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Danica FINK-HAFNER

**PARTY SYSTEM CHANGES AND  
CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY:  
SLOVENIA IN A COMPARATIVE  
PERSPECTIVE**

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Slovenia is considered to be a consolidated democracy, although it experienced a few elements of democratic backsliding between 2020 and 2022. However, many different qualitative changes in the last decades have importantly transformed the way democracy functions in Slovenia. A key change refers to the specific ways political parties and the party system have transformed. Understanding the changes in party systems and their connection to democracy can be studied from quite a narrow, institutionalist perspective. Danica Fink-Hafner instead chooses a different, much broader and holistic approach, focusing on the interplay of politics, the economy, society, international factors while analysing this topic in her book *Party System Changes and Challenges to Democracy: Slovenia in a Comparative Perspective*.

Fink-Hafner presents a complex analysis of changes occurring in the Slovenian party system. She is primarily interested in the influence of party system changes on the quality of democracy in Slovenia and how the specific political, social, economic and international contexts and constraints influenced the transformation of the party system and democracy in the country. The book is divided into eight chapters, with the first four more focused on

theoretical and comparative questions of democracy, political parties and challenges to democracy, while the remaining chapters deal with case study selection and the empirical case of Slovenia, concentrating on party changes and party system changes over the last three decades.

After the first introductory chapter in which Fink-Hafner sketches out the central goals and arguments of her book, Chapter 2 contextualises the book's main topic and provides an overview of various political theories on the democracy-political parties relationship. The author considers the different legacies of British and American political and theoretical liberalisms. Fink-Hafner also provides an operational definition of liberal democracy in everyday practice and reflects on the important distinctions between liberal and illiberal democracy; presents different ideas that have been around since the end of the Second World War aimed at correcting the weaknesses of liberal democracy: consociational democracy, neo-pluralist theories etc. She also deals with the concepts of cosmopolitan democracy and transnational democracy, with special regard to the European Union, the democratic deficit of the EU's institutional design, and the organisation of European political parties.

The third chapter presents analysis of the relationship between democracy and political parties, focusing on the different practices of democracy and various political parties. Apart from the usual positive outlook on the role of political parties in a democracy, the author makes critical observations con-

cerning the role political parties play in liberal democratic polities. A special section refers to the role of political parties and their important function in the transition to and consolidation of democracy, while also reflecting on the role of political parties and other elements that can lead to democratic backsliding without necessarily causing a breakdown of democracy.

In Chapter 4, the author discusses the various dimensions and characteristics of party systems and the challenges to democracy following the increasing political and party polarisation. Fink-Hafner looks in particular at the institutionalisation of both parties and the party system, along with stabilisation of the latter. At the same time, she also discusses the personalisation of politics and parties, even the processes of presidentialisation that lead to the opposite outcomes from party institutionalisation. The topic of the representativeness of parties and their social embeddedness, coupled with the problems of the growing disembeddedness of parties is considered in a separate section, while also analysing political polarisation, anti-systemic parties and populism.

Chapter 5 is devoted to giving context for the case study of Slovenia. The author focuses on the party system and the Slovenian context. Fink-Hafner provides several justifications for the case study (a stable and successful democracy compared to most other post-socialist countries; a stable institutional framework of a parliamentary democracy; no neoliberal shock therapy in the early days of the transition period and economic gradualism; a

vibrant party system that did not seriously challenge the quality of democracy; low party system institutionalisation combined with a high quality of democracy; the specific role of the old party (League of Communists of Slovenia) and the youth of the party since they played a key role in adapting to liberal democratic standards; strong NGOs and trade unions). She also presents the need to understand the specific domestic and worldwide social, economic and structural changes that have influenced the party system changes and quality of democracy in Slovenia: exogenous shocks, autocratic tendencies across the globe, globalisation, economic factors (unemployment, GDP per capita, privatisations, loans), social and economic inequalities, role of the EU, and role of non-party actors. She also describes the indicators of the party system (institutionalisation – personalisation, stability, social embeddedness, number of coalition parties, stability of governments, early elections, fragmentation, polarisation etc.) as the most important indicators of the party system's transformation taking place in the changing domestic and international context.

Chapter 6 provides analysis of the “flow of democracy” (118) in Slovenia within the altered internal and external context. Fink-Hafner initially focuses on the political context, analysing different political processes (gaining of independence, adaptation of the old political and economic elites to the new political system, transition to and consolidation of democracy, the role of different political parties, joining the EU and NATO, the rise of the

illiberal SDS party and its political and constitutional proposals with focus given to the illiberal period between 2020 and 2022 under a government led by Janez Janša) along with different indexes showing the quality of democracy in Slovenia. In this section, the author also looks at other, non-political factors that have been shaping the nature and changes of democracy in Slovenia: privatisation processes of state-owned enterprises, the rise of foreign debt, GDP per capita, the HDI index, unemployment rate, Gini coefficient of income and wealth inequality, poverty rate, the importance of the neocorporatist Social and Economic Council, the importance of trade unions and the Roman Catholic Church, and the importance of the international context (collapse of socialism in the late 1980s; breakup of Yugoslavia, role of the EU, the 2008 crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic).

Chapter 7 discusses certain changes in the party system in Slovenia. The author distinguishes four periods: the establishing of parties and the transitional party system (1989–1991); 2) consolidation of the party system (1992–2000 elections); 3) destabilisation of the party system (2004–2008 elections; and 4) continuous renewal of the party system (2011–2022 elections). The first party system was quite fragmented with nine small parties, where the formation of DEMOS and the struggle for power with the reformed communists proved crucial. In 1991, a new constitution was adopted that has played a notable role since the proportional system was put in place, leading to further fragmentation of the party system.

Parties have had some serious conflicts, especially over privatisation and the role of the Church, while broader government coalitions consisting of liberal and conservative parties have stabilised the party system. The LDS party played a vital role during this period. The third period was one of destabilisation of the party system when important changes started to appear. LDS lost most of its support, parties began to turn to neo-liberal policies while the conservative government attempted a sharp neo-liberal turn. The fourth period (2011–2022) was marked by considerable volatility and constant changes with new parties emerging and declining rapidly, with personalisation and presidentialisation growing in this time while programmatic elements were becoming increasingly obsolete.

Chapter 8 is the concluding chapter of the book in which the author summarises the main findings of her research. A critical finding concerns the fact that political parties and the entire party system in Slovenia “have evolved away from their primary role of representation. Rather than offering ideological and political ideas for Slovenia’s development, they either lost their parliamentary positions or joined in with the growing polarization, populism and personalization of politics. The empty spaces have been filled by new political parties, which have lacked programmatic clarity” (215–216). Crucially, as the author notes, a narrow focus on party institutionalisation, polarisation and other institutional segments cannot provide sufficient explanations “on their own why transitions to democracy are successful, why democracy

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is consolidated, or why consolidated democracy may become endangered” (219).

The book presents a holistic and detailed analysis of the development of political parties, the party system and democracy in Slovenia following the country’s independence, making it an indispensable source for scholars and the broader public alike.

The greatest merit of the book is the argument that democracy is always a process that is challenged and unfinished, with multiple different streams and outcomes. The author is thus interested in the “fluidity of democracy”,

which enables her to grasp the broader perspectives and contexts, making the book very different from the typical analysis of party-system changes and provides the author with the framework needed for in-depth and detailed explanations of the democracy-party system relationship on one hand, and specific political, economic, social domestic and international contexts. Here, a question that emerges for future research is whether it is possible to approach the subject from the standpoint of a more radical theory of democracy.

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