

Slovenia: Split national political identities in EU electoral democracy

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INTRODUCTION

The election in Slovenia for eight European Parliament (EP) seats took place on May 26th. For the EP elections, Slovenia is considered a single electoral constituency. As for all countries, a proportional system is adopted. Voters must choose a party list and optionally also give a preference vote to any of the individual candidates on the selected party list. EP seats are distributed according to the d'Hondt method. There is no formal electoral threshold. This, together with the official introduction of a gender quota system, has proven to be a fairly effective electoral system (Fink-Hafner and Deželan, 2016).

The interest of Slovenian political lists to compete in the EP elections has traditionally been quite high. There were fourteen political lists, among which seven competing for the first time in EP elections. Out of one-hundred-three candidates, fifty-one were women and fifty-two men. All nine parliamentary and five non-parliamentary parties submitted candidacies.

Slovenia is entitled to eight seats in the EP. In 2019 these seats were equally distributed among four party lists (two left-wing and two right-wing parliamentary parties), with two seats each. Three of these four lists confirmed their previous EP status, one was newly elected, and two from the 2014-2019 mandate lost their bids. An 11% threshold of the very low 28.89% turnout rate in Slovenia was needed to enter the EP in 2019. As for previous EP elections, strong dependencies on contemporary domestic political circumstances and balances of powers have marked this year's EP campaign processes and electoral choices.

POWERS ON THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL PARQUET FLOOR AS A RUNWAY FOR EP ELECTIONS

Slovenians' political trust in the EU is low – similar to domestic political institutions and parties – although these are, at the same time, seen as holding solutions to the majority of the country's problems (Toš et al., 2018). Although entering into the EU has traditionally been seen as a positive political decision for Slovenia, low trust in the EU, expressed both in public opinion polls and through participation in elections, is an issue that has not been addressed since the first elections in 2004. To some extent, this can be directly linked to the role of the EU and its institutions, which in the

eyes of citizens are unsuccessful in solving many of the serious problems facing the country, such as the 2012 financial crisis and the recent migration issues that literally paralysed the state's apparatus in 2015. In this regard, and together with a weary attitude towards domestic politics, this year's 28.89% turnout, the second lowest among all EU members at 2019 elections, is no surprise.

From the national political perspective, as in 2014, EP elections have been held in the domestic political circumstances of a vague and fragmented minority government. Early national elections were held in July 2014 and again in June 2018, both of them falling within the same EP election cycle. In both cases, newly established liberal political parties took over the leading coalition positions (the Modern Centre Party (SMC) after the July 2014 elections and the List of Marjan Šarec (LMS) after the June 2018 elections). Both of these parties formed coalitions with the Social Democrats (SD) and the Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia DeSUS (both traditional parties in the political arena with slight internal reformations from the 1990s onward). The small and young Party of Alenka Bratušek (SAB) is a third example of a new liberal party, originally under the umbrella of the Positive Slovenia party, leading a coalition between 2013 and 2014 and also joining the current coalition. Despite being unusually numerous, the five current coalition partners are together still a minority due to the scattered election results, with all of the partners having similar proportions of votes. The absolute winner of the 2018 election, the right-wing Slovenian Social Democracy (SDS), was unable to form a coalition and, together with New Slovenia (NSi) – a Christian Democratic party – and the Slovenian National Party (SNS), they became part of the opposition.

In such fragmented and fragile circumstances, characterized also by positive growth cycle statistics of 4.1% GDP growth, 1.7% inflation, and 4.4% unemployment rate (SORS, 2019), but bound by poor economic growth forecasts, the lack of needed structural reforms, and active migrant issues, the Slovenian electoral campaign for the EP elections got underway.

CAMPAIGN

The 2019 EP election campaign was implemented without any serious negative attacks, the campaign in general can be labelled as 'by the book', with a mixture of pre- and post-modern campaign elements (Farrell and Schmitt-Beck, 2002). The parties and their candidates were active on social media (especially Twitter, Facebook and Instagram), all of the EP parliamentary parties distributed large posters, and most circulated campaign leaflets. Parties strongly engaged in direct communication on the ground, also involving international support such as visits by European politicians. At a certain point parties' campaigns became so similar that it was almost impossible to identify anyone's campaign as unique.

This led to an extensive yet standardised media coverage of the campaign. Media debates among candidates all focused on a set of salient issues (especially migration, the future of the EU and the role of Slovenia in the EU). Social media campaigns coincided with EU-run national campaigns projects, like '#EUandME', ad-

dressing young voters, and a video project, 'Tokratgremvolit.eu', unsuccessfully calling for higher electoral participation.

Interestingly, a series of pre-election opinion polls were released to the public during the campaign period with many apparently biased results in favour of certain parties that were eventually successful.

With the exception of SDS, NSi and The Left, little can be said about the parties' ideological and policy programme statements, positions or choices, because parties used only programme-dashboards or did even less to address the voters' preferences. LMŠ, which gained two EP seats, for example, compensated for a lack of a programme statement with the president's and party list holder's speeches and press releases. It is interesting that, though parties refer to their membership in the European Parliamentary groups, they rarely directly apply any of the 'mother' group's programme statements or manifestos. The campaign's content was marked by a lot of very basic and general statements about the importance of the European Union's future, the role of Slovenia inside it, European values and principles, and only a couple of very general policy positions on security, corruption, social, economic and agricultural issues.

RESULTS

Of the eight seats available, four went to the parties in the government coalition, and four to opposition parties. The leading coalition party, The liberal LMŠ (newly established a year before the national elections), and its partner, SD, each got two mandates. The leading opposition party (SDS), together with its current EP pre-electoral coalition partner, the Slovenian People's Party (SLS), won three seats. Finally, NSi alone (without its EP 2014 pre-electoral coalition partner SLS) got one seat. Altogether, the four elected parties to the EP gained a bit more than 70% of all valid votes, with all of the eight elected candidates being elected with preference votes. Gender balance was equally distributed between four female and four male MEPs on both the coalition and opposition sides.

Besides the equally distributed domestic political powers, the EP 2019 election results draw a very interesting picture of the national elite in the EP (Scarrow, 1997). Apart from DeSUS, the other traditional parties (those established shortly after Slovenian independence in 1991), that is SD, SDS and NSi, have been re-elected from the first EP Slovenian elections in 2004 onwards. Furthermore, at the level of individual MEPs, within these parties there is a recognisable set of candidates that is now consolidated. Three MEPs from the SDS list and one MEP from SD have been re-elected twice, and a newly elected MEP from NSi was previously a sitting MEP in 2004-2009 who, in 2011-2019, held a national parliamentary mandate. With regard to the remaining three MEPs, only the one elected in the LMŠ list lacks previous political experience, as the second LMŠ MEP had gained executive political experience in the extinct liberal party For Real (2008-2011). Finally, the newly elected MEP from SD served as the Speaker of the National Assembly and vice-president of the then coalition-leading liberal party, SMC, during the 2014-2018 Parliament, and was re-elected on the SMC list for the 2018-2022 term, while transferring to the SD parliamentary group and party list a few weeks later.

Table 1: Net vote change between 2004 – 2019 EP elections for selected parties* (%)

PARTY	EP GROUP	2004	2009	2014	2019
Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) leading coalition 2004-2008, 2012-2013	EPP	17.7% of all votes (2)	+10 (2+1**)	-1.9 (3)	+1.4 (with SLS) (3)
New Slovenia - Christian Democrats (Nsi)	EPP	23.6% of all votes (2)	-7.1 (1)	-0.1 (with SLS) (2)	-5.5 (1)
Social Democrats (SD) leading coalition 2009-2012	S&D	14.1 % of all votes (1)	+4.3 (2)	-10.6 (1)	+10.6 (2)
Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS) leading coalition 1992-2004	ALDE	21.9% of all votes (with DeSUS) (2)	-10.4 (1)	NR	NR
Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (DeSUS)	ALDE	(with LDS)	7.2% of all votes	+1.1 (1)	-2.4
For real	ALDE	NE	9.8 % of all votes (1)	-8.9	NE
Marjan Šarec List (LMŠ) leading coalition 2018-	ALDE	NE	NE	NE	15.4% of all votes (2)
Party of Alenka Bratušek (SAB) (Alenka Bratušek, still as a member of party Positive Slovenia leading coalition 2013-2014)	ALDE	NE	NE	NR (6.6% of all votes for Positive Slovenia)	4% of all votes
Party of Modern Center (SMC) leading coalition 2014-2018	ALDE	NE	NE	NE	1.6% of all votes
Believe, List of dr. Igor Šoltes	G-EFA	NE	NE	+10.3 (1)	NE
The Left	GUE-NGL	NE	NE	8.1% of all votes	-1.7
Slovenian national party (SNS)	NI	5 % of all votes	-2.1	+1.1	+0.01

Legend: Elected (number of MEP posts); * selected parties: all elected lists in the EP, all leading coalition parties at the national level, far left party in the national arena (The Left), central national party in the national arena (SNS); ** additional MEP seat due to the 2013 EU enlargement; NE: party not exist; NR: party not run for the EP elections; SLS – Slovenian People's Party.

Source: own calculations on the basis of SEC, 2019.

Table 2 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Slovenia

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) and Slovenian People's Party (SLS)	EPP	126,534	26.30	3	+1.4	
Social Democrats (SD)	S&D	89,936	18.70	2	+10.6	+1
Marjan Šarec List (LMŠ)	ALDE	74,431	15.40	2		+2
New Slovenia - Christian Democrats (Nsi)	EPP	53,621	11.10	1	-5.5	-1
The Left (LEVICA)	GUE-NGL	30,983	6.40		-1.7	
Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (DeSUS)	ALDE	27,329	5.70		-2.4	-1
Party of Alenka Bratušek (SAB)	ALDE	19,369	4.00			
Slovenian National Party (SNS)	NI	19,347	4.00		+0.01	
Greens of Slovenia (Zeleni)	NI	10,706	2.20		+1.4	
DOM -national league	NI	8,184	1.70			
Let's Unite (Povežimo se)	NI	7,980	1.70			
Party of Modern Center (SMC)	ALDE	7,823	1.60			
Movement United Slovenia (ZSI)	NI	3,288	0.70			
Good state (DD)	NI	2,544	0.50			
Total		482,075	100	8		
Turnout (%)			28.89			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			<i>none</i>			

Source: https://www.uradni-list.si/_pdf/2019/Ur/u2019036.pdf, pp. 4280-4283

It is difficult to identify a real winner of the 2019 Slovenian EP election. SD regained the seat lost after the 2009 elections, LMSŠ got two MEP mandates, and the NSi lost one seat. All traditional parties only experienced a slight change in vote shares between individual elections, while the emergence and disappearance of new parties point to extremely high volatility (see Table 1; Kustec Lipicer and Henjak, 2015). In the case of the 2019 elections, for example, two newly established and former leading coalition liberal parties at the national level, SAB/Positive Slovenia (2013-2014) and SMC (2014-2018), did not obtain a seat in the EP, polling much lower compared to national elections.

Regarding volatility, we should also mention that more than half of all competing lists for the 2014 EP elections (nine out of sixteen) did not stand in the 2019 elections, among them three coalition partners from that term that are today either defunct or only regionally active (e.g. Positive Slovenia). On the other hand, exactly half of the completely new political parties ran in this year's EP elections. SMC and SAB did not run in 2014 EP elections while they were preparing for the early national election that was held in July of that year, and LMSŠ was only formed as a party in 2018, before the early national elections in June that year. Party lists DOM and Let's Unite were formed specifically for the 2019 EP elections.

CONCLUSION

The debate about Slovenia's 2019 EP experience is not so much centred on its first- or second-order character (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Reif, 1984; Hix and Marsh, 2011) as it is about split political and party identities in the national arena.

The following set of findings call for analytical consideration that is beyond the remit of this chapter:

- 1) low turnout and template-structured, self-seeking campaign activities that, at the same time, promote the EU as a champion for the future of the nation;
- 2) asymmetric volatility scores in a context of successful introduction and consolidation of EP elites in traditional parties on both the right and left side of the political spectrum, along with the devastating failures of newly established, mostly liberal, parties to retain voter support in successive elections;
- 3) an unstable, constantly changing first-order national political arena having a direct impact on voting behaviour in national and EP elections.

Considering the 2019 Slovenian EP electoral experience, a call for the stabilisation of the national political and party arena and the building of a stronger domestic attitude towards EU electoral democracy and political culture is clearly needed, especially given the forthcoming, traditionally combative, domestic political disputes in the process of nominating a national member for the European Commission. This has already been triggered by the announcement of the election results (Rtvslo, 2019).

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