

## Slovenian Presidential Elections 2012

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*(Abstract)* During the 2012 presidential race, Slovenia was politically more divided than ever, people had lost faith in the political institutions, which led to demonstrations and a tense socio-political atmosphere. Milan Zver, Member of the European Parliament, Danilo Türk, the incumbent president, and Borut Pahor, the former PM, the three main presidential candidates, set out to win over the voters. The international press' coverage of the elections and the outcome was unpretentious because they were more focussed on the ongoing anti-austerity demonstrations.

*Keywords:* Slovenia, elections, Danilo Türk, Milan Zver, Borut Pahor, International Press.

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## Introduction

For the fifth time, approximately 1.7 million Slovenes went to the polls on 11th November 2012, because neither of the candidates received the majority of the votes, the name of the new president was decided with a run-off election, on 2nd December 2012. In Slovenia, the presidential elections are held every five years, with the president given a rather ceremonial role. Early on it became clear at the early stage of this election that it would be a three-horse race for the president's post between the incumbent president *Danilo Türk*,<sup>1</sup> independent candidate with support of the main opposition party, the centre-left Positive Slovenia; former PM *Borut Pahor*,<sup>2</sup> with the backing of the Social Democrats; and Member of the European parliament *Milan Zver*,<sup>3</sup> with the backing of the centre-right Slovenian Democratic Party. Prior to entering the presidential race, all candidates had to get signatures from at least three MPs or 3,000 voters.

*The presidential campaign*

When it became obvious that Milan Zver, Danilo Türk and Borut Pahor were the serious candidates to become the next president, the polls, measuring the popularity of each candidate early in the presidential race, showed a significant lead and a clear favourite, the incumbent president Danilo Türk. Yet, he would not have received the necessary majority to be re-elected. According to the polls, in the event of a second round, the former PM Borut Pahor could be a close competitor to the leading candidate. Later on as the events developed, it would have turned out that Borut Pahor would go from rags to riches, due to an unorthodox presidential campaign, which saw him centring in the middle, between Milan Zver, with the support of a centre-right party, and Danilo Türk, backed by a centre-left party.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Danilo Türk was born on February 19, 1952 in Maribor, Slovenia. After obtaining a law degree at the Faculty of Law at the University of Ljubljana, he pursued an academic career as a professor at the Faculty of Law in Ljubljana. In 1987 Dr Türk participated in establishing the Human Rights Council in Slovenia and in 1992 assumed the position of Ambassador of Republic of Slovenia to the United Nations. After 13 years in New York, in 2005, Dr Türk returned to Slovenia, where he resumed teaching International Law and related subjects at the Faculty of Law in Ljubljana.

<sup>2</sup> Borut Pahor was born on November 2, 1963 in Postojna and grew up in Nova Gorica, near the Italian border. He enrolled to the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Science. His B.A. thesis was awarded the highest academic award for students in Slovenia. He was actively involved in politics and rose to prominence in the late 1980s, as a strong supporter of the reforming wing of the Communist party. In 1988, Pahor publicly proposed that the Communist Party would allow political pluralism. Pahor also achieved the so-called political hat-trick; President of the National Assembly (2000-2004), Prime Minister of Slovenia (2008-2012) and President of Slovenia (2012 - ).

<sup>3</sup> Milan Zver was born on May 25, 1962 in Ljubljana. He graduated in 1987 at the University of Ljubljana at the Faculty of Social Science and continued his studies at the University of Graz. In 1998, he obtained his PhD at the University of Ljubljana and started teaching sociology at the University of Maribor. Milan Zver, fluent in English, German and Serbo-Croatian, became Minister for Education and Sport between 2004 and 2008. During the 2009 European Parliament elections he was chosen to lead the Slovenian Democratic Party's list of candidates.

During the presidential race those three main candidates had been using different strategies to gain support from voters. Milan Zver, the Member of the European Parliament started his campaign early in the spring, by doing so he had the upper hand, more time to convince the voters. By organising many conventions in different parts of Slovenia, and stressing the importance of posters and “branding”, his campaign looked to be very US flavoured. He was the advocate of political stability, economical consolidation, and of a solid national consciousness. Although, during his campaign he had to fend off attacks that were directed at the current government that backed his candidacy. He had to defend the unpopular austerity measures taken by Slovenian Social Democratic party.

Zver, on the other side, saw the main rival in the form of the incumbent president Danilo Türk, therefore his attacks were mainly focused on Türk’s allegedly luxurious lifestyle and his »concept of no«, where Türk opposed every reforms proposed by the government, such as the pension reform, the golden fiscal rule etc.

Türk’s presidential campaign took a different stance, with many analysts believing that his strategy was too passive and conventional. However this could only be said for the first round of the race, as he adapted his rhetoric thereafter, when faced only Borut Pahor. Türk became more active in visiting different parts of Slovenia and giving speeches on ceremonies; he took part in the ceremony of *My country – beautiful and hospitable* project and gave a speech on the celebration of the 21. Anniversary of the departure of the last YNA soldier from the Slovenian territory. He was accused, by Pahor and Zver, of not being connective and also of acting on behalf an elite group.

When Borut Pahor revealed that the incumbent president is under the direction of an influential group, the first president of Slovenia, Milan Kučan, challenged him to come forward with the names of the people who constitute this particularly influential group. (DKO: Kučan Pahorju: Razkrij resnico o stricih iz ozadja,<sup>4</sup> *Večer*,<sup>5</sup> November 19, 2012).

We should also point out Türk’s attempt in identifying himself with the protesters and their ideas, which have started a week before the run-off election. Samo Uhan from the faculty of social informatics, stated that the incumbent president’s attempt to identify with the protesters turned out not to be of use to him. He was not able to win them over because the protests were expressing a much broader levels of distrust. (Barbara Hočevar: Najnižja volilna udeležba,<sup>6</sup> *Delo*, December 3, 2012)

If we did not have (it were not for) Borut Pahor the 2012 presidential campaign would have been generally a calm and a tedious one, filled with predictable strategies of »it is not our fault, but our main political rival’s fault«. The former PM took advantage of Türk’s adversity and Zver’s feebleness, when he positioned himself in the centre, between the lefts and the rights. By doing so, he was able to strengthen his stance of being a bridge between the left and the right side of the river, an experienced politician who can reach socio-political consensus. But Pahor’s presidential campaign was an unorthodox one, when he began doing voluntary work around Slovenia. By mid-October, he completed more than 200 voluntary hours, he visited the city of Murska Sobota where he worked as a garbage man. In a small village of Turnišče he helped to renovate a house, in Železnih Dverih he took part in the grape harvest and was selling ice cream in the city centre of Ljutomer. His goal was to prove, with words and deeds, that his leadership will be based on the experiences he gained from these approximately 200 hours of voluntary work. He would be the leader who understands the distress of the common man, his primary stance which attracted voters from left and right.

Before the elections, on 11th November all three candidates took part at different presidential debates. I would like to highlight the one which was hosted by the publishing house *Večer* on 22. October 2012. All three main candidates agreed that Slovenia can recover from the crisis on its own; however the candidates proposed different solutions, and using these answers I would like to demonstrate their political orientation.

Borut Pahor had stressed the importance of a political consensus among the political parties, playing on his strongest card of uniting the nation and guiding it towards better times. Milan Zver emphasised the role of the opposition in salvaging the economic crisis. According to Zver, the opposition should be constructive and not a malevolent political unite that rejects the proposed reforms, which are supposed to lead the nation towards prosperity. Danilo Türk suggested that the government holds all the cards. (STA: Prvo soočenje:

<sup>4</sup> Kučan to Pahor: Reveal the truth about the Master of puppets.

<sup>5</sup> *Večer* is a daily all-Slovene newspaper of the northeast Slovenia published in Maribor. The newspaper focuses on local and regional news. The first edition came out in 1945; it was a four page announcement of the liberation of Maribor with a circulation of 20.000 copies. The national reading survey conducted in 2012 showed *Večer* is the 4<sup>th</sup> most popular newspaper with a reach of 119.000.

<sup>6</sup> The lowest voter turnout

Slovenija lahko sama reši težave, a kako?<sup>7</sup> *Dnevnik*,<sup>8</sup> October 22.2012, <http://www.dnevnik.si/clanek/1042558808>

We may see that Milan Zver was predominantly occupied with attacking the opposition, which supported the incumbent president Danilo Türk. Türk, on the other hand, focused his attacks into tarnishing the reputation of the current government, led by Janez Janša, the leader of the party which had backed Milan Zver. The current president wanted to shift the blame for the current economic situation in Slovenia onto the Slovenian Democratic Socialists party, however forgetting his role in successfully cooperating with the government for the welfare of Slovenia and Slovenes. This is where Pahor, according to many analysts, made the best move, when positioning himself in the middle, in this manner he was able to gather some votes from both sides. Vanessa Čokls wrote; »Pahor is not a candidate who is running against Danilo Türk or Milan Zver. (Vanessa Čokl: Predsednik kot dežni plašč,<sup>9</sup> *Večer*, November 23, 2012)

Therefore the results were not surprising in the run-off, 32,56% of votes went to Danilo Türk, 67,44% to Borut Pahor, with a record low voter turnout of 41,95%, while the voter turnout was much lower compared to the first round, 48,41%. We should also point out that the number of invalid votes was 14,546 which accounts to approximately 2% of all votes that had been handed in. The record low voter turnout and the relatively high number of invalid votes, demonstrates the general distrust towards the political institutions. Why is this important? *Vesna Vuk Godina* a renowned anthropologists explained in an interview for a magazine *7DNI*: »Pahor was politically dead, but was reawakened, because he used the only strategy people “buy”, that is; “I am one of yours, I listen, tell me what to do”. It is typical of Slovene voters to vote for the candidate, who is going to provide them comfort. (Gloria Lorenci: Policijska ura in vojska na ulicah?<sup>10</sup> *7DNI*,<sup>11</sup> December 5, 2012, <http://www.7dni.com/clanek2012120505858505>).

The comments made by the new president after being elected gives us a great insight into this “comfort” that people “bought”. *Slovenia Times* quotes the newly elected president: “We need trust, mutual respect, tolerance, readiness to listen”, during his speech he also stressed the importance of unity, cross-partnership and the need to restore faith in the political institutions. (STA: Sloveni Elects New President, *Slovenia Times*,<sup>12</sup> December 3, 2012, <http://www.sloveniatimes.com/slovenia-elects-new-president>). This rhetoric could be labelled as “promise everything, but give nothing”, what we are trying to state was clearly demonstrated by *Renata Salecl*, philosopher and sociologist who writes in the newspaper *Delo*: “The candidate for all times and for everyone won. The fact that Pahor’s speech has no content is just an opportunity that everyone interprets it in a way he/she wants”. (Renata Salecl: Odzivi,<sup>13</sup> *Delo*,<sup>14</sup> December 3, 2012)

The newspaper *Večer* provides us with some of the responses from the leading political figures regarding the election of Borut Pahor for the president. Janez Janša expressed gratitude, in a calm way, he stated that Pahor pointed out certain things during the presidential debates which were not popular, but important, and received support in spite. (Jst: Janša čestita in poziva k odpravi blokad,<sup>15</sup> *Večer*, December 3, 2012).

Milan Kučan, the first president of Slovenia said: “the president must be open-minded; he must understand that politics are a collective effort. Political institutions cannot function without reciprocal communication, without the necessary dialogue. (Sid: Ne gre brez ljudi,<sup>16</sup> *Večer*, December 3, 2012).

Gregor Virant was convinced that Pahor will calm the current tense political atmosphere when he stated: “He does not have the magic wand, but has the moral and formal authority to sit the political parties around a table” (Jaj: Zmaga sredincev,<sup>17</sup> *Večer*, December 3, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> First confrontation: Slovenia can overcome the crisis, but how?

<sup>8</sup> *Dnevnik* is a daily newspaper for all social strata and the population from all regions, which is published in Ljubljana. The first edition was published in June 1951 as *Ljubljanski dnevnik*, The national reading survey conducted in 2012 indicated *Dnevnik* is the 3<sup>rd</sup> most popular newspaper with a reach of 139.000.

<sup>9</sup> President is like a raincoat.

<sup>10</sup> Curfew and the army infested streets.

<sup>11</sup> *7DNI* is a weekly magazine published by the publishing house *Večer*. In January 1972, the weekly became an independent publication. It focuses on socially responsible attitude towards life and often includes interviews with eminent persons and deals with socially important issues.

<sup>12</sup> *Slovenia Times* is a central newspaper in the English language in Slovenia since 2003. With over 10.000 copies per month *The Slovenia Times* reaches approximately 50.000 people. It offers a critical, in-depth analysis of the social and economic image of Slovenia.

<sup>13</sup> Feedback

<sup>14</sup> *Delo* is the central and most credible daily newspaper published in Ljubljana, which highlights and comments on the socio-political and economic occurrences. According to the national reading survey conducted in 2012 *Delo* is the 2<sup>nd</sup> most read newspaper in Slovenia with a reach of 148.000.

<sup>15</sup> Janša congratulates and calls for the removal of the blockade.

<sup>16</sup> Not without the people.

### *International Press*

The Economist attempts to enumerate the reasons for the defeat of incumbent president Danilo Türk after having had a clear advantage earlier in the race, namely, governmental reforms, the current economic and political situation contributed greatly to his downfall. On the other hand, the article states that Pahor won the presidential race, because, by sugar-coating his message, he was able to make it more appealing to the Slovenes' sense of national unity, however it is now up to him to realise all the goals he has set. (J.H, a vote for austerity policy, *The Economist*, 3.12. 2012,

<http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2012/12/slovenia>)

The Washington post stressed that despite the president's ceremonial role, he will play an important role in the tough times Slovenia is faced with and pointed out all the challenges the Slovene nation will have to overcome, including the pension reform, recapitalization of nation's banks, which are burdened by bad loans and pointed out that the reforms of the current government have been stalled, because of political division. (Associated press, Exit poll: Ex-PM Borut Pahor wins Slovenia presidential election with 67.3 percent of vote, *Washington Post*, 2.12.2012 [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-12-02/world/35585644\\_1\\_borut-pahor-slovenian-state-reforms](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-12-02/world/35585644_1_borut-pahor-slovenian-state-reforms))

BBC News wrote a short article providing the poll results and stressing the importance of anti-austerity demonstrations. (Slovenian ex-PM Borut Pahor wins presidency, *BBC News*, 3.12.2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-20571215>)

The Croatian newspaper *Jutarnji List* quotes the newly elected president; "We are going to overcome the crisis and the Slovene star is going to shine on the sky". In light of recent demonstrations, the newspaper suggests, the president's first task will be to calm the nation and instil a sense of justice, which was tarnished in the previous years. They also expressed a desire that the cooperation between the two countries will be beneficial for Slovenia and Croatia. (Hina, Pahor bi trebao najprije pokušati smiriti situaciju u državi i razočaranim ljudima pokazati put prema pravdi,<sup>18</sup> *Jutarnji List*,<sup>19</sup> 3.12.2012. <http://www.jutarnji.hr/pahor-ponudio-viziju-slovenije-koja-moze-rijesiti-probleme-krize/1070137/>)

### *Conclusion*

After an intriguing and a dynamic presidential debate, the new Slovene president, Borut Pahor, is ready to fulfil the promises he made during his campaign. Now, it is his turn to prove all doubters, the ones who said his words have no content, wrong. The task that he has to face is a monumental one with Slovenia experiencing a record low voter turnout and anti-austerity protests. He should start bridging the political differences, restore faith in the political institutions and in politics in general, as this was the reason he got elected. Now it is up to Borut Pahor, the fourth president of Slovenia, to make his next step.

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Your cooperation is highly appreciated. *The Editor in Chief*

<sup>17</sup> Triumph of moderation

<sup>18</sup> Pahor should firstly focus on calming the situation in the country and show a sense of justice to the disappointed nation.

<sup>19</sup> *Jutarnji List* is a daily newspaper in Croatia which was first published in 1998. The newspaper is part of the Europapress Holding media group and has a circulation of about 115,000 copies. It is generally considered to be more left leaning and liberal.