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Slovenia: uncertain future of the Janez Janša's government

Janez Janša's government is losing the support of the coalition parties and the parliamentary majority that would support his actions. Two attempts by the opposition to overthrow Janez Janša ended in failure. Opposition parties are unable to provide the majority needed to form a new government.

Opposition actions. The first motion for a vote of no confidence in the government of Janez Janša was submitted on January 15, 2021. The vote did not take place at that time because Karl Erjavec, who was put forward by the opposition as a candidate for prime minister, withdrew his candidacy, arguing that not all MPs could vote in the National Assembly for epidemiological reasons. Some of the deputies representing opposition parties united in the Constitutional Arc Coalition (KUL, Koalicija ustavnega loka) were then in quarantine.

On February 10, 2021, the centre-left opposition parties comprised of KUL: List of Marjan Šarac (LMŠ, Lista Marjana Šarca), Social Democrats (SD, Socialni demokrati), Left (Levica), Alenka Bratušek's Party (SAB, Stranka Alenke Bratušek), and the Democratic Party Slovenia (DeSUS, Demokratična stranka upokojenecv Slovenije) again requested a constructive vote of no confidence. These parties agreed that Karl Erjavec, the leader of the DeSUS party, would again be the candidate for the post of prime minister.

The vote took place on February 16. Forty deputies voted no confidence. The required majority is 46 members. Opposition parties, i.e. LMŠ, SD, Levica, and SAB, had a total of 39. Paradoxically, some members of the DeSUS party, which had previously left the ruling coalition, hesitated to vote no confidence due to their earlier participation in Janez Janša's government. Only one member of this party voted in favour of the opposition's proposal.

Gradual disintegration of the government. Even support from all five MPs representing DeSUS would not provide the opposition coalition with the majority of votes needed (the opposition parties would then gather 44 votes in favour of the government resignation). As the ruling coalition partner, the Party of Modern Centre (SMC, Stranka modernega centra) is going through a crisis and its participation in the government is questionable, it was not known how some of its MPs would behave during the February 16 vote. Eventually, however, its members remained loyal to the ruling coalition.

The current leader of the SMC, Zdravko Počivališek, who plays the key role of the economy minister in the government, is accused by his party colleagues of being too submissive to Janez Janša. For this reason, three members of this formation, together with Juri Lep from DeSUS, formed a separate group of non-attached members on March 30, without joining the KUL. On the same day, the ruling coalition lost the vote on the change of the speaker of the parliament, previously Igor Zorčič, one of the deputies who left the SMC. The government coalition lacked one vote, so it has lost a de facto majority in the parliament.

Minority government. Currently, the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS, Slovenska demokratska stranka) with 26 members, conservative New Slovenia - Christian Democrats (Nsi, Nova Slovenija - Krščanski demokrati) with 7 members, and the above-mentioned SMC with five members remain in the coalition. In addition to these 38 votes, the ruling coalition can also count on the votes of three MPs from the nationalist Slovenian National Party (SNS, Slovenska Nacionalna Stranka) and both MPs representing historical national minorities - Hungarians and Italians. The opposition united in the KUL can count on 39 deputies, which does not give it the majority of 46 deputies needed to overthrow Janša's government.

The other MPs are therefore critical - four non-attached MPs and another four MPs from the DeSUS party, who occupy an unclear position and remain outside the ruling coalition and are not members of KUL. Both SMC and DeSUS enjoy a modest 1 percent support in opinion polls (likewise, the nationalist SNS, who can count on 1.9 percent). With the current distribution of support, the new elections would be very risky for them and would most likely mean leaving the domestic political scene.

According to the latest opinion polls published by the daily Delo on April 12, 2021, only 20 percent of respondents rated the government and its actions positive, down 20.2 percentage points from last April. At the same time, the number of people who assessed Janez Janša's government negatively increased from 20.3 to 57.5 percent, and 15.6 percent would vote for the SDS today. The Social Democratic SD can count on 12.4 percent of votes, and the Left party can count on 8.4 percent. LMSŽ would win 7.5 percent of votes, DeSUS 2.6 percent, SAB 2.4 percent, and SMC only 0.5 percent. The conservative NSi would win 5.8 percent and the nationalist SNS 1.9 percent. Currently, 21.9 percent of voters would vote for the ruling coalition (SDS, SMC and NSi), and 30.7 percent for the KUL coalition.

Conclusions. Janez Janša's government may not last until the end of the Slovenian parliament's term of office, that is, until 2022. The opposition, although internally divided, closes ranks and mobilizes supporters in the European Union institutions to exert international pressure. DeSUS members, who take a pragmatic position, are under pressure to turn to active opposition. The debate is also ongoing in the co-ruling NSi party. Its participation in the ruling coalition is openly criticized by the party's founder, Ljudmila Novak, who is currently one of the most popular politicians in the country.

Janez Janša's government is harmed by the way Janša is fighting his war against the media. Janša's bold statements make him an easy target of attacks for the growing number of opponents in Slovenia and liberal politicians active in the European Union. The latter, using the controlling function of the European Parliament, relatively easily build their own political capital at the expense of Janša. The latter, in turn, tries to build its public image through attention-grabbing Twitter entries. This earned him the nickname "Marshal Twitto", but has not produce the desired results.

The Slovenian prime minister also has no additional supporters in the international arena that he could use to build his position in the country. Close cooperation with Viktor Orbán is perceived rather negatively in Slovenia. Some Slovenian and regional media put the current government in the same camp as Poland and Hungary as an example of undesirable developments in this country.

Appropriate distribution of government positions may be of great importance, although, taking into account the internal dynamics of individual coalition partners, this also does not guarantee the government's survival until the end of its term of office. Prime Minister Janša will benefit from a determined, state-centric policy of fighting the consequences of COVID-19. This is because this fight allows for fairly free administration of public funds, and thus provides support to individual social groups. However, this aspect also carries the risk of a collapse of public finances as a consequence of Covid-19.

Undoubtedly, a factor favouring Janez Janša's government is the internal division of the opposition, which brings together both left-wing (Left and SD) and centre-liberal (LMSŽ and SAB) parties. It was the lack of a common vision that led to the collapse of the previous coalition government of LMSŽ, SAB, SMC, SD, and DeSUS and the appointment of the third Janez Janša government (which, paradoxically, also included representatives of SMC and DeSUS). Opposition groups will probably find it difficult to convince voters that parties that failed to reach an agreement earlier, and thus brought Janše to power, will form a new and stable government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to this situation, Slovenia has been on the verge of a government crisis and a political stalemate for several months.