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Slovenia's election thriller

Sunday's election promises a close race between the authoritarian Janez Janša and supposed newcomer Robert Golob. But the left still has a chance

Welcome to the foothills of the Alps in Slovenia's super election year! The country is an ideal holiday destination. Perhaps you have already enjoyed the hospitality of the peace-loving Slovenians, who are proud of their snow-capped peaks, picturesque old Adriatic towns, and outstanding wines. The exemplary country of the former Yugoslavia was integrated into the EU at an early stage and had a tradition of welcoming everyone.

But then two evils struck the country in 2020: The Covid-19 pandemic claimed many victims and a right-wing populist called Janez Janša became head of government, with his Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) having taken power without an election after a coalition break-up. Prime Minister Janša exploited the Covid-19 emergency to secure his power – by restricting the right of assembly and stoking fears.

Slovenians have a chance to regain their good image in the super-election year 2022; first in the parliamentary elections on 24 April, where 20 party lists will compete for 90 seats, and then in the autumn in presidential and local elections.

The political chameleon Janez Janša

However, this will not be an easy task. In the past two years, Janša has managed to simultaneously demobilise and polarise Slovenian society politically: Through corruption scandals and smear campaigns in the increasingly SDS-affiliated media, he has deliberately propagated the image of a political class that is lining its own pockets –regardless of which party politicians belong to. With the help of his army of trolls, 'Marsal Tweeto' has reinforced the division in society that has existed since the 1940s. From anti-Semitic and Islamophobic tweets to anti-EU propaganda and sexist comments, he has used every means at his disposal. Calling two female journalists 'presstitues' earned him an indictment –

and it was not the first.

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Many observers saw him radicalising after his second stint in prison in 2014. As a result, the political chameleon Janša was born, who started out as a communist and then moved to the far-right. His attacks on democracy and the rule of law in the former EU flagship country partly resemble a vendetta against 'the system' that had convicted him. He learned how such systemic restructuring works from his hero Viktor Orbán's frequent neighbourly visits. EU funds continue to flow unabated, like the Ljubljanica through the capital, whose tranquillity is only occasionally disturbed by swathes of pepper spray and mounted police beating up peaceful anti-Janša demonstrators. The EU, whose institutions Janša obviously does not take seriously, intervened when he wanted to cut off the money of the news agency STA. But it was through other practices that Janša still managed to bring the media largely 'in line'.

Knight in shing armour

The best thing to come out of the EU during this period was a social democratic figure of light: Slovenian Member of European Parliament Tanja Fajon. A cosmopolitan and popular politician throughout South-Eastern Europe, the former journalist took over the presidency of the Social Democratic Party (SD) in 2020. The country was in a mood for change; protest movements such as on the water referendum were surprisingly successful. While Janša hid behind his Twitter account, Fajon and experts toured across the country's marketplaces with the campaign 'We're listening to you!' to win back citizens' trust in politics.

The results were incorporated into a comprehensive election programme that was intended to appeal to young activists as well as the core social democratic electorate. There was a conscious decision to draw on international experience in election campaigns that had helped social democrats win.

Together with three opposition parties, the list of ex-prime minister Marjan Šarec (LMŠ), the Left (Levica) and the SAB party of ex-prime minister Alenka Bratušek, the SD formalised the electoral alliance KUL ('Koalicija Ustavnega Loka' – Constitutional Arc Coalition) in

September 2021. The coalition has many nominated man young and female first-time candidates with diverse backgrounds who are currently going from door to door. Tanja Fajon smiles at them from the bright red election posters and promises that everything will be ‘drugače’, everything will be ‘different’.

The flight of the ‘dove’

And then everything turned out differently. The KUL coalition was constantly ahead in polls until December 2021, when the supposedly new face Robert Golob entered the electoral arena and immediately overtook the SD on the right – or left? His candidacy completely reshuffled the cards.

In Slovenia’s electoral history, it has already happened three times that political newcomers were elected to the highest government office – and it could happen again this time. Yet ‘the dove’, as Golob is called because of his surname, is not as politically ‘innocent’ as he claims: He was state secretary in Janez Drnovšek’s government and vice-chairman of the ‘Pozitivna Slovenija’ (Positive Slovenia) party. Most recently he was head of the state energy company GEN-I. It was only when the government did not extend his mandate that he turned against them. Since then, he has acted as Janša’s fiercest critic – and that’s also the bulk of his political programme.

With the charismatic manner of a pied piper, Golob has the potential to attract voters from all parts of the political spectrum who are dissatisfied with Janša.

Although he has taken over an existing Green Party and renamed it ‘Gibanje svoboda’ (Freedom Movement), he describes his future politics as ‘a bit left and a bit right’. With the charisma of a pied piper, he has the potential to attract voters from all parts of the political spectrum who are dissatisfied with Janša. As his chances of victory increased, many who had previously sympathised with the KUL coalition jumped on his electoral train.

At the moment, Golob’s ‘Freedom Movement’ is very close to Janša’s SDS in the polls, with Fajon’s SD in third place. How the Alpine election thriller will end remains open.

Potential scenarios

Should Golob win, it is unclear what this means for Slovenia’s future. Will he enter a coalition with KUL in which Fajon, a European

politician, becomes foreign minister? The KUL parties have deliberately left this possibility open, though they have not commented publicly. Sceptics fear that a Golob-KUL coalition could be unstable, and the loss of a majority could once again pave the way for Janša.

Because of his unclear programme, it is difficult to assess in which direction Golob would steer the country. However, a turn away from the government's 'fascist policy', as Golob calls it, would be certain. In that case, he would have to clean up the political mess left by Janša – hopefully in good cooperation with the KUL parties. Above all, it would be necessary to build institutions such as media companies and polling institutes that are accepted as neutral by society as a whole. This is the only way to regain confidence in the functioning of Slovenian democracy.

If, on the other hand, Janša and his political partners succeed in presenting President Borut Pahor with the 46 parliamentary seats necessary to form a government, Slovenia will follow Hungary's dubious 'model'. Janša will use this term in office to secure his power. He will try to further dismantle the rule of law, weaken the opposition, replace even more people he does not like in all spheres he has influence over, and further destabilise society.

If Janša wins, the EU's hesitant actions will fall on its feet, because another right-wing populist will complicate joint decision-making and drag European values into the mud.

Although Janša's authoritarian course seemed like a flirtation with Vladimir Putin, he once again showed his ability to change. With a surprise visit to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv in March, he just about got himself on the right side of history.

The fact that Janša's surprise visit to Ukraine was welcomed abroad and – to some extent – also in Slovenia shows once again how important it is to expose right-wing populists from the outset and openly place them in the right-wing corner. Neither the EU nor parts of the opposition in Slovenia showed him the red card early and clearly enough.

If Janša wins, the EU's hesitant actions will fall on its feet, because another right-wing populist will complicate joint decision-making and drag European values into the mud. It has proven wrong to assume that EU members will be stable democracies forever. If Golob wins, there is hope that, with European support, the country will once again become the model country of the southern Alpine region – and perhaps welcome you on your summer holidays.



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