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The Orbanisation of Slovenia

Slovenia's Prime Minister Janez Janša has learned from Orbán's and Trump's playbook how to slowly dismantles the free press and rule of law

In recent months, Slovenia has been at the centre of attention in the international press. This was, however, not because of the outstanding performance of our esteemed sport athletes – like the cyclists Primož Roglič's and Tadej Pogačar's recent triumph at Tour of the Basque Country. Instead, Slovenia's increasingly shrinking space for the media has made international headlines – after direct verbal attacks and intimidation tactics against journalists and media outlets by Slovenia's Prime Minister Janez Janša and his government.

Janša was sworn in shortly after Marjan Šarec's minority government had stepped down in early 2020. Janša had already held the office from 2004-08 and 2012-13. But this time, it was going to be different. Janša quickly turned into an extreme-right copycat, emulating Orbán's and Trump's political playbook.

Unsurprisingly, the free and independent media – as the fourth pillar of any healthy democracy – became an obstacle to his authoritarian-style rule and, hence, became his prime target. Just two months after taking office, Janša even laid down his plan in a blog post on the government's website. The title – '*War with the media*' – speaks for itself.

Hungarian money in Slovenia

In the last year alone, Janša and his government have financially depleted the National press agency (STA) and proposed the reform of media legislation that could seriously endanger independence of the national broadcaster RTV Slovenia and the STA. We have seen sharp increase in attacks on journalists online and threats against media outlets that are not to Janša's liking. As some journalists admitted, this has led to self-censorship. At the same time, Hungarian money close to Orbán's circles has been pouring into Slovenia's media landscape. First, it came through Nova24 TV and their satellites, which act *de facto* as Janša's SDS party

propaganda machine rather than as credible and independent media outlets; and most recently after Janša took office via the purchase of Planet TV station last year.

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Janša's authoritarian turn went hand in hand with his government's lacklustre handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Janša government, which had just come into office when the pandemic hit, enforced failed political and scientifically questionable anti-corona measures, combined with an authoritarian-style communication. These are largely the reasons why Slovenia has recorded one of the highest coronavirus mortality rates in the world, with occupants in care and retirement homes accounting for majority of deaths. The second wave last fall was particularly brutal.

Unable to handle the pandemic with strict lockdown measures and closed schools for nearly four months, Janša's government quickly lost wider public support. According to the European Parliament's *Parlemeter 2020* survey – conducted at the end of last year – more than 79 per cent of Slovenian respondents found that Slovenia is heading in the wrong direction, the most of any country in the EU.

However, the Prime Minister – instead of worrying about the pandemic – continued to engage personally in discreditation, intimidation, harassment and verbal attacks of anyone even remotely critical of the government, be it in Slovenia or abroad.

Attacks on the free press

In February 2021, Politico journalist Lili Bayer reported on the dire situation of the free press in Slovenia. Janša immediately attacked and accused her of lying. But this backfired in a way that he probably didn't expect. Several news organisations condemned his action and the incident caught the attention of the wider international press.

The EU institutions became more alert, too. The European Commission condemned his actions. And in early March 2021, the European parliament held a debate at its plenary session on 'Government attempts to silence free media in Poland, Hungary and Slovenia'.

The situation in Slovenia

Later, the European Parliament's Civil liberties committee invited, among others, Janez Janša

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and his Minister of Culture Vasko Simoniti to an exchange on the media situation in the country. The meeting eventually took place on the 26 March after several setbacks. However, after a brief intervention and eventual disagreement on the screening of a video Janša had prepared, both him and his minister disconnected without engaging in a discussion with the Members of the European Parliament.

Slovenia's EU Presidency

The situation in Slovenia is extremely worrying considering how fast the country has come to this point. Ever since the early 2000s, Slovenia has been a poster child of success and a role model in the region for its fast EU integration and economic development. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case.

In this context, Slovenia will assume the EU Presidency under Janša's leadership on 1 July this year. Therefore, it's not unreasonable to expect further irritations: not only has the Janša government been trying to reinterpret Slovenia´s official foreign policy using a nationalistic narrative, on several occasions the prime minister has placed himself symbolically closer to Orbán's vision of the European Union.

I would have never imagined that we would talk about my country in such a context, a country where the authorities so shamelessly and blatantly violate our common European values of the rule of law, democracy and media freedom. I am afraid that this period in Slovenia's history will not be remembered for the successes of Pogačar and Roglič, but for something much, much worse. I sincerely hope, for all Slovenians' sake, that it will never come to that.



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