

# The genesis of new Right-wing movements and their rhetorics in Slovenia

Populism and neoconservative forces have been among us for a very long time and are the most prominent pillars of the capitalist neoliberal agenda. We could argue that their renaissance began at the start of the 21st century, when we emerged into the constant “state of crisis”, that we are still facing today. Let it be regarding terrorism (after the tragic attack on 9/11), the economy (after the financial crisis in 2008), refugees (after the refugee crisis), the EU (after Brexit) ... we are always in a “state of crisis”, which paves the road for the Right and is, of course, also produced by it, and also shows the weakness of the Left — that of it still not being able to find a proper language to formulate itself, always playing the opposition and being incompetent of taking concrete actions when in power or losing itself in the centrist position. Only a strong transnational movement on the Left, which main goal should be building horizontal solidarity and a welfare state, but also analysing the Right-wing movement, as it is noticeably progressing in its rhetorics and tactics, will be able to defeat the opposition.

In this paper I would like to explain the course of actions that led to the formation of new Right-wing parties and their impact on politics in Slovenia.

## LGBT and women’s rights under attack

### The Church and its satellites

The neoconservative political programme of different movements, which we are encountering in Slovenia and around Europe in the past years, mostly in connection with reproductive rights and LGBT rights, was conceived as a fight for protection of allegedly endangered social groups. Agents of these movements build its politics on the unambiguous and excluding understanding of “life, family and religious freedom”. An important part in this is played by the Roman Catholic Church, which is, with the help of all its “civil society” movements and satellites, moving away from the biblical, dogmatic, discourse, which is not effective in the populist sense anymore, and is substituting it with a discourse, which at first glance might seem very rational, calming, at points even scientific and is relying on “common sense” — that, which is perceived to be “normal” and “natural”. This way the Church secularised its discourse and tried to form a more clerical society: its religious beliefs, which are in many cases the foundation for exclusion of many marginalised groups, are being

presented as universal, scientific and rational. It is important to find a way to see through this kind of populism. The mentioned politics of exclusion are not here for protecting rights, but for maintaining the *status quo*, positions of power and a new attempt at re-traditionalization of society.

I will illustrate this on the case of LGBT rights — in the year 2009 the Department of social services in Slovenia presented their proposal of the new Family Code, which expanded existing same-sex registered partnerships to have all rights of “straight” married couples, except adoption (excluding step-child adoption); in addition, the law expanded provisions protecting the rights of children, such as outlawing corporal punishment.

The proposal quickly became one of the most debated topics in the Slovene public sphere and allowed new agents of the Right to emerge, but this time in a different form — not only as known Catholic agents (like priests) or members of Parliament from right parties, but as a civil movement called “Civil Initiative for the Family and the Rights of Children”, led by the activist and philosopher Aleš Primc (back then member of the conservative-centrist Slovenian People's Party). The movement also created its own media, *24kul.si*, which was the definition of what we today call *fake news*, talking about the “gay and feminist lobby”, the “LGBT ideology” and starting the “gender theory” discourse in Slovene space, which was not yet present to this point and later on played a pivotal role in opposing same-sex marriage in the next referendum, that would take place three years later. And even though the web page and the movement itself tried to secularise itself from the Church, it was later on discovered, that the web page *24kul.si* was hosted on servers owned by the Church. The movement gathered the required signatures to force a referendum on the law and won by 54.55 % with a 30.10 % turnout. For this we can blame the lack of a left discourse — The Left (Levica) was not yet formed at that time and the ruling party were the Social Democrats (SD), an epitome of the “third way” social democrats — and also the ability of the mobilisation of the Right and its new populist tactics. They have managed to privatise the concept of “family” by invoking fear in the society, using one of the most beloved tactics of capitalist neoliberalism.

### “The Time is Now!” campaign

But the fight was not over yet. The Left, then already in parliament, proposed a Law that would amend The Marriage and Family Relations Act by redefining the definition of marriage from the community of “husband and wife” to a community of two persons (two subjects of the same or different gender, of any gender at all). The amendment would enable the same symbolic, legal, economic and social status to same-sex couples as that of heterosexual ones and would also allow them to adopt, on a notion that this kind of discrimination is in direct contrast with the Constitution,

which does not allow discrimination based on personal conditions. The proposed changes of the Family Code would manage this area in a systematic, effective and simple way and would fully actualise the constitutional principles of equality before the law and those of a just welfare state. The Law was approved.

History repeated itself, as the Law was met with opposition from the Right. "Civil Initiative for the Family and the Rights of Children" was now under the new name "It's about children!" and has evolved into a network of several smaller groups and movements, all connected to the Church, for example "Holy Children" and the international initiative "40 Days for Life". They, again, forced a referendum, which was enforced by the constitutional court. All of the groups spoke the same language, which has evolved from the referendum in 2012 and internalised the new tool of populism — still relying on the so called scientific discourse, litigation (playing with law arguments) and their own victimization, turning the discourse into "We are the real victims here", and coming up with a new term "christianophobia", all of this merged together with "gender theory", or what we like to call now gender ideology. To simplify this term, it is something the Right is attributing to the Left as a "tool used by radical feminists and radical homosexual activists who want to destroy the traditional family and gender itself". This is of course exploiting the writings of Judith Butler and modern studies of gender. The Slovene movement only followed the pattern that was going on in Croatia, Slovakia, Hungary, France, Italy, ... mostly relying on the books by Gabriele Kuby, who writes: "A hidden cultural revolution is going on, which goal it is to dissolve the identity of men and women, overlook gender and sexual norms, which are based on the institutions of marriage, family, motherhood and fatherhood." All of these movements internationally, following the trend and ideology first created in The States, carry the same message, even similar graphic design and names, use same photos, videos and propaganda material, for example — images and graphics of "happy families", usually depicting nuclear heterosexual families, the word "child", "children" and "protect".

The Left led the campaign "The Time is Now!" with little to no support from the governing center-left coalition, despite their promises. The campaign also started at the peak of the so called "refugee crisis", a month after the decision was made to put up wire fences on the Croatian border, consequently making The Left less effective on both fronts. Even though The Left and its supporters led a strong campaign, it inadvertently got caught into the discourse of the Right, defending itself against the accusations of "trying to change the traditional family". Even though the movement "It's about children!" itself did not get a lot of followers *per se*, due to its radical positions and caricature-like personalities, it still managed to evoke doubt among people and compelled them to vote against the law. The referendum was a success, 63,51 % against with a 36,38 % turnout.

## The attack on women's reproductive rights

The movement "It's about Children!" was, of course, mostly against the notion of same-sex couples having the right to adopt, but also very obviously against abortion and pro-choice movements, so much so, that they showed pictures of fetuses on national TV already during the debates for marriage equality — they were already preparing the playing field for their next agenda. This manifested itself in the movements "Holy Children" and "40 Days for Life". Even though we have to be fair and say, that Slovenia is one of the countries with a very good legislation linked to abortion — in Article 55 of the Constitution it states that the woman has the right of freedom of choice when giving birth to a child, the procedure is also covered by medical care — we still have to be vigilant on this front and protect the rights, that have already been fought for.

One of the things they did was setting up a screening of a documentary "The Miracle of Life" in front of a church on the main square in Ljubljana, which spread the "pro-life propaganda". Even though they were warned by the county of Ljubljana and several movements to end the screening of the video, it did not get removed till the end of the "40 Days for Prayer" period. During this time they also organised daily prayers in front of abortion clinics all over Slovenia, holding signs with "pro-life" propaganda and applying direct pressure and violence on women going into the clinic to get an abortion, which is already a traumatic experience by itself. The interesting part of the movement was also including women as first agents of this movement — women, that "dreaded the pain of women getting abortions and the killed children". The leader of this movement was Angelca Likovič, who also stated that even raped women should bear a child.

## Slovene "technical obstacles"

### The tactic of alienation of refugees

The "refugee crisis" gave power to Right-wing forces, that have been pretty much inactive in the Slovene space for a very long time, ever since the influx of refugees from former Yugoslavia in the 90s. They formed into groups like "Radical Slovenia", "Slovenia, protect your borders!", ... which organised protests and led the public discourse into their wanted direction. You see, all of these radical movements never impose larger movements, in Slovenia an anti-immigration protest had count of around 200 people, but what they successfully do is legitimate decisions that would be made later on. The mobilisation of their followers and the spread of their idea was made through different blogs and Facebook pages, but also through a new media company "Nova24", created by the biggest right party in Slovenia, The Slovenian Democratic Party, led by Janez Janša, the leader and "father" of the whole Right

movement in Slovenia, and bought out afterwards by, through various mediator companies, Orban, not a long time ago. Janša and Orban are good friends, of course.

Their tactics of alienating refugees are very well explained by Tadej Troha, a Slovene philosopher:

“The strategy of the radical right was clear from the very beginning. By translating the previously neutral term “migrant” into the figure of the “Migrant”, the phantasmatic figure wreaking havoc on trains, carrying infectious diseases and systematically raping women and children, the radical right at the same time prepared the ground for its claim that it makes no sense to differentiate between refugees and migrants. Just like in Nazism Jews were most Jews when they disguised themselves as their opposites and gallantly frequented Berlin parlours, so, too, migrants are most migrants when they try to present themselves as suffering refugees. Since no individual refugee can be said to be completely clean, since every refugee has something of a migrant in them, it can generally be claimed that all refugees are really migrants. And so it is best that we simply stop talking about refugees — including the rights they are supposedly entitled to.”

(Tadej Troha: "The Undoing of the Refugee Crisis", soon to be published in European Refugee Policy Disaster: Perspectives from the »Balkan route«, Cambridge Scholarship Publishing)

### Putting up the wired fence

After the biggest influx of refugees the governing coalition decided to take matters into its own hands by putting up a wired fence, or what the Prime Minister Miro Cerar likes to call “technical obstacles”, on the border with Slovenia, following the decision of its role model Hungary. The only party that opposed this decision was The Left. It also accepted two unconstitutional laws — one giving the seemingly same rights and authorities to the police as those given to the army and a new Aliens Act, that would, in a state of “crisis”, which was not well defined in the Act, allow Slovenia to completely shut down its borders and not allow free passage to anyone. Amnesty International found that this new Act broke around 10 Articles of Slovene Law and several international agreements. The Slovene Interior Minister Vesna Györköcs Žnidar has also said the Geneva Convention is obsolete and Slovenia refuses to allow others to dictate its asylum policy. This way the government is exploiting the “refugee crisis” and is moving towards creating a somewhat “police state” by politics of fear. Just to get a better overview of the “crisis” that we are actually facing in numbers — the last count of asylum seekers, made in March 2016, was around 300 (the number is probably significantly lower now, probably something above a 100, since most asylum seekers flee the country even before the asylum decisions are

made, which can take up to 2 years in several cases) and has given asylum to only around 13 % of asylum seekers.

## The future of The Left

We are now facing an increase in number of right parties in Slovenia, which offer every option of the Right agenda — from the biggest Slovenian Democratic Party, Slovenian People's Party, New Slovenia - Christian Democrats and newly found party The Voice of Children and Families (Glas za otroke in družine, under the acronym GOD), formed by Aleš Primc and the movement “It’s about Children!”. This momentum and gain of political power was achieved by the exploitation of previously mentioned topics. The left (in general) seems to have lost on both fronts tremendously. All this made possible by newly found rhetorics of the Right and their condemnation of the feared and hated “Other”.

We will be holding a parliamentary vote next year and as it seems by the public polls, we are either facing the victory of the Slovenian Democratic Party, which would then form a strong right “fortress” in the parliament, or the victory of Social Democrats, the left-centrist party, which would then form a centrist party, probably also letting into the coalition The Left, but also centrist parties, which are mostly to blame for the current situation. This means that any outcome is not ideal, but The Left has managed to stay relevant in Slovene politics and became a somewhat household name. The next step should be maintaining its popularity, without falling into populism itself, and continuing its movement and appeal towards social reform.