Between populism and socialism: Slovenia's Left party

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Abstract

This chapter offers the first in-depth study of both structural and agential factors behind the emergence and electoral breakthrough of a new radical left party in Slovenia, the Left. It defines the party's ideological profile and it analyses its tactics of party competition through a selection of concrete examples. It concludes by outlining two possible trajectories for the future electoral and organisational development of the party.

Introduction

The Left (Levica) is a relative newcomer in the Slovenian party system and the European Populist Radical Left (PRL) party family more widely. Formally established in March 2014 as a coalition party under the name of the United Left, it managed to surpass the 4% electoral threshold in the July 2014 parliamentary elections with 5.97% of the popular vote. The electoral result translated into six seats in a 90-member National Assembly, putting the new party on a par with the traditional party on the Slovenian Left, the Social Democrats, which was their worst electoral result since Slovenia's independence in 1991.

The novelty of the United Left was notable not only in terms of its electoral breakthrough in July 2014, but also regarding its founding organisational structure and its organic ties with new left social movements. The United Left was a coalition of three smaller parties and the 'fourth bloc,' which represented social movements and individuals: (1) Initiative for Democratic Socialism (IDS); (2) Democratic Labour Party (DSD); (3) the Party for the Sustainable Development of Slovenia (TRS); and (4) civil society movements and individuals. Without taking account of its beginnings in the 2012 – 2013 anti-establishment protests in Slovenia, we cannot fully understand the key drivers behind the emergence of this new left-wing party. Yet, the party's ideological and activist roots precede the protests, and they are closely tied with the fragmented, yet vibrant new left social movements that have animated the urban spaces of Slovenian civil society in the 2000s and early 2010s.

The aim of this chapter is to explain the emergence of the Left and its electoral breakthrough in 2014. The first part will focus on the movement-party phase of its

trajectory and will inquire into how the United Left managed to capitalise on the public's growing anti-establishment sentiments by providing further insights into the political opportunity structure behind United Left's success. It will do so through a multi-level analysis of the intersection between the 2012-2013 protests, wider structural conditions, the peculiarities of the political system and the dynamics of party competition. The second part will attempt to define the Left's ideological profile by analysing its discourse in order to determine whether it is a democratic socialist or a populist socialist party. It will then outline an overview of the Left's programmatic positions on socio-economic and cultural issues, as well its evolving stance towards the EU, with a special focus on its tactics which differentiate it from other party competitors. The third and final part will contrast the current ideologically more pronounced trajectory of the Left with an alternative populist, and ideologically lighter one, which could increase its chances of electoral success in the future.

1. The political opportunity structure behind United Left's success

1.1 The 2012-2013 Slovenian protests as the populist rupture in Slovenian politics

The short-lived movement that emerged during the 2012-2013 Slovenian protests marked the beginning of the trajectory that led to the establishment of the Left's predecessor, the United Left. The mass protests in the winter of 2012, which were triggered by corruption allegations against the mayor of Maribor, Slovenia's second largest town, swiftly spread to other parts of the country, widening the scope of protesters' scorn to the whole of the political class. These protests were the largest in Slovenia's short history of independence since 1991 and were widely seen as spontaneous and not organised by any of the trade unions or established political parties.

With the people as the discursive nodal point and an antagonistic opposition against the whole political class, the 'All-Slovenian People's Uprisings', as they came to be known, represented a pivotal populist rupture in the Slovenian political landscape. According to the minimal definition of populism (see Mudde 2004; Laclau 2005; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis; Katsambekis 2016), the centrality of a homogenous 'people' and anti-elitism provide the key criteria of what constitutes populism in discursive and ideological terms. As the protests in Maribor and the capital of Ljubljana grew in numbers between December 2012 and April 2013, a discursive chain of equivalence was formed by uniting ideologically heterogeneous protest groups through a populist discourse which effectively differentiated the purity of popular sovereignty from the corruption of the existing political parties and politicians. Protest slogans, such as 'It is over with him/them!' and 'They are all crooks!' (Kirn 2014), represented a powerful rallying cry for different protest groups with at times contradictory political demands.

While protest groups managed to agree on a set of mutually agreed demands by February 2013, including an end to austerity, the reform of the judiciary and the introduction of recall elections, they diverged on their analyses of the situation and the ways forward. The key short-term goal of the movement was for Prime Minister Janez Janša to step down, but views diverged over whether they should put efforts into demanding the same from the parliament, as well. More generally, the rejection of the political establishment as illegitimate led most of the protest groups to demand new, morally pure faces in politics, which they believed would be able to rise above the old left–right political divide and to find non-divisive solutions to identified problems.[i] This liberal technocratic narrative was influential in the movement, and it side-lined a more systemic critique of the relationship between the political class and the economic system. The latter narrative was driven most strongly by the Initiative for Democratic Socialism (IDS), which was one of the protest groups that formed during the popular uprisings. When the protest movement succeeded in toppling the corruption-ridden Prime Minister Janez Janša and his government, the fragile populist front of the movement eventually disintegrated.

IDS was the main driving force behind the emergence of the Left's predecessor, the United Left, and it was the only protest group to survive the 2014 election period. The question that needs to be addressed here is what IDS did right that other protest groups failed to do. In contrast to other protest groups, IDS effectively brought together ideologically similar individual and groups – some that emerged directly from the protests and some that had been active before – around a common set of ideas under the banner of 'democratic socialism.' Composed of members who were mostly young Marxist students and academics with previous activist experience in social movements, IDS possessed clear advantages, both intellectually and in terms of ideological cohesiveness over other protest groups. Intellectually, it developed its Marxist analysis through educational and research projects, such as the Workers and Punkers' University and the Institute for Labour Studies, which is partly supported also by the Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung. Their activist experience in social movements (e.g. the anti-globalisation movement, minority rights movement, anti-NATO protests, precarious workers movement and Occupy Slovenia) helped the members to test and develop their philosophical ideas in practice.

Yet, it was also their past activist experience which made IDS members realise, during the 2012-2013 protests, that entering the electoral arena was the only way to cut the cord with the past impotence of the radical left in Slovenia.[ii] While the radical left was vibrant and rich in its activist experience, it failed to effect any substantive change to the neoliberal course that Slovenia had taken under past centre-right and centre-left governments. This important shift in the political organisation and the strategy of the Slovenian radical left was fundamentally influenced by the cotemporaneous experience of the *indignados* and Podemos in Spain and the *aganaktismenoi* and Syriza in Greece. Both examples showed that for radical left politics to have any effect on key political decisions it needed to be ready to march through the institutions and to compete with

established political forces in the electoral arena. By placing the Slovenian protests within the wider context of political developments in other parts of the European periphery, IDS realised that it needed to take a more organised form if it was to transform the political centres of power (IDS 2017). Two founding members explain that '[p]rotests as such have definitely caused history to speed-up and processes that would otherwise demand much more time have unravelled rather quickly' (Korsika & Mesec 2014: 85–6).

The 2012-2013 protests, therefore, opened up an opportunity for a strategic shift of the Slovenian radical left towards direct engagement with electoral politics. As it was undergoing a process of formalization as a registered political party, IDS sought to ally with other ideologically similar political groups to surpass the fragmentation of the radical left and to form a coalition, leading to the establishment of the United Left in March 2014. Going back to the question I raised above, it can be said that past activist experience and the ideological coherence of IDS and its sister parties gave to the Left an organisational and motivational advantage over other protest groups and enabled it to capitalize on the anti-establishment feeling. The latter groups either disintegrated or they formed pre-electoral coalitions with established political parties. In the next section, I focus on the structural and meso-institutional factors that can help explain the electoral breakthrough of the Left in the 2014 parliamentary elections.

1.2 Wider structural conditions, party system rules and party competition
In order to understand why the pivotal 2012-2013 protests erupted in the first place and what contributed to the electoral success of the Left in the 2014 parliamentary elections, we need to introduce into our analysis more explanatory variables. Following Paolo Chiocchetti (2017), I identify three interrelated variables: (1) wider structural conditions; (2) party system rules; and (3) party competition.[iii]

(1) After the declaration of independence in 1991, successive Slovenian governments followed a strategic middle path between 'the shock doctrine' of rapid liberalisation and privatisation of state assets, which was implemented in many other post-socialist states in Eastern Europe, and the Yugoslav model of state-managed economy. This gradualist approach to the transition to a capitalist free market economy lasted until 2004, when Janez Janša's first coalition government accelerated privatisation and market-friendly reforms. When Slovenia entered the Exchange Rate Mechanism II (ERM II) in 2004, the inflow of foreign credit increased greatly. This offered Slovenian banks cheap access to capital, and it triggered a pronounced shift in the predominantly state-owned bank financing from deposits to foreign capital markets (Furlan 2014). When the financial crisis hit the global economy in 2008-2009, the Slovenian export-oriented economy 'witnessed a sharp fall in export performance (the exports decreased by 16.1% in 2009) and a devastating decline in economic growth (GDP dropped by 7.9% in 2009)' (Furlan 2014). This caused the construction and real estate bubbles to burst. Many enterprises went bankrupt and highly indebted companies accumulated

losses on banks' balance sheets. A sovereign debt crisis ensued as governments took on the debt by increasing the state's deposits ('state recapitalisation') in the banking system (Furlan 2014).

The economic downturn provoked a swift rise in unemployment (from 4.4% in 2008 to 10.6% in 2013). This had a knock-on effect on the deteriorating living standards for ordinary Slovenians. Lacking the power to facilitate exports by means of external devaluation after the adoption of Euro in 2007 and accumulating public debt, both centre-right and centre-left governments introduced austerity measures (cuts to public spending) and market-friendly structural reforms. Welfare reform restricted the criteria for obtaining social security benefits, and some transfer payments were reduced or eliminated. Together with labour market and pensions system reforms, these factors increased the risk of poverty and social exclusion for vulnerable groups, especially lone parents, the elderly and the unemployed (Filipovič Hrast & Ignjatović 2014).

The public in Slovenia has traditionally been highly pro-egalitarian and supportive of the redistributive role of the state, with positive attitudes towards redistribution being quite constant over time at around 80% (Rus & Toš 2005; Toš 2016). Although Slovenia maintained one of the lowest levels of income inequality in the OECD (a Gini coefficient of around 0.24), the economic crisis had a notable effect on the public's perception of their livelihoods. There has been a clear rise in those who think that the cause of poverty is structural (too much injustice in society) rather than individual (people are lazy and lack willpower): from 42% in 2007 to 61% in 2010 (Filipovič Hrast & Ignjatović 2014: 610). The rise in perceptions of injustice has been accompanied by a growing dissatisfaction with the way democracy functions in the country, with less than a third expressing their satisfaction with the functioning of democracy between 2004-2016 (Rus & Toš 2005; Filipović Hrast & Ignjatović 2014; Toš 2007; Toš 2016). Trust in the parliament and political parties has also declined further during this period. This decline accounts for heightened critical attitudes towards established political elites, a key driver behind the 2012-2013 protests.

In his study, Niko Toš has noted that the aggravation of living conditions for many ordinary Slovenians also contributed to a more negative public attitude towards capitalism and a more positive attitude towards socialism (Toš 2016: 527). In fact, between 1995 and 2013, public support for capitalism has been steadily falling and has constantly been lower than support for socialism. This trend became even more pronounced with the aggravation of the economic crisis in Slovenia after 2011. Considering these structural trends altogether, we can see more clearly how economic and political performance affects the public's perception of political elites and institutions, and how people's willingness to switch party allegiance (or not to vote altogether) might increase as a result (see Kustec Lipicer & Henjak 2015). It also helps us explain how the Left, with an ideologically coherent message, managed to pull off an electoral success when political forces on the radical left in other post-socialist countries were not able to do so.

(2) Before I turn to analysing the success of the Left in relation to its party competitors, I first need to outline another explanatory variable, which eased the process of establishing a new party in the Slovenian electoral system and provided support for party competition: party system rules and dynamics. The Slovenian electoral system is proportional, with a relatively low parliamentary threshold of 4% which makes the system considerably more open to new political parties than first-past-the-post electoral systems. As a result, the Slovenian electoral system makes room for the existence and the participation of many, including small size, political parties (Kržan 2007). According to the Political Parties Act, a political party can be established with the support of at least 200 adult citizens. Political parties rely mostly on public funds. The amount of public money they receive is determined by their electoral performance in previous parliamentary elections. Both parliamentary and non-parliamentary groups are eligible, as long as they gain at least 1% of the vote in the previous elections. Alongside public funds, political parties in Slovenia are financed also from membership fees and donations. However, this represents only a moderate amount, compared to the substantial funding they get from the public budget (Kustec Lipicer & Henjak 2015). Newly established political parties have the right to claim funds from the public budget, as long as they receive at least 1% of the vote (or 1.2% if running on a joint-list with another party and 1.5% if running together with two or more parties).

Alongside the relatively open and publicly supported system of political parties, media access and exposure also play an important role. As Katja Agrež (2016) outlines, mass media exposure is particularly important for new political parties. While mass media raises their public visibility and awareness through reporting, opinion polling and prominence in media coverage can also affect voter preferences and prompt 'band-wagon effects' (Rothschild & Malhotra 2014). The personal qualities of a leader have also become increasingly prominent in light of the mass mediatisation of politics. This is reflected in instances where political leaders score higher ratings than their own parties (Kropivnik & Zatler 2002) or when the charisma or integrity of a leader increases the publicity and voter preference for new party challengers (Sikk 2011; Lucardie 2000). Indeed, three days before the election day in 2014, the commercial television channel with the highest ratings in Slovenia, POP TV, hosted the last TV debate between the leaders of political parties which enjoyed the highest support in opinion polls (minimum around 2-3%). Luka Mesec, the young leader of the Left,[iv] was the biggest surprise of the evening, coming second in the public perception of trustworthiness among nine party leaders who participated. His popularity started to grow as the debate moved to the topic of privatisation in the second part of the show (24UR 2014). Many commentators have attributed the electoral breakthrough of the party to his good performance in the television debate, which was also demonstrated by a 1% jump for the Left in the last opinion poll before election silence (see Mladina 2014).

(3) Party competition is the third element that needs to be taken into account. As Allan Sikk fittingly notes, new political parties 'have been particularly numerous and successful in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe' (Sikk 2011: 467), and Slovenia is no exception. Despite the relative openness of the party system and the resulting fragmentation of the parliamentary arena, Simona Kustec Lipicer and Andrija Henjak note there has been 'a high degree of party stability, with parties creating stable organisations, membership bases and political identities' (Kustec Lipicer & Henjak 2015). While the stability of the party system was traditionally maintained by the dominance of the left-liberal bloc, with the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS) at the helm up until 2004, from then onwards the political system has been increasingly polarised between the conservative Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) and a splintering of the LDS into new parties (Kustec Lipicer & Henjak 2015). The party system has become more unstable with the worsening of the economic crisis. Instability reaching its peak with the 2011 and 2014 elections, which disrupted the bipolarity between established centre-right and centre-left elites (see Tables 1 and 2 below). The once dominant LDS was left out of parliament in 2011, its voters shifting to the newly established centre-left party Positive Slovenia (PS), led by the popular Ljubljana mayor Zoran Janković. The corruption charges against Zoran Janković (PS) and Janez Janša (SDS) in February 2013 and the 2012-2013 protests shook up the political landscape once again. The PS splintered and a new personalistic party won the centre-left vote, the Modern Centre Party (SMC), led by Miro Cerar. Kustec Lipicer and Henjak (2015) describe the period following the 2008 parliamentary elections as characterised by a phenomenon of 'single-term parties, emerging and disappearing from one election to the next.'
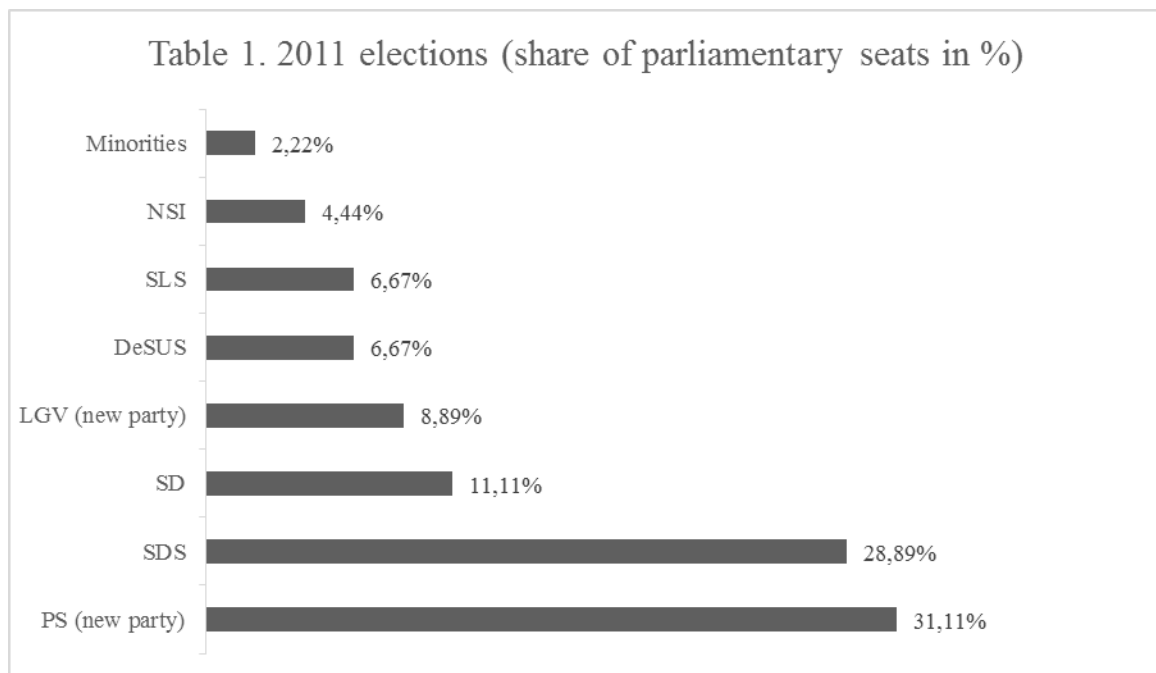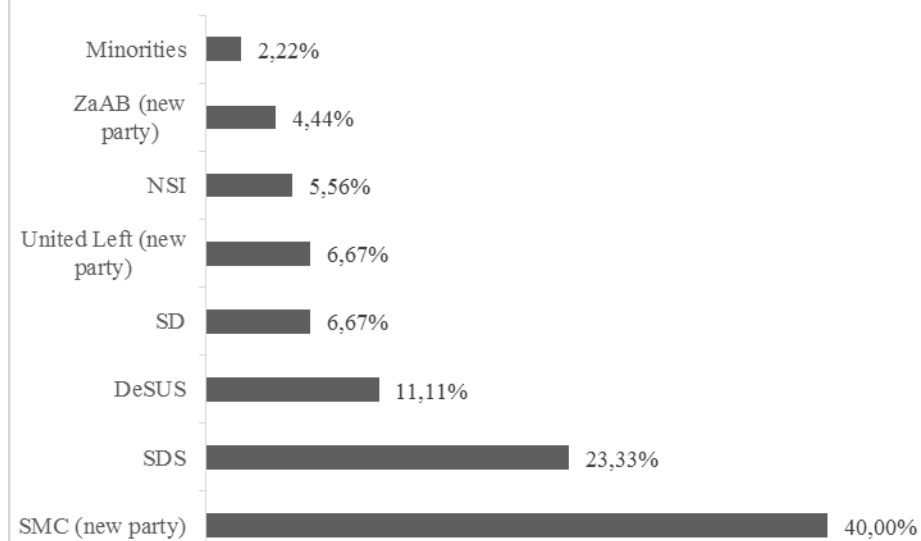

Table 1. 2011 elections (share of parliamentary seats in %)

Party	Share
Minorities	2,22%
NSI	4,44%
SLS	6,67%
DeSUS	6,67%
LGV (new party)	8,89%
SD	11,11%
SDS	28,89%
PS (new party)	31,11%

Table 2. 2014 elections (share of parliamentary seats in %)

Party	Share
Minorities	2,22%
ZaAB (new party)	4,44%
NSI	5,56%
United Left (new party)	6,67%
SD	6,67%
DeSUS	11,11%
SDS	23,33%
SMC (new party)	40,00%

Given this instability of parliamentary politics, we can see how the (centre-) left political space was in a constant shift during this period. Traditionally, it was dominated by LDS, then by the Social Democrats (SD) between 2008 and 2011, and then by new personalistic parties (PS and SMC). A key factor for the electoral success of the Left in 2014 was the cotemporal decline of the Social Democrats and the demobilisation of their voter base. When they were in government between 2008 and 2012, SD adopted a number of neoliberal structural reforms in its key policy areas (welfare, labour market and the pensions system), which were very unpopular with the electorate. As a result, many of its voters felt abandoned. This created a political opportunity for a new party to fill the vacuum. Although SMC was perceived as the new party which would take over the centre-left ground in 2014, its centrism was strongly predicated on an ideologically vague moralism, which was also aimed at disenchanted right-wing voters. Its ideological-programmatic ambivalence entailed that during the election campaign the party did not crystallise its position on many issues important to left-wing voters, making again room for a more ideologically coherent left-wing force. It is in this context of party competition that the Left as a new left-wing challenger, which represents the interests of the working class and marginalised groups, was able to enter the parliamentary arena.

If we consider all three explanatory variables together, it is difficult to determine precisely which was the more influential behind the Left's success. Sikk (2011), for instance, argues that the simple appeal of 'newness' may be enough to account for the success of new parties, and that a party's ideological clarity and social cleavages may not matter so much. He adds that this might be the case especially in the context of the de-ideologised political competition that characterises contemporary democracies

(Sikk 2011: 467). Contra Sikk, I argue that while the appeal of newness arguably did play a role in the 2014 parliamentary election, especially with regard to the victory of SMC, this argument is insufficient to explain the success of the Left. Miro Cerar, the leader of SMC, was a highly respectable and recognisable figure in Slovenian civil society, while Luka Mesec, the leader of the United Left, had been unknown to the general public. The Left, and its leader, only gained higher visibility with a persuasive and ideologically coherent political manifesto. For this persuasiveness to be registered among the general public, both the relative openness of the media space to new parties and policy proposals that resonated with the zeitgeist of the period were crucial. Therefore, the three explanatory variables should be considered in a complementary and inter-related manner.

2. Between populism and socialism: ideological profile, programmatic positions and strategy

In this section, I analyse the ideological and programmatic profile of the Left and its strategies of cooperation and competition with other political parties. The ideological profile will be analysed in terms of the ideological relationship between socialism and populism, with a special focus on the discursive construction of 'the people' in the Left's discourse.

(1) The Left presents itself as a democratic eco-socialist party. This is evidenced by their membership in the Party of the European Left, which brings together democratic socialist and communist parties around Europe. Yet, from its very inception, the Left has been perceived by its party competitors and the commercial media also as a left-populist party. The populist label has been almost exclusively used in a pejorative way, especially when employed by its competitors on the centre-left to discredit the Left as a bunch of idealists and 'random street people,' a reference to their roots in the 2012-2013 protests (Vičič 2015). The negative connotations around the term explain in part why the Left has not readily appropriated the populist description in the way that Jean-Luc Mélenchon did, for example, in France. The semantics surrounding the populist signifier 'the people' in Slovenian points towards an explanation as to why the Left finds it hard to brand itself as populist, even though its discourse does carry populist elements. In Slovenian, the term 'the people' (*ljudstvo*) carries strong ethno-nationalist undertones, which is reflected in the more common usage of the word 'nation' (*narod*) when referring to the people. This perhaps explains why the Left's discourse refers more often to 'the ordinary people,' which in Slovenian is plural (*navadni ljudje*). The signifier 'ordinary' people in the Left's discourse is heterogeneous. It is pluralist in the sense that it is inclusive of people regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, age, gender, (dis)ability and sexuality. And it carries strong class undertones, appealing to all those humiliated, degraded and marginalised by the current political economic system.

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At a more philosophical level, the reticence to embrace the populist label might also have to do with the Marxist analysis that heavily informs the Left's programme and the discourse of many key figures in the party. Marxism has historically entertained a difficult relationship with populism. While they both share a strong anti-elitism, Marxist philosophy often presented itself as a refined version of conflict theory, whereas populism (of the peasants, for example) was treated only as a rudimentary form of (evolving) class/socialist consciousness. This is because the populist construction of the radical subject ('the people') lacked a systemic analysis and failed to bring into play an account of the economic relations of power underpinning elite rule. However, as the limitations of the Narodnik movement in the 1870s demonstrated, for example in the Russian Empire, revolutionary socialist ideals are often at odds with non-proletarised dominated groups, and this makes it difficult to establish a more hegemonic role for socialist ideas without education and proselytising from the intelligentsia. As many scholars of populism have noted, populism is often opposed to the role of intellectuals in society, as they are seen as far removed and out of touch with the common sense of the people.[v] As I will show in the last section, this might present a problem for the future strategy of the Left in broadening the popular support for its message.

With regard to the strong class-based analysis that characterises the Left's discourse, the party at first sight easily falls into the *democratic socialist parties* category according to Luke March's typology of far left parties (March 2008). Yet, its use of anti-elite and anti-establishment discourse, its beginnings in the 2012-2013 anti-establishment protests, and the perception of the party espouses among its competitors place it closer to the *populist socialist parties* category. The Left's support for democracy, the inclusion of marginalised and excluded groups (refugees, immigrants, LGBT and the unemployed), the rejection of both totalitarian communism and neoliberal social democracy, and a strong anti-elite and anti-establishment position can be said to position the party somewhere in between democratic socialist parties and populist socialist parties. Because its socialist ideological core is stronger than its populist appeal, it cannot be simply situated in the latter group. Its discourse and ideological profile convey, therefore, both the hard socialist ideological core and the ideologically lighter populist appeal.

(2) The next section will analyse how this heterogeneous ideological profile translates into the party's programmatic positions on socio-economic and cultural issues, as well as its stance towards the EU and other international/transnational collaboration. The Left's 2014 political manifesto reads more as a collection of policy guidelines and justifications, divided into 16 different points, rather than as a set of precise policy proposals, with a few exceptions. Most of the points in the manifesto (11 out of 16) have a clear socio-economic dimension:

Table 3. The Left's key manifesto positions (United Left 2014)

Socio-economic positions	Cultural (and other) positions

1. Immediate halt to austerity measures	12. Direct democracy and transformation of the state
2. State assistance for enterprises, halt to privatisation	13. The extension of personal freedoms and rights
3. Workers' management in enterprises	14. Towards an ecological shift
4. Public oversight of banks	15. Commitment to peace and demilitarisation
5. A coordinated economy towards full employment	16. Demand German reparations for World War II
6. Solution to the problem of debt through the establishment of an independent debt audit	
7. Fair tax reform through capital income taxation	
8. Fight against tax havens	
9. Protection of the welfare state	
10. Democratic and participatory public finance	
11. Sustainable food production	

Some more concrete policy proposals that can be found in the political manifesto gained wide media attention during the 2014 election campaign, especially the 1:5 ratio for limiting income disparities in the public sector and state-owned enterprises. Between 2014 and 2016, the Left's biggest achievement as a small political party with only six MPs in a 90-member parliament was its ability to push new issues onto the political agenda and up for parliamentary debate. By introducing motions to reverse austerity measures, to ensure state provision of free lunch meals for all school children, to legalise marijuana, to enact same-sex marriage equality, to stop the adoption of new free trade agreements and to guarantee the rights of refugees under international conventions, the Left was able to exert considerable pressure on the centre-left coalition government of PM Miro Cerar and to change the terms of the political debate. Despite being in opposition, the Left has managed to put into practice some of its political goals by building partnerships with civil society groups (issue-specific interest groups, trade unions, individual activists, artists, etc.), by organising press conferences and by tabling of bills and amendments of bills.

While the party's call to exit NATO has been clear from the very start, its position on the EU/Eurozone has been evolving together with the developments in the wider regional context. Learning from the experience of Syriza in 2015 and its failure to present a decisive alternative to the Troika's austerity and structural reforms programme, the Left has joined other political parties at the European level to work towards 'A Plan B in Europe.' The plan consists of a double strategy: one that aims towards a complete renegotiation of the European Treaties and the democratisation of the EU structures (Plan A); and another focused on building an alternative international

infrastructure for monetary and economic governance outside the Eurozone (Plan B). In order to fend off blackmail from opposing political and economic forces, Plan B's objective is to strengthen the negotiating position of participating members. Alongside this transnational initiative, the Left's internationalist perspective goes even further. By sending its delegates to regional and international conferences, it seeks to share its experiences with other left-wing political groups, while building and developing new international collaborations.

(3) The following section will analyse how the Left as a small opposition party attempts to translate its programmatic positions into practice. In order to assess the success or failure of specific policy initiatives, it is important to take into account the dynamics of party competition/cooperation and how this shapes the Left's strategy in the parliament. Using Sikk's extended typology of party competition and new political parties (Sikk 2011), originally put together by Paul Lucardie (2000), I lay out the Left's parliamentary strategy in conjunction with two analytical markers: (1) ideological motivation, and (2) whether a policy niche is shared by an established party. In the first part of this section, I have already posited that the party's ideological motivation is strong, rather than weak. This means that the party advocates for an ideologically cohesive and comprehensive set of policies (Sikk 2011: 466). With regard to the second marker, the Left occupies mainly the position of a *challenger*, attempting to purify and claim a niche from an established party (SD and other parties on the left of centre). On some issues, it also takes the position of a *prolocutor*, by representing a particular issue or an interest in society, but only when such an issue is compatible with the party's ideological profile.

Data analysis of the Left's voting record at the aggregate level over the course of the 2014 parliament[vi] shows that the party has voted mostly together with other opposition political parties, irrespective of their ideological profile, and against the coalition parties. Yet, when the analysis proceeds on an issue-by-issue basis, four types of parliamentary dynamics can be identified. Each type will be outlined by giving a concrete policy example.

> (a) *Cooperation with opposition parties on a shared matter of public concern.* When amendments to the proposed reform bill on social assistance were separately tabled by SDS (the main centre-right opposition party) and the Left at the 25th ordinary parliamentary session, both opposition parties voted together to support each other's amendments, despite their ideological divergence. Although with the proposed reform bill the government was already relaxing the stringent eligibility criteria for social assistance, the Left and SDS attempted to achieve further relaxation. In the end, their amendments were voted down by the government coalition parties, and the reform bill was adopted without the support of the Left, while SDS voted in favour of the government bill.

(b) *Competition with government parties on a (non-)shared matter of public concern.* Responding to MP Marjan Dolinšek's (SMC) proposal to establish a new public holiday, which would mark the day the last Yugoslav People's Army troops left Slovenia, the Left tabled an alternative amendment to bring back 2nd of January as a public holiday. As part of Janez Janša government's austerity programme in 2012, the public holiday of the 2nd of January was abolished. When the Left tabled their amendment to bring the public holiday back in force February 2015, it was defeated in the parliamentary committee. In December 2016, SMC reconsidered the proposal and proposed its own amendment to restore 2nd of January as a public holiday. Many critics viewed the tactic as a populist gesture in view of the upcoming 2017 presidential elections and 2018 parliamentary elections.

(c) *Cooperation with government parties on a shared matter of public concern.* In December 2014, the Left introduced an amendment to the Marriage and Family Relations Act, which would legalise same-sex marriage. Despite declaring his support for LGBT rights, PM Miro Cerar hesitated at first to offer the government's support for the proposed amendment as the government was planning to introduce its own version of the reform. With a simple amendment, however, the Left overtook the government. Pressure from progressive civil society groups and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), led the government to support the amendment introduced by the Left. With the backing of other centre-left parties, the amendment was passed through the parliament.

(d) *Competition with opposition parties on (non-)shared matter of public concern.* In December 2015, the government approved the draft of the reformed International Protection Act and referred it to the parliament. While the new act largely preserved the regulations on international protection that were already in place, it introduced some controversial restrictions in order to tighten the eligibility criteria to claim asylum. Whereas the Left endeavoured to mitigate the proposed restrictions with its amendments, SDS aimed to tighten them further. While SDS was successful with its more restrictive amendment to the law in the committee stage, the final draft was amended by the government parties and restored to its original form, after the outcry of the Amnesty International Slovenia and other human rights NGOs, and it passed with opposition from the Left and boycott from SDS and NSi.

The terms in which the Left opposes mainstream political forces are, hence, ideologically motivated and in line with its manifesto commitments. It is interesting to note that whenever the Left challenges the government coalition parties on socio-economic grounds and it questions the economic liberal status quo, it is denounced as 'populist.' Yet, when the party acts to uphold political liberal principles (protection of minorities and constitutional liberties) and takes on its prolocutor role, the populist label

is absent. The marriage equality and the refugee rights examples demonstrate that on cultural issues the Left puts pressure on other liberal and centre-left parties to be coherent and consistent with their declared liberal principles. The Left's effectiveness can be also observed in the pressure it exerted on SD towards adopting a more liberal position on cultural issues (e.g. legalisation of marijuana) and a democratic socialist stance on economic issues (e.g. workers' representation on Slovenia's public holding group that runs privatisation processes). These party competition dynamics point towards the formation of an anti-populist front in Slovenian politics, a phenomenon that has been witnessed in other European countries as well, especially in the aftermath of the European sovereign debt crisis (see Katsambekis 2014; Medarov 2015). The anti-populism of the centrist SMC and centre-left parties is activated whenever any political force moves away from the prescribed (neo)liberal policy repertoire, supported by the EU institutions and the IMF.

Political polarisation therefore takes place along two antagonistic frontiers. The first is the traditional right-left divide. Contrary to some other Central and Eastern European countries, the right-left axis persists in Slovenian politics and it is well established (Fink-Hafner & Deželan 2016: 474). The second is the nascent anti-populism of centrist parties, which has not yet consolidated around a clear set of signifiers. For now, it is activated opportunistically to delegitimise the demands raised by the Left. Yet, this may very well change on the way to the 2018 parliamentary elections, as the anti-populist front closes ranks to stave off any further electoral gains by the Left.

Overall, the Left's parliamentary strategy and tactics are influenced by its ideological motivation and by whether a policy niche is shared by competitor parties as well. With regard to other opposition parties, which are mostly right-wing in the current parliament, the Left's strategy is to cooperate on the issues that are ideologically aligned with its own programmatic positions, most commonly on socio-economic issues. With regard to other centre-left parties, which are in government positions in the current parliament, it tends to compete on issues of socio-economic nature and to cooperate on cultural issues, depending on whether the governing parties are ideologically consistent with their declared liberal position.

3. The changing organisational and ideological trajectory
The final section of the chapter examines the degrees of radicalisation and moderation of the Left after its presence in parliament for more than two years. I also consider the party's changing trajectory in ideological and organisational terms, the ensuing difficulties, and whether the party's discourse will move from the hard socialist ideological core to an ideologically lighter populist discourse.

The growing learning experience and aptitude in manoeuvring through the parliamentary arena have activated a tendency towards higher centralisation and systematisation of internal party decision-making. While the Left's MPs have acted uniformly and without much friction in the parliament, the situation was more tense in

the internal structures of the Left's coalitional formation. There were frequent organisational, and sometimes ideological, disagreements between the four constituent parts that composed the United Left: DSD and civil society groups on the one hand, and TRS and IDS on the other. IDS itself was beleaguered with internal infighting along ideological lines. At IDS' annual congress in April 2015, a faction of the party accused the leadership of not being socialist and radical enough, warning that the party was headed towards the same fate as other established political parties. DSD changed its name to 'United Left-Democratic Labour Party', while accusing IDS and TRS of usurping the control of the United Left brand.

The tensions within the coalition became only more critical once the leaderships of TRS and IDS moved ahead with their plans to transform the United Left into a single political party. The two parties justified the unification plans on the grounds of enhanced organisational and decision-making efficiency, better management of available resources, and streamlining of engagement activities with supporters at the local level. For example, in the older organisational structure, if a supporter wished to become a member of the Left, they were unable to do so. They could only become members of one of the three coalition parties. This organisational structure, although it has its merits (i.e. a hybrid link with social movements and more open structures), proved to be inefficient electorally and confusing among (potential) supporters. The key concern among those opposing unification was that the United Left would no longer be any different from other established political parties and it would become more moderate/conservative as a result. This would have also meant a betrayal of the original aims of the party, which presented itself as an alternative model to 'politics as usual' by espousing democratic, consensual and open internal structures.

By March 2017, TRS members voted in favour of the plans to unify the United Left. Between the April 2015 annual congress and March 2017, many of the rebellious members opposed to the unification of the United Left's coalition left IDS. In May 2017, the IDS leadership took the unification plans to an online vote, which were confirmed by around 80% of participating members. Because of the disruption and the lack of cooperation from DSD and the fourth block of civil society members, they were bypassed in the process. DSD and the fourth block of the United Left subsequently organised a press conference, where they publicly expressed their frustration and indignation over the procedures. On the day of the inaugural congress of the new Left in June 2017, 94 more members left IDS by releasing a public letter of protest over what they perceived as an undemocratic breakdown of progressive forces through the party's centralisation. With the formal establishment of the Left, the United Left exists in name only, leaving DSD and the fourth bloc outside the Left's structures. The media coverage of the split within the party did not considerably affect the party's poll rankings. Moreover, all of the Left's MPs come either from IDS and TRS or they are no longer members of any of the four constituent groups. This means that the split did not destabilise the Left's parliamentary group. Luka Mesec was reelected as the Left's

coordinator and Violeta Tomić (previously TRS's leader) was elected as deputy coordinator.

It is debatable whether the unification of IDS and TRS signals a break in the relationship with social movements. At the level of internal party structures, there is a clear change in that there is no symbolic status conferred on affiliated members in the Left, because of the way this affiliation was institutionalised within the United Left coalition. If we pause to consider how this hybridity between the United Left as a political party and social movements worked in practice, however, the fourth bloc was mostly coordinated through, and dominated by, a network of a few political groups and activists. Political actions were still organised separately by the constituent groups of the United Left, most often by IDS and TRS members. There were frequent fights between the different constituent parts of the internal party structure. The experience around this hybrid institutional channel was therefore one of frustration on both sides. In its new single party form, the Left continues its work both in the parliament and out on the streets by championing progressive causes. This is demonstrated by the party's continuing cooperation with trade unions and its engagement in various political actions, such as participation in public sector strikes and in the 2016 strike in support of the Port of Koper's workers.

With the organisational move towards further centralisation and uniformisation, it remains to be seen whether this change will be followed by moderation in the ideological profile of the party. From interviews with the Left's leader Luka Mesec, it transpires that these changes in such a relatively short time-span were largely driven by an accelerated sense of perceived urgency to turn the tide in Slovenia away from a neoliberal path, which continues to exacerbate inequality and disintegrate social cohesion (see Trampuš 2016). Two possible future trajectories can be envisaged. While the first one would continue along the same trajectory with an ideologically hard-core democratic socialism and a light populist appeal, the second would take the party away from its pronounced ideological hardness towards a populist socialist party.

The first trajectory would uphold the party's ideological clarity and would keep it close to its original principles. Yet, at the same time, it would risk alienating a large swath of voters and citizens, who do not self-identify as socialist or left-wing. This could confine the party to a relatively small parliamentary force, depriving it of the prospect of governing and enacting its political programme. The second trajectory would necessitate the watering down of class discourse and a continuation of its anti-elite, anti-establishment appeal. As the analysis in the previous section has shown, the Left's programme tilts more towards reformist pragmatism than revolutionary idealism, despite the strong Marxist analysis and discourse that are maintained by those previously affiliated with IDS. Moreover, the second trajectory would require (re-)inventing and articulating a new set of signifiers and discourse that would be able to transverse the different struggles and cleavages in society. This is what Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Laclau 2005) mean by the idea of building

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a chain of equivalence, and what can also be called a 'populist transversality.' As Juan Antonio Gil de los Santos, a representative of Podemos, explains, transversality is 'the act of building majorities,' 'building a broad consensus among diverse groups of people for things like the defence of free, public and universal healthcare, the social right to housing, and regaining lost labour rights' (Gil de los Santos 2016).

While we can identify attempts at building such a transversality in the Left's current political strategy, this transversality is often couched in Marxist terms. However, the recent move towards the centralisation of the party shows that in the leadership of the party there is a recognition of the need to build majorities and to take state power. This might as well signal a shift in the Left's discursive strategy and a move towards a populist socialist party as the 2018 parliamentary elections are fast approaching. While the second trajectory could potentially enable the party to double or, even, triple the number of seats in the parliament and would empower it to take its programme to governmental corridors, there are noteworthy caveats involved. A resolute shift towards a populist socialist party would clearly involve some ideological stretching and loosening of ideological coherence. The danger here is that the party becomes just another catch-all party, focused solely on increasing electoral support while neglecting its original aim of extending democracy and socialising its member base. Considering the coalitional nature of government politics in Slovenia, it would also mean that the Left would have to compromise on its key programmatic positions, faced with the centrist anti-populist front, if it entered a governing coalition as a minor junior party.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I sought to explain the reasons behind the emergence and relative success of the Left in Slovenia. I did so by using a multi-level analysis of the interaction between structural factors and agential strategies.

Overall, the chapter traced the party's path from its populist inception in the 2012-2013 protest movement to the formation of a hybrid party-movement, to the creation of a uniform party. As in Greece and in Spain, the mass mobilisations that preceded the rise of the United Left were its essential precondition. Yet, in order to understand why the protests erupted in the first place, wider structural conditions need to be taken into consideration. In the context of an economic downturn, the restricted monetary and fiscal independence due to the Eurozone rules led governments to implement austerity measures and structural reforms, which resulted in the degradation of living conditions for people on low incomes. At the time of the protests, the Janez Janša's right-wing government was quickly losing support. This helped to mobilise progressive groups and led trade unions to join the movement. The overall low trust in all established political parties and the move of Social Democrats towards the centre meant that the conditions were ripe for a new left-wing party. Furthermore, the 'newness' factor, the relative openness of the political system to new political parties, and good media exposure helped the Left to enter the parliament only three months after its formation.

Using Luke March's typology of radical left parties, I placed the Left in between democratic socialist and populist socialist parties. The party combines a strong ideological core of democratic socialism with a light populist appeal, which is sustained by its outsider status and its anti-establishment discourse. Its parliamentary tactics vary depending on the ideological motivation and on whether a policy area is shared by its competitors. The analysis of a selection of concrete examples demonstrated that the party collaborates with other opposition parties when their positions are programmatically aligned, and it competes with them when their ideological interests diverge. Accordingly, the party is ready to cooperate with the parties in power when issues along the cultural dimension need to be defended against right-wing parties. Here the party can also be said to be acting as a prolocutor, while challenging other centre-left parties to remain consistent with their declared culturally liberal values.

The last part of the chapter explored two possible futures trajectories for the Left. I argued that a shift towards a stronger left-wing populism in its strategy could clear the way for a better electoral performance of the party and could enable it to enter government. Regardless of which of the two trajectories the party follows, it will need to continue building its local network of supporters by increasing its membership and non-partisan engagement activities. Moreover, as the experience of Syriza forcefully demonstrated, the party will need to come up with concrete policy proposals to resolve some critical issues beleaguering the European continent. Without a strategy to ensure equitable economic development, which would be based on a new model of state's role in the economy, the Slovenian Left will hardly be any more equipped to govern than its centre-left competitors.

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[i] During the post-Yugoslavian transition to free-market capitalism and liberal democracy, all established political parties had their turn in coalition governments at one point. With continuing gradual destruction of the Slovenian industrial base and the retrenchment of the welfare state after the 2008 financial crisis, the angry protesters therefore viewed the whole political establishment as bearing responsibility for the failed transition.

[ii] I elaborate on the organisational shortcomings of the Slovenian radical left in another work (see Toplišek & Thomassen *forthcoming*).

[iii] Alongside the three explanatory variables outlined here, Chiocchetti also mentions the role of mass mobilisation as the fourth. I have already covered the role of mass mobilisation in the earlier section by singling out the 2012-2013 protests as the catalyst behind the emergence of the United Left, so this is not included here.

[iv] At the Left's inaugural congress, the delegates voted to use 'coordinator,' instead of 'president,' as the leader's title. This was a practice adopted from IDS.

[v] See Chapter 6 on 'Intellectuals' in Steve Jones' *Antoni Gramsci* (2006).

[vi] The data is recorded and compiled by the Information Sector of the National Assembly, which is then aggregated and visually presented by an independent project Parlameter.si as part of the institute Danes je nov dan (see Parlameter 2017).