

Briefing on

Parliamentary Elections in Slovenia

April 24, 2022

Marko Lovec
University of Ljubljana

FREEDOM MOVEMENT

election winner

70.9 %

voter turnout

41 out of 90

seats in the National
Assembly for Freedom
Movement

Introduction

Slovenia was a frontrunner among the post-socialist countries in the Euro-Atlantic integration process; it became EU member in 2004 and was the first among the new Central and East European Member States to enter the Eurozone (2007) and to preside over the EU Council (2008).

In the last decade and a half, in the context of the global and EU crises such as the Eurozone and migration crisis, which have had substantial impact on Slovenia, the country witnessed substantial political turbulence, a rise of nationalism and Euroscepticism as well as democratic backsliding. Between the years 2008 and 2020, none of the government coalitions in Slovenia survived until the end of the mandate.

At the parliamentary elections in 2022, the first regular elections in fifteen years, a centrist liberal Freedom Movement (Gibanje za Svobodo – GS) led by Robert Golob, a party that was established just a couple of months before the election, achieved a landslide victory over Janez Janša, the long-time leader of the ruling Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska demokratska stranka – SDS). Over the past few years, Janša's SDS has adopted a populist nationalist rhetoric and aligned itself with illiberal forces, such as Victor Orban of Hungary and Donald

Trump, using their playbook as a source of inspiration to consolidate its power.

Political context

Soon after the accession of Slovenia to the EU, the centre-left side of the political spectrum began to deconsolidate. After being defeated at the 2004 parliamentary elections by Janša, the Liberal Democratic Party (Liberalna demokracija Slovenije – LDS), the party that was in power during most of the transition period, started to decline. During the global and EU crises period, deconsolidation of the centre-left reached extreme proportions, with established parties disappearing and new parties entering parliament during each of the elections. On the centre-right, following the collapse of its second government due to allegations of corruption and Janša's brief imprisonment in 2014, SDS managed to sustain its position by evolving into a hegemonic force, adopting nationalist-populist rhetoric and aligning with illiberal regimes such as that of Orban's Fidesz.

In 2020, after the fragmented centre-left minority government led by Marjan Šarec of the List of Marjan Šarec (Lista Marjana Šarca – LMŠ) fell apart, Janša took the opportunity of many MPs resisting early

elections that would end their careers, as well as the start of the pandemic, to put together his third coalition government. Members of his coalition were, besides SDS, New Slovenia (Nova Slovenija – Nsi) and individual members from the Modern Centre Party (Stranka modernega centra – SMC) and Pensioner's party (Demokratska stranka upokojencev – DeSUS). Additional votes were provided by the Slovenian National Party (Slovenska nacionalna stranka – SNS) and the two minority MPs.

The government soon faced allegations of corruption in the process of procurement of medical supplies, of using the emergency measures and laws to target its political opponents, and of interference with the judiciary, media and civil society. Internationally, Janša made some controversial steps, such as congratulating Trump for winning the elections (which he lost) and using strong rhetoric against liberal European politicians, representatives of EU institutions and media.

Towards the end of the 2021, in the context of the growing pressures on and the declining role of right-wing populists and Eurosceptic forces in Europe and beyond, in the second part of the Slovenian EU Council presidency, Janša adopted more moderate tones to regain some external legitimacy.

Elections campaign

There has been strong mobilization against Janša's government on the side of civil society, which has engaged in protests almost since the beginning of the government mandate. The government has attempted to constrain protests, including by instrumentalising the police. In reaction to the government's politics, parts of the population, such as young people and people who previously did not vote for any party, have been mobilised. At the referendum on water in 2021, civil society managed to block the government's law that would reduce protection of the natural environment. At the referendum, the share of youth turnout was no longer below its share in the electorate (at the 2018 parliamentary elections, share of youth votes was still 15% below its electoral share).

Civil society has often expressed disappointment with the weak responses of the fragmented centre-left opposition. In the second half of 2021, Social Democrats (Socialni demokrati – SD), Marjan Šarec's List (Lista Marjana Šarca – LMŠ), Alenka Bratušek's Party (Stranka Alenke Bratušek – SAB) and The Left (Levica) formed the Constitutional Arch Coalition (Koalicija ustavnega loka – KUL) to close their ranks and join forces in the fight against Janša's interference with independent institutions, and civil rights and liberties.

Towards the end of the year, Robert Golob, director of a state-controlled energy company, after Janša's government had decided not to extend his mandate, launched the Freedom Movement, which featured several other individuals who also faced pressures from the government for their critical stance. The Movement soon reached a strong position at the opinion polls and became a competitor to Janša's SDS for victory at the 2022 parliamentary elections.

The official start of the elections campaign coincided with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Janša adopted strong pro-Ukrainian rhetoric in an attempt to divert attention away from domestic topics. He was one of the first Western leaders to visit Kyiv, which earned him some positive coverage from the Western media. Domestically, his government re-regulated oil prices and distributed energy vouchers to a large part of the population to earn public support. SDS used two electoral slogans: "we build Slovenia" and "no experiments". The former referred to huge infrastructure investments (using EU funds) and the latter was a critique of the centre-left political competitors who either had no record of accomplishment (Golob) or were associated with the pre-independence communist regime, largely considered a failed experiment.

Election results

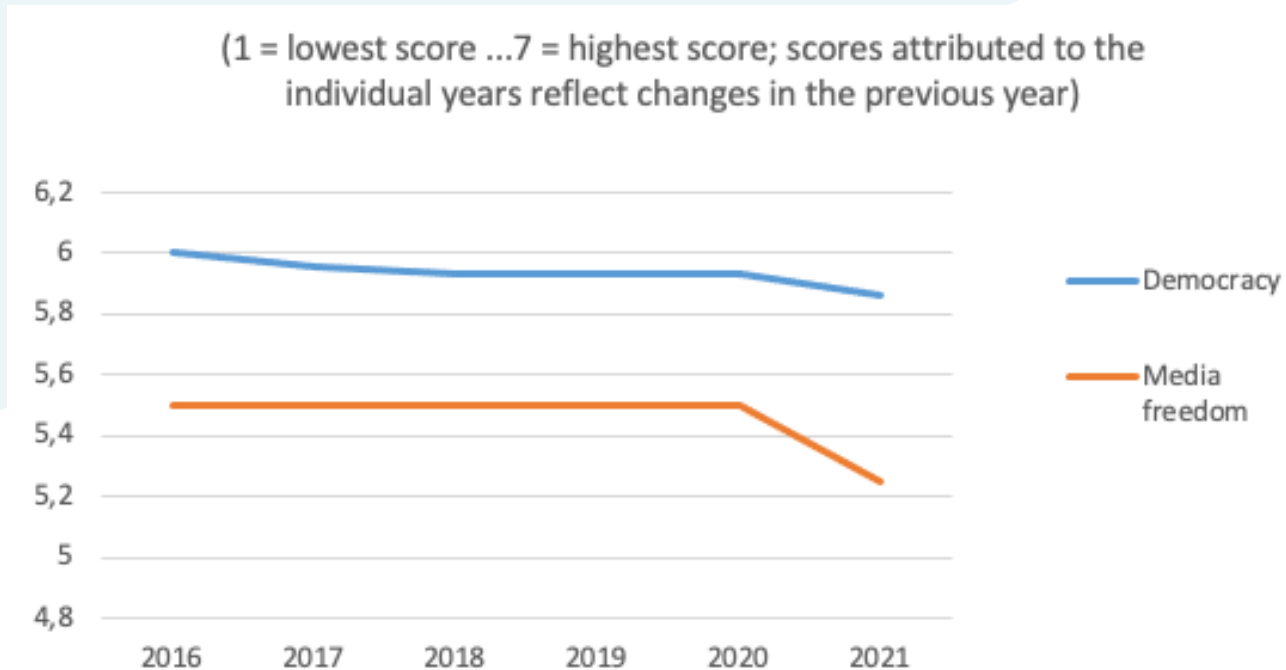
The elections held on 24 April were characterized by almost 70% turnout, the highest in over 20 years. Golob's GS secured a relative victory by 34.53%, which translated into 41 seats in the parliament (out of 90), followed by Janša's SDS (23.52%, 27 seats), NSi (6.86%, 8 seats), SD (6.66%, 7 seats) and the Left (4.93%, 5 seats) (as mentioned already, two seats in the parliament are reserved for elected representatives of Hungarian and Italian national minorities). While all of the aforementioned pre-existing parties achieved a lower share compared to the 2018 elections, many other parties, both pre-existing and newly established, did not make it over the 4% threshold. This is why some of the parties, namely SDS and NSi, were able to increase the number of their seats in the parliament. GS won especially in the western constituencies, while SDS won in south-eastern ones.

Such election results were explained by strong mobilisation of the centrist voters, who mostly voted against Janša, and by tactical voting of the centre-left voters, who supported the most likely candidate for the relative victory to avoid the repetition of the fragmented and weak centre-left opposition.

The most likely coalition will be between Golob's GS and SD. Another possibility is a coalition between GS, SD and The Left. Such a coalition would theoretically be more stable but could also be challenged by more critical views of The Left on the issues such as Slovenia's NATO membership and related commitments. Another possible coalition would be between GS, SD and NSi. Such a coalition would bridge strong polarisation that has been hampering Slovenian politics. However, due to support of the NSi for Janša's government, this coalition is less likely. Due to a lack of experience and human resources, Golob will have to take on board many members of the centre-left parties that failed to pass the threshold, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

Domestically, the government is expected to restore the independence of institutions and adopt progressive liberal policies, with more attention paid especially to the environment, e.g. to the sustainable energy transition. The government has inherited challenges such as growing public debt, poor access to public healthcare and ageing, and will have to cope with an unstable international environment. Lack of experience will pose a challenge for the new government and so will the risk of further political instability in Slovenia. Internationally, a moderate pro-European policy can be expected. Slovenia is unlikely to have the media coverage it had during the Janša government for its controversial actions.

Freedomhouse-Nations in transit ratings of Slovenia



Parliamentary elections results 2022

Party	Votes	%	Seats	+/-
Freedom Movement (Gibanje za svobodo-GS)	406,761	34.53	41	New
Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska demokratska stranka-SDS)	277,094	23.52	27	+2
New Slovenia – Christian Democrats (Nova Slovenija – NSi)	80,757	6.86	8	+1
Social Democrats (Socialni demokrati-SD)	78,393	6.66	7	-3
The Left (Levica)	51,662	4.39	5	-4
List of Marjan Šarec (Lista Marjana Šarca-LMŠ)	43,885	3.73	0	-13
Let's Connect Slovenia (alliance of SMC and several other parties) (Povežimo Slovenijo-PoS)	40,270	3.42	0	-10
The Truth – anti-covid measures never again (Resni.ca)	33,680	2.86	0	New
Party of Alenka Bratušek (Stranka Alenke Bratušek-SAB)	30,773	2.61	0	-5

In the framework of a panel discussion series, the **Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe** analyzes parliamentary elections in the countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The event is jointly organised with the Political Academy of the Austrian People's Party and the Karl Renner Institute.

