

To the international friends of Slovenia:

The following document was drafted during the month of December 2012 with some changes added in the early days of 2013. The drafting was a collective effort of the boards and members of the following four organizations: KOKS (Coordinating Committee for Cultural Slovenia), DSP (Slovene Writers Association), ODBOR (Committee for a Just Society), and TRS (Movement for Sustainable Development in Slovenia), SVIZ (Trade Union for teachers), VSV (Anonymous All Slovenia Uprising) SRP (Veteran organisation). The purpose of the document was to provide an explanation to the international community about the recent protest movement in Slovenia. The very drafting of this document caused a controversy with the ruling government of Slovenia: Prime Minister Janez Janša's Social Democrats (SDS). This controversy and Prime Minister Janša's public letter in response to the draft will be presented in an addendum. First we present our open letter to the international community.

Slovenians Demand Radical Change

During the closing months of 2012, Slovenia has seen a series of mass popular protests. Thirty thousand demonstrators gathered on November 17 for the first protest, organised by trade unions, students, and organisations of retired people and artists. Dozens of protests followed, large and small, taking place in virtually all of the urban settlements of Slovenia, often organized spontaneously through Facebook and other social media.

We would like to clarify to international observers that these demonstrations are not "rebellions against austerity measures and necessary reforms" as the ruling rightwing neo-liberal autocratic government of Janez Janša has tried to depict them. The demands made by Slovenian citizens on the streets of their country are not merely for improved economic conditions, but for the basic foundations of a just and democratic state: the rule of law, the preservation of social services, and a sustainable economic policy that will serve the interests of the majority of the population rather than the narrow interests of a few.

To provide some background on the situation, let us first emphasize that protest has been an extremely rare event in this traditionally calm nation of two million people, a country that has enjoyed a healthy economy and dignified living standards under a variety of different forms of government. Even current statistics show Slovenia's relatively healthy condition: 89% of EU

GNP, public debt at 48% of GNP, public deficit at 6.3% of GNP in 2011. As the first and only of the former Yugoslav republics to enter the EU, NATO, OECD and the eurozone, Slovenia has been justifiably praised as an exemplary and successful post-socialist country. In 2009, the global economic crisis began to affect Slovenia, not only due to shrinking European exports, but also because of misguided policies taken during the years of economic expansion (mostly during Janez Janša's first mandate). In 2009, the Slovenian economy shrunk by 8% and the overheated construction sector disintegrated. The Slovenian economy entered a second recession in the last quarter. Protesters blame this new recession not only on the autocratic, neoliberal, corrupt and incompetent policies of the current government, but on a recent succession of corrupt self-serving governments. This is why protesters have recently demanded the replacement of the entire political elite.

The government has responded with arrogance to the raised voices of its own citizens. The ostensibly representative government has consistently refused to enter into dialogue with protesters and had instead discredited and ridiculed their legitimate demands. This shameful response has only helped the protest movement to grow. The government has also responded to the protests by closing down the centre of the capital city of Ljubljana, by using riot police, horses, armoured vehicles, water cannons, antiriot fences and helicopters in what can only be characterized as a gross overreaction to the largely peaceful gatherings of Slovenian citizens. Top members of Janez Janša's party (SDS) have described the protesters as "ultra left extremists," "zombies," and characterized them as radical "neo-socialists," in an effort to balance out the actual presence of neo-Nazis during the first Ljubljana protest (possibly organised by the ruling government itself in an effort to discredit the protests at the beginning of the movement). Again this insulting government response has backfired, drawing more and more angry citizens into the streets.

During his two mandates, the right-wing populist autocrat Janez Janša, a supporter and personal friend of his Hungarian opposite number, Viktor Orban, has attempted to take over the mass media, many of the country's most profitable industries, and a host of other institutions, packing boards and management positions with his own party members. The ruling government is thus attempting to hinder free speech and a free press and to use public telecommunications networks as a mouthpiece of the prime minister's own party. The government's methods have been disturbingly similar to measures we experienced during Yugoslavia's totalitarian regime: attacks on and replacement of unwanted authors and members of media bodies by loyal representatives of the ruling government, blurring the structural differences between state and commercial media, denigrating specific individuals. Measures have also been taken by an increasingly politicized

Constitutional Court to block the people's constitutional right to referenda (plebiscites). The dysfunctional legal system, the privatization of public funds as well as the hasty and extreme austerity measures have only aggravated the economic crisis, starving and destroying whole sectors of Slovenia's once healthy economy. To the dismay of its citizens, Slovenia is looking more and more like an autocratic neo-liberal banana republic.

The following are other actions that have been taken by the ruling government in the year since it took office with less than 30% of the popular vote: attempts to hamper the free speech of public media by cramming boards with politically-appointed members and threatening media and journalists for openly reporting on the demonstrations, the economic starvation of Slovenia's public universities in favour of state-financed "private" ones (**usually founded by members of the ruling party**) the economic starvation of public schools and pre-schools, a war of attrition waged on Slovenia's research community and cultural institutions, the increased enrichment of an economically corrupt and politically active Roman Catholic Church in Slovenia. According to polls, the government's popular support has dropped to less than 20%. Nevertheless, many of these measures may be difficult to reverse and they draw a grim picture for the future of Slovenia.

The ruling government pursues a policy of dividing and conquering the population, attacking trade unions as the enemies of progress, attacking the public sector as a parasite of the private sector, attacking artists as parasites of both, attacking retired people for spending the future of the younger generations. The ruling government's public discourse is also marked by nationalist declarations, contempt for minorities (non-ethnic Slovenians) as well as for the gay population. The protestors' response to these ugly and divisive policies is to call for solidarity for all and to summon true Slovenian patriotism. The protests that are taking place in Slovenia's urban centres include all segments of the population: old and young, retirees and students, professional and working class, public servants and private entrepreneurs, different ethnic groups and minorities. Newly published polls reveal that 16% of the population has taken active part in the demonstrations, 67% support them, and 85% of the population expect the protests to continue.

On December 22, 2012, cultural organizations in Slovenia organized the first "protestival" that drew over 1,000 participants. It was a lively artistic event, offered as an alternative to the official state "Mother Slovenia" celebration of the Independence Day. The day before that an estimated 16,000 people, many of them young, took part in an all Slovenian uprising in Ljubljana. Several thousand gathered in Maribor and other smaller Slovenian towns. It is extremely significant that organized veterans of the 1991 Slovenian war of independence also are taking part in the protests,

spurning the government of Janez Janša who counted on the support of these patriotic citizens without whom independent Slovenia might not exist.

New protests have been announced for January. New resistance organisations are being founded on a daily basis. A congress of protest-Slovenia is being prepared for mid-January to connect all the diverse groups and organisations that stand in opposition to the current government and to the direction it has taken the country. The purpose of the congress is to define a unified action program to forward common goals of the protesting Slovenia.

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ADDENDUM

The original purpose of the above document was to inform foreign media about the nature of the recent protests in Slovenia and to provide some background to the current political upheaval in this country. International media reported on early protests, especially the violence of the first protests. (This violence is referred to in the above document, as it appears to be caused by forces external to the protest movement. All subsequent protests have been peaceful and have been covered little, if at all, by international media). International media has also generally assumed that the Slovenian protests were primarily against austerity measures, similar to the protests in Greece, when in fact the main driving force behind the movement is the belief that not only economic equality but social justice and democratic principles have been seriously undermined by recent policies and decisions undertaken by the ruling government and the constitutional court of Slovenia.

During the closing days of 2012, a draft of the above letter was circulating among the four organizations that were authoring it. A draft was also sent out to all members of PEN Club Slovenia, of which Prime Minister Janez Janša is also a member. (His membership dates back to the 1980s, when Janša was himself being persecuted by the then Yugoslav government, and was an expression of solidarity. His membership has not been rescinded, as it is not the policy of PEN to rescind memberships.) In any case, Prime Minister Janša received a draft of the document and responded with a letter to Igor Koršič, member of KOKS, who was coordinating the drafting of the document. This letter was also published in the media and a press conference was held on January 4, 2013 at DSP in response to it.

Dear Mr. Koršič:

I do not know what purpose it serves to defame Slovenia and the Slovenian government in international circles. In any case, I officially ask you to give me an answer as to who is the author of this statement, or who is responsible for the lies you put into the statement, otherwise I will be forced to view you as its author in the legal sense. The claim that "Prime Minister Janez Janša has described the protesters as "extremist left zombies" and characterized them as radical "neo-socialists" in an effort to balance out the actual presence of neo-Nazis (possibly organised by the ruling government itself in an effort to discredit the protests at the beginning of the movement)" is completely untrue. It is one among many other untrue claims, including, "The government is thus attempting to hinder free speech and a free press and to use public telecommunications networks as a mouthpiece of his own party." Please report to me as soon as possible the name of the author

of these blatant lies. I also suggest that you send English-language corrections of the above-cited claims as well as other untruths in the original statement to those who received it.

Janez Janša

We believe the above letter speaks for itself and indeed provides additional proof of the methods resorted to by Janez Janša and his ruling party in their effort to suppress the free speech of political opponents. The drafters did make minor modifications to the original document in response to the above letter, namely that top members of SDS, rather than Janez Janša himself, characterized the protestors as left-wing zombies.

In closing, we note the irony of Janez Janša's implicit threat of legal action against the drafter(s) of this document. Prime Minister Janez Janša is currently a defendant in a criminal trial related to his alleged involvement in the illegal Patria arms deal (which took place during SDS's first mandate). Though the trial is ongoing, the Prime Minister rarely pays his respect to the court by attending, citing urgent government business. We also note that in the week following the January 4 press conference, Slovenia's anti-corruption commission released a report on the financial status of parliamentary parties and members. Janez Janša was one of two members of parliament who failed to report substantial parts of his income. As a result, there have been calls for Janez Janša's resignation, including from members of his own coalition.

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