

Activists in Slovenia seek to protect purity of water as the country goes to polls - When Slovenia's National Assembly passed legislation in late March that changed the rules for construction along waterside land, the country's environmentalists were furious. Their most pressing concern was that the amendments to the Water Act would open the gates for over-development and pollution.

To overturn the law they needed to trigger a referendum by navigating a lengthy process of signature-gathering. The only problem was they weren't sure how to manage such a task. That was when they approached Nika Kovac, a seasoned Slovenian activist who helped manage the national campaign for LGTB equality in 2015.

"The first step was to get 3,000 unverified signatures. We did that in a few days", Kovac told The Irish Times. Then came the requirement for 40,000 verified signatures. "That was a huge undertaking."

The unverified signatures were names gathered during lockdown when people ventured out to purchase a coffee or shop at their local store. When that target was achieved, 400 volunteers fanned out, stationing themselves outside town halls across the country.

To get a verified signature each citizen had to be shepherded into reception and asked to fill out a witnessed form, which was then stamped by the authorities. It was slow work but by the deadline in late May more than 50,000 people had signed up.

Now Slovenes are heading to the polls on Sunday for the first referendum in four years. The amendments passed by parliament change the requirements for construction of public buildings, such as hotels, and non-complex facilities, such as playgrounds, to be built along waterside land. They also introduce an increase in funding for flood prevention measures. The Slovenian Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning told The Irish Times that, under the legislation, "the conditions for public buildings and non-complex facilities will be tightened considerably". Kovac and her campaign disagree, and believe the new rules will lead to hotels, bars and other attractions mushrooming around the country's rivers, lakes and coast.

Alpine nation

Slovenia is renowned for its crystal-clear water and lush green forests. Indeed the Alpine nation made drinkable water a fundamental right for all its two million citizens in 2016.

There is also little privatisation of beauty spots, making the country especially attractive to tourists.

"This government sees nature as a commodity and us citizens as only consumers," says Sara Kosirnik, a climate campaigner for Greenpeace Slovenia. "Nature should always be free to

people and it should be kept wild and unspoiled, that is what we are fighting for in this referendum.”

The campaign headquarters in central Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, are sparse. A few young activists make handmade badges while others compose emails to volunteers across the country. “We don’t have much money,” says Kovac. “For the whole campaign, we have around €8,000 and that has been donated to us by around 150 people. Everyone who is working on this is working for free.”

In recent weeks the young team and its 28-year-old leader, Kovac, feel there has been growing hostility towards them in pro-government media and describe a climate of intolerance against those who challenge the government’s line.

Right-wing prime minister Janez Jansa has accused campaigners of acting in self-interest and claims they have bought private plots of land near riverbanks, lakes and coast. His government also rejects any allegations it is putting the country’s water at risk. In its statement to The Irish Times, the environment ministry said the changes “strengthen the protection of the constitutional right to access to quality drinking water” while also ensuring “better protection of water resources and waterside land”.

Verbal attacks

Last week Slovenia took over the rotating EU Council presidency for the second time, and criticism of Jansa’s tilt towards the illiberal powers of central Europe - Hungary and Poland - overshadowed a series of carefully orchestrated events. At a press conference in Ljubljana, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen pointed out that trust in solid institutions, efficient judicial systems and independent media were the essence of the European Union.

Since returning to office for a third time in March 2020, Jansa (62) has come under increasing scrutiny for his verbal attacks on journalists, disruption of funding for state-news agency STA and criticism of the country’s constitutional court. Slovenia has also been accused of undermining the new European Public Prosecutors Office by failing to appoint two “delegated prosecutors” to help fight misuse of EU funds.

Turnout can be low in Slovenia and for results to be valid, 20 per cent, or 340,007 registered voters, must cast their ballots. With the relaxation of pandemic restrictions on international travel and families leaving for summer holidays, meeting this quorum will be a high bar.

Kovac is undeterred. “This referendum is a strong message to our politicians that they cannot make changes like this without proper consultation from all citizens and it’s a



Slovenian right-wing prime minister Janez Jansa criticized by environmentalists and Brussels

reminder to them that the power is really in our hands”, she says.

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