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Slovenia

The fight for socialism in Slovenia: an interview with Anej Korsika

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV476 - September 2014 -

Publication date: Tuesday 9 September 2014

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An interview from LeftEast with Anej Korsika a political scientist, a member of the Marxist think tank, Institute for Labour Studies in Ljubljana and a member of the socialist party Initiative for Democratic Socialism conducted by James Robertson for LeftEast

JR: Let's start with a brief history of the Initiative for Democratic Socialism (IDS) and its role in the formation of the Združena leвица (UL, United Left) earlier this year. What are the origins of IDS?

AK: The Initiative for Democratic Socialism, to use the old cliché, has a short history and a long past. Officially, the party was founded on the 8th of March this year. However when one wants to grasp the gradual formation of the party, one needs to take into consideration a much longer timeline. Before Slovenia entered NATO in 2004, there was a strong civil initiative that opposed joining such a military organization. There was also opposition to the support of the invasion of Iraq (Slovenia was among the countries that signed the disgraceful Vilnius letter). There were domestic issues that mobilized civil society, such as the case of the erased and migrant workers. These and many other "anomalies" depicted a more sinister picture of the so-called "success story" that domestic and foreign politicians liked to call Slovenia. Apart from such initiatives, there were also a couple of student associations and progressive professors that encouraged critical thinking. The Institute for Labour Studies (former Workers' and Punks' University) played a very important role here. It was one of a handful of places where one could seriously engage with critical political economy and conceptually equip oneself to systematically and thoroughly understand the dynamics of contemporary capitalism.

This all illustrates that there was no lack of political activism and theoretical production; what was lacking from the picture was a well organized and ideologically consistent political subject that would not have to be reinvented for each new occasion and social problem that we faced. If it were not for the crisis of 2008, which materially challenged the neoliberal orthodoxy and gave ground and breathing space for a wider articulation of Marxist ideas and socialist policies, one could imagine such a state lasting indefinitely. Although already with the collapse of Lehman Brothers capitalism was proved a disastrous and economically bankrupt system, it is obvious that capitalism is still very much alive politically and will become politically bankrupt only when forces that organize to defeat it are mature and strong enough. The series of protests that swept through Slovenia in 2012/13 were a direct response to the ever more immiserated conditions of the masses, which were threatened with yet further cuts and austerity measures. They accelerated the processes of forming the party, along with the awareness that such an organizational form is absolutely essential if one wants to seriously challenge the ruling class. The formation of IDS thus provided exactly what was lacking from all the political activism and theoretical endeavours, a stable organizational platform that is here to stay.

JR: Despite having only been formed in April, the UL has already had unexpected successes in both the European and Slovene elections, (5.9% and 6% respectively). Could you tell us a bit about how this played out - the strategy you pursued in campaigning, the key turning points of the campaign and why you think the UL was able to achieve such results in so short a time?

AK: UL is a coalition of three parties (Democratic Labour Party, Initiative for Democratic Socialism, Party for the Sustainable Development of Slovenia) as well as the fourth group which includes representatives and organizations of civil society. As such it is a unique political formation, both in the sense of the diversity of its groups as well as in its political program - democratic, ecological socialism. UL was the only participant of the European elections that provided a rational and critical stance towards the European Union. We emphasized the disastrous and capital-driven austerity measures that are a direct outcome of our being a member of the EU. We argued that the actually existing EU is by its very structure an undemocratic organization, explicitly established to serve the interests of large

European capital and oligarchies. Its historical development confirms such judgement since one can see a clear trajectory of this political project as becoming ever more calibrated with the interests of capital over time. These contradictions that have accumulated during the past decades have erupted and become very visible with the crisis. The contradiction between European south and north, core and periphery is, at the end of the day, the contradiction between labour and capital. This disillusionment with the EU project is now clearly visible in Slovenia: ten years ago 90% of people voted in favour of entering the Union but recent polls show that less than 30% of Slovenians still trust the EU. Being a new and well articulated political force and the sole critic of EU policies, we managed to address issues that people have started to feel in their everyday life and that other parties have ignored. Our past work in the above mentioned Workers' and Punks University, especially the May Day School: The Future of European Integration: Left Perspectives and the annual series of lectures devoted to the crisis of European integrations, has proven to be especially valuable in this sense. Despite refusing this type of European integration, we never held the Eurosceptic position, and we strongly believe that international cooperation and integration is crucial. Instead of advocating the EU, we argued that we should start building different political foundations, such as would enable us to build a Socialist Europe.

All this proved to be a good prospect for the early parliamentary elections that happened less than two months after the European elections. These elections were organizationally, financially and in all other aspects much more demanding. With very little experience, an extremely short timeline and little to no financial sources, we faced a very difficult job. Hundreds of hours of unpaid labour, good organization, a consistent and well-communicated program, gave us the ability to achieve a much greater votes to financing ratio than all the other parties. Again our distinguishing figure was a clear stance against any policies that would benefit capital and further imiserate workers. We have been the only political group that has categorically opposed privatization and advocated for alternative socialist policies. Instead of further tax cuts for the rich, we have proposed higher taxation for capital, the 1:5 ratio between the lowest and the highest wage, the complete stop to all privatizations etc. These were policies that clearly separated us from other "leftist" parties, namely the Social Democrats. Returning socialist policies back to the agenda was our explicit goal, since these policies can only be implemented with the broad support of the people. Therefore it is even more encouraging that the young (i.e. people from 18 to 24) have voted for UL and provided more than 14% of all the votes UL received. Although this might seem a modest percentage, one needs to bear in mind that other parties only got a percent or two out of this population and that many of those that voted for UL have abstained from voting altogether in earlier elections.

JR: Your campaign was marked by a turn towards grassroots movements, local activist groups and communities. Could you explain a little what the relationship between the formal political interventions of UL and the movements on the ground looks like? How do you envision this relationship developing in the future?

AK: A rich and well developed civil society with many political initiatives has been continuously present in Slovenia and fought important campaigns like the above mentioned anti-Nato campaign, the campaign for immigrant and precarious workers, the occupation of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana and the fight against the cutting of scholarships. However the anti-party sentiment was very wide-spread and although many of these very important campaigns did a lot of good, they faced structural problems that are very difficult to overcome at the level of a very loose organisation. Such initiatives and student organizations commonly suffer from a lack of continuity, as generations flux, each has its specificities, some are more engaged, others have worse conditions to work in and are therefore less active. Many of us have spent quite a couple of years in such campaigns, they have had an important role in forming us, but at a certain point we started to realize that in order to have a long-term effect on the course of the development of society, different organizational approaches need to be considered. It was in 2012 that the circle around the former Workers' and Punks' University started to seriously discuss how to enter political struggle on both a higher as well as deeper level. We became painfully aware that student struggles, crucial and necessary as they are, are just a part of a much bigger picture. One could say that we began a slow transition from struggle at the university, to universal struggle. These processes were accelerated by the winter of 2012 and spring of 2013, with the so-called Zombie Uprising.

I wanted to emphasize that the IDS was well rooted in grassroots movements and will always be defined by those formative years. Because of these experiences we had no trouble understanding the still widespread (but to a lesser and lesser extent) anti-party sentiment. IDS and UL have proven to be a different type of party; if all the other parties have always knelt before the interests of capital, UL has written on its banner an uncompromising struggle against capital. It was such a prehistory, such an organizational development and ideological platform that attracted and gave breathing space for numerous grassroots movements and active individuals to join forces under the same banner. It is yet to be seen how this unique relationship will develop in the future, as it is a process through which we are all learning and trying to find common solutions. However one thing remains clear: democratic ecological socialism, the ideology of UL, can be achieved only through massive popular support and even more importantly, through massive popular participation.

JR: The elections of 13 July were the first to take place since mass protests shook Slovenia during the winter of 2012-13. In what way did these events shape the current political landscape of the country? Would it be fair to say that the two key shifts within these elections - the victory of Miro Cerar and the unexpected and significant gains of UL - have their roots in a common crisis of the Slovene political class?

AK: Let me answer like the old Radio Yerevan jokes: in principle yes, but... Yes, in principle both Miro Cerar and UL are rooted in the common crisis, but our understanding of the crisis and what should be done about it is completely opposed. We have already talked about the the historical trajectory of UL and its numerous building blocs, so let us now focus on the genesis of the phenomenon called the Party of Miro Cerar. From the ideological point of view Cerar's party program reads like a bad recycling of the *Â»economic original sinÂ«*, something Marx writes about at the end of the first volume of *Capital*, in the chapter on primitive accumulation. Here Marx mocks the classics of political economy for their understanding of the underlying causes of poverty and wealth and gross inequalities, phenomena whose scope and depth have surpassed those of Marx's time. If the theological sin tells us why man is *Â»condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his browÂ«*, the economic original sin reveals to us why some need not suffer and can enjoy living on the fruits of others' labour. According to this theory, in prehistory there were two kinds of people, those that toiled and were hard working and are today's elite and those that have been reckless and lazy and are today's working class. The point being that the origin of inequality was seen to be a free and conscious ethical decision of each individual and, if they knew what would be the consequences of their decision to work or not to work, they could only blame themselves for their current suffering and hardships. Of course, this is a delirious projection that has nothing to do with reality as such, but mistaken as it is, it still provides the ideological bedrock of neoliberalism. Miro Cerar always presented himself, his policies and ultimately his party as one based on sound ethical principles, objectivity, ideological neutrality etc.

However this is far from the truth. In an article he published last year *Â»Why Capitalism?Â«* Cerar argued that: *Â»Now we are already well aware that we have caused the Slovenian financial, economic and social crisis mostly by ourselves with our unethical snapping for material goods and superficial splendor of all kindsÂ«*. It goes without saying that Cerar's government will continue with the privatization process, austerity measures and all other policies dictated by Brussels. So, yes, indeed, we both have our roots in the protest movement, but the Party of Miro Cerar represents the continuation of the policies against which the protest movement as such has been organized. UL on the other hand, is, for the first time after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, a voice of progressive socialist policies that aims at radically transforming capitalist society and ultimately wants to abolish it.

JR: I want to ask you to delve into the UL's political strategy a bit more, in particular your perspective on the European Union. In an interview published in *Pogledi* earlier this year, you argued that for the IDS:

The key concern is the establishment of a movement on a European scale. While Slovenia and other countries in the European periphery, such as Greece and Portugal, are too small to change the system by themselves, if they combine in an allied bloc they can become much more powerful and better able to not only articulate but also implement different policies.

Since that interview we have witnessed another round of elections to the European parliament. While there were significant gains for the far left in some countries - in particular, Greece, Spain, Slovenia - elsewhere real support was given to far right parties, many of whom rode to victory on a wave of Euroscepticism - the FN in France, UKIP in the UK, Jobbik in Hungary, Golden Dawn in Greece. Looking back now, has the organization reconsidered its focus on a European strategy? How would you reply to Costas Lapavistas' recent call for a 'Euroscepticism of the left', for example?

AK: I don't think we need to reconsider our international strategy; it is one based on adamant internationalism and a strong belief that socialism is a world process that cannot (could history be more obvious on this point?) be achieved in one country. The dilemma of being part of the European Union or leaving it altogether is a false one and perhaps one that can excite certain professors but doesn't really have much to do with the political reality we are currently facing. Euroscepticism is not the right answer. We have to be much more radical on this point: our standpoint is that we reject the actually existing European Union altogether. We must not have any illusions about the EU being a project that derailed with the crisis. On the contrary, it is a consistent political project of European capital that has shown its true face with the onset of the crisis. All of the processes that have culminated in the crisis have been maturing for several decades, actually from the very beginning of the EU. One just needs to study the trajectory of the most important treaties (Rome, Schengen, Maastricht treaties) the EU has consistently implemented to further capital liberalization and deregulation, privatization and the dismantling of the welfare state. Treaties like the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) are just the next logical step in completely destroying everything that is left of the welfare state. If TTIP would be implemented, international corporations would gain absolute supremacy over nation states in judicial terms and the latter would lose any meaningful sovereignty whatsoever.

For example, the so-called 'Euros Investor-State Dispute Settlement', a part of the TTIP, would allow corporations to sue governments for any national policies (or EU policies for that matter) that would potentially limit corporations' future profits. This means that if a country wants to provide its citizens with universal health care, a corporation that sells private health insurances can sue the government for the loss of potential profit. This is exactly what the Dutch firm Achmea did in 2013 when it filed a case against the Slovak government that tried to set up a public insurance scheme. The reality we are facing is one of capital being internationally and immensely powerful and well organized. Organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, the World Trade Organization etc. are a more efficient 'Capitalist International' than anything the workers of the world have ever had to face. To make things worse the working class was never so weak, both nationally and even more so internationally. There is nothing that could effectively challenge the rule of the IMF, there is no international organized political force of which the capitalist class could be afraid. Capitalists perhaps never had it better. If we accept it or not, internationalism already is our reality, it only remains for one to decide whether one wants to challenge the international rule of capital or one opts for the defeatist scenario/illusion of going back to the sovereignty of the nation state. At its very core this is actually a pre-modern conception of political reality, a wish to return to relations that have long past been smashed by the bourgeoisie.

So facing reality with sober eyes is now more important than ever and building a European movement definitely remains a key task. The international socialist movement is the only way to effectively combat capitalist oppression and hegemony, to ultimately abolish it. An essential part of such a movement is a well organized socialist party, one that differs from bourgeois parties in a clear understanding that the parliamentary arena (whether national or European) is an important part of the struggle but only a part. On this issue we should learn from the brilliant *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, where Lenin is very clear that bourgeois institutions such as parliament should be used for the development of socialist hegemony, until this hegemony is strong enough to abolish the parliament. As we said, this struggle only represents a small portion of the struggles, ultimately the class struggle, at the forefront of which must be the socialist party. Boris Kidrič, an important Slovenian Marxist revolutionary and a leader of the Liberation Front of the Slovenian People during the nazi and fascist occupation of 1941-45, can also provide a valuable insight on the essentiality of building socialist hegemony. During the WW II he argued for the doctrine of 'building a state within a state' and this is exactly what Slovenian partisans did on the territories they

controlled. They established all kinds of institutions and infrastructure, in the midst of heavy fighting they organized elementary and high schools, even scientific institutes, a monetary institute that issued its own currency. It was something specific and it definitely provided a well prepared and organized takeover of the power from the old monarchist forces, once the war ended.

On the international level Yugoslav and other communist parties were united in the Third International, the Communist International, i.e. Comintern. Especially in Lenin's time, but also later on, this was probably the most powerful and effective international organization communists and the working class ever had. Comintern, established in 1919, was built in much more difficult circumstances and much further ahead of the organizations of international capital, which only really started to develop after WWII. Facing the current historical situation one can only conclude, as we did above already, that the working class is currently, both organizationally as well as ideologically on a much lower level than the previous levels it has historically achieved. This is not a moral judgment of any kind, I do believe it is the current state of affairs, whether we like it or not. To rise to the level required by the historical task that is ahead of us, we need to understand all the shortcomings of the contemporary socialist left and realize that there is still a long road ahead of us. This road will include many defeats and we need to be conscious of them as an essential and valuable part of winning the class war as such. In order to do that we should learn from the history of struggles our comrades already fought in the last two centuries. Perhaps we can then realize that there is not so much new under the sun, after all. Perhaps to genuinely move on, we should learn to reinvent organizations and ideology that already existed. Through rediscovering and reinventing it, we will inevitably also transform it.

JR: Given the numerous successes of the far right across Europe in May, it is curious that an equivalent group has not emerged in Slovenia. Indeed, in comparison with neighboring Austria, Italy or Hungary, the country appears to be relatively free from the growth of populist right wing parties. On this, I have two questions: First, how do you explain the apparent weakness in the far right in Slovenia today? Second, how do you see UL's role at a European level in challenging the rise of far right movements? Can the structures of the EU serve an anti-fascist strategy, and if so, how?

AK: I would be wary of depicting Slovenia as relatively free from the populist right wing parties. Perhaps, at first glance one could conclude that such a party really doesn't exist but a closer look is much less encouraging. The biggest right-wing Slovenian party - the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) has successfully absorbed certain elements of extreme right-wing rhetoric and policies. So it would be mistaken to see the position of the extreme right-wing as a structurally empty one; it was just taken over by a party that officially isn't an extremist right-wing party. However it is very aggressive in promoting historical revisionism and justifying the collaboration with the occupiers of WWII as a kind of patriotic deed against the aggression of the communist partisans. The official Roman Catholic Church is very supportive of these policies and the party as such, as parts of Slovenian Catholic Church also collaborated with the nazis. However one needs to bear in mind that there were many Christians among the partisans and that in the portion of Slovenia occupied by fascist Italy, the church played a very progressive role and was very supportive of the partisan struggle. Because of that, the SDS and the Church are not hugely successful in their anti-partisan, pro-collaborationist historical revisionism. People are fed up with these debates - how could they not be if their own material existence is what they have to think about everyday? UL categorically rejects any historical revisionism, both the conservative-clerical project we just talked about, as well as the liberal-social democrat one. If the former completely rejects any positive role of the partisan struggle and depicts it as the true enemy of the nation, the latter perceives it as a kind of cultural heritage- yes, there was war and occupation and of course, we took the arms, fought and liberated the country! This perspective is on purpose devoid of any meaningful ideological substance. UL is the only political force that affirmatively speaks of the revolutionary dimension of national liberation struggle, that is, the most important dimension.

I see the role of UL in challenging the rise of fascism on the European level exactly in line with the strategy we talked about above: that is, in building the UL as a strong, well organized force to support the spread of socialist hegemony, both on a national as well as an international level. This is the only way to effectively combat the global domination

and hegemony of capital. Apart from using the actually existing political organization of Europe, i.e. the EU, I don't see it as being a positive factor in combating fascism. On the contrary, I strongly believe the EU and its crisis policies are the most crucial objective factor contributing to the creation of fertile political grounds for the growth of extreme right and fascist parties. Again, Golden Dawn, UKIP, FN, Jobbik are not some kind of external anomaly but a direct consequence of austerity policies forced by the troika. European bureaucrats in Brussels offices and fascist thugs on the streets of Athens, Budapest, Paris etc. are intimately related, they presuppose one another. Without the objective consequences caused by EU policies, the subjective fascist forces could not thrive as they do. Ultimately fascist parties and movements are more acceptable for European capital since they direct all their hostility towards already weak and marginalized groups (immigrants, the LGBT community, communists, anarchists etc.). From a general perspective, these groups are already sanctioned by the official EU policies (Schengen border system was implemented to stop immigration). Perhaps most importantly, proponents of fascist policies are not challenging the class division of society, on the contrary, they are reaffirming it. Historically speaking fascism always presented a continuation of the policies of liberal capitalism by different means.

JR: Finally, the successes of UL mean that for the first time since the breakup of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, an explicitly socialist group is represented in the Slovene parliament. Given the history of socialism in south east Europe and its close association with ideas of regional unity - whether Yugoslavism or Balkan Federation - I am curious about the regional perspective of UL. Certainly, in the past two years we have seen a great deal of grassroots political activity in the region - from the protests in Bulgaria and Slovenia in 2012-2013, the uprisings that took place in Bosnia earlier this year, and the ongoing resistance to austerity in Greece. Is there a distinctly regional perspective that the UL can bring to Slovene politics today? If so, does this stand in tension with UL's orientation towards the EU, given that many countries of the region remain outside Europe's borders?

AK: The success of UL have certainly had a very positive effect on the progressive forces in the region. However, one must bear in mind that the Balkan Peninsula, despite or perhaps exactly because of its common history, is currently an extremely heterogeneous political region. Countries like Hungary and Macedonia practically already have autocratic governments with obvious elements of fascism and the situation for progressive socialist forces is perhaps the most difficult there. In Romania and Bulgaria such forces are very limited and marginalized, further constrained by electoral laws. They are especially harsh in Romania where a new political party can be registered only if it is founded by 25000 members residing in 22 Romanian counties out of 42. To further restrain the creation of new parties, the laws state that if a party would wish to run candidates for all the mandates, i.e. both houses of parliament, it would have to pay 300, 000 euros (700 euros for each candidate), and I believe this was further constrained in recent years. In comparison, in Slovenia you only need 200 signatures and don't have to pay a deposit in order to establish a party.

You mentioned a series of protests that happened in Slovenia, Bulgaria and Bosnia. We can agree that these protests all had a common denominator in, broadly speaking, the increasingly worsening living conditions of working class people. However how this dissent was articulated took on very different forms. In Slovenia one of the main motifs of the protest movement was the fight against corruption. An important qualitative step forward was achieved through understanding the protestors' belief that 'EurosÜthey' (left-wing and right-wing parties and politicians are 'EurosÜall the same.' What we tried to further articulate is that 'EurosÜyes, they are all the same, they are all willing servants of capital.' In Bosnia the protests, and, later on, the plenums, were perhaps the most important achievement of civil society ever since the disintegration of Yugoslavia. For the first time in more than twenty years people started to talk about class instead of ethnic divisions. In Bulgaria, the protest movement was largely characterized by a mistaken belief that the EU can bring about the desired changes. Without going into too much detail or making claims as to how representative these protests actually were, it is clear that socialist forces have immense ideological work ahead of them. As we already said, it is easier said than done with draconian electoral legislature. Although the Balkan Peninsula is clearly very heterogeneous both on the level of different states as well as on the level of the different development of socialist forces, there is a clear and strong need for regional cooperation. In UL we will do everything in our power to provide all the support we can for our comrades in other Balkan countries.

Of course Greece does appear to be a very positive case with the outstanding prospect of Syriza gaining power in

the foreseeable future. A lot of the hopes of Greek comrades, as well as other socialists around Europe, are invested in the possible electoral victory of Syriza. I am afraid that actually too much and too unrealistic a hope is invested in Syriza and that some kind of a miracle is expected from them. The danger of deformation and disillusionment is quite acute. Syriza should be supported in any way possible; it is the only progressive and organized political force that can actually challenge the situation in Greece. However, we should also be very sober about the current limitations of this project and very conscious of the fact that if Syriza wins, the international organizations of capital, first and foremost the troika, will do everything in their power to smash any resistance to the vital interests of capital. To organize effective resistance, socialist forces will have to become much stronger and ultimately much more militant, each and every concession that the working class achieved (the 8 hour workday, retirement, universal health care, universal system of education) and which are all now being dismantled, were achieved through long, intensive and more often than not, bloody struggles. All this might seem a bit exaggerated at the moment. In principle we are all against violence but standing up against the oppressor that systematically violates your rights, exploits you to augment his wealth, is a just and a necessary fight. The sooner the contemporary left comes to terms with this fact, both ideologically as well as organizationally, the better.

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