

Protests against Slovenian government

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On December 3, tens of thousands took to the streets in Slovenia to demonstrate against the austerity measures of Prime Minister Janez Janša's right-wing government.

In Maribor, the country's second-largest city, there were violent clashes with police in which 14 protesters were injured.

The demonstrators carried banners with images of Janša and Maribor's mayor, Franc Kangler, accused of corruption, bearing slogans like "Put the criminals in jail", "We are clearing out the crap from the stables" and "They're finished". City hall came under fire from fireworks and other projectiles, and many shop windows were smashed in the city centre. Barricades were erected on many city squares and garbage containers set on fire.

A large contingent of police brutally attacked the protesters. They fired tear-gas grenades at the crowd and beat them with truncheons. According to the media, some 120 were arrested.

There were also demonstrations in Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana, in Celje and other cities, which were largely peaceful.

On Thursday, several hundred people in Kranj and Koper took to the streets to express their anger. Further protests in Ljubljana, Murska Sobota, Bohinj and Ajdovščina were announced online. On November 26, tens of thousands had already demonstrated in the capital against the government.

The demonstrators' anger was directed against the drastic austerity measures of the right-wing government. The four-party coalition under Janša is planning further harsh cuts; amongst other things, retirement age is to be raised and numerous social provisions cut.

Parliament recently agreed to raise the retirement age from 57 for women and 58 for men to 65 for both sexes, with no votes against. In addition, the pay of

public sector workers is to be cut once again and protections against dismissal watered down.

Janša is one of the country's most hated politicians. Several times he has tried to influence the independent media and put critical journalists under pressure. In 1994, he resigned as minister of defence following allegations of abuse of office. During his first period in office as prime minister (2004-2008), he was suspected of being involved in a bribery scandal involving the supply of Finnish "Patria" armoured vehicles. There are ongoing investigations into Janša in several European Union states.

In the December 2011 parliamentary elections, Janša was punished electorally. After the election winner Zoran Jankovič and his Positive Slovenia party failed to put together a coalition that could command a majority, the parliament elected Janša as prime minister in January 2012.

Kangler, mayor of Maribor (population, 95,000), is similarly controversial. Last year, the police searched the city hall and Kangler's private residence as a result of suspicion of corruption. However, no charges were laid against the politician.

Due to the difficult financial situation, Maribor has had to cut its programme as European City of Culture and close down numerous projects and events. After the massive protests, Kangler resigned his position on Thursday.

The alienation of Slovenians from the country's political class was clear in the presidential elections. In the run-off election on Sunday, voter turnout was just 31 percent, a record low.

The election took place between the incumbent Danilo Türk and the former premier Borut Pahor. Türk was supported by the opposition and the trade unions, Pahor by the government.

With 67 percent, Pahor received twice as many votes as Türk. During his five-year period in office, Türk

explicitly supported the government's austerity programme and declared that saving the banks was his primary objective.

Incoming president Pahor supports the same policy, but even more aggressively. Last year, his government collapsed after he attempted to push through cuts in pensions and social programmes. In this regard, his declaration that his election was "just the beginning" should be seen as a warning.

Since the pension reforms were blocked last year by means of a referendum, Janša and Pahor are trying to bring on board both the opposition and the unions to jointly push through the attacks on the population.

Given the ongoing protests, Janša has offered the opposition early parliamentary elections in the middle of next year. "If the opposition wants, we are offering them participation in government or new elections", he said.

Talks are also to be launched with the unions, after they announced a general strike for January. During his presidential campaign, Pahor had declared that he would try to find a "consensus" with all participants in order to overcome the crisis in the country.

With the social attacks, Jansa and Pahor are following the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has long called for harsh reforms in Slovenia. "Prompt action to address problems in the financial sector, consolidate public spending, and reform the labour market is essential to resolve the current crisis and lay the groundwork for future growth in Slovenia", Antonio Spilimbergo, head of the IMF mission in Slovenia recently declared.

This former Yugoslav republic is experiencing the sharpest reverse in GDP in the euro zone after Greece as a result of the economic crisis. The European Commission recently forecast a fall in economic output by 2.3 percent this year, with a decline of 1.6 percent next year. Interest rates for state bonds are currently near the critical 7 percent mark.



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