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CASE STUDY

EUPopLink Country report - Slovenia

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Tine Šteger[1], Simona Kukovič[1,2]

[1]School of Advanced Social Studies in Nova Gorica, Nova Gorica, Slovenia
[2]Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia

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Abstract

This country report examines the situation in the field of Euroscepticism and populism in Slovenia between the onset of global financial crisis in 2008 and the end of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2023. Various studies have shown that, since Slovenia's accession to the European Union, the role of EU-related topics in national political debates in Slovenia has gradually increased. In the initial post-accession period, both hard and soft Eurosceptic positions occasionally emerged; however, these were typically sporadic or isolated from mainstream political discourse. Such attitudes significantly intensified with the onset of the global financial and economic crisis, and later during the migrant crisis, followed by a series of subsequent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the energy crisis. Polycrisis period in Slovenia has fueled rise of populism and populist actors. In times since the financial crisis, several new political parties were formed shortly before elections; these parties generally lacked a comprehensive political programme and presented various ideas in a style that could be characterised as populist, while migration crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic further contributed to an intensification of populist discourse among certain political actors.

Keywords

Populism, Euroscepticism, Slovenia.

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Corresponding author: Tine Šteger (tine.steger@fuds.si)

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Introduction

The present country report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action[1] following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework Guidelines.[13] It focuses on the situation in the field of euroscepticism and populism in Slovenia between the onset of global financial crisis in 2008 and the end of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2023.

Since declaring independence, Slovenia has consistently expressed - both in its strategic development documents and through its political leadership - its commitment to joining the European Union (EU).[8] The efforts for Slovenia's accession to the EU were supported by all the political parties at the time, except for the Slovenian National Party (SNS).[5] Throughout the entire process of Slovenia's integration into the European Union, public support remained consistently high. In the accession referendum (held in March 2003), nearly 90% of voters endorsed Slovenia's membership in the EU, reflecting a plebiscitary level of support.[6]

Various studies have shown that, since Slovenia's accession to the European Union, the role of EU-related topics in national political debates in Slovenia has gradually increased. In the initial years following Slovenia's accession to the European Union, both hard and soft Eurosceptic positions occasionally emerged; however, these were typically sporadic or isolated from mainstream political discourse. Such sentiments significantly intensified with the onset of the global financial and economic crisis, and later during the migrant crisis, followed by a series of subsequent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the energy crisis.[7]

While trust in the European Union among Slovenian citizens remained above the EU average from the time of accession up until the onset of the polycrisis period, this trend has since reversed.[9] According to the most recent wave of the Eurobarometer survey (Spring 2025), only 37% of Slovenian residents express trust in the European Union, compared to the EU-wide average of 52%.[2]

Populist political actors

The period of global economic and financial crisis in Slovenia represented an era of political instability, as all governments concluded their tenure before the end of the term, either because of resignation or a vote of no confidence. In early parliamentary election in 2011 (and later in 2014 and 2018) the country witnessed what was then a new political phenomenon, when several new political parties were formed in the last two months leading up to the elections (e. g. Positive Slovenia in 2011 elections, Party of Miro Cerar – SMC on parliamentary elections three years later or List of Marjan Šarec – LMŠ on parliamentary elections in 2018).[8] Prior to the 2022 regular parliamentary elections, Gibanje Svoboda (the Freedom Movement) was established in this manner. Such *ad hoc* established political parties usually lack (ed) a comprehensive political programme and present (ed) various ideas in a style that could be characterised as populist. Political parties, from Positive Slovenia in 2011 to the List of Marjan Šarec in 2018, were largely promoting ideas such as the fight against corruption, increased transparency, and moral integrity, contrasting themselves with what they characterised as "dirty and corrupt politics" while advocating what they presented as "new, clean politics".[8] Elections in 2014 brought success to another new political party, the left-wing Levica (The Left), a full member of the Party of the European Left, equipped with many populist policies mainly in the socio-economic area, drawing on public nostalgia for the former socialist system.[8,22]

While early parliamentary elections in 2011 brought to the Parliament new political parties, portraying themselves as those with high (er) moral calibre, a hard Eurosceptic party, the Slovenian National Party (SNS), has not been re-elected to the Parliament. However, the Slovenian National Party and its leader, Zmago Jelinčič Plemeniti, soon returned to the political arena – first as a (unsuccessful) candidate in the 2014 presidential elections, and later with an (successful) attempt in the 2018 early parliamentary elections.[3] Since its foundation, the Slovenian National Party (SNS) has adhered to a core ideological pattern rooted in nationalist-populist ideology. It positions itself sharply against what it describes as corrupt elites and portrays itself as acting on behalf of "the people" – a term which, in the SNS's discourse, primarily refers to ethnic Slovenes.[3] In doing so, the party aligns itself with the model of the populist radical right (PRR). In the 2019 European elections, the SNS presented itself as a member of the Alliance of European National Movements (AEMN).

Between 2014 and 2018, particularly between October 2015 and March 2016, almost 480,000 migrants passed through Slovenian territory. This led to chaos, particularly in the first few weeks, and gave the impression that the government – led by one of the *ad hoc* established political parties, the Party of Miro Cerar (later renamed the Modern Centre Party, a full member of ALDE) – was not in control of the situation. During that time, the centre-right opposition (especially the Slovenian Democratic Party, abbreviated as SDS) used populist and increasingly negative attitudes towards migrants and the closure of borders, sparking fears that Slovenia would become a "migrant hole".[8] During the migration crisis, the political party Zedinjena Slovenija (the United Slovenia) - a populist radical right party[14] - increased its visibility by employing populist rhetoric, adopting increasingly negative attitudes towards migrants, and advocating stricter border

controls. Its president, Andrej Šiško, together with his supporters, established Štajerska varda (the Styrian Guard), which organised various activities aimed at strengthening control over Slovenia's national border, based on the group's belief that the state was failing to manage it effectively (for a detailed overview, see Flander, 2023).[4] Because of its organisational structure, uniforms, and use of replica weapons, the group was classified as a paramilitary formation.[15] Andrej Šiško was later convicted of inciting a violent change to the constitutional order.[16]

Another crisis that provided fertile ground for the emergence of populism and populist political actors was the COVID-19 crisis. One of the most active groups in Slovenia during COVID-19, a newly established political party Resni.ca (the Truth), gained visibility with the online campaign(s), mostly over social media; its supporters later constituted important part of the crowd during the anti-measures and anti-government protests in Slovenia. Expanding on the idea of common sense – while rejecting expert knowledge – has been a part of their political identity building, particularly as they were already preparing for the upcoming parliamentary elections.[18] The available evidence suggests that they were using populist discourse, intertwined with elements of conspiracy theories, while advocating for values such as human agency, human rights, and the autonomy of "us," the ordinary people, in opposition to "them." However, they were unable to surpass the parliamentary threshold and secure seats in the National Parliament in the 2022 election.[21] In the lead-up to the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2026, there has once again been increased activity in the formation of political parties and in discussions regarding potential joint participation in the national elections. In 2025, a new political party, Suvereni (the Sovereign), was established. The party presents itself as a national, patriotic, and sovereignist political force, promising a new kind of politics that transcends the traditional left-right divide and places the well-being of the Slovenian nation at the forefront. As stated in their programme, "*the party believes that the current political system no longer serves the people but rather the interests of a narrow political elite that continually misleads the public with empty promises*".[20] This suggests that the party shares characteristics with *ad hoc* political formations established in the past ten years, which present various ideas in a style that could be described as populist. The party is forming connections in the political arena with the extra-parliamentary political party Zedinjena Slovenija (the United Slovenia), led by Andrej Šiško, and clearly expresses in its programme the idea that members of the native group should be prioritised. In doing so, the party aligns itself with the model of the populist radical right (PRR).

Position on "Europe" and the populism-Euroscepticism nexus

The analysis of political party programmes in Slovenia[7] reveals that topics related to the EU and European integration are present among Slovenian political parties, but are generally not heavily emphasized, especially in comparison to other issues. Most of the parties established on an *ad hoc* basis discussed in the previous chapter no longer exist. These parties were either dissolved (e.g., Positive Slovenia) or merged with other parties (e.g., SMC and LMŠ). For our analysis, the remaining relevant parties that use populist rhetoric, at least occasionally, are SDS, SNS, Resni.ca, Levica, Zedinjena Slovenija and Suvereni.

SDS can be identified as a party with general strong support for the EU (it is also the Slovenian party with the most members in the European Parliament), with a critical stance towards European Union especially during the migrant crisis, when party employed anti-immigration and refugee rhetoric and criticise the EU's policy on quotas and liberal migration policies.[10] Levica (The Left), Slovenian National Party (SNS), Resni.ca (the Truth), Zedinjena Slovenija (the United Slovenia) and Suvereni (the Sovereign) demonstrate a different stance toward the European Union. In its electoral programme for elections in 2022, Levica (The Left) addresses its stance toward the European Union primarily from a left-wing reformist perspective. Support for the EU is thus conditional, as they believe it must be *"thoroughly transformed from within, otherwise it will destroy itself"*.[12] In their programme for the European Parliament elections, they ran with the slogan "For a Europe of people, not capital".[11] Resni.ca (the Truth) adopts a more critical, right wing stance toward the European Union. In its programme, the party states that *"Slovenia's status within various international organizations must be re-evaluated, (…) as the interests of voters in the Republic of Slovenia take precedence over the interests of international organizations"*.[19] While Levica (the Left) and Resni.ca (the Truth) could be classified as soft Eurosceptics, the same does not apply to the Slovenian National Party (SNS). In its new party programme from 2019, SNS explicitly called for Slovenia's withdrawal from the EU.[3] Given this position, the party can currently be characterized as hard Eurosceptic. In the lead-up to the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2026, two extra-parliamentary political parties, namely Zedinjena Slovenija (the United Slovenia) and Suvereni (the Sovereign), joined their efforts in the national political campaign "SLOEXIT," advocating for Slovenia's exit from the European Union. They believe that the European Union holds excessive power, as it makes decisions regarding borders, currency, and security. They primarily cite the Migration Pact – which is set to come into effect in 2026 – as an example, arguing that it undermines Slovenia's sovereignty.[17] In this context, both parties can be characterised as hard Eurosceptics.

Response to euroscepticism and consequences

Eurosceptic positions held by a handful of the aforementioned parties were largely overlooked by other political parties, particularly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with the exception of anti-immigration discourse during the migrant crisis.

Since then, a gradual shift away from EU-aligned policy can be observed within Slovenia's mainstream left-wing political actors, also among political parties, which usually show strong pro European Union attitude, especially in relation to the conflict in Gaza. Slovenia, under the leadership of the Freedom Movement (2022–2026) frequently adopted a more critical stance toward Israel's actions compared to the more cautious response of the European Union. In the lead-up to the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2026, two extra-parliamentary political parties, namely Zedinjena Slovenija (United Slovenia) and Suvereni (Sovereign) started their "SLOEXIT" campaign. This emergence of hard Euroscepticism has once again been largely overlooked by mainstream political parties and has received only minimal coverage in mainstream media. This may reflect the perception among established parties that such hard Eurosceptic extra-parliamentary political actors do not represent significant political competition, and therefore do not warrant a response to their activities.

Conclusion

Public trust in the European Union has significantly declined in Slovenia since the country's accession. During the initial stages of the so-called *polycrisis* period, marked by overlapping political, economic, and security challenges, this decline in public trust was not strongly reflected in the positions of Slovenian political parties towards the European Union. At that time, overtly Eurosceptic views remained relatively marginal within the political mainstream.

In more recent years, attitudes toward the EU have become increasingly polarised, with EU-related issues more frequently framed through the lens polarised party competition.[10] With the exception of the largest coalition party (2022–2026), Gibanje Svoboda (the Freedom Movement), left-wing political parties have expressed a certain degree of reservation toward the objectives of the European Union and the NATO, particularly concerning general armament policies. At the same time, all parliamentary left-wing parties have expressed some level of disagreement with the European Union's stance on the conflict in Gaza. The pre-election period ahead of the 2026 parliamentary elections once again marked a time during which political parties more actively advocated their positions, including those concerning the European Union. In this context, we witnessed the emergence of political formations, most notably within the populist radical right, that adopted a hard Eurosceptic position, including calls for Slovenia's withdrawal from the European Union. This represents a development that had not been observed to such an extent in previous election cycles. As such, the 2026 pre-election period provides a particularly interesting case study of the politicisation of European integration and merits dedicated scholarly attention in future research.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability statement

No data associated with this article.

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