

# Slovenia: The struggle against authoritarian liberalism is more urgent than ever

Epidemic and the far right on the European periphery

Thursday 13 August 2020, by [PODVRŠIC Ana](#), [VESELINOVICH Jaša](#) (Date first published: 15 July 2020).

**Rarely given any space in international media, Slovenia has recently been filling the (web)pages of newspapers like *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*, *Courrier International* and the BBC. Reports were about thousands of people protesting on bicycles against the new right-wing government, led by Janez Janša and his Slovenska demokratska stranka (SDS - Slovenian Democratic Party). They are known internationally for their ideological, political and financial links to Viktor Orbán's Fidesz. Under the guise of fighting the coronavirus, the Slovenian government combined strict public health measures (broadly supported by the public) with a vicious attack on public institutions, journalists, NGOs and practices of formal democracy.**

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\*Preliminary note: The article was written at the end of May 2020. Since then, the protests have further intensified and the social initiatives, mentioned at the end of this article, succeeded in equipping the protests with better articulated and more progressive demands. At the same time, the government has stepped up its confrontational response to the weekly protests. On the one hand, the protests have become more heavily policed. On the other hand, there have been attempts at organizing simultaneous, pro-government protests in Ljubljana, the capital city. These protests have been led by well-known neo-nazis and (former) SDS members and remained relatively unsuccessful in shifting the overall dynamic of weekly gatherings- In the meantime, the government has continued its attacks on the media. It has overseen a sale of a TV channel by a state-owned enterprise to a Hungarian investor close to Viktor Orban. It also unveiled a legislative proposal aimed at financially devastating the national radio- television. Prime minister Janša continued to exert pressure on the judiciary, writing to the Supreme State Prosecutor and asking for a more vigorous prosecution of the protesters. All of this, in combination with the still unravelling corruption scandals and assorted daily outrages (e.g. Janša relativizing genocide in Srebrenica on its anniversary) will likely contribute to the continuation of the protests.

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newspapers like *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*, *Courrier International* and the BBC. Reports were about thousands of people protesting on bicycles against the new right-wing government, led by Janez Janša and his Slovenska demokratska stranka (SDS - Slovenian Democratic Party). They are known internationally for their ideological, political and financial links to Viktor Orbán's Fidesz. Under the guise of fighting the coronavirus, the Slovenian government combined strict public health measures (broadly supported by the public) with a vicious attack on public institutions, journalists, NGOs and practices of formal democracy.

Such developments might come as a surprise to many who considered this small country on the Eurozone's industrialized periphery as a neo-corporatist (South-)Eastern European exception whose recent political trajectory was in addition characterized by the emergence of and entering into the Parliament of (radical) left-oriented Left Party (Levica) in 2014. The predominant media reaction to the current events in Slovenia has been limited to warnings against Slovenia's turn away from "European values" towards the illiberal Visegrád four, while socio-economic aspect and class power relations SDS is defending have been ignored. Instead of considering SDS as something external to the European integration project, it would be more correct and politically productive to contextualise the rise and policymaking of yet another far-right party on the European industrial periphery within the European authoritarian liberal state project and its contradictions.

### **Authoritarian liberalism and its European manifestations**

The ongoing tensions between democracy and liberalism, between political and economic rights, are far from being unique to contemporary developments, let alone post-Yugoslav Slovenia. They are immanent to the establishment and reproduction of a liberal market economy based on private ownership and world market, i.e. capitalism, as such. Unsurprisingly, it is in the debates that flourished in the core European regions in interwar years, a period of intensive struggles over the extent of democratic participation of the masses and the sanctity of property rights, that we can find productive insights for reflecting upon the current situation. The reinterpretation of Carl Schmitt's project of an 'authoritarian state' by his contemporary and SPD member Hermann Heller is especially illuminating (Mastnak 2015, Chamayou 2018).

Schmitt was a member of the Nazi Party who devoted his juristic knowledge and skills to theorising, legalising and legitimatising the ascendancy of Nazi regime (Gowan 1994). For Schmitt, the key problems of the economic crisis of the Weimar Republic were of political character and related to the incapacities of the Weimar system of "pluralist democracy" to govern or discipline popular aspirations and pressures from below. He called for the restoration of a "strong state" that would act as an independent instance of authoritative decision-making. This call was heeded by the government in late Weimar which elevated the "catchphrase of the 'authoritarian state' ... to the level of a governmental programme" (Heller, 2015, p. 295). For Heller, Schmitt's authoritarian state as realized in Weimar remained in its essence a liberal one. He coined the concept of "authoritarian liberalism" to "denigrate the attempts of the German state in alliance with big business [that] bypassed parliamentary democracy, using presidential decrees under cover of emergency, in order to impose austerity and defend the social relations of capitalism and economic liberalism - competition, the profit motive, accumulation, private property, and social inequality". (Wilkinson, 2018, p. 12)

Thus, Heller urged to consider how the proponents of political liberalism position themselves towards the economic order and how political liberalism - insisting on a strict and substantive separation between the political and the economic - disregards the question of economic power and domination. This is crucial because market liberties and their consequences i.e. commodification,

competition, profit motives, individualisation, lead to social fragmentation, dislocation and the undermining of societal links and solidarity, necessary for any meaningful democratic participation to thrive (Polanyi 2008, Wilkinson 2018).

Schmitt's warnings about democratic processes potentially curtailing economic liberties inspired many debates within the then emerging neoliberal economic thought. In the post-war period, these »lessons of Weimar« also played a historically important role in thinking about and constructing what became the European Union. They guided the then predominant European Christian Democrats who were working closely with (German) ordoliberals. In contrast to classical liberalism, ordoliberal economic thought gives the state with its rules- based system of law and regulations a central place in the improvement of market conditions. Strong public authority, constitutional and institutional checks, technocratic rules and expertise are seen as necessary means to prevent or block any distortion of market forces, especially in the field of competition. Aiming to institutionalise "a system ensuring that competition in the common market is not distorted", the Treaty of Rome (Art.3, Part one) not only did not bear practically no sign of what is normally understood as Keynesian welfare, but also created a supranational institutional channel for the European competition policy and its gatekeepers - the European Commission (EC) and its the Directorate General for Competition (Wigger 2015, 119).

The anti-social and anti-democratic character of the European integration has been further deepening since the mid-1980s (cf. Močnik 2006, 116). Friedrich Hayek's vision of European interstate federalism, claiming that supranational rule-based authority would most efficiently protect free markets in as much as it would de-politicize economic relations, limit national macroeconomic sovereignty and discourage solidarity between popular masses, became the main inspiration for the forthcoming Maastricht Treaty establishing the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) (Gowan 2009). Through the EMU, single market rules forbidding any state-led strategic industrial policy, were complemented with fiscal restrictions, liberalisation of financial markets and the creation of the centralised supranational monetary authority prevented from acting as the lender of last resort to Member states in financial difficulties and focusing exclusively on price stability. With small and inflexible European budget, such institutional architecture prioritises competition, monetary and financial issues at the expense of social ones and subordinates the concerns for secure employment and social equality to the interests of capital, especially to the leading European fractions from export-oriented and financial sectors. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the concept of social market economy, advanced by Alfred Müller-Armack, ordoliberal adviser to German Minister for Economic Affairs, in the post-war period, figures in 2009 Lisbon Treaty (Art 3(3)).

Bringing the key macroeconomic decision-making under the control of the European Central Bank (ECB) and the EC, the two key supranational and non-elected institutions, liberated from direct democratic pressures from local constituencies, the EMU "inscribed the neoliberal policy of market freedom associated with Hayek through the creation of European supranational institutional devices that check expansionary responses to labour conflict" (Bonefeld 2002, 132-33). During the Eurozone crisis, European authoritarian liberalism loomed large in the political empowerment of the informal Eurogroup meetings and the interventionism of the European central banking authority, all in the name of protecting the interests of financial and export-oriented capital (Keucheyan and Durand, 2015). Streeck (2015, 369) even draws parallels between the ECB and Schmitt's conception of the sovereign, "entitled and proves himself as such in being able to suspend the law and use whatever means available, legal or extra-legal, to secure the survival of the community".

During the recent epidemic, the EC decided to activate the "general escape clause" and suspend the State Aid and Stability and Growth Pact restrictions to allow the member states to exceed the spending ceilings put on public finance. While this decision indeed helped the governments to mitigate the effects of the health crisis, it did not in itself provide for any greater democratic

participation and integration of subaltern social classes into the policy-making – be it on local or supranational level. Much like in the financial storm that followed the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy, the non-elected EC and the ECB remain the key, “sovereign” actors of the European current policy-making. Although the outbreak of the epidemic and the shocks to public health and social systems revealed the failures of the austerity-focused European semester cycles, the authoritarian liberal construction of the European integration project remains intact.

The short review of debates on authoritarian liberalism and its embeddedness in the EU’s functioning allows us to understand the anti-democratic tendencies of the socio-political system within which the recent ascendancy of the Slovenian far-right took place. As an Eurozone member since 2007, the Slovenian state and its macroeconomic policy-making were much reshaped by the European architecture. The ambition to selectively curb the participation of subordinated social forces in state decision-making with institutional barriers and technocratic norm-based rules is not only a property of the European economic and financial architecture. As will be shown below, it emerged as a particularly powerful response of the Slovenian ruling classes to the crisis of peripheral capitalism as triggered by the 2007/08 global financial and later the Eurozone crisis. In fact, the strengthening of the far-right parties and movements in the EU in the recent years is much related to the strategy of the European centre parties, on the periphery in particular, of transferring the costs of the crisis onto workers and middle classes. This was done by relying on and reinforcing European authoritarian liberalism and thereby compensating for the structural weaknesses of the EMU design. In response to this strategy and its socio-economic outcomes, an important current arose within the contemporary Right, which SDS is also inspired by. This current, most prominently represented by Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, is challenging the (de)politicized character of the European state project and the core-periphery divide on which it is premised (Becker and Smet, 2018). The transformation of SDS from traditional right to the radical right in the last decade should also be understood against the background of these crises of the European integration project and authoritarian liberalism.

## **The far right as a reaction to the crisis of the Eurozone peripheral capitalism in Slovenia**

Since the turn of 2010s, SDS has become the most financially, socially and ideologically powerful voice on the Right and later on far-Right in Slovenia. Like Fidesz, SDS was formed in the late 1980s and has a solid social base, well-established network of cross-generational and cross-regional activists, as well as a powerful “ideological” apparatus, including media (generously co-financed by people close to Fidesz) and a smaller network of intellectuals based predominantly in private higher education. In addition, the Party was already in power twice, during Slovenia’s integration into Eurozone (2004-2008) and the Eurozone crisis (2012-13). Nowadays’ SDS is, however, much more radicalised version of its pre-crisis self. In fact, similar to its Italian peers in Salvini’s Lega, SDS has turned social media into a powerful tool for inciting its social base with xenophobic lies about the omnipotent Soros and the refugees, especially after 2015 refugee “crisis”, as well as for the personal discreditation of opponents in media, politics, or public life (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). Due to its powerful party apparatus, this Party of the “traditional Right” could not be challenged by any new right-wing formation, often classified as “populist”, as was the case in some other European countries.

SDS enjoys loyal electoral support and ranked second and first in the parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2018, when they obtained 20% and 25% of votes, respectively. However, this stable support, which persists despite the fact that its leader Janša was accused of (and briefly imprisoned for) corruption, is also related to the historical crisis of peripheral capitalism in Slovenia and the

political failure to elaborate any meaningful alternative developmental project. In the run-up to the crisis, Slovenian economy became deeply integrated in the German-led production and the European circuits of financial capital and subordinated to the non-elected EC and the ECB with regards to state aid and monetary issues. The Slovenian economy was hard hit by the 2007-08 global financial and the Eurozone crises. GDP recovered to its 2008 level almost ten year later in 2017 (SI-STAT), mainly because of the harsh austerity drive and the prolongation of the crisis related to the Eurozone turmoil. In addition to the crisis of dependent export manufacturing in 2008/09, Slovenia experienced a severe sovereign debt crisis, resulting from the public budget being forced to shoulder the costs of the restructuring of indebted domestic banking-corporate sectors.

During the Eurozone crisis, the unemployment rate more than doubled and began to slowly fall only with the restoration of economic growth in 2014 (SI-STAT). Successive governments used the European integration and the pressures from international competition as a handy cover to liberalise social and employment arrangements. While social pressures and struggles, often led by trade unions, succeeded to somewhat slow-down the dismantling of public welfare, this was not the case for wage and working conditions which became the main element of the regular trade-offs between the institutional social partners. Due to restrictive wage policy, the 1989 average real wage level was restored only in 2006 (Podkaminer, 2013: 17, tab.13a). Since 2002, Slovenia has recorded the highest shares of temporary employment among the youth in the EU, standing at 63% of total employment in 2008 (Eurostat). Then years later, Slovenia ranked the second among the EU state regarding the share of temporary contracts in the employment of youth, behind Spain (67.1), but before Portugal (61.1) (Eurostat).

During this profound social and financial crisis, the strategy of gradual neoliberalisation, led by neo-corporatist coalition between pro-European state leaders, managers and trade unions from export-oriented industry, simply broke down. Between 2009-2013, the country became the arena of on-going strikes, protests, and mass demonstrations characterised by a wholesale rejection of the old parties and the predominance of anti-corruption slogans (Stanojević, Kanjuo Mrčela, and Breznik 2016). These were partially appeased only through economic recovery. The intensification of social conflicts and struggles was related not only to the economic and financial crisis, but also to the evermore visible interventions of European authoritarian liberalism. The regular EU-level supervision of the macroeconomic policy within the excessive deficit procedures already narrowed the manoeuvring space for Slovenian policy-makers. But the EC and the ECB also directly intervened into the domestic policy-making and institutional setup regarding the restructuring and recapitalisation of the banking sector at the height of the crisis. During the fiscal coordination cycle in mid-2013, the EC halted procedures and, together with the ECB, requested a new asset quality review of bank portfolios. The new review arrived at a much higher estimation of the total capital needs of the banks than the initial calculations. The overall banking rescuing operation exceeded 10% of GDP and further fuelled the rise in public debt (Breznik and Furlan, 2015). In addition, due to single market state aid provisions, the Slovenian governments were obliged to enact an unprecedented privatization of the banking sector under a strict supervision of the EC (Piroska and Podvršič, 2019). The overall result of this orchestrated state rescue of banks was the stabilisation of the banking system and restoration of profits at the expense of deepening social fragmentation and insecurity. In 2018, the newly-privatised main banking group, NLB recorded over 200 million of net profits (Sovdat, 2020).

The political vacuum that emerged within this major crisis of Eurozone peripheral capitalism in Slovenia was mainly filled by political newcomers which could hardly fit the classical definition of a political party. After 2013 pragmatically built alliances of political opportunists of pro-business orientation whose main virtue was often that they were not Janez Janša led the ruling coalitions. These personalized parties quickly gained voters' confidence with their "new face" discourse, but

lost it just as rapidly. Since 2008, six different governments have been in power and all of them resigned before the end of their term. Once in power, the nominally centre-left governments were faced with increasingly right-wing SDS as the main opposition party and continued with neoliberal policies that had increasingly anti-participatory and (far-)right wing characteristics. The on-going austerity, a far-reaching foreign-led privatization of enterprises and banks, the constitutionalisation of the fiscal rule, the restriction of public referenda on fiscal issues, international treaties and matters of national security, installing barbed wire on the borders and militarization of refugee crisis, deportations of asylum-seekers, the appointment of an openly xenophobic and racist security expert to the post of state secretary, and the recognition of Juan Guaidó as a temporary president of Venezuela are among the main “achievements” of the recent ruling coalitions, whose leaders consider themselves as representatives of the “moderate centre”.

But the political weakness of advancing an alternative developmental project should also be understood in relation to the gradual de-radicalisation of the Left. Now already in their second parliamentary mandate, the Left’s origins lay in the 2012-2013 mass protests (Robertson 2014). Mixing anti-austerity and anti-corruption demands against the then Janša government (2012-2013), the protests were the birthplace of the (radical) left *Iniciativa za demokratičen socializem* (IDS - Initiative for Democratic Socialism). To the extent that it gave rise to the strong social movement on the left which opened the questions of alternatives, socialism, and democratic policy-making, the crisis of peripheral capitalism in Slovenia was politically productive – at least initially. Forming an alliance with two other parties and some small civil society organizations, the Left, then still called the *Združena Levica* (United Left), entered the 2014 parliamentary elections with an anti-privatisation programme and a strong emphasis on fighting austerity both within and outside the parliament (Toplišček 2019). Yet, once elected, the party increasingly focused on parliamentary activities. This came at the expense of grass-roots and local, branch organising as well as building of alliances with labour representatives, and led to the centralisation of power in the parliamentary group with privileged access to media and resources.

In 2016, a major internal dispute took place when about one third of active members (including entire local branches) left the party because of their disagreement with the (parliamentary) core cadre’s ambition for political power. The Left, which was established in order to defend exploited working classes and run against the neoliberal “There is no alternative!”, steadily transformed into the representative of an urban, educated middle-class and rather young population, often reactively defending social welfare state and building on a rhetoric of socio-cultural liberties. Although strongly supportive of strikes and other concrete fights for workers’ rights, it plays no role in actually (co-)organising them. Consequently, the Left lost the support from many radical left activists and movements, and increasingly addressed and attracted – as well as felt the pressures from – the disappointed voters of centrist liberal parties. This is how in 2018 elections, its electoral support increased from 6% in 2014 to 9,3% (Jerele et. al 2018). Modelling itself on the “Portuguese example”, the Left decided to provide external support to the minority government of the latest in the series of centrist “new faces” - the former comedian and small-town mayor Marjan Šarec. The Left conditioned this move with a signing of a “Memorandum” containing a timeline with several pro-social measures to be implemented throughout the government’s mandate. However, the ruling coalition had no intention of realizing the agreement. After a hard fought (and ultimately successful) battle for the previously agreed upon minimum wage increase, the Left officially cancelled its external support for the government.

After additional tensions within the fraught coalition, prime minister Marjan Šarec, hoping to provoke yet another early election, resigned in January 2020, just as the danger of a world- wide spread of coronavirus from China entered into the public debate spotlight. Contrary to Šarec’s calculation, new elections did not materialise. Janša’s SDS relatively smoothly signed a coalition

agreement with two smaller centrist parties with low public support and another right-wing party, the New Slovenia, which aspires to the image of respectable conservatives akin to the German CDU. The political weakness of Janša's coalition partners and the fact that most of them owe their political survival to SDS, means that the new government is under almost total control of its most powerful party.

### **Epidemic as a cover for a further authoritarian neoliberalisation with a party state project**

The new far-right government took power in mid-March just when the epidemic was officially declared. Since then, its governing was focused on four core activities: a) the adoption of three intervention packages, amounting to almost 12% of GDP, which provided state subventions especially for middle classes (Breznik 2020), relatively modest liquidity provisions for small and medium capital, and some aid to tourist sector and restaurant business; b) curtailing the independence of public health experts and epidemiologists by immediately replacing the leadership of National Institute for Public Health and centralizing the pandemic-related policy-making in the government; c) emphasizing the role of the police in enforcing social-distancing measures, attempting to expand the powers of the army patrolling the refugee-frequented southern border d) attacking critical segments of civil society and limiting their formal inclusion in the policy-making processes. By the end of May, the government implemented most of the measures in a relatively exclusionary way, with a practical ignorance of institutional social partners as well as minimal consideration of the parliamentary opposition. Regarding socio-economic measures, the government mostly relies on the advice of a new, government-appointed, advisory group with no legal basis, composed mainly of neoliberal economists often running their own private businesses, state functionaries from SDS' previous stints in government, and representatives of domestic exporters. Fast-tracked decision-making, with minimal space for the parliamentary debates, predominated. In fact, at the outbreak of the epidemic, the parliament gave the government full discretion in the use of budget funds approved for purposes not deemed part of obligatory expenditures. For up to three months after the official end of epidemic, the government thus has full control over the budget and only has to present to the MPs the *fait accompli* report of how the money was spent once a month.

Using replacement of cadres and the establishment of ad hoc "crisis groups" as its favourite policy tools, SDS has evidently used the epidemic as a cover to advance its state project where the practices of representative democracy and social bargaining are to be subordinated to the ruling party's political and socio-economic ambitions. As the first in the EU, the government declared the end of the epidemic in the mid-May in order to prevent the automatic prolongation of the (selective) social measures, adopted in the initial packages, beyond May. Instead, a third package was adopted at the end of May to provide legal basis for the EU-subsidized *Kurzarbeit* schemes, but also to secure the return to neoliberal economic normality under the guise of economic recovery plan. The attempts to further reduce workers' rights gained first legal grounds with the adoption of the first intervention package which allowed for the possibility that workers temporarily sent home for waiting for work are forced to undertake low-paid seasonal work (Breznik, 2020). In the discussion regarding labour market provisions for the economic recovery period, the flexicurity concept, advanced by the government advisory group, sparked public debate. While labour market reforms are currently put aside, the government is leading a far-reaching attack on anyone that could slow down or block the construction projects, which are deemed essential for the post-crisis recovery. At the same time, only minimal extra resources were dedicated to the public healthcare sector, although the latter had experienced chronic financial difficulties already before the epidemic. And the government decided for this move only very reluctantly and after the State Council threatened to veto the whole intervention package. Last but not least, the government liberalized the existing



construction regulations with plenty of new legislative restrictions which excluded environmental NGOs and other “unpleasant” civil society organizations from challenging new construction permits on environmental grounds (Petković, 2020). With this supreme act of authoritarian (neo)liberal ruling, where state public power is used to fend off democratic-political »intrusion«, the Ministry of Environment completely appropriated the political space and subordinated the “public interest” regarding environmental issues to top state functionaries and capital, especially the private one (Gantar, 2020). Commenting the preparation of state investment program, Andrej Vizjak, the Minister of Environment, clearly said that when the choice will have to be made between two construction projects, the priority will be given to the one financed with private resources. (Hreščak, 2020).

That said, when speaking about SDS governance, a further qualification is in place. Much in contrast to, let’s say, ordoliberalism for whom economic policy should be “freed” from politics and placed in the hands of technocratic bodies and norm-based policy-following, the currently ruling party in Slovenia is known for its aggressive and systematic replacements of top personnel in defence structures, managers in state owned enterprises, and attempts to privatize the “(remaining) big monopolies” (public healthcare, education, and radio- television), into the hands of SDS-loyalists. During the epidemic, this construction of the party state reached previously unseen extent and included the replacement of the director of the Slovenian Statistical Office, who acted according to legislation and refused to provide protected raw data to the above-mentioned government advisory group (Cirman and Vuković, 2020). The government also changed the non-executive directors of the Bank Assets Management Company (BAMC, the so-called “bad bank”), established in 2013 to restructure bad loans and indebted companies and whose assets amounted to over 700 million € in January 2020 (Simac and Božin, 2020). Note that this took place together with the change of nomination procedures. The government changed the BAMC statute which circumvented previously required expert evaluation of candidates and put the process exclusively into the hands of the Slovenian executive (Finance.Live, 2020). These steps towards repoliticization of state bureaucracy and economic policy from the right are in line with SDS’s long-time ambition to establish so-called Second republic. Janez Janša is regularly claiming that “protracted liberalization” of the Slovenian economy and the absence of any systematic lustration of the state apparatuses are the main barrier to Slovenia’s capitalist success story. Supposed remnants of communist nomenklatura running the hostile deep state can only be overcome through a wide-ranging constitutional and societal reform, thus establishing the Second Republic, finalizing the transition and reaching “true independence” once and for all. As we’ll see below it is especially this aspect of SDS ruling that sparks the revolt among the Slovenian population.

Despite the short period of SDS in power, one can nevertheless attempt to decipher the first contours of the party’s societal project and place it on the map of far-right parties in the region (Becker and Smet 2018). Curbing the influence of civil society and restricting the parliamentary debate and empowering the executive without doubt loom large. Another important element of SDS’s programme is the ambition to gain control over key state apparatuses and the media. According to SDS, reforms are especially urgent in judiciary, where they have long been advocating an end to life tenure of judges. In all these aspects of the party state project, SDS is close to Polish Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS – Law and Justice) and especially Fidesz. Indeed, SDS’s leader, declaring at the beginning of April that “[w]e can rely only on our self and our friends in the region” (24ur.com, 2020), does not hide his sympathies for the Visegrád group and their critical stance towards the EU’s initial inaction in corona crisis and Western Europe’s supposedly pro-migrant policies. Yet, when socio-economic policies are considered, there are also important differences. Both PiS and Fidesz, consider the reorganisation of banking sectors in favour of domestic financial capital as a crucial step and have strategically reduced the share and market powers of foreign subsidiaries. Both parties, but especially PiS, are inspired by national-conservative economic thought



to defend pronounced state role in the economy and develop strategies to counter or mitigate against the subordinated position of their economies within the European division of labour (Becker and Smet 2018). Regarding Fidesz, it is noteworthy that in line with the Party's selective economic nationalism, an increase of taxes on foreign multinationals from retail and financial sector were at the core of the initial measures during the epidemic (Podvršič et al., forthcoming). In other words, Fidesz and PiS are both trying to shift inter- class power relations between foreign and domestic capital by selectively supporting the emergence or strengthening of domestic bourgeoisie.

In contrast, SDS seems to defend "(economic) business as usual", meaning securing neoliberal liberties for (international) capital and markets and further commodifying and commercialising the existing welfare provisions. Contrary to PiS and partially to Fidesz, no sign of challenging the predominant European core-periphery relations can be found in SDS. In this regard, SDS is close to the Czech Občanská demokratická strana (ODS – Civic Democratic Party) and the Slovak Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS – Freedom and Solidarity), which both exhibit strong neo-liberal orientation and do not try to subvert the alliance/subordination of domestic ruling classes to the interest of leading European fractions from financial and export industry (Becker and Smet 2018). That said, although Slovenia, Poland and Hungary are all part of the European industrial periphery dependent on manufacturing exports and foreign capital, there are clear differences in structural constraints these countries face. Among the three, only Slovenian state adopted the common currency and became part of the Eurozone industrial periphery. It can neither use currency devaluation to counteract fluctuations in foreign demand nor rely on its own central banking authority to support its fiscal policy and state projects. Without monetary sovereignty the Slovenian state is much more dependent on the European macroeconomic policy-making than its regional counterparts which can also rely on large(r) domestic markets, as is especially the case for Poland. Current Slovenian government does not question the predominance of international capital and accepts the subordinated position of the Slovenian economy in the Eurozone division of labour. During the initial debates about the "European response" to the epidemic Slovenian government was among the original proponents of the coronabonds (Michalopoulos, 2020).

Regarding its anti-democratic drive, the current Slovenian government thus combines a mix of elements of authoritarian liberalism and more conservative party state project. Whereas for the first it could find a solid inspiration (and institutional basis) in the European integration, the second is closer to the strategies of the state leaders from the European industrial periphery who claim and/or seek, in a more or less consistent manner, to formulate an alternative to the European core-periphery divides, but without a radical transformation of domestic class power relations and structures. Consequently, an opposition to Janša's SDS can be politically productive and socially emancipatory only if it addresses all these elements.

## **The limits and potential of anti-government contestation**

This year's mobilisations against the future Janša's government began as soon as it became clear that he is about to form a coalition. Initially, the mobilisation of social groups with great intellectual and social capital was especially strong and enjoyed media support. A month before SDS managed to secure parliamentary majority, a group of more than 150 academics co-signed an open letter, broadcasting their concern about the country's future if Janša's third government in Slovenia's history was to materialize (Alternativna akademija 2020). During the epidemic, another letter was published – now joined by even more signatories – stating that Slovenia is making big strides in a dangerous direction and is gradually joining "the group of EU member states which are blacklisted as violators of fundamental principles of protecting democracy, rule of law, independence of media, and human rights." The letter ends with a call for protests, where "we will win back the previously

taken-for-granted state of democracy" (Forum za demokracijo 2020). The weekly protests on bicycles indeed rapidly grew after some explosive whistle-blowing about corruption in public procurement of personal protective equipment – medical masks, was added atop of government's authoritarian handling of the crisis and vicious attacks on journalists. Bringing more than ten thousand people on their bicycles into the streets of Ljubljana and more than a dozen other cities every Friday evening around the country, these mass gatherings evolved from small protest actions that had took place at the beginning of the government's mandate.

The currently predominant media discourse and a rapid mobilisation from below against the government can be partly explained by the fact that SDS did not assume the current government as a consequence of elections, but because of the unravelling of government parties. For those familiar with social and political struggles in Slovenia this response is far from surprising. In fact, each time when SDS was in power mass protests took places – in 2005 against the neoliberal reform package and in 2012/13 against austerity and corruption. This "anti-Janša reflex" is partly related to the polarizing policies pursued by SDS but also to the fact that the Slovenian society, comparatively to, let's say, Hungarian and Polish one, is much less conservative. Ever since the first Janša government (2004-2008), the Slovenian civil society – universities and intelligentsia, judiciary, public sector officials, trade unions, journalists, and many NGOs – have been perceived by the right wing as the bastions of left- leaning politics. As such, they are under constant attack both in the forms of cuts to financing (when SDS was in power) as well as persistent personal abuse. Scandalizing over Janša's "attacks on the institutions" or the threats to the "rule of law" are therefore powered by both an honest concern for liberal ideals and the fear of Janša's policies undermining the social standing and well-being of this left-oriented stratum of the Slovenian society.

Main arguments in the predominant "anti-Janša" discourse can be broken down along two axis – the threat of an authoritarian drift on the one hand, and on the other, the complementary move away from "European values" and towards Hungary and other Visegrád states. Accordingly, the current protests started out with relatively narrow demands limited to the political sphere, while socio-economic issues have only recently come more to the fore. The main demand is government's resignation, followed by calls for an end to corruption, more transparency, respect for expertise and public institutions, and more decency. These demands are highly fixated on the figure of Janez Janša and his party. It is true that Janša possesses considerable political power and a very divisive personality, but the personalizing and moralizing line of argument tends to narrow down the space for political debate, instead of opening it. A striking example of this anti-political tendency has been the common slogan "Thiefs!". It should be, however, noted that the struggle of various environmentalist NGOs against the above-mentioned construction legislation change has attracted relatively solid support from otherwise politically fragmented protestors.

The Left's response so far, has been very much within the coordinates laid out by the moralising problematization of SDS's leader and outcries against the government's staff changes within the state apparatuses. On the one hand, the Left has been by far the most vocal political force with regards to socially unjust aspects of some of the purportedly anti- Covid-19 measures. It was instrumental in pointing out "overlooked" social groups and can be credited with achieving their inclusion in subsequent corona stimulus packages. But on the other hand, it has adopted the political line laid out above, which has a further benefit of being easily embraced by the media. The Left's leader Luka Mesec (2020), for example, sees current Janša's government as "grossly abusing its authorities" trying to get rid of liberal democracy. Although the Left's emphasis in these matters is different and their language is full of references to the workers and the poor, they have not managed to articulate a comprehensive alternative to the prevailing "anti-Janšism".

By overly personalizing the current political situation, the predominant anti-Janša argument is overlooking important historical trends and has a very limited political potential. As we have shown,

the checks on genuine democratic policy-making are not only characteristics of the Central Eastern state leaders but are built into the constitutional setup of the European Union. Thus, with no major change in the political content and demands, the current social and media mobilisation against the Slovenian government could lead to another round of the vicious circle reproducing the existing political and socio-economic constellation with its danse macabre where Janša's government is toppled by a protest movement hoping for little more than "decent politicians" and instead getting an evermore neoliberal and right-wing though nominally centrist government. Warnings against the attack on however idealized (pre-SDS government) formal democracy are in itself valuable. But limiting the political debate to this argument precludes any questioning of the prevailing socioeconomic order and does not offer any productive grounds for discussing alternatives capable of envisioning a society where democracy and social equality will rule over markets and not vice-versa, as is currently the case be it through (European) norm-based rules or the politicization of the economy from the right.

To address the burning problems of social precarisation, shrinking public sector services, insecurity and fear, as well as the looming climate collapse and external dependency of the Slovenian economy and its ruling classes, it would be much more productive to contextualize the current Slovenian government's policy-making within the non-resolved crisis of peripheral capitalism and class-power relations that sustain it. There is potential within the current mobilization wave in Slovenia to bring these issues at the forefront of social struggles. In mid-May, first general assembly of various social initiatives and movements took place, where three of them started to collaborate to advance not only an anti-government, but also anti- (capitalist)system agenda. The current joint actions of the cultural workers, environmentalists and the anti-capitalist group, as well as the coming recession, exposing once again the social weaknesses and class nature of the existing socio-political system, present themselves as a good opportunity for articulating an alternative development project and rallying mass support behind it.

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