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Election Analysis

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The Slovenian Early Parliamentary Elections of 2018

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Introduction

Early parliamentary elections were held in Slovenia on 3 June 2018. The reason for holding early elections was the collapse of the centre-left coalition government due to weak public support, especially for the main coalition party, and attempts by its coalition partners to improve their position by distancing themselves from the coalition leader. The prime minister and leader of the main coalition party responded to this by resigning. Nevertheless, the fact that the coalition lasted for almost four years demonstrates improvement in terms of political stability, especially in comparison to the turbulent period 2008-2013.

The election campaign was characterised by fragmentation on the centre-left side of the political spectrum and exclusion of the main opposition party, which had been leading the polls throughout most of the pre-election period, due to its authoritarian style and Orban-style illiberal positions on issues such as migration and civil society. In spite of a relatively large number of undecided voters, the pre-election polls were confirmed by the election result: the conservative opposition leader came first but was short of potential partners needed to form a coalition, while votes to the centre-left parties were widely dispersed, making it difficult to put together a stable coalition.

Even though the inability to form a coalition means becoming obsolete in the long-term, not everything is bad for the conservative opposition, since the expected troubles of the would-be centre-left coalition will likely harm its position in the local elections in autumn and the European elections in 2019. Moreover, in case of another early election, which, considering the constellation of political powers, will always be around the corner, many of the centre-left parties would not make it over the threshold.

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The context: Collapse of an ineffective centre-left coalition

The centre-left government coalition which has been in power since 2014 had been facing relatively low public support, with no more than one third of citizens supporting it for most of its mandate.¹ For the most part, this was a result of (perceived) ineffectiveness in dealing with internal and external political barriers to much needed decisive actions and structural reforms in a number of policy fields and state subsystems.

The 2014 parliamentary elections were won by Miro Cerar, a law professor and political newcomer, and his progressive-liberal party Miro Cerar Party (*Stranka Mira Cerarja*, SMC, later renamed Modern Centre Party – *Stranka modernega centra*). SMC won by a sweeping majority, taking 36 seats in the 90-seat national assembly² (of which 2 seats are reserved for representatives of the Hungarian and Italian national minorities). Cerar formed a coalition together with the Social Democrats (*Socialni demokrati*, SD) and the Democratic Party of Pensioners (*Demokratska stranka upokojenecv*, DeSUS). In contrast, the centre right opposition witnessed one of the poorest results in the history of Slovenian parliamentary elections, not even winning a blocking minority (i.e. one third of seats plus one vote) to prevent constitutional changes should these be proposed in the legislative process. One of the reasons for the poor result of the centre-right parties was the imprisonment of the long-term charismatic leader of the main opposition party, Janez Janša of the conservative Slovenian Democratic Party (*Slovenska demokratska stranka*, SDS), for allegations of corruption just before the elections, which led to the radicalisation of the party's rhetoric and its isolation: by linking everyone that did not support Janša with the communists, they mobilised their most faithful voters but also pushed others away.³

The opposition was further divided by the entering into parliament of the radical United Left (*Združena levica* – ZL), a party similar to Podemos of Spain or Syriza of Greece; a result of strong economic decline in the 2008-2013 period, with a secondary recession caused by the savings policy and the Eurozone crisis.

SMC, which, in contrast to its coalition partners, had no luggage from the past, was in a good position to be a pro-reform factor. The painful fiscal consolidation measures and recapitalisation of the finance sector had already been implemented by previous governments, and growth had started to pick up from its low levels, creating some manoeuvring space. However, even at the beginning of the mandate, SMC's lack of political experience and poor choice of staff started to show.⁴ In summer 2015, Zagreb took advantage of a fresh

¹ Roglič, Meta. 2017. [Vox populi: Cerarjeva vlada v novo leto z najvišjo podporo doslej](#). Dnevnik, 16. January 2017 (accessed: 19. June 2018).

² State elections commission. *Predčasne volitve v državni zbor 2014*. Available here.

³ For the background on the cartelisation of political space and "partitocracy," see Krašovec, Alenka and Tim Haughton. 2011. Money, Organization and the State: The Partial Cartelization of Party Politics in Slovenia. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 44(3), 199-209; for background on political turbulence in Central and East European party systems, see Haughton, Tim and Kevin Deegan-Krause. 2015. Hurricane Season. Systems of Instability in Central and East European Party Politics. *East European Politics and Societies AND Cultures* 29(1), 61-80.

⁴ Roglič, *Vox populi*.

partner in Ljubljana to unilaterally walk out of the arbitration on the Slovenian-Croatian border dispute, which had been considered a strategic victory for Slovenia, accusing the Slovenian arbiter of acting inappropriately and spoiling the tribunal.⁵ Indecisive reactions by the Cerar government gave Croatia a strategic advantage. Moreover, the inability of Cerar to make foreign minister Karel Erjavec accountable for the misbehaviour of his employees demonstrated SMC's weakness, as the party walked into the trap of depending on the votes of more experienced coalition partners such as Erjavec's DeSUS instead of playing hard with them by threatening early elections from the very beginning. A demonstration of the lack of experience of newcomers such as Cerar also worked well for the more traditional party, SD, which hoped to take back their voters who had switched to SMC in 2014.

Different lobby groups, working from outside and within the coalition, immediately saw the government's weak points and took advantage by blocking various reform proposals or extorting the government to get something out of them. With popular support for SMC in decline, the tactics of putting pressure on the "old forces" within the coalition were no longer possible and stalemate became the mode of the day.

In 2015, another important event took place. After Hungary closed its border with Serbia and Croatia to stop migrants from entering the country, the influx was redirected to Slovenia. Faced with a chaotic situation on the ground, pressure from countries to the north and growing anti-immigrant rhetoric by the centre-right opposition, Cerar panicked and resorted to the securitisation approach, setting a razor wire fence on the southern border and calling for military force to step in.⁶ The decision turned out to be a mistake; while it did not help him to gain any new supporters from the centre-right, it turned progressive voters away from him. Meanwhile, the opposition SDS, strengthened by Janša's return from prison (the constitutional court had repealed the verdict), started to organise anti-immigration rallies, in spite of the fact that the number of applicants for asylum in Slovenia was no more than a couple of hundred. The situation only calmed down after the official "closure" of the Western Balkan corridor in March 2016.

The presidential elections that took place in October and November 2017 were a test for the coming parliamentary elections. These elections were won by the incumbent president Borut Pahor, who ran with the support of SD and DeSUS but was nevertheless more of an independent candidate. Pahor's popularity was based on his personal approach and avoidance of taking any clear political positions. In a context of strong political polarization, these tactics worked well. Nevertheless, Pahor won only in the second round, where he was challenged by Marjan Šarec, the mayor of the mid-sized town of Kamnik. The fact that Šarec, largely unknown at that time, was able to challenge Pahor and actually won more votes than the candidates of all the established parties put together

⁵ Nielsen, Nikola. 2017. *Croatia ignores ruling on Slovenia border dispute*. *EUObserver*, 30. June 2017 (accessed: 31. August 2018).

⁶ Bučar, Maja and Marko Lovec. 2017. *Pasing the 'Hot Potatoes': Croatia and Slovenia as Transit Countries in the European Migration and Refugee Crisis*, in *Mapping the Migration Challenges in the EU Transit and Destination Countries*, edited by Rozsa, Erzsébet. Joint policy study 6. European Institute of the Mediterranean, 116-138.

during the first round⁷ demonstrated a crisis of the established political parties.

Šarec used his capital gained in the presidential campaign to announce that he was taking part in the parliamentary elections. Rather than taking any clear ideological positions, his strategy was built on the image of a “doer,” which fitted his background as a mayor and the perceived ineffectiveness of the centre-left coalition government, making him particularly appealing for small business owners and suburban voters, which was also the voter base of the centre-right that shied away from SDS for its increasingly radical rhetoric. Pahor’s victory helped SD to strengthen its position at the polls.⁸ Towards the end of 2017 and in early 2018, the Social Democrats already saw themselves as the winners of the coming parliamentary elections. Coalition members no longer bothered to give the impression that there had ever been a coalition, but rather attempted to put the blame on SMC to be able to present themselves as an alternative. In April 2018, after facing huge accusations from the coalition and opposition for several scandals that had come up, Cerar decided to do the only logical thing –to resign before being forced out, thus triggering early elections (though only a couple of weeks ahead of the regular schedule). Nevertheless, due to the perception of his lack of experience and weakness, his resignation came as a genuine surprise for the coalition partners and analysts.

By resigning, Cerar signalled that SMC was not the only member of the government coalition and that many of the reforms were, in one way or another, being blocked by the coalition partners. As a result, support for SMC temporarily turned upwards.

Another implication of his resignation (intended or not) was that it reduced the time available to his competitors, e.g. to a number of new parties that were emerging. The change to the electoral law in 2014 made it more difficult for political parties to receive financial support from private entities. Instead, political parties reaching a threshold of at least 1% were granted more generous financial compensation per voter from the state budget. Since 1% plus one vote, in case of an average turnout, meant no more than about 7,000 votes, and since the financial compensation for this would be approximately €6,000 per month, the financial award as such became a factor for the emergence of a number of new political parties.⁹

Election results: no real winners

In the election campaign, the key issue was which of the parties would, or rather, would not, participate in a coalition with Janša’s SDS. Demonisation of the conservative party leading the polls was used by the centre-left parties to mobilise their voters to vote in spite of the fragmentation of this part of the political spectrum and disappointment of the voters with the centre-left parties, as well as to demotivate the centrist voters from supporting the likely

⁷ State elections commission. Volitve predsednika RS 2017. izidi glasovanja. Available [here](#).

⁸ Roglič, Meta. 2017. *Vox populi: socialni demokrati po dobrem letu dni prehiteli SDS*. *Dnevnik*, 15. October 2017 (accessed: 31. August 2018).

⁹ The threshold for entering parliament is 4%.

relative election winner by isolating him, thus making any votes for him a waste.

Janša, who has been leading his party for over 20 years, has been, besides Borut Pahor, one of the few remaining politicians from the pre-transition period who continues to occupy key positions. He has become unacceptable for the rest of the political space for his antagonising politics and authoritarian style.

In the election campaign, some of the SDS representatives used illiberal rhetoric on migration and civil society issues. SDS also used huge posters warning of a migrant invasion and promising to not allow a single migrant to enter the country. However, Janša himself played the role of an open-minded and accessible politician, offering hands of cooperation to everyone. In public appearances, he demonstrated great skills and experience, which the newcomers and many of his second league competitors simply did not have. By professional standards, the SDS campaign was much ahead of the others.

The image of a “true democrat” – the opposite of the radical rhetoric of the 2014 campaign – was based on the fact that the polls showed weak support for the satellite parties, such as the Movement for Children and Families or the New Slovenian People’s Party (*Nova Slovenska ljudska stranka*, Nova SLS) which had emerged in the SDS’s orbit in the period 2014-2016 and were one of the reasons for the tensions between the SDS and the rest of the centre-right political parties, i.e. liberal-catholic New Slovenia (*Nova Slovenija* – NSi) and the “old” SLS.¹⁰ Thus, Janša and leaders of NSi and SDS shook hands before the elections. However, it was still unclear whether this would provide sufficient support for a right-wing coalition, which is why Janša needed to play the nice guy in order not to help the centre-left parties bring more people to the elections. Since SDS had by far the largest membership, accounting for over 20,000, and the largest pool of committed voters, a low turnout would play in their favour.

The centrist stance of SDS also created some additional space on the right side of the spectrum, which was taken by SLS and especially the Slovenian National Party (*Slovenska nacionalna stranka*, SNS) led by Zmago Jelinčič, known for his vulgar nationalist and populist rhetoric.¹¹ If, at the end of the day, centre-left parties refused to go into coalition with Janša, SDS could use this as an excuse to take SNS on board. Jelinčič stated openly his price: the ministry of culture.

Just before the elections, Janša made a final brilliant move – he publicly revealed that both of his main competitors, Marjan Šarec and president of the

¹⁰ Lovec, Marko. 2018. [Slovenia Country Profile](#). *Nations in Transit* (accessed: 31. August 2018); for analysis of right wing populism in Slovenia in the given period, see Pajnik, Mojca / Kuhar, Roman and Iztok Šori. 2016. *Populism in the Slovenian Context: Between Ethno-Nationalism and Re-Traditionalisation*, in *The Rise of the Far Right in Europe*, edited by Lazaridis, Gabriella / Campani, Giovanna and Annie Benveniste. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 137-60; for specific focus on communication, see: Prodnik, Jernej Amon and Boris Mance. 2017. *Slovenia: Populism as Political Marketing*, in *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, edited by Aalberg, Toril / Eser, Frank / Reinemann, Carsten / Stromback, Jesper and Claes De Vreese. London: Routledge.

¹¹ For types of populism in Slovenia see Fink-Hafner, Danica. 2016. A Typology of Populisms and Changing Forms of Society: The Case of Slovenia. *Europe-Asia Studies* 68(8), 1315-1339.

SD Dejan Židan, who had categorically rejected cooperation with him, had met him privately. This made the anti-Janša stance appear to be a show for the electorate, and was expected to finally persuade undecided centre-left voters to stay at home. However, it was also an “all-in” move that demolished any remaining bridges and closed the door to a broad coalition.

Even without Janša’s move, the centre-left competitors were not doing well. Šarec who was a “new star” at the end of 2017 and early in 2018, was unable to hide that he was just a local politician, while national politics was a different league. Slowly but surely, he was losing support. In contrast to Cerar, a well-known law professor who emerged as a new face in 2014, Šarec did not have an appeal among well-educated and urban voters. Židan also did not perform well during his public appearances. In their campaign, SD focused on fiscal rule and security, presenting themselves as a centrist party, which were untypical topics for social democrats. However, since many of the other parties already supported similar views, this did not really help SD to stand out. It seemed that their strategy was decided late in 2017 when, based on the effects of Pahor’s victory at the presidential elections, they were leading the polls and thought they would replace SMC.¹² Cerar was able to put off some of the blame and rescue part of the image of his four year term, which had been years of relative stability and steady economic growth, especially in comparison to the earlier period. However, apart from that, for the future, he was only offering “more of the same,” which was not enough for the voters to turn out. Nevertheless, according to the polls, he often came as the second best choice, meaning that he was generally acceptable but not particularly appealing.¹³ DeSUS, a troublemaker in the Cerar government, had trouble with its image. Its leader Erjavec proposed to establish some sort of populist left pre-election coalition against Janša, but was rejected by the rest of the centre-left leaders. The Left (*Levica*, renamed from ZL), on the other hand, took advantage of the centrist stance of SD to demonstrate itself as a progressive alternative to the univocal positions of most of the parties on issues such as economic policy and national security.

The very last polls published before the elections showed that the share of undecided voters was still as high as 20%, making the result somewhat unpredictable.¹⁴ When the elections were over and the votes had been counted, the results were however more or less in line with the polls and projections. SDS won 25 seats, followed by Šarec (13 seats), SD and SMC (10 seats each), Levica (9 seats), NSi (7 seats), Party of Alenka Bratušek (*Stranka Alenke Bratušek*, SAB, 5 seats), DeSUS (5 seats) and SNS (4 seats).¹⁵

¹² Roglič, *Vox populi*.

¹³ Slovenian press agency. *Parlamentarne volitve 2018* (accessed: 31. August 2018).

¹⁴ Slovenian press agency. *Parlamentarne volitve 2018*.

¹⁵ State election commission. *Predčasne volitve v Državni Zbor Republike Slovenije 2018*. Available [here](#).

Table: outcome of parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2018

2014			2018		
Party	%	Seats	Party	%	Seats
SMC	34.49%	36	SDS	24.92%	25
SDS	20.71%	21	LMŠ	12.6%	13
DeSUS	10.18%	10	SD	9.93%	10
SD	5.98%	6	SMC	9.75%	10
ZL	5.97%	6	Levica	9.33%	9
NSi	5.59%	5	NSi	7.16%	7
ZAB	4.38%	4	SAB	5.11%	5
			DeSUS	4.93%	5
			SNS	4.17%	4

Source: State election commission¹⁶

A low turnout (52%) and the dispersion of voters by the centre-left and centrist stance of SD enabled SDS to win in all electoral units and in most of the districts, including those with a high share of centre-left supporters, such as urban ones. In the latter, the second place was often taken by Levica, which was another sign of SD moving too far to the right. The turnout was lowest in the less developed south-eastern part of Slovenia, demonstrating general distrust and a sense of being disconnected.

There were no real winners of the elections. SDS won the most votes, but was short of potential coalition partners. Even with NSi, SNS and one or two parliamentarians switching sides, this would still not be enough. Their relative victory was not as convincing as they might have hoped. NSi under new leader Matej Tonin, who tried to imitate Sebastian Kurz, also fell short of expectations, and SLS did not make it over the threshold. Šarec was the next candidate for a coalition leader, but the number of seats won was unconvincing there too. The centre-left coalition, which would have to be based on a number of parties, would be anything but effective, which was the motif Šarec had used in the campaign. SMC got more votes than the polls predicted, but this was still only a third of their performance in 2014. SD improved their result from 2014, but their game was overtaken by Šarec. Even Alenka Bratušek, who had been Prime Minister for a while in 2013 and managed once again to get over the threshold (related to the fact that she was the only female party leader in the “boys club,” showing gender bias in the party politics in Slovenia), had a bitter smile on her face, since in fact she had not been elected to parliament and, ironically, only men were elected on her list.

Future prospects: Short-term gains and long-term loses

Forming a new Slovenian government will not be an easy task, and will probably take some time. As already explained, SDS does not have enough seats to form a centre-right government. Moreover, even if they manage to convince one of the centre-left parties with a “generous offer,” this may still not be enough. Plus, for any of the centre-left parties, partnership with SDS would mean a certain political death in the long run.

¹⁶ State election commission. Predčasne volitve v Državni zbor 2014. State election commission. Predčasne volitve v Državni Zbor Republike Slovenije 2018.

There is a chance of proposing a Prime Minister other than Janša, or forming a centrist coalition with several centre-left parties. However, the former scenario is unacceptable for SDS, and the latter for the centre-left parties. The polarisation and distrust between parties is just too high. Moreover, the fact that it will not be able to form a coalition might play in SDS's favour, at least in the short run. The long and difficult negotiations between the centre-left parties will impact negatively on their public image, which will affect the local elections in autumn this year and might also influence the outcomes of the 2019 European elections. Nevertheless, the fact that SDS under Janša is unacceptable for two thirds of the political spectrum in Slovenia, which will be proven by his inability to form a coalition in spite of a strong relative victory at the elections, will play a negative role in the long run. A party which cannot be part of the government is impotent and does not have access to real sources of power. It makes no sense for voters to support such a party. The more time it takes for SDS to replace Janša, the deeper the crisis of the party will be once they decide to do so.

If Janša fails, Šarec will be the one to lead the new government. The expectations towards him are not as high as they were when Cerar won the elections. However, they might still be too high, especially regarding the issue of effectiveness. A new central left government will basically be a more fragmented and slightly ruralised version of the old one, which is not a particularly good prospect for much-needed national structural reforms, not to mention the challenges awaiting on the EU level and in bilateral affairs. If anything, such a government might affect the distribution of resources towards rural areas.

A positive factor is that the programme differences on the centre-left are not especially big, since many of the parties have centrist, pragmatic and undefined views. LMŠ, SMC and SAB could form a "centrist bloc" with 28 seats. Together with SD and NSi, this would make a centrist government which could take advantage of its pro-EU stance to implement some of the reforms and strengthen its image abroad.¹⁷ However, the price of NSi to enter might be high. An alternative to that would be a centre-left coalition without NSi. Even with DeSUS not acting as a troublemaker, at least not in the first year given its decline in support, in order to have enough votes, they would have to reconcile with Levica having some difficult positions, such as opposition towards fiscal policies agreed at the EU level and demanding a referendum on NATO membership, which would seem unacceptable for the rest.

Many of the centre left parties cannot afford another election, since they would risk failing to reach the threshold. Moreover, not just parties but also some of the members of parliament who were elected would risk losing their positions. Thus, as time passes, they might take more pragmatic positions. Nevertheless, be it for programme differences, lack of experience and party discipline, or

¹⁷ Lovec, Marko and Lange Sabina. 2018. Kako izvoliti evropsko politiko po meri Slovenije?. *Vecer*, 26. May 2018 (accessed: 31. August 2018); the EU was not an important issue at the elections. For background on that, see: Haughton, Tim. 2014. Money, Margins and the Motors of Politics: The EU and the Development of Party Politics in Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52(1), 71-87.

fragmentation and rivalry between similar parties, the future government, if formed, will be unstable and will probably not last beyond the first crisis.

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