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Slovenia

Three surprises

- IV Online magazine - 2004 - IV360/1 - Autumn 2004 -

Publication date: Friday 1 October 2004

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Contrary to predictions, Slovenian voters showed no great enthusiasm to participate in these European elections. During the referendum on Slovenia's entry into the European Union in March 2003 the abstention rate was only 45% - less than in a number of eastern European countries. This June 13 it was 71.6%.

Two other surprises marked this election:

- ▶ For the first time a right wing party, New Slovenia (NSi), emerged as the biggest party;
- ▶ Three women were elected as European deputies (out of a total of seven seats), which amounts to a victory for the women's movement.

The low rate of participation has many different causes. For Slovenes their country's participation in the EU ended with the referendum when some 60% of the electorate voted in favour of membership. Moreover, the public believe that Slovenia's representation in the European Parliament - 7 seats - is insignificant.

The right wing parties, currently in opposition, are in a phase of pre-electoral offensive as parliamentary elections are scheduled for next October. It should be noted also that the electorate of the parties of the ruling coalition is weary of the meagre social and economic results of government policy. Growth has declined from 4.1% in 1995 to 2.3% in 2003. For the first time since 1990 the parties of the right overtook the parties of the centre and the left by more than 5% of votes cast, which raises the threat of a right wing government coming to power in autumn 2004. But the results of the parliamentary elections will undoubtedly be closer and a remobilization of an electorate fearful of the revanchist excesses of New Slovenia is possible.

Results in % of elections

parliamentary (2000), presidential (2002, first and second round) and European (2004)

	2000	2002-I	2002-II	2004
Participation	70.1	71.2	65.2	28.3
LDS [1]	36.3	44.4	56.5	
DeSUS [2]	5.2	1.8	-	
LDS + DeSUS				21.9
ZLSD [3]	12.1	2.2	-	14.1
SLS [4]	9.6	7.6	-	8.4
SDSS [5]	15.8			17.6

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NSi [6]	8.7			23.6
SDSS + NSi		30.8	43.5	
SNS [7]	4.4	8.5	-	5.0
SMS [8]	4.3	3.2	-	2.3

The low rate of participation and the weariness of the population explains the honourable score of the ex-Communist social democrats of the ZSLD. Its more motivated and more disciplined electorate mobilized effectively on June 13.

The election of three Slovene women to the European Parliament constitutes another event. Since 1990 Slovene democracy has suffered from the absence of women in political life. Activists for sexual equality have fought without results for ten years. It was only in 2004 that the Coalition for parity succeeded in convincing Parliament to change the Constitution so as to establish an obligatory quota of a minimum 40% to represent each of the two sexes. Even if all the parties who obtained at least one seat in the European Parliament had men at the head of their lists and women second, as three of those parties obtained two seats, three women would be elected, or 42% of Slovenia's total representation (only 13% of member of the national parliament are women).

What now?

Slovenia has become a society that can be compared to other EU societies. Its GDP per inhabitant is at the level of that of Greece or Portugal. The structure and the defects of the political parties are very similar and it seems that there is no perspective of a modern alternative left. Yet the successes of the women's movement in particular show that the emergence of new forces is possible.

The electoral results reflect the tensions existing in Slovene society, including the frustrations of a people who observe the appropriation by a few families of the economic patrimony built up after 1945 by collective accumulation. We should add to this the veritable traumatism resulting from the growth of unemployment. Some traditional industries, like steel, engineering, and textiles have seen employment collapse.

There are two reasons why this has not led to a violent explosion. The first is that Slovene industry is very decentralized and that hence there are no big urban working class concentrations. The second is that the existence of a rural subsistence economy softens the blow.

Nonetheless all these events, as well as low wages, have created a latent climate of discontent, which is expressed in numerous demonstrations organized by the trade unions. The government's submission to the military policy of the great powers, particularly the USA, has generated opposition from many young intellectuals and has led to the appearance of a significant anti-war movement.

These tensions, which undoubtedly are here to stay, have until now not found any political expression in party form, but the need for such an expression and the forces capable of creating it are crystallizing.

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[1] Slovene Liberal Democracy (LDS) has been the biggest party in Slovenia since 1992. Made up partly of personalities from the former regime and partly of establishment "yuppies", it has borne the main responsibility for the implementation of neoliberal policies. It heads the government and the president elected in 2002, Janez Drnovsek, comes from its ranks.

[2] Democratic Party of Slovene Pensioners (DeSUS), a centre-left grouping, is a pressure group defending the interests of pensioners. It is part of the current ruling coalition headed by the LDS.

[3] United List of Social Democrats (ZSLD) partly emerged from the former League of Slovene Communists (the only party that existed prior to Slovenia's separation from Yugoslavia). A member of the Socialist International, the ZSLD has participated in all the LDS-headed governments, its representatives compromising with neoliberal policies.

[4] The Slovene Popular Party (SLS) is a moderate agrarian party.

[5] The Social Democratic Party of Slovenia (SDSS) is a party of the populist right.

[6] New Slovenia (NSi) was created in the mid 1990s and partially emerged from the DEMOS movement that led the country after the end of the old regime (1990-1992). This Catholic party is based on a conservative and reactionary ideology. It benefits from the support of a Slovene Church which is nostalgic for its old grip on the rural population before the Second World War. Its economic and social policy differs little from that currently being presided over by the centre-left coalition headed by the LDS.

[7] Slovene National Party (SNS) is a right wing nationalist party.

[8] Party of Young Slovenes (SMS) was founded by student union activists. It is opposed to NATO and presented a common list with the Greens at the European elections of June 13, 2004.