
FORMING POLITICAL PARTIES IN A NEW POLITICAL LANDSCAPE
AN INTERVIEW WITH DAMJAN MADELC

We met at a cafe in the centre of Ljubljana, in the half of the Metelkova complex that has been officially re-developed. While the other half is a squat and remains a colourful space of mostly alternative and autonomous artistic and political production, the gentrified half where our cafe is feels like a cold and empty space of concrete and glass. This isn't helped by the fact that it is home to various institutions such as the Ministry of Culture, the Slovene Ethnographic Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art. In this context, and among all these contradictions it seemed a fitting back drop for an interview with Damjan Mandelc, professor and civil society activist, on the intense year Slovenia has behind it.

I had asked Damjan for an interview because of his active participation in the civil society scene in Slovenia, particularly over the last year during the wave of protests (*vstaja*) that swept the country, where he was deeply involved in the formation of a new political party, *Solidarnost* (Solidarity). I was particularly interested in his experience of the *vstaja* and why it was a moment to form a new party. The party formed on December 13, 2013 when three initiatives – *Vseslovenske Ljudske Vstaje* (VLV), *Odbora za pravično in solidarno družbo*, and *Mreže za neposredno demokracijo* – active in the *vstaja* united under the name of *Solidarnost*. I experienced the *vstaja* from within the crowds and closely followed the political and economic developments during and since this period and was intrigued as to why now seemed a good moment to form a party. The uprising seemed fairly hostile towards the existing parties and political class in general.

The protests started in Maribor in November of 2012 following the implementation of a new radar system aimed at controlling traffic around Maribor. The deal was a private – public partnership between the municipality of Maribor and Iskra Sistemi. It had been set up so that the municipality of Maribor would pay around 30 million to set up the radar system, and Iskra would be responsible for maintaining them, issuing and collecting the fines. As if it wasn't bad enough that public money of a struggling community with 17% unemployment¹ was being spent like this, in the first days that the system went online, the apparently overly sensitive system generated an amazing 25,000 fines. Fairly quickly people began to take matters into their own hands. Damjan suggested that the roots go further back than the deal between Maribor City and Iskra Sistemi. "It is related to a specific political process that goes back at least to the independence. What happened in *vstaja* was not only the civil society and active citizens facing the zeitgeist, but also mixed people coming together for the first time in such great numbers since independence." Later on he also added that outside of Ljubljana, it was primarily a response to corrupt local elites.

This included destroying 10 of the radars, but more importantly, they began to protest. From these initial protests in Maribor, the uprising spread across all Slovenia. By December 2012 the protests were being centralized in Ljubljana as the "All Slovenian Uprising." But this shifted the nature of the uprising significantly. When asked about his own experience with the protests, presumably because of his own long term involvement with civil society, Damjan saw the uprising as having produced a positive impact on civil society in the country. "It's kind of a revival of civil society at the very place of *vstaja*... You saw how people were getting involved in ideas, getting ideas,

1 17,2 % as of March 2012 according to data from the Slovenian agency for employment (*Zavod RS za zaposlovanje*)

forming new coalitions, having follow ups with new civil society groups, with new agendas, petitions, etc. In this sense, we needed *vstaja* so badly.”

While he acknowledged that economic factors, particularly the austerity measures of the last years are among the reasons why people went on the streets, more important seemed to him the autocratic nature of the government in power during that period. “As many say and observe, not only in Slovenia but also abroad, *vstaja* were massive as long as [Prime Minister Janez] Janša was in power.” It is true that after the government collapsed, though a combination of public pressure and an ongoing investigation into Janša, less people came out, but the protests did continue through April. Arguably, the most radical moment of the uprisings in Ljubljana, after a number of clashes between police and demonstrators in December, came after the government had already resigned. On the 27th of April a large number of protesters took over an abandoned cinema for a few hours, to show a film and bring attention to the privatization of public space.

While there was a strong participation of various civil society initiatives in the All Slovenian Uprising, and a number of new coalitions formed, there is also an important critique of this aspect of the demonstrations. A lot of it relates to the violence that occurred after the first massive demonstration in Ljubljana. There was a split in the unity of people on the streets, creating a division between the peaceful protesters and those who saw legitimacy in confrontation with the police and the state. This didn't occur in Maribor, where there was a more unified position on the fact that violence was coming largely from the state, whether on the day of a demonstration or more generally in daily life. This unity continues even now, a year later, with high support for arrested protestors and their legal trials.

Unfortunately this was not the case in Ljubljana, where the division took the form of organized groups connected to civic initiatives on one side, and autonomous social groups on the other. On a few occasions this turned rather nasty as some protestors called for a police intervention against activists who were seen as doing anything vaguely extreme, such as pulling on the police fence. When I asked about the violence on the protests, Damjan posed it as a complex issue within the uprising. Referring primarily to a protest in Ljubljana at the end of November 2012, when a group of organized neo-nazis took part, he said on the one side that there was a clear motivation from the Janša government to try and legitimize itself through creating fear about extreme groups on the left and right, and then coming down hard on them. But on the other side he felt there was no room at all for violence as a political tactic. “In this sense I am a democrat and legalist. So when someone is throwing stones to people, whether this is police, or another protestor, or a building, there are laws against it. You cannot damage buildings in order to express yourself as a citizen, in the street, in a protest. It is my opinion that if there is violence by someone against anyone, there are laws to prevent it, and there are punishments.”

He did go on to concede that in the specific case of the uprisings in Slovenia, the police seemed to have overstepped their boundaries in how much their tactics were pre-emptive and provocative. In this case the question he posed was “why would a government have to protect the people's parliament in a democratic society where you have a constitution allowing people to go together to protest against whatever they want? So when an elite sees a threat from people gathering to protest, I think there is a problem with the elite.”

Due to the complex nature of the *vstaja*, we only came to the formation of the party towards the end of our discussion. As I mentioned above, much of the *vstaja* had focused on the political elite, and the corruption that seems unavoidable within political institutions. Damjan suggested that

much of it was down to the shift in the society and an increase in public mobilization around political issues. Perhaps the *vstaja* had not ended, but had shifted gears. “If you are observing the processes of this 'post-protest' period, you would see enormous activity in social media, new groups, connections and collaborations. I think we numbered 80 civil society initiatives and they are vivid. They are active and one of these activities is to form a political alternative.” In addition, there was a lot of movement in other European countries towards forming left oriented political alternatives on the party level. “We have four or five groups that are trying to form, together or separately, alternative... And we can observe similar processes taking place in other European countries and on the European level.” It should not be forgotten that there are also other politically organized groups active outside of the civil society realm who propose an alternative beyond parties and formal representative politics. I pressed Damjan on how he saw the social movements. His answer was rather sceptical and he shifted the focus back to doing party politics and focusing on the relationships on the European level. Coalitions are essential on this level, he argued, because to change the basic conditions, we need to change the laws, which is not exactly a radical process. “We cannot just turn the system upside down. We have rules to follow.”

David Brown