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Far from Orbán

Minister of Education Jernej Pikalo on Slovenia's new centre-left coalition government and its place in Europe

Read this interview in German.

The result of the Slovenian elections in June 2018 has made the formation of a new government fairly difficult. After long negotiations over the summer, five centre-left parties have formed a coalition which — only with the tolerating support of the Left Party — has a slight majority of 52 out of 90 votes in the parliament. The Slovenian Social Democrats (SD), who came in third in the elections with 10 per cent of the vote, are part of this broad coalition.

Max Brändle spoke to Jernej Pikalo who is designated to become Minister of Science and Education for the SD in the newly formed government.

Why was the formation of a coalition so difficult and how strong is the bond between the five plus one parties that will support the new government?

> The formation was difficult because five centre-left parties do not hold a majority in the parliament. So they needed another partner. The first round of negotiations, which took several weeks, was with New Slovenia – Christian Democrats. At the end it failed, due to the decision of New Slovenia not to enter the centre-left coalition. In the following weeks, negotiations with The Left started and rather quickly led to a successful outcome with regards to the content of the coalition contract. The bond within five coalition partners is rather strong, so The Left opted for separate agreement with the coalition parties. This is why we have a minority government with an outside support of The Left.

Marjan Šarec, a former TV comedian, will become the new Prime Minister. Besides some experience as the mayor of the small town Kamnik, he is a newcomer to politics. This reminds us of similar

careers of former comedians in politics. Is Marjan Šarec the Beppe Grillo of Slovenia?

Marjan Šarec is a relative newcomer to Slovenian national politics. Besides being mayor of Kamnik, he also ran for the position of the President of the Republic and gained a lot of votes, both in the first and in the second round of voting. He also led his party — which is named after him, a phenomenon already seen in Slovenian politics several times — to second place in the parliamentary elections. He ceased to be a comedian several years ago and has since focused solely on politics. His political views are far from Grillo, his political language is less populist and he is media-savvy. Throughout negotiations he has maintained a statesman-like position, focusing intensively on important issues.

The SD was the only party from the former coalition government that managed to improve their election result from 6 to 10 per cent. Still, many found this result disappointing. Why did Marjan Šarec' party, as a complete newcomer on the national level, get a result so much better than the SD and the other centre-left parties?

Slovenian voters are always in search of new political faces. We've seen this phenomenon for several elections in a row now, where newcomers win or come very close to winning the elections. Šarec' party stems from the electorate's conviction that established politicians are not doing their job properly, and that new ones should be at every election who might do the job better. Some political commentators are even saying that the electorate is in permanent search of a saviour, which then almost always disappoints. So also this time, they search for a new one. The result of the Social Democrats at the elections can be seen from two perspectives: It's the only party of the former coalition that actually gained in votes (also in comparison with previous elections), but also, is comparison with pre-election polls of about 4-6 months before the elections, the end result is significantly lower.

25 per cent of the vote went to Janez Janša's right wing SDS party, which had strong support from Viktor Orbán in their election campaign. Eventually, Janša did not manage to form a majority in the parliament. Is Slovenia split between a pro-European centre-left and a right-wing populist camp in line with Viktor Orbán's ideas of illiberal democracy?

In a sense yes. Methods of political campaigning and electoral topics pushed by the SDS show a similar pattern to Orbán and other right-wing populist political parties in Europe. It is a proven recipe that

includes his own party media outlets, very strong online media presence, campaigns based on spreading fear, xenophobia and so on. Slovenians, though, are rather difficult to convince that their new political fortunes are to be found with populist governments in Eastern and Central Europe instead of in the heart of Europe.



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Jernej Pikalo is Minister of Research and Science in the new Slovenian government. From 2013 to 2014, he was Minister of Education, Science and Sport.