

Mapping Left Actors: Slovenia

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the Yugoslav Socialist Federation and Slovenia's declaration of independence in 1991, the political field in Slovenia has been dominated by liberal and conservative forces. Until 1992, *The Democratic Opposition of Slovenia (Demokratska opozicija Slovenije-DEMOS)*, a wide coalition of right wing, left-liberal and social-democratic parties united under the banner of patriotism, was in power. During its short rule, the first steps towards the fundamental reconstruction of the Slovenian economy were made. The reconstruction was launched with a drive to privatize state owned property, a process introduced in a disorganized manner, and often via illicit means. This coincided with a severe economic depression, combined with high inflation and rising unemployment that accompanied the collapse of the Yugoslav markets. In 1992, mass workers' strikes helped to stop the so called «wild privatization» period and contributed to the fall of the DEMOS government.¹ After 1992, a coalition of moderate left parties, along with the party *Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (Liberalna demokracija Slovenije-LDS)*, with Janez Drnovšek at the fore, took power. With the exception of the brief reign of a right-wing conservative government in the year 2000, headed by the Christian-democrat leader Andrej Bajuk, the LDS managed to preserve their dominant role in Slovenian parliamentary politics, and were the most influential force in all government coalitions until 2004.

The period from 1992 to 2004 was characterized by a social-democratic development model. This was made possible by a gradual process of transition that avoided the most detrimental social effects witnessed in most of the other Eastern and Southern European post-socialist countries, namely those that undertook a swift «shock-doctrine» approach to transition. The liberal government continued with the process of privatisation, but in a rather peculiar manner: by means of internal buyouts and the direct distribution of shares to workers, the managers and workers retained majority shares in most of the small and medium-sized companies. The government, on the other hand, retained majority shares in most of the large-sized and strategically important

¹ Aleksander Lorenčič, *Gospodarska tranzicija v Sloveniji (1990-2004)*: <http://www.sistory.si/hta/tranzicija/index.php> (30.3.2018); Aleksandra Kanjuo Mrčela, *Sindikati in privatizacija*: <http://dk.fdv.uni-lj.si/dr/dr17-18KanjuoMrcela.PDF> (30.3.2018).

companies and banks.² When the depression grinded to a halt, a period of economic growth followed, during which workers' wages rose in real terms and many social benefits, including relatively high unemployment benefits and the possibility of early retirement, were preserved. Moreover, most of the institutions of the welfare state, i.e. public healthcare, education and the pension system, were kept intact throughout the nineties. During this period, the Central Bank of Slovenia was committed to a policy of currency depreciation aiming at nurturing the backbone of the Slovenian economy, its export sector. This monetary policy - made possible by the flexible exchange rate of the domestic currency, the Tolar – also curtailed pressure on worker's wages due to competition from abroad.³

A comparatively progressive set of socio-economic policies, sustained throughout the nineties, was not so much a consequence of socially receptive and worker friendly ideological orientations on the part of the ruling liberal forces, but rather an outcome of a balance of forces that included pressure from below. This pressure, which prevented the government coalitions from adopting a straightforward neoliberal development model, did not come from any radical left political party or movement, since they were practically non-existent at that time. It rather came from relatively strong trade unions – note that, in the early nineties, Slovenian trade unions covered more than 60 % of the total workforce.⁴ The *Social-Economic Council (Ekonomsko-socialni svet-ESS)*, composed of government, employer and trade union representatives and established in 1994, set the directions of national welfare policy, labour legislation and fiscal policy. Through their activities in the ESS and occasional protests and strikes, trade unions played a decisive role in restricting regressive and promoting progressive governmental socio-economic policies.

During the process of Slovenia's integration into the EU and the Eurozone, the social-democratic development model broke down. Slovenia joined the EU and NATO in 2004 and adopted the euro in 2007. During this period, Slovenia witnessed increased economic growth. However, this growth was based on the unprecedented accumulation of debt that swiftly piled up in the private sector,

² Branko Bembič, *From victory to victory to the final retreat*, http://revistes.uab.cat/tdevorado/article/view/v4-n2-bembic/pdf_104 (30.3.2018).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Miroslav Stanojević, *Sindikalne strategije v obdobju krize*, <https://www.dlib.si/stream/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-T2WNC4GS/ed1b538d-ff10-414c-9966-fd4187ce664d/PDF>.

after having gained access to cheap credits on European markets. In 2004, a right-wing government coalition, headed by the leader of *Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska demokratska stranka-SDS)*, Janez Janša, took power, and adopted a straightforward neoliberal agenda that included fiscal and labour market reforms, often conceived without mediation from the ESS. Even though its attempts to adopt an overall flat tax rate were stopped by trade union protests, it succeeded in decreasing tax rates on company profits and in implementing a uniform tax rate on capital incomes. It boosted the process of the privatisation of state owned companies and introduced several labour market reforms which increased the number of precarious jobs. At the same time, the casualisation of work gained momentum due to increasing structural pressures relating to European integration. After entering the European exchange rate mechanism (ESM) in 2004, Slovenia could no longer count on currency depreciation policies to tackle the pressures of foreign competition, and had to primarily resort to the flexibilization of the labour market.

During this period, many leftist protest movements came into being. Inspired by the world-wide counter-globalization movement, civil society activists, many of whom were influenced by radical-left or anarchist political views, launched a campaign against the war in Iraq in 2003 and against Slovenia's entry into the NATO alliance in 2004. Several so-called «autonomous spaces» were established in squatted areas in Ljubljana that later served as meeting points and mobilization centres for leftist activists. At the same time, several sporadic movements against the casualization of work arose. One of the most noticeable movements that came out of the anti-war movement and struggles for the rights of precarious workers was the *Social Center Rog*, a grass-roots collective of activists, gathered in a squatted factory in Ljubljana. From 2006 onwards, Social Center Rog organized several protests and demonstrations that were, for the most part, aimed at improving the working and living conditions of workers employed in the most vulnerable segments of the casualized labour market, i.e. migrant workers. They were also involved in movements for the rights of refugees, universal basic income and free higher education, to name just a few.⁵ During the 2000s, however, radical left actors with an anti-capitalist orientation were few in number, often loosely organized and operating on the margins with limited influence.

⁵ SC Rog, *Socialni center Rog se predstavi*, <https://tovarna.org/node/2755> (30.3.2018).

The critical event that eventually helped to create favourable conditions for leftist movements was the global capitalist crisis which struck the Slovenian economy in 2009. The crisis resulted in rising unemployment, the further casualization of work, and increasing poverty levels. The nominally left-wing government coalition, led by Borut Pahor's *Social Democrats (Socialni demokrati-SD)*, which succeeded the right-wing government in 2008, launched a programme of bank recapitalization. This resulted in increasing levels of public indebtedness, and the government also attempted to implement labour market and pension system reforms. Those reforms that were aimed at the further flexibilization of labour markets and the curtailing of public pension benefits, were stopped by referendum campaigns and mobilizations, headed by the trade unions. During the period of Pahor's government, two left-wing parties with anti-neoliberal political programmes and views were formed: the *Democratic Party of Labour (Demokratična stranka dela-DSD)* in July 2010, and the *Party for Sustainable Development of Slovenia (Stranka za trajnostni razvoj Slovenije-TRS)* in November 2011. By 2011, protests, demonstrations and events organized amongst the student population and the broader civil society were becoming ever more frequent. Encouraged by the Occupy Wall-Street and Arab Spring movement, students and other activists first symbolically occupied the Slovenian Stock Exchange and later, the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. The most visible participants in both occupations were radical left activists, mostly with socialist political views, who framed their distrust in the dominant financial institutions and their struggle for public education in anti-capitalist terms. A group of student activists involved in the occupation of the Faculty of Arts and engaged in the so-called *We are the University (Mi smo univerza-MSU)* movement for free public higher education⁶, formed the radical-left student party *Iskra*, with an explicitly socialist programme and political views.

In 2012, a right-wing coalition, led by the SDS, took power once again, and immediately started to implement severe austerity measures. Budget cuts in the public sector were accompanied by accelerated privatization and tax relief for the rich. The austerity measures deepened the recession, resulting in further increases in levels of unemployment and poverty. Simultaneously, several corruption affairs occurred. Many Slovenian mainstream politicians, including those of the highest ranks, were involved in attention-grabbing

⁶ See Lea Kuhar, *Predstavitev zasedbe FF*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFBJRZ5z6Pg> (28.3.2018).

scandals. In November 2012, protests against the corrupt mayor, Franc Kangler, erupted in Maribor, the second largest Slovenian city. What at first appeared to be a local protest with limited scope, eventually turned out to be a preface to the most massive and enduring popular uprising in Slovenian history. Widespread discontent with the harmful effects of the economic crisis, combined with rising dissatisfaction with the predominant political parties, helped the protest movement to spread to Ljubljana and many other Slovenian cities. At the beginning of 2013, the leader of the ruling right-wing coalition, Janez Janša, and the leader of the by then biggest nominally left-wing oppositional party *Positive Slovenia (Pozitivna Slovenija-PS)*, Zoran Jankovič, were accused of corruption by the *Slovenian Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (Komisija za preprečevanje korupcije-KPK)*.⁷ The simultaneous discrediting of the two politicians who personified the right-wing and the left-wing of the Slovenian parliament contributed to a radicalisation of the protest movement, which soon started to target the entire mainstream political establishment.

During the 2013 protest movement, a group of young activists and intellectuals started to promote the idea of democratic socialism. A curious identifier that eventually began to signify the key political project of the recently emerging radical left in Slovenia, this group represented a thorough break with the predominant narratives of socialism in Slovenia. After the collapse of Yugoslavia, socialism was habitually used as a pejorative term, designating a shady totalitarian past. The revisionist discourse, especially widespread amongst the right-wing parties and media, equated socialism with an oppressive command economy and with a principally non-democratic political apparatus from the past, which had been triumphally superseded with the transition of Slovenia to a free market economy and a system of representative democracy. At the same time, an alternative Yugo-nostalgic discourse on socialism co-existed and appealed to popular opinion as well. Yugonostalgia, praising the energetic cultural life of the former Yugoslavia, became popular amongst some centre left political parties, the media and several notable cultural associations in Slovenia. The latter often also nourished nationalist versions of a positive recollection of the socialist past, by integrating the fight of socialist partisans against the Nazi-occupation of Slovenia during WW2 into

⁷ Delo, *KPK: Janša in Jankovič sta edina hudo kršila zakonodajo*: <http://www.delo.si/novice/politika/kpk-jansa-in-jankovic-sta-edina-hudo-krsila-zakonodajo.html> (25.3. 2018).

a long-term chronicle of Slovenia's nation building. What both these seemingly opposing discourses have in common is that they empty recollections of the socialist past of all emancipatory political content.⁸ While the revisionist narrative demonizes the socialist past, the Yugo-nostalgic narrative glorifies it, but only after reducing it to politically sterile cultural phenomena ranging from the Yugo rock scene to Tito's Relays of Youth.⁹

The idea of democratic socialism that gained momentum in 2013 broke with both narratives by intrinsically linking the socialist project to democracy – conceiving it as a process of strengthening democratic procedures in politics as well as an expansion of democracy to the economic sphere – and by revitalizing the politically charged emancipatory moments of the socialist past (such as self-management, democratic planning, workers' councils, anti-fascist struggle etc.), while leaving the fetishization of the cultural relics of the once powerful Yugoslavia behind. After three decades of the unquestionable hegemony of pro-capitalist ideologies in Slovenia, socialism was once again presented as a potentially desirable contemporary political and economic alternative to capitalism. Due to rising dissatisfaction with the crisis-prone capitalist system and general distrust towards the mainstream political parties during the popular uprisings, the idea of promoting direct democracy in politics and in the workplace soon gained wider public support.

Consequently, the *Initiative for Democratic Socialism* (IDS) was formed in 2013. The initiative, first conceived as a socialist movement, soon evolved into a relatively strong socialist party. In 2014, the IDS formed a coalition with the TRS, DSD and the so called *Fourth Group* (*Civil Society Movements and Individuals*), called *The United Left* (ZL), which ran in the Slovenian parliamentary elections in June 2014. ZL obtained 5.47% of votes, enough to gain 6 parliamentary seats and to be consolidated as a parliamentary party. The electoral success of the ZL designated a critical moment when, for the first time after Slovenia's declaration of independence, a socialist party became part of the Slovenian parliament. After the electoral success that roughly coincided with the end of the turbulent popular uprisings, the ZL coalition shifted its focus to parliamentary activities. Despite recurring disagreements within and

⁸ See Primož Krašovec and Igor Ž. Žagar, *Evropa med socializmom in neoliberalizmom* (Pedagoški inštitut, Ljubljana: 2011); Mitja Velikonja, *Rock'n'retro* (Sophia, Ljubljana: 2013).

⁹ Relays of Youth have been organized every year until 1988 on May 25th to celebrate Titos birthday.

across the coalition parties during 2015 and 2016, ZL succeeded in establishing itself as an oppositional parliamentary party with relatively high public support. In 2017, the TRS and IDS merged to form a united party, now called *the Left (Levica)*, whereas DSD and the Fourth Group departed from the coalition but retained the name *United Left (Združena Levica)*.

Other non-parliamentary left organisations functioning on the level of civil society over the last couple of years, consist of a plethora of quite diverse smaller organizations. The most noticeable left-oriented research and educational institutions are: the *Institute for Labour Studies (Inštitut za delavske študije-IDS)*¹⁰, with a broad focus on critical theory; the *Centre for Social Research (Center za družbeno raziskovanje-CEDRA)*¹¹, focused on labour movements and labour issues; and the *March 8 Institute (Inštitut 8. marec)*¹², focused predominantly but not exclusively on feminist issues. The leftist trade union style organized non-governmental organizations with a focus on precarious labour issues include: the *Mladi Plus Trade Union (Sindikat Mladi plus)*¹³, and the *Movement for Decent Work and Welfare Society (Gibanje za dostojno delo in socialno družbo)*¹⁴. Other noticeably left-oriented organizations include the *Second Home (Drugi dom)*¹⁵ project, involved in migrant and refugee support and integration; *Zadrugator*¹⁶, a research and activist organization dealing with housing issues; and *Radio Student (Radio Študent)*¹⁷, an alternative student radio station with a predominantly left-oriented programme.

While each of the aforementioned organizations deserves closer scrutiny, the following research on left actors in Slovenia has limited scope – it focuses on actors that meet all three of the following criteria:

¹⁰ See Institute for labour studies, <http://www.delavske-studije.si/en/institute-for-labour-studies/> (23.4.2018).

¹¹ See CEDRA, <http://cedra.si/sl/2017/03/kdo-smo-center-za-druzbeno-raziskovanje-cedra/> (23.4.2018).

¹² See Inštitut 8. marec, <https://www.facebook.com/institut8.marec/> (23.4.2018).

¹³ See Sindikat Mladi plus, <https://www.mladiplus.si/> (23.4.2018).

¹⁴ See Gibanje za dostojno delo in socialno družbo, <http://socialna-druzba.si/> (23.4.2018).

¹⁵ See Second home, <https://www.facebook.com/secondhomeljubljana/> (23.4.2018).

¹⁶ See Zadrugator, <http://zadrugator.org/> (23.4.2018).

¹⁷ See Radio Študent, <https://radiostudent.si/> (23.4.2018).

1) A clear-cut left (socialist/anti-capitalist) orientation (as opposed to actors questionably drawing on liberal, nationalist or ambiguous political worldviews).

2) Engagement in a broad spectrum of activities, covering a wide range of political, economic and cultural issues (as opposed to actors focused on single issues or narrow fields of interest).

3) Continuity of political activities and reproduction of membership (as opposed to actors who function sporadically, and/or with irregularly defined membership).

Besides the two parliamentary parties (*the Left* and *ZL*), only the student party *Iskra* meets all the above criteria.

2. THE LEFT (LEVICA)

2.1. History

The *Left Party* was officially formed with the fusion of the *Initiative for Democratic Socialism (Initiative for democratic socialism-IDS)* and the *Party for Eco-Socialism and Sustainable Development of Slovenia (Stranka za ekosocializem in trajnostni razvoj Slovenije-TRS)* in 2017. The merged parties, however, have a longer history, which includes the separate activities of both actors as well as cooperation between them.

The origins of the IDS can be traced back to the turbulent era of the popular uprisings, which initially erupted in Maribor in November 2012, and soon spread to the capital Ljubljana and other cities all around Slovenia. In late 2012, a group of radical left activists from Ljubljana started to publicly promote the notion of democratic socialism, based on the democratic planning of production and direct democracy in the political sphere and in the workplace. The most visible activists that gathered under the banner of

democratic socialism – predominantly students and young intellectuals from Ljubljana – came from two collectives: *The Institute for Labour Studies (Inštitut za delavske študije - IDS)* and *Direct Democracy Now!*¹⁸ The former is an informal educational programme, self-managed by students and young researchers, that produces and promotes critical theory, especially from the field of the critique of political economy. The latter was a collective of young activists that promoted direct and participatory democracy in political decision making, and encouraged workers' co-management and co-ownership of enterprises in the workplace. The notion also gained support from many individuals who had been directly engaged in protest movements over the last decade, particularly in the campaign against Slovenia's entry into the NATO alliance, as well as activist projects concerned with precarity and the student movement *We Are the University*.

In general, the idea of democratic socialism strongly resonated with the subsection of the broader public sensitive to the detrimental effects of the economic crisis, especially following the implementation of austerity measures. This subsection was discouraged by the lack of any real alternative to the predominant political establishment. Note that during 2013, the recurrent protests in several Slovenian cities were in most cases directed against the entire mainstream political establishment, consisting of right and centre-left parties. The resulting political vacuum, combined with general distrust towards official parliamentary democracy and the prevailing neoliberal economic policies, helped to foster popular support for alternative economic and political models.

This, in turn, empowered the activists gathered around *ILS* and *Direct Democracy Now!* to form the *Initiative for Democratic Socialism (IDS)* on 1 May 2013. The IDS was conceived as a wide platform for building a socialist movement, aimed at gaining a permanent base of supporters and activists, as well as being an institutional network for a new socialist party that would complement the movement by eventually engaging in parliamentary struggle for state power. During 2013, the IDS remained involved in the protest movement and simultaneously negotiated with various individuals, movements and parties, with the intention of building a left coalition for the upcoming 2014 European and Slovenian parliamentary elections. On the basis

¹⁸ See Neposredna demokracija zdaj, <https://neposrednademokracija.com/> (23.4.2018).

of shared experiences during the uprisings and the convergence of programmatic views, the IDS gradually strengthened its cooperation with the *Democratic Party of Labour* (DSD) and the TRS. Lengthy negotiations eventually led to the formation of the *United Left* (ZL) coalition, consisting of TRS, IDS, DSD and the so-called *Fourth Group* (*Civil Society Movements and Individuals*) at the Founding Congress on 1 March 2014 in Ljubljana, with the immediate intention of collectively running in the June 2014 European parliamentary elections.

The second coalition partner, the TRS, originally named the *Party for Sustainable Development of Slovenia* (*Stranka za trajnostni razvoj Slovenije*), was officially founded on 12 October 2011, with the immediate aim of running in the parliamentary elections on 4 December 2011. Alongside the party, the *Movement for Sustainable Development in Slovenia* (*Gibanje za trajnostni razvoj Slovenije*) was established. The former Slovenian Ombudsman, Matjaž Hanžek, was elected head of the party - engaging in electoral activities; and the journalist Manca Košir became the head of the movement - acting in the sphere of civil society. The twofold organisational structure was complemented by several local chapters, dispersed across Slovenia. In comparison to the nominally left Slovenian parliamentary parties of the time, most notably the *Social Democrats* (*SD*), that had long ago accepted the neoliberal consensus - these new parties were positioned to the left.

However, their initial programmatic objectives and political views were neither anti-capitalist nor socialist, but rather a mixture of social-democratic and liberal approaches. Despite having put forward straightforward views on the subjects of ecology and demilitarisation, and their insistence on the need for Slovenia to exit from the NATO alliance, their standpoints on socio-economic issues were somewhat ambiguous. In their media appearances during 2011, Hanžek and Košir both argued for the preservation of the welfare state and opposed the prevalent austerity policies.¹⁹ In the main party documents, however, political standpoints on crucial socio-economic issues were formulated rather vaguely. According to the 2011 Party Statute, the main political objective of the party was to promote: «social balance, based on the principles of sustainable development, which abides by ethics, as a primary

¹⁹ See, for example, Matjaž Hanžek, *Zmaga je že, da smo prebudili ljudi*, <https://www.dnevnik.si/1042486166> (28.4.2018).

value, realized by individuals in cooperation with others by means of labour, wherein one's activity is aimed at permanent care for environmental and social balance.»²⁰ The statute places an emphasis on ethical values such as social responsibility, environmental responsibility, solidarity, knowledge, tolerance, active citizenship and transparency; the need to restore the rule of law by fighting against corruption and for human rights; and the promotion of social security. The 2011 election programme, similarly, focuses on issues of nature conservation, morality and legality, but does not address class issues.²¹ As far as socio-economic issues are concerned, the programme does not go beyond abstract pleas for social welfare, social security, the just distribution of wealth and decent salaries.

At the 2011 elections, TRS obtained 1.22 % of the vote, far below the parliamentary threshold (4%). It did, however, receive enough votes to receive financial backing from the state: according to the Slovenian *Law on Political Parties*, every party that obtains at least 1.2 % of the vote becomes a rightful claimant of public funds.²² Even though this state financial support was negligible in comparison to the support received by larger parliamentary parties, it helped the TRS to continue with their political activities and foster a permanent base of members and staff. The TRS's activists were actively engaged in the popular uprisings. At the end of 2012, they started negotiating with various left-leaning activists and groups that had been active in the uprisings, with the intention of forming a common front against the prevailing political establishment.

The engagement of TRS members in the uprisings from 2012 to 2014, and the simultaneous process of coalition building with movements and parties from the radical left and with a socialist orientation (most notably, the IDS), led the TRS to gradually radicalize some of its programmatic objectives. This process was reflected in the adoption of a new programme declaration with the title «*From Neoliberal Capitalism to Democratic Ecological Socialism*», in March 2013. In line with the declaration, the TRS also changed its name to the *Party*

²⁰ TRS, *Statut stranke TRS*, http://arhiv.gibanje-trs.si/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/statut_19032016_kon%C4%8Dni.pdf (29.4.2018).

²¹ TRS, *Program stranke TRS*, <http://arhiv.gibanje-trs.si/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/TRS-Program-stranke.pdf> (29.4.2018).

²² Vlada Republike Slovenije, *Zakon o političnih strankah*, <http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO359> (29.4.2018).

for *Eco-Socialism and Sustainable Development of Slovenia* in March 2014. In comparison to the founding programmatic texts, the declaration places more emphasis on socio-economic issues, and, for the first time, explicitly refers to socialism as the party's ultimate objective. Even so, the notion of democratic eco-socialism as delineated in the declaration, is ambiguous, since it includes both economic planning and a market economy, public property and private property. Moreover, it does not delineate a clear class position, but rather strives towards a supposedly neutral «third way between capital and labour».²³

After the official establishment of the ZL coalition on 1 March 2014, the paths of the IDS, TRS and DSD converged. Despite some initial programmatic differences and quarrels over the role of each individual party within the coalition, the three left parties were united in the common goal of running in the European parliamentary elections in June, and in the Slovenian parliamentary elections in July 2014. During the first half of 2014, the popular uprisings grinded to a halt, and the focus of ZL shifted towards the struggle to enter parliament. The struggle immediately gained an international dimension, since ZL became a rightful member of the *European Left Party*. At the elections for European parliament, the ZL coalition obtained 5.47 % of the vote, which was below the threshold for entering European parliament. It did, however, gain a sufficient number of votes to be considered a serious force to be reckoned with in the upcoming Slovenian parliamentary elections. At the national-level parliamentary elections in July 2014, ZL managed to break through the threshold, obtaining 5.97 % of the vote, and thereby gaining six seats in the Slovenian parliament out of the 90 members of parliament.

The majority of members in both parties saw the electoral success as a confirmation of the strategic orientation of the coalition, which had prioritized the parliamentary struggle. Yet, a group of IDS members expressed serious doubts about this latest direction taken by the ZL. Amongst the most common objections were claims that the IDS was subordinating its daily functioning to the logic of bourgeois parliamentary politics and PR strategy, directed more towards gaining voters than to fostering a permanent base of activists by means of building a socialist movement. Some IDS members were also sceptical about the general political worldviews of IDS's coalition partners,

²³ TRS, *Programska deklaracija gibanja in stranke TRS*, http://arhiv.gibanje-trs.si/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/predlog_programska_deklaracija_final1.pdf (30.4.2018).

disapproving of the «vague liberal orientation» of the TRS, and the «dubious nationalist views» of the DSD, whereas others focused their critique on the withering away of democratic procedures and transparency in internal decision making. Despite these internal disagreements, ZL managed to establish itself as a party that provides a serious alternative to mainstream political parties. During its day-to-day parliamentary activities from July 2014 to December 2016, ZL preserved a relatively large base of supporters and succeeded in attracting new supporters. According to the *Vox populi* polls, published by the Slovenian media house *Ninamedia* on a monthly basis, during this period the percentage of people who would vote for ZL oscillated between 5.2 (October 2014) and 10.9 (June 2015).²⁴ From time to time, ZL also succeeded in mobilizing a large number of people beyond the acts of voting or expressions of passive support, most notably in their campaign against the government's plan for the privatization of several state-owned companies. In cooperation with various civil society movements and trade union confederations, ZL organized a set of relatively large anti-privatization protests in 2015.

Yet, most of the ZL funds and staff resources were directed at the day-to-day activities of the parliamentary group. Once again, this led a group of IDS members to sharpen their criticism of the parliamentary group and its supporters, who formed the main line within the party. Consequently, an informal internal opposition formed, that repeated some of the concerns stated a year before by their predecessors, while adding several new concerns. Namely, they criticized the party leadership for subordinating the functioning of the party to parliamentary activities and for neglecting the nurturing of grassroots movements and the development of local chapters; they accused the party leadership - gathered around the parliamentary group - of subordinating the party council and executive committee, and therein curtailing internal democratic procedures; and, last but not least, they argued that the IDS should stop cooperating with the other two parties in the ZL coalition that were deemed not to be socialist.

The fraction around the IDS leadership maintained that the informal opposition's accusations might have sounded appealing but lacked real substance. The most common counter-objections to the main party line were

²⁴ Ninamedia, *Vox populi*, <http://www.ninamedia.si/stranke.php> (22.4.2018).

roughly framed as follows: some claimed that the party's focus on electoral activities might not be ideal, but that it is nevertheless essential if the party wants to attract wider masses and foster a permanent member base – the basic material precondition for the thorough reproduction of the party in terms of finances and staff rests on access to public funds that can only be obtained through electoral success; some claimed that parliamentary activities and sound PR strategy is at least as important as building a grassroots movement, due to the enlarged potential to directly influence legislative procedures and shape public opinion; others claimed that the direction of the party at that time did not in any way exclude the parallel building of such a movement, and they insisted that the ones who mourned the lack of grassroots activities themselves did not generate any serious grassroots initiatives; as for the question of future cooperation with other coalition partners, the IDS leadership claimed that existing differences between the coalition partners – at least those between the IDS and TRS – could be dealt with by means of cooperative dialogue, and they warned that the complete disintegration of the coalition would only weaken the IDS and further fragment the socialist left.

The internal fractional struggles reached their peak at the Congress in Krško in May 2016, when IDS members were due to decide on whether to transform the current ZL party coalition into a unified party. The congress ended prematurely, because the attendees failed to reach the necessary quota, and resulted in IDS members – roughly in line with the views of internal opposition – aggressively stating their opposition to the main party line. By the end of 2016, fractional struggles within the IDS gradually cooled down, since the majority of critical members either exited the party or ceased to actively engage in its activities. This led to the consolidation of the main party line, supported by the IDS leadership who opted for a fusion of the party coalition into a unified left party.

At that point, disagreements between the DSD and the Fourth Group on the one hand, and the IDS and TRS on the other, escalated to the point where the prospects of future cooperation became grim. Franc Žnidaršič, the president of the DSD, accused the IDS of monopolizing the coalition and constantly neglecting the rightful role of the DSD in the plans for a future unified party. Similar objections were directed at the IDS by the most visible activists from

the Fourth Group.²⁵ On the other hand, Luka Mesec, the IDS coordinator, argued that Žnidaršič retained old-fashioned views of a hierarchically structured party, run from the top down, which was incompatible with the organizing principles of democratic socialism. It soon emerged that the differences between the TRS and IDS on the one hand and the DSD and the Fourth Group on the other, were irreconcilable. This eventually led the IDS and TRS to continue negotiations over a new party on their own.

However, even the negotiations between the TRS and IDS were not free of serious disagreements. In 2017, internal differences within the TRS surfaced. The long-standing leader of the TRS, Matjaž Hanžek, exited the party at the beginning of 2017, due to the alleged non-democratic negotiating procedures surrounding the fusion of the TRS and IDS. In March 2017, Violeta Tomič left the DSD to join the TRS and was elected the new president of the TRS. In May 2017, some members of the TRS's council exited the party and publicly expressed their opposition to the main party line that argued for the fusion of the IDS and TRS into a unified party. They claimed that the conceived structure of the new unified party, supported by Tomič and Mesec, alienated it from the base, since it gave too much power to the coordinator and delegates elected at the congress, and not enough power to the delegates of local chapters.²⁶ As in the IDS, the main party line, which was in favour of a swift fusion, was consolidated in the TRS. The lengthy process of fractional struggles within and across coalition partners was over. At the congress in Ljubljana on 24 June 2017, the members of the TRS and IDS thus voted with a vast majority for the fusion of the TRS and IDS into a united and integrated party, with a new name – the Left, while the name of the former coalition, *United Left* (ZL), was retained by the DSD and the Fourth Group.

²⁵ See RTV Slovenija, *Združena levica razpada*, <https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/zdruzena-levica-razpada-znidarsic-ids-in-trs-odhajata-mesec-znidarsic-izsiljuje/414598> (23.4. 2018).

²⁶ See Delo, *IDS in TRS se bosta v kratkem zlili v novo stranko*, <http://www.delo.si/novice/politika/ids-in-trs-se-bosta-v-kratkem-zlili-v-eno-stranko-zl.html> (29.4.2018).

2.2. The Party Programme and Political Positions

2.2.1. The Party Programme

The latest Left Party programme (June 2017) explicitly declares the need to overcome capitalist society and substitute it with democratic socialism. The programme starts with a general analysis of recent historical socio-economic trends on three levels: global, European and Slovenian, and continues with concrete evaluations of the current situation within 13 different policy fields: economic development, labour issues & workers' rights, equal opportunities & gender equality, environmental issues, public finance & public debt, the welfare state, education, science & research, media, culture, sports, foreign policy, defence policy, and political democratization. Each evaluation of the current situation within a particular field is complemented by a set of concrete policy proposals. Short- and medium-term policy proposals within a given policy field roughly follow nine general guidelines, which – taken as a whole – provide a sketch of the ultimate goal of the Left, i.e. democratic socialism:

- 1) *Production for the satisfaction of human needs*: as opposed to capitalist production, which is based on the accumulation of profit, socialist production should strive towards the satisfaction of human needs. The profit motive should thus be superseded with the motive of satisfying human needs.
- 2) *Social and communal ownership of the means of production*: in capitalism, the institution of private property enables the appropriation of the products of labour by a minority of property owners. The dominant role of social ownership, on the other hand, ensures that the collective productive activity of labour is directed towards the free development of all people, and does not serve the private aims of capitalists, managers or state bureaucrats.
- 3) *Democratic economic planning*: the satisfaction of human needs cannot be achieved via competition or via alienated state central planning, but only by subjecting the economy to democratic planning and control. The market mechanism should thus be substituted with the democratic planning of production and consumption.
- 4) *The limitation of economic growth in accordance with environmental capacities*: the scope of the economy should be planned in accordance

with the regenerative capacities of the environment and aim for balanced economic growth, based on the redistribution of existing wealth and the simultaneous introduction of environmentally-friendly technologies.

- 5) *Democracy in the workplace*: despotic relationships in the workplace should be substituted by relations of equality and cooperation. The division between the planning and execution of production should be abolished.
- 6) *Solidarity*: the progress of a society should be measured in terms of how well this society takes care of the most vulnerable, and not by how much wealth is accumulated in the hands of the few. The modus operandi of socialist society is: from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.
- 7) *The expansion of political democracy*: the current political system, where each person is at liberty to vote every four years, is not sufficiently democratic. One should thus strive towards establishing new forms of communal cooperation in decision-making processes regarding public issues and towards creating the conditions for such cooperation, by providing access to information and means of communication.
- 8) *The abolition of all forms of exploitation and domination*: capitalist society includes various forms of domination that cannot be reduced to class exploitation. These include discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, national or ethnic belonging, and handicaps. Fighting against these forms of domination is as essential for building a socialist society as class struggle, and thus should not be subordinated to it.
- 9) *The peaceful coexistence and equality of nations*: relations of exploitation and domination are not limited to relations between individuals and social groups within a given country but are at work in relations between countries as well. One should fight for equal relations between nations, peaceful coexistence and the right of each country to autonomous development.²⁷

²⁷ Levica, Program stranke Levica, <http://www.levica.si/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/program-Levica.pdf> (13.3.2018).

The following analysis will present, in more detail, the political positions of the Left with respect to three thematic fields (identity politics vs. class politics; a national focus vs. a European/international orientation, and confronting populism & the New Right), as delineated in the programme and elucidated by the interviewed party members themselves.

2.2.2. Political positions

2.2.2.1. Identity politics vs. class politics

The interviewed party members in general expressed doubts over the pertinence of this division or claimed that these two approaches need not be mutually exclusive or conflictual alternatives. Judging from the party programme, its activities²⁸, or content on its webpage²⁹, we can discern that, quantitatively speaking, class, social justice and labour related topics are notably better represented than identity based topics, but that the latter are present. The party programme devotes one chapter to the topic of gender equality³⁰, while identity based issues are mentioned only in passing.

It has to be noted that in the Slovenian context, other possible forms of «identities» (racial, political, religious) are less pertinent politically than in more heterogenous societies, although there has been a notable increase in racist hate speech in the wake of the refugee crisis. The Left maintains a firm pro-refugee and anti-racist posture. However, it is debatable whether this posture should be classified as strict «identity politics», given that the Left's interventions and activity in this area have been mostly concerned with critiquing the repressive apparatus of the state.

²⁸ See, for example, the list of events on the party's Facebook site, https://www.facebook.com/pg/zdruzenalevica/events/?ref=page_internal (14.3.2018).

²⁹ Levica, *Novice*, <http://www.levica.si/novice/> (14.3.2018).

³⁰ Levica, *Program stranke Levica*, <http://www.levica.si/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/program-Levica.pdf> (13.3.2018).

As an example of a strictly identity based issue, the party supported an initiative for a change to the constitution to officially recognize national groups from the ex-Yugoslav region as minorities.³¹

There is, however, at least one case of the party (at that time still as part of the United Left coalition) vocally throwing its weight behind a purely identity based cause. This was particularly noteworthy as it was the first major public activity of the party after its entry into parliamentary politics: the campaign for a referendum on the so called «Family Law» (proposed by the United Left itself), introducing the right for same-sex couples to marry and adopt children.³² The refutation of the Left's proposal in the referendum led some leftists to criticize the party's campaign strategy³³: the party was accused of reproducing the ideological division between the «backward» socially conservative periphery and the «enlightened» liberal urban population, by vocally siding with the latter, instead of attempting to break this divide altogether.

Judging from the interviewees' responses, the party understands itself as committed to a class approach and it is aware of the limits of identity politics – likely also having taken into account the experience of the aforementioned referendum. Interviewees generally viewed identity based issues as relevant political foci that have to be included in a broader fight for social justice. They have, however, noted that identity issues (in the sense of political efforts, mainly aimed at improving the status and protecting the rights of a particular minority social grouping) can be tactically beneficial, since they allow for the forging of determinate political cooperation and perhaps even long-term alliances with these groups and their representative organizations.

³¹Levica, *Čas je za vpis pravic narodnih manjšin nekdanje SFRJ v Ustavo*, <http://www.levica.si/cas-je-za-vpis-pravic-narodnih-manjsin-nekdanje-sfrj-v-ustavo/> (13.3.2018).

³²Iniciativa za demokratični socializem, *Referendum, ki ga ne bi smelo biti*, <http://www.demokracni-socializem.si/zl-referendum-ki-ga-ne-bi-smelo-bit/> (13.3.2018).

³³ See, for example, Žan Zupan, *Brcanje mrtvega konja*, <https://radiostudent.si/politika/off-komentar/brcanje-mrtvega-konja> (13.4.2018).

2.2.2.2. A national focus vs. international/European integration

This issue has been quite fervently and at times conflictedly dealt with in the Left Party's past, particularly by members of the IDS in 2015/2016, in the wake of the Greek Syriza government's confrontation with European institutions and its aftermath. There were numerous voices that called for a decisively anti-EU position³⁴ – given Syriza's total failure to reach even modest concessions within the EU and Eurozone framework – and to seriously consider the option of abandoning the Eurozone if the party assumes power. Nevertheless, in the end, the party seemed to have settled for a somewhat modest «soft euro-sceptic» position: the current programme of the merged party thus includes only a brief remark on the possible need to «prepare for the possibility of introducing an autonomous currency»³⁵. However, most of the programme's points regarding European integration aim at reforming the EU and Eurozone institutions by pushing them towards more just and redistributive policies.³⁶

Judging from the interviews, however, this is not an issue currently of immediate importance that weighs heavy on party members' minds; it is likely that a certain pragmatic realism has settled in with regard to the dilemmas of European integration, given that the party is currently quite far from a position in which it would have to make any important decision in this regard – not only is it unlikely that the party will find itself in a sufficiently influential position in the country in the near future, but even so, the small and highly externally exposed Slovenian economy offers relatively little space for manoeuvre in relation to any autonomous radical actions of this kind. We could say that the Left has in due course settled for a reactive position regarding this dilemma, recognizing that exiting the EU or the Eurozone is a rather complicated project (also now taking into account the example of Britain), and

³⁴ Združena levica, *Programska konferenca o evropskih integracijah*, <http://www.demokracni-socializem.si/plan-b-programska-izjava-ids-o-evropskih-integracijah/> (13.4.2018).

³⁵ Levica, *Program stranke Levica*, <http://www.levica.si/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/program-Levica.pdf> (13.3.2018).

³⁶ Ibid.

that such measures could probably be only undertaken as a last resort or in response to potential general disintegration.³⁷

There is another dimension to this political dilemma: the importance of EU integration not as a programme point for a future plan of international relations, but as an element of present day practices in the party. Namely, in terms of resource allocation, how important to the party is its integration in trans-national party structures (e.g. the European Left), compared with its activity in the national political arena? For the party members, both dimensions were important; however, a decisive preference for national level politics was emphasized. One interviewee, for example, expressed the concern that too big an emphasis on international party cooperation (where for example any issue, as long as it has at least a plausible international relevance, e.g. anything refugee-related, is immediately raised to the international level), can sometimes make the question of whose responsibility it is to *act*, less clear. Another interviewee stressed that the national political arena provides more space for exerting pressure and influence on policy-making and legislative procedures than the European arena – the national parliament, for example, has greater jurisdiction than the European parliament.

Therefore, while the party naturally maintains international perspectives and alliances, it appears to place a strong strategic emphasis on the national political arena.

2.2.2.3. Confronting populism and the New Right

The precise way in which we (and the interviewees) interpreted this question can be roughly phrased as follows: we are witnessing the upsurge and notable success of political parties and movements that decisively position themselves against established political groupings, structures and modes of functioning, i.e. the rise of *populist* groupings. In all notable cases, populism takes aim specifically at the *liberalism* of the contemporary establishment and proposes decisively illiberal and right-wing alternatives. Of greater worry, populist groupings often tend to attract certain sections of disenfranchised,

³⁷ Ibid.

disappointed, resentful and excluded people, who should or could in theory be supporters of left parties. The question is, then, how should populism be countered – or more specifically, how should populist elements (tactics, discourses or even positions) be appropriated on the left.

For the most part, interviewees opposed any kind of concessional tactics that have been witnessed elsewhere on the continent, such as tentatively playing on anti-immigrant sentiments visible in an important *Die Linke* faction (to counter the *AfD*), or playing on nationalist sentiment, such as *France Insoumise* (to counter the *Front National*).

The party is also declaratively opposed to another possible kind of populism, namely, sliding towards the centre to increase its general appeal. For example, there was a short debate over whether the party should get rid of its potentially «divisive» symbol of a five-pointed star in favour of something with less historical baggage, but it was decided that the star should be retained.

It must be mentioned that there are no «purely» populist (in the sense of new, anti-establishment, antiliberal right-wing parties) influential political actors in the Slovenian political space; while the main right-wing party (SDS) often uses populist rhetorical and tactical elements, this party can hardly afford to assume a sincere «anti-establishment» position, given that since Slovenia's independence, it has been at the top of several ruling government coalitions. In some sense, an «anti-establishment» attitude has become integral to the system itself: since the onset in 2011 of a crisis period in the political system, new parties with supposedly «fresh» and «apolitical» faces have been repeatedly springing up and seizing large swaths of the centrist vote – the currently ruling *Modern Centre Party (Stranka modernega centra-SMC)* being one of them.

One interviewee summarized the party's strategy in the following manner: the party is combating populism not by tactically co-opting it, and neither through uncritically denouncing it, like the liberal-centrist block. Rather, the party tries to present how in fact, centrist liberal politics and right-wing populism (in the Slovenian context) are much more similar than they appear to be, with the centre often projecting a «nicer facade», but ultimately implementing policies that would «satisfy» any populist (such as in the case of the treatment of refugees).

2.3. Organizational structure

The main organs of the Left Party are:

- *The congress*: the supreme decision-making organ of the party, consisting of all the party members, regularly summoned once a year. The congress elects the members of the council, the statutory commission, the disciplinary commission and the supervisory commission. The congress decides on issues concerning the party statute; the party programme; the electoral programme; the formation of electoral or government coalitions; the rules of procedure for the supervisory, statutory and disciplinary commission; the party logo and graphic designs, and possible mergers with other parties.
- *The party coordinator*: elected by the party council and authorized to coordinate the party, represent the party in the public sphere, represent the party in legal issues, and to run the executive committee meetings.
- *The council*: the highest decision-making organ in the period between two congresses.
- *The executive committee*: the supreme executive organ of the party.
- *The supervisory commission*: an independent party organ consisting of five members, elected by the congress, authorized for surveillance of the financial management of the party, and for the consistency of the activities of party organs with the statute and other party documents.
- *The disciplinary commission*: an independent party organ consisting of seven members, elected by the congress, and authorized for oversight of the internal and public activities of the party from the point of view of their consistency with the general ethical guidelines of the party.
- *The statutory commission*: an independent party organ consisting of five members, elected by the congress, and authorized for the interpretation of the statute, the interpretation of other party acts and for their compliance with the statute.
- *The general secretariat*: an organ authorized for ensuring expert, administrative and organizational support for other party organs on the national and local levels. The general secretary is elected by the party council. The functions of the secretary include representation of the party in legal issues and preparation of the party's annual financial plan.

- *The parliamentary group*: consisting of five members of parliament and nine other employees, authorized for expert appraisal, consultancy and PR strategy.
- *Local chapters*: centres of the party's activities at the local level.³⁸

The following analysis of the internal organizational structure of the party will consist of a detailed analysis of four party organs, which are the most influential in forming the *programmatic* directions of the party in its day-to-day activities: the executive committee, the council, parliamentary group and local chapters. Other organs with decisive jurisdictions of an *administrative* nature, e.g. the general secretariat, will be left aside.

2.3.1. The council

The council is formally the highest decision-making body of the party in between two consecutive congresses. It is composed of 25 representatives elected at the congress and a maximum of 18 regional delegates, whose number is determined according to the state of the currently existing regional chapters of the party. While the congress-elected members of the council have complete autonomy when it comes to voting and voicing their concerns, the regional delegates are supposed to represent the will of the local chapters and are voted for by the local delegates of their respective regions – they can therefore be recalled by the local delegates if they do not fulfil this condition. Their mandate is half the length of other council members – it lasts only one year. The meetings of the council are announced and led by the assistant coordinator of the party.

The party council's tasks are to oversee the work of the party in general (except for tasks which fall under the jurisdiction of the disciplinary committee, oversight committee and statutory committee) including its bodies and functionaries, by assigning them tasks and giving them guidelines for their execution. It is supposed to function as the steering mechanism of the party, by collecting suggestions for new possible actions, deliberating upon possible

³⁸ Levica, *Statut stranke Levica*, <http://www.levica.si/statut/> (28.4. 2018).

changes to the structure and direction of the party, including questions regarding staff, electoral strategies, the authorization of candidate lists, the establishment of project-focused working groups and the final authorization of all kinds of formal procedures, except for those covered by other bodies (the statutory, disciplinary or executive committee and the congress). The council also has a final say in all disciplinary procedures as a last instance for complaints. Any disciplinary measures can thus be overruled by the council.³⁹

While the council is formally the most powerful body in the party, serving as its own internal version of a parliament, the actual state of affairs is that the council only partially fulfils its role at present. Several interviewees voiced their concerns over the passivity of the council with respect to the decisions of the executive committee and the parliamentary group. This appears to be due to conflicts inside the councils of the parties that predated the Left Party, and due to the independent role that the parliamentary group and the executive committee sometimes took in such situations. Even though such conflicts are not as pressing in the newly integrated party, a regaining of its full role as the main steering wheel of the party is yet to happen.

2.3.2. Parliamentary group

The Slovenian Parliament consists of several parliamentary groups, made up of elected deputies who are members of the same party. The parliamentary group of the Left in a narrow sense currently consists of five elected members of parliament: Miha Kordiš, Violeta Tomič, Matej Tašner Vatovec, Franc Trček, and the group head Luka Mesec. Initially, the parliamentary group of the former ZL consisted of six members, including Matjaž Hanžek, who left the group due to the aforementioned disagreements regarding the unification of the party, to become an independent deputy. The parliamentary group in a wider sense includes nine other employees, authorized for consultancy, expert appraisal and PR strategy.

In the new statute of the Left, accepted at «the merger congress» on 24 June 2017, the rights and obligations of the parliamentary group were roughly determined as follows: in their parliamentary work, the members must abide by the constitution and the law, and are responsible to their voters. They are to

³⁹ Ibid.

act in accordance with the party statute, decisions, directions and views of other party organs. They propose the leader of the parliamentary group and his or her deputies to the party council and are chartered to confirm their proposal. According to the statute, the function of the leadership of the parliamentary group is incompatible with the functions of the executive committee of the party (apart from the function of the representative of the parliamentary group in the executive committee), supervisory committee, statutory commission and the disciplinary commission.⁴⁰

In comparison with the previous statutes of the ZL coalition parties, particularly with that of the IDS, the role of the parliamentary group within the Left Party is defined somewhat loosely. Many paragraphs that used to determine its responsibilities and commitments towards other party organs, are absent in the new statute. Namely, the former IDS statute stressed that the members of the parliamentary group are responsible to the party organs and are obliged to cooperate with them. The parliamentary group was to regularly inform the party organs about its work, and the council had the right to demand a report on the work of the parliamentary group or its individual members. Moreover, the internal rules of procedure, accepted by the parliamentary group, had to be authorized by the council.⁴¹ These statutory changes could either be interpreted as mere technical simplifications, aimed at improving the smooth functioning of the parliamentary group, or as curtailments of «checks and balances», that previously limited the autonomy of the parliamentary group in its relations with other party organs, and especially with the council.

Even though, according to the current statute, the supreme decision-making organ of the party is the council, it seems that the *de facto* most influential organ of the party, at least as far as issues concerning the ideological and programmatic directions of the party are concerned, is the parliamentary group. Its influence, however, does not derive so much from its formal status, determined by the statute, but rather from the material conditions of its functioning. First, the members of parliament are, solely due to the nature of their daily work, well equipped with important information and know-how

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ IDS, *Statut Inicijativa za demokratični socializem*, <http://www.demokracicni-socializem.si/onas/statut-stranke-inicijativa-za-demokracicni-socializem-ids/> (28.4. 2018).

regarding political issues of high technical complexity. Second, due to their ease of public recognition, resulting from the media coverage of their work, they are able to exert more influence through the media. Third, the parliamentary group in the wider sense includes 13 professional cadres, who all take care of the smooth functioning of the parliamentary group, whereas the rest of the Left's professional staff, primarily (but not exclusively) taking care of the functioning of other party organs, includes only four employees. Last but not least, most of the government funds, obtained by the party on a monthly basis, are directed towards the parliamentary group. The distribution of funds and human resources within the party clearly favours the parliamentary group in comparison to other party organs.

2.3.3. The executive committee

The executive committee is the highest operative body of the party. Its primary role is to implement the decisions of the party council and it provides guidance in its decision-making process.

It is composed of 11 members: the coordinators of each of the party's seven «working groups» (working group for internal communication, working group for external communication, programme conference working group, internal education working group, regional cooperation working group, international working group, and working group for cooperation with allied organizations and civil society), the party's coordinator (responsible for coordinating the executive committee), the party's vice-coordinator (responsible for coordinating the council), the general secretary, and a representative of the parliamentary group.⁴²

The executive committee's tasks are:⁴³

- Preparing proposals for discussion at party council
- Coordinating the work of party organs at different levels of the party
- Leading and executing the party's electoral campaigns
- Deciding on exceptions regarding party membership fees

⁴² Levica, *Statut stranke Levica*, <http://www.levica.si/statut/> (28.4. 2018).

⁴³ Ibid.

- Being informed on the financial state of the party and executing its financial plans
- Coordinating the cadre policy of the party
- Implementing the decisions of the congress and party council
- Giving opinions on initiatives to create new local chapters

The executive committee has regular meetings every two weeks, and more if necessary.⁴⁴

The executive committee reports to and is supervised by the party council.⁴⁵ Its members, however, are elected directly at the congress (except for the representative of the parliamentary group, which is not an elected function). While initially (in the IDS stage of the organization), the executive committee was more of an administrative appendage to the council, it seems that over time, responsibilities have slowly migrated from the purview of the council to the purview of the executive committee. In other words, the executive committee eventually assumed a much more proactive role in directing the council – typically, all the council’s decisions and accompanying discussion is framed in advance into concretely predetermined alternatives prepared by the executive committee. One small, but perhaps telling mark of this transition is the fact that, in the IDS’s 2014 statute, the role of the executive committee in relation to the council was listed last among the committee’s tasks, and framed as «preparing necessary materials for the council».⁴⁶ In contrast, in the current 2017 statute of the *Left Party*, this task has moved to the top of the list and has been slightly reframed as «preparing proposals for discussion at the council.»⁴⁷

At the same time, the executive committee integrates the party working groups, having been composed by their coordinators. Moreover, it includes (at least one by formal design, but factually more) members from the parliamentary group, thereby completely integrating the whole of the party’s central apparatus.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ IDS, *Statut Inicijative za demokratični socializem*, <http://www.demokracicni-socializem.si/o-nas/statut-stranke-inicijativa-za-demokracicni-socializem-ids/> (28.4. 2018).

⁴⁷ Levica, *Statut stranke Levica*, <http://www.levica.si/statut/> (28.4. 2018).

2.3.4. General overview

To sketch a concrete example of the dynamics of the party's activity in its «normal» mode of functioning, as described by the committee's members. It must be noted that such normal functioning has only been a relatively recent possibility, so to say, as the *Left Party* has only been formally (re)constituted recently.

Now that the party has full resources, its «normal functioning» is organized along the following lines: the council decides (following a proposition by the executive committee) on three to four main annual campaigns, each lasting for about three months. These are then the focal area of the party's activity on all levels of its functioning. According to the coordinator of the working group for communication, the general objective of these campaigns is to inform and highlight a chosen topic or political effort in a sustained manner, that is to foster continuous activity regarding the chosen topic as opposed to one-off press conferences where the party's views are declared. The idea is to engage the public on various levels: with publicized events (e.g. public debates and round table discussions), petitions, and parliamentary activities (questions, amendments, etc.), which are more prone to media coverage. The minimum wage increase campaign was emphasized by an interviewee as a particularly strategically useful topic, as it satisfies two important goals at once: it is a simple and straightforward motion, clearly very consistent with the party's general programme, and perhaps even having a chance of succeeding, if the government considers that blocking the initiative would harm its political image (by the time of this report's conclusion, however, this has turned out not to be the case).

In general, the main challenge for the executive committee (in coordinating with the council), is to preserve the coherence of ideological guidelines and of general political agreement within the party. The most prominent possibility for conflict, or failure regarding the functioning of the party's internal democratic procedures, comes from the parliamentary group, which is well organized, well integrated, the most publicly visible and most active part of the party, and, consequently, the best equipped for autonomous action; the crucial question is how to assure that it does not, at one extreme, overstep its mandate in decision-making and in the determination of the party's programmatic

guidelines as regards the party's internal democratic decision-making process. Simultaneously, at the other extreme, it should be assured that it is not uselessly dragged down by the relatively slower functioning of the rest of the party apparatus. The precarious balance between what is the appropriate and at the same time, pragmatic, level of autonomy has emerged (or is still emerging) through continual experience.

One of the interviewed members of the executive committee provided us with an informative analysis by breaking down political issues into three categories, differentiated by the degree of conflict they could potentially induce.

- a. The first category includes straightforward issues where the general position of the party has already been unambiguously decided in advance, solely on the basis of the party's programme or its commonly accepted ideological tenets. A representative example is the aforementioned minimal wage campaign. Here, the parliamentary group and other autonomous party bodies are generally allowed a lot of discretion in deciding on the detailed course of action deemed appropriate.
- b. The second category consists of cases where the party programme and ideological tenets provide only abstract principles. These are to be asserted, whereas the way in which these principles and tenets can best be asserted in a concrete situation are not evident. A recent example is the issue of Catalonia's independence. The party programme upholds the principle of the self-determination of nations. However, due to the controversial circumstances of the attempted secession procedure, it was not unambiguously clear within the party whether this principle would be best followed by wholly supporting Catalonia's independence, or sufficiently satisfied via Catalonia's regional autonomy. During an internal debate, the two positions crystallized, and finally the grouping that supported independence won by vote on the council. Consequently, the parliamentary group was given the mandate to argue for and attempt to convince the government to support Catalonia's independence.
- c. The third category includes completely new topics, often technical in nature, e.g. responses to certain legislative initiatives. These tend to

naturally fall under the purview of the parliamentary group. However, sometimes they include important political decisions and induce dilemmas, most often framed in terms of political feasibility and compromise vs. ideological strictness.

It is worth pointing out that, at the present moment, the central party bodies – the council, the executive committee and the parliamentary group - are in fact much more tightly knit together than is required by the formal party rules, with three members of parliament from the party ranks also holding a position on the executive committee (apart from the parliamentary group representative), and also with virtually all members of the executive committee also being members of the party council, hence ensuring a fair amount of influence and party cohesion purely by virtue of participation.

It should also be noted that, judging solely from the executive committee, the vast majority (8 of 11) of members come from the pre-merger IDS section of the party. It might be permitted to say that, at this top party level, the merger was more an extension of the previously existing «IDS» executive committee. Furthermore, we can observe that almost all of them have been present in the party since the very inception. In fact, the following pattern seems to have emerged: amongst those people most crucially involved in the launch of the IDS, a significant number have since (more or less vocally) left the party altogether due to disagreements, and the rest have formed a tight party «core».

It seems that we are currently dealing with a party that went through a certain process of consolidation: after a period of intense disagreements, it has stabilized and adopted a more harmonious *modus operandi*, importantly supported by the cohesive alliance of its central group of members. While this group provides coherent and stable leadership, it remains to be seen how this relatively firm hierarchy affects the enthusiasm and feelings of inclusion of other members of the party.

As regards the future: according to the generally expressed view of the interviewees, the future of the party is clearly framed in its parliamentary context. The crucial determining event for the party will thus be the spring 2018 elections. There is a chance that the party will find itself in a «kingmaker» position, where the possibility of a centre-left coalition will hinge on the Left's readiness to enter a ruling coalition. Our interviewees mostly expressed

caution regarding this option (the decision to enter a ruling coalition is otherwise subject to an internal party referendum as defined in the statute).⁴⁸

2.3.5. Local chapters

The Left Party's local chapters are the elementary cells of the party. They are the centres of party activity at the local level.

The local chapters are integrated into the party as a whole through the delegates' mediation, who represent the chapters at the party council. Each local chapter has one delegate in the party council (while the statute ultimately anticipates a three-tier structure of the party, with regional committees constituting the level between local chapters and the party council.⁴⁹ Currently, the regional network is not extensive enough for this to be necessary, so local chapters mostly interact directly with the council). This relation functions in the following manner: 14 days before a certain local chapter's meeting, the local chapter receives the relevant materials from the party council, so it can prepare and discuss the issues at hand, initiate a voting procedure if necessary, and instruct its delegates on how to represent it.

Local chapters are also mutually connected via the working group for regional cooperation. This group is a platform that unites all the local chapter coordinators and secretaries to discuss and exchange experiences regarding local issues (as opposed to the party council, whose function is to determine the general political direction of the party).

They are also centres of the party's participation in official local politics: they propose candidates for municipal councils and mayors and supervise them during the electoral process. However, the selection of candidates must be confirmed at the central party level.⁵⁰ Local chapters also function as centres for the initiation of new party members: they have the task of establishing personal contacts with new joint members and integrating them into the party's activities.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

2.3.5.1. Case study: the Ljubljana local chapter

The Ljubljana local chapter is relatively large. There are no other chapters established in this central Slovenian region, and so it also functions as a provisional regional committee. Formally, about 400 members belong to it, with about 100 actively participating in party life (e.g. participating in online debates, responding to events, etc.). Monthly chapter meetings typically attract around 30 members.

An important part of the local chapter's activities is focused on participating in official local politics: in Ljubljana, this especially means participating in Ljubljana's city council, through the party's representative; the representative's activities in the city council are coordinated with and supervised by the local party chapter. This is particularly important in Ljubljana, because the city is governed by a nominally left-aligned mayor and his coalition, with the opposition composed of right-wing parties. The Left Party therefore remains the only actor likely to articulate a left critique and opposition to the municipal government's actions and policies (opportunities for this are not rare). While the raw political power of the party by itself is negligible – it has only one seat in the city council – its participation in the city council gives it access to information and a certain amount of public authority, so it can at least exert pressure, for instance through the media.

In the case of the biggest Slovenian cities such as Ljubljana, active involvement is also possible at the level of district councils, the lowest level of city governance dealing with smaller scale issues relating to urban life. At this level, the party notes and mediates local issues, complaints and initiatives.

Another responsibility of the local chapter is to function as a local task force for the organization and promotion of the general party's activities: organizing small-scale campaigns (e.g. petitions), and organizing round table discussions about current party campaigns and topics (the most recent example being a smaller public consultation on the minimum wage issue).⁵¹

⁵¹ Levica, *Posvet o dvigu minimalne plače v Ljubljani*, <http://www.levica.si/napoved-posvet-o-dvigu-minimalne-place-v-ljubljani/> (14.3.2018).

The recent merger process, which the local chapters went through, proceeded relatively painlessly (if we disregard the departure of dissenting IDS and TRS party members who left prior to the merger); the members of both precursor local chapters had prior experience of cooperation - if nothing else, due to the fact that the only public official (the city council member) from the party ranks responded to both chapters, and they also had prior experience of (and hence an acquaintance with) functional collaboration.

The local chapter to date have not appeared to hold political positions that conflict with positions held by those in the party centre, likely because this chapter is quite intertwined with it. Considering the regional affiliation of the members in the central party organs, by far the highest number of them (i.e. about half of directly elected members of the party council) are located in Ljubljana.

3. THE UNITED LEFT – THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF LABOUR (ZDRUŽENA LEVICA – DEMOKRATIČNA STRANKA DELA / ZL-DSD)

ZL-DSD is a left-of-centre political party. Formed in 2010, it even ran for parliament in the same year, but with negligible success. While its leader Franc Žnidaršič is viewed as an experienced actor in the Slovenian political scene and the party, at least in its own account,⁵² the party previously had a relatively large base of members (1200 people at its height before the 2011 parliamentary elections), but is now the smallest of the currently active left political parties to have some political representation in state institutions (exclusively in municipal councils). While still technically part of the United Left electoral coalition, it has been excluded from the formation of the Left Party and is currently reorganizing itself with other actors (including the left-liberal party Solidarnost, members of the now defunct Fourth group of the United Left and some ex-TRS members) into another potential electoral coalition.

3.1. History

The ZL-DSD party's founding was announced on 31 July 2010 by Franc Žnidaršič, a former member of parliament for the *Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (Demokratična stranka upokojencev Slovenije - DeSUS)*. Its announcement (initially called the *Democratic Party of Labour and Solidarity – Demokratična stranka dela in solidarnosti-DSDS* – for a brief six month period, after which it was renamed the DSD) followed Franc Žnidaršič's resignation from the DeSUS parliamentary group in December of the previous year and his ultimate withdrawal from his previous party on 22 July of the same year (2010). At this time, the DSD communicated that it had already retained about 100 active supporters, who came mostly from the DeSUS party. While DeSUS is a single-issue party, whose membership base consists mainly of Slovenian pensioners, it was traditionally seen as aligned with the mainstream centre-left position. However, as DeSUS' support was often needed to form government

⁵² ZL-DSD, *ZL-DSD Vestnik*, <http://dsd.si/vestnik-zl-dsd/> (18.3.2018).

coalitions, the party entered into coalitions led by the right-wing SDS twice (2004-2008 and 2011-2013).

Following the period of the first SDS-led coalition, Žnidaršič established himself as a critic of participation in the coalition government and of the party's leadership based around Karel Erjavec. The path towards a breakaway was consolidated after Žnidaršič's unsuccessful bid for DeSUS's presidency in this period.

The party participated in the 2011 early parliamentary elections, obtaining 0.65 % of the vote with a list of candidates, that consisted – in Žnidaršič's own words – of «new [political] faces, especially those from production jobs, who worked, are waiting for work or who have to survive with minimal resources.»⁵³ However, the electoral result was not enough to secure government funding.

The situation changed dramatically in 2014 when the DSD formed the United Left (ZL) electoral coalition together with the TRS and IDS. The coalition first participated in the 2014 European elections, where Violeta Tomič, then vice-president of the DSD party was chosen as the frontrunner candidate for the position of MEP. However, despite the coalition achieving 5.47% of the vote and Tomič receiving a number of preferential votes comparable to some of the currently standing Slovenian MEPs, the small number of Slovenian European parliamentary seats sets the threshold quite high, at 8%.

During the 2014 Slovenian parliamentary elections, the DSD managed to get one MP elected (Tomič) to parliament on a shared ticket with the United Left. However, relationships within the electoral coalition quickly began to deteriorate, culminating in Tomič leaving the DSD party and becoming a member of the TRS, thus effectively leaving the DSD as the only party in the electoral coalition without parliamentary representatives. This was followed by a series of public accusations between the parties involved, that ultimately led to the DSD being side-lined as a potential member of the Left Party. However, Žnidaršič, together with other DSD members, publicly voiced his disapproval with what he interpreted as an attempt by the IDS and TRS to hijack the success of the ZL, and the party was therefore renamed the ZL-DSD

⁵³ 24 Ur, *Delavci bodo na listi DSD*, <http://www.24ur.com/novice/slovenija/delavci-bodo-na-listi-dsd.html> (18.3. 2018).

in 2016, to safeguard its own contribution to the success of the United Left coalition and to thus prevent the party arising from the IDS – TRS merger from taking up the ZL name.

At present, the ZL-DSD holds 10 seats in several Slovenian municipal councils.

3.2. Organization

The formal structure of the ZL-DSD party as envisioned by its statute mimics the structure of other larger parliamentary parties, with the appropriate provision that the number of representatives in certain bodies and the number of bodies themselves are coordinated in relation to the current size of the party membership and its standing in particular local (municipal and regional) communities. The party's bodies include a twofold division, separated out between the state level and the local/regional level. The state-level bodies are as follows:

The **party congress** is the highest-ranking body of the party, whose jurisdiction includes the election of the president and vice presidents of the party, the authorization of the statute, the programme, programme guidelines and general aims of the party, the dissolution or merging of the party, confirmation of reports on work done by the party in between congresses, and the election of members of all other party bodies except for the general secretary and other secretariats. The congress ordinarily meets once every four years to set out plans for the next elections, while an extraordinary congress can take place in cases where at least 20 members from five local committees from three different regions demand one. In situations where the party membership is below 400 people, the congress consists of all party members, while otherwise, a delegate system is put in place whereby the executive committee decides upon the number of delegates necessary for the congress to take place, and the quorum is set at one delegate more than half of them.

However, while the party congress is the body that should be ultimately responsible for changes to the statute and the programme, this is somewhat misleading as the **party council**, which is the main decision making body in

between congresses, also has the authority to change party regulations and programme orientations with an absolute (two thirds) majority. It can also elect members into positions that become available, decide on potential coalitions, confirm the candidate list for the European elections or potential candidates for the presidential elections, and nominate special committees or councils, or its own president and vice-president. The number of council members ranges from between 15 and 40, while the exact number gets chosen by the council according to the relative size and needs of the party before each congress. The membership is divided into members whose seats stem directly from their positions (the party president and vice-presidents, general secretary, MPs and ministers) and those who get voted in during the party congress.

When taking into account the structure of the party's **executive committee**, one can see a clear pattern of the doubling of functions inside the party, as the president, vice presidents and party general secretary are all automatically members of the executive committee as well as the council. The executive committee's powers and obligations include overseeing the day-to-day activities of the party - including control over the implementation of the party programme, taking care of internal communication, confirming the list of candidates for the election of the party bodies during the party congress, and confirmation of the list of candidates for the parliamentary, European and presidential elections. The remaining members of the executive committee, which has to be composed of nine to 15 members, are chosen by the party's congress.

The party's financial administration is overseen by the party's three-member **supervisory committee**, while questions regarding the ethical conduct of members in public and internal disputes are handled by the three-member **honorary tribunal**, which also decides on the potential exclusion of party members. Both are elected at the party congress.⁵⁴

According to the publicly available party statute, our conclusion is that - even on a strictly formal level - the **president** of the party holds a disproportionate amount of control over the workings of the party, at least in comparison to the other organisations studied in this report. The president is a member of both

⁵⁴ ZL-DSD, *Statut demokratične stranke dela*, <http://dsd.si/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Statut-DSD-2015.pdf> (18.3. 2018).

the council and executive committee, the legal representative of the party, while also having the autonomy to choose members for active engagement in the party's activities. The president also leads the meetings of the council and nominates the party's **general secretary** (in charge of the financial and administrative dealings of the party in coordination with the president), who is also a member of the aforementioned bodies. While the statute also includes the function of **vice-presidents** (three in total) who are voted for at the party's congress, their role is determined by the tasks assigned to them by the council and executive committee.

While both the programme and party statute are nominally supportive of regionally balanced representation in the party's leadership, it is clear from its own internal regulations that the presidential role holds a large amount of internal authority. This opens up the question of balance between the functional leadership of the party, which is still trying to consolidate its position and, on the other hand, the level of internal democratic oversight. This is especially the case as a significant number of the public appearances of the ZL-DSD have been focused on a small number of representatives, with the president of the party – himself a well-known person in Slovenian political life – gaining a disproportionate amount of media attention.

As mentioned, the statute also includes another level of internal party organization, i.e. the local chapter, separated into municipal, inter-municipal, electoral-district and regional levels. While all the levels include their own internal staff, bodies and hierarchies, such organization is more of a testimony to the initial ambitions of the party than to the current needs of a widely dispersive and branched organisation (i.e. most of the party infrastructure, mentioned in the statute, does not actually exist in terms of local chapters, etc.). The local chapters, whose highest levels are the regional councils, are mostly subservient to the central party leadership and, while having the formal obligation to create lists of potential candidates for electoral lists, the same lists have to be confirmed by the central party leadership. Furthermore, all the regional councils also have to include members of the party council and executive committee from the region.

3.3. Political positions

In terms of political positions, the ZL-DSD proclaimed itself to be a leftist party with a working-class member base from its very inception. While nominally supportive of identity-based issues such as feminist or pro-LGBTQ campaigns (such as being against the referendum that overturned the family legislature in Slovenia, which would effectively legalize adoption of children by gay and lesbian couples) one can find a clear pattern both in the party programme and the public statements of its leadership. LGBTQ questions are commonly left unaddressed or become obscured by the use of language, which refers to the rights of «others» or «people who are different», often without an explicit explanation of what this particular otherness is supposed to mean. The ZL-DSD's emphasis seems to be on the image of the hard-working and downtrodden Slovenian worker, who has been plagued by neoliberalism, corruption inside state institutions, and a lack of wealth redistribution. To understand the ZL-DSD's positioning inside the public sphere, one has to take into account the way in which a certain component of national identity in Slovenia is tightly entwined with remembrance of the WW2 Partisan Liberation Movement, with many Slovenian associations and annual events honouring historical battles and occurrences, while reproducing a specific folklore and mythology tied to Slovenia's socialist past - which has been, at least over the last two decades, progressively emptied of leftist content and reduced to a project of national liberation from Axis occupation. The ZL-DSD's (as is so often the case with left-leaning parties in the country, including the social democrats) positioning is thus tightly connected with this approach to the Partisan heritage, whose main ideological elements include an allegiance to anti-fascism, self-reliance and a celebration of leftist values such as workers' solidarity. This positioning effectively immunizes the party (and Slovenian centre-left parties in general) from an overt emphasis on nationalism that could slide into xenophobia, while at the same time, the mythology of self-reliance encompasses certain nationalist elements (such as a reified «power of the nation»). While being critical of the EU's neoliberal policies, the party supports European integration, but argues for Slovenia's exit from the NATO alliance and for a «peaceful foreign policy». Moreover, it advocates more involved relations with other, non-EU Slavic states, such as the ex-Yugoslav countries and Russia.

4. ISKRA

Iskra is a political youth organisation – until recently a student party – with a decidedly leftist, Marxist orientation. It began as a unique attempt to form a strong left-oriented force in the generally politically apathetic and opportunistic context of student politics. During the five years of its existence, it has developed in a wobbly fashion, and is at present still (or once again) in a state of transformation.

4.1. History

Iskra's origins can be traced back to the aftermath of the 2011/2012 occupation of the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana.⁵⁵ The occupation and the *We are the university (Mi smo univerza-MSU)* movement connected with it proved that there exists a desire and need for the articulation of leftist demands within the student population. However, the MSU led occupation did not manage to achieve a great deal more than express this general demand, and it was widely perceived that the reason for this was its hastiness and lack of preparation (it was at least partly fuelled by the «rebellious» spirit of times – 2011 was the year of the Occupy Movement, Arab Spring and the Movement of the Squares in Greece). Consequently, an idea took hold among younger participants in the occupation and accompanying protest movements for the establishment of a leftist student organisation that could enter student political institutions.

Student politics has a strong institutional grounding in Slovenia. Each university has an independent central student organization, which funds (albeit decreasingly) and oversees many established institutions (such as *Radio Student*). This organization possesses considerable assets and we could even say that it collects its own «taxes», as much of its funds come from taxes on «student labour», a special Slovenian legal form of short-term labour contract, only available to students.

Unfortunately, student politics hardly deserves to be called politics. It has been consistently controlled by one or another shady group, that has used its position of power to repeatedly quickly mobilize, during election periods, a sufficient number of candidates among new students to retain control of the

⁵⁵ Iskra, *O Iskri*, <https://studentska-iskra.org/o-iskri/> (14.3. 2018).

student parliament (a large majority of students being mostly disinterested or completely ignorant).

Iskra was therefore launched as an attempt to seize the opportunity that the student political field, despite all its difficulties, presented. One of the important steps it had to overcome to achieve this, was to break the usual bubble that encloses leftist and politically engaged attitudes among students mostly in the humanities, social sciences, and sometimes art academies. Iskra successfully broke these barriers, with notable breakthroughs at to date atypical university faculties (medicine, physics and mathematics). In the autumn 2012 student elections, Iskra gained five seats in the student parliament (of about 30) and acted as the radical left opposition in the student parliament.⁵⁶

While this did not allow Iskra to achieve much besides closely monitoring the activities of the student government, it primarily had an impact in terms of student mobilisation. Most notably, in December 2013, Iskra attempted to formally change the rules of the official student political organisation through a student referendum, with the goal of involving a larger part of the student population in student politics, making it more transparent and seeking to prevent (an ongoing) *de facto* privatization of student politics. Unfortunately, it did not succeed. However, it managed to attract about 5500 voters, amounting to 10% of the student population, which was justifiably considered a success given the normal level of student (non-)engagement; yet the quorum for the success of the referendum was even higher, at a practically unachievable 20%.⁵⁷ An unfortunate side effect of this attempt was that the student government then introduced even more restrictive rules regarding student referenda⁵⁸, making them practically impossible to use as a method of political struggle. This was one of the main reasons why Iskra eventually decided to move away from the formal student political arena. It continued mobilizing students through various campaigns: most notably, in spring 2014, it organized

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Delo, *Študentska Iskra z veliko podporo*, <http://www.delo.si/novice/ljubljana/studentaska-iskra-z-veliko-podporo.html> (16.3. 2018).

⁵⁸ Delo, *Študentski referendum le še za tiste z resnim namenom*, <http://www.delo.si/novice/ljubljana/studentaski-referendum-le-se-za-tiste-z-resnim-namenom.html> (16.3. 2018).

and led a mass protest⁵⁹ against the proposed new national higher education legislation, which was opening the door to the further commercialization of higher education and the potential introduction of tuition fees. The bill was in fact put on hold, and in the meantime the government fell, while the new government did not pursue this further.

As mentioned, Iskra's enthusiasm for political activity within formal student political bodies soon dropped; during the following election cycles, Iskra did not improve nor even repeat its success in the student parliament elections; some individual cells at university faculties stopped functioning, and many of the original members eventually completed their studies but did not necessarily stop being active in Iskra. As is the case with any student party so far, Iskra found out that it is practically impossible to organically cycle and reproduce party members and cadres fast enough to keep the party strictly within the bounds of student life and experience, while at the same time keeping the party politically coherent.

The party thus evolved along with its membership (though, to a certain extent, there was a generational shift), moved away from official student politics, and is currently in the process of reorganization, aiming to expand its focus and move towards more general social issues.

4.2. Organization

Iskra's organizational scheme is currently undergoing a significant transition, related to the shift in the organization's self-understanding. If we take into account the fact that the organization mostly functions through voluntary work, i.e. that it has no full-time employed staff, its organizational scheme (although yet to be totally stabilized) is rather complex.

We could separate out Iskra's activity on two levels that are not directly or totally integrated: a central grouping of about 40 people, primarily concerned with the matters of group organization, bureaucracy, finance, Iskra's long-term strategic outlook and development. The other level is that of the working

⁵⁹ Delo, *Študentski protest za brezplačno šolstvo*, <http://www.delo.si/novice/slovenija/studentski-protest-za-brezplacno-solstvo.html> (16.3. 2018).

groups, the basic cells of the organization, typically devoted to one particular political issue (e.g. ecology, feminism, higher education). The working groups consist of around 60-100 additional people.

The central institutions of the organization are, in descending order of political authority (and increasing order of cooperativeness).⁶⁰

- Party congress
- Central committee
- Executive committee

In addition, the central level includes two specialized secretariats:

- Secretariat for PR
- Secretariat for internal education

The party congress consists of all members and meets annually, confirms the annual programme and changes to the statute if necessary, and elects individuals into functions.⁶¹

The central committee is the central political organ of the organization. It is composed of the executive committee, coordinators of all working groups, and of the (ten) members of the executive committee - but the latter have no voting rights. Currently, the precise delineation or division of labour between the central committee and executive committee remains a matter for debate, but the idea is to have an effective executive committee that handles technical and administrative tasks, whereas the central committee would function as a centre for debate, reflection and determining the general direction of the organization.⁶²

The executive committee prepares a strategy for the implementation of the organization's programme and is responsible for its execution; it is responsible for the execution of the decisions of the central committee; it prepares an

⁶⁰ Iskra, *Statut Študentskega društva Iskra*, <https://studentska-iskra.org/o-iskri/> (16.3. 2018).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Iskra, *Program društva Iskra 2017/18*, <https://studentska-iskra.org/page/3/> (16.3. 2018).

annual financial plan on the organization's general activities and financial plans for individual projects; it keeps records of the organization's membership and is in charge of ensuring the material conditions for its functioning.⁶³

It is composed of the general secretary, and the secretaries of both specialized secretariats. The members of the executive committee are elected by congress.

The secretariat for PR and **the secretariat for internal education** are operative collectives, devoted to more intensive administrative work regarding their respective areas of competence.

Working groups: Until recently, while still embedded in the student politics system, the lower, "fieldwork" level of Iskra was composed of party cells at different university faculties at the University of Ljubljana. With the aforementioned transformation and slide away from the formal structures of student politics, however, these cells were becoming defunct, or at least less concerned with day-to-day student experiences. Instead, the party reorganized along goal-oriented or issue-oriented lines: the new basic cells of the organization became the working groups – in some cases, these working groups were simply transformed party cells from university faculties, and most were closely concerned with a given issue (e.g. the biotechnical faculty party cell became the working group for ecology).

At present, the most successful and vibrant working groups are the working group for **feminism** and the working group for **ecology**. Apart from these, there also exist working groups for **technology** and **higher education**.

Working groups are relatively autonomous in their functioning, each ideally having its own coordinator, secretary and PR strategist, and being sufficiently informed and operatively capable so as to organize and run events independently.⁶⁴

⁶³ Iskra, *Statut Študentskega društva Iskra*, <https://studentska-iskra.org/o-iskri/> (16.3. 2018).

⁶⁴ Iskra, *Program društva Iskra 2017/18*, <https://studentska-iskra.org/page/3/> (16.3. 2018).

4.3. Activities

Iskra's outwardly-directed activities (we limit the survey here to the year 2017, when the activities framed in terms of regular student political institutions had already moved into the background) comprise mainly of a wide array of educational events as well as some more "entertaining" promotional events, such as:

- An annual festival of theory, culture, and fun named «Resistance»
- A series of public lectures named «Theory and Class Struggle»

When the opportunity arises, Iskra maintains the practice of organizing protests, the most recent being a feminist protest on 8 March.⁶⁵

Another aspect of Iskra's activity consists of direct critical interventions and responses to current events, mainly - but not exclusively - pertaining to student related matters. The most recent cases were a protest (and petition) against the closing of a dedicated student health centre⁶⁶, and a public protest letter critically addressing the Ministry of Higher Education's curtailment of students' social rights.⁶⁷

In addition, many of its activities consist of internal education and training, mostly within the framework of the individual working groups.

4.4. General Overview

Iskra's strengths and weaknesses equally stem from the fact that it is a youth or student movement. It is mainly fuelled by youthful enthusiasm through which it has proved to be able to perform formidable feats over the years. Its horizontally diversified structure allows for the inclusion of a considerable

⁶⁵ Delo, *Če življenja niso nič vredna, protestiramo*, <http://www.delo.si/novice/ljubljana/letosnji-8-marec-ndash-dan-protestov.html> (16.3.2018).

⁶⁶ "V Iskri nasprotujemo pripojitvi zdravstvenega doma za študente k zdravstvenemu domu Ljubljana", 29.11.2017, <https://studentska-iskra.org/v-iskri-nasprotujemo-pripojitvi-zdravstvenega-doma-za-studente-k-zdravstvenemu-domu-ljubljana/>

⁶⁷ "Javno pismo proti krčenju študentskih pravic," 17.10.2016, <https://studentska-iskra.org/javno-pismo-proti-krčenju-studentskih-pravic/>

number of active members. However, there is a danger of overextending its activity and of involving itself in too many projects. Its recent disentanglement from the frame of formal student politics was reasoned. However, it was in a sense a risky move insofar as it is now less clear, how Iskra will prove to be durable. There is at least a certain danger that without such an external reference or established framework, it will be harder to maintain a unified sense of purpose. Its ambitions however, remain high: the programme states the goal of becoming «a strong actor in the left political field» and, moreover, «to inscribe itself in history». In any case, it remains an important centre of activity and is particularly important as an institution for the political formation of new generations of student activists.

4.5. Political positions

As regards Iskra's political positions, we have to keep in mind that due to its specific scope of operation, not all political dilemmas are equally relevant to it. Therefore, strictly speaking, it does not *officially hold a position* on every such matter. However, we can delineate the general range of attitudes among its members:

4.5.1. Identity politics vs. class politics

Iskra generally insists on asserting a class-based perspective. Indeed, we could say that Iskra's founding gesture was to approach student politics as *class struggle*, instead of treating students as a specific social group with a common identity, which should be *represented*. At present, a noticeable segment of Iskra's activities is explicitly feminist oriented, which could be considered a form of identity politics. However, the party's feminist interventions have a strong materialist, anti-capitalist, class conscious bent, as displayed in their ambitious feminist manifesto.⁶⁸

The (potential) divergence between identity based (concretely: feminist) and class-based approaches is to some extent a persistent subject of internal

⁶⁸ Iskra, *Manifest: Če naša življenja niso nič vredna, protestiramo*, <https://studentska-iskra.org/manifest-ce-nasa-zivljenja-niso-nic-vredna-protestiramo/> (16.3. 2018).

debate. While the more decidedly feminist section of the party and the rest of the party agree that gender issues are to be approached from a class perspective, in the background of the party, there are theoretical disputes and debates over «how identity is to be understood». Iskra does not seem to often venture into issues concerned with other forms of identity, if we discount occasional interventions regarding refugee issues.

4.5.2. A national focus vs. international/European integration

With Iskra being a mainly student organisation based around one university, this issue is not of particular practical importance. Thus, their views on European integration are more a matter of a general political attitude, or perhaps a long-term political imagination. In that respect, the members of Iskra made an analogy with their experience of engaging in student political structures, namely, that they became aware of how structures can determine or derail ambitious political projects. Analogously, official national politics can put in place similar restricting structures, whereby any progressive intent can dissipate. Therefore, a serious transformative political project should be possible, according to our interlocutors, with a complement to it on an international level. In terms of its practical attitude, Iskra is naturally open to and actively searches for cooperation with international partners. However, beyond that, this is not a very pressing dilemma for Iskra.

4.5.3. Confronting populism and the New Right

Iskra, being a young, activist-based organisation, has mostly had opportunities to confront the New Right and populist tendencies on the «grassroots level». Aside from general political and educational work among students, Iskra has been engaged in various counter presences in cases where right wing populist directions and movements have taken to the streets. Such was the case in relation to issues accompanying the refugee crisis, where Iskra formed (as is often the case) a visible section of the general leftist pro-refugee protest alliance – most notably, there was an anti-refugee protest organized in Ljubljana in January 2016, and in response, a counter-protest, which ultimately surpassed the original protest in numbers. Another example is that of counter protests to (smaller) anti-abortion protests in front of the abortion clinic.

Except for the above, Iskra does not often come face to face directly with «right wing populist phenomena», as these are not, fortunately, vocally present among the student population, as populist political positions are notably more pronounced in rural or peripheral areas. On a more general strategic level, however, our interlocutors expressed some precautions about making «right wing populism» the central political enemy or antagonist, presumably because it is more of a symptom than an original source of social conflict and inequality. According to one interviewee: «We do not yet properly understand this upsurge in the contemporary New Right and populism» and «it has to be studied first» before we can strategically confront it.