

social issues & initiatives

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Tough times for a model student

Slovenia, the first new EU member state to introduce the euro, took over the presidency of the EU on the first of January of this year. However, price increases and political scandals are now threatening to disrupt the idyll of the small Alpine republic.

They are among the best in the new Europe, they get only the best grades from the EU, for the speedy adaptation of their laws, for their strict budgetary discipline, for the high level of economic growth. The "model student among the new member states" – the Slovenes work hard to get this accolade and even harder to keep it and to reap the rewards: whereas Hungary and the Czech Republic had to postpone the introduction of the euro until kingdom come, the Slovenes were able to enter the joint currency area as planned on January 1, 2007. And from January 1, 2008 the government in Ljubljana holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

For the young democracy that severed its ties to Yugoslavia 17 years ago, the leading role in the European Union is a delayed gratification. European politicians who had previously always placed the two million Slovenes in the Balkans (can there be any greater insult for Slovenia?) now have to learn how to pronounce the tongue-twisting name of the Slovene capital Ljubljana, and can no longer afford to confuse Slovenia with Slavonia or Slovakia. This is something that cannot be taken for granted: only a few years ago George W. Bush and Silvio Berlusconi greeted leading Slovene politicians as representatives of "Slovakia". And at a Slovene state visit in Bucharest the Slovakian rather than the Slovene national anthem was played.

But curiously, since Slovenia has arrived at the heart of Europe nothing seems to run properly any more for this the model student. Eavesdropping and corruption scandals are threatening the stability of the government, journalists protest against censorship and attempts at intimidation, economic growth is slowing down, prices are rising more rapidly than in most EU countries. Last November 70,000 people demonstrated against the increase in the cost of living and demanded greater social justice. The Neue Zürcher Zeitung wrote at the time about the "threat to the Slovene idyll". Since then inflation has continued to rise from a figure of 5.7 per cent in December 2007 to 6.4 per cent in January 2008 (the average inflation figure for the EU in December was 3.1 per cent). In Ljubljana in January 2008 a litre of milk cost 40 cents more than in January of the previous year.

The most popular politicians in the country have also been made to feel the general sense of dissatisfaction: Lojze Peterle was the first prime minister of an independent Slovenia, later he became foreign minister and was subsequently a Christian Democrat member of the European Parliament. When he ran for the office of president in autumn 2007 he thought it would be an easy campaign. To the surprise of many observers (including himself) in the

run-off ballot Peterle lost Danilo Türk, an expert on international law who was supported by the Social Democrats. In fact the trouncing Peterle received was really directed at the unpopular head of the government, Janez Jansa.

Jansa, a former journalist with Mladina, a magazine for young people, first became known outside the borders of Slovenia in 1989 when he was put behind bars on an alleged charge of revealing Yugoslav Army secrets. He was defence minister in the first government of the new republic, but had to resign after a maltreatment affair in the army. Today there are no longer any visible signs of Jansa's social democratic roots. His party, the SDS, is on the outside right of the party spectrum; he presents himself as an economic liberal with a strong nationalistic streak.

After a good start by the centre-right coalition in 2004 controversial privatisations, the highest inflation rate in the EU and political intervention in the media brought Jansa a low rating in the popularity polls. At the beginning of February the foreign minister Dimitrij Rupel also teetered into a crisis, when the left-wing liberal newspaper Dnevnik published secret minutes of Slovene-American discussions, which revealed that Slovenia would follow the line of the USA in the Kosovo question. As a first reaction Rupel fired the diplomats who were suspected of having had contact with the newspaper. And prime minister Jansa again saw himself threatened by a left-wing conspiracy.

Jansa is convinced that the "old communist networks" can be kept out of power only by a conservative revolution. The Slovenes have heard this sermon too often to take it seriously. But the basic problem behind the battle slogans will indeed occupy the country for a long time to come. Over 60 years after the end of the Second World War there is a deep divide running through Slovene society – between the descendants of the Tito partisans and the descendants of those who collaborated with the Nazis, the Domobranci (Protectors of the Homeland).

Anyone says today that Slovenia has a number of skeletons in the does not mean this just in a metaphysical sense. Mass graves are regularly discovered when erecting new buildings or building new motorways. It is still unknown how many Slovene Domobranci, Croatian Ustaschas, Serbian Tschetniks and members of the German minority were murdered by Tito partisans in the first days and weeks after the end of the war. A historians committee set up by the Slovene government to examine the matter of "secret mass graves" lists 540 such places. The largest, in a wood near the Austrian border, is said to contain 15 000 dead. Disinterment is taking time, the historians complain that their work is being obstructed. Marshall Tito who died in 1980 still has a lot of supporters who stoutly resist any re-examination of the past. "Yugo-nostalgia" is a widespread phenomenon in Slovenia also.

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