

Interview

From Slovenia: 'The Formation of a European Movement is Key'

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An interview with Anej Korsika, Initiative for Democratic Socialism (Slovenia).

The Initiative for Democratic Socialism (IDS) is a Leftist organization initially conceived following the mass protests that shook Slovenia in the winter of 2012/2013, which eventually led to the collapse of the right wing government of Janez Jansa. On May 1 2013 the group was formally established to bring together activists that had been involved in many spheres of activism – from campaigns against Slovenia's entry into NATO to movements addressing the precarity of migrant and adjunct work. The goal of the organization is to bring into Slovenian public discourse a new vision of socialism. After this interview was conducted, IDS transformed itself into a party at a founding congress on March 8. It is also one of the founding members of the 'United Left', a tripartite party coalition formed for candidacy in the European elections.

Tadel: Many of the symbols that appear on your material, such as the red star, and many of the concepts that you use in your programmatic texts, in particular the limitation of private property, we recognize from the period of real socialism. You see capitalism as the key problem for modern society. Do you think it is possible to run in the European elections with such a radical platform, especially in light of the recent formation of another grand coalition between the CDU and SPD in Germany? Despite the fact that the left parties - the SPD, Greens and Die Linke - won almost half of the parliamentary seats, and yet Die Linke, the heirs of the former East German Communist Party and your programmatic co-thinkers, are considered 'untouchable' by the traditional western parties.

To ask you a concrete question – could a comparable constellation of left wing parties be agreed upon in Slovenia between the IDS and the Social Democrats (SD)?

Korsika: Our ideological point of view places us far to the left of the SD, as well as of other comparable European parties, such as the British Labour Party, the French socialists and the German SPD. Since the beginning of the neoliberal offensive in the 1970s, with the impact of financialization and other global processes, we have seen a comprehensive shift of political space to the right. And the above-mentioned left parties have followed that shift. Today these parties offer only a marginally gentler capitalist politics – in practice this means that they do not reject austerity policies per se, but only promise that they will introduce these policies more gradually, more gently. But there is no doubt that they arrive at the same capitalist logic of cutting the public sector and reducing public spending. They are still trapped within the horizon of capital as such – for us it is most important that we transcend this horizon, which in the appropriate historical context means opening a revolutionary horizon. We believe that society is caught in a contradiction, which capital is unable to solve and that is why at the end of the day, a better and more just society necessitates the overthrow of capitalism – this position places a crucial distinction between us and social democracy

in Slovenia and elsewhere.

Our orientation is socialist, even communist and is fed from the history of workers' struggles; we acknowledge this loudly and clearly. At the same time we have a complex relation to those attempts to enforce these views in the hitherto existing socialisms of the twentieth century. But we cannot reduce the complexity of these relations, since it would be wrong in both cases to merely reaffirm these regimes or completely negate them. As our comrade Lev Centrih says, the history of the past century is impossible to understand without the Soviet Union, the fact of the existence of real socialism and the attempts to introduce this socialism to other countries around the world. The very history of these socialisms needs to be disaggregated – especially in the case of the Soviet Union, which is a state that we can only understand if we consider it in different stages of its formation. The entity at the beginning of the revolutionary process was something completely different than at its end.

For us it is both historically correct and politically productive to show the dialectics of these relations. It is absolutely true that in the real socialisms there existed positive civilizational achievements; they enforced emancipatory social practices which today we must critically assess and explore, to understand where and why they reached their limit and then to develop them further. We must not forget that the Soviet Union was one of the first states where women were given the right to vote and the right to divorce. Although eventually this space of freedom began to shrink, in the first years it was really great. This was also true, for example, of the Soviet artistic realm. To our mind, all of these are points upon which it is valuable to build.

Last but not least the very existence of the Eastern bloc exercised a certain pressure on the states of the West, leading them to develop the welfare state as a response to the 'red menace'. In terms of the class struggle in countries such as France or West Germany, the threat of communism helped labor movements to achieve many concessions from the side of capital. And today we hear too little about one of the important aspects of Yugoslav self-management socialism, namely the politics of non-alignment, which aided developing countries in the critical moments of their liberation from colonial regimes. Non-alignment made it possible for many smaller and developing countries to be recognized in the international arena, which was otherwise dominated by the East and West powers of the Cold War.

We believe that Yugoslav self-management socialism was the socialist experience which in its practice went the furthest – but then, like the others, stumbled upon its real limits. This too was not quite socialism of the type that we desire, but it made possible a real historical experience on the basis of which we today can continue to work.

The fact that I first of all pointed to the positive aspects of real socialism does not mean that we are not aware of its negative aspects – these facts are well known and recycled endlessly. And this is a good thing, because it forces us to establish socialism anew, as a democratic force – that is why we have made clear that we are the Initiative for a Democratic Socialism, although recently Vlado Miheljčak in a column pointed out that this is a pleonasm: socialism must be by its own definition democratic. But it is necessary to emphasize this point today, and we must continue to underline socialism's democratic moment.

So how does democratic socialism view elections, and how does it view revolution? Of course, the classic bolshevik doctrine promoted those circumstances in which a revolution could be carried out. Victory in elections was not considered a realistic scenario.

I am not sure if that is entirely true. Of course it is true that in those countries in which real socialism ruled Lenin and bolshevism were canonized for decades. But it is interesting to note that

their ideological interpretations agreed with a good part of western historiography and that the historical reality of Lenin as a person and of bolshevism as a political movement does not have much in common with this scholarship. Contemporary authors, such as Lars T. Lih in the book *Lenin Rediscovered*, highlight how committed Lenin was to the project of German social democracy, particularly the 'Erfurt model', both in substantive and organizational terms. According to his interpretation, Lenin tried to operate along the lines of Germany social democracy but in the concrete situation of tsarist Russia, in which the undemocratic state recognized neither the right to free speech nor to the freedom to association.

The central moment of this Erfurt program was the so-called merger formula, according to which there needed to be a merger between, on the one side the movement of people who must survive every day by selling their labor - the workers - and on the other side, the socialist idea. Of course, this does not mean some kind of mechanical merger of two forces, but an organic merger; a whole lot of intermediary and supporting institutions played a role in this merger, the most important being the trade unions. But broadly we might paraphrase Kant and his view of the merger of fatality and necessity: 'Workers without socialism are blind, socialism without workers is empty.' Although it contradicts the common view of the bolsheviks as revolutionary conspirators, the fact is that they were very aware of the need to attend to all legal forms of struggle, including and especially elections. This is very important to keep in mind. Illegal formations and conspiracies were simply the ways in which they could keep the organization afloat given the conditions of the Tsarist regime...

You brought up the notion of avant-gardism: how does this sit together with the concept of democracy? Of course every political organization has its own leadership, but the experience of real socialism is nevertheless that at a certain point this avant-garde ceased to trust the people and increasingly came to rely on repression to implement its programs. Presumably, for any renewal of the socialist idea it is useful to consider the relationship between the leaders and 'the led'.

Viewed conceptually, avant-gardism, at least in the sense attributed to it by Lenin and the bolsheviks presupposes democracy since in the long run it never happens that the party functionaries are more left wing than their base. The examples are countless. Take, for instance the bolsheviks' refusal on the outbreak of World War One to vote for war credits for their own government. This was a position that was determined by rank and file pressure on the leadership.

So this question of leadership and the avant-garde is quite a complex one and should be considered very seriously. We should not rely on simplifications. And here the Soviet experience is particularly telling. The fierce space of freedom, which was in principle open from the beginning of the revolution in the year 1917 to the beginning of the 1930s, when Stalin achieved absolute dominance of the state during factional struggles, is a very specific historical period and one with few parallels. On this question there are marvelous studies in Slovenian by Marjan Britovsek, *Boj za Leninovo dediščino* (The Struggle for Lenin's Legacy, 1976) and *Stalinov termidor* (Stalin's Thermidor, 1984). From these works it is very clearly seen how hard it would be to argue that developments in the Soviet Union took place according to a clear teleology, that is to say, that the Soviet project contained in its very core some kind of kernel of annihilation. Without any doubt, this aspect was to a certain extent present, however, in assessing the factional struggles between the left and subsequently also the right oppositions against the center, which was represented by Stalin, we should recognize a powerful dramaturgy, which lasted a good ten years. In the end Stalin was established as an absolute hegemon, finally consolidating his power with the great purges on the eve of World War Two.

The organizational question is key: how to maintain a healthy relationship between the necessity of an operational organization, that is, how to prevent the organization from becoming a debating club,

while at the same time avoiding the danger of ossification, whereby only the 'centralism' of 'democratic centralism' remains. Self-critically, we can see that in this area socialism has shown a lack of regenerative capacity: it is interesting to note that through almost the entire period of the Soviet Union the key positions of power were exchanged by pre-October bolsheviks, that is the older revolutionaries. Mikhail Gorbachov was the first party leader who was not born before the revolution and therefore was not personally formed in its first years. Instead he was shaped by the period after the Second World War, and it is perhaps for this reason that Gorbachov's leadership was the swan song of the Soviet Union. This was also true in other states, including Yugoslavia: there were no suitable mechanisms for the adequate reproduction of political cadres, which would take care of the generational changes that took place following the withdrawal of the older revolutionary guard. Such mechanisms would probably have required the implementation of limited mandates and similar controls and this is another area that will need to be addressed within the framework of potential socialist projects in our time if we want to offer a truly democratic alternative.

Of course, it should be noted that in the states of bourgeois parliamentary democracies with their clearly limited mandates and their democratic 'checks and balances', such as the USA, we can see parallel centers of concealed power and control which are completely undemocratic and which violate the entire ABC of good rules and conduct. This is especially relevant in light of the recent revelations by Edward Snowden. You could perhaps say that nowadays the bourgeois form of democracy is plagued by similar problems as the former one-party regimes.

Yes, however, Snowden's disclosures are spoken about openly and in a democratic environment in which it is clear who should respond. In real socialism such a public debate would have been impossible.

True, in East Germany there was no broad public debate about the stasi – that had to wait until East Germany was no more. But what will happen in the USA is another question: will President Obama be held politically responsible for the NSA's actions? The key issue, it seems to me, is whether the question of 'impeachment' will be thrown into the equation. If there is no demand for the president to take real political responsibility, we must draw the conclusion that words alone no longer hurt and that the case will eventually be put away in a drawer that will be very slow to open. Capitalism is a much more refined system of control and power than real socialism in its entire history could ever have hoped to be. As the old joke from Radio Yerevan illustrates: 'Nixon says to Brezhnev that in front of the White House everyone is free to shout "Down with Nixon!" and nothing will happen to him. Not to be outdone, Brezhnev retorts that in front of the Kremlin as well all are free to shout "Down with Nixon!" and nothing will happen to them either.'

The key question is: what happens? What are the real effects of this speech? Recent experience teaches us that the answer is very simple – they have none.

And yet, even if the democracies around the world have a variety of internal problems, the public have much greater access to information and to public debates than existed in the states of real socialism or than in dictatorships around the world today. Of course, sometimes it seems that the social contradictions are increasingly accumulating, but still – is there really such a 'classic' set of alternatives: capitalism vs. socialism? Isn't the basis of this alternative an orthodox Marxist analysis, which maintains that elections change nothing of any significance and that, instead of such cosmetic adjustments, revolution is the only answer? That after the revolution such problems no longer exist, as the joke that you told beautifully illustrated?

I think that it is necessary to reveal that this is merely a formal divide, especially because in this moment of capitalism's crisis we live in a time of grand coalitions, in which, as much here as in other

countries, the nominal left and the nominal right both cooperate to maintain the status quo. In fact it is clear that the difference in their views on the key economic-strategic questions that we face are merely cosmetic. This is a key political question internationally today, but unfortunately it is not addressed in the current political market. These parties are much more interested in debating the more juicy culture wars, or issues concerning the legacy of recent history. These policies in essence don't hurt anyone, however they do enable certain politicians to boast about their being the true heirs to left wing or right wing values.

And if we were to pay close attention to details we would see that there existed a greater diversity of political opinions between liberal and orthodox factions in the one party systems than in the present-day situation of political pluralism. Even though these faction struggles took place within a single party, the content of these struggles was much more significant than the debates between the supposedly contrary positions of the political parties that we witness today.

What did you have in mind here concretely?

I mean the liberal trends within Yugoslav communism: Stane Kavcic [Slovene liberal known for the so called "highway affair"], the Croatian MASPOK [Maspok = 'masovni pokret' or 'mass movement' - otherwise known as the 'Croatian Spring' of 1971], or Marko Nikezic in Serbia [leading figure in the liberal wing of the Serbian League of Communists and purged from the organization in 1972]. These movements opened fundamental questions, which were suppressed by the League of Communists at the time, but are even more suppressed in public discourse today. In contrast to our case, such liberal movements within the Chinese and Vietnamese communist parties were able to win and the result has been one of the most successful and, therefore, one of the most brutal forms of capitalism in history. What I want to emphasize is that even if these real socialisms were one party regimes, these ruling parties were themselves internally divided, which shows us that they were not so monolithic as some try to portray them. Between liberal and orthodox factions within the Yugoslav League of Communists there were much more heated debates than there are today, for instance, between Igor Luksic [president of the Slovene Social Democratic Party] and Gregor Virant [leader of the conservative-liberal Civic List].

This leads us to perhaps the most crucial question, which is also present in many of the materials of the IDS, which is the question of property. If private property is limited, as it was under real socialism, the question arises as to who owns the means of production? In the Yugoslav model of self-management socialism which attributed ownership to 'associated labor', the people were supposed to be owners of all, but owing to practical questions - and also probably because of concerns of political control - it was actually the state that owned the means of production.

It is worth keeping in mind the idea from the Communist Manifesto that it is already the case that in capitalist society private property is abolished for nine-tenths of the population - this could even be converted into the modern '99%'. Also, in this context, we need to be very precise: what we in the IDS emphasize is the concept of social property. This of course does not refer to washing machines or other household appliances, which we use in our everyday lives. Of course, our society does not suffer because of this kind of private property. Rather we refer to the kind of private property which causes not only suffering, but also the ongoing cycles of economic crisis, that is the private property of the means of production - the factories, laboratories, ports and other centers of production.

Even state ownership is not in the strict sense a break with the framework of capital: it is not simply a question of a conflict between capitalism, with its private property, and socialism, with its state property. In the largest capitalist states the most important strategic concerns are not sold to foreign buyers. Currently we are told that Deutsche Telekom are among those interested in

purchasing Telekom Slovenija. The German state would never dream of selling its telecommunications companies, even though it advises smaller and weaker countries to do just this – privatize their key public industries. Who in the more powerful position would not give just this advice, especially if they could easily pay off the purchasing price with the company's operating revenues within a few years? And the converse is also true: if Telekom would remain in state ownership it would in three years generate the same amount of money for which it is now being sold.

Therefore, the concept of social property is crucial for us as it actually breaks with the dichotomy of private and state ownership. The problem of both poles of this dichotomy is that they often produce the same or similar results: in the case of private ownership profits are taken possession of by the owners of capital, in the case of state ownership by the political elite who escape democratic control and therefore do not act in the interests of the citizens but abuse their ownership for various clientalist interests. Paradoxically, privatization is offered as a solution to state ownership, which means that any democratic control is by definition weakened, and a poor and corrupt situation is merely given legal legitimacy. We think that it should go the other way: ownership must be democratized with all citizens providing an insight into that which concerns them. That is the realization of social ownership.

This of course should not be taken to absurd details – we would not call for direct public votes to decide on whether electricity production in the Krsko Nuclear Power Plant should be increased or decreased, but just for the most widely accessible and democratic public debate about the basic strategic-developmental questions of our common property. The goal is to resist property becoming a victim of the elites, and from the perspective of the exploited majority it is irrelevant whether this is a capitalist or political elite.

But isn't this very close to how Kardelj imagined self-management socialism? [Edvard Kardelj, a Slovene communist leader and one of the architects of the Yugoslav self-management system in the 1950s]

That's right. And at the micro level of the working collective it functioned well, to a certain degree. But at the macro level it has never been realized.

But such a position nevertheless still presupposes a certain avant-garde does it not? If nothing else, as the case of the Krsko nuclear plant shows, an avant-garde composed of professional experts, since the level of qualification for such professional debates restricts it from the bulk of the general public.

Of course the socialist vision cannot be realized overnight with a single action. At this point the basic question is access to the media: if it remains in the hands of capitalist elites, who have by definition enough money and connections to impose their own agenda, the views of the workers will not be raised in public and then we will not be able to achieve much at all. That people today do not have knowledge of business management does not mean that they are unable to attain this knowledge. So long as they do not have control over the real levers of access, it is utopian to expect that they will study these things in their spare time, especially if nobody asks them how decisions should be made.

The introduction of the socialist project needs to be conceived through short-term as well as medium- and long-term measures. It is a dramatic and revolutionary change from the situation in which we live today: we demand that man develop into a wider being, better able to follow the social processes and to deeply understand them, because only this will work with a view to benefiting society as a whole. It is clear that we are at the moment very far from this goal, but we need to resolve ourselves to this path at once because the alternative is the pure dystopia in which we live now, believing that the current situation can continue indefinitely.

**What concrete projects do you and your co-thinkers hope to achieve in the coming years?
Is a European framework suitable for these projects?**

The key concern is the establishment of a movement on a European scale. While Slovenia and other countries in the European periphery, such as Greece and Portugal, are too small to change the system by themselves, if they combine in an allied bloc they can become much more powerful and better able to not only articulate but also implement different policies. This certainly sounds pleasant – but in practice it demands that the left, socialist forces of these states acquire real political power or even take over government. Today the country closest to achieving this goal is Greece, where current opinion polls suggest that on the 18 and 25 May in the local elections SYRIZA will achieve a convincing victory. These elections, held simultaneously with the elections to the European parliament, will be a very important litmus test for the future development of the Left throughout Europe. And we can assume that international capital, whose interests will be put under threat in Greece, will try to minimize their impact.

We understand the IDS, which came into existence ten months ago, as a part of a wider attempt to win the progressive forces in Europe. We are not a classic parliamentary party; rather we understand the party as merely an instrument in a wider movement. This is also why we are so intensely devoted to programmatic work, because we want to better define only the substance of this subject, which we are establishing, while at the same time however not neglecting the expansion of our ideas and working in an ideological and activist sense to attract more people, who would accept the party as a logical mechanism for exercising their beliefs.

The elections for the European parliament are therefore a great opportunity, but most likely in Slovenia this year you will not be totally prepared?

It is not about how well we are prepared at the moment, there will be plenty of elections in the future. For us it is more important to insist on our presence and that we speak out publicly, and to ensure that internally we follow a democratic process, which can sometimes be rather lengthy but when we reach a decision the entire organization stands behind it. The decision to found a party for us is now no longer a technical problem – the necessary two hundred signatures we could easily gather overnight – but it is a political question of when and how to take this step. For several months we have held extensive and substantive discussions on this question. We follow these internal dynamics of our movement rather than foolishly respond to external impulses, which could disappoint many people and result in even less confidence in our politics. Our primary goal is not to win the election, but to firmly establish democratic socialism as we truly believe that this is the only way to improve the quality of people's lives. Elections and parliamentary activity we see as one of a series of different measures to achieve this objective.

P.S.

* <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/interview-anej-korsika-ids-1/>

Slovenian original: <http://www.pogledi.si/druzba/kljucna-je-vzpostavitev-evropskega-gibanja>

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