

Slovenia: From spontaneous protests to renewal of the Socialist Left

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At the end of year 2012 Slovenia was, for most of the people completely unexpectedly, overwhelmed by the most massive protest movement in last 20 years. It all started when a right wing major of Slovenia's second largest city Maribor decided to set up a traffic control network of speed radars, based on public-private partnership. According to that partnership 93% of the revenue, earned by penalties for speeding, would be received by a private partner that set up the network.¹ Only few days after first radars started operating and thousands of citizens received speeding penalties, upheavals erupted. The first and the second so called "Maribor uprising" was poorly attended, just by a few hundreds of people, but the third was a surprise for us all: on November 29th more than 10.000 people gathered in the center of a city that has around 95.000 habitants.

That sparked a fire all over Slovenia. Only a few days later, upheavals occurred in several biggest cities. On December 2nd more than 20.000 protesters gathered in Maribor, more than 4.000 in Ljubljana and more than 2.500 in Celje. At the time, agitators for the protests were unknown, gathered by several Facebook groups that emerged as agitators for the upheavals. However, administrators of different groups and pages soon started to coordinate their activities. So by the end of the year, a new, coordinated wave of upheavals under a common name "All-Slovenian Upheaval" started to shake the country. The first "All Slovenian Upheaval" was on December 21st when simultaneous protests were organized in six largest cities, including Ljubljana where 5.000 people gathered. In months that followed, upheavals mostly concentrated to Ljubljana, also because the mayor of Maribor, Franc Kangler was deposed.²

The next main goal of the protest movement was deposal of the right-wing government led by Prime Minister Janez Janša. The government was imposing harsh austerity and cuts in public sector, they were establishing bad bank and public holding as means for quick privatization and they were trying to limit democracy by inscribing fiscal rule in constitution and limiting the usage of public referenda only to matters that do not have "fiscal consequences". Besides, they were unpopular also due to their rhetoric. Important members of the government, including the Prime Minister were insulting the protesters with expletives such as "zombies", "left fascists" etc.

Therefore protesters focused their ambitions on deposal of the government in the beginning of the 2013. On January 8th, when the Anticorruption commission published its report blaming Janez Janša of corruption, the first upheaval demanding government to step down was organized in Ljubljana. It was attended by 8.000 people. In the following month, Prime Minister and his collaborators started to mobilize their supporters. They organized a series of round tables in different Slovenian towns. Consequently on February 8th, that is Slovene cultural day (anniversary of death of Slovene's most famous poet France Prešeren) two upheavals were organized. In the noon, right wing supporters of the government gathered on Kongresni trg, one of the main squares in Ljubljana. About

4.000 people, mainly with right wing, anticommunist agenda gathered. The mass was addressed by Janez Janša himself who appeared with a video-speech from Brussels, in which he compared the left-wing upheavals with Nazi holocaust and called for “firm struggle against left fascism”.³ His speech provoked outrage of the public. Among others public figures also ombudsman Zdenka Čebašek Travnik protested against such escalation of public expressing.

As consequence, the Third All-Slovenian Upheaval that was organized in the afternoon the same day mobilized more than 20.000 people on the streets of Ljubljana. The protesters were clear: Janez Janša must be deposed. And within a month, he indeed was. On February 20th the government was deposed by vote of no confidence. During the constitution of a new government, a last large demonstration was organized on March 9th in Ljubljana that was attended by 9.000 people. On March 20 government was finally succeeded by a new one, led by center-left party Positive Slovenia and Prime Minister Alenka Bratušek.⁴

1. What happened?

The reasons for such imminent escalation of dissatisfaction are still one of the major topics of public debates. There are some facts that practically all of the commentators agree about. They agree that it is rising unemployment what upsets people. Namely, Slovenia, a country with 2.000.000 habitants lost 134.000⁵ workplaces since the beginning of the crisis. They agree that it is raising public debt that concerns people. Indeed, Slovenia’s public debt will rise to 74.8% of GDP according to claims of financial minister Uroš Čufer after the recapitalization of the banks and implementation of bad bank.⁶ For comparison, Slovenian public debt at the end of 2008 was 21,9% of GDP.⁷ And all commentators agree that macroeconomic projections are not positive at all. According to projections, the recession will last at least for two more years in Slovenia.

However, there is a wide range of different interpretations of the reasons for the crisis and for the escalation of spontaneous anger, manifested in the protests. Right wing commentators are trying to embed the events in their usual anticommunist conspiracy theory. Their claim is that Slovenia was for the last 20 years led by communist elites whose corruption led Slovenia to the crisis and they perceive the protests against right-wing champion Janez Janša as a part of communist plot. Liberal commentators are also claiming that corruption is the main reason for the crisis and that we are in fact faced with the crisis of morality. They are calling for anti-corruption campaigns and focusing public attention mainly at some scapegoats from politics and business that were caught in corruptive, illegal deeds and therefore confirm the assumption of corruption being the major problem. And last but not least, there is parliamentary left, who is the “communist elite” in right-wing accusation. They are trying to show that it is not the “communist elite”, i.e. them, who is responsible for crisis, but Janez Janša and his collaborators.

However, what is needed in Slovenia is a systemic analysis. Namely, all the three described narratives are putting finger on corruption of this or that elite. The mainstream left and right mutually accuse each other of being responsible for crisis, while the centrist liberal position is trying to go beyond this kind of quarrels between supporters of different parties and set up an “apolitical” anticorruption campaign that should resolve the situation. However, their analysis is no better than others: it still focuses on corruption as an anomaly of otherwise well-functioning capitalist system. But what must be explained is that the normal functioning of capitalist system itself brought us into crisis. And that is

the position we (Initiative for Democratic Socialism and Workers and Punks' University) are trying to present in public.

2. Ideology of the protest movement

Slovenia was, for the most part of its transition, perceived as a kind of success story, a kind of model Eastern-European country that could and should be seen as a successful model for other countries of the region. Massive social upheavals of winter 2012 and spring 2013 that were unprecedented ever since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, were therefore for many, both local as well as international observers⁸, an unexpected event. Through a closer inspection, as will become obvious in the next chapter, these protests don't appear to be so unexpected and are deeply rooted in the processes that have been going on right before the crisis and ever since. Especially austerity measures have taken their social toll and peoples living conditions have very much worsened. So concrete, material circumstances, joined with the arrogance and cynicism of right-wing politicians have provided for an explosive social movement. Although one can argue that its causes were not that spontaneous, its public appearance and the ideology it was presenting definitely was rather spontaneous or at least very much heterogeneous.

Various protest groups have quickly and easily agreed upon their common denominator. It was a conviction that all politicians, no matter what their political color is, are basically the same. One could see them depicted side by side, together with slogans such as: "They are all the same". There are actually various layers to this slogan we can now try to articulate. First and perhaps most basic is the widespread standpoint that politicians in general are all the same. It doesn't matter who you vote for, in the end they will all deceive you, and they all have their private interests in mind and don't care about public interests. Such position that was already widespread before the protest movement does have its point however is fatally mistaken in its prognosis. Since they are all the same, all of our efforts are doomed to fail; ergo it is better to completely abstain from politics. Apolitical position therefore appears as a position of some kind of special virtue. Since politics are such a dirty game we become virtuous just by the fact we abstain from it. Without spending too much time with this type of political attitude let us just quote Bertolt Brecht on this issue who put it so succinctly:

"The worst illiterate is the political illiterate, he doesn't hear, doesn't speak, nor participates in the political events. He doesn't know the cost of life, the price of the bean, of the fish, of the flour, of the rent, of the shoes and of the medicine, all depends on political decisions. The political illiterate is so stupid that he is proud and swells his chest saying that he hates politics. The imbecile doesn't know that, from his political ignorance is born the prostitute, the abandoned child, and the worst thieves of all, the bad politician, corrupted and flunky of the national and multinational companies."⁹

However the slogan of: "They are all the same" that appeared during the protest movement was a bit more complex than that. It basically meant that all politicians since the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the independence of Slovenia the same. They emphasized that political distinctions between left-wing and right-wing politicians and governments that have been perceived as differences of utmost importance, are basically false differences. Therefore one of the conclusions and demands of the protest movement was that they must all go, that none of them are trustworthy enough to continue doing their job. Indeed the solution was very much framed in the ethical and moral dimensions. A kind of

purification of political space was demanded and at a certain point ethically virtuous people were sought after as the potential candidates for prime minister. Although such efforts did not come to any fruition media actually talked to some of these people that were publicly perceived as ethically impeccable, if they would be willing to take upon themselves the responsibility of becoming a prime minister. They have all declined such offers, completely unfounded as they were. The problem with such analysis that was widespread, perhaps even predominant in the protest movement is that it perceives systemic problems as psychological problems. Corruption as such is an integral and necessary moment of capitalist mode of production. As Marx has shown surplus value cannot be produced without a worker being deprived of a certain amount of value he or she produces in his/hers labour time. Corruption is therefore not an anomaly but a sign of a normally functioning capitalism. A current of the protest movement that did not share the conceptual shortcomings of the hitherto described currents has also emerged. It was developed under the name of Democratic Socialism.

Although Initiative for Democratic Socialism (IDS) as such did not yet exist in the period of social upheavals, members of Workers and Punks' University (WPU) that latter on formed it with another protest group called Network for Direct Democracy, already presented the position of class analysis. Signifier of "democratic socialism" was already adopted and publicly articulated. This was actually the first time since the breakup of Yugoslavia that a political group seriously advocated socialist ideas as the only reasonable and rational alternative to capitalism. In comparison to those that demanded more ethical politicians WPU argued that as long as we will live in a system based on the eternal drive for ever greater profits nothing else can be expected. Instead of cosmetic corrections this system needs a radical change, ultimately it needs to be abolished and socialism needs to be built in its place. In order to clearly differentiate ourselves and underline that ours is not a project of blind copy-pasting of actually existing socialism of 20th century, we have decided for the name of Democratic Socialism. As such it was warmly accepted and received wide and important media coverage that goes uninterrupted for more than a year. Members of WPU and later on IDS have through various interviews, articles, speeches provided for more than 200 media appearances where they advocated for the ideas of democratic socialism.

We will pay closer attention to the development of IDS in our last chapter but perhaps one of greatest merits of the analysis that was provided on the basis of historical materialism was that the upheavals and crisis as such were not so spontaneous and contingent as they first appeared. They both had their roots in the transition period.

3. The roots of the crisis

It could be initially said that Slovenian crisis much resembles those in the South of the European continent. Namely, it has a problem with indebtedness of private sector, credit crunch in banking sector, falling consumption and low investments. But the root is indebtedness of private sector and incapability of the state to recapitalize it and the banks. Namely, Slovenia as a member of the Euro zone gave away its monetary sovereignty and on the other hand it is having more and more problems with taking credit on private financial markets, since interest rates are high. When government took a loan of 1.5 billion euros in November, it was charged with 4.7% interest rate.¹⁰ Therefore the most probable future scenario is that the state will have to accumulate dear debt burden in order to recap-

italize the banks and end the credit crunch, but on the other it will try to compensate for the debt burden with privatization of state owned businesses and banks.

That scenario terrifies people and they feel robbed since majority of people was sure until recent that Slovenia is more or less in a good economic shape. Namely, there was a success story of Slovenian transition that gave people the feeling that Slovenia is in a way different, better than other comparable countries. And to a certain degree it was through the 1990's. Namely, Slovenia (under a massive pressure of trade unions) conducted a so-called gradualist type of transition. That meant it did not face rapid privatization as some others post-socialist countries did, but a gradual one. Probably the main reason for that is that trade unions organized massive protests against a right wing government called Demos at the beginning of the 1990s and successfully deposed it in 1992. A center-left government led by Liberal Democratic Party (that ruled – with an exception of six months in 2002 – continuously until 2004) was forced to give workers some concessions in order to assure social peace.

And they did so. The first concession was privatization legislation from 1993 that stopped “wild privatization” that was going on before and enabled that workers and managers to take over small and medium enterprises, while ownership of larger enterprises was either transferred to state funds or distributed in form of certificates. The second concession was that a Socio-economic Council was established in 1994 which coordinated negotiations between labor, capital and the state. And the third concession was higher social benefits and massive early retirements for the workers who lost their jobs due to transitional economic shocks.

All these changes made Slovenia a transitional exception to some point. When in the mid-nineties comparable countries were already falling into control of foreign capital and focusing their strategies towards attracting foreign direct investments, Slovenia managed to maintain domestic ownership with large shares of workers' ownership and even achieve stable and high economic growth (in 1995 even 7.4%).

However, this kind of ownership relations did not last. It started to decay already in the late 1990's with a so-called second wave of privatization. In this era, workers partly sold the certificates they gained in transition on their own in order to enlarge their household budgets. Between 1999 and 2004 average shares of major owners increased by 1/3, while the number of shareholders radically decreased. But people did not feel that then, since there still was prosperity and they even increased their budgets by selling the certificates. With the EU accession in 2004, the optimism and euphoria even raised. The common goal of transitional elites was achieved and people understood that move as a civilizational achievement. Economy also prospered in the first years of EU membership and achieved its peak in 2007 with an impressive 7%¹¹ growth. However, underlying this economic prosperity was rapid indebtedness of the private sector since 2005. Namely, Slovenia took over a financialized credit-led development model similar to those in PIGS after the accession to EU.

One of the reasons for that was that with the start of the EU accession process, export-oriented light industry that was a flagship of Slovenian economy started to lose its competitiveness (mostly due to accessing the free-trade area and implementing harder currency). The other reason was defeat of the transitional center-left elites (the Liberal Democratic Party) and electoral victory of right-wing SDS, led by Janez Janša. If we introduce the distinction between national bourgeoisie and comprador bourgeoisie, who is an agent of foreign capital, the first party (LDS) was an advocate of the first one, while SDS

tried to implement the will of the second one. After 2004 they set up a series of liberal reforms. They introduced new income tax rates, which reduced the taxes for the richest, they tried to impose even a flat-tax rate, but were stopped by trade unions in 2005 and they liberalized capital flows and deregulated the banking sector. Especially the last two policies enabled indebtedness of the private sector.¹²

The flagship of Slovenian economy then became construction sector that was booming on cheap credits. Its creditors were often state owned banks who also provided cheap credits to managers who wanted to expand their ownership shares in the “second wave” of privatization. All in all external debt of Slovenia jumped from practically 0 in 2005 to 10 billion in 2008. The relation between credits and deposits worsened to 1,6:1 in 2007. And when global crisis reached Slovenia at the end of 2008, its economy crashed instantly. In 2009 there was a 7.9%¹³ drop in GDP. Practically all large construction firms collapsed and firms, privatized in second wave of privatization faced with liquidity problems.

From then on, the story is similar to other European: crisis in private sector became a problem for banking sector. The state had to intervene in order to save the banks and with its recapitalization of the banks, crisis became the crisis of public finances. And since Slovenia put on a Maastricht straight jacket back in 2004, it does not have much other options than austerity and privatizations. But that of course tightens a yet sharp class conflicts in society even worse.

So we must understand the escalation of mass anger in the protest in the context of Slovenian transition of the last 20 years. People are angry since all the promises current elites have given to them dispelled with the emergence of the crisis. That is why Slovenia faced the first massive, but spontaneous protests. Trade unions who served as a “emergency brake” for the last 20 years – they were able to mobilize mass protests when the liberal offensives by governments were most drastic, such as in 1992/3, 2005 and 2011 -, had no visible role in last protests. Protests erupted spontaneously, people mostly organized via social networks such as Facebook and trade unions were only quietly sympathizing with the masses.

That illustrates how despaired and unsatisfied people in Slovenia nowadays are since they do not see any alternative to the situation in the current political options. Therefore the time is right to start talking again about a real alternative: socialism.

Renewal of the Socialist Left

On the 1st of May 2013 Initiative for Democratic Socialism was officially launched and for the first time after more than twenty years socialism as a serious political alternative is once again present. We have already dealt with the protest movement and it is safe to say that without it Initiative as such would have never been born or out would be born only much later on. Protests as such have definitely caused history to speed-up and processes that would otherwise demand much more time have unraveled rather quickly. However one must keep in mind that there is a rather long prehistory to the Initiative which is crucial for thoroughly understanding it. Most of its active members were already active in the student movement, various student organizations, newspapers, fights against plans to implement tuitions etc. All these efforts concentrated in the period of 3-month occupation of Faculty of Arts that happened during the winter of 2011/12, beginning roughly a year before the protest movement started. Although this occupation was not particularly successful in guarantying any of the demands it wished to fulfill it did provide for a very valuable collec-

tive experiences. On this basis and through the reflection of experiences of the occupation a clear understanding was formed that different and most importantly much stronger organizational forms are necessary. Forms that will be able to go beyond university struggle and ultimately address the universal struggle in our society, i.e. class struggle.

Because of that a couple of months after the occupation members of Workers and Punks' University have formed a special group - Working Group on Political Strategy, where we had several months of discussions on how to implement socialist policies and how to build a socialist political subject in Slovenia. These discussions could have lasted for a much longer time but luckily history intervened with the protest movement and we were forced to concretize our efforts. Because of the movement we have also decided that it is high time that we announce our plans for the future publicly. Joined with another protest group, Network for Direct Democracy we have formed and publicly launched the Initiative. What has happened since its launch?

Although the height of the protest movement was over, we have nonetheless participated on various other protests that have taken place since the spring of 2013. Building and implementing our political ideas amongst people is one of our major efforts and in the future we plan to intensify this work as much as possible. However in order to really build a movement one needs a clear ideological platform, a program, around which one can build a movement. Precisely because of that a lot of time and energy was devoted to writing an alternative developmental model for Slovenia as well as for European Union. In this model members of the Initiative have articulated concrete policy proposals that could immediately improve the living conditions of people that are worse affected by the crisis. It is not a program that would guarantee an immediate transition to socialism, but it is a program with a set of policies that are building terrain for the introduction of socialism. As such it deals with very concrete problems Slovenia is currently facing. Especially it addresses the problems of bad bank, state holding, public debt, relations with EU and relations with other countries of the European periphery. It is a socialist program. It does not seek for class compromise, but for working class hegemony. As such it is written as an action plan. It starts with analysis of the crisis in the EU and Slovenia, explains why and how they are intertwined and in what way are both crises just a local manifestation of crisis of global capitalism and then provides concrete policy alternatives use current institutional framework of Slovenian state for a transition towards democratic coordinated national economy. For instance, it describes how to use the bad bank for extension of public ownership over the economy, how to use public holding as a coordinating body of the economy, how to socialize banking sector and investment policy and how to introduce workers' self-management in the firms. A very important part of the program is devoted to the environment as it is becoming increasingly evident that capitalist mode of production is aggressively undermining the living conditions for all living species. Initiative was actually the first among all the protest groups that has publicly articulated its program.

As we have already emphasized above, it was rather easy to find a common denominator about all the issues we are *against*. It is much more difficult to articulate one's own position about what he stand *for*, and even more so when we try to build common alliances that will fight for the same issues. Tactic of some groups has been again to resort to ethical and moral terminology, emphasizing that we are all people of good-will and that efforts at writing program are not necessary. In Initiative we categorically reject such ideas and strongly believe any reliable alliance can only be built upon clear ideological unity, otherwise any such efforts are bound to fail. Only on this basis have we then decided to

continue our regional expansion. Members of the Initiative are present in various local environments outside the capital, Ljubljana, on weekly basis and through such efforts we are building our regional network. Although the program we have written addresses some of the most burning issues as they are present on the macro level, it is of crucial importance to fine tune such proposal with very concrete problems each local environment is facing. In comparison to those that are demanding quick and easy solutions that should be given immediately, we are well aware that building a serious socialist alternative will take time and energy. Though it is a slow process of organic growth it has already given us some positive results, in less than 8 months of its functioning more than 2000 people have expressed their support for the cause of the Initiative.

Being well aware that socialism in one country is not possible, we pay special attention to our regional and European networking. We have established very good relations and common projects with partner organizations in Croatia and Serbia and all other former countries of Yugoslavia as well as with Bulgaria and Romania. We have also established good connections with members of the European left party, especially Die Linke, Syriza, Fronte de Gauche, Austrian Communist Party and Portugal Left Bloc. Such international cooperation is especially important for peripheral countries such as Slovenia that can only through establishing a strong bloc of countries that are in comparable political and economic position, guarantee the improvement of the living conditions of its people. Record high level of unemployment, environmental degradation, collapse of social, health and pension systems, and lack of any kind of perspective for younger generation is not just things we hear in media, but are concrete social facts we are experiencing in our daily lives. Alternative to capitalism is therefore absolutely necessary that much is clear, we cannot live with this self-destructive system. However a question we need to pose is: Is an alternative *possible*, and if that is so on what terms?

We believe right now, broadly and globally speaking, working class is very much atomized, extremely exhausted both physically and intellectually, it lacks any serious self-consciousness, it lacks any serious institutional, ideological or political power. Generally speaking working class was forced into continuous defeats and retreats in the last couple of decades, after the onslaught of neoliberal policies in the beginning of seventies. With the crisis millions of people that used to have some basic trust in this system were forced to look on their living conditions with sober senses. Younger generation was suddenly forced to accept the fact that their perspective and quality of life will be much worse than the one their parents have enjoyed. These trends harsh as they are were not so present in Slovenia, where trade unions still hold a considerable amount of power and are able to mobilize workers and general public against the most harmful policies of destroying the welfare state. However although situation in Slovenia is comparatively much better than elsewhere, a lack of workers party, a proper socialist party still presents a huge problem. Because there is no one political subject that would provide for a concise class analysis and class policies from the working class perspective. In perspective it is Initiative for Democratic Socialism that needs to be able to eventually transform itself into such a political force. Establishing a party is not a technical problem, in Slovenia anyone that collects 200 signatures is able to establish a political party. However we perceive this as a political problem, party must not be a goal in itself but only means for achieving higher political goals. We do not want to build a classical bourgeois party that will be just one among many. Instead, we want to build a proper workers party that will be only an instrument of a wider and deeply rooted movement.

Therefore we believe that nowadays the most urgent task in combating capitalism is to build workers power, to build working class self-consciousness once again. This is an extremely difficult and long-term process and precisely because of that it is urgent we devote to it as much time and energy as possible. It means we need to once again establish all kinds of workers institutions that once already existed. We need to have workers theatres, libraries, sport clubs, newspapers, web portals, international cooperation and so on and so on. Each element of the society we are currently living in has a potential to contribute to building socialist hegemony. Only then will capitalist once again tremble before the specter of communism!

Endnotes

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