

Newly founded party wins election in Slovenia

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The virtual collapse of the established bourgeois parties and the victory of a little-known jurist with hardly any political experience make clear the depth of the political crisis in Slovenia. Twenty-five years after the restoration of capitalism in the former Yugoslav republic, and 10 years after it joined the European Union (EU), Slovenia is characterised by political, economic and social instability.

The political newcomer Miro Cerar and his SMC party, named after himself and founded just six weeks ago, won a landslide victory in parliamentary elections last Sunday. By contrast, the established social democratic and conservative parties suffered a debacle. Of the 1.7 million eligible voters, just 51 percent took part in the vote. In 2011, participation was over 65 percent.

The legal professor and renowned lawyer, Cerar was previously best known due to his parents. His father Miroslav Cerar was a double Olympic champion in gymnastics, and his mother Zdenka was Yugoslavian youth champion in the same sport. His newly founded party has now won 34.6 percent of the vote at its first elections.

Although the SMC is described in the media as a green-liberal party, the lacklustre Cerar avoided taking any clear political position during the election campaign. Instead, he railed against corruption and promised to bring morals back to politics. His election campaign was directed above all against the conservative Democratic Party (SDS) and its leader, former Prime Minister Janez Jansa, who is now serving a two-year prison sentence due to bribery. With 20.7 percent of the vote, the SDS became the second largest party.

Positive Slovenia, the party of Ljubljana Mayor Zoran Jankovic, which won the election in 2011, failed to enter parliament, along with the right-wing Citizen's List (DL), which was involved in the last government,

and the conservative People's Party.

Former Prime Minister Alenka Bratusek, who resigned in May, was punished for her brutal austerity policies. With 4.5 percent of the vote, her alliance Alenka Bratusek Zapp just made it into parliament. Bratusek led Positive Slovenia until the end of April when she was dethroned by Jankovic, which resulted in the downfall of the government and early elections.

The Social Democrats (SD) also suffered major losses, falling from 10 percent to 6 percent of the vote. They were overtaken by the Pensioners' Party (10 percent) and the newly founded United Left (ZL, 6 percent).

Slovenia, once regarded as a role model in the EU, has been in deep economic and political crisis since 2008. Due to the multi-billion debts of the state banks, Slovenia became a candidate for the European stability mechanism in 2012. After the fall of the conservative government of Janez Jansa at the beginning of 2013, Bratusek adopted strict austerity measures and privatisations, which have had horrific consequences. The official unemployment rate is currently 14.2 percent, the highest since 1993. Just six years ago, it stood at 6.2 percent. Slovenia saw the largest protests since independence in 2012 and 2013.

Against this background, the victory of Cerar and the potential talks on forming a government are viewed critically internationally. The EU and International Monetary Fund (IMF) insisted on the austerity efforts of the government in recent years, demanding ever more cuts. The future government will also be under great pressure to continue this course.

Speaking on behalf of the country's business elite, economist Miroslav Verbi? stated that there had to be "more savings in spending." The size of the budget deficit could no longer be tolerated, "especially after the introduction of the debt break," Verbi? told the Vienna-based *Standard*. The privatisations of state

companies introduced by Bratusek had to be continued.

On the list of 15 companies to be sold to boost the state budget are Telekom Slovenia, the Ljubljana airport and Slovenia's second largest bank, NKBN. The sale of the bank was made a condition by the EU commission to permit Slovenia to bail out its banks with state funds.

The already concluded sales of the retail chain Mercator and the paint manufacturer Helios came under criticism during the election campaign. The sale of Mercator to the highly indebted Croatian foodstuffs producer Agrokor was held up due to disputes between the creditor banks. The retail chain was ultimately sold well below its market value. Immediately after the takeover by the Austrian Ring International Holdings (RIH), layoffs began at Helios.

Cerar now faces the task of uniting the deeply divided camps in Slovenia. For years, the government has gone from one crisis to the next, and the conflicts have delayed the planned austerity measures. Cerar announced after the election victory that the voters had opted for a new political culture, "one which does not divide."

There is speculation about a coalition embracing the SMC, the Christian democratic NSI and Bratusek's party. Cerar declared after the elections that he wanted to reevaluate the layoffs in the public sector and privatisation of state-owned companies. To this end he intends to stop the sale of the former monopoly Telekom Slovenia. "We are against the privatisation of some key companies in state ownership which are strategically important for infrastructure," he told the Austria Press Agency.

Such hollow rhetoric aims to clear the way for the entry of supposed left forces in to a coalition. With good reason, Cerar has been compared with former Prime Minister Janez Drnovšek of the early 1990s, who brought right and left parties together to impose the interests of the European banks and business concerns. Among Cerar's potential coalition partners are the Social Democrats, which lost significantly to the newly founded United Left and won only 6 percent of the vote.

The United Left emerged from last year's protest movement. It was established prior to the European elections in May through the merging of the Democratic Workers Party (DSD), the Initiative for

Democratic Socialism (IDS) and the Sustainable Development for Slovenia Party (TRS). It is a coming together of diverse tendencies and was supported by the European United Left and its candidate Alexis Tsipras.

The United Left will assume the same role in Slovenia as Tsipras' Syriza in Greece: to direct the anger over the social attacks into safe channels and suppress the development of an independent movement of the working class.

Luka Mesec, leader of the United Left, was among the organisers of the protests 18 months ago. He speaks out in favour of a broad "left movement." The fact that the United Left is neither left nor socialist is shown by the presence of the TRS in the alliance, a right-wing economically liberal party paying lip service to ecological politics.

Mesec has also reassured the European elites that no resistance to the austerity course should be expected. He welcomed the bailout of businesses and banks with taxpayers' money in order that they could later be privatised.



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