

2022: A Super Election Year in Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

The election year 2022 set a record in the number of direct expressing of political will of voters in the recent political history of Slovenia. Citizens went to polls even seven times. The parliamentary elections and the referendum trio were the most echoed and important ones. The former, on one hand, brought political shift to left liberal centre, after two years of the rightwing coalition that misused the pandemic time for strengthening of the autocratic approach. This was most obvious in continuing efforts to dismantle the Slovene Press Agency and the National TV. The latter, on the other hand, focused on the right to clean drinking water for everybody. The presidential elections only confirmed that political trend, bringing victory to the independent candidate from the political centre. Key characteristics of the super election year were the defeat of rightwing parties, huge election turnout and an outstanding activity of civil society that contributed significantly to a political change.

KEYWORDS: Elections, Slovenia, parliament, political parties, The Freedom Movement, civil society

POVZETEK

Volično leto 2022 je bilo v novejši politični zgodovini Slovenije rekordno po številu neposrednih izjasnjevanj volje volilcev. Ti so se na volišča odpravili kar sedemkrat. Po politični odmevnosti so izstopale parlamentarne volitve in referendumski trojček, kjer je bil v ospredju referendum za pravico do čiste pitne vode za vse. Parlamentarne volitve so prinesle korenit preobrat v levo liberalno sredino, po dveh letih vladanja desne koalicije. Ta je čas pandemije izrabila za krepitev totalitarnih teženj, ki so se najbolj izrazito pokazale v prizadevanjih za demontažo STA in TV Slovenija. Predsedniške volitve so prav tako prinesle zmago neodvisni kandidatki s politične sredine. Ključne značilnosti supervolilnega leta so bile poraz desnih strank, zelo velika volilna udeležba in izjemna, vsestranska aktivnost civilne družbe, ki je v ključni meri pripomogla k političnemu preobratu.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: volitve, Slovenija, parlament, politične stranke, Gibanje Svoboda, civilna družba

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INTRODUCTION

Slovenia is one of the Central-Eastern European post-socialist countries that underwent the transition process in the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, when it implemented the values of liberal democracy and adopted new democratic constitutions that introduced the parliamentary system. The new Slovenian constitution was based on certain decisions regarding the constitutional organisation, including the proportional representation system for elections of the 90-member National Assembly and the direct election for the President of the Republic, which is the only directly elected high state function, unlike other parliamentary democracies where the president of the state is appointed by the parliament. Slovenians were enthusiastic about the modern parliamentary democracy and the possibility for political parties to be freely established and to compete in elections.

The election system (in 2000, the 4% electoral threshold was laid down in the constitution) enabled a very open National Assembly. Besides the established political parties, new inexperienced ones entered the National Assembly, which was largely the result of the 2008 economic crisis and the decreasing confidence in the established political parties. This created considerable problems in the formation of coalitions, which united parties with similar programmes and ideological orientations, but due to the low coalition potential they were unable to form stable governments. The period of government instability, which began with the government of Borut Pahor (2008), lasted for a long time, as individual parties refused to associate with ideologically different parties or those on the other side of the political divide between conservative and centre-left parties, or parties with a different attitude to the past. Here, it would be interesting to dwell on the question, whether the electoral system or political culture prevents coalitions across ideological divide.

The main focus of this paper goes for the parliamentary elections, since they present the main election event of the super election year 2022.

ELECTIONS TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUMS

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2022: A 2018 PRELUDE

The very open nature of the National Assembly was demonstrated at the eighth election to the National Assembly on 3 June 2018, with a 52.6% turnout, when nine parties entered the National Assembly. After the first-placed Slovenian Democratic Party – SDS (24.9% of votes) failed to form a majority coalition, the second-placed List of Marjan Šarec – LMS (12.6% of votes) under the leadership of Marjan Šarec managed to form a minority coalition of five centre-left parties. However, due to leadership problems and the cancellation of external support from the Left Party, it disintegrated in the middle of its four-year term of office (Zajc, 2020: 233). SDS leader Janez Janša managed to form a new majority coalition government together with the liberal Modern Centre Party – SMC and a small Christian-Democratic Party – New Slovenia (NSi). The new coalition took office on 13 March 2020, which enabled Slovenia to avoid early elections and the lengthy formation of a new government during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

During the last two years of its mandate, the centre-right coalition government under Janša's leadership operated under Covid-19 pandemic conditions, during which period there was a large asymmetry in the balance of power between the National Assembly and the government. On the basis of its programme and special powers it had due to emergency situation, the government adopted a series of urgent measures to limit the spread of Covid-19, with which it disproportionately interfered into human rights (some of those measures were annulled by the Constitutional Court) and tried to influence the media and subordinate the Slovenian Press Agency (STA).² Despite great difficulties, the coalition government managed to contain the pandemic and achieve some positive economic results (economic growth and a historically low unemployment rate). In the second half of 2021 it also successfully presided over the Council of the European Union. However, dissatisfaction with the imposed measures and limitations, the authoritarian leadership of the state and the degrading attitude towards civil society led to growing dissatisfaction with the government and increasing political polarization. This was demonstrated at the referendum on waters in July 2021, the initiator of which was the 8th of March Institute

2 In its 2021 report, the U.S. non-governmental organisation Freedom House ranked Slovenia among the countries with substantial decline of democracy as compared to Central European countries.

(expertise on the subject matter was provided by professional associations in the water field), when 86.7% of voters (with a 46% turnout) voted against the amendment of the waters act proposed by Janša's government.³

The next regular election to the National Assembly, which was the first in a row of elections during the “super-election year”, marked a significantly higher turnout (70.9 percent) in comparison with the previous elections. This shows that citizens began to realize the importance of political participation, and similar trends were also noticed in some other European countries (at the same time, presidential elections were held in France, where Emanuel Macron's liberal party *La République en Marche* defeated the far-right populist party *Rassemblement National* led by Marie Le Pen). This time the election was not an ordinary race between political parties that allows for a change of power – growing uncertainty among the people due to the consequences of the pandemic as well as the outbreak of the war in Ukraine made it different. The election was special also because of the main antagonists – on one side was a long-time politician, the head of the established SDS and the leader of several coalition governments from the Demos times, Janez Janša, and on the other side was Robert Golob, a representative of the younger generation who had not previously participated in politics, otherwise the chief executive officer of Gen-I, a successful Slovenian state-owned company, who took over the green party Z.DEJ and renamed it into the new one, called Freedom Movement.⁴

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2022: RESULTS AND CHARACTERISTICS AND FORMATION OF THE COALITION

Unlike the previous elections, this time only five parties made it to the National Assembly. Four out of nine parties did not reach the electoral threshold, which represented considerable rationalization in the political sphere. Only 32 members of the National Assembly were re-elected, which is less than at previous elections, while a record number of female members of the National Assembly (36) were elected and this put Slovenia on par with the countries of Northern Europe. The

3 The environmental activists and a vast part of civil society called upon a referendum, since they were convinced that the Government's proposal aims to have detrimental effects on environment, drinking water in particular. The proposal was rejected with a huge majority and with one of the biggest turnouts in the recent Slovene political history.

4 The Freedom Movement, which represents the ideas of liberalism and green politics and ranks between the political centre and the left-centre, was founded on 26 January 2022, with Robert Golob elected its president. It presented its programme and candidate list for elections at its assembly on 19 March 2022.

largest share of votes (34.4%) went to the completely new Freedom Movement party led by Robert Golob. Founded as a political project only a few months before the elections, the Freedom Movement won 41 seats and thus enjoys unprecedented power held by one political party in the National Assembly. Its ideology and programme follow liberal political parties (it belongs to the European alliance of liberal parties ALDE), although its MPs have no political experience. It answered people's expectations for change, but it also brought risks, as it had not (yet) been sufficiently institutionalized and consolidated, nor did it have an adequate political network. The second by the number of votes was the previous leading centre-right SDS party, which won 23.5% and 27 MPs, and the third was the Christian-Democrat NSi with 6.8% and 8 MPs – both slightly increased their number of MPs.

The biggest losers were the centre-left parties united in the so-called Constitutional Arch Coalition (KUL) – the well-established SD (Social Democrats) won only 6.6% of the votes and reduced the number of MPs from 10 to 7, while the Left Party came close to the electoral threshold with 4.3% of the votes and reduced the number of MPs from 9 to 5. The centre-left LMŠ, which was the leading government party in the first part of the mandate, suffered a complete defeat – it received only 3.7% of votes, while SAB⁵ received 2.6% of votes. Contrary to expectations, the Let's Connect Slovenia coalition, consisting of several smaller parties including the Concrete party (former SMC), did not cross the electoral threshold – it received only 3.4% of votes. The Truth (Resnica) Citizens' Movement with 2.8%, SNS⁶ with 1.5%, Our Country with 1.5%, Vesna – Green Party with 1.3% and even DeSUS (Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia) with 0.6% of votes all remained far below the threshold. Among the parties that crossed the electoral threshold, there was no longer any “personified” party, i.e. a party that would be named after its leader, which is a sign of normalization in the political party sphere. The election results showed great changeability of voters' support for parties, which is typical of countries that have developmental problems or are affected by economic, social or other crises (Zajc 2015, p.190). It was actually a case of spill-over of votes or tactical voting: the voters, especially those in the centre-left, mostly supported an alternative party that had a better chance of success.

5 SAB – Stranka Alenke Bratušek (Party of Alenka Bratušek) Mrs. Bratušek was the first Slovene female Prime Minister in the period 2013-2014.

6 SNS – Slovenska nacionalna stranka (The Slovene Nationalist Party).

An important result of these elections was the rationalization of the number of parties (Slovenia with five parties in the parliament can be compared to Germany with six), which made it easier and faster to form a new coalition. A smaller number of parties in the government enables faster and more predictable decision-making, and can thus contribute to greater transparency and better manageability of the political space and to greater accountability for the adopted policies. The Freedom Movement leader Golob emphasized that the formation of the coalition would not be based on political affiliation and party loyalty but rather on professionalism and competences of individuals, as it is the case in more successful countries. Based on his experience in economic management, Golob also promised a faster and more dynamic decision making, which represented a big change compared to previous non-operational centre-left governments.

The overview of the results of the parliamentary elections is presented in the Table 1.

Table 1: Results of the Parliamentary Elections
Elections to the National Assembly (24 April 2022)

Party	%
Freedom Movement	34.3%
SDS	23.5%
NSi	6.8%
SD	6.6%
The Left Party	4.3%

Source: The Author

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2022: FORMATION OF THE COALITION

When forming the coalition government, Golob did not want to associate with political parties outside the political centre. He invited the centre-left SD, which represents itself as a classic social-democratic party, and the radical far-left Left party, which waived its requirement for Slovenia's withdrawal from NATO before it entered the government. While SDS is a party with long history and experience in joining in coalitions and cooperating with partners, the Left Party, which has entered the coalition government for the first time, lacks the ability to accept differences and to cooperate with its coalition partners. The coalition thus acquired some characteristics of centrist liberal govern-

ments, which were common in Western and Central Europe, at least until the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. The new opposition consists of only two parties – SDS and NSi, which are ideologically similar, but quite different in terms of management, cooperation and public relations. Since they have both been in the opposition before, their current status has not caused any upheaval.

Another specific feature of the last parliamentary elections was the speed of forming the three-party coalition and of forming the government in accordance with the timeline drawn up by the election winner. The Freedom Movement, whose goal is to win the next elections as a unified party of the liberal centre-left, quickly reached an agreement with SD and the Left Party on common interests and priorities as well as the number of ministerial portfolios, whereby the achievement of programme goals seemed more important than gaining the seats in the government (while the areas of some new portfolios remained unclear). At the first regular constitutive session of the National Assembly on 13 May, 2022, at which the mandates of the MPs were confirmed and the Vice-President of the Freedom Movement Urška Klakočar Zupančič was elected as the National Assembly Speaker (after SD gave up this position), the coalition government submitted a proposal for amendments to the Government Act with the aim to increase the number of ministries and change the powers of some departments. Coalition negotiations between the three partners led to the initialling of the coalition agreement on 16 May 2022, which was supposed to represent a shift towards a modern, developmentally- and socially-oriented state. Considering this coalition's great ambitions, their agreement is not very extensive – it comprises only 74 pages, which is comparable to the extent of coalition agreements concluded between Slovenian parties in previous mandates.⁷ Like some previous coalition agreements (Krašovec and Krpič, 2019, p.229), the current coalition agreement emphasized the resolution of conflicts between the partners with the aim to ensure the survival of the coalition, and placed regulation of the health system and measures to mitigate the energy and food cost crisis in the foreground. However, it remained largely unelaborated. In terms of content, it represents harmonisation of the individual part-

7 The coalition agreements signed by Slovenian political parties in the past were of similar volume. In 2014 the coalition agreement concluded between the centre-left parties SMC, SD and DeSUS for the coalition government led by Miro Cerar, contained 72 pages. The shorter coalition agreement signed in 2018 by LMŠ, SMC, SD, SAB and DeSUS for the coalition government led by Marjan Šarec had 47 pages, while the 2020 coalition agreement between SDS, NSi and SMC for the coalition government led by Janez Janša, contained only 13 pages. In countries with longer tradition of parliamentary democracy coalition agreements are much longer – thus the 2021 coalition agreement between the German SPD, FPD and the Green Party contains of 177 pages.

ners' most important programme guidelines and goals, whereby the Left Party and SD managed to incorporate more content from their respective programmes. At the same time, it contains considerable financial risks – compared to coalition agreements in other developed countries, it does not provide an accurate financial evaluation of the planned measures. The agreement was signed on 24 May 2022, and the day after, Robert Golob was elected Prime Minister by secret ballot in the National Assembly with 54 votes in favour. He proposed a list of candidates for ministers, half of whom were politicians, including members of some previous governments, and the other half were experts from various fields. At the same time, the Freedom Movement undertook the process of uniting with the SAB and LMŠ parties, which remained below the electoral threshold. This was another tactical move, as the Freedom Movement thus consolidated its dominant position on the centre left, and gained an extensive network of committees at the local level and professional staff (especially in the National Assembly). At their “dissolution” congresses in June 2022, the two parties adopted decisions to merge with the Freedom Movement (the symbolic merger congress took place on 10 November 2022). During the coordination of priorities, the three parties hastily prepared a Protocol on Coalition Cooperation in order to ensure equality and communication between them. Unlike those of previous governments, it is more specific, stating that proposals for laws and meeting documents may be included in the government session until the content is fully harmonised, and that coalition partners should avoid filing or voting on interpellations against ministers or votes of no confidence in the government.

At the end of May 2022, all 17 candidates for ministers, who were nominated under the existing Government Act, undergone hearings by the respective committees of the National Assembly. At those hearings, in accordance with Article 230 of the Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly, they presented their respected areas and the necessary measures. During the presentations, considerable differences emerged between the candidates who had very different political experiences, especially in terms of their expertise and competences, and individual candidates also differently interpreted the content of the coalition agreement – particularly as regards their willingness to spend financial resources and the need to control the spending, which should be in line with the possibilities. All the proposed candidates (including seven female candidates) were approved by the majority of committee members.

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2022: THE FIRST FEW MONTHS OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT

Due to the quick formation of the coalition and the speedy procedures laid down in the Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly, Slovenia got its fifteenth government at the 3rd extraordinary session of the National Assembly on 1 June 2022, i.e. 38 days after the elections, which was faster compared to the time it took to form previous coalition governments (the proposed list of ministers was elected by a majority of 63 MPs). In view of the situation in Slovenia and the world, the new coalition government tried to establish a more effective organisational structure of the ministries. With the proposal for amendments to the Act on the Government of the Republic of Slovenia, it aimed to establish three new ministries in priority areas (the Ministry of Solidarity-based Future, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, and the Ministry of the Environment, Climate Change and Energy), which would place Slovenia among European countries with the largest number of ministries (20). The law was adopted at the 6th extraordinary session on 22 June 2022, but the opposition demanded a consultative referendum.

Having announced rapid changes in priority areas, the coalition government ensured a faster pace of work of the National Assembly (17 extraordinary sessions were convened within a hundred days after the constitutive session). Aiming for quick changes, the government sent meeting documents to the National Assembly at a fast pace, which led to numerous violations of the Resolution on Legislative Regulation. This could affect the quality of the adopted acts, as pointed out by the National Assembly's expert services. In a short period of time, they submitted some important laws to the National Assembly, such as the amended Communicable Diseases Act prepared by the civil society. The Constitutional Court found that this Act – which was almost three decades old – was not in conformity with the Constitution. On 27 June 2022, at the 7th extraordinary session of the National Assembly, the proposed amendments were supported by the coalition majority with 49 votes in favour (SDS voted against, NSi abstained). The amendments precisely determine the order of taking measures against infectious diseases and strengthen the role of the National Assembly. After Russia's aggression against Ukraine and with the aim to act in accordance with the security policy of other EU countries and NATO members, the government prepared the Act on the Ratification of the Protocols on Sweden and Finland's acces-

sion to NATO, which was passed at the 10th extraordinary session of the National Assembly on 14 July, despite the disagreement of the Left Party. The government also prepared an intervention Act Determining Emergency Measures to Ensure Stability of Healthcare System, which was adopted by the urgent procedure at the same session on 14 July (by 48 votes in favour and 27 against). During this time, the coalition government also prepared the Act Amending the Radio-Television of Slovenia Act, which was supposed to prevent the influence of political parties and re-determine the organizational structure of the National Radio and Television (RTV) Slovenia (instead of 29 members of the Programme Council, a 17-member RTV Council was introduced). The Act was prepared with the assistance of the Legal Network for the Protection of Democracy and it was adopted by the urgent procedure at the 11th extraordinary session on 14 July, which started 15 minutes after the end of the 10th extraordinary session (by 53 in favour and 2 against). At the 12th extraordinary session on 21 July, MPs also adopted amendments to the Long-Term Care Act, which postponed the implementation of the Act till 2024 due to major financial consequences. The National Assembly also adopted the very complex Act to Reduce Inequality and Harmful Policy Interventions and Ensure Respect for the Rule of Law, prepared by the March 8 Institute, which was supposed to abrogate the amendments to eleven laws adopted during the previous government – the Act was passed, and after a veto by the National Council, the National Assembly re-adopted the law at the 13th extraordinary session on 21 July. After a number of European countries decided for tax cuts, Slovenian government also decided to lower the VAT on energy products at the end of July, which should have had a positive effect on the economy – the MPs passed the VAT Reduction Act following an urgent procedure at the 14th extraordinary session on 23 August (with 78 votes for and none against). Subsequently, the government also prepared the Covid-19 exit strategy and began removing the barbed-wire fence along the border with Croatia.

The coalition government, which maintained a convincing majority and unity during its first six months, began to fulfil the main commitments from the coalition agreement, although with some delays. There was also some dissatisfaction with the government's attitude towards MPs who did not want to be the coalition's voting machine. Due to speedy proceedings, there is also insufficient coordination between the Freedom Movement, SD and the Left Party in the preparation of

legislative proposals and also in personnel selection. Neoliberal orientation of some proposed and adopted laws, especially in the field of healthcare, caused some friction within the coalition. The differences within the Freedom Movement became apparent in December during the voting on amendments to the Financial Administration Act, when only 38 of its MPs supported it (MPs from the SD and the Left party abstained). At the same time, there was a need for more efficient government with greater use of soft and smart power (Fabiani, 2015, p.42) and better coordination between the coalition partners. The way each prime minister operates is also important – Prime Minister Golob, who transferred his management style from economy to politics and concentrated great decision-making power in his hands, has showed considerable competence in addressing the public. However, the results of government work are not only evaluated by the market, but also by the citizens, the civil society and the social partners (Svetlik, 2022, p.12). It should not be overlooked that during this time the differences between the state and the civil society have decreased (Igličar, 2022, p.7) and that the civil society has been very intensely involved in politics through discussions and the preparation of proposals for various laws, so that it eventually became an extension of politics.

On the other hand, the opposition, which initially announced a constructive and state-building stance, did not allow the government a hundred days of peace. It has sharpened its rhetoric and used numerous means of control provided by parliamentary democracy. Both opposition parties, which also have the most experienced MPs, know well how to use those means of control. It showed its power already on the first day at the constituent and the only regular session of the National Assembly on 13 May 2022, when SDS and NSi submitted 34 legislative proposals, including some fundamental ones, which were the first to be deliberated by the National Assembly. This kind of pressure from the opposition was unprecedented in Slovenian parliamentary history, as well as in the practice of other parliaments. After the MPs rejected the proposal for a consultative referendum on the Government Act, the SDS submitted a demand for a subsequent legislative referendum and began collecting signatures, which dragged on and caused a deadlock in government formation (due to summer holidays, the collection of 40,000 verified signatures was delayed until 5 October). The opposition intensified the pressure on the government also by filing interpellations (they were unsuccessful against Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon and Interior Minister Tatjana Bobnar in November) just as in the

previous period the KUL coalition constantly threw spanners in the works of previous government with meaningless and unsuccessful interpellations.

Although it is a strong coalition government, it had to undergo the first stability test after the first six months. At the beginning of December 2022, the Minister of Internal Affairs Tatjana Bobnar resigned due to the Prime Minister's influence on police staffing, after the government failed to support her proposal to appoint Borut Lindav as Director General of the Police (after reporting alleged pressure, Prime Minister Golob's conduct was examined by the prosecutor's office and the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption). However, the government has maintained a fairly high level of voters' support since its inception.⁸ Under the circumstances of the energy, environmental and food crises and the general cost of living crisis together with the forecasts of inflation and much slower economic growth in 2023 (1.7%), the performance of the government may be affected by highly volatile international circumstances with the possibility of a serious security crisis due to the war in Ukraine.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Not long after parliamentary elections, the campaign for presidential election began. This is a directly elected office, unlike in other countries with parliamentary democracy, where the president of the state is appointed by the parliament. President of the state also enjoys the highest repute among the voters, regardless of the relatively limited powers of this function. In contrast to the campaign for the parliamentary elections, the presidential election campaign was tolerant, respectful and professionally run. Seven candidates competed in the first round of presidential election on 22 November 2022, among them Anže Logar, a long-time SDS member (though proclaiming that he is running as an independent candidate), who represented the classic European centre-right orientation, and a non-party candidate Nataša Pirc Musar, who comes from the business and economic elites. Logar, who has considerable political experience (he was also foreign minister in the previous government led by Prime Minister Janša), in his rather reassuring rhetoric also made reasonable statements about Slovenia's past and reconciliation, but did not explicitly distance himself

⁸ According to opinion polling carried out by Mediana (5-8 December), support to Golob's government remained high - in December 2022 it was supported by 45% of respondents (Delo, 12 December 2022).

from the leader of his SDS party. Nataša Pirc Musar, who had not been a member of any party in the past, registered her candidacy with voters' signatures, and she was supported by the two previous presidents of the country, Milan Kučan and Danilo Türk as well as the Freedom Movement. As a lawyer she showed high professional competence, but had no political experience. She also represented a new successful younger generation, and she built trust by advocating human rights and the rule of law.

In the first round Logar won 33.9% and Pirc Musar 26.8% of votes. Other candidates received much smaller shares of votes: Milan Brglez, who was supported by the Freedom Movement and SD, got 15.4%, Vladimir Prebilič as an independent candidate received 10.6%, the physician Stanka Senčar won 5.9%, NSi candidate Janez Cigler Kralj got 4.3%, and the Left Party candidate Miha Kordež only received 2.8% of votes.

In the runoff presidential election there was a significant spill-over of votes from candidates with lower chances to candidates with higher chances of being elected. Thus Logar, won 46.1% of votes, which was more than in the first round and even more than SDS and NSi won together at the parliamentary elections half a year ago. Although he received a high share of votes due to his rhetoric and speaking skills, he did not get sufficient support from voters outside the narrow centre-right circle. He exceeded the expectations, but that was not enough to defeat his rival Pirc Musar, who received high support in the centre-left circle as a non-party candidate and got 53.8% of votes due to tactical voting. The ratio of votes in support of one or the other candidate was affected by the current political polarization between centre-right and centre-left parties, which prevented them from turning to a more moderate and more pragmatic politics and integration in the Slovenian political space.

The results of the second round of the presidential elections are presented in the Table 2.

Table 2: Final Results of the Presidential Elections
Presidential elections (runoff 13 November)

Share of votes for Nataša Pirc Musar	53.8%
Share of votes for Anže Logar	46.1%

Source: The Author

On 22 December 2022, Nataša Pirc Musar took the oath as the first female president at a ceremonial session in the National Assembly, and the next day she took over business from former president Borut Pahor, who had held the office for two terms.

REFERENDUMS, NATIONAL COUNCIL AND LOCAL ELECTIONS

In autumn 2022, a referendum was held on three laws that had already been passed by the National Assembly. The demand for three referendums, which were supposed to show the true will of the people, was submitted by the largest opposition party SDS, which gathered the signatures of 160,000 voters. This was actually a special form of checking the voters' attitude after SDS suffered a major defeat at parliamentary elections in April and later at presidential elections in November. The intention of the SDS was to reject the laws that were previously adopted in parliament.

The referendums on the Government Act, Long Term Care Act and Act Amending the Radio-Television Act were held together on 27 November 2022. The voters supported all three acts, although the voting result for Government Act was not as convincing as for the other two acts. The voting "against" the three acts can be compared with the voting "for" Anže Logar at presidential election – the share of votes against the Government Act was only slightly lower than the share of votes that Logar received. The differences between the share of votes for the other two acts and the share of votes for Logar were much larger, which indicated greater opposition to the government.

After the National Electoral Commission issued a report on the referendum results on 1 December, the National Assembly announced those results on 23 December. All three acts came into force after publication in the Official Gazette on 28 December. Prime Minister Golob was then able to propose ministers for the new and the changed ministries to the National Assembly (immediately after this, an initiative was filed to assess the constitutionality of the Act Amending the Radio-Television Slovenia Act, the author of the initiative was a reknown legal expert Matej Avbelj).

The overview of the referendum results is presented in the Table 3.

Table 3: Referendum Results
Referendums (27 November 2022)

Referendum	For	Against
Long Term Care Act	62.3%	37.8%
Act Amending the Radio-Television Slovenij Act	62.8%	37.2%
Government Act	56.6%	43.3%

Source: The Author

In 2022, indirect elections to the 40-member National Council were also held. The National Council of the Republic of Slovenia is a representation of social, economic, professional and local interests, and its composition is supposed to neutralize the excessive influence of political parties. In 2022, the National Council cast 21 vetoes, ten of which were successful. This should contribute to the quality of decision-making in the National Assembly. The new leadership of the National Council (elected on 19 December) expressed the ambition to increase the powers of the National Council and to establish a dialogue with the leadership of the National Assembly, but this would require changes to the constitution and an extended legislative process (should the National Council obtain the right to propose amendments to adopted laws), and in case of a constitutional veto by the President, they would have to vote again. This is not very likely, bearing in mind the coordination of interests and the speed of decision-making, especially since the Freedom Movement does not see the need for it.

Local elections were also held in autumn 2022. Again, individual parties tried to win as many seats as possible – SLS⁹ came first and SD second in terms of the number of elected mayors and municipal councillors.

⁹ SLS – Slovenska ljudska straka (a nonparliamentary Slovene Peoples Party).

CONCLUSION

The super-election year 2022, in which citizens were repeatedly invited to the polls, was the first such year in the history of Slovenia. The most important among the elections were those for the National Assembly, which marked the victory of the liberal-oriented centre represented by the new Freedom Movement, against its opponents on the right and competitors on the centre-left. Accordingly, a new coalition government was formed. In the same year, there were also presidential elections (held in two rounds), referendums on three acts, indirect elections to the National Assembly and local elections. Thus, voters could express their will seven times in one year.

Slovenian right-wing parties experienced a series of defeats in 2022. This was partly the result of the actions taken by SDS-led government during the Covid-19 pandemic, when it imposed disproportionate measures and numerous restrictions on human rights through its authoritarian leadership. Its (un)successful fight against Covid-19 can be compared with the governments of other countries affected by the pandemic, where they also adopted stricter measures (France, Spain, New Zealand), but were able to better explain them to the citizens with well-intentioned communication.

However, the reasons for the failures are not only in the way SDS operates and its inadequate communication with the public, but are also related to the past and recent history of Slovenia and large imbalances of social power in the post-war period, which resulted in the continuity of deep political polarization. Another reason for the changes in voters' support to parties and their candidates is the strong impact of the economic crisis in the last decade and a half, which led to the emergence of many new parties and the spill-over of votes or tactical voting, which has led to great instability. The third reason for the social changes brought about by the super-election year is probably the need for periodic generational renewal of any political system and the introduction of new innovative ideas. This points to the need for greater cooperation between political parties. If Slovenia wants to avoid further crises and actively participate in the formation of policies at EU level, it should make a realistic plan for the near and more distant future.

The new liberal-left government has great possibilities and potential to end the period of instability after a decade and a half and enable

greater political steadiness. It also has the possibility to start cooperating with the opposition NSi party. However, it should be taken into account that the new coalition government lacks the experience. Its ability to create new, urgently needed policies in some areas (health, economy, energy) has not (yet) proven to be sufficiently successful. Doubts have also been raised about the way the government is run and the use of certain methods of operation and influence in personnel changes.

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