

TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

Country Study Slovenia

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A DEFINITION OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

Populism is usually associated with the rise to power of right-wing and far-right movements in the West, although the term was originally introduced into political science to refer to left-wing political movements (including the People's Party) that campaigned for more rights for peasants and workers in the United States of America (USA) in the late 19th century. After the end of the Second World War, the term spread from the USA to other parts of the world; arriving first in Latin America, where it was used as a label for the style of government of Juan Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (Šalaj 2018).

Šalaj (2018) traces the origins of today's meaning back to the 1950s. At the time, Edward A. Shills defined populism as "the existence of populace dissatisfaction with the current social order imposed by the ruling class, whereby people believe that this ruling class has a monopoly on power, property, and culture." The most influential contemporary definition of populism, as described by Szalay, comes from the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, who defined populism as "an ideology that divides society into two opposing groups, the common people and a corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the will of the people" (Šalaj 2018). A similar definition had been proposed somewhat earlier by Torcuato Di Tella (1995), who believed that populism could be defined as "a political movement that emphasises 'the interests, culture and spontaneous feelings of ordinary people against those of the privileged elite'." The

central idea of populism is that society is divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: The honest people and the corrupt elite.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LEFT-WING AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM

Šalaj (2018) distinguishes between left-wing and right-wing populism. If the elites are predominantly liberal, populism will be reactionary, as has been the case mainly in Europe over the last two decades. If, on the other hand, the dominant elites are mainly conservative, populism — as illustrated by the cases of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador — will be based on left-wing political values, such as defending the interests of workers against those of rich capitalists. However, it is important to note a crucial distinction between the two populisms. Left-wing ideology sees the problems primarily at the level of the system and wants to change it to the benefit of all people. Right-wing populism, i. e., the far right, focuses on particularised threats, "dangerous others", often promising that their elimination will be sufficient to fix the problems (thus shifting the blame onto immigrants, ethnic minorities, the influence of foreign capital, etc.). It, therefore, does not want to change the system fundamentally.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RIGHT-WING AND FAR-RIGHT POPULISM

Another division is worth noting. Richard Stöss (2017) distinguishes between right-wing populism and far-right extremism. In analysing institutionalised right-wing extremism, we need to distinguish between moderate right-wing extremism and orthodox right-wing extremism. The former seeks to assert its demands within the existing political order and distances itself (though often just verbally or half-heartedly) from historical fascism. The latter openly acknowledges its hostility to the political system, tolerates or supports violent behaviour, and cites historical precedents in support of its own programme.

THE CAUSES OF THE RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT

It is important to add, however, that the rise of populisms is facilitated by social discontent, which is a direct consequence of the deterioration of people's (financial and social) situation. In Europe, right-wing populisms have most markedly been on the rise after 2008 and the crisis of capitalism. In the aftermath of the crisis, austerity measures have made people's situation much worse and increased their discontent. In this context, it is particularly interesting to look at the past and the policies implemented by German Chancellor Heinrich Brüning. These were policies of austerity, balanced budgets, public sector redundancies, wage cuts, etc. These policies were, therefore, almost identical to the neoliberal policies that were introduced widely after the 2008 crisis and are described in the founding documents of the EU.

It was Adolf Hitler who was elected to succeed Chancellor Heinrich Brüning, taking his far-right party from 2.6 per cent of the vote before the crisis to 43.3 per cent in the post-crisis year of 1933. A similar rise of far-right ideas has taken place in the last decade or so in the West because of similar economic policies.

The events that led to the nationalist wars in former Yugoslavia are completely overlooked today. Once again, the rise of far-right nationalist ideas, which culminated in war, was brought about by austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Like most peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, Yugoslavia fell into the trap of 'cheap' credit after the oil crisis of the early 1970s. Lowinger (2009) stresses the role of the IMF in the deterioration of the economic situation, as it started to impose 'austerity' measures on Yugoslavia as early as the late

1970s. Between 1979 and 1988, the country entered into no less than six stand-by loans with the IMF, as it needed an inflow of foreign capital. According to Lowinger, the rise of nationalisms was thus a consequence of these policies, which enabled the breakup of Yugoslavia and the bloody war. Wolff (2014) writes that the IMF created a particularly negative era in Yugoslavia by extensively contributing to increasing poverty in the country. The growing dissatisfaction of the population, a result of the exacerbated economic situation (inflation, deepening debt crisis, etc.), resulted in the accelerated political and economic disintegration of the Yugoslav federation (Popović 1996).

A SHORT HISTORY OF SLOVENIAN INDEPENDENCE

Slovenia's post-independence story was unique and differed from the transition processes of other post-socialist countries, which more or less zealously followed the radical neoliberal shock doctrine. Unlike some other countries of former Yugoslavia, Slovenia avoided a prolonged war. After 1991, it developed in a concentrated period, following a pattern that was prevalent after the end of the Second World War. From 1991 to 2004, Slovenia, like Europe in the post-World War II period and until the 1970s, developed in line with a neo-corporatist model (Klarič 2021). Unlike other post-socialist countries, it was pressured to do so mainly by strong trade unions, the legacy of socialism, and a proportional electoral system that forced political parties to take account of broader social interests and to work together to form government coalitions. The legacy of socialism also left strong trade unions with numerous members, which, by means of protests, made it easier to force the government to consider their interests. After all, at first the post-independence governments also wanted to introduce radical neoliberal reforms in Slovenia. Since this was not possible, policy-making, as in Europe under post-war Keynesianism, was based on tripartite negotiations between trade unions, the government, and employers. Policies were based on advocating for full employment and wage growth, for instance. Slovenia achieved enviable results during this period, described by some as a success story, mainly due to positive economic indicators. For most of this time, the left-liberal *Liberalna demokracija Slovenije* (LDS; Liberal Democracy of Slovenia) was the largest party in government.

When Slovenia joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, the existing development model came to an end. The centre-right won the elections later that year

and the government's policies took a turn towards a more radical neo-liberal doctrine. The turnaround was similar to what had already taken place in the West at the end of the 1970s, only the reasons for the change were somewhat different. The state lost some of its macroeconomic levers in the fiscal and monetary domain (customs duties, the possibility of autonomously controlling the amount of money in circulation, and, in particular, its mechanism for devaluing its own currency). These currency devaluation mechanisms had previously allowed Slovenia to pursue autonomous Keynesian policies.

Slovenia was forced to abandon these policies mainly because of the structural changes mentioned above, which were a consequence of joining the EU and following its neoliberal rules prescribed by EU documents. In doing so, Slovenia lost a part of its (economic) sovereignty, even though that had been one of the main reasons for gaining independence. The trade unions (once again), with massive protests in November 2005, prevented the radical implementation of neoliberal reforms that would have been imposed by the right-wing government coalition led by the *Slovenska demokratska stranka* (SDS; Slovenian Democratic Party) and Prime Minister Janez Janša. The party came to power after many years of LDS rule. The SDS was economically neoliberal at the time, but at the time policies were less extreme in other areas than they were in later years.

During this time, after joining the euro area and in the absence of measures to prevent the economy from overheating and excessive borrowing from abroad, there was an enormous increase in external debt. In fact, the country's gross external debt doubled in the four years that followed. Public debt increased simultaneously, thanks to ill-advised reforms that lowered the corporate tax rate and tax rates for on the richest. When the crisis hit in 2008, those in power, just like experts and politicians in the West, were unaware of its scale and its long-term (structural) nature. The unpreparedness for the crisis was reflected in the policies pursued by Slovenian governments after 2008. Following the electoral defeat at the end of 2008, the government of Borut Pahor, who led the *Socialni demokrati* (SD; Social Democrats), succeeded Janša's government. This coalition, even though the SD party was in charge, also followed neoliberal policies, which, at the time, were based on 'austerity' measures and were directed mainly against the poorest segments of society. Due to slow and inadequate action, which led to a decrease in demand, economic growth was also lower. At the height of the crisis, Slovenia changed governments a total of three times; new faces with new parties and (unrealised) promises to pursue different policies won the early elections following the

rule of the Pahor government. Dissatisfaction with politics had been high due to rising unemployment, poverty, as well as cuts to pensions, wages, and other benefits. However, various governments still pursued (more or less) radical neoliberal policies, imposed by international (and especially European) institutions in the face of ever more expensive borrowing. The space for alternative policies was thus even more limited than the years directly after Slovenia joined the euro area. The crisis only started to subside at the end of 2014. Since then, Slovenia has recorded one of the highest growth rates in the EU, but this benefited mainly the wealthiest few, as inequality has risen further. In 2014, a political newcomer, Miro Cerar, won the elections with his Miro Cerar Party, later renamed *Stranka modernega centra* (SMC; Modern Centre Party) as an antipode to the SDS party, which had been accused of rampant corruption.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL PARTNERS AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL DIALOGUE

As mentioned above, during the 1990s, unstable, centre-left coalition governments systematically prevailed. These governments were open to trade union demands. On the other hand, they were also strongly determined by the ongoing process of accommodation to EU rules and demands. High inflation, which first fell below 10 per cent in 1995 – having previously risen to three and then two digits (Silva-Jáuregui 2004) – was a problem that had to be dealt with during the accession process. Accordingly, reducing inflation was a permanent priority of Slovenian governments. This focus implied systematic wage moderation, which was not possible without sustained cooperation with social partners. Accordingly, the resulting policies were strongly focused on job protection, sustaining a low unemployment rate, and a gradual lowering of relatively high inflation.

It seems that the constellations associating strong unions and employers' organisations, combined with the unstable centre-left coalition governments, almost spontaneously generated the 'neo-corporatist' compromise. Institutionalisation of the neo-corporative system was concluded in 1994 when the Economic and Social Council (ESS), the most important institution for social dialogue, was formed. The ESS basically resulted from the political exchange between the first centre-left government and trade unions. Faced with the problem of high inflation, the government intended to use wage moderation, but was aware that it would not be able to manage it without the unions' support.

The establishment of the ESS was, in some respects, the ‘price’ that the government had to pay for the unions’ support. Since 1994, social partners have systematically negotiated income and other policies within the ESS. Negotiations led to one or two-year agreements on income policies, occasionally also taking the form of broader social pacts, wherein chapters on wage policies were of central importance (Stanojević / Klarič 2013).

The key implementation mechanism of the agreed policies was the centralised collective bargaining system. In the 1990s, general collective agreements for the private and public sector framed sectoral bargaining. At the time, sectoral agreements were implemented in almost all Slovenian organisations. The coverage rate, due to the companies’ obligatory membership of the Chamber of Commerce – which was the main negotiator and signatory of the collective agreements – was exceptionally high and covered almost all dependent employees (Glassner 2013).

Trade union density rates started to decline rapidly in the mid-2000s. The intensity of this transformation, which began when Slovenia entered the EU, may be compared to the massive changes of the early 1990s. From 2005 to 2008, the density rate dropped from 40 to below 30 per cent and later on to around 20. The share of unionised blue-collar workers declined relatively quickly. Unionisation within public services has been stable and/or growing, but not intensively enough to make up for the losses in manufacturing.

In spite of this, the distribution of the unionised workforce among the main union organisations has not changed significantly. Despite recent heavy losses, the *Zveza svobodnih sindikatov Slovenije* (ZSSS; Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia) remains the largest confederation, just as it was in the 1990s. Today, ZSSS consists of 23 trade unions as members and traditionally focuses primarily on blue-collar industrial workers; ZSSS covers more than half of the unionised population (Visser 2011).

In 2006, some major unions formed the *Konfederacija sindikatov javnega sektorja Slovenije* (KSJS; Confederation of Public Sector Trade Unions), which covers almost a quarter of the unionised workforce. The affiliates of this new confederation are quite strong and autonomous. Compared to the ZSSS, where internal fragmentation at the micro level is an outstanding trend, fragmentation within the KSJS is more sectional in nature. The rest of the union organisations, covering around 20 per cent of the unionised workforce, consist of smaller confederations, that is, au-

tonomous national, mostly public sector unions and, in addition, some company unions (Visser 2011).

The Chamber of Commerce, the main employers’ organisation, had mandatory membership in the 1990s. Since it was the main negotiator representing employer interests, collective bargaining was, in effect, centralised, and coverage was almost complete. In parallel to the Chamber of Commerce, there was also a chamber of small and medium-sized enterprises that also had mandatory membership.

Under pressure from international organisations, especially the International Labour Organization (ILO), which criticised the involvement of mandatory interest organisations in autonomous and voluntary bargaining processes, both chambers set up parallel voluntary interest organisations in the mid-1990s. These new employers’ associations were involved in collective bargaining and in negotiation processes within the Economic and Social Council, but were dependent on the financially strong and influential chambers.

The situation radically changed under the centre-right coalition government. In 2006, the position of the Chamber of Commerce changed; its former status as a mandatory organisation was abolished. In line with the new law, it was transformed into a voluntary interest organisation. The new status resulted in an immediate decline in membership and forced the Chamber to compete for members; in other words, it let the Chamber to adopt new, more radically oriented policies closer to the interests of its potential constituents. Accordingly, the formerly modest employers’ interest organisation, which used to play an important role in the negotiations of social pacts, significantly radicalised its stance (Stanojević / Klarič 2013).

In the last ten years, as was the case across Europe, trade unions in Slovenia have had to face several unpopular measures in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, which they had difficulty resisting in the long term. Slovenia’s accession to the EU has further weakened their power, as they have had to follow the guidelines of EU institutions. Nevertheless, throughout the entire period, with short interruptions, they operated within the framework of the Economic and Social Council (ESS). The ESS has seven trade union members, the largest of which are ZSSS and KSJS. Employers’ organisations in the ESS are represented by the Employers Association of Slovenia, the Chamber of Craft and Entrepreneurship of Slovenia, the Association of Employers in Craft and Small Business of Slovenia, and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia.

THE SLOVENIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY – FROM MODERATE TO FAR RIGHT

In the autumn of 2015, another landmark event took place. During this period, a large number of refugees passed through Slovenia in search of a better future. Around the same time, Janša's SDS party had started to acquire far-right ideas. They began to score political points by spreading hatred against the refugees. However, the party still failed to rise to power. Even in the 2018 elections, albeit gaining the majority vote, they remained in the opposition because most of the other parties initially refused to form a government with them.

Ever since then, the SDS party, which by a turn of events managed to form a government just as the coronavirus pandemic began in March 2020, has been moving towards the far right. Its policies – attacks on independent institutions such as the Constitutional Court, the prosecutor's office, and the media, as well as their strict implementation of anti-corona measures (the country had a strict curfew for about six months and restrictions on movement between municipalities) – have led to a number of protests, joined on some occasions by trade unions due to a suspension of dialogue with the ESS. It is telling, however, that on several occasions members of far-right and even neo-Nazi movements (misleadingly dressed as French yellow vests) have come to the government's aid by taking part in the protests, where they chanting pro government and patriotic slogans (such as, for example, 'for Slovenia', slogans promoting a militarised border, and 'anarchists are leftist fascists') and provoking other protestors. They were protected by the police and praised by Prime Minister Janša and some other ministers for their courage.

The aforementioned sympathies between SDS and far-right movements make it impossible to find a politically viable alternative on the far right. For example, Bernard Brščić, former State Secretary of the Janša government, unsuccessfully attempted to enter the European elections with far-right views using his newly founded party *Dom* (Home). In truth, the party could not be successful because their constituency was already quite successfully addressed by SDS. A similar situation occurred with the political grouping of Andrej Šiško, who organised paramilitary militias to control the border. His party, the *Gibanje Zedinjena Slovenija* (ZSi; Movement United Slovenia), has never been successful in elections either.

The SDS cannot be unequivocally labelled a far-right party, as it also advocates for policies that are more moderate. In any case, its tendencies have become in-

creasingly totalitarian with each new rise to power under its leader Janša, who has been party chair for the past 28 years. He seeks to subjugate every part of society and is becoming increasingly radical as a political leader, which is triggering strong resistance from the public. SDS also draws political ideas from Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, who invests heavily in party media, as well as from former US President Donald Trump. From the US Republican camp, Janša's party has adopted ideas about the deep state, left-wing fascism, and cultural Marxism, for instance.

Vehovar describes the modus operandi of SDS as an "administrative coup d'état", where there is a division between "us" and "them" – the enemies who have hijacked the state (Plavčak 2020). The latter are destroying us and must therefore be defeated. In the case of an administrative coup d'état, "the means of violence are not a matter of street fighting, but of interdepartmental and inter-office struggles, where semi-legal or even illegal administrative procedures and their party army invade without any restraint". Vehovar was describing the functioning of the Janshist government (March 2020 – June 2022) when he said that a "violent front is being waged, and administrative tanks are rolling over the systems, subsystems, administrative and expert structures (and thus knowledge, skills, social and civilizational manners) by which the state ensures its institutional functionality. When a party, under the pretext of a real or fabricated crisis, removes civil servants from decision-making positions and installs their own party militants in their place, it is not only ensuring itself a docile and obedient operative that will enable it absolute power; it is at the same time fighting the enemy, as it replaces the imagined enemy ('communist') network with its own, Janshist one. The project of Janshism will therefore only be complete when it has seized everything, only when the last enemy has been destroyed" (Plavčak 2020).

THE 2022 NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

As already mentioned, the behaviour of the SDS party in power has provoked a great public resistance. Civil society organised more than 100 protests every Friday during Janša's government. However, despite the pressure from civil society, his government stayed in power until the elections in April 2022. However, even the generous financial resources, the strengthened media apparatus, and the takeover of many social subsystems did not help the SDS party win the 2022 elections. Another new left-liberal party, the *Gibanje Svoboda* (GS; Freedom Movement), which was formed a few months prior the elections, managed to

Table 1
General Elections in Slovenia 2018 and 2022 (votes in per cent)

Party	2018	2022
<i>Gibanje Svoboda</i> (GS; Freedom Movement)	–	34.45
<i>Slovenska demokratska stranka</i> (SDS; Slovenian Democratic Party)	24.92	23.48
<i>Nova Slovenija</i> (NSi; New Slovenia)	7.16	6.86
<i>Socialni demokrati</i> (SD; Social Democrats)	9.93	6.69
<i>Levica</i> (L; The Left)	9.33	4.44
<i>Lista Marjana Šarca</i> (LMSŠ; List of Marjan Šarec)	12.60	3.72
<i>Stranka Alenke Bratušek</i> (SAB; Party of Alenka Bratušek)	5.11	2.61
<i>Slovenska nacionalna stranka</i> (SNS; Slovenian National Party)	4.17	1.49
<i>Stranka modernega centra</i> (SMC; Modern Centre Party)	9.75	–
<i>Povežimo Slovenijo</i> (PoS; Let's Connect Slovenia)*	–	3.41
<i>Demokratska stranka upokojencev Slovenije</i> (DeSUS; Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia)	4.39	0.66
Others	21.97	12.19

* PoS is a 2022 coalition of SMC and several other smaller parties.
Source: National Electoral Commission, www.dvk-rs.si

win. What is special about the last decade is that for the third time, the voters have given support to a new left-liberal party that was formed shortly before the elections, and, thus, for the third time, they have expressed a strong vote of no confidence in Janša's government.

It is interesting to note that, in 2018, nine parties entered parliament, having received more than the 4 per cent threshold of votes required, while in 2022, many parties lost votes to the newly formed GS and thus only five parties entered parliament. The current government coalition now consists of the Freedom Movement (GS), led by Robert Golob as Prime Minister, the Social Democrats (SD), and the *Levica* (L; Left Party), which, after two terms in the National Assembly, joined the government for the first time.

SYNDICALISM, RIGHT WING POPULISM AND THE FAR RIGHT IN SLOVENIA

Slovenian trade unions wanted to act constructively during the time that Janša's government was last in power (March 2020 – June 2022). After the previous two experiences with his government, they did not expect the escalations that followed. In the Economic

and Social Council (ESS), trade union proposals were taken into account less and less. The pandemic was a convenient excuse for the government to make decisions without any real coordination with them. In May 2021, the negotiations under the ESS were therefore suspended. Social dialogue was not established until the end of Janša's government and was at its lowest point in Slovenia's history.

Despite this, trade unions have remained restrained in their criticism of the government. Officially, they had taken part in a few protests against the government, but there has been no major criticism. Part of the reason for this lies in the tradition of apoliticality of trade unions. It is also due to their transition from an organisation that supported the socialist regime in Yugoslavia to one that, in the post-independence context, strived to show itself as neutral, independent, and as detached from politics as possible.

Moreover, trade unions are largely reluctant to make political statements for fear that this will drive away the members that belong to certain (even extreme) political parties. However, in doing so, the unions are actually falling into a trap, because this also makes it impossible to win over all the members who are opposed to such a stance and thus do not join. Since in-

dependence, we have as already mentioned, seen a decline in unionisation in Slovenia. Dr Gal Kirn, a researcher at the Dresden University of Technology and the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, points out that workers are more than their title and have other affiliations. He also suggests that right-wing populism has further fragmented workers along ethnic and identity lines. This is where, he believes, a workers' struggle is possible, with respect for class solidarity: "The struggles must not be separate but must be presented as part of a single struggle. They must not produce an additional identity that portrays foreign workers as different. Such policies are then wrapped up in cultural phenomena and class consciousness is forgotten," Kirn explains.

Mirsad Begić, President of the Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (SSS), which operates within the framework of the largest trade union headquarters, the ZSSS, (self-)critically admits that right-wing populism offers something that the trade unions fails to. Begić explains that "much of what right-wing populism advocates for that is different and/or in opposition to the trade union movement in Slovenia and elsewhere stems from the shortcomings, failures and overlooked challenges of our agenda. In particular, right-wing populism undermines (the possibilities of) mobilisation, organisation, community action of trade unions and of the population, as well as hinders a progressive understanding of economic foundations and practices, environmental problems and demographic-technological challenges." He also believes that trade unions are too apolitical and that this is one of the reasons they cannot address the problems described. He comments that, with a few more occasional exceptions, he does not see trade unions as being prepared to fight against right-wing politics, let alone right-wing populism and the far right, and this poses a problem. "Historically, trade unions have traditionally worked towards (greater) equality, the (gradual) equalisation of people, the economic and social improvement of the situation and the cultural convergence of all. Therefore, all concrete agreements in the area of work (collective bargaining and contracts, social policies, internal debates, etc.) that go in the direction of the above strategic political-economic orientations are those that oppose and eliminate the policies and methods of right-wing populism and its more malignant sister, the far right," he comments.

Hana Radilovič, former president of the Movement for Decent Work and Welfare Society and investigative journalist at the *Pod Črto* web portal, describes trade unions in Slovenia as old-fashioned: "Decades of glorification of the political organs and procedures of the so-called social dialogue have led to the bureaucrati-

sation and political passivation of trade unions. In this sense, it seems to me that the very nature of old-fashioned unions is their biggest obstacle today." She stresses that trade unions should be more militant and address the fight against capitalism: "They should get out of the social dialogue bubble and engage in broader actions." In this context, she gives the example of the *Lidl* trade union, which decided to assume an active role during the Water Act campaign. Limiting trade union action to legal service, confining negotiators to senior trade union bureaucrats, and leaving the wider membership without a say in the matter has become too normalised. It is the militant trade unions, which have not allowed themselves to be distracted by the empty promises of social dialogue, that are currently very successful; they are able to inspire a sense of belonging and hope in people, as well as provide realistic economic solutions to their material insecurity, as a counterbalance to the racist projects of the parties. "Involving the members more directly in the union's decisions and negotiations with external actors is key to maintaining motivation and retaining memberships, as well as building solidarity," Hana Radilovič explains.

Mojca Žerak, activist and member of the *Mladi plus* trade union, believes that right-wing populism in Slovenia threatens workers' interests in the same way neoliberalism does. "By advocating the privatisation of community systems such as education, health care, and public transport, by advocating the abolition of a welfare state and the elimination of aid to vulnerable social groups, by generally opposing trade union organising, by calling for workforce flexibilisation, etc. Precisely because, in the political and economic sphere, right-wing populism actually advocates the same measures as the dominant neoliberal ideology, I think it is a very dangerous combination," she comments. In her view, the problem in Slovenia is that the understanding of trade unionism is too narrow: "Trade unions or trade unionists need to understand that immigrants are also workers, that workers are members of the LGBT community, that workers are single mothers, that the unemployed and the precarious workers are also part of the working class. Some of them are a part of the active workforce, and some of them exist as a 'reserve' workforce that can be quickly mobilised in line with the needs of capital (e.g., importing foreign workers when the Slovenian economy needs them). In general, I think that in trade unionism, the understanding of the working class or workers is very narrow and limited to people with a contract of employment and a trade union membership."

In Slovenia, because the majority of their members are full-time employees, trade unions defend this group

in particular. Others, such as precarious workers and younger workers, are forgotten. This weakens trade unions in the long term; the proliferation of precariousness that we are witnessing is diminishing trade union power from the outside, as it reduces trade union membership. This is why Žerak stresses that trade unions need to “first understand more broadly who they represent and what this group and all its subgroups need for a decent life, moving beyond decent work for decent pay. Only then will the foundations be laid for broader trade union action that does not, for example, exclude precarious workers, foreigners, the unemployed, etc.”

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