

As the government in Slovenia fights to put through its austerity programme, there is little sympathy for the Greeks

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The average pension in Slovenia is €570 per month. Many Greeks receive – even in times of austerity and budget cuts – much higher pensions. Nevertheless, Slovenia has helped to bail out Greece, most recently in March when it offered €1 billion of collateral. But [Marko Milosavljević](#) predicts that the Slovenies' willingness to pay for Greece's troubles will soon fade.



When Christine Lagarde gave an interview to *The Guardian* in May, it was probably not difficult to foresee that many Greeks would not like her comments that they were 'a nation of tax dodgers'. But it was the reactions and statements of the Greeks themselves that in many places brought more sympathy for Lagarde than for the Greeks. Slovenia is one of such countries.

The evening news on Slovenian television also brought those reports from Greece about the reaction to Lagarde's statements. The statements from ordinary Greeks were full of outrage and would probably bring a great deal of – at least – understanding for austerity-stricken Greeks even in Slovenia, were it not for a very telling example of the consequences of the crisis: a man on the street in Athens was saying that the situation is terrible – his pension used to be more than €1700 per month but is now less than €1300.

The statement was probably meant to illustrate the extent of cuts, but it probably didn't cause a lot of understanding from ordinary Slovenes. The average pension in Slovenia is only €570 per month. And the prices in Slovenia are just as high as in Greece, or most of Europe. In spite of this, Slovenia gave financial help to Greece, most recently in March with almost €1 billion in collateral. And because of the planned budget cuts in Slovenia, most Slovenes are now more concerned with their Slovenian future than with other countries, especially with those where the consequences of the crisis don't cause as much understanding and sympathies from the Slovenes as it used to.

The question still remains as to what budget cuts in Slovenia will look like, as many are still being negotiated with different unions. After many weeks of tense negotiations with unions of public servants and sectors, especially teachers and nurses, the government plans to slash the budget are now being tested by the police unions. The police unions have threatened to initiate a referendum on the proposed budget cuts if the government does not abide by their demands. And if the referendum does indeed happen, it is quite possible that the budget cuts would be rejected and the government would find itself in huge financial difficulty.

So it was no surprise to see that the government is now trying to protect itself also by changing the law on how referendums are run. Since main conditions for the referendums are set in the constitution, this includes plans to change the constitution: there would be a change about who can initiate the referendum, which topics can be decided at the referendums at all (the government proposes to remove any decisions about fiscal policies from the possible topics) and what would be the needed quorum in order for the referendum to be valid at all (at least 35 of all the registered voters).

Since independence from Yugoslavia, Slovenia often looked at Switzerland as an example: both of economic efficiency and success, and of direct democracy, often based on referendums. The referendums thus in Slovenia remained very lightly regulated and easy to initiate. Indeed there were 20 referendums in the past 20 years, often with very limited attendance and with very difficult or controversial topics for citizens to decide. Most of the time they were initiated by right-wing parties or groups, as right-wing voters turned out to be more disciplined and in favour of going to referendums than left-wing voters; the referendums were most of the time not surprisingly successful for the right-wing proposals.

The initiative to change the regulation of referendums, including the constitution, that comes from the right-

wing government can thus seem surprising, but only at first sight. The initiative confirms the problematic situation in which this government is right now, and that many of her proposals or decisions can be rejected at the referendum. Especially if the proposals are as unpopular as the budget cuts and slashed spending on education, health and other areas.

As the negotiations with the police unions are still ongoing, it remains to be seen whether the threat of the referendum will be fulfilled. But it seems that the government want to have bigger power and less possible opposition to its plans – first with the austerity programme and later also with other perhaps less popular or controversial proposals.

If the government's proposed changes to the referendum law had historically been in place, only 4 out of Slovenia's 20 referendums would actually have been allowed. Whether or not the newly imposed restrictions can or will harm democracy in Slovenia, remains to be seen. But so far most of the political parties agree that the conditions for the referendum need to be stricter, only the precise extent of this remains to be decided. After the statements by Christine Lagarde and the newscasts from Greece, one thing is however certain: any referendum on additional help for Greece would most likely not be successful.

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