yet another attempt of the Slovenian government to apply pressure on the representatives of the Slovenian judiciary.

That was not the only issue in terms of the relationship between the executive and judicial branches in Slovenia, but may be the most telling in regards to its effect on Slovenian foreign affairs.

Conclusion

In 2021, the COVID-19 epidemic and its immediate effects still heavily affected Slovenian society. According to the data, available on the website Statista, even as of December 2021 Slovenia still sits among the lower half of EU member states in regards to the number of COVID-19 vaccine doses administered per 100 population as of October 18, 2021, (data is available on URL: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1196071/covid-19-vaccination-rate-in-europe-by-country/>). The frequency of the protests against PCT regulation and the presence of the organizations which actively oppose vaccination efforts indicate the relatively high level of discomfort among the general population in regards to restrictions, and the presence of distrust towards the political and medicinal elements in charge of the restrictions and the proactive efforts against COVID-19 virus. With the new omicron strain being an immediate cause of concern, the Slovenian society should strive to find a common tongue with politics which has been previously undermined by the lack of fully transparent communication and the harmful overuse of social media. Nevertheless, the relative economic stability and a decent international standing may showcase a way to improve the social cohesion in Slovenian society of 2022.