



The Progressive Compass





THE PROGRESSIVE COMPASS



Published by:

FEPS - Foundation for European Progressive
Studies and the Karl-Renner Institut
Avenue des Arts, 46 – 1000 Brussels, Belgium
T: +32 2 234 69 00
Website: www.feps-europe.eu

Copyright © 2025 by Foundation for European
Progressive Studies

Editors:

A. Schieder, L. Andor,
M. Maltschnig, A. Skrzypek

FEPS project coordinators: A. Skrzypek,
C. Guedes

English language editor:

R. Cowie

Design, layout and printing:

Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR

Logo and cover design:

Les Marquises (V. De Wolf)

This book was produced with the financial
support of the European Parliament.



978-2-39076-028-3 9782390760283

D/2025/15396./23

This book reflects the opinions of the respective
authors, not those of the European Parliament
or the Foundation for European Progressive
Studies (FEPS) or of the Karl-Renner Institut. The
responsibility of FEPS and Karl-Renner Institut
is limited to the publication in as much as it is
considered worthy of attention by the global
progressive movement.





THE PROGRESSIVE COMPASS

Edited by:

Andreas SCHIEDER

László ANDOR

Maria MALTSCHNIG

Ania SKRZYPEK



— FEPS —
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



European Parliament

THE PROGRESSIVE COMPASS

THE ENDORSEMENTS

Lina GALVEZ MUÑOZ, MEP, S&D Group, Chair, FEPS Scientific Council

This edition of the The Progressive Compass sheds light on the challenges social democracy is currently facing and offers innovative ideas on how progressive forces can inspire hope for a better future amidst turbulent and polarized times. By exploring strategies such as forming alliances, reengaging with citizens, and restoring trust in politics, the book sparks a crucial debate on the path forward to building more equitable and resilient societies. The book generates a debate on the way forward to build better and stronger societies, decrease inequalities via political action and put the wellbeing of citizens at the centre.

Zita GURMAI, President, PES Women

"The Progressive Compass is a call to action for those determined to shape a more inclusive and democratic Europe. As we confront systemic inequality and a backlash against progress, this volume provides much-needed direction to anchor our values and renew the social democratic promise, for this generation and the next."

Christian KRELL, Professor, University of Applied Sciences for Police and Public Administration, North Rhine-Westphalia

"The Progressive Compass" is an essential read for anyone interested in the future of social democracy in Europe. This volume brings

together insightful contributions from leading thinkers who address the pressing challenges faced by social democratic parties today. This book is a must-read for policymakers, academics, and anyone committed to or interested in progressive politics. It offers an inspiration for social democratic parties to regain credibility, engage voters, and implement a progressive agenda. Highly recommended for those seeking to understand and shape the future of European social democracy.

Mikael LEYI, Secretary General, SOLIDAR

"The most recent volume of *The Progressive Compass* offers a most welcome contribution to the ongoing and much needed discussion on what progressive parties and movements should do faced with the current multiple and parallel crises. What is our movements answer to the climate and environmental emergency, the declining trust in institutions, the rise of far-right and populist parties, the wars at our doorstep, or the rising inequalities within and between countries? The authors of this volume contribute valuable insights and findings to help all of us to better navigate this new reality, be it as political parties, trade unions or civil society. It guides us to what we could weave our dreams of and what material to use for our political project."

Isabelle HERTNER, Senior Lecturer in the Politics of Britain in Europe, King's College London

This edited volume will hopefully, as its name suggests, become a compass for progressive parties and voters in contemporary Europe. It provides plenty of direction on the political issues that progressives care about. Amongst them are increasing trust in political institutions, addressing an increasing sense of insecurity, and finding progressive solutions to urgent issues like migration and climate change. As popu-

list radical right parties gain more support, progressives need to raise their game, understand voters better, and offer fresh, fair, and sustainable visions for today's challenges. Get the compass out!

Pedro Silva PEREIRA, President of the Res Publica Foundation and former Vice-President of the European Parliament

"The Progressive Compass" is another remarkable and timely contribution of the Next Left Research Programme to the renewal of social-democratic thinking, from values to political action. As always in the progressive movement, the starting point to find political answers to the challenges of our time must be the proper understanding of the nature of the "social question" in our contemporary societies and the discussion about the meaning and implications of our political principles here and now. When too many simplistic and misleading answers are given to the very complex problems we face, it is a good idea to listen to what scholars and young politicians have to say, enlarging and deepening the debate in search of new ideas and better progressive policies for our common future. This is why this book deserves our time and attention.

Enma LÓPEZ, PSOE Councillor, Madrid, Secretary of Economic Policy and Digital Transformation of the PSOE Executive Member

In a world awash with misinformation, polarisation and disenchantment; surrounded by technofeudalism and growing threats to our democracies, it is more important than ever to renew our program and bring together the brightest minds. The remarkable duty of FEPS in addressing these challenges gives this 16th volume its true historical relevance.

Aleksandra IWANOWSKA, FMS, Vice President Young European Socialists

The Next Left 16th volume provides a compass for the European progressives to follow. As someone from the first generation of Poles who grew up as an EU citizen, I have been witnessing the European project begin to crack under the blows of populist and far-right forces. I have been observing it protesting on the streets of Warsaw just as much as seeing election results from all over Europe. Social democracy, despite all its historic achievements, must evolve to remain relevant. Europe's future depends on our courage to act. And I know no political family more courageous, more ready to act, and stronger through its diversity than the social democrats.

THE PROGRESSIVE COMPASS

INDEX

- 12 Editors' Foreword
Maria MALTSCHNIG
- 16 Preface
Eighty years after World War II: A turning point
for social democracy in Europe?
Andreas SCHIEDER

Progressive strategy to overcome disenchantment and revive trust in politics

- 22 Rebuilding trust and strengthening democracy
Eunice GOES
- 44 To win, social democrats should meet voters
where they are
Kaisa VATANEN
- 62 Reimagining the state? Rebuilding public
capacity in the post-market liberal era
Patrick DIAMOND
- 78 Freedom – is the struggle nowadays with it or
for it?
Ania SKRZYPEK

Progressive politics to re-empower citizens and reassure them about the future

- 116 The new politics of insecurity: Formulating a
new political script and agenda that consider
the emerging insecurity in European lives
Lorenza ANTONUCCI



- 134 Squaring the circle – social democratic voter demands for change, transformation and security
Felix BUTZLAFF
- 150 A progressive reframing of resilience: Strengthening European democracy in the time of polycrisis
Tomáš PETŘÍČEK

Progressive integrity to persevere in polarized politics and meet the hard choices

- 174 Is a progressive migration policy possible?
Dimitris TSAROUHAS
- 186 EU fiscal capacity: Our last hope
Carlo D'IPPOLITI
- 204 Reaffirming an alternative: How to revive social democracy
João ALBUQUERQUE

Progressive narrative to forge connections and build mighty coalitions for change

- 240 Progressive storytelling in Europe: Content, mechanisms and actors
Anna PACZEŚNIAK
- 258 Logics of politics
Konstantin VÖSSING
- 272 Participation! Revisiting a progressive value and some of its critiques
Margarete HADERER
- 289 **Biographies**



Andreas SCHIEDER, László ANDOR, Maria MALTSCHNIG & Ania SKRZYPEK

Editors' Foreword



This new volume of contributions to the Next Left research project provides a series of inputs to help social democratic parties in Europe navigate a puzzling and challenging time. After a disruptive year of elections around the world, it is clear that people's expectations of their political leaders have become much more difficult to address through traditional positions and means.

When social democratic parties perform poorly in elections and the far right is gaining strength, it is often linked to an overall sentiment of pessimism and distrust towards political institutions. The "Democracy Monitor", a long-time survey by the Austrian institute Foresight, which has been supported by the Karl-Renner-Institute for years, shows that every time a major crisis hits, trust in democratic institutions falls significantly. Usually, the figures recover afterwards, with one exception: after the recent dip in the year 2022, when inflation suddenly hit, those in the low-income group continued to lose trust in the years that followed. The medium and higher income groups, however, recovered their trust in the political system. The authors of the study link this development to a lack of representation experience and suggest focusing on the political inclusion of lower income groups. Tackling this problem will be key to future success for progressive political parties.

In this book, four authors – Eunice Goes, Kaisa Vatanan, Patrick Diamond and Ania Skrzypek – discuss this issue of trust in politics. Under "Good governance, transparency, accountability and access", Eunice Goes suggests seven concrete steps to gain more trust in the political system. Kaisa Vatanen draws a map of the electorate and underlines, in this context, the importance of a welfare state that both protects and liberates people.

Governing these days is extremely tough, even if – in the case of the UK – the government has a stable one-party majority and is politically free to manoeuvre. A structurally weak economy, distressed public finances and path dependency, however, limit the possibilities for implementing a classic social democratic agenda. Patrick Diamond outlines the dilemmas and challenges in providing public services that deliver for the people under these conditions.

Lorenza Antonucci argues that the dichotomy between “economy” and “culture” is overly simplistic and explains why meritocracy and social status are key factors to understanding that insecurity has to be politically tackled on an individual level as much as on the macro level.

Meeting voters’ expectations is the core challenge for political parties. Without gaining electoral majorities, social democrats will not be able to implement their progressive agenda. It does not help that expectations diverge largely. While some root for security, others demand change.

Felix Butzlaff tries to develop an approach that could help social democratic parties to satisfy both needs. Tomas Petricek addresses the security part of this agenda. He takes the traditional social democratic goal of resilience against crises – both internally and externally – which has been pursued by establishing solidary welfare states, and asks what this can mean today. Joao Duarte Albuquerque is in accordance with this argument and suggests a set of policies that contribute to three progressive core values: individual freedom; security; and hope.

One major credibility issue for social democratic parties has become migration. Progressive narratives meander from avoidance, denial of societal and cultural problems, and drastic changes of direction towards restrictive policies. Dimitris Tsarouhas explains why the discourse has shifted over the past decade and outlines a set of recommendations for a credible progressive migration policy.

EU fiscal policy is not an easy topic to campaign on. Carlo D'Ippoliti argues that a debate based on distant and technocratic arguments is not suitable for convincing a majority of the importance and purpose of common goods for European citizens.

Finally, politics is much more of a communication task than many social democrats like to admit. There is no other political family that delivers on a programmatic and policy level in such a detailed, coherent and ambitious way as social democratic parties do. But to get the chance to implement this agenda, we need to convince enough voters of our capability to actually deliver. Anna Paczesniak, Konstantin Vössing and Margarete Haderer elaborate on the importance of storytelling, strategic organising and citizen engagement.

2025 is the year when European social democracy will gather to fundamentally define a new path towards a progressive future. We hope that with this book we can contribute to a thorough debate and inspire new ways of political thinking.

Maria Maltschnig on behalf of the Editors



Andreas SCHIEDER

Preface:

Eighty years after World War II: A turning point for social democracy in Europe?



Eighty years have passed since the end of World War II – a period that has seen the successful construction of democratic welfare societies across much of Europe. What is often referred to as the “European model” – characterised by a strong state, comprehensive social protection and a free society – can be understood as a legacy and achievement of social democracy.

Parallel to this internal development has been the gradual yet profound process of European integration. From the early days of the European Coal and Steel Community (EGKS) to the European Union (EU) as we know it today, Europe has evolved from a shared economic space into a political union with a much broader vision.

Yet, none of this can be taken for granted. European societies are undergoing deep changes. Trust in social welfare institutions is weakening, and the rise of far-right movements signals a disturbing return of old ideologies once thought relegated to history. The political and cultural consensus that underpinned post-war Europe is under increasing strain.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, globalisation – boosted by the EU single market, free trade agreements and international cooperation – was seen as the engine of progress. Borders blurred, the world seemed smaller and integration felt inevitable.

However, Putin's war on Ukraine has shattered many of those assumptions. War has returned to European soil, and security has moved to the forefront of political discourse. Nationalist and fundamentalist forces are gaining traction in elections across the continent. Are we witnessing a shift to a new political era dominated by far-right populism? Has social democracy reached the end of its historical trajectory?

These questions echo the concerns of historian Eric Hobsbawm, who referred to the “short twentieth century” – a period now seemingly behind us. Is the political agenda reverting to the imperialist, nationalist logics of the 19th century?

As a famous German pop song by ‘80s band *Fehlfarben* puts it: “*Keine Atempause – Geschichte wird gemacht – Es geht voran!*” (“No respite – history is being made – progress is being made!”). The challenge now is to determine the role of social democracy in this new phase of history.

What does a social democratic approach look like in a world of renewed conflict, weakened institutions and growing populist appeal? The answers will shape not only the future of Europe, but also the very idea of democratic progress itself.

This collection of essays you are holding in your hands explores the many challenges and opportunities facing progressive forces today – and offers insightful solutions. At its core, the question is how progressives can stay true to their core values – like equality, solidarity and justice – while navigating a world that feels more uncertain, divided and rapidly changing than ever. In other words, what does it take to craft a political vision that pushes for transformation, while also acknowledging the deep human need for security and a sense of belonging?

This collection addresses key themes such as social democracy, populism, migration, political engagement and the need for transparency in governance. Central to the discussion is the call for social democratic parties to reconnect with core values like economic redistribution, social justice and inclusive policies that tackle both insecurity and cultural recognition. As the gap widens between those demanding change and those seeking stability, populist movements from both ends of the spectrum are gaining ground. One thing has become clear: traditional approaches are no longer enough. The rise of fear-based narratives across the political spectrum has shown how power-

ful storytelling can be in shaping public opinion. If we want to reclaim the political imagination, we need to communicate more clearly, more emotionally and more honestly. This means tackling complex issues such as migration, climate change and economic inequality, without losing sight of hope or compassion.

What this collection also highlights is the importance of resilience and solidarity in the face of growing political and economic uncertainty. A progressive reimagining of resilience – one that prioritises collective action and community empowerment – is essential for addressing long-term vulnerabilities and promoting social cohesion. This shift away from the neoliberal focus on individual self-reliance aims to foster a more sustainable future for us all.

As mentioned before, Europe stands at a crossroads. And the essays in this volume serve as both a critical reflection and a forward-looking guide. They do not offer easy answers, but they do offer a vital starting point: a renewed conversation about what social democracy can and must become in the 21st century. In the face of fragmentation and fear, the enduring values of equality, solidarity and justice are not relics of the past – they are tools for building a future worth believing in.

Eighty years after the end of World War II, the promise of social democracy is being tested once again. Whether it falters or finds new life will depend on the courage, creativity and conviction of those who dare to shape what comes next.



**Progressive strategy
to overcome
disenchantment and
revive trust in politics**



Eunice GOES

Rebuilding trust and strengthening democracy



1. Introduction

The crisis of European social democracy has a myriad of causes: class fragmentation and class dealignment; the rise of inequalities; the neoliberalisation of social democratic parties; diverse electorates; fragmented party systems;¹ and a decline in public trust in public institutions. There are no easy solutions to these complex and mutually reinforcing problems; however, the recent victory of the Labour Party in the UK suggests a potential route to power.

Labour's electoral strategy focussed on showing British voters that the party was competent and could be trusted. To gain that reputation, Labour wrapped itself in the Union Jack, promised to be responsible with public finances and to "clean up politics" by strengthening the rules on lobbying standards in public life.² Crucially, the Labour Party, led by Keir Starmer, contrasted its composed and serious demeanour with the alleged sleaze and incompetence of the Conservative government. The strategy worked. Several surveys conducted following the British general election results show that a lack of trust in politicians was one of the main reasons why the Conservatives lost the election and Labour won a landslide majority.³ To show that he meant what he said, Starmer used his introduction to Labour's first King's Speech, to argue that "the fight for trust is the battle that defines our political era".⁴ But as his first months in office showed (he was accused of accepting clothes, concert tickets and glasses from donors and not declaring them), addressing the problem of low trust in politics can be tricky.

Low levels of public trust in politicians are not an exclusively British problem. The 2024 OECD Trust Survey shows that low levels of trust in politicians and public institutions are widespread across the world. According to this survey, only 39% of voters across 30 OECD countries trust their governments.⁵ These findings correlate with data from the latest Eurobarometer, which shows that 68% of European voters believe

that the national institutions of their countries are corrupt, 75% of Europeans think that too close links between business and politics lead to corruption and 63% think that corruption is part of the business culture in their country.⁶ Moreover, the Edelman Trust Survey, which mapped a decade of public attitudes towards political institutions, shows that there has been a steady decline in levels of trust. In 2012, 43% of the global population distrusted public institutions, but by 2020 that figure reached 52%.⁷

Low levels of trust in politicians are also difficult problems to tackle because they can include a variety of problems, from inadequate and irresponsible public services to the perception that politicians lack integrity either because they are deemed to be too close to powerful interests or because they are involved in politics to further their interests and those of their friends.⁸ To make matters worse, this problem goes beyond defining the conceptual boundaries of what constitutes behaviour that leads to low levels of trust. As scholars of good governance⁹ have found out, this issue is particularly thorny because different and conflicting understandings of what constitutes ethical behaviour in public life can have a corrosive effect on representative democracies because there will be a gap between public expectations and actual practices.

As parties that value democracy and need to win the trust of voters, social democratic parties should take the current low levels of public trust in politicians and public institutions seriously, especially because voters expect higher standards from left-wing politicians than they do from right-wing ones. This is so because voters expect centre-left parties to be better attuned to a commitment to values of equality and transparency and therefore to behave according to those high standards of public conduct. Moreover, such an agenda offers social democratic parties the opportunity to tell voters they are committed to a readjustment of the relationship between elites and voters. For these reasons, they must commit themselves to an agenda of transparent

politics. Such an agenda can revolve around three main strands. The first strand would focus on delivering greater transparency to the activities of political and public institutions when dealing with private- or third-sector actors; the second strand would address integrity issues, namely, the problem of the revolving door between the public and private sectors; and the third strand would concentrate on opening up the policymaking process to less powerful but perhaps more representative voices of European societies.

To identify the possible solutions or remedies to this thorny problem, it is important to diagnose it well and to understand how the disproportionate influence of powerful corporate interests can undermine democracy. Hence, this contribution starts by analysing how the problem of the decline in trust in public institutions has become such a salient issue in European democracies and discussing the conceptual challenges of addressing the problem of low levels of public trust. Next, I identify three key challenges that have contributed to the current low levels of trust in public institutions, namely, in the areas of lobbying and transparency, and the problem of the “revolving door” of politics. Having identified the key areas that have contributed to low levels of trust, I discuss ideas and proposals to increase transparency in public life, addressing the revolving door of politics and opening the process of decision-making to a more diverse range of voices from civil society. Finally, a set of seven policy proposals that social democrats can endorse, with a view to strengthening public trust in politicians and democratic institutions, are proposed.

2. Conceptualising the problem

A lack of trust in political institutions and politicians is a problem as old as the world, but since the 1990s, it gained new visibility in Europe and North America. According to Powell, Wafa and Mau, the political

changes brought about by globalisation and democratisation processes changed expectations about the performance of governments. Crucially, the international community moved “from an acceptance that unethical behaviour by governments and business was too coercive an influence on the progress toward universal economic and social advancement”¹⁰ towards the expectation that such behaviour should no longer be tolerated.

It does not help that the concepts of good governance and transparency in public life remain quite nebulous. They normally refer directly and indirectly to the concept of corruption. However, the concept of corruption is slippery. It has meant the “abuse of public roles or resources, or the employment of illegitimate forms of political influence by public or private individuals”;¹¹ it has also been defined as “misuse of public power for private gain”,¹² while Transparency International defines it as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”.¹³ But as noted by Powell, Wafa and Mau, “confusion exists in the literature in the misuse and difficulties of the meaning of the word ‘abuse’, which varies significantly” across different societies.¹⁴ That being said, what is common among the many forms of corruption, whether they are bribery, nepotism, cronyism or state capture,¹⁵ is the role of public servants in policy development or the delivery of public services.¹⁶

As corruption takes different forms and degrees of depth, a variety of behaviours can be incorporated into the definition. For example, patronage, nepotism and cronyism relate to what is understood as “favouritism”,¹⁷ while “state capture” by parts of the corporate sector has been defined as “the propensity of firms to shape the underlying rules of the game by ‘purchasing’ decrees, legislation, and influence at the central bank, which is found to be prevalent in a number of transition economies”.¹⁸

If this typology of corruption introduced new layers of understanding about what constitutes good governance and public service it

has also muddied the waters in terms of understanding what constitutes legitimate practices. For example, lobbying is a practice of healthy democracies. The fact that private interests can “lobby” governments and politicians on issues as varied as consumer protection and financial regulation is a sign of an open democratic government that is responsive to the needs and inputs of voters. But the way that certain private corporations have used their power to influence decision-making raises questions about transparency and integrity and about the uneven distribution of access to power in representative democracies.

The difficulty in bringing conceptual clarity to an issue that acquired new salience, together with new practices in the formulation and implementation of public policy, has contributed to growing concerns about insufficient transparency in political practices. This growing concern resulted in dozens of international initiatives that went from conventions and new codes of conduct to the measurement of good governance across the world.¹⁹ It was around this time (1993) that the global coalition against corruption, Transparency International, was created and which has since then become the go-to institution to measure levels of transparency (or opacity) in public life across the globe. If in the early 1990s the spotlight of these international initiatives tended to be directed at the ethical standards in the developing world, in recent decades standards in public life in the rich democracies of the Global North (Europe included) have become a new focus of interest.

This new focus came from the realisation that democracies were not immune to corruption or and could exhibit low ethical standards in public life, especially in an era where the separation between the state and the private sector became more porous. Indeed, the greater involvement of private-sector actors in the delivery of public services meant that the relationship between national and local governments in

Europe and the private sector required greater scrutiny. After all, private-sector actors were now seeking to celebrate profitable contracts with different state actors.

In fairness, since at least the 1960s, social scientists have drawn the public's attention to the vulnerabilities in solid democracies like the USA. Scholars such as Robert A. Dahl, Charles Lindblom and C.W. Mills noted that business interests had a greater influence on policy-making than ordinary citizens. They also warned that the disproportionate power of corporations over democratic politics and the policymaking process could undermine democracy.²⁰

3. Towards good governance in Europe

These warnings were routinely ignored. If anything, powerful business lobbies went on to capture entire areas of public policy in the USA, the UK and other European countries. Indeed, the scholars Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson offered a forensic analysis of how corporate interests captured most areas of public policy in the USA and how this capture was correlated with the rise of inequality.²¹ Identifying similar patterns in European countries, the late political scientist Peter Mair warned that the disproportionate power of business interests in decision-making was "hollowing out democracy",²² while Colin Crouch argued that this tendency was transforming party politics and could lead to the emergence of post-democratic regimes.²³

But concerns with these new trends were treated by politicians as naïve. The depoliticisation of public policy, the growth of the lobbying industry and the growing presence of corporate actors in the delivery of public services were presented as inevitable developments in increasingly globalised and fragmented processes of policymaking and policy implementation. However, and as a result of these practices, Eu-

rope is no longer a standard bearer for transparent politics. According to Transparency International, undue influence over decision-making, poor enforcement of integrity standards and threats to the rule of law are undermining European governments' efforts to deliver good governance.²⁴

Its latest survey of anti-corruption practices, published in late 2023, showed that transparency efforts have stagnated in more than half of the 31 European countries surveyed. While Denmark, Finland and Norway are the countries with the most robust transparency systems in place, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria are the countries with the weakest systems in place. Between the two margins, quite a few European countries have some ground to cover in terms of taking the required steps to become more transparent.

Over the years, different governments and institutions like the EU have developed efforts to address this problem. The recent adoption of a common transparency register, which applies uniformly to all EU institutions, is an important development in efforts to make EU policy-making more transparent, but more needs to be done. For example, the transparency mechanisms that have been put in place rely on self-reporting and are not independently verified.

Moreover, the widespread practice of revolving doors between the public and private sectors also undermines public trust in public institutions and in the EU. More often than it is desired, former EU officials start working as lobbyists for corporations without respecting the required cooling-off period. Research by the Corporate Europe Observatory showed that "around three quarters of all Google and Meta lobbyists (those that either hold or held European Parliament accreditation) have formerly worked for a governmental body at the EU or member state level" and that "some individuals even held the Big Tech company's lobby passes within only a few months of leaving public office".²⁵

EU institutions are also vulnerable to lobbying activities by third countries. Liberia spent €100,000 to €199,999 on a lobbying firm in 2019; however, no meetings with Liberia were recorded by any MEPs or the Juncker or von der Leyen Commissions, according to a database of MEP and Commission meetings compiled from EU data by Transparency International.²⁶

In recent years, European governments and EU institutions have tried to address these vulnerabilities by strengthening the codes that govern the relationships between politicians, public bodies and private-sector actors, but, as in most areas of public policy, more can be done, especially in the areas of transparency, accountability and widening access to democratic participation in public policy. For example, the requirement to declare all meetings held between politicians tends to cover only official meetings, but decisions are increasingly made in informal settings, including via social media platforms. These rules also tend to focus on elected politicians and senior civil servants and ignore the fact that many corporate interests are hidden behind the activities of research centres, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charities. In addition, business interests have long benefitted from having easy access to politicians and civil servants. Some policy areas (finance is a case in point) have been “captured” by those outside interests.

The same can be said about the problematic practice of a “revolving door” between the public and private sectors. Far too often, the existing rules are not enforced, the sanctioning regime does not work as a deterrent and the cooling-off periods are too short. Finally, social democrats should support the trend of the last decade of opening policymaking to a wide range of voices by making greater use of instruments like citizens’ assemblies, deliberative polling, consultation exercises, economic democracy and petitions.

3.1 Increasing transparency, accountability and access

As argued earlier, lobbying is an important part of the democratic process. It is the means whereby citizens, corporations, pressure groups and civil society actors have an opportunity to influence policy-making. In other words, lobbying can widen the scope for the exercise of voices in representative democracies. Moreover, properly regulated and sufficiently open lobbying opportunities have the potential to improve the quality of political decision-making because political actors will be legislating on the basis of more and better information about the policy area in question and about its impact on voters. However, as argued in this contribution so far, lobbying has gained a shady reputation, as it has been associated with the overrepresentation of powerful corporate interests in law making to the detriment of the interests of everyone else. According to the OECD, the influence of the fossil fuel industry on policymaking has been a key contributing factor in blocking action by governments globally to implement regulations on climate change.²⁷

For this reason alone, social democratic parties should endorse an agenda of transparency, integrity and openness that ensures that lobbying can strengthen democracy. The first step of this agenda should focus on regulating lobbying activities. The assumption behind this focus is that transparency encourages good behaviour from political actors. This involves the establishment of rules that force lawmakers, governments and senior civil servants to declare the meetings they hold with lobbyists and corporate interest, as well as potential conflicts of interest, in an open public register. This register should be sufficiently robust to ensure that politicians do not forget to register meetings with lobbyists or donations by private-sector actors, and it should be monitored by an independent body.

But as Bitonti and Mariotti argued, transparency is not sufficient, because lobbying activities involve far more than meetings between lawmakers and lobbyists.²⁸ A report by the OECD shows that “government policies can be influenced by and through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), research centres and think tanks, and the use of social media strategies to inform, shape public discussions on key issues, misinform or change public perceptions”.²⁹ It turns out that “[c]ertain actors that are de facto lobbyists, such as some NGOs, and think tanks, are not always covered by transparency requirements”.³⁰ Thus, the OECD recommends, as a first step, that countries should agree on a definition of lobbying and lobbyist. This definition should be sufficiently broad so that transparency rules also apply to organisations that fund research, think tanks and grassroots organisations. This step would widen the number of actors in the policymaking process that need to comply with transparency requirements.

Moreover, the monitoring of lobbying activities should widen its scope. Alongside a register of official meetings, independent monitoring bodies need to investigate the use of social media as a lobbying tool.³¹ Moreover, as Bitonti puts it, “we need to take into consideration a wide variety of other measures, legislative or not”, namely, measures that

concern physical access to governmental buildings, political financing, the conflicts of interest of policymakers, the procedures of consultation with stakeholders, the regulatory impact assessments (RIAs) of policies, the more or less institutionalised dialogues between governmental authorities and various interest groups, the legislative/administrative footprints of public decisions, the public agendas of policymakers, and many other aspects that generally affect the interaction between interest groups and policymakers.³²

Political actors also need to demonstrate integrity by making their ministerial diaries available to the public, as required in the UK and Spain, and by making declarations of gifts, invitations and hospital-

ity. But these measures, in place in several countries, are clearly not sufficient to free politics from the disproportionate influence of corporate interests. Thus, the rules should establish limits to the amounts politicians and public-sector actors can receive in gifts, donations and hospitality from the private sector. In addition, transparency rules should apply to political advisers and bureaucrats. For example, special advisers should be required to disclose meetings with news media organisations proprietors and editors. Moreover, the rules on transparency, outside interests and lobbying should also apply to regional and municipal levels of governments or public bureaucracies, such as healthcare systems, embassies and boards of trade.³³ Indeed, national embassies based in Brussels should be required to register the meetings national diplomats hold with lobbyists.

Recent cases of malpractice suggest that the oversight of transparency and integrity regimes tends to be incipient.

Thus, to ensure a more robust regime, European countries and the EU should create independent oversight bodies with powers to sanction malpractice, namely, for the non-registering of lobbying activities, for the non-disclosure of information required or disclosing inaccurate or misleading information, and for the failure to update information on a regular basis (a minimum of every three months). The typical sanctions deployed by existing monitoring bodies in countries of the OECD include “warnings or reprimands, fines, debarment and temporary or permanent suspension from the registry and prohibition to exercise of lobbying activities”.³⁴ But, as suggested by the OECD, the sanctioning regime should also encourage good behaviour by regularly reminding those who serve in public office (politicians and officials) about potential breaches of the codes of ethics and about mandatory reporting obligations.³⁵

3.2 Slowing down the revolving door

European democracies would also benefit from stronger rules to reduce the revolving door of politics. Rules such as banning former ministers, parliamentarians and top civil servants from engaging in lobbying in the two years after leaving public office can have a beneficial impact; however, they are not sufficient to ensure transparency and integrity in policymaking. Moreover, the rules should include forms of financial compensation to support the different public-sector actors in those cooling-off periods.

While the status of rules on revolving-door practices varies considerably from country to country, the set of instruments used for regulation is similar: cooling-off periods are time-limited restrictions on the ability of former public officials to accept employment in the private sector. The rationale is that the capacity to exercise undue influence or use information learned while in office decays over time. Therefore, requiring individuals to wait before taking up a private-sector role is seen as a key tool to reduce the risk of any conflict of interest. The time period varies between countries, from six months for politicians in Norway to two years in Japan and the Netherlands. Some countries operate time periods of different lengths for officials at different levels of seniority. This differentiated approach seems appropriate since the durability and value of contacts is also likely to vary in different sectors, roles and according to personal circumstances. For example, Germany operates different time limits for civil servants if they have reached retirement age. Transparency International recommends adopting a common cooling-off period of two years and extending the remit of regulation to appointments to non-commercial entities.³⁶ But in some cases, the cooling-off period can be longer, especially for those officials who had been involved in procurement or managing outsourcing and market testing.

Restrictions can also be targeted to take account of the kind of work the individual performed while in office – for example, former officials can be banned from working on particular projects. Governments can also consider adopting restrictions relating to pre-public employment. For example, the Obama administration in the USA introduced restrictions relating to “pre-employment” in business: all appointees entering government were banned for two years from the date of appointment from participating in any matter directly related to their former employer or former clients.³⁷ The restrictions applied by the Obama administration are examples of good practice, but given that several European countries have far less developed policies pertaining to cooling-off periods, the adoption of restrictions relating to “pre-employment” should be left for another stage in the deployment of this agenda.

But equally, politicians or former public officials can either be offered compensation as support during the cooling-off period or directed to employment opportunities in the not-for-profit sectors. European social democrats should agree on a common cooling-off period to be applied across the EU member states, as common rules can lead to a shared understanding of the problem and dispel often prejudiced ideas about why certain parts of Europe have maintained more opaque practices.

3.3 Opening-up politics

Another way of tackling the disproportionate influence of business interests on policymaking is by diluting its power. This priority is important because, as a recent OECD report showed, “perceptions of having a say in government actions influence trust more than socioeconomic or demographic characteristics do”.³⁸ This can be achieved by opening up the space for political influence to other, normally weaker, actors from civil society, so that the quality of policymaking improves through wider deliberation with a variety of policy actors and stakeholders. Currently, far too many stakeholders from civil society are only invited to

participate in the policymaking process far too late in the process and when they are included, they are given too little information to allow them to effectively influence decision-making.³⁹ Moreover, as the example of the 2018 French Citizens' Climate Convention demonstrates, when citizens take their time to learn about the issues they have been asked to discuss, most of their recommendations are ignored by governments and legislatures.

However, more democratic and transparent politics also involves fair access to politics. That is why the OECD guidelines on transparency privilege the principles of "fair (equality) of access to different interest groups in policy-making processes" and "the accountability of policymakers themselves (for instance, through the provision of policy footprints and plain-language political communication)".⁴⁰

Obviously, greater participation in policymaking is not a panacea. If deliberative procedures and institutions are not correctly designed, participatory or deliberative democracy can reproduce the pathologies we currently observe in representative institutions. Thus, deliberative institutions need to be designed with a view to ensure that citizens are prepared (through information packs and access to experts) to participate in discussions and decision-making on the basis of equality and reciprocity and that there are mechanisms in place to ensure that the recommendations of the deliberative forum are either taken seriously by representative institutions or are subject to a referendum. Moreover, because these participatory mechanisms require so many resources and demand so much time, their use should be restricted to either constitutional matters, polarising issues like climate change or abortion, or important local matters. However, with careful institutional design, which ensures what Seyla Benhabib defines as egalitarian reciprocity,⁴¹ as well as processes of deliberation designed to guarantee well-informed and egalitarian participation of a diverse range of voices, the greater use of forms of deliberative democracy have the potential to

enhance the quality of decision-making and soften the edges of moral disagreement in pluralist societies.⁴²

These principles can be enacted through the opening of the process of policymaking to a variety of actors, including citizens, neighbourhood associations, workers' councils, trade unions and grassroots organisations, from the initial stages of the policymaking process until the end. This opening up of the process of policymaking can also be institutionalised in deliberative forums and citizens' assemblies, different forms of economic democracy, and include the greater use of petitions or greater involvement of citizens with legislatures and local authorities.

3.4 Seven steps to strengthen trust in public institutions

As the different elections that took place in Europe in 2024 across Europe suggest, social democratic parties struggle to win elections. The causes of the unpopularity of social democrats are varied and beyond the scope of this contribution, but the electoral success of the British Labour Party in the 2024 general election shows that addressing voters' lack of trust in politicians and politics in general pays off at the ballot box.

In summary, social democratic parties should take voters' concerns with standards in public life seriously and propose concrete steps to make politics and policymaking more transparent, unencumbered by private interest and accessible to voters in visible ways. Such an agenda would involve the development of proposals that would strengthen the existent regimes for the declaration of interests; donations from private actors; the establishment of clear and independently monitored regulators of interests; clear rules governing the revolving door between politicians, public officials and the private sector; and the levelling of the playing field in terms of opening up the corridors of power to the voices and influence of ordinary citizens.

All these steps, and in particular the opening up of politics to voices from civil society, can help social democrats advance their wider agendas. Often, social democratic parties are forced to compromise on their economic proposals because powerful business interests have made their voices heard in the corridors of power. But by regularly including the voices of workers, citizens, neighbourhood associations and NGOs in policymaking, social democratic parties may find they have allies who are supportive of their agenda.

As a starting point, social democratic parties could draft a programme that includes the following proposals:

- 1) propose a definition of lobbying that includes not only the relationship of politicians and public officials with corporate actors, but also includes organisations that fund research, think tanks and grass-roots organisations;
- 2) create open registers of official and informal meetings where all the exchanges between politicians and public officials with third-party actors are registered;
- 3) establish independent monitoring mechanisms that entail powers to both sanction malpractice and encourage ethical practices;
- 4) propose that all public officials from elected politicians to civil servants, political advisers and diplomats, local government officials and so on are covered by identical rules on transparency;
- 5) establish the rule that all public officials should declare exchanges and meetings with private actors that take place in formal and informal settings, including social media platforms;
- 6) establish cooling-off periods of two years before a former public official can accept a position in the private sector, and create adequate financial packages for outgoing public servants to ensure they can live with dignity during the cooling-off period; and
- 7) open the process of political decision-making to more voices through the greater use of citizens' assemblies, petitions and con-

sultation mechanisms that will ensure that more voices are involved in the process of drafting public policy proposals and legislation.

Prioritising this agenda is particularly important at a time when the political process has become so vulnerable to manipulation, misinformation and corporate capture, as the first months of the Trump administration have illustrated so vividly. The proposals outlined are modest in scope but have the potential to become key stepping stones to rebuild voters' trust in mainstream politicians and democratic institutions and in narrowing the gap between voters and elites.

Bibliography

- Benhabib, S. (1996) "Toward a deliberative model of democratic legitimacy", in S. Benhabib (ed.) *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Bitonti, A. (2022) "How lobbying regulation can make democracy work better". The Loop, the ECPR's Political Science Blog.
- Bitonti, A. and C. Mariotti (2022) "Beyond transparency: The principles of lobbying regulation and the perspective of professional lobbying consultancies". *Italian Political Science Review*, 2(53): 143-160.
- "The revolving door – from public officials to big tech lobbyists". Corporate Europe Observatory, 20 September 2022.
- "What the Steelie Neelie case tells us about Commissioners' ethics". Corporate Europe Observatory, 30 September 2016.
- Crepaz, M. and B. Worthy (2024) "Cleaning up UK politics: What would Better lobbying regulation look like?" *Parliamentary Affairs*, 3(77): 435-449.
- Crerar, P. (2024) "Starmer counts on promises he can fulfil to rebuild voters' trust". *The Guardian*, 17 July.
- Crouch, C. (2004) *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- Dahl, R. A. (2006) *On Political Equality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- Edelman, R. (2020) "20 years of trust". Edelman.
- "Citizens' attitudes towards corruption in the EU in 2024". Eurobarometer, March 2024.
- Garafalo, C. (2020) "Surviving bureaucracy: Patterns of corruption, prospects for reform", in M. Power, D. Wafa and T. A. Mau (eds) *Corruption in a Global Context: Restoring Public Trust, Integrity and Accountability* (Oxford: Routledge).
- Goes, E. (2024) *Social Democracy* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Agenda Publishing).

- Goes, E. (2008) "It's good to talk: Addressing moral conflict in multicultural societies", in N. R. Khadepekar (ed.) *Understanding Multiculturalism* (Hyderabad: ICFAI University Press).
- Hacker, J. S. and P. Pierson (2010) *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks).
- Huberts, L. and K. Lasthuizen (2020) "Corruption in context: What goes wrong in governance", in M. Power, D. Wafa and T. A. Mau (eds) *Corruption in a Global Context: Restoring Public Trust, Integrity and Accountability* (Oxford: Routledge).
- Johnston, M. (2005) *Syndromes of Corruption: Wealth, Power, and Corruption* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Johnston, M. (1997) "Public officials, private interests, and sustainable democracy: When politics and corruption meet", in K. A. Elliot (ed.) *Corruption and the Global Economy* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics).
- Hellman, J. S., G. Jones, D. Kaufmann et al. (2000) "Measuring governance, corruption, and state capture—how firms and bureaucrats shape the business environment". Policy Research Working Paper Series, no. 2312. The World Bank.
- "How Labour won". Labour Together, September 2024.
- Kaufmann, D. (2024) "State capture matters". Results for Development.
- Mair, P. (2013) *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing Out of Western Democracy* (London: Verso Books).
- Mills, C. W. (2000) *The Power Elite*, New Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- "Change pending: The path to the 2024 general election and beyond". More in Common/UCL Policy Lab, 2024.
- Mungiu-Pippidi, A. (2006) "Corruption: Diagnosis and treatment". *Journal of Democracy*, 3(17): 86-99.
- "OECD survey on drivers of trust in public institutions 2024". OECD, 10 July 2024.
- "Lobbying in the 21st century: Transparency, integrity and access". OECD, 2021. DOI: 10.1787/c6d8eff8-en
- Power, M., D. Wafa and T. A. Mau (2020) "Introduction: Global strategies for a global scourge", in M. Power, D. Wafa and T. A. Mau (eds) *Corruption in a Global Context: Restoring Public Trust, Integrity and Accountability* (Oxford: Routledge).
- "CPI 2022 for Western Europe and EU: Undue influence and fragmented anti-corruption measures hurt progress". Transparency International, 31 January 2023.
- What is Corruption?", Transparency International, 2025.
- Worthy, B. and M. Crepez (2024) "Can Starmer 'clean-up' UK lobbying?" UK in a Changing Europe, 7 February.

Endnotes

- 1 Goes, E. (2024) *Social Democracy* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Agenda Publishing).
- 2 Crepaz, M. and B. Worthy (2024) "Cleaning up UK politics: What would better lobbying regulation look like?" *Parliamentary Affairs*, 3(77): 435-449; Worthy, B. and M. Crepaz (2024) "Can Starmer 'clean-up' UK lobbying?" UK in a Changing Europe, 7 February.
- 3 "How Labour won". Labour Together, September 2024; "Change pending: The path to the 2024 general election and beyond". More in Common/UCL Policy Lab, 2024.
- 4 Starmer quoted by Crerar, P. (2024) "Starmer counts on promises he can fulfil to rebuild voters' trust". *The Guardian*, 17 July.
- 5 "OECD survey on drivers of trust in public institutions 2024". OECD, 10 July 2024.
- 6 "Citizens' attitudes towards corruption in the EU in 2024". Eurobarometer, March 2024.
- 7 Edelman, R. (2020) "20 years of trust". Edelman.
- 8 Power, M., D. Wafa and T. A. Mau (2020) "Introduction: Global strategies for a global scourge", in M. Power, D. Wafa and T. A. Mau (eds) *Corruption in a Global Context: Restoring Public Trust, Integrity and Accountability* (Oxford: Routledge), p. 18.
- 9 Garafalo, C. (2020) "Surviving bureaucracy: Patterns of corruption, prospects for reform", in M. Power, D. Wafa and T. A. Mau (eds) *Corruption in a Global Context: Restoring Public Trust, Integrity and Accountability* (Oxford: Routledge); Power, M., D. Wafa and T. A. Mau (2020) "Introduction: Global strategies for a global scourge".
- 10 Power, M., D. Wafa and T. A. Mau (2020) "Introduction: Global strategies for a global scourge", p. 1.
- 11 Johnston, M. (1997) "Public officials, private interests, and sustainable democracy: When politics and corruption meet", in K. A. Elliot (ed.) *Corruption and the Global Economy* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics).
- 12 Mungiu-Pippidi, A. (2006) "Corruption: Diagnosis and treatment". *Journal of Democracy*, 3(17): 86-99.
- 13 "What is Corruption?", Transparency International, 2025.
- 14 Power, M., D. Wafa and T. A. Mau (2020) "Introduction: Global strategies for a global scourge", p. 21.
- 15 Kaufmann, D. (2024) "State capture matters". Results for Development.
- 16 Johnston, M. (2005) *Syndromes of Corruption: Wealth, Power, and Corruption* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- 17 Huberts, L. and K. Lasthuizen (2020) "Corruption in context: What goes wrong in governance", in M. Power, D. Wafa and T. A. Mau (eds) *Corruption in a Global Context: Restoring Public Trust, Integrity and Accountability* (Oxford: Routledge), p. 46)

- 18 Hellman, J. S., G. Jones, D. Kaufmann et al. (2000) "Measuring governance, corruption, and state capture—how firms and bureaucrats shape the business environment". Policy Research Working Paper Series, no. 2312. The World Bank(Hellman et al., 2000, p. 1.)
- 19 Huberts, L. and K. Lasthuizen (2020) "Corruption in context: What goes wrong in governance", p. 44.
- 20 Dahl, R. A. (2006) *On Political Equality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), p. 85; Mills, 2000.
- 21 Hacker, J. S. and P. Pierson (2010) *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks).
- 22 Mair, P. (2013) *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing Out of Western Democracy* (London: Verso Books).
- 23 Crouch, C. (2004) *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- 24 "The revolving door – from public officials to big tech lobbyists". Corporate Europe Observatory, 20 September 2022.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Craig, S. (2023) "Lobbying for change in the European Parliament". *The Parliament*, 23 January.
- 27 "Lobbying in the 21st century: Transparency, integrity and access". OECD, 2021. DOI: 10.1787/c6d8eff8-en
- 28 Bitonti, A. and C. Mariotti (2022) "Beyond transparency: The principles of lobbying regulation and the perspective of professional lobbying consultancies". *Italian Political Science Review*, 2(53): 143-160.
- 29 "Lobbying in the 21st century: Transparency, integrity and access". OECD.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 "Lobbying in the 21st century: Transparency, integrity and access". OECD.
- 32 Bitonti, A. (2022) "How lobbying regulation can make democracy work better". The Loop, the ECPR's Political Science Blog.
- 33 "Lobbying in the 21st century: Transparency, integrity and access". OECD.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 "Lobbying in the 21st century: Transparency, integrity and access". OECD.
- 36 "CPI 2022 for Western Europe and EU: Undue influence and fragmented anti-corruption measures hurt progress". Transparency International, 31 January 2023.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 "OECD survey on drivers of trust in public institutions 2024". OECD.
- 39 "Lobbying in the 21st century: Transparency, integrity and access". OECD.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Benhabib, S. (1996) "Toward a deliberative model of democratic legitimacy", in S. Benhabib (ed.) *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- 42 Goes, E. (2008) "It's good to talk: Addressing moral conflict in multicultural societies", in N. R. Khadepekar (ed.) *Understanding Multiculturalism* (Hyderabad: ICFAI University Press).

THE PROGRESSIVE COMPASS



Kaisa VATANEN

**To win, social democrats
should meet voters where they are**

1. Introduction

European social democratic parties have not seen significant electoral success recently. The rise of radical parties in a large number of European countries challenges entire political systems by making government formation and responses to international crisis like pandemics or the war in Ukraine more difficult in more fragmented political landscapes, not only through conflicting interests but in questioning the entire political cultures of finding coalitions and consensus around some of the biggest issues. In this landscape, renewing democratic structures faces new challenges that the traditional mainstream parties struggle to navigate.

The electoral misfortunes of the mainstream centre-left's coincide with the rise of the radical right, but it would be a mistake to consider that as a causality or a reason for the lack of consistent electoral success of the left. But the success of the radical right does highlight many of the underlying issues that should be addressed to achieve future success.

The centre-left can no longer trust on the general agreement of keeping the radical right out of governments to protect democracy. Where once *cordon sanitaire* was considered the mainstream approach to dealing with these parties, now more and more of the mainstream centre-right parties are opening the doors for the authoritarian right parties to enter governments and exercise real power. Or moving the goal posts in whom are considered to be fit for government. When the ECR parties would not have qualified in the past, many now think of them as mainstream and would only exclude parties right of them. This is largely due to the electoral reality, in which the hard-right parties have gained enough strength to limit coalition opportunities, but there is also some belief that accommodation of the radical-right policy lines will reduce support for the radical right. And finally, there is an appetite for coalitions that can deliver right-wing policies without having to

negotiate with the centre, left or greens. In Finland, for example, the centre-right prime minister keeps defending the “good coalition agreement”, despite numerous scandals on racism, misogyny or foreign policy deviations that the radical-right government partner, The Finns, keeps producing.

The rise of the radical right is also a problem for the right¹. But progressives have often found it difficult to process and react to this new political environment. Even when the authoritarian right suggests or implements policies that are against the basic principles of social democratic movements, the EU's fundamental values or (Western) democratic ideals, there has been hesitation to lead a strong opposition, many times out of fear that the working-class voter base of the social democratic parties would be lost to the radical right. The analysis from the mainstream left parties seems to have been that they have lost *credibility* on immigration or economic policy, and therefore, the traditional voting base is moving to the radical right.

But that analysis hardly stands up to closer scrutiny. Not only do the mainstream left often lose when they move too close to the centre-right or radical-right narratives, but they open doors to a newer kind of populism on the left, as can be seen in recent German state elections with the rise of BSW. And when the progressive parties adjust their policies to where they think the voters are in search of *credibility*, they might actually lose a lot of the credibility that was built on ideological foundations of welfare-state building, social cohesion of societies, or the principles of social justice and solidarity. In some recent elections, this can be claimed to have resulted in strong results not only for the “left” populists like BSW, but traditional left parties in the European elections in Finland or Sweden, or the *La France Insoumise* in the French Legislative elections.

For social democrats and the progressive parties to find new success, return to power and be able to deliver on their pledges, they

need a more thorough analysis of what they are ideologically, what their vision is and where the potential voters that share these values would be. In this contribution, I look at some data on where the voters are and ask if they have changed and could that explain the electoral malaise of the centre-left? And based on this, I aim to make brief recommendations on what the programme of social democrats could consist of going into the 2030s.

2. Where are the voters? Public opinion on some key issues in case study countries

There is a lot of research that implies that the voters are not where the social democratic parties seem to think they are and as discussed above, the election results seem to support that. So, the relevant question is, where are the voters? One way of trying to figure that out is to look at cross-national attitude surveys and changes in them over time. In this section, the European Social Survey (ESS) data is being used.² ESS strives to uphold high quality standards in its methodology and has a wide country spread that offers insights into the mindsets of Europeans across the continent and over time.

I look at aggregate data from different rounds of ESS over the last 20 years, mostly at the European level. This will obviously leave a lot of gaps in the analysis – country differences and generational or socio-economic differences are not considered at this time. The data for men and women is separated, but all other details have been left out. The aim of this section is to take a bird's eye view of if attitudes have changed in general and what the implications of these changes would be to European progressive actors.

2.1 Political self-identification and vote choice

As discussed before, in recent times, there has been a lot of talk about the rightward turn of male voters, and especially of young men. And when we look at the election results, the centre-right have dominated European politics for some time, and the radical right has been gaining support. Yet when people were asked to place themselves on the left-right axis in ESSs, the overall placement of men has remained fairly steady. It is women who have taken a leftward turn in the last ten years, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

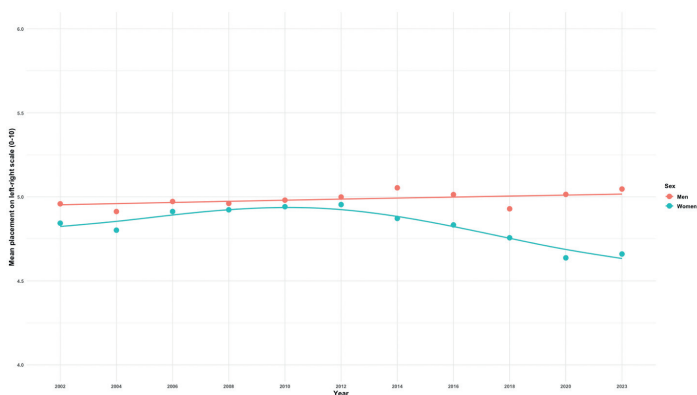


Figure 1. Self-placement of men and women on the left-right axis in ESSs (2002-2023).

Averages can obviously hide important information on differences between countries, but it appears clear that there is a strong and growing gender gap in self-placement between men and women. There have been similar findings in several other surveys and research as well. For example, a recent Shell Youth Study³ found that in Germany

young people described themselves as more politically interested and aware than in the past, and they said that they followed politics more. The political self-placement follows similar patterns to those in the ESS data in that young women are slightly more on the left than men, but in the Shell Youth Study more people place themselves further to right and left than in 2019, highlighting further polarisation among the young generation.

Looking at some country-level data, there are wide differences between the European countries on how and if the gender gap exists in political self-placement. From the graphs in Figure 2, we can see that the gender gap is more evident in some countries than in others. In countries where there is a strong radical right party, like Germany, Sweden, Finland, Spain or Netherlands, the gender gap seems particularly strong. Whereas in countries like the UK or Ireland, where either the electoral system or party landscape create different kind of dimensions, the gender gap is not as visible.

It is then clear that, at least in some European countries, a consistent gender gap exists, and it also seems to be widening. The change, on the other hand, is not caused by men moving rapidly to right, but mostly by women's movement to the left in their self-placement on an ideological spectrum.

A strong or widening gender gap creates obvious challenges to the parties. If the parties were to cater strongly to the gender gap, and thus, increase polarisation, that would unquestionably lead to challenges to democracy more generally as well. Add this to the fragmentation of the political landscape and move towards block politics seen in many European countries, and we can start to see the complexity of issues facing our democracies.

But, at the same time, the election results do not reflect this ideological self-placement of the electorate. As women are generally as likely to vote in European countries than men,⁴ the lack of participation

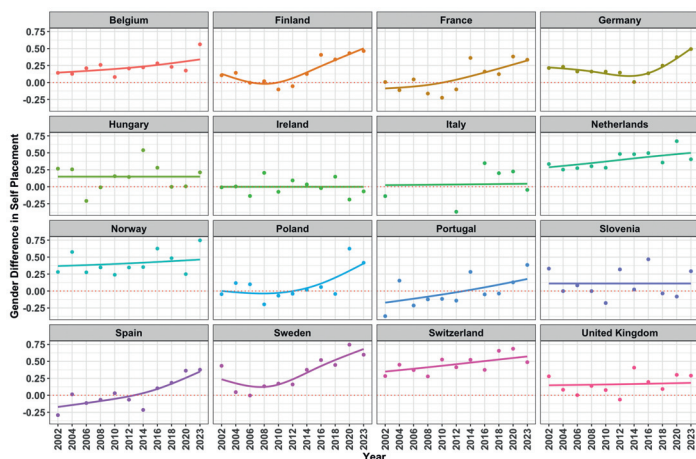


Figure 2. Gender differences in self-placement on the left-right axis in different European countries.

does not explain the difference. The question of election results can then be lot to do with parties offers, in other words as much or more about the supply than demand.

When we look at the ESS data on voting behaviour (Figure 3), we can find few key points to explain some of this.

A clear shift in the voting behaviour of women is evident in the data, but it happens a couple of years later than the change in the ideological self-placement spectrum.

But even so, the average self-placement of men on the ideological scale very close to the centre and of women clearly on the left still does not match with the election results or the past vote of the respondents presented in Figure 3.

Reasons for this can obviously be multiple. As the gender gap seems to appear in the mid-2010s and the trend is continuing – women keep moving further to the left – it should become more evident in

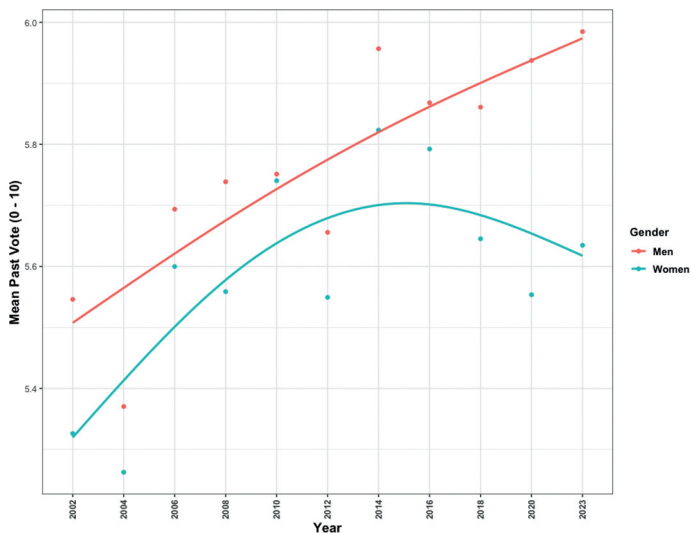


Figure 3. Voting behaviour of men and women based on mean vote (2002-2023).

future elections. We already see a gender difference in different parties' electorates, but not so much in the overall results.

At the same time, it appears that, at the point of decision, the vote does not land where the ideological position of the voter would suggest. And that raises the question of supply-side issues. Does the offer of current parties attract voters where they place themselves ideologically? It seems obvious to argue the answer is no.

To understand a little better what people are thinking, in the next section, I look at views on three issues that could be considered divisive on the left-right spectrum. Attitudes to redistribution signal more traditional economic views, whereas immigration and LGBTQIA+ rights are more cultural conservative/progressive issues.

2.1.1 Redistribution

Whether or not the government should redistribute and by how much is one of the most important political questions for Western democracies and the source of party identities. Social democratic parties across Europe have built their policies on modern welfare states on the principle of social justice and idea of fairness of creating more-level playing fields and redistributing wealth, resources and opportunities in their societies.

According to the ESS data, support for redistribution remains fairly stable in public opinion (Figure 4).

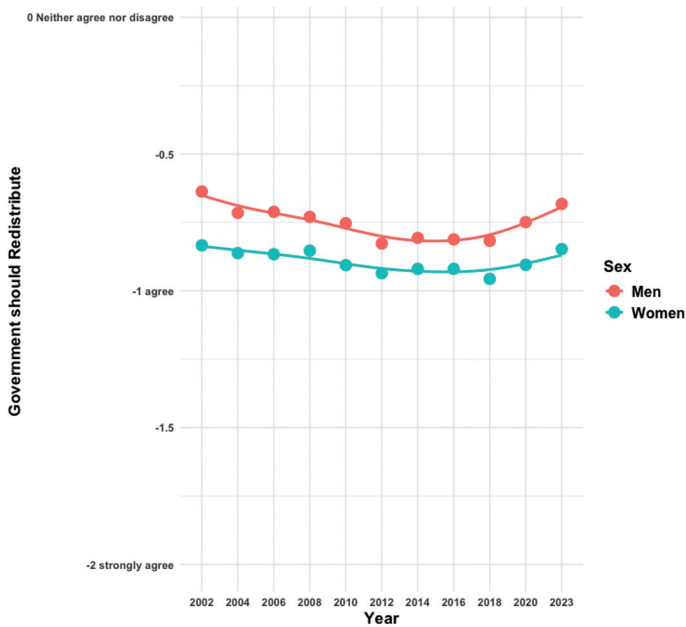


Figure 4. Gender differences in opinions on whether governments should re-distribute (2002-2023).

On average, Europeans lean somewhat to agreeing with the statement that governments should redistribute, but not very strongly. Women tend to be a little more favourable to redistribution than men, but the difference is not vast. There is also no significant change over time that would explain or coincide with the ideological shift. Therefore, it does not seem like the more traditional socio-economic left-right issue would explain either a growing gender gap or turn in political self-positioning of voters.

2.1.2 LGBTQIA+ rights

If the traditional social-economic redistribution indicator remains fairly stable, the newer cultural issues of measuring progressiveness

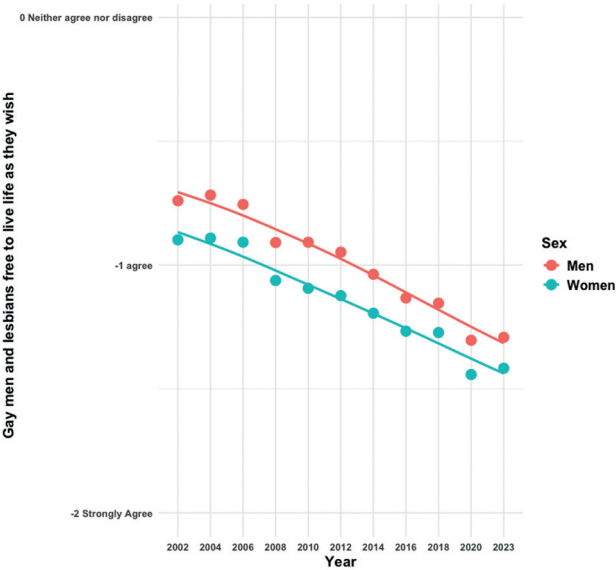


Figure 5. Gender differences in opinions on the rights of gay men and lesbians to live their lives freely (2002-2023).

of a society, like attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ rights, have not. Responses to a question of whether gay men and lesbians should be “free to live life as they wish” have moved significantly towards strong agreement over the last two decades (Figure 5).

Even if there is a small gender gap in the data, the change in attitudes is similar for both men and women over time and happening simultaneously. This indicates an overall change in attitude in European societies. In the 2020s, Europeans are getting closer to strongly agreeing than even “only” agreeing to that the LGBTQIA+ people should be free to live their lives as they wish. This again supports the discourse of European societies growing more liberal and progressive as a whole over time, but does not explain the gender gap.

2.1.3 Immigration

The idea of society becoming more liberal is also supported by a look into immigration attitudes data. Figure 6 shows data for two different questions: one on whether immigration is good for a country's culture; and the other on if immigrants make a country better or worse. On the latter, there has been a significant change in the respondents average thinking, from immigrants making a country slightly worse at the beginning of the millennium to respondents now, on average, thinking immigrants make their country slightly better.

This change in attitudes is similar for both men and women, with women taking a steeper progression into more positive attitudes. For the question on the impact of immigration to a country's culture (Figure 7), the difference between men and women is a lot more pronounced, but, overall, the average response has become more liberal over time.

Even as overall attitudes on immigration are becoming more progressive over time, here, we find a significant gender difference that would support the findings of women becoming more left leaning in response to this question than men.

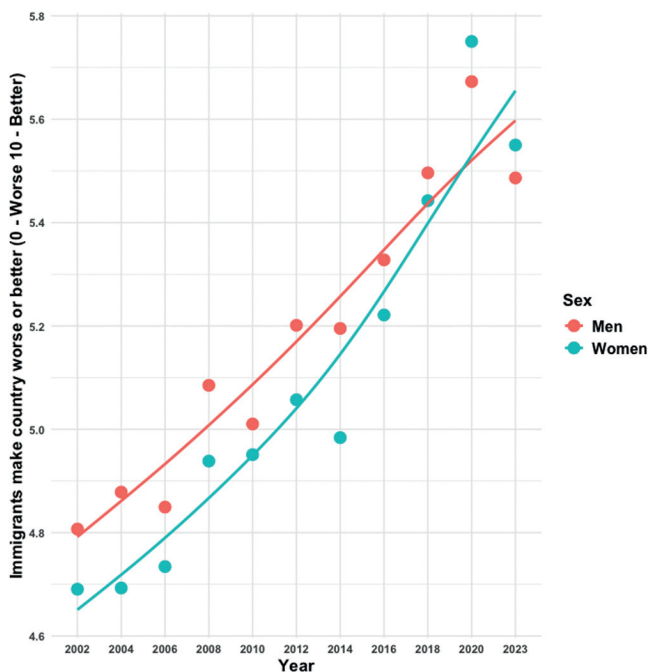


Figure 6. Gender differences in opinions on the influence of immigrants on a country (2002-2023).

Further analysis on generational differences and country levels would be very useful here to build a clearer picture of the changes and perhaps explain what is behind the much faster change in women's attitudes in comparison to men, but this will remain something for other articles to investigate. For the purposes of this piece, we can conclude that, based on the ESS data over the last two decades, there has been a clear shift in attitudes across Europe on immigration and migrants' impact on society. The change is not necessarily what one would ex-

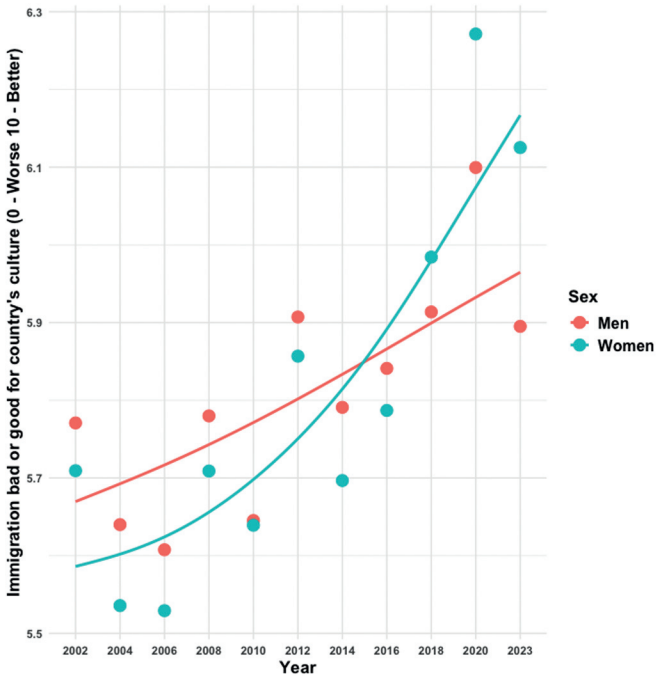


Figure 7. Gender differences in opinions on the influence of immigrants on a country's culture (2002-2023).

pect, considering the public discussion, but in line with the finding of especially women self-identifying stronger to the left than in the past.

3. Conclusions

In general, the data from the selected indicators show that, despite what the political narratives might be, the attitudes in European societies are moving in a more liberal and progressive direction, and voters

are more open to immigration and LGBTQIA+ rights, as they remain supportive of redistributive elements of welfare states.

The fact that this is not reflected in election results nor public narratives is an important question for any progressive actors to contemplate on. It seems that the stronger narratives of increasing support for far-right, conservative values and strict policies on cultural issues have won over many of progressive organisations and parties.

Many parties cater for the loudest of audiences, with a general fear of sounding out of touch if not doing so. And yet, this has not worked for the left. The strategy of accommodation chosen in many countries at one time or another has not worked in the way it might have been imagined. The support for radical-right parties has not diminished, and voters have not moved back to the traditional mainstream parties that have adopted their policies.

There is a lot of research on the topic showing why this is the case. For example, in a series of tests that analysed over 350 mainstream party strategies from 108 electoral contexts between 1976 and 2017, Abou-Chadi, Krause and Cohen concluded that they

find neither general nor conditional support for the claim that accommodative strategies significantly reduce support for the radical right. To the contrary, voters are on average more likely to defect to the radical right when mainstream parties adopt anti-immigration positions, a pattern that has been particularly pronounced for established RRP. ⁵

It has also been established, as in the data introduced above, that voters do not actually share the analysis of the mainstream left catering for radical-right pressures; there would need to be a shift towards austerity-driven economic policy or strict immigration policy to create credible alternatives. Instead, progressive voter coalitions could be built around a combination of economically left and culturally progressive positions. ⁶

3.1 What could the social democratic political project of the 2030s be?

The most important question facing progressive parties obviously is what the social democratic project of the next decades could be. To be parties that built the most successful, equal and competitive welfare states in the last century is no campaign slogan for future elections. The social democratic movement lacks vision and narrative, as has been pointed out in many fields in past editions of the *Next Left* book series. Being a safe pair of hands that stops the chaos⁷ might be enough to win one election, but it is not a vision to build consistent governance, mobilisation and movement for the success stories of the past.

The competition does better in this respect. The centre-right has a narrative of overgrown states that need to be stripped for economic success, and the radical right works on a combination of (leftist) nostalgia and blaming globalisation and immigration. The mainstream left fails to offer a strong alternative narrative that would defend the basic values of social democracy or the future of welfare states.

There are a lot of good individual policies, but with a lack of an overall vision for the direction of society, progressive actors are going to continue to struggle from election to election. What could be the story of social democrats going towards the 2030s?

3.2 Welfare state as credible politics?

From election to election, the commentators remark that the credibility in economic policy or taking the problems of immigration seriously are two of the key issues social democratic parties seem to be struggling with. These could be explained by growing inequalities and changing distributional conflicts, but the economic credibility is understood more and more as it is defined by the centre-right; as the ability to cut sovereign debt or balance state budgets in the short term. Since

the Financial crisis the ideological right has managed to project the idea that the only “credible” solution, more often than not, is cuts that “hurt” and allow politicians to claim that difficult decisions have been made. Usually, the pain must be faced by those already in disadvantaged positions, less advocating power or voters of other parties. And usually, the impact of austerity is not what was desired or promised. The sovereign debt continues to rise, and many European countries have placed themselves on slow growth tracks by the decisions taken by themselves. The centre-left has executed these austerity policies in many of the European countries during their time in power, solidifying the narrative and undermining their own principles of social justice.

On the other hand, taking the problems of immigration seriously has only come to mean lowering the number of immigrants, not improving integration, adding to language learning, or improving employment protection to stop the creation or continuation of two-layer labour markets.

To create real opportunities for winning, mainstream left parties should meet voters where they are. This would require them to find their way back to creating visions, listening and debating them with wider audiences, building narratives and campaigning on stories that change the lives of ordinary people. This could happen around the most successful and credible concept that European countries have seen and which still has wide support: the welfare state. We know that the happiest, most productive, inclusive and innovative people live in societies where their basic needs are protected, where the social contract allows for trusting in a better future for oneself and one's children.

Social democrats should come back to this story, to build upon it and create a model of societies that protect, educate and create freedoms for people to live, innovate, fail and try again. As discussed above, there are volumes of research indicating that this is also what centre-left voters would want.⁸ As shown above, there are more voters

that self-identify as left of centre than how they vote in elections. With matching the supply of a programme, they could be an electoral force to change the singular paths of European narratives.

The programme that could win would need to be *credible* in a very different way to how that word has been used in the recent past. In light of the attitudes displayed in the data above, there should be demand for a progressive party that is consistently culturally progressive and economically left. The programme offered would have to include economic policy that builds a solid welfare state with the aim to redistribute and decrease inequalities in wealth and living standards. It would have to be pro-immigration but with a strong emphasis on integration and equal labour market rights for all to stop exploitation.

Endnotes

- 1 See extensive discussion on the topic in the Klaus Welle & Federico Ottavio Reho (Eds.) (2025) "Christian Democracy, Conservatism and the Challenge of the Extremes". Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies.
- 2 I would like to thank Ben Ginsburg Hix for brilliant data analysis and the graphs used in this section.
- 3 Albert, M., G. Quenzel and F. de Moll (2024) *Jugend 2024. 19. Shell Jugendstudie* (Weinheim: Beltz).
- 4 Zamfir, I. (2024) "Women in politics in the EU - state of play in 2024". European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing, March.
- 5 Krause, W., D. Cohen and T. Abou-Chadi (2023) "Does accommodation work? Mainstream party strategies and the success of radical right parties". *Political Science Research and Methods*, 1(11): 172-179. DOI:10.1017/psrm.2022.8
- 6 See for example: Abou-Chadi, T. and S. Häusermann (2024) "The myth of a divided Left". Research Brief Series 1: Rethinking Progressive Politics Based on Facts Rather than Myths. Progressive Politics Research Network, p. 10.
- 7 See, for example: UK Labour Manifesto 2024.
- 8 Also, see my article "Can social democrats build a winning coalition of voters?" in *Next Left*, vol. 15, on possible voter coalitions around different issues.

THE PROGRESSIVE COMPASS



Patrick DIAMOND

**Reimagining the state?
Rebuilding public capacity
in the post-market liberal era**

1. Introduction

Not surprisingly, the issue of the strategic role of the state has long animated the ideological debate about social democracy in Europe. The state has traditionally been central to social democratic ideas and programmes. Both the post-war welfare state and activist Keynesian macro-economic management implied a wide-ranging role for the state. From the 1940s, there was a political consensus in Western Europe that the state's central functions were to stabilise the economy, to ensure an adequate supply of public goods, and to redistribute resources between social groups and class interests. There is inevitably variation across national regimes in the approach to the state. For example, in the literature on varieties of capitalism, co-ordinated market economies require a strong state to broker agreement between interest groups and negotiate consensual economic policies. On the other hand, in liberal market economies, the state's role is confined to enabling business competitiveness by investing in human capital and the skills of the national workforce.¹

Several distinctive ideological conceptions of the state's role have emerged on the left in recent decades. The first, closely associated with New Labour's advocacy of a third way for the centre-left, insisted that the state was being reconstituted as a consequence of globalisation. The political theorist, John Gray, among others, maintained that social democracy faced a fundamental threat given that the state had lost its fiscal capacity and political authority, as global market forces undermined nation-state Keynesianism and welfare capitalism that had prevailed since the Second World War. Many obituaries for the welfare state have been being written. Even sociologists of the welfare state, such as Gosta Esping-Andersen, claimed by the early 2000s that the welfare state was in "crisis", partly as a result of instability generated by alterations within global capitalism, alongside demographic and so-

cial changes that made welfare states less fiscally sustainable. More recently, scholars have charted the “shrinking” of UK state capacity, which has widened inequalities between households and geographical areas.² As such, the fracturing of the state more generally meant that, according to Gray, we were witnessing the “end” of social democracy.

Yet arguably Gray's analysis ignored the evidence that nation states were devising new means of exercising power (a shift that political scientists label “meta-governance”). As Geoff Mulgan has written: “The basic powers of governments have not diminished [...] the idea that governments have become impotent is an illusion, albeit one that can provide a useful alibi”. Mulgan observed that states retain their capacity to raise taxes and spend public resources; they can more comprehensively resolve collective-action problems from organised crime to environmental degradation; states have further enhanced their role in relation to dealing with long-term challenges from early childhood disadvantage to the demographic pressures of an ageing population. Moreover, there is little evidence that in affluent advanced economies exposed to heightened domestic and geo-political risk, citizens wish to eschew the protective capacity of the state.

As such, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, there was growing confidence on the left, in Europe at least, that “the state was back”. In the wake of the crash, it was the state that had allegedly “saved” capitalism and the banking system, propped up capital markets, acted as an employer of last resort, and sought to protect workers and households from the severity of the economic shock. The financial crash had struck like an earthquake at the heart of the market liberal institutions, practices and beliefs of previous decades. The central question of the crisis was whether it would rejuvenate nation-state social democracy by stimulating new strategies on which a revived programme of egalitarian prosperity and social welfare might be built.

The task was to frame a response such that social democracy could benefit from the new openness to ideas in domestic and world politics against a residual “neo-liberalism” that framed the financial crisis as the product of an over-bearing state.

More than 15 years since the 2008 Great Financial Crash, however, confidence in the state has rapidly receded. There are few examples anywhere in Europe of social democratic governments fashioning an intellectually coherent and reimagined conception of the state. This point alludes to the changing nature and form of the state in many liberal democratic countries. Social democracy has been historically dependent on state capacity and political authority, although in a number of EU member-states, even centre-left governments appeared to acquiesce to fiscal austerity. Meanwhile, states have been losing democratic legitimacy. The size and complexity of the state makes it more and more difficult for citizens to understand who makes decisions, and who should be held accountable. Large-scale, unaccountable bureaucracies risk fuelling citizen disengagement and declining trust in the political system.

Meanwhile, the development of new technologies and scientific innovation increasingly places decision-making power in the hands of regulators, experts and owners of social media companies, putting further pressure on modern liberal forms of representative and participative democracy. There are other pressures on the traditional social democratic conception of the state, such as the fiscal burdens associated with the ageing society and changing demography that are unlikely to disappear. Are social democrats capable of developing a governing strategy that can confront such enormous structural challenges?

Although the nation state has become the principal bastion in the fight against financial and economic instability, its “golden age” is seemingly behind us. There is now an urgent need for new capacities and instruments to wield collective power locally, nationally and globally. For

social democracy, however, that will require a shift of mindset, given the long-held fixation with the levers of power exercised through the bureaucratic nation state. Citizens will have to be engaged in a more wide-ranging dialogue about the nature of economic prosperity, interdependence and the meaning of sovereignty, enabling the centre-left to regain ownership of a changing internationalist agenda, whether through European integration, climate change or the response to humanitarian crises.

Yet European social democracy has yet to undergo the rethinking necessary to make a success of governing in a new era. It has not so far found a convincing answer to why the demise of 1980s market liberalism led to a political focus on the size and efficiency of the state, rather than the inherent dysfunctionality of markets. The danger is that left parties have little idea of what to do with power in the aftermath of victory. Lacking direction, they quickly flounder, facing catastrophic defeat only a few years later. This is the terrain on which left-of-centre parties have to forge new electoral strategies and political identities. That means bringing ideas back into the mainstream of European social democracy.

To undertake that task, this contribution is structured in the following way. Section 2 examines the predicament facing the British Labour Party as it returned to power in the UK after 15 years in the electoral wilderness. Then Section 3 considers the preliminary thinking that has emerged within social democracy in recent years about the future form and conception of the state. Section 4 addresses the emerging dilemmas of Labour's state strategy and the implications for its approach to statecraft having returned to power, before finally tentative conclusions are drawn.

2. British Labour in power again

The context in which the Labour government in the UK has come to power is scarcely propitious. The new administration was elected on a manifesto of *Change*.³ It is not difficult to see why. The 2024 general election cemented a belief among voters that the UK state was no longer working effectively after 14 years of Conservative-led government. Public services, undercapitalised and underperforming, had descended into a parlous state. The much-lauded “post-Brexit” levelling-up agenda failed to reverse – or even moderately reduce – widening geographical inequalities. And while the acute economic dislocation stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine had dissipated somewhat, the failure to secure a satisfactory post-Brexit settlement still blighted the UK’s political and economic landscape.

The British state, increasingly fractured and incoherent, appeared to many as broken or even a failed state.⁴ Overall, government borrowing was at its highest level since the 1940s, while the stock of public sector debt was at its highest point since the 1960s.⁵ The UK was a striking example of how a persistently weak economy led to a high burden of personal taxation, alongside a high level of public debt.⁶ The public finances were stretched to breaking point, while public services had already endured 15 years of underinvestment and mismanagement. Confidence in the state was receding rapidly.

Out of necessity, the impact of recent domestic and external shocks, the belief that “nothing worked” in public services, and the depth of the fiscal predicament in the UK encouraged Keir Starmer’s team to cautiously outline a new model of the state. The Starmer government’s approach represents a tentative attempt to rebuild state and public sector capacity in the UK during the new hard times.

Nevertheless, Labour’s conception of the state remains, at best, a work in progress. The grim nature of the party’s inheritance has

meant that the new administration has little time or space to reflect on how best to elaborate a revised model of statecraft. Centre-left thinking about the state remains largely inchoate 15 years after the 2008 crisis undermined the traditional social democratic model based on rising levels of public expenditure and welfare, even if the market liberal growth model has remained largely intact.⁷ What can be observed in the wake of the 2024 general election are various strands of thinking about the shape of the state yet to be moulded into a coherent project. The next section briefly examines these emerging ideas.

3. New thinking about the role of the state

The British Labour Party's approach to the state attempts to rebuild state and public sector capacity in three principal ways, even if this approach is still work in progress. Firstly, by forging an active industrial policy. Secondly, by developing a "mission-based" approach to government that can more effectively tackle public policy problems. And thirdly, by reorganising the public sector, downgrading the influence of new public management (NPM) doctrines in favour of collaborative public governance.

The first strand of Labour's approach is so-called "securonomics", drawing on the policy agenda of the Biden administration in the USA. The core priority for the Labour government is unquestionably to improve economic growth. Growth is judged to be necessary, not least to improve living standards, which have been stagnant for more than a decade, while increasing investment in public services. Labour has set out five core missions for government. Chief among them is the party's ambition to achieve the highest rate of growth in the G7 economies. Britain's growth potential has been undermined since the financial crisis by its relatively poor productivity performance and long-standing regional disparities.⁸

President Biden's economic programme sought to provide a blueprint, including an active industrial strategy, "pro-worker" policies, and regional regeneration and innovation. Collectively worth \$3.8 trillion, the Inflation Reduction Act, the Infrastructure, Investment and Jobs Act, the American Rescue Plan Act, and the CHIPS and Science Act have been described by Mark Muro of the Brookings Institution as "remarkable" – not only for the eye-watering level of investment, but because resources are being directed at place-based industrial policy.⁹ As Muro remarks, these are, "direct investments in underdeveloped places and regions [...] to advance national goals such as strengthening domestic supply chains, promoting international economic competitiveness, and mitigating the impacts of climate change".

Industrial policy in the USA explicitly links national economic performance with the revival of struggling cities and regions in industrial heartlands. The Inflation Reduction Act targets spending on so-called "energy communities", defined as significant brownfield sites and coal-field areas with high fossil-fuel employment and higher than average unemployment.¹⁰ Similarly, the regional tech hub competition – part of the CHIPS and Science Act – is allocating new research and development funding to regional centres away from the "superstar" cities on the east and west coasts of the USA. As former US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen has reiterated: "We expect to see dollars catalyse innovative investments across cities and towns that haven't seen such investment in years".¹¹

This approach acknowledges the "fundamental under-appreciation of the role of government" and the need for an "active, co-ordinating state" at both "federal" and state or city levels. There is a widely held belief that governments are pre-eminent actors in driving growth-enhancing initiatives. It is believed that active government intervention will spur the clean energy transition, reduce bills for consumers and create additional blue collar industrial jobs. The argument is that government's

role must focus on active industrial policy that harnesses technological change and innovation. Another dimension of Bidenomics is protecting the US from impending national security threats, particularly by strengthening industrial manufacturing capacity, given the rise of China and other authoritarian regimes. The administration has been prepared to use tariffs, trade sanctions and investment controls to revive domestic supply chains.

Although the bridge across the Atlantic between progressives has not recently proved as fertile as during the Clinton presidency (in part, because Biden proved to be a weaker president, while questions remain about the efficacy of his economic programme and its continuation under the Trump presidency), this approach has solidified British Labour's confidence about the nascent role of the state in the economy. While the UK does not have the fiscal firepower and federal capacity available to US governments, it can seek to build them.

The second strand of British Labour's thinking about the state draws on the economist Mariana Mazzucato's makeover of the notion of the "entrepreneurial state"; this time under the guise of "mission-orientated" government. Like Bidenomics, the approach speaks to the absence of state machinery that is necessary to stimulate growth in the British economy, a problem that was originally identified in the 1960s. Mazzucato advocates an active role for the state in the economy that extends beyond tackling egregious market failure: government should be willing to take risks; invest in emerging growth sectors; and promote sectoral innovation. It is a myth that the private sector is necessarily more efficient and dynamic than the public sector, Mazzucato argues. The Labour government's commitment to "mission-driven government", it is claimed, will:

[...] focus on a long-term problem, and apply a long-term plan. Our missions will tackle complex problems that have no magic-bullet solutions and need many players and agencies, national and local, work-

ing on them. They will be common causes to which many people will want to contribute, and, importantly, the missions will have measurable outcomes – ambitious but attainable goals that go beyond the incremental. They will require a huge effort and urgency to succeed. And they will start with tangible first steps that deal with the immediate crises – the cost of living, the NHS – to restore people's sense of security.¹²

This work on mission-driven government is intended to address long-standing issues of British state capacity. The missions approach recognises the need for “joined-up” government that tackles policy problems collaboratively, rather than being trapped within bureaucratic silos, while integrating the activities of public sector agencies. There is an emphasis on mobilising a coalition of stakeholders to address societal challenges, not only government but the public and private sectors, civil society, not for profit organisations, social enterprises, and so on.

It has to be said that many questions about mission-driven government remain as-yet unanswered. For example, will the mission boards intended to oversee the Starmer government's policy agenda amount to anything other than rebadged cabinet committees or independent task forces co-opted by Whitehall departments? What are the political and fiscal incentives that will encourage public agencies to co-operate beyond optimistic exhortation from the centre? Leaving Whitehall's traditional top-down, department-focused accountability structures untouched has long been an impediment to substantive change. These issues will need to be resolved if mission-based government is to flourish.

The third strand of thinking about the state is the attempt to define a new model for managing the public sector that addresses the dysfunctionality and pathologies of so-called NPM doctrines. The UK was a leader in the absorption of NPM ideas in the 1980s and 1990s, but that approach to public management has been increasingly influential

throughout much of Europe. Centre-left think tanks in the UK, notably, the *Institute for Public Policy Research*, *New Local* and *Demos*, have sought to map out a new post-NPM framework. Their efforts are inevitably a work in progress. There is a widespread rejection of market-based competition in public services, yet the alternative models based on collaboration, trust, networks, systems thinking and “community power” remain embryonic at best.

These ideas are already evident in the Labour government's approach. There is a shift away from public sector outsourcing and contracting with the private sector, at least in local government services. In social care, both children's and elderly care, a process is underway to reduce the role of private equity in the ownership of care providers. Elsewhere, the ownership of railway companies will gradually be brought back within the state-owned entity, *Great British Railways*. The clean energy transition is to be powered by a public sector agency, namely, *GB energy*. It is quite possible that other public utilities, such as water and gas, will be brought back into public ownership over the next few years. The privatisation agenda of the 1980s and 1990s will not be entirely reversed, but the cumulative effect of such changes is to give the state a much greater role in public provision and the economy.

Of course, NPM is a nebulous concept, while many public services retain elements of NPM that are unlikely to be dismantled, notably, the emphasis on performance frameworks, targets and external regulation through inspection. Ministers are likely to focus on how the failings of NPM should be remedied within specific services, such as the National Health Service and social care, not least by giving additional discretion to frontline practitioners and managers.

Overall, the new Starmer government is forging an approach to statecraft that uses the state to improve British economic performance and stem the crisis in public services, while improving the resilience and strategic capacity of government. Yet, as we have seen, Labour's

statecraft is a melding of disparate ideas and traditions on the left that is yet to cohere into a systemic model of government action. The approach is replete with dilemmas that are likely to make the task of governing competently in Labour's first term challenging, to say the least.

4. Statecraft dilemmas

Here, we focus on three major statecraft dilemmas that have surfaced so far in Labour's approach to the role of the state. The analysis draws on the experience of the British Labour party but the implications are relevant to social democratic parties across Europe. The first is the *fiscal* dilemma. If the new government adheres to the fiscal rules it inherited, as it promised in its 2024 manifesto, that will inevitably mean lower spending, constrained borrowing or higher taxes in forthcoming budgets. To secure adequate funding for public services and future borrowing for investment, the government will have to strengthen the UK tax base. Yet Labour had already ruled out raising income tax, National Insurance or purchase taxes (VAT) for 'working people'.

Another approach is to revise the government's fiscal rules, especially the promise of a falling debt-to-GDP ratio by the fifth year of the forecast. The OECD recently warned that pursuit of a falling debt-to-GDP ratio implied self-defeating policies for the UK, not least the postponement of critical capital investment. The UK does not currently require fiscal consolidation; significantly greater public sector investment is the priority. Moreover, such investment 'pays for itself' in growing the productive capacity and potential of the economy. Without investment, the UK is condemned to a cycle of low growth, high taxes and stagnating real living standards.

Yet to rebuild state capacity in the long term and deliver sustained improvement in public services, the government will have to strengthen the tax base further. There is currently chronic underfunding. An age-

ing society not only means higher demand on the health service and social care, but implies a tighter labour market (particularly if net migration falls) and higher public sector wages. Gambling on rapid efficiency gains from public sector reform, and higher tax revenues from accelerated economic growth, is hardly prudent policy making.

Given all this, if the UK wants an adequate welfare state and decent public services in the future, voters will have to be prepared to pay higher taxes, including on income. The income tax system should be as progressive as possible, yet voters across the income distribution will have to contribute more, as they do in many Northern European countries. Many voters increasingly understand that reality. A recent Social Attitudes Survey revealed that almost half (48%) of British voters supported higher taxes linked to increased funding for the National Health Service (NHS).

The dilemma is that Labour fears an adverse political reaction if the government pursues either of these “hawkish” or “dovish” approaches. Abandoning fiscal prudence will, they believe, be judged as economically reckless. Public debt spiked after the shocks of the early 2020s, while the National Institute for Economic and Social Research (NIESR) observed that private investors would have to absorb an increasing share of debt issuance given the winding back of the Bank of England’s quantitative easing programme. To minimise the risk of spiking interest rates, the government will remain committed to a broadly orthodox macro-economic regime. Meanwhile, the UK tax burden is at the highest level since the 1940s, while Labour fought the last election on a platform of not raising taxes on “working people”.

The second dilemma relates to *accountability*. If the state plays a much greater role in the provision of public services and the regulation of economic activity, how is it best held accountable? Recent experience indicates that established mechanisms of parliamentary and ministerial accountability are not working effectively. Accountability

structures in the British state are judged to be, at best, ineffectual. Citizens frequently complain that it is impossible to know who or what is in charge of key services or what to do when things go wrong, such is the labyrinth of regulators, inspectorates and public bodies.

The incoming government has ambitious proposals for new state-owned operators and agencies, but how should these public bodies be held accountable by citizens? The risk is that with increased public ownership, poor performance in sectors such as rail and energy will be blamed directly on central government and its public face – elected ministers. There is an accountability deficit in the UK, which will be exacerbated by significantly expanding the size of the state and public sector. Strengthening accountability will be crucial in restoring citizen's confidence in the state.

The third dilemma concerns *centralisation*. The UK (and England in particular) is among the most centralised of the advanced economies. There is a danger that the expansion of state capacity merely reinforces the existing pattern of endemic centralisation. Such is the extent of centralisation in the UK that it will be necessary to provide cities and regions with practical levers to drive local economic growth, especially in parts of England that previously experienced rapid deindustrialisation, leading to declining economic performance and stubbornly low productivity.

As such, devolution must tackle the root causes of democratic discontent, moving decision-making closer to citizens, while giving those in “left behind places” greater control over the decisions that affect them. It is striking that the governance structures of historically high-growth economies, notably Germany and the USA, are underpinned by significant regional and state-level autonomy.¹³ This contrasts with the fragility inherent in the UK model, not least endemic over-centralisation, weak co-ordination, policy churn and short-termism, accompanied by a lack of understanding of how policies should be enacted beyond

central government. Devolution is an antidote to the prevailing “geography of discontent” that plagues peripheral regions.¹⁴ Yet, if expanding public sector capacity merely draws more fiscal and decision-making power into the centre, marginalised localities are much less likely to feel the benefit of social reform and political change.

5. Conclusion

Thus far, Labour’s governing project in the UK does not yet represent a coherent vision of a reimagined state. That will require a commitment not only to “missions” but to significant institutional reform and devolved decision-making and fiscal powers at the sub-national level. It also entails a sustained increase in public investment. However, the Treasury is committed to retaining the fiscal rules of its predecessor, while the new Finance Minister is adopting a cautious approach, pinning hopes for future growth largely on a fall in long-term interest rates and the return of private-sector dynamism.

Labour’s experience in the UK indicates that social democratic parties in Europe have some way to go in fashioning a coherent view of the state to underpin their core ideas and programmes. There are few intellectually cogent models of state action in other European countries that offer a template for centre-left parties in power elsewhere. The state in many ways has exhibited extraordinary resilience in recent decades, while there is little evidence anywhere in Europe that citizens are prepared to abandon the state in favour of *laissez-faire* individualism.

Nonetheless, frustration and disillusionment with the state have been rising, fuelling the precipitous decline of trust in liberal democracy and empowering populist political forces. The goal for social democrats remains to fashion a state that works, not one that withdraws, which means facing up to the fundamental dilemmas of modern statecraft. There is the basis for a new consensus on strengthening state

and public sector capacity across Europe, but that will require facing up to difficult trade-offs and dilemmas in policy and politics in the years ahead.

Endnotes

- 1 Iverson, T. and D. Soskice (2019) *Democracy and Prosperity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- 2 Lobao, L., M. Gray, K. Cox et al. (2018) "The shrinking state? Understanding the assault on the public sector". *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 3(11): 389-408. DOI: 10.1093/cjres/rsy026
- 3 "Change: Labour Party manifesto 2024". Labour Party, 2024.
- 4 Richards, D., S. Warner, M. J. Smith et al. (2022) "Crisis and state transformation: Covid-19, levelling up and the UK's incoherent state". *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 1(16): 31-48.
- 5 "Fiscal risks and sustainability, 2024". Office for Budgetary Responsibility, 2024.
- 6 Johnson, P. (2024) "How is the tax burden at all time high when most of us are taxed so low". *The Times*, 18 March.
- 7 Hay, C. (2013) "Pathology without crisis? The strange demise of the Anglo-liberal growth model". *Government and Opposition*, 1(46):1-31.
- 8 "A 'mission driven' government to end 'sticking plaster' politics". Labour, 2023.
- 9 Muro, M., R. Maxim, J. Parilla et al. (2022) "Breaking down an \$80 billion surge in place-based industrial policy". Brookings Institution, 15 December.
- 10 'Inflation Reduction Act: A Summary', Bipartisan Policy Centre, https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Energy-IRA-Brief_R04-9.26.22.pdf
- 11 Yellen, J. (2022) "Remarks by Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen at Ford Rouge Electric Vehicle Center". U.S. Department of the Treasury, 8 September.
- 12 Starmer, K. (2023) "Kier Starmer: This is what I believe". *The New Statesman*, 1 March.
- 13 McCann, P. (2016) *The UK Regional-National Economic Problem: Geography, Globalisation and Governance* (London: Routledge).
- 14 Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2018) "The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it)". *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 1(11): 189-209. DOI: 10.1093/cjres/rsx024



Ania SKRZYPEK

**Freedom – is the struggle nowadays
with it or for it?**



The electoral results across Europe tell a rather terrifying story about the surge of the far-right-wing parties. The contemporary narrative necessitates that they are referred to in that rather euphemistic and domesticated manner, which may be rather misleading. It seems to suggest certain heterogeneity among the parties that fall into this category,¹ on one hand, and, on the other, it makes them sound perhaps less terrifying than if one were to use more precise terms – if applicable – such as *fascists*. Accordingly, the world of politics consents somewhat to the idea that the new xenophobic, homophobic, racist and ultra-nationalists have close to nothing in common with the organisations that spread terror and committed atrocities a little over half a century ago. It is easy to fall for this approach, especially since the new generation of these parties' politicians seems so subtle, well-spoken or even sophisticated, comforting and attractive when they resort to unacceptable narratives. Moreover, they appear so deceitfully modern and, in many cases, youthful that one can easily fall for their self-confidence, which is a somewhat welcome contradiction to the sense of insecurity that is daunting to many in these uncertain contemporary times.

Evidently, each of the national political systems has its own specificities.² And there is also always a set of contextual reasons why these right-wing radical, extremist and populist parties are experiencing – what looks to become – more and more glorious momentum. In Austria, in the September 2024 general elections, FPÖ managed to win almost one third of the votes; in France, the overwhelming result for the Front National in the European elections was a reason for President Macron to call for snap elections; in Saxony and Thüringen, the results prompted a rush to re-introduce controls at the German borders and to try to counter arguments about uncontrolled migration, preventing the same outcomes from also being noted in Brandenburg. The situation isn't much different in

Scandinavia and South or Central and Eastern Europe. An example of the latter is the current polling ahead of the presidential elections in May 2025, whereby *Konfederacja* and their candidate, Slawomir Mentzen, are polling steadily in third place, with a quarter of voters behind them. Though particularities vary, depending on the respective national contexts, across these elections, there seem to have been some common trends – and within them, while they attract young voters, there has been a clear split within the group of these cohorts. Young women lean towards progressive and green parties, while young men are somewhat close to being core voters of the radical right. It is a bizarre phenomenon, especially within this age group, which has been showing a strong inclination towards gender deconstruction and pleading not to identify themselves by any gender, in fact. Amongst the electoral statistics, it looks like the rage of *angry white men* is not just a singularity that drove, for example, youngsters to march onto Capitol Hill in January 2021,³ but rather a broader experience. It seems to have spread elsewhere, including in Europe.

Analysts debate if that is indeed an angle from which the rise of the radical right wing can be explained, but as the issue persists, so does the question of why there would be such a split. While volumes have been written about the radicalisation, polarisation, fragmentation and corrosion of the so-called traditional parties (here, social democracy included), there is a scarcity of views regarding why this trend exists. Subsequently, there is not much available yet concerning what kind of social impact it might have for ideas such as *uniting societies within a social contract* if the tendency is sustained. Is a *social contract* even plausible when the age cohorts drift so strongly apart from one another? And nor is there much to find when it comes to the question of how to counteract the growing divide, except a picture which shows that next to age, which has been

a focus point for many recently, family background still influences the way young people vote – even though it is a defining factor in a different way than it was in the past. Therefore, the new analyses point to a dealignment of voters, with cohorts with working-class origins moving away from the left, while the preference of citizens with parents that are socio-cultural professionals spans across choosing between green, left-libertarian and radical left parties.⁴

One of the interesting hypotheses that has emerged amid the conversation about the split in political preferences between young men and women at a FEPS seminar⁵ is that the current divide in votes reflects a diversified approach to understanding freedom. It was suggested that, for women, *freedom* is more about making choices and integrating and contributing to the community or society in a broad sense. At the same time, for men, the term freedom stands very much for the ability to reject the current order and have the capacity to make individual decisions. While it is just a theory, and by 2025 several serious experts in analysing data have suggested that this electoral divide between young men and women may have been a temporary issue, with more women now switching sides – it still leaves one pondering. It is the understanding of freedom and the differences here between left and right that really define the demarcation lines among the political parties and, subsequently, their respective electorates. Is there any relationship between this theme and the consideration of the volatility of voters and, by extension, the debate about the future of social democracy? To that end, how does the centre-left define freedom nowadays? And is that definition adequately prolific, modern and distinctive? Do the social democratic parties give citizens a chance to consider them as agents fighting in the name of freedom? And does that freedom still remain coherently framed in relation to equality and solidarity? These are the questions that provoked the research and writing at hand.

1. Freedom in the light of programmatic documents

To check the proverbial state of play, it seems most appropriate to start by analysing the programmatic documents of social democratic parties. For the purpose of this chapter, it is key to be selective – trusting that the well-balanced sample can offer enough material to draw at least general conclusions. In this spirit, the author seeks to look at the following parties: SAP in Sweden; Parti Socialiste (PS) in France; PSOE in Spain; PvdA in the Netherlands; SPD in Germany; SPÖ in Austria; Nowa Lewica in Poland; and the Labour Party in the UK. The selection of these eight parties represents the ambition to look at parties from different regions, and hence, treat them as potentially mirroring different trajectories of their historical developments and diverse contexts in which they operate. The latter refers to the observation that, within societies and, consequently, welfare systems,⁶ there may be different traditions as to what constitutes *freedom, emancipation and empowerment* and, if and to what extent, ensuring them is a collective or individual issue.

Furthermore, the empirical study is limited to the electoral programmes issued only and exclusively in 2024. This selection is dictated by the rigid word limit and an ambition to find a comparative basis for this particular chapter. It is further inspired by the deliberations described above – namely, to explore how far social democracy advocates for an updated concept of freedom and if that issue can indeed differentiate the support among potential voters. Of course, one can argue that casting a vote does not need to be done with full knowledge of what all the parties and candidates on the ballot paper say about one thing or another, as well as that few citizens read electoral documents. Nevertheless, in theoretical terms, this is as close as it comes to trying to see what parties believe and what

voters may hear if they listen to what social democrats have to say on the matter.

To that end, since 2024 was described as a “super-electoral year” – as half of the world’s population was involved in elections and many of them took place in Europe on a diverse governance level – potentially, it could be an option to analyse even more than one manifesto. However, after initial research, it seemed that it was necessary to be more selective to fit the limits of one article, on one hand, and, on the other, not to risk imbalances in the text (which would occur as not all the parties selected had to face more than one election, and there were some that would approach subsequent elections within a coalition – an example of which is PS, which went into the snap election within a broader formula of the *Nouvel Front Populaire*). As a conclusion of that reflection, the focus of the comparative study remained on the manifestoes that the parties analysed prepared for the European elections, with the exception of the UK Labour Party, which is the only one from outside the EU, and hence, could not participate in these. Nevertheless, the general elections in the UK and the European Parliament (EP) were held within a month of one another, and hence, there was reason to believe that working on this material was not contradictory but complementary.

2. Swedish Social Democratic Party: Freedom for the sake of sustainability and sovereignty

The European elections in Sweden could have been perceived as a type of mid-term election,⁷ since the country held its general election on 11 September 2022. This resulted in the Social Democrats (SAP) winning the largest number of votes but still not being in a position to form a government, and hence, moving into opposi-

tion. So, returning to the polling stations almost two years later, both parties and citizens viewed it as a chance to express their views on both European and domestic questions (perhaps even more on the latter). This makes these characteristic of the definition of “second-order” elections. In that context, and knowing the reserved Swedish approach to many aspects of European politics, it is understandable why SAP chose the title “Together for Sweden”,⁸ and why in the introduction, the party’s leader, Magdalena Andersson, stated as a goal, “I want to strengthen Sweden”.

Canvassing the document, one can establish that *freedom* is mentioned in two very specific contexts. The first one is connected to the geopolitical context and global challenges, and more particularly, the crossroads between the evolving conflict around global resources and the ambition to fight climate change. SAP insists on the following question: how can security and sovereignty be ensured and, consequently, eliminated in the country’s dependency on fossil fuels? The party articulates this ambition further in the section “Lead the green transition and fast track environmentally friendly jobs” as follows:

Sweden’s citizens cannot be dependent on rogue states to be able to drive their cars or heat up their homes. By transforming our industries and energy production, we will create [a] Sweden that is more secure, create new green jobs and reduce emissions.

The strategy for accomplishing this is threefold: (1) investment in green technology and ending the dependency on oil; (2) supporting Swedish industry; and (3) guaranteeing fair conditions (for the green jobs agenda). And *freedom* is mentioned as the underpinning value within the first one, as follows: *investments that are good for our environment will increase our country’s freedom, create jobs nationwide and reduce emissions.*

The second context in which SAP uses *freedom* is when it refers to geopolitical changes, but in much more direct relation to the historical nature of the moment within which the 2024 elections were held. The argument here is that the EU was formed as a project in *pursuit of peace, freedom and democracy, trade, and cooperation (that) have bound the member states together*. Departing from this angle means that SAP also perceives Russian aggression and the war in Ukraine as an assault on the European Community and its fundamental principles. They write, “The fight in the Ukrainian trenches is, therefore, about Ukraine’s right to freedom and democracy but also about us here in Sweden, about defending our way of life”. The text further makes a connection between what the Russian regime is about and the parallel dangers coming from right-wing populist and authoritarian forces rising in Europe and the USA and attacking the principle values as they do. The list of targets included in the document features, among others, assault on the free media, trade unions, academic freedom, abortion rights and LGBTQIA+ rights. To that end, SAP states, “The political struggle ahead is increasingly between freedom and oppression, between cohesion and division”. In that context, Swedish social democrats pledge within the text to (1) “create the conditions for faith and hope for the future. We want the EU to stand for stability, security, democracy and freedom. It is our protection against uncertainty in a changing world”; and (2) “ensure that all EU member states are well-functioning democracies that fight corruption and enable accountability in free and democratic elections”.

3. The French PS: Protecting freedoms amid historical confrontation

For the French PS, the European elections were a crucial moment domestically. The party has faced some of the most difficult times in its modern history, not only fading from election to election, but also reaching the point at which it had to let go of some important symbols of its standings – such as the famous headquarters at *rue Solferino* in Paris. To make matters worse, none of the waves of disenchantment seem to have provided an opportunity for a breakthrough from a trajectory that would see a prevailing struggle between President Macron's *La Republique en Marche* and Marine Le Pen's *Front National*. While in the run up it was not possible to foresee that the outcome would be so dramatic as to prompt snap elections, there was still no doubt that there was much at stake for PS in May 2024.⁹

Anticipating this, PS prepared a guiding document in autumn 2023 under the theme “*Faire basculer l'Europe. Du néolibéralisme vers le socialisme écologique*”.¹⁰ The text was composed of 54 pages and *freedom (liberté)* appeared 17 times. The manifesto opens with a diagnosis that points to Europe (the EU) finding itself in a profound and multilayered crisis, spanning across health, environmental and geopolitical dimensions. PS is convinced that the reason is the hegemony of neoliberalism that has been guiding the European project for too long. For left-wing parties (understood here more broadly), understanding this means that they have to assume their responsibility and actively change course. In the opinion of PS, their mission is to deliver social, ecological and democratic progress. And in the context of that ambitious objective, they see *freedom* as a guiding value translated into four political guidelines.

Firstly, *freedom* connects the deliberations with the assessment of the current geopolitical situation. In the introduction, PS remarks that the Russian aggression against Ukraine is among the pieces of evidence that there is growing international disorder and augmented confrontation, within which – as they write – “Europe can’t lose”. To that end, they believe that “Russian aggression is not only against Ukraine but against our freedoms and the European project, against European sovereignty”. And hence, they remind us that – while the EU was founded on aspiration, values, rights and responsibilities, democratic institutions, healthcare systems, and redistribution – the resistance of Ukraine is not only for itself but on behalf of all EU member states. This is why there is a need to stand in solidarity with Ukraine and remember that “we must collectively defend our freedoms like our way of life, and nobody will do it in our stead”.

This interpretation condenses to two points that PS makes when it comes to the implications of the above-mentioned factors and repeated in their manifesto notion of a *grand confrontation*. One has to do with understanding that, in this context, the strive to change direction towards *eco-socialism* is a historical fight for social justice and emancipation, the latter of which is understood as freeing oneself from the negative impact of the effects of climate change and energy dependencies, for example. It is about striving for openness and cooperation, which, in an internal context, is threatened by the rise of right-wing radicals – who had succeeded in other places, as PS states, to drive countries towards nationalism and an inward focus. They name Brexit as an example but also enlist other implications of the radical right-wing attempt to return to nationalism, which should make the left stand with their backs against *the walls and against restrictions of public freedoms, women’s rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and the stigmatisation of foreigners*. The other point is more narrowly defined in the scope of “security and defence”, whereby the

grand confrontation (and the Russian invasion of Ukraine) should in fact be seen as an incentive to intensify cooperation with other allies across the globe. The text states, “in partnership with the others, we will resist pressures of the imperialists and preserve democratic freedoms and freedom for trade across the globe”.

Secondly, PS defines *freedom* within the parameters of socio-economic policies. In the manifesto’s section on “Investing in a solidaristic manner”, the party argues that the EU must act to withstand the pressures of the model driven by multinational corporations and liberate itself from the prolific inequalities that corrode the Union. The term *freedom* is used in a very particular way: in relation to capital (emphasising that *science and progress for ecological transition require liberty and dialogue*) and in connection to the trade unions. PS writes, “We want a minimum salary [...] and a new social agenda that will see penalties for the countries that disrespect the trade unions’ freedoms or principle of equal pay and equal work, and will strive for the four-day working week”. The demand to preserve the freedom of trade unions and the freedom of association is also reiterated elsewhere in the manifesto when PS touches on worker’s rights again and demands for a new European pact for workers.

Thirdly, PS sees *freedom* as a component of the fight to *protect our democracies*. In one section, they demand that the EU does more to safeguard human rights, *freedom of expression, information, opinion, orientation and confession*. The same plea is repeated twice in the manifesto and included in the final paragraphs.

Fourthly, and finally, for PS, *freedom* should also be understood as a means towards emancipation and a key to unleashing creative potential. This is what is meant within a point that is also included towards the end of the text and touches upon the ambition of the *New European Enlightenment – youth, culture and research*. Consequently, to the belief that neoliberalism has been a hegemonic

philosophy and that, as a drive for capitalism, it has been corrosive, PS reiterates that the EU is responsible for doing more and fighting against privatisation and destruction of education. The latter must be seen and restored as a public good, which means that there must be a guarantee of free access to education for all, alongside insurance that all academics and researchers will enjoy full freedoms in their endeavours.

4. The Spanish PSOE: Freedom as a compass while dealing with conflicts and digital capitalism

Spain had yet another political context within which the European elections were taking place. By the time the elections approached, PSOE was in the government – led by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who in parallel was also president of the renewed Socialist International. Immediately after, he also became one of the two main negotiators for the Party of European Socialists (PES) for the post-electoral institutional settlement in the EU, and saw further recognition for the leading role he had both at the level of the European Council and within the progressive family. By May 2024, PSOE had successfully survived several electoral battles and a governmental coalition disappointment, as well as snap elections and crises that were caused by particularly vicious allegations and attacks orchestrated by right-wing extremes. The political landscape has been changing, but many feared growth in the popularity of VOX, which would be yet another trial for an otherwise two-plus partisan system in Spain.¹¹

Facing those challenges, PSOE adopted a European election programme of “*Más Europa*”,¹² which was an impressive document that was 104 pages long. Freedom (*libertad*) appeared in the text

23 times, starting from the first introductory paragraph. There, PSOE speaks about the upcoming elections as being decisive ones for Europe, stating that “Europe is the most exciting political project in history with a unique capacity to unite in plurality and diversity a Union, which is a space of common interests and build on social democratic principles – solidarity, rights, freedom and equality”. In the same section, it is repeated that the elections are an opportunity to reaffirm a compromise that would lead to more integration, which would then better represent the ambition of social values and progress. This type of Europeanism will be, in the opinion of PSOE, a way to work and adapt to changes, reinforce solidarity, and defend the European way of life. Especially since it is synonymous with peace, stability and sustainable development, as well as the protection of the wellbeing and freedoms (liberties) of citizens. To that end, in practical terms, PSOE translates the concept of *freedom* into five policy areas.

First of all, *freedom* is, for PSOE, a core EU value, but equally importantly, it underpins what they call *our democratic contract*. Consequently, it is one of the core principles referred to in the manifesto section on “Fiscal justice and social justice”. There, the party states:

We want fiscal systems that will guarantee growth and funds to finance and safeguard the rights and freedoms of the European citizenry. They need to be aligned with principles of equality and progressiveness, promote equality and opportunities, compensate for inequalities social and territorial and contribute to the equalisation of women and men.

These beliefs are complemented by further declarations, which clarify that PSOE is a strong supporter of the European pillar of social rights and the inclusion of a social protocol in all treaties, which for them is a way to ensure an equilibrium between rights and responsibilities, and more concretely, a path to elevate social entitlements to

the same degree of importance as the economic freedoms enjoyed in the EU.

Secondly, similarly to the other sister parties, PSOE recognises that this is a historic moment marked by confrontations and conflicts. Through these lenses, they agree that *the Russian attack on Ukraine represents an attack on democracy, rights and freedoms and will affect families and enterprises across Europe*. So, while the party sees that helping Ukraine and others to join the EU is *a moral obligation and geopolitical necessity to protect our system of freedoms, values and social and economic development model* – the Union itself requires reforms to be able to deliver on that responsibility. This is what PSOE calls for in the section “More federal Europe”, marking that the adjustments are essential to prepare for an EU of 35 member states. This section is complemented by statements that are included in another part of the text “Solutions for the open and democratic societies”. There, it is elaborated that *the EU, since the beginning, stands on the fundamentals of democratic values and respects of the fundamental rights and freedoms, equality between men and women, against discrimination of the minorities*. Hence, also, *our European project cannot continue without these freedoms, and we need to reinforce them*. The sense of urgency to do so is a real one since PSOE argues there is a continuing global tendency that shows a democratic regress, as well as the emergence of populist movements and ultraconservative parties, which – with the consent of traditional right-wing parties – infiltrate the political systems. This makes the party reiterate their call to rise and defend rights and freedoms. The same understanding is also embodied in another PSOE document, namely, the national election manifesto from the preceding year in the chapter “*Bloque IV – La España de las libertades y la convivencia*”.¹³

Thirdly, for PSOE, it is also important to emphasise that, though these are turbulent times, there should not be compromises made

on the achievements of the European project. This is the motivation with which the section on “Guarantee security” is drafted, whereby it is stated how much importance it carries for the EU to be a space of freedom, security and justice. Here, more specifically, the *free movement of people* is mentioned to illustrate the point. In the opinion of PSOE, it needs to be preserved and cherished, but the best way to do that is to ensure equilibrium in a dispute on how to protect the freedoms of citizens and, at the same time, protect them against terrorism and organised crime. This is a very relevant question, especially amid all the recent controversies and tensions around the Schengen zone, which saw some member states restoring border checks with temporary permission to do so.

The fourth policy area that PSOE applies the value of *freedom* to is related to democracy, media and digitalisation. One finds that, in the party’s opinion, “to defend liberty is to fight disinformation and radicalisation by promoting political debates and spaces for social exchanges”. PSOE recognises that European democracy has not been immune to manipulations and disinformation, so more must be done. One step is to defend media against populism while guaranteeing freedom of expression and freedom of the press, media, newspapers and other means of communication. This calls for a European media law with provisions that also safeguard editorial independence, set clear rules for social platforms, fight against disinformation online, and ensure transparency when it comes to media and digital sphere ownerships. Online or offline, the same principles must be upheld, such as respect for privacy, rules that guarantee cybersecurity and the protection of minors, the defence of freedom and pluralism, and cultural diversity.

Finally, *freedom* must also apply to policy areas focused on progress innovation. On one hand, this means defining the parameters within which research and developmental projects are being

conducted. And on the other, within the arts sectors, protecting the liberty of creation, respect for the work of authors, and freedom of expression and from censorship. Rights to and within culture should be guaranteed by EU legislation.

5. The Dutch Labour Party: Fight for freedom that is multidimensional and transcends borders

The Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) went into the European elections jointly with GroenLinks. At that point, the parties were not united, but just presented a common list and electoral platform. This represented an attempt to bounce back within the exceedingly volatile and progressively fragmenting party system, which was successful, since the joint forces won the battle. This was one among many, which may see further drift to confrontational politics in the Netherlands.¹⁴

The PvdA-GroenLinks election programme was entitled “*Sterker met elkaar. Voor een hoopvolle toekomst in een groen en sociaal Europa*”¹⁵ with the subheader that could be translated as “a secure and free existence for all, now and in the future, demands a social and green Europe”. The document consisted of 68 pages, and freedom (“*vrijheid*”) appeared 19 times within it. The tone of the document, set by the introduction signed by Bas Eikhoudt, was very affirmative towards European integration. It began with the following words:

Our country has become great because of its orientation towards the outside and towards international cooperation. [Within it w]e respect one another and we are free to be who we are. It is precisely in these values of solidarity, openness, cooperation and freedom that our country is bound with the other free countries in Europe.

Furthermore, however, the text points to the fact that Europe has changed, as extremists undermine efforts against climate change and European cooperation. Eikhoudt underlined that,

it is enough to look at their friends – Trump, Orban and Putin – to know what they want. This is what makes 2024 a crucial election for the Greens and Progressives to have their voice heard. Because together we can defend our democracy and protect freedom, while making our life together fairer and more sustainable.

Subsequently, the concept of freedom appears within five policy dimensions. First among them is the plea to *defend freedom*. The PvdA-GroenLinks manifesto states that rights and freedoms are for everyone and cannot be limited because of people's origins, identity, sexual orientation, gender or sex. For them, this is also a matter of repeating that this is a question of belonging, and as they wrote, "Everyone belongs here". This may sound rather defensive, but, to be accurate, it is a motivation that prompts them to propose both an overarching European antidiscrimination law and punitive sanctions which would ensure that governments breaking democratic principles would no longer receive funds from the EU. Their position here is firm and categorical, spelled out as "there is no place for the autocrats". In the strive to *defend freedom*, PvdA-GroenLinks argues that this fight doesn't end at the EU's borders, but, on the contrary, has to be extended beyond, especially while recognising the nature of the conflicts and war, in Ukraine and Gaza particularly. The statement points out, "The support of the US as a partner is much less self-evident. We keep supporting our allies in Ukraine, who fight for freedom and security", and one has to remember that it was coined before the US presidential elections and the return of President Trump to the White House.

The second policy dimension within which PvdA-GroenLinks defines *freedom* is amid the diagnoses of the state of democracy,

how to make it resilient and how to stand up for rights. Chapter 2 of the manifesto refers to the fact that *Europe is a democratic project*, which came to be after learning very hard historical lessons and *is constructed to enable everyone to be themselves, while putting shared interests first*. While this is a principle, it should mean that citizens can trust in the project and that the government will protect them from injustice, which currently is not the case across the Union. PvdA-GroenLinks observes that, while “an independent judiciary, the rights of minorities and freedom of the press are crucial pillars of our democracy that we cherish [...] these foundations of our democracy are increasingly under pressure”. While they reaffirm that they stand firmly for the rule of law in the Netherlands and Europe, more needs to be done to disempower the attacks of the right on these very principles. The manifesto states that these parties are adopting their extreme and anti-democratic ideology and projecting it on democratic institutions, including in the EP. And that their ambition remains to polarise, divide and make the EU a scapegoat for their accusations. PvdA-GroenLinks is convinced that the best defence is *to offer real solutions by making the EU more democratic and effective*. In their agenda, this translates into strengthening the protection of freedom and human rights, safeguarding free speech, and free media overall in the EU, building a democratic resilience and boosting civil society.

The third context to apply *freedom* is the dimension of *security, prosperity and solidarity across borders* – as outlined mainly in Chapter 3 of the manifesto. PvdA-GroenLinks offers the diagnosis that there is a progressing fragmentation and promptness to global conflicts, and that the EU must be the political player that is ready to maximise its influence, striving for international peace and showing leadership in the era of confrontation. They write as well that “the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a crosspoint for Europe. [...] Ukrain-

ians fight not only for their own freedom and security. They fight to protect our European values. And they deserve our unwavering support". To accomplish its mission of being a global stakeholder, the EU must keep upgrading in a number of areas. It starts from ensuring its *strategic autonomy, security and human rights* (Section 3.1), which should be synonymous with Europe being sovereign and independent, with the capacity to act (whereby Dutch progressives argue for 2% spending on defence and NATO). What is important is that the text emphasises that this strength should be built for the sake of having a say, continuing to pressure other actors to follow agreements on conventional and nuclear weapons disarmament, and especially to have a nuclear-weapons-free world. Moreover (as Section 3.4 reads), *in the times when peace is no longer self-evident*, deepening and expanding the EU gains further importance and meaning. The Union, in their opinion, has a bigger responsibility, and while the majority of neighbouring countries want a *democratic and free future*, the EU is obligated to provide them with support and a clear path towards potential accession.

The fourth dimension in which the concept of *freedom* is applied is connected to media, digitalisation and academic freedoms. With regard to the media, the manifesto stresses that media freedom is a key ingredient of a democracy. Henceforth, the EU should ensure media independence and conditions for both pluralism and editorial freedoms, fight against disinformation, media monopolists (oligarchs) and practices that lead to intimidation, hacking and attacks on journalists, politicians and activists. This argument is repeated in the text, but for anyone familiar with the Dutch context, this will not be a surprise.¹⁶ What PvdA-GroenLinks demands is that EU legislation (such as the SLAPPs directive) and funds are used to service that fight, with more being done to protect freedom of speech and the right of access to information (see, for example, manifesto point 2.1.4).

When it comes to digitalisation, PvdA-GroenLinks remains consistent in the rhetoric that brings forward progressive thinking against monopolies and unfair competition, as well as in favour of the progress translated into universally available public goods. Therefore, much attention is also spent on the question of “open source” (see point 2.3.7), which is explained in the following words:

The EU should stipulate that software developed or co-financed on behalf of a government is always published under free and open licenses. That makes the government less dependent on the tech giants and mainly stimulates European small and medium-sized IT companies that develop and maintain this software in an open manner. Governments are also encouraged to use existing open source softwares.

And with regard to academic freedoms (see point 2.6.5), PvdA-GroenLinks puts forward a demand that the EU steps up in its efforts to protect academic and artists’ freedoms. They recall that there are countries in which scholars find themselves under pressure (pointing here to Hungary), and make a connection between the freedom to create and express and humane development. In that logic, the document also presents a longer list of how they would then also not only safeguard the supply side but also for demand, by making culture and sports in particular more accessible (via tickets for concerts, museums and others).

Finally, the fifth area within which Dutch progressives embed their interpretation of *freedom* refers to the laws that already exist inside of the EU. The first block is connected to the right to free movement. There, PvdA-GroenLinks writes (see point 3.5) commenting on “work migration”: “the right to move freely and work in the EU is a great good, but it should and cannot be abused”. This statement is followed by recommendations on how to fight unfair competition, rise to the bottom and exploitation of what then becomes cheap

labour. The second block of questions connected to existing EU laws relates to consumer rights and consumer protection. PvdA-GroenLinks expresses the view that, with all the progress and modification in production methods, consumers must be protected and guaranteed free choice, and to that end have a right to be provided with adequate information on all products available.

6. German SPD: Freedom as the foundation for a better world and internal democracy

The German SPD went to the European elections at a challenging time. The governmental coalition, with SPD as the lead, was polling poorly, and internal conflicts escalated to the point of threatening a possible snap election. This happened at the end of February 2025, following the failure to agree on the budget in autumn 2024. To that end, the party was aware of internal and external challenges, as well as of the fact that the unpopularity of the Chancellor at that time might have a further spillover effect and lead to voters punishing SPD for the situation at hand.

As a response to these and other concerns, SPD approached the elections with the program “*Gemeinsam für ein starkes Europa*” (Together for a Stronger Europe).¹⁷ In the introduction, it is clearly stated that this is a crucial document for the SPD, which sees itself as a *Kanzlerpartei*, and hence, also carries much of the responsibility for the European future. They emphasised that this was a time to stay together (at home and in the EU), and not to let divisions rip Europe apart. The robust manifesto of almost 50 pages was divided into an introduction and three chapters (“Europe of the future”, “Stronger Europe in the world” and “Europe of respect”). Each of these was divided into five sections, and *freedom* appeared in the headers of

the last two of them: “Ensuring a society without discrimination”; and “Protecting security and freedom”. The words *free* and *freedom* are used in the document 44 and 25 times, respectively.

To start with, for SPD, *protecting our freedoms in an insecure world* is one of the key missions of the EU, and this is the rationale for them to convince citizens to take part in European elections, lending their legitimacy to the EU. SPD reiterated that

the EU must be a community of peace, freedom and prosperity to be able to face the challenges of contemporary times, to remain resilient against the rising wave of the right-wing populism and to offer to all the citizens the chance for a better, fairer future.

The above-mentioned EU mission should be seen as having implications for both domestic and international politics. SPD argued that the times, which are marked by a growing number of conflicts and by people’s demand for more security (understood as protection and as life opportunities), were calling for a stronger Europe in the world. The manifesto argues that the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the war and the crisis of multilateralism require that the Union stands up in the name of *our common values of peace, freedom and democracy*, trying to preserve and restore these globally. This EU re-engagement should be prolific, including an agenda to fight against poverty and exclusion, as well as for development and human rights. This is also the departure point for revisiting the EU enlargement policy, which should be seen as a powerful transformative instrument. To prepare for a larger Union, the EU, however, must also reform, and it should not delay the ambition to equip itself with strategic autonomy, cutting off the dependencies from external suppliers (when it comes to, for example, strategic resources).

Consequently, the EU striving for freedom and democracy is – according to SPD – also a Union that stands with Ukraine. The pros-

pect of enlargement towards it is a clear sign and response *to the aggression of Putin's Russia*, but the EU will have to dare more. It will have to take responsibility for rebuilding Ukraine and enabling it to consolidate in peace, freedom, the rule of law and democracy. And while the question of Ukraine is one within the EU neighbourhood, the obligation to support freedom fighters is more of a universal one for Europe (exemplified in the manifesto by the description of the purpose of the Feminist Foreign Policy and extending help to freedom fighters in Iran, for example).

Furthermore, the SPD manifesto allows three dimensions to be distinguished in which the party translates the concept into concrete policies. The first relates to the freedoms already established in the EU, the second to the questions that are brought by diverse modernising processes and the third to broader anticipation of the challenges of democratic regress.

When it comes to existing EU legislation, SPD writes that “the free movement of goods, services and people is an achievement of the EU”. By acknowledging this, the party makes several promises when it comes to working towards improved infrastructure to help transport and mobility, financial support to broaden access (especially for young people), and to advance social rights and labour standards that would apply across the Union's market.

In relation to modernisation processes, there are two that SPD correlates with a need to define and reiterate freedom. The first is research and in particular the processes that lead to the genetic modification of plants and, by extension, food. Embracing this debate within a larger context of disputes on the reform of the Common Agriculture Policy, SPD argues for the freedom of choice for consumers and users, who may not want to use these products. The second set of questions derives from digitalisation. SPD elaborates on it in the sections on “the protection, confidence and sovereignty in digital

space” and “open and free internet”. They argue that digital or analogue, both spheres should have the same principles that protect citizens against discrimination and guarantee them the right to privacy, as well as to freedom of expression and assembly. The Internet, the services it can render and networks should be accessible in the same way for all. SPD writes, “the digital sphere has to be organised so that people can trust it and believe that the basic principles, rights and freedoms will also be represented/upheld there”.

Finally, as stated in the introduction of the SPD manifesto, *freedom* is the EU’s core value, and that belief is also reiterated in the last chapter, which pertains to a *Europe of Respect*.¹⁸ It is repeated there as well that Europe has to *stand together for freedom, democracy, peace, justice and welfare for all*. It should guarantee that everyone deserves and receives respect and solidarity, alongside the same chances, right to education and good jobs. There should be the same rights, and the text elaborates further what this means when it comes to equality of men and women, as well as of the LGBTQIA+ community (arguing for the recognition of same-sex partnerships and rainbow families across the EU, regardless of where they have been legalised and if the respective other states have a provision to do that). SPD sees these principles as being close to their heart and part of the common European understanding. They write, “we are German, and thus regionally anchored, Europeans”.

7. SPÖ: Freedom reflected in the ambition for a democratic, social and open to fair trade Union

The Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) was looking at both the European and national elections in 2024 (in that order). The polls fluctuated in the preceding months, with the major question being

which party would end up first, and the numbers indicated it might have been SPÖ, ÖVP or FPÖ – the last of which was a scenario many warned against. The end results were the inverted order, but all three parties were very close on the podium, with a difference of up to 2% between them.¹⁹ SPÖ must have been anticipating that the European elections would be a type of grand rehearsal; however, it does not mean that the sequence of the two was treated as one marathon, and as time showed, the party ran two very different kinds of campaigns. It is important to add that this was also the first test for Andreas Babler, as newly elected leader, who secured his position in a very gripping inner-party contest, and who had previously commented rather critically on diverse aspects of European integration.

The SPÖ programme for the EP elections was entitled “*Europa fair gestalten*”,²⁰ with 28 pages that featured an introduction and four thematic chapters. Freedom appeared 11 times in the document, starting with the introduction by Andreas Babler, where he argued that:

On 9th June, there is much at stake [...] in the past years, we as Social Democrats in the EP stood against the rise of conservatives and right wing and their policies. [...] They are a danger. [...] Social policy achievements are threatened as much as basic freedoms and human rights.

For SPÖ, the EU remains a *promise of peace, security and freedom in Europe*, together with the common values – *democracy, human rights and basic freedoms* – as a *central pillar of our European community*. Consequently, the party translates the concept of *freedom* predominantly into three political dimensions of the integration process: a strong democratic Europe; a social Europe; and a Europe of fair economy and trade.

When it comes to the proposals in the chapter “For a strong, social and democratic Europe”, SPÖ believes that the right and the radical right try to instrumentalise the crisis that the EU (and global politics) finds itself in. Examples of that are their assaults on and attempts to subordinate democratic institutions, as well as their tendency to spread false information, to divert from the fight against climate change and undermine social security systems, to attack justice systems and the free press, to try to dismantle women’s rights and the rights of minorities. It is not only rhetoric, but a set of actions that take place in member states when they seize power. SPÖ believes that all these can lead to the *destruction of the common Europe*, and hence, appeals to stand together – reminding that *together we are stronger*. Later in the text, the party also refers to the need to strengthen European democracy by taking measures to defend the rule of law and the justice system, to fight corruption, while also safeguarding media freedom and pluralism.

In the context of a social Europe, SPÖ reaffirms the importance of European integration’s achievements, such as freedoms that came with the common market. These, however, must be embedded strongly in social provisions, and herewith, the need for a Social Progress Protocol is imminent. The party is worried about different examples of the existing race to the bottom, which is a type of competition with no winners in the end. This leads them to articulate an agenda that would restore public goods and services, pointing out that their liberalisation and unleashed sales based on a limited understanding of what frames consumer choice have been proven harmful.

Finally, SPÖ strives for a *Europe of a fair economy and trade*. In that section of the manifesto, similarly to the one on a social Europe, there is much focus on what happens when *freedoms* are effectively abused. This is echoed in statements such as

We have to break free from the liberalisation, unfair competition, and credo “the market will solve everything”. We are for civilised markets and free trade, as long as it is conducted in a fair manner. Workers’ rights and ecological and social standards have to be implemented, along with tariffs and trade barriers. Only with the fair trade agreements can we fight inequalities, as prevent environmental destruction.

8. Nowa Lewica: Right to freedom and freedom of choice

In Poland, the European elections were held after the national ones, which in October 2023 made the country break out from the authoritarian path and saw a coalition government established. The centre left entered it, but in the position of a junior partner and after a split (since Razem, whose candidates stood on common lists, took the decision not to join). For the EP elections, however, yet another alliance was formed under the banner “Lewica” – uniting four parties: Lewica Razem; Nowa Lewica (formerly SLD and Wiosna); Labour Union (UP); and Polish Socialist Party (PPS).²¹ It agreed on a common programme, “The European Programme of the Left”,²² a document that was 54 pages long and divided into 150 proposals. References to freedom appeared in it six times, starting from the third paragraph of the introduction, which spelled out the coalition’s mission to strive for

a democratic, free, just and safe Europe. That guarantees human rights and dignity for all the inhabitants. [...] and shall see democratisation of the decision-making processes to halt the rise of the eurosceptic right and to become a real civic community.

There are three policy proposals that illustrate how Lewica understands the concept of *freedom*. The first of them refers to the

Protection of democracy and citizens' rights (point 7), which confronts the danger coming from the authoritarian tendencies that arise in member states. The answer they propose includes provisions to safeguard Article 2 of the Treaties (*points from which are listed in the text as the right to dignity, freedom, democracy, the rule of law and equality*). Measures then would include the establishment of a Copenhagen Commission by the European Court of Justice to look at violations.

Subsequently, *freedom* is very prominent as a value that should be imprinted in the rules framing *Digital transformation for society* (point 82). The language of the manifesto is very bold in this section, as it states that “instead of the digital dystopian overpower, the strive must be to create a digital society that respects human rights”. Lewica is determined to ensure that technological development benefits all citizens, leaving no one behind and helping all fulfil their needs and aspirations. Complementary to this, efforts must be made to ensure that people and their rights (to privacy, security and freedom of choice) are protected.

Finally, Lewica also refers to *freedom* when deliberating on the future of EU trade policies (point 143). They point out that “trade must be fair, and not just free. The current model brings profits to corporations and losses on the social and environmental sides”. Consequently, they argue that free trade agreements as they stand with the Global South must be phased out and replaced by those that respect international conventions and treaties.

Three aspects complete the list of points in which Lewica uses the term “freedom” in their manifesto. For the sake of comparison, in the earlier national election, the only other example for which the electoral programme referred to it was connected to the struggle with the “clause of conscience”, which would allow doctors and pharmacists to take decisions “in accordance to their belief sys-

tem” to provide patients with contraceptives, for example. Lewica remained vehemently against the existence of such a rule.²³

9. Labour Party: New freedoms and trust in politics

The Labour Party’s “Manifesto 2024”²⁴ foresees that the upcoming elections could be a chance for national renewal and rebuilding of the UK. As the Labour Party stated, this would be the moment to turn the page after 14 years of ideas that “consistently left us more vulnerable in an increasingly volatile world”. This suggested that control was slipping away, which was a sentiment broadly discussed not only in the UK but across the globe by the time the document had been drafted and adopted. What is interesting, however, is that on more than 140 pages that followed, “freedom” as a word appears four times. Firstly, in the context of a mission that Labour recognises as re-establishing trust in politics. The reference is made to the times of the COVID-19 pandemic when *people (were) sacrificing their freedoms*, while at 10 Downing Street parties were organised. That contrast eroded trust and the sense of “we are in this together”. The second time “freedom” appears as a term is in the paragraphs that debate relations with the EU and how to make Brexit work. Labour has an ambition to work on it. However, it also declares benchmarks here – namely, that any future relationship between the EU and the UK would not see a return to the single market or freedom of movement. The third time the Labour Party writes “freedom” in its manifesto is in the context of housing policies. The text speaks about funds, *new freedoms* and flexibilities when using grants. This is not further defined. And finally, the fourth time that freedom is used is in the context of LGBTQIA+ people. The text speaks about the ban of “the so-called conversation therapy”, while protecting the

freedom of people to explore their sexual orientation and gender identity. For the sake of being very prudent, the manifesto was also analysed for potentially substitutive words. The term “emancipation” is not used in the text at all, and the word “empower” appears four times in sentences about empowering local communities and local leaders, women and girls (amid an economic downturn), and persons in danger of eviction (to be able to challenge unreasonable rent increases).

10. Conclusion: It is not too late to reclaim freedom as a core progressive value, but it is time to translate freedom into a transformative value

The fascinating journey through an empirical study of the programmatic documents that became the electoral manifestos of eight progressive parties in Europe allows us to answer, at least partially, the questions that were asked at the start and inspired the deliberations in this chapter. To start with the initial one, it does not seem that the social democratic parties have abandoned the concept of *freedom*. It is referred to in all the materials that have been quoted, even if its exposure varies. In the case of the Dutch PvdA (PvdA-GroenLinks), it is very present; this may be explained by the political culture and traditions of the Dutch political system. At the same time, it seems less prominent for SPÖ, the UK Labour Party and Lewica. In all cases, however, *freedom* is determined very differently and referred to in different contexts. It would be most challenging to briefly answer what the common European progressive definition of that term actually is.

The subsequent observation is that in the understanding of several of the parties, the manifestos of which were analysed here, in the current context *freedom(s)* has come under attack. Several parties refer to the fact that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is an assault on the European way of life, values and freedom, and here provides the motivation and diverse responsibilities to remain solidaristic with Ukraine. This represents part of a changing global reality, which also sees growing tendencies to confrontations and conflicts, which, with the rise and consolidation of the global radical right, may further threaten what seem to have been indispensable rights and shared core values. While the diagnosis isn't wrong, this induces a feeling that progressives are alarmed and strive to *protect freedom* – which, yes, is an essential action, but it shouldn't be seen as the end game. The worry here is that it is a very defensive approach, without much reflection on what to do to promote and provide more freedom(s) at the same time.

Evidently, this is partially because of the tension around what types of freedom are emancipatory and socially desirable, and which ones are not and can be corrosive. The latter for social democrats are usually the ones that are imposed by neoliberal hegemony (and on that several parties, like SPÖ or PS France, have well-articulated criticism) and are embodied in many of the trade agreements, for example. This is a very traditional narrative, which comes with the caveat that progressives usually also disagree amongst themselves about the actual definition of what trade is, just free, and what trade is free and fair. Though it has always been a strategic vulnerability not to unite on the question, such as what to do about the equation “freedom – the EU – trade”, the situation is getting worse, as it seems that the list of uncoordinated and unclear issues is growing. Only from the analysed texts, it would appear that similar difficulties would be there to unite behind a common understanding of the freedom

of consumer choice, the freedom of expression and its limitations in the digital media, and the balance between freedom and security. Now, there is an excuse because the contexts have been changing quickly, and the answers that would befit contemporary times take time to elaborate instead. But one should not be complacent about the sense of urgency, because, while the documents speak about how these concerns are being instrumentalised by the radical right-wing parties, they do not always offer a convincing, prolific and alternative narrative that could be used to counteract them.

Moreover, one of the difficulties in comparing the material was that sometimes *freedom* appeared as a synonym of liberation (i.e., SAP argued for freedom from dependencies on fossil fuels and freedom from oppression), sometimes it was framed as non-discrimination (i.e., when SPD argued for women's and LGBTQIA+ rights) and sometimes it was about principle statements (such as expressing support for media freedom or academic freedoms). This diversification posed a challenge, but also prompted a reflection that across all documents, there were not too many links between freedom, on one hand, and, on the other, the two other core values of the progressive movement – equality and solidarity. They infrequently appear in very specific contexts, for example, when SPD, SPÖ and PSOE speak about the EU, the freedom of movement and the necessity to balance *freedoms* with binding social legislation to prevent a race to the bottom, social dumping and abuse. But what is striking is that there are just a handful of examples in which progressive parties analysed here would take the concept of *freedom* and apply it to areas of their core political competence – economy, labour and social dimensions. This seems to be rather a serious shortcoming that would call for radical efforts to reclaim that ground.

And to that end, there is also a point to be made about the fact that there is something almost *conservative* in the way that the pro-

gressive parties apply freedom. Indeed, in the previous paragraphs, it has already been mentioned that part of the problem is that the focus is on *defending* much more than *promoting* freedom. What is missing now is how *freedom* can be framed as a concept that provides a way to fulfil aspirations. There are some fragmentary proposals – PSOE is a good example here, which is trying to apply *freedom*, in an incomparably complex manner, as a compass in the era of digital capitalism. So are SPD and PvdA-GroenLinks, when they state their support for *freedom* as access to culture, sport and transport infrastructure, for example. Several of the parties refer, though rather concisely, to the freedom of expression, creation and research. These are all important pieces of a puzzle, but do not give an answer for how progressives see *freedom* as a concept that would determine opportunities and be guaranteed for all to make *free choices about and for their own future*. While the radical right advocates a return to the past, and everyone keeps repeating the disempowering mantra about how the next generation will have it worse than previous ones in these turbulent times, it would seem rethinking and reframing *freedom* to offer an alternative may be a decisive asset within the progressive narrative.

And that leads to the final point. The research conducted here cannot help answer the question about the correlation between the gender-based split of votes among young cohorts and the way *freedom* is defined in the programmatic documents of social democracy. Yes, perhaps, social democracy leans towards using *freedom* when referring to collective principles and standards, but it cannot be proven that it is exclusive in its approach, as it also clearly pays attention to individual ones (speaking about freedom of expression, freedom enshrined in the right to privacy etc.). But what is striking is that only two parties see guaranteeing freedom as a responsibility that governments and political stakeholders have in keeping their

part of the agreement, when it comes to the social contract. This is something to ponder, and for social democracy, which has ambitions to halt the march of the radical right wing, to answer. Much time and ink have been spent on citizens' trust in politics and its stakeholders fading away, but, as in any relationship, trust must be mutual for it to work. So perhaps, amid all the previously mentioned troubling scenarios and appeals to safeguard, defend and protect – also accusations from opponents that traditional parties are the very ones to limit freedoms – it is time for progressives to ask themselves this question: with what kinds of freedoms, what kind of expansionary and emancipatory definitions of them, are we ready to trust and equip our citizens with? And how do they pave the way to a fairer, better, more solidaristic and egalitarian society of the future?

Endnotes

- 1 There is also no consensus on the terminology among academics. For Cas Mudde, “far right” stands for “these on the right, who are ‘anti-system’, defined here as hostile to liberal democracy”. See: C. Mudde (2009) *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity), p. 7.
- 2 An interesting account in regard to these parties diversity is provided by C. De Vries, who suggests that on key issues – such as attitude towards EU integration – the parties in question differ, and how they feel and articulate is also strongly driven by the context in which these respective parties exist and their cultural, historical embedding. See: C. de Vries (2018) *Euroscepticism and the Future of European Integration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. vii.
- 3 Kitchener, C. (2021) “What happened at the Capitol was ‘pure White male privilege’”. *The Washington Post*, 6 January.
- 4 M. Ares and M. M. van Ditmars (2024) “Who continues to vote for the left? Social class of origin, intergenerational mobility, and party choice in Western Europe”, in S. Häusermann and H. Kitschelt (eds) *Beyond Social Democracy. The Transformation of the Left in Emerging Knowledge Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 139-140.
- 5 Such a hypothesis was formulated by Professor Przemyslaw Sadura at the FEPS – FES Warsaw – Ferdinand Lasalle Centre for Social Thought training session, responding to the author's question about that. The conversation took place in Warsaw on 28 September 2024. The author remains grateful for this interesting insight!

- 6 See, for example: G. Esping-Andersen (1990) *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- 7 See: K. Reif and H. Schmitt (1997) "Second-order elections". *European Journal of Political Research*, 31: 109-124. DOI: 10.1023/A:1006860919635
- 8 "Our Sweden can do better". Socialdemokraterna.
- 9 See: P. Marlière (2024) "A social democratic revival overshadowed by Rassemblement National's crushing victory". *The Progressive Post*, June.
- 10 "Faire basculer l'Europe». Le Parti socialiste, 5 September 2023.
- 11 See: E. López (2024) "Spain resists". *The Progressive Post*, May.
- 12 "Más Europa». PSOE.
- 13 "España avanza vota». PSOE, 7 July 2023.
- 14 See, for example: E.-M. Sent (2024) "The Dutch Green-Labour alliance wins the European elections". *The Progressive Post*, June.
- 15 "Sterker met elkaar". GroenLinks-PvdA.
- 16 See, for example: H. Keman (2024) "Next Left Country Case Studies – the Netherlands". FEPS and Karl Renner Institut.
- 17 "Gemeinsam für ein starkes Europa". SPD.
- 18 Respect was the key concept with which SPD won the elections in 2021. See A. Skrzypek (2022) "The narrative of respect and how it revamps the progressive values", in *Progressive Proposals for the Turbulent Times: How to Boost the Political, Organisational and Electoral Potential, Next Left Book Series, vol. 13* (Brussels: FEPS and Karl Renner Institut), pp. 20-53.
- 19 Maltzsching, M. (2024) "Austria – an unexpectedly tight race". *The Progressive Post*, June.
- 20 "Europa fair gestalten". SPÖ.
- 21 "Koalicyjny Komitet Wyborczy Lewica na wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego zarejestrowany". Lewica.
- 22 "Program europejski Lewicy". Lewica.
- 23 "Program wyborczy KW Nowa Lewica". Lewica.
- 24 "Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024". Labour Party.

THE PROGRESSIVE COMPASS



**Progressive politics
to re-empower citizens
and reassure them
about the future**



Lorenza ANTONUCCI

**The new politics of insecurity:
Formulating a new political
script and agenda that consider
the emerging insecurity
in European lives**

1. Introduction

Since the aftermath of the Brexit/Trump momentum, commentators, political analysts and academics have focused on explaining the triggers of populist support as either a “cultural backlash” or an “economic explanation”. As populist support – both from the left and right – continues to gain momentum, and as almost as a decade has passed since Brexit, we are compelled to ask the same question all over again: what is driving support for populism? I argue in this piece that both the “cultural” and “economic” camps have excluded some key explanations; most importantly, both camps are based on an artificial division between economic and cultural spheres that does not reflect the interconnections between cultural and economic elements of people’s lives. To overcome this limitation, I use other concepts from political sociology, particularly studies on insider/outsider divisions, recognition and meritocracy. Through this more framework, I articulate how support for populism – which takes the form of support for radical populist right (RPR) and radical populist left (RPL) parties – is connected by feelings of insecurity that reflect both material and cultural changes. In the last section, I suggest that social democratic parties could channel rising insecurity into political support by adopting a dual strategy: adopting a collective-focused political script and by supporting policy interventions that restore the capacity that the state, the family and the market have in providing security to individuals.¹

2. Populism: Culture versus the economy

Despite having attracted a good number of critics, “the cultural backlash” argument remains very persuasive in political discussions on populism. In short, the theory by Norris and Inglehart suggests that

votes for right-wing populism are fundamentally driven by support for anti-migration and a general backlash against the promotion of liberal values (e.g., gender equality, LGBTQI+ or post-secularism).² While this study has empirically shown the link between right populism and support for such attitudes, the connection between populist (right, in particular) support and support for such values is also tautological, as suggested by Inglehart himself in his last book.³ In other words, the opposition to these attitudes is simply the manifestation that populist right-wing support takes. Although Inglehart himself suggests that insecurity occurs earlier in the explanation chain of what is driving populist support,⁴ we lack a conceptual understanding of how the “economic” and “cultural” are intertwined and result in widespread insecurity. Furthermore, it is unclear why such cultural attitudes would lead citizens to distance themselves from the three established political groups that have dominated politics in Europe since the end of WWII (Christian democrats, social democrats and liberals) and endorse new political agendas that revolve more explicitly around the will of the people and target more directly the elites as opposed to the people (the two ingredients to define a populist agenda, according to the ideational literature, see Hawkins et al.⁵).

One of the fundamental assumptions behind Norris and Inglehart’s cultural backlash argument⁶ is the theory of post-materialism – namely, the idea that we live in post-materialist times when the material no longer matters. We have plenty of evidence to intuitively think this is not the case – from the cost-of-living crisis to growing work insecurity, material concerns are growing, and recent evidence shows that financial issues are at the forefront of voters’ concerns.⁷ However, the economic camp has not been more persuasive: dominated by economists, this part of the literature has mostly investigated the link between the economy and populist people looking at macro-economic policies, such as trade shocks⁸ or public cuts.⁹ Intuitively, we can imagine individuals’

political behaviour to be driven by people's everyday circumstances of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, rather than by remote macro-economic phenomena such as trade shocks. Political theorists have identified the passage to precarity capitalism as the macroeconomic change behind the diffusion of micro-level insecurity.¹⁰

This pushes us to investigate socio-economic concerns at the individual level. But here as well, the majority of political scientists have operationalised this in a limited way, purely as the fear of job loss.¹¹ This conceptualisation of insecurity as the fear of job loss is rooted in the insider/outsider economic division that has been the base of much policy interventions, namely the emphasis on bringing people into work because it's the loss of work that creates insecurity. Fear of job loss is certainly growing, but it is still relatively limited to a portion of people, although we know that work conditions are on the decline in Europe. Trying to open up the conceptualisation of insecurity, a growing number of studies are looking at how the declining work conditions among insiders and the financial insecurity faced by voters (e.g., the inability to cover unexpected expenses, make savings or pay bills) are driving populist support.¹²

It is not just work that is on the decline, the material decline in individuals' socio-economic conditions and their insecurity are also expressed via financial insecurity. A growing number of individuals are economically insecure – it is not just the working classes that struggle to pay for everyday expenses. The base of political support in Europe, the middle class, is also declining. The middle class identifies not just a specific socio-economic group (e.g., the OECD defines it as the group that earns between 75% and 200% of the median national income), but a specific sociological group of workers who are not employed in manual jobs, but in the service sector, and who increasingly struggle to meet expenses that are attached to the middle-class status, for example, paying for a mortgage, paying for the higher education of

young people in the family or facing unexpected expenses. The idea of a declining, squeezed middle with anti-establishment sentiments¹³ also gives us the opportunity to revisit classic studies in political sociology by Lipset,¹⁴ according to whom each social group – upper, middle and lower – found extremism (into which populism could possibly enter) appealing for different reasons, with the middle ultimately driving the government agenda because the bulk of the voters came from this segment of the population.

Based on this, we could simply conclude that looking at material economic concerns at the individual level would be enough to explain populist support. I would argue, however, that cultural values are key to understanding how insecurity is channelled towards either populist right support or populist left support and why it is taking this shape. If political voting for the right and left by those who feel insecure or who feel that their social status is under threat is logically explained by an instrumental link between citizens' conditions and parties' agendas (i.e., RLP/RPL agendas generally offer a radical form of redistribution and build support from post-austerity fatigue in Europe), support for the RPR among those who feel that their status is in decline is usually attached to a symbolic and instrumental link between voters' conditions and RPR parties' agendas that is mediated by a number of cultural schemas. In more simple terms: why should insecure individuals vote for RPR parties based on their material concerns? RPR parties offer a security to voters that is instrumental – for example, stopping migration and keeping citizens secure. While it would be simplistic to refer to RPR agendas as welfarist and leftist, alongside proposing an exclusionary and selective approach to welfare state access,¹⁵ they also offer a new set of interventions around the state-market-family nexus that aims, in principle, to address socioeconomic security gaps.¹⁶ While what they propose does not translate into policies that are actually able to reduce insecurity, RPR formulate political agendas that offer

an explicit political response to voters' micro-level insecurity in a political climate when established centrist parties have prioritized market responses.

Cultural values here mediate the support for the RPR, but not in a rational-based way – to understand this, we need to dig into the current cultural schemas.

3. Beyond post-materialism: A cultural sociology for the Trump/ Brexit momentum

In political science, whether it agrees with cultural backlash theory or not, the understanding of culture is based on a limited set of attitudes that are understood to reflect a society's culture, such as attitudes towards migration, views of gender equality and LGBTQI+ issues (see Norris and Inglehart,¹⁷ for a classic operationalisation of culture in political science research). Prominent research in cultural sociology has stressed, instead, other elements of what defines contemporary cultural scripts, such as the reduced recognition felt by a growing number of workers and a perceived threat to social status – which have both been strictly connected to socioeconomic transformations.

Work and financial security not only have an intrinsic meaning in voters' lives of supporting their lives in a material way, but they also have an extrinsic value with respect to the status and recognition that men and women have in society and that bring them security. Overcoming the simplistic opposition between culture and the economy, sociological research on culture tends to stress the continuum between economic and cultural factors behind populism and a self-reinforcing pattern between the two. Lamont¹⁸ and Bonikowski,¹⁹ for example, have noted that the rise of right-wing populism in the USA is connected to status threat and recognition gaps that emerge from economic neoliberal

shifts. Drawing on sociological research, Hall and Gidron link the loss of social status to deindustrialisation and the economic passage to the knowledge economy and the rise of insecurity;²⁰ they interpret the loss of social status particularly among (low-educated) men as both an economic process of losing material resources and a cultural process of reduced status that drives men in particular towards RPR support. This empirical work builds on the findings of classic studies in sociology that had found a loss of recognition and social status to be particularly relevant among working-class men.²¹ This is not to say that women could not also experience a loss of recognition, coming from the increasing pressures that they face both at work and in their family lives; indeed, we know that, despite the focus on men, a large and growing portion of voters of populist right parties are actually women.²²

In this framework, social status is a key sociological concept to overcome the materialist and utilitarian focus in the study of political behaviour and formulate a better theory of why, for example, low-income individuals do not necessarily support political parties that do not propose policies in their favour.²³ The connection between social status and populism remains fairly untheorised but is intuitive. Current research on status threat resonates with the framing of populism as a political movement against the status quo and that intervenes to fix the gaps of recognition experienced by common voters.²⁴ More deeply, status is a sociocultural schema that creates both a collective sense of belonging to a certain group that is being ranked, and a competitive and individualistic focus on comparing ourselves to others.²⁵ This interdependent and individualistic focus of status connects well with the core oppositional element inside the definition of populism. Populism is indeed built on the idea that the ordinary people (possibly as a group sharing a similar declining position and relatively low social status) should be central and are not, and are in opposition to the elites, as a group with high social status. In this sense, populism becomes a po-

tential fixer of the social status threat and the collective loss of social status and a response that offers a new sense of recognition to “the people” compared to what has been offered by established parties.²⁶

A final component of culture that is central to understanding the changing nature of European societies is the popularity and use of meritocratic beliefs, which have been understood as a cultural frame to justify existing inequalities. At its core, a meritocratic belief is a belief that society operates in a way that awards those who work harder, no matter the level of inequalities in the society.²⁷ Hence, believing in meritocracy contributes to the collective acceptance of inequality, and it occurs, paradoxically, in a time of growing material inequalities.²⁸

Here, I note an important conceptual connection between meritocracy and the idealist definition of populism. The ideational definition of populism conceptualises populism to be based on two ideas: the centrality of the people; and the opposition between the people and the elite. The construction of “the people” implies a form of othering and categorisation shaped by socio-economic/moral values. These values are mediated by people’s view of “the other” that is shaped by values of merit and individualism more generally. As an example of the diffusion of the meritocratic script, a recent study by Ivaldi and Mazzoleni investigates the diffusion of “producerism” among citizens in Europe (i.e., how much people believe that one has to be productive to have value in a society).²⁹ Producerism creates a moral distinction between makers and takers that reinforces the division between deserving and undeserving individuals. In the study, the authors find that, firstly, European citizens are strongly in favour of producerism, as much as their American counterparts; secondly, right-wing producerists in Europe are more likely to support RPR parties.

How has producerism infiltrated European societies? We could interpret the popularity of producerism as a manifestation of the widespread popularity of the meritocratic script in Europe, but also of the

reforms of the welfare state that have reproduced – through interventions and through the political legitimization of such interventions – an emphasis on the individualised competition between individuals to obtain the scarce resources delivered by the state based on deservingness, merit and worth.

4. An integrated framework to understand populism with respect to culture and the economy

An integrated framework for understanding why individuals support populism implies shifting the current focus in two ways. Firstly, moving from an understanding of macro-economic factors to an investigation of micro-level and individual material lives, for example, how do people live; how do they feel, not just their “objective” conditions (which tend to investigate numbers, such as income and wealth). This implies asking individuals how they feel about their working lives and how/if they feel they can cover financial security, for example, cover all their costs and make savings; these indicators are considered and dismissed as “subjective” – at the same time, there is no other way to investigate individuals’ conditions without exploring them via personal questions.

The second shift implies integration of the economic with the cultural and understanding how individual conditions of insecurity are not necessarily articulated through political demands for more security in a rational-based way. This link is mediated by cultural schemas among social groups and in the society in general. In particular, the link between insecurity/rising inequality and RPR support is mediated by a complex set of cultural schemas and socio-economic values, such as a vision of society that is dualised between ethnic insiders and ethnic outsiders and a more general division between deserving and undeserving citizens. Cultural schemas are present both at the

voter level and in the discourses and strategies that parties use. For example, a society that has a low belief in meritocracy will have a more encompassing view of “the people” than a society where meritocratic values are very high. A society that strongly believes in meritocracy and productivism will include in the category of “the people” only those with merit and will create discourses to exclude other individuals that are not considered to be deserving of belonging to a shared vision of “the people” for ethno-racial reasons or economic notions of productivity, such as migrants or welfare claimants.

Cultural schemas can include value-based forms of recognition (e.g., how populist movements can make specific groups/classes feel recognised), cultural constructions of insider/outsider-ness (e.g., how Trump and other populist leaders define themselves as outsiders, see Lamont et al.³⁰) and the socio-economic values that parties promote reinforce and reproduce the cultural script of voters (e.g., how much voters will feel that their hard work is valued, recognised and promoted by a certain party if we look at the meritocratic script). As inequalities increase, meritocratic beliefs also increase,³¹ determining a spiral that can only be interrupted by the adoption of alternatives frames and policies.

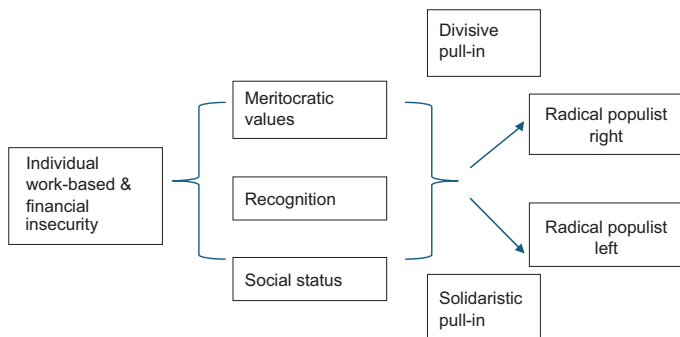


Figure 1. A framework to understand the interconnections between economic and cultural drivers of populism.

The framework in Figure 1 suggests that cultural frames intervene to determine the type of pull in towards left and right populism – as well as determining the pull-out from established politics, which does not offer a solution to insecurity and reproduces the current cultural frames. Current research on RPR shows that support for RPR parties is strongly associated with forms of ethno-nationalism and xenophobia that tend to exclude migrants and non-white citizens from belonging to the people;³² this form of distinction is also directed towards undeserving citizens, as attitudes to welfare have increasingly become divisive and targeted against the undeserving citizens who use state sources. The populist response of RPL is generally one more oriented towards a solidaristic notion of politics that addresses insecurity towards a more radical form of redistribution.

5. Politics and progressive values: How to articulate an agenda that addresses insecurity

The meritocratic script is not used just by populist parties; mainstream parties have made significant use of meritocratic scripts to gain political support. Mainstream parties (Christian democrats, social democrats and liberal parties) have endorsed the shift towards a social investment welfare state that is based on an individualistic and meritocratic vision of the society, favouring higher means testing and conditionality in social security interventions, endorsing individual-based interventions for deserving citizens in various areas (labour market, education etc.) and using meritocratic language in policy reforms.³³ Hence, an important step towards reversing the meritocratic and productivist turn would be to adopt a political and cultural frame that is solidaristic-based rather than individualistic-based. How does such a frame look like? Adopting a solidaristic-based script means building support via

in-group solidarity (e.g., appealing to different groups of voters who have been affected – to different degrees – by insecurity), as well as through oppositional out-group dynamics (e.g., establishing a distance from political or socio-economic actors that endorse a concentration of economic resources). The most difficult step for social democratic parties would be to establish a convincing distance between the old individualistic-based script and a new collective script, given that the language of meritocracy and individualism remains still prevalent. In concrete terms, this means changing the frames used in political communication, as well as in the formulation of political agendas, by privileging references to micro-level issues of insecurity that individuals and groups face over references to macro-economic and abstract issues (e.g., including more references to specific issues in facing everyday financial commitments or paying for unexpected expenses over macro-economic notion of inflation). It also means referring more to collective diagnoses and solidaristic responses (e.g., references to shared experiences of financial anxiety or issues with work-life balance) over individualised-focused diagnoses and privatised solutions (e.g., enhancing individual competition in individuals in the labour market through work-based activation).

Secondly, at the policy level, alongside the more macroeconomic solutions proposed by economists to eradicate inequalities (e.g., a progressive and global tax on wealth, initiatives to reduce tax dodging), political actors need to intervene to restore the balance between the three providers of security: the state; the family; and the labour market. Some of the key policy proposals formulated to address inequalities also serve to reduce insecurity, particularly if they consist of micro-level solutions that touch on the availability of family resources to navigate security. For example, the implementation of changes to progressive taxation that permit low- and lower-middle-income families to retain more resources to navigate insecurity, and the expansion or

creation of a temporary universal basic income for children or young people to equalise the distribution of resources to navigate insecurity early on. State interventions could be revised to consider the security of the family unit (broadly defined) throughout life, rather than just individual conditions. Other policy solutions have to be more explicitly targeted to address insecurity not just via state interventions, but through the redefinition of state and market responsibilities in working conditions, as well as in managing financial insecurity. On working conditions, new negotiations between the state and employers have to take place to address the decline in work-life balance, the rise of work pressure and the overall decline of working conditions. With respect to financial insecurity, the state can play a more active role in limiting the use of private providers to navigate short-term insecurity through consumer debt. Instead, contributions from workers, states and employers can be pooled to fund short-term cash-based mechanisms to address financial insecurity (e.g., security-based basic income schemes).

6. Conclusion

The now dated issue of “who is voting for populist parties?” deserves new answers. Overcoming the Lipsetian separation between the cultural and the economic, and the anachronistic post-materialist vision of the populist momentum, we find that both socio-economic individual factors affecting people’s work and lives, as well as the dominant cultural scripts of meritocracy and producerism, play a role in explaining the direction that populism is taking. My proposition for a political agenda that addresses insecurity and can block the vicious cycle of disengagement from anti-establishment politics is one that engages with both the material and cultural components of the current dissatisfaction. At the level of culture, established progressive parties that want to tap into the new politics of insecurity to gain political

support should engage with the adoption of solidaristic narratives and cultural scripts that underline shared condition of insecurity among the population. Furthermore, they could gain a support base by intervening on the socioeconomic concerns of voters at the micro-level, namely, not by drafting agendas on remote macroeconomic reforms, but with social policy interventions that address individual financial concerns in more concrete terms (e.g., through ad hoc policies and redistributive interventions).

Bibliography

- Abou-Chadi, T. and T. Kurer (2021) "Economic risk within the household and voting for the radical right". *World Politics*, 3(73): 482-511. DOI: 10.1017/S0043887121000046
- Antonucci, L., C. D'Ippolito, L. Horvath et al. (2023) «What's work got to do with it? How precarity influences radical party support in France and the Netherlands». *Sociological Research Online* 1(28):110-131. DOI: 10.1177/13607804211020321
- Antonucci, L., R. Di Stefano, C. D'Ippolito et al. (2024) "Gender, insecurity and populism in Europe". Open Forum Series 2024-2025, no. 53. Center for European Studies (Harvard University), November.
- Antonucci, L., L. Horvath, Y. Kutiyski et al. (2017) «The malaise of the squeezed middle: Challenging the narrative of the 'left behind' Brexiter». *Competition & Change*, 3(21): 211-229. DOI: 10.1177/1024529417704135
- Autor, D., D. Dorn, G. Hanson et al. (2020) «Importing political polarization? The electoral consequences of rising trade exposure». *American Economic Review*, 10(110): 3139-3183. DOI: 10.1257/aer.20170011
- Azmanova, A. (2020) *Capitalism on Edge: How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change Without Crisis or Utopia* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press).
- Bonikowski, B. (2017) "Ethno-nationalist populism and the mobilization of collective resentment: Ethno-nationalist populism". *The British Journal of Sociology*, S1(68): S181-S213. DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.12325
- Burn-Murdoch, J. (2024) "What the 'year of democracy' taught us, in 6 charts". *Financial Times*, 30 December.
- Fetzer, T. (2019) "Did austerity cause Brexit?" *The American Economic Review*, 11(109): 3849-3886.
- Gidron, N. and P. A. Hall (2017) "The politics of social status: Economic and cultural roots of the populist right". *The British Journal of Sociology*, S1(68): S57-S84. DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.12319

- Hawkins, K. A., R. E. Carlin, L. Littvay et al. (eds) (2019) *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis. Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy* (London, New York, NY: Routledge).
- Inglehart, R. F. (2018) *Cultural Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Ivaldi, G. and O. Mazzoleni (2024) "Producerist populist attitudes and electoral support for populism in the USA and Western Europe". *Socio-Economic Review*, 1(23): 25-50. DOI: 10.1093/ser/mwae034
- Lamont, M. (2018) "Addressing recognition gaps: Destigmatization and the reduction of inequality". *American Sociological Review*, 3(83): 419-444. DOI: 10.1177/0003122418773775
- Lamont, M. (2000) *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation).
- Lamont, M., B. Y. Park and E. Ayala-Hurtado (2017) "Trump's electoral speeches and his appeal to the American white working class: Trump's electoral speeches". *The British Journal of Sociology*, S1(68): S153-S180. DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.12315
- Lipset, S. M. (1981) *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Manunta, E., M. Becker, M. J. Easterbrook et al. (2022) "Economic distress and populism: Examining the role of identity threat and feelings of social exclusion". *Political Psychology*, 5(43): 893-912. DOI: 10.1111/pops.12824
- Mendelberg, T. (2022) "Status, symbols, and politics: A theory of symbolic status politics". *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 6(8): 50-68. DOI: 10.7758/RSF.2022.8.6.03
- Mijs, J. J. B. (2021) "The paradox of inequality: Income inequality and belief in meritocracy go hand in hand". *Socio-Economic Review*, 1(19): 7-35. DOI: 10.1093/ser/mwy051
- Norris, P. and R. Inglehart (2019) *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Obradović, S., S. A. Power and J. Sheehy-Skeffington (2020) "Understanding the psychological appeal of populism". *Current Opinion in Psychology* 35: 125-131. DOI: 10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.06.009
- Ridgeway, C. L. and H. R. Markus (2022) "The significance of status: What it is and how it shapes inequality". *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 7(8): 1-25. DOI: 10.7758/RSF.2022.8.7.01
- Schmidt, V. (2002) "Does discourse matter in the politics of welfare state adjustment?" *Comparative Political Studies*, 2(35): 168-193. DOI: 10.1177/0010414002035002002
- Schmidt, V. (2013) "Speaking to the markets or to the people? A discursive institutionalist analysis of the EU's sovereign debt crisis". *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 1(16): 188-209.
- Spierings, N. and A. Zaslove (2017) "Gender, populist attitudes, and voting: Explaining the gender gap in voting for populist radical right and popu-

- list radical left parties". *West European Politics*, 4(40): 821-847. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2017.1287448
- Zhirnov, A., L. Antonucci, J. P. Thomeczek et al. (2024) "Precarity and populism: Explaining populist outlook and populist voting in Europe through subjective financial and work-related insecurity". *European Sociological Review*, 4(40): 704-720. DOI: 10.1093/esr/jcad052

Endnotes

- 1 I dissect, analyse and explain the structural triggers of the insecurity shift, as well as the individual mechanism of how socio-economic factors and cultural factors are linked with populism, in my forthcoming monograph titled *Insecurity Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2026).
 - 2 Norris, P. and R. Inglehart (2019) *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
 - 3 Inglehart, R. F. (2018) *Cultural Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
 - 4 Ibid, p. 232.
 - 5 Hawkins, K. A., R. E. Carlin, L. Littvay et al. (eds) (2019) *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis*. *Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy* (London, New York, NY: Routledge).
 - 6 Norris, P. and R. Inglehart (2019) *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*.
 - 7 Burn-Murdoch, J. (2024) "What the 'year of democracy' taught us, in 6 charts". *Financial Times*, 30 December.
 - 8 Autor, D., D. Dorn, G. Hanson et al. (2020) "Importing political polarization? The electoral consequences of rising trade exposure". *American Economic Review*, 10(110): 3139-3183. DOI: 10.1257/aer.20170011
 - 9 Fetzer, T. (2019) "Did austerity cause Brexit?" *The American Economic Review*, 11(109): 3849-3886.
 - 10 Azmanova, A. (2020) *Capitalism on Edge: How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change Without Crisis or Utopia* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press).
 - 11 Abou-Chadi, T. and T. Kurer (2021) "Economic risk within the household and voting for the radical right". *World Politics*, 3(73): 482-511. DOI: 10.1017/S0043887121000046
 - 12 Antonucci, L., C. D'Ippolito, L. Horvath et al. (2023) «What's work got to do with it? How precarity influences radical party support in France and the Netherlands». *Sociological Research Online* 1(28):110-131. DOI: 10.1177/13607804211020321
- ; Zhirnov, A., L. Antonucci, J. P. Thomeczek et al. (2024) «Precarity and populism: Explaining populist outlook and populist voting in Europe through subjective financial and work-related insecurity». *European Sociological Review*, 4(40): 704-720. DOI: 10.1093/esr/jcad052

- ; Antonucci, L., R. Di Stefano, C. D'Ippoliti et al. (2024) «Gender, insecurity and populism in Europe». Open Forum Series 2024-2025, no. 53. Center for European Studies (Harvard University), November.
- 13 Antonucci, L., L. Horvath, Y. Kutiyski et al. (2017) "The malaise of the squeezed middle: Challenging the narrative of the 'left behind' Brexiter". *Competition & Change*, 3(21): 211-229. DOI: 10.1177/1024529417704135
- 14 Lipset, S. M. (1981) *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- 15 Juliana Chueri, 'An Emerging Populist Welfare Paradigm? How Populist Radical Right-wing Parties Are Reshaping the Welfare State', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 45 (December 2022). Rathgeb, Philip. *How the Radical Right Has Changed Capitalism and Welfare in Europe and the USA*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.
- 16 Guglielmo Meardi and Igor Guardancich, 'Back to the Familialist Future: The Rise of Social Policy for Ruling Populist Radical Right Parties in Italy and Poland', *West European Politics* 45, no. 1 (2022): 129-53; Matteo Jessoula, Marcello Natili, and Emmanuele Pavolini, "'Exclusionary Welfarism': A New Programmatic Agenda for Populist Right-Wing Parties?", *Contemporary Politics* 28, no. 4 (2022): 447-68.
- 17 Norris, P. and R. Inglehart (2019) *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*.
- 18 Lamont, M. (2018) "Addressing recognition gaps: Destigmatization and the reduction of inequality". *American Sociological Review*, 3(83): 419-444. DOI: 10.1177/0003122418773775
- 19 Bonikowski, B. (2017) "Ethno-nationalist populism and the mobilization of collective resentment: Ethno-nationalist populism". *The British Journal of Sociology*, S1(68): S181-S213. DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.12325
- 20 Gidron, N. and P. A. Hall (2017) "The politics of social status: Economic and cultural roots of the populist right". *The British Journal of Sociology*, S1(68): S57-S84. DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.12319
- 21 Lamont, M. (2000) *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation).
- 22 Spierings, N. and A. Zaslove (2017) "Gender, populist attitudes, and voting: Explaining the gender gap in voting for populist radical right and populist radical left parties". *West European Politics*, 4(40): 821-847. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2017.1287448
- 23 Mendelberg, T. (2022) "Status, symbols, and politics: A theory of symbolic status politics". *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 6(8): 50-68. DOI: 10.7758/RSF.2022.8.6.03
- 24 Manunta, E., M. Becker, M. J. Easterbrook et al. (2022) "Economic distress and populism: Examining the role of identity threat and feelings of social exclusion". *Political Psychology*, 5(43): 893-912. DOI: 10.1111/pops.12824; Obradović, S., S. A. Power and J. Sheehy-Skeffington (2020) "Understand-

- ing the psychological appeal of populism". *Current Opinion in Psychology* 35: 125-131. DOI: 10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.06.009
- 25 Ridgeway, C. L. and H. R. Markus (2022) "The significance of status: What it is and how it shapes inequality". *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 7(8): 1-25. DOI: 10.7758/RSF.2022.8.7.01
- 26 Lamont, M. (2018) "Addressing recognition gaps: Destigmatization and the reduction of inequality". *American Sociological Review*, 3(83): 419-444. DOI: 10.1177/0003122418773775
- 27 Mijs, J. J. B. (2021) "The paradox of inequality: Income inequality and belief in meritocracy go hand in hand". *Socio-Economic Review*, 1(19): 7-35. DOI: 10.1093/ser/mwy051
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ivaldi, G. and O. Mazzoleni (2024) "Producerist populist attitudes and electoral support for populism in the USA and Western Europe". *Socio-Economic Review*, 1(23): 25-50. DOI: 10.1093/ser/mwae034
- 30 Lamont, M., B. Y. Park and E. Ayala-Hurtado (2017) "Trump's electoral speeches and his appeal to the American white working class: Trump's electoral speeches". *The British Journal of Sociology*, S1(68): S153-S180. DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.12315
- 31 Mijs, J. J. B. (2021) "The paradox of inequality: Income inequality and belief in meritocracy go hand in hand".
- 32 Bonikowski, B. (2017) "Ethno-nationalist populism and the mobilization of collective resentment: Ethno-nationalist populism".
- 33 Schmidt, V. (2002) "Does discourse matter in the politics of welfare state adjustment?" *Comparative Political Studies*, 2(35): 168-193. DOI: 10.1177/0010414002035002002; Schmidt, V. (2013) "Speaking to the markets or to the people? A discursive institutionalist analysis of the EU's sovereign debt crisis". *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 1(16): 188-209.



Felix BUTZLAFF

**Squaring the circle
– social democratic voter demands
for change, transformation
and security**

Contemporary social democratic parties face a seemingly paradoxical challenge: on one hand, European citizens show more and more progressive attitudes when it comes to controversial topics, such as climate change, migration or gender roles. Furthermore, citizens understand that these topics carry difficult political choices to be made, as widely diverging social interests need to be balanced. Consequently, social democratic parties could be, in principle, considered the most likeable and sympathetic political party family by many citizens. On the other hand, this does not translate to progressive shares in the voting booth. Quite the contrary. Here, I argue that, in the contemporary constellation, progressive policy proposals for future reforms and more just societies require especially high levels of trust in political leaders and parties – a leap of faith that has grown increasingly elusive. This is both good and bad news for progressive actors.

When revisiting electoral achievements of the past, it is necessary to emphasise that any social democratic or progressive political movements' success during the last five decades has depended on how they were able to balance and equalise increasingly heterogeneous voter (and member) demands. From the onset, social democratic politics aimed to provide change and was rooted in the expectation to reform (or even revolutionise) societies and to facilitate a better and more just tomorrow. However, electorally, the social groups that advocated thorough change were not enough, mathematically. Social democratic and progressive successes were only made possible by a carefully balanced coalition between those parts of society longing for substantive change and those parts craving protection from hardships and a more conservative take on change and transformation. And by highlighting a professional political management capable of providing this carefully balanced social change.

The famous electoral majorities, for instance, of Austria's Bruno Kreisky throughout the 1970s highlighted this recipe: form coalitions

that twin the progressive parts of society with, on one hand, the economically more vulnerable social strata, and, on the other, the more conservative middle classes or even elites that were open to but more sceptical of any ambitious ideas of social transformation.¹ And even the most recent electoral victories, such as the majority for the UK's Labour Party in 2024, became possible when the proposed thorough change and reform were coupled with an outreach to those parts of UK society that were sceptical of wide-reaching social transformation.

Yet, these coalitions and the need for balance in itself transformed social democratic parties all over Europe: progressive political parties became co-designers of their respective societies. The more they succeeded in implementing progressive frameworks and social policies, the more they were confronted with the task of safeguarding past achievements. This turned them into forces of the social and political status quo. Therefore, balancing progress and reform, on one hand, with security and status quo, on the other, has become the circle especially social democrats are expected to square.

Furthermore, since their beginnings, political and economic equality have always been the hallmarks of social democracy's policy ambitions. However, notwithstanding great progress in reducing inequalities in the past, during the last four decades, within-country inequality levels have stalled or are even on the rise again.² As progressive struggles of the past remained incomplete (or even unsuccessful), whole social groups did *not* experience the change and mobility they were hoping for but faced *growing* socio-economic inequalities and *decreasing* social mobility. To them, social democratic promises of a more just transformation increasingly sounded hollow and led to socio-economic security and promises of social mobility becoming even more important topics. Consequently, today, the sometimes contradictory demands of progressive change *and* socio-economic security are often voiced in parallel.³ The gap and perceived tension between, on one hand,

those that have already benefitted disproportionately from progressive achievements and, on the other, those that have yet to see economic and social promises materialise have led to diagnoses such as an increasing polarisation between “somewheres” and “anywheres” – between social groups that understand the world as an open playground of opportunities and those that are more rooted to where they were born and raised, and in comparison are more security- and stability-oriented.⁴ Thus, progressive movements are now increasingly confronted with demands for change and reform, while they are also expected to cushion and protect vulnerable groups from too much change in today’s crises and tumultuous and complex world. Especially topics such as migration, climate change and economic inequality show patterns of increasing tension within potentially progressive or social democratic constituencies.⁵

Here, I take a closer look at contemporary voter demands in various European societies with regards to the sweet spot between change, reform and security, especially voiced towards progressive parties. I then compare how different European social democratic parties seek to address this balance between change and protection.

1. Are voters more progressive than expected?

Recent research on how European voters perceive of political challenges, such as climate, migration and economic inequality, show that they are well aware of the political task of equalising the conflicting or inconsistent demands of different social groups.⁶ Citizens have learned that representative democracy is, in its liberal understanding, a process to find the middle ground between the interests and demands of many different social groups. Additionally, many study results show that a social democratic policy approach focusing on balancing the inter-

ests of diverse social groups, and thus, facilitating a careful transformation might be considered the most favourable and attractive among many voter groups. Social democracy as a *label for an idea* providing change and reform, yet safeguarding previous achievements and providing social security and justice, is considered the most sympathetic and credible. Yet, currently, this does not automatically transfer to votes for actual social democratic parties and contenders (anymore).⁷

For instance, a majority in most European societies accept that climate change requires swift and comprehensive action and demands a careful eye on the social effects ambitious climate policies will have.⁸ The number of citizens not believing in human-made climate change has been continuously decreasing – and most people are aware of the fact that the climate crisis will make a thorough transformation of our established economic models and forms of living necessary. They know, not without worries, that this will bring about many changes for their lives, their security and social position, and for the welfare and life prospects of their children. Public opinion on issues of climate change has been shifting, and notwithstanding changes in this support due to other pressing issues or crises to be dealt with, a strong majority of European citizens would clearly support the notion of a socio-ecological transformation. However, citizens differ in the way they prioritise (and how strongly they welcome) far-reaching changes to their personal lives.⁹

Similarly, a majority of Europeans show a thorough understanding of the necessity to welcome migrants seeking asylum or employment, yet wish their governments to safeguard their societies' welfare states, education and health systems, and their own social positions.¹⁰ Citizens throughout Europe increasingly accept that European countries are countries of immigration and need to come to terms with the fact that societies will need to find a way to integrate migrants in the long term. Especially younger Europeans have come to grow up in societies that increasingly see migrants as natural members.¹¹ What is more,

a growing number of citizens also welcome migrants not only from an economic, welfare state and workforce-oriented perspective, but also emphasise the cultural contribution they make.

Lastly, some of the most controversial topics in public discussions on social changes in the last decades have been shifting gender roles and the politics around them. But also here, data and surveys show that, notwithstanding a considerable polarisation of gender-role attitudes – along the lines of education, income and religion² – expectations for traditional gender roles and marriage models have decreased throughout European societies, and an overwhelming majority of Europeans strongly support gender equality, policies reducing the still existing gender pay gap³ and LGBTQ+ rights (although for the last of these, less so in Eastern Europe; see Fitzpatrick⁴).

Furthermore, especially the radical right-wing parties in Europe, which are electorally on the rise and appear to be spearheading the public political discourse, meet a strong and increasing dislike and rejection from at least 50% of the population.¹⁵ This is noteworthy, as especially in the runup to the 2024 European elections, the seemingly irresistible ascent of the populist radical right dominated headlines and public debates. However, alongside the rise of right-wing parties, their rejection is also strongly growing in many social groups of EU societies.¹⁶ There is – notwithstanding growing support – a growing rebuff of a right-wing project of transforming European democracies into fatherlands of illiberal national sovereignty. As the 2024 elections in France, the UK and Austria, but also in German regions, have shown, a significant majority of European citizens can (still) be mobilised for political projects opposing the reactionary far right.

Thus, through this lens of attitudes, European societies have become ever more progressive. Contrary to what recent electoral trends seem to insinuate, there is hardly a unanimous social development towards reactionary, exclusive or right-wing values.

2. ...but not convinced by contemporary social democracy

However, what is striking is that, notwithstanding this great untapped potential, surveys and results in the voting booth *also* show many citizens' decreasing belief that progressives and social democracy will be able to balance the seemingly inconsistent expectations between facilitating change and reform, on one hand, and much-needed security and protection for the vulnerable, on the other.¹⁷ Whereas there seems to be a growing demand for a social democratic equalisation of social demands, safeguarding equal opportunities, curbing inequalities and providing mobility for the many,¹⁸ social democracy and progressives are less than ever considered credible facilitators. Those political forces that in the past were able to thrive on the promise of a progressive balance and equalisation of interests in the contemporary appear to have lost their appeal.

Transformations and substantial changes are psychologically complex processes. And to decide on them, electorally, is a bet on the future. To debate and discuss necessary future climate politics, socio-ecological transformations, migration regimes, income redistribution, gender-equality rules or healthcare policies, they have to be judged upon their credibility or plausibility to prospectively address the problems they seek to solve. For this, the credibility of those suggesting the policies are key.

In the face of increasing complexities of the modern and confusing world, the trustworthiness of politicians has become ever more important. Citizens need to trust in the capabilities and the authenticity of those representatives we deem able and worthy of solving future crises and problems affecting our lives. And in the case of the above-mentioned topics, voters need to trust the ability of politicians and administrators to find the much-needed balance between thorough trans-

formation and security, between reform and safeguarding the status quo. This is especially the case with topics that many citizens perceive as a potential trade-off that might affect their lives.

Knowing that climate change will require transformations, but fearing that any more ambitious change might curb individual or societal economic outlooks, requires a considerable leap of faith to trust political leaders to take the right (progressive) decisions. It is this shortcoming that is (at least in a major way) responsible for the substantial gap between theoretical sympathy for social democracy as an idea and concrete support for social democratic politicians: the missing belief that social democratic parties can deliver the balance they carry in their name and program.

Generally, many surveys highlight two developments. Firstly, despite the fact that democratic institutions still receive a comparatively stable level of trust by voters and citizens,¹⁹ in almost all European countries, citizens voice a decreasing and already strikingly low trust in the established political elites. Whereas, for instance, in Poland and the Netherlands half of the citizens still believe that political elites and elected politicians care about what they think, in all other European countries this number is substantially lower.²⁰ The trust in political elites to act upon and take decisions that benefit most of society and – most importantly – those that feel worse off has decreased constantly. What is more, in qualitative research, we can observe that citizens specifically lack trust in politicians' abilities and willingness to achieve a fair and just distribution of the burdens that come with crisis politics.²¹ Many citizens favour more progressive climate, migration or gender politics – but they do not believe that politicians advocating them would be able to achieve a just and fair compromise or find a societal balance. This scepticism is fuelled by many citizens' past experiences with social democratic politicians and politics. They fear that any policies addressing the multiple crises of the contemporary would repeat

the well-established mechanisms of catering to the better off and not hearing those that do not feel listened to.²² Against the background of social democracy's long-established narrative of equality and justice, the concrete results of their own politics are especially destructive for the credibility of progressive and social democratic movements. In particular from the perspective of those social groups that feel they are still waiting for social mobility to happen in their favour and that have come to experience that material prosperity has been administered to other groups within their society first.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the measured approval of societal balance, compromise and societal equalisation of interests, processes of individualisation for several decades might have undermined the willingness to accept compromise in a democracy among citizens.²³ Citizens and voters would like to see broad compromises and a true balance of interests, but feel less able to accept forgoing parts of their own interests in the name of compromise. As a result, the political organisation of the societal compromise and balance, which, on one hand, appears to be so desirable, might become ever more difficult, on the other.²⁴

3. Right-wing role models?

There is a glimmer of hope, though, that these shifts are not necessarily set in stone but can indeed change. Of course, any political organisation must consider existing social preconditions. In the case of present-day Europe, social democrats have to deal with more and more individualised societies, as well as societies that experience a democratic exclusion of the less well-off, and have to adapt their organisational structures accordingly.²⁵ Organising political empowerment and installing trust – this is what the recent right-wing populist successes have shown – might work differently than in the past. As

a consequence of the individualisation and flexibilisation of identities,²⁶ empowerment and self-efficacy, as drivers for engagement and mobilisation, are more focused on the individual rather than on ascribed social groups. And this is exactly what contemporary parties of the far right have been doing: promising security by exclusion of those that are perceived as “undeserving”, and promising revenge on those that citizens perceive as the culprits for their dissatisfaction and grievances. Empowerment of grieving individuals today has been framed as a right-wing characteristic.²⁷ Social democrats should look very closely at how “modern” opportunities for belonging are organised on the political right. To do this, progressives need to take into account two things.

Firstly, and this might make it easier, social democratic supporters in particular demand a stronger legitimisation and orientation of political measures, as well as their own organisation through a credible and visible political narrative.²⁸ Sympathisers of progressive parties typically differ considerably from right-wing supporters in that they prioritise concrete policies and programs over protest and emotion. Therefore, social democrats need to visibly ask: what should a balanced climate politics, or a fair and just migration regulation, look like? How do we guarantee progressive and liberating gender politics without scaring those afraid of change? A huge share of European citizens appear to be very receptive to narratives answering these questions in a tangible and socially balanced way.

On one hand, recent debates around social democratic narratives have emphasised the need to provide more “radical” perspectives. This way, the party could credibly connect to its own history by challenging aspects of economic and social systems that have proved time and again to undermine principles of social justice and equality. In the field of climate politics, for instance, this could mean developing narratives around alternative economic production, ending economic growth and reformulating the 1980s concept of *eco-socialism* (see, for instance,

Scherer ⁹ or Magnette). On the other hand, from the perspective of this article, more radical narratives could quickly jeopardise one of the most important (potential) strengths of social democracy: squaring the circle between providing reform and transformation while, at the same time, facilitating protection and security for those most in need. Therefore, instead of emphasising the most radical policy solutions, the balance between change and shelter might provide the most convincing starting point. This does not necessarily mean foregoing radical social-ecological transformations. But it would mean beginning by underlining the different perspectives on climate-change-induced transformations among social groups, and by acknowledging that thorough societal reform necessarily bears different consequences for different social groups. What might an empowering future look like, in particular for those that fear economic and material hardship? And what role can they as individual citizens play within social democracy to bring about these changes?

Secondly, beyond the political narratives, putting an emphasis on concrete political solutions is key. We have learned that to reverse shrinking political trust, the experience of the quality of government has the biggest effect.³⁰ This means that delivering concrete answers to the aforementioned problems, together with a narrative that binds these answers back to their own values and orientations, might be the most promising social democratic perspective of today. In contrast, the experience of crises and hardships easily shatters trust in political decisionmakers. Whereas this loss of trust is not automatically following crises, as in many cases citizens might turn to the executive in a rally-round-the-flag effect, it can undermine confidence and trust if politicians and elected officials do not show the capabilities necessary to address what is needed. For the case of climate change, this would mean outlining what exactly life, especially for the vulnerable and exposed groups in society, might look like in a transformed society,

and especially, how and where they can be facilitated (and experience) to be empowered and have agency. What are policy instruments that credibly protect the socially weaker strata from carrying disproportionate burdens of necessary social-ecological transformations? What are concrete social policies under conditions of social-ecological transformations?

Taken together, delivering concrete policies that provide material progress and security to a majority of the population needs to be a core ingredient of any future social democratic strategy. Here, the good news is that, on many core issues, Europeans might be less polarised than expected. But any strategy needs to be accompanied by a narrative that provides empowerment and self-efficacy for the individual citizen. Only if citizens have the impression that by supporting progressives they contribute to a (positive) change that benefits and provides agency to themselves and many others will they step up and vote.

References

- Albert, M., G. Quenzel, F. de Moll et al. (2024) *Jugend 2024 – 19. Shell Jugendstudie: Pragmatisch zwischen Verdrossenheit und gelebter Vielfalt* (Weinheim: Julius Beltz GmbH & Co. KG).
- Bandau, F. (2023) "What explains the electoral crisis of social democracy? A systematic review of the literature". *Government and Opposition*, 1(58): 183-205. DOI: 10.1017/gov.2022.10
- Bauman, Z. (2012) *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- Blühdorn, I. and F. Butzlaff (2020) "Democratization beyond the post-democratic turn: Towards a research agenda on new conceptions of citizen participation". *Democratization*, 3(27): 369-388. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2019.1707808
- Bremer, B. and L. Rennwald (2023) "Who still likes social democracy? The support base of social democratic parties reconsidered". *Party Politics*, 4(29): 741-754. DOI: 10.1177/13540688221093770
- Butzlaff, F. (2022) "Emancipatory struggles and their political organisation: How political parties and social movements respond to changing notions of emancipation". *European Journal of Social Theory*, 1(25): 94-117. DOI: 10.1177/13684310211027111

- Butzlaff, F. (2023) "When parties become movements: The movement-ization of established party organizations in Austria, Germany, and the UK". *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 65: 645-666. DOI: 10.1007/s11615-023-00524-9
- Butzlaff, F. (2024) "Creating new participatory linkages? Political parties and democratisation in Germany, Austria, and the UK". *Party Politics*, 2(31): 217-227. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688241306727>
- Chancel, L., T. Piketty, E. Saez et al. (eds) (2022) *World Inequality Report 2022* (Paris: World Inequality Lab).
- Elsässer, L., S. Hense and A. Schäfer (2017) „Dem Deutschen Volke,? Die ungleiche Responsivität des Bundestags“. *Zeitschrift Für Politikwissenschaft*, 2(27): 161-180. DOI: 10.1007/s41358-017-0097-9
- Elsässer, L., S. Hense and A. Schäfer (2020) „Not just money: Unequal responsiveness in egalitarian democracies“. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 12(28): 1890-1908. DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2020.1801804
- "Exploring public attitudes, informing public policy: Selected findings from the first nine rounds". European Social Survey, June 2022.
- Eversberg, D., M. Fritz, L. von Faber et al. (2024) *Der neue sozial-ökologische Klassenkonflikt. Mentalitäts- und Interessengegensätze im Streit um Transformation* (Frankfurt: Campus).
- Fitzpatrick, R. (2021) "Attitudes toward LGBTIQ rights in the EU". The Institute of International and European Affairs, January.
- Goodhart, D. (2017) *The Road to Nowhere: The New Tribes Shaping British Politics* (London: Penguin Books).
- Hillen, S. and N. D. Steiner (2024) "Rising inequality and public support for redistribution". *European Journal of Political Research*, 1(64): 442-455. DOI: 10.1111/1475-6765.12696
- Kaltwasser, C. R., M. Dolezal, M. Van Hauwaert et al. (2024) *The Transformation of the Mainstream Right and Its Impact on (Social) Democracy* (Brussels: The Foundation for European Progressive Studies), April.
- Kösemen, O. and U. Wieland (2022) *"Willkommenskultur zwischen Stabilität und Aufbruch"* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung).
- Lomazzi, V. and N. Soboleva (2024) "Polarization of gender role attitudes across Europe". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 4(32): 1192-1211. DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2024.2327846
- Lütjen, T. (2022) "The anti-authoritarian revolt: Right-wing populism as self-empowerment?" *European Journal of Social Theory*, 1(25): 75-93. DOI: 10.1177/13684310211027113
- Mau, S., T. Lux and L. Westheuser (2023) *Triggerpunkte. Konsens Und Konflikt in Der Gegenwartsgesellschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp).
- Messing, V. and B. Ságvári (2019) *"Still Divided but More Open. Mapping European Attitudes towards Migration before and after the Migration Crisis"* (Budapest: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung).
- Petritsch, W. (2010) *Bruno Kreisky. Die Biografie* (St. Pölten/Salzburg: Residenz Verlag).

- Scherer, K.-J. (2024) „Radikaler Reformismus für das Überleben. Sozialdemokratisches Narrativ in der Umweltkrise“. *Perspektivends*, 1(41): 58-75.
- Wike, R., J. Poushter, L. Silver et al. (2019) *European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center).

Endnotes

- 1 Petritsch, W. (2010) *Bruno Kreisky. Die Biografie* (St. Pölten/Salzburg: Residenz Verlag).
- 2 Chancel, L., T. Piketty, E. Saez et al. (eds) (2022) *World Inequality Report 2022* (Paris: World Inequality Lab).
- 3 Butzlaff, F. (2023) "When parties become movements: The movementization of established party organizations in Austria, Germany, and the UK". *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 65: 645-666. DOI: 10.1007/s11615-023-00524-9
- 4 Goodhart, D. (2017) *The Road to Somewhere: The New Tribes Shaping British Politics* (London: Penguin Books).
- 5 Mau, S., T. Lux and L. Westheuser (2023) *Triggerpunkte. Konsens Und Konflikt in Der Gegenwartsgesellschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp).
- 6 Mau, S., T. Lux and L. Westheuser (2023) *Triggerpunkte. Konsens Und Konflikt in Der Gegenwartsgesellschaft*; Eversberg, D., M. Fritz, L. von Faber et al. (2024) *Der neue sozial-ökologische Klassenkonflikt. Mentalitäts- und Interessengegensätze im Streit um Transformation* (Frankfurt: Campus).
- 7 Kaltwasser, C. R., M. Dolezal, M. Van Hauwaert et al. (2024) *The Transformation of the Mainstream Right and Its Impact on (Social) Democracy* (Brussels: The Foundation for European Progressive Studies), April; Albert, M., G. Quenzel, F. de Moll et al. (2024) *Jugend 2024 – 19. Shell Jugendstudie: Pragmatisch zwischen Verdrossenheit und gelebter Vielfalt* (Weinheim: Julius Beltz GmbH & Co. KG).
- 8 Mau, S., T. Lux and L. Westheuser (2023) *Triggerpunkte. Konsens Und Konflikt in Der Gegenwartsgesellschaft*.
- 9 Albert, M., G. Quenzel, F. de Moll et al. (2024) *Jugend 2024 – 19. Shell Jugendstudie: Pragmatisch zwischen Verdrossenheit und gelebter Vielfalt*; Mau, S., T. Lux and L. Westheuser (2023) *Triggerpunkte. Konsens Und Konflikt in Der Gegenwartsgesellschaft*.
- 10 Messing, V. and B. Ságvári (2019) *Still Divided but More Open. Mapping European Attitudes towards Migration before and after the Migration Crisis* (Budapest: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung); Kösemen, O. and U. Wieland (2022) *Willkommenskultur zwischen Stabilität und Aufbruch* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung).
- 11 Albert, M., G. Quenzel, F. de Moll et al. (2024) *Jugend 2024 – 19. Shell Jugendstudie: Pragmatisch zwischen Verdrossenheit und gelebter Vielfalt*.

- 12 Lomazzi, V. and N. Soboleva (2024) "Polarization of gender role attitudes across Europe". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 4(32): 1192-1211. DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2024.2327846
- 13 Wike, R., J. Poushter, L. Silver et al. (2019) *European Public Opinion Three Decades after the Fall of Communism* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center).
- 14 Fitzpatrick, R. (2021) "Attitudes toward LGBTIQ rights in the EU". The Institute of International and European Affairs, January.
- 15 Kaltwasser, C. R., M. Dolezal, M. Van Hauwaert et al. (2024) *The Transformation of the Mainstream Right and Its Impact on (Social) Democracy*.
- 16 Albert, M., G. Quenzel, F. de Moll et al. (2024) *Jugend 2024 – 19. Shell Jugendstudie: Pragmatisch zwischen Verdrossenheit und gelebter Vielfalt*.
- 17 Bremer, B. and L. Rennwald (2023) "Who still likes social democracy? The support base of social democratic parties reconsidered". *Party Politics*, 4(29): 741-754. DOI: 10.1177/13540688221093770; Bandau, F. (2023) "What explains the electoral crisis of social democracy? A systematic review of the literature". *Government and Opposition*, 1(58): 183-205. DOI: 10.1017/gov.2022.10
- 18 Hillen, S. and N. D. Steiner (2024) "Rising inequality and public support for redistribution". *European Journal of Political Research*, 1(64): 442-455. DOI: 10.1111/1475-6765.12696
- 19 Albert, M., G. Quenzel, F. de Moll et al. (2024) *Jugend 2024 – 19. Shell Jugendstudie: Pragmatisch zwischen Verdrossenheit und gelebter Vielfalt*.
- 20 Wike, R., J. Poushter, L. Silver et al. (2019) *European Public Opinion Three Decades after the Fall of Communism*.
- 21 Mau, S., T. Lux and L. Westheuser (2023) *Triggerpunkte. Konsens Und Konflikt in Der Gegenwartsgesellschaft*.
- 22 Elsässer, L., S. Hense and A. Schäfer (2017) "Dem Deutschen Volke"? Die ungleiche Responsivität des Bundestags". *Zeitschrift Für Politikwissenschaft*, 2(27): 161-180. DOI: 10.1007/s41358-017-0097-9; Elsässer, L., S. Hense and A. Schäfer (2020) „Not just money: Unequal responsiveness in egalitarian democracies". *Journal of European Public Policy*, 12(28): 1890-1908. DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2020.1801804
- 23 Butzlaff, F. (2022) "Emancipatory struggles and their political organisation: How political parties and social movements respond to changing notions of emancipation". *European Journal of Social Theory*, 1(25): 94-117. DOI: 10.1177/13684310211027111
- 24 Blühdorn, I. and F. Butzlaff (2020) "Democratization beyond the post-democratic turn: Towards a research agenda on new conceptions of citizen participation". *Democratization*, 3(27): 369-388. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2019.1707808
- 25 Butzlaff, F. (2023) "When parties become movements: The movement-ization of established party organizations in Austria, Germany, and the UK".
- 26 Bauman, Z. (2012) *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press).

- 27 Lütjen, T. (2022) "The anti-authoritarian revolt: Right-wing populism as self-empowerment?" *European Journal of Social Theory*, 1(25): 75-93. DOI: 10.1177/13684310211027113
- 28 Butzlaff, F. (2024) "Creating new participatory linkages? Political parties and democratisation in Germany, Austria, and the UK". *Party Politics*, 2(31): 217-227. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688241306727>
- 29 Scherer, K.-J. (2024) "Radikaler Reformismus für das Überleben. Sozialdemokratisches Narrativ in der Umweltkrise". *Perspektivends*, 1(41): 58-75.
- 30 "Exploring public attitudes, informing public policy: Selected findings from the first nine rounds". European Social Survey, June 2022.



Tomáš PETŘÍČEK

**A progressive
reframing of resilience:
Strengthening European democracy
in the time of polycrisis**



1. Introduction

Our European democratic societies faces a myriad of new, complex risks and threats to its security that are increasingly difficult to define solely in terms of defence policy or national security. It is suggested that one of the available options to address these challenges is to employ the concept of resilience – redefined not just as a capacity to endure shocks, but as a commitment to safeguard and enhance social and economic security, and build truly inclusive and resilient societies. At the same time, strengthening our societies' resilience must also encompass addressing vulnerabilities of our critical infrastructure, supply chains, energy systems, cyberspace and other key aspects our society relies on. Moreover, it is essential to recognise that the wellbeing of people and communities is vital for our security. It should be understood in broader terms and should not be narrowed down only to national security. Ensuring security in a democratic society also requires continuous public scrutiny and debate, preventing a narrow, expert-driven approach from sidelining democratic oversight and civic engagement.

From geopolitical shocks, including the resurgent ambitions of Russia, the systemic challenges posed by China violence in the Middle East, and last but not least the global political and economic disruptions caused by the second Trump administratioto the far-reaching security implications of climate change, the rapidly advancing emergence of new technologies and risks to economic stability, our Union must navigate an unprecedented landscape shaped by geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions, as well as complex global societal transformations. Given this context, it is no surprise that people across Europe are increasingly anxious – about how these profound changes, often beyond their control, will influence their lives and, more importantly, about the risks they cannot address as individuals or households.

The 2024 European elections have underscored that security is among the key priorities for citizens. They are increasingly expecting the EU to provide solutions that will enhance their security and protection, especially in reducing, mitigating or socialising the risks of potential external shocks that negatively affect their lives – from physical safety to welfare and socio-economic conditions, but also increasing uncertainty about the future economic and social development of Europe. However, as we confront these new challenges, it is imperative to recognise that the traditional notion of providing security, including the role of the public sphere, is no longer sufficient to address complex challenges and needs to evolve.

The multifaceted nature of today's threats makes it unrealistic to prevent all potential risks, as the security landscape grows increasingly unpredictable, where "surprise is always a potentiality".¹ This acknowledgment does not signify surrender, but rather calls for a nuanced, progressive approach to address the complexities of today's world. It is an opportunity to move beyond the conservative focus on "hard" security. It also allows us to move beyond the neoliberal approach that often considers security as a protection of the status quo, which leaves many people vulnerable, if not in terms of physical security, then in terms of degrading social and economic conditions, or elementary stability and certainty in their lives. The shared anxiety over the future and the loss of security in its broader meaning are fuelling authoritarian tendencies and growing support for the far right within our societies.

This contribution seeks to reframe the concept of building societal resilience based on progressive values and a broader understanding of whole-of-society security. To achieve this, we must first reject the neoliberal concept of resilience, which emphasises individual responsibility and self-capacitation, while selectively defining vulnerability.² Instead, we should advance collective resilience strategies that enhance the agency of individuals and communities, addressing the root causes

of vulnerabilities and making our society more resilient to external threats.

Furthermore, we need to strike a new balance between promising protection and controlling risks, hence providing security, while also recognizing that we are facing complex and often unpredictable threats that heighten general anxiety and uncertainty about the future. As we navigate these challenges, we must also ensure that the burden of adaptation is shared fairly - supporting people through economic transitions, reskilling for new opportunities, and ensuring that the benefits of investment in infrastructure, jobs, and security are broadly socialized. At the same time, it is necessary to avoid replacing the promise of security, which is no longer fully credible in these complex circumstances, with the non-promise of resilience.³ Instead, we need to explore how progressively employing resilience can make our efforts to strengthen the security and protection of people credible again. Especially, we should focus on how we can fairly increase societal capacity to adapt to both anticipated and unforeseen risks.

This contribution focuses on the critical intersection of resilience and security, while also examining how resilience is constructed as a governance discourse that not only frames the democratic debate but also defines what is considered legitimate, acceptable, and prioritized in policy and public discourse.. So far, the resilience has been used to legitimize the neoliberal governance model. The contribution questions whether there is a progressive alternative to this model and seeks to offer a reframed notion of resilience rooted in solidarity and social justice.

Finally, by reframing resilience as an integral part of a progressive governance model, we can better operationalise the connection between social and economic justice and the need to enhance European security. Contrary to the neoliberal argument that prioritising security is a prerequisite for ensuring social welfare, we must demonstrate that

security is inseparable from social and economic justice. Our European social model depends on ensuring security and effectively investing in the capacities needed to address new threats in a challenging geopolitical environment. By redefining societal resilience as whole-of-society resilience, we can address both internal and external risks facing our societies and safeguard European democracy itself.

2. Rethinking resilience: From buzzword to progressive framework

Before delving into the criticism of the so-far-dominant neoliberal approach to resilience and outlining a possible progressive reframing of the concept, it is necessary to start by stressing that the term resilience can have different meanings in different contexts or from the perspectives of different disciplines.⁴ Resilience, a term that originated in environmental science to describe the capacity of organisms or ecosystems to adapt to changes in their environment, has over the past decade gained significant traction in other fields, from psychology to security studies, international relations or geopolitics.⁵ Within these later domains, resilience has become a cornerstone concept, often framing responses to threats against national security and democratic structures. These include challenges like disinformation campaigns, hybrid warfare, cyberattacks, and other tactics aimed at destabilising governance and public trust. While this focus is a valuable starting point, it reflects a narrow understanding of resilience – one that is inspired by a neoliberal approach that prioritises defence against a broad range of national-security-related risks. A progressive approach must go beyond this. Resilience cannot be confined to a singular domain, as it is inherently interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional. Importantly, its construction – or erosion – occurs within a broader socio-economic, cultural and political context.

This contribution, therefore, explores this rather holistic approach to resilience, while accepting the understanding of resilience as relying on ideas of self-organisation, institutional innovation, adaptation, transformation and survival in the face of adversity or crisis.⁶ Resilience, in this context, is seen as essential for society to manage changes in the security environment. These changes encompass not only imminent security threats but also long-term security trends from increased geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions, growing climate insecurity or the rise of asymmetric threats ranging from hybrid and influence operations to targeted cyber operations. The impacts of these trends can be anticipated only to a certain extent, increasing overall uncertainty. Europe is also facing substantial transformative processes – green transformation, digital and AI revolution, transformation of global trade, which can represent shocks for individuals, households or whole communities when the society as a whole is not resilient and capable of adapting and managing these processes. On the contrary, these trends and transformative processes can represent an opportunity and turn into benefits for European society in the long run if Europe could further develop its capacity to turn shocks into positive change.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that while we should not resign in our attempt to control negative changes or mitigate potential threats, there is a need to accept that European society cannot fully determine the dynamics and evolutionary momentum of the global security environment and global transformative processes, which are increasingly complex. This means acknowledging the limitations of our ability to fully shape the global security landscape, in broader than national security terms, we will be living in. Instead, we must develop strategies that allow us to react to the world as it is, not as we wish it to be.

Resilience also builds on the understanding that we cannot predict or prevent every risk or mitigate every threat. Instead, we can better

prepare for a wide range of possible scenarios by applying a whole-of-society approach. Here comes the notion of vulnerability, which is central to both our understanding of the dangers of the neoliberal approach of resilience and to the presented attempt to reframe the concept in line with progressive values. In general, the existing literature accepts that vulnerability is associated with susceptibility to harm or powerlessness when facing changes or risks. However, it is the differences in the views of what causes the vulnerability, and whether we can address the root causes of vulnerability in the complex global security system. Moreover, it is also suggested, in contrast to traditional approaches, that vulnerability to risks is not distributed equally throughout society. Hence, it is not about the unequal ability to adapt or unequal capacity to deal with risks or shocks of different social groups or communities. Some groups and communities are more vulnerable or exposed to causes of vulnerability than other groups, in particular for socio-economic reasons, but also due to their minority status or place of living.

3. Neoliberal governance and resilience: The critique

Many critical thinkers consider the concept of resilience as an integral part of recent neoliberal governance discourse.⁷ This is particularly evident in the emphasis on individual responsibility to address change, uncertainty, different kinds of new risks and the need to adapt to adversity. In these approaches, resilience aligns with contemporary neoliberal governance, particularly in terms of its individualistic approach, its shifting of responsibility from the public to the private sphere, as well as transferring the risks onto individuals and communities, and the promotion of reflexive self-governance through strategies of awareness, risk management and adaptability.⁸

At the same time, the neoliberal perspective neglects systemic problems and structural vulnerabilities. Moreover, systemic solutions dealing with structural vulnerabilities can prove to be more efficient than shifting the responsibility to deal with risks to the level of individuals or communities. By doing so, the neoliberal perspective ignores the root causes of vulnerabilities, especially social, economic and political inequalities too. Moreover, while acknowledging the existence of different forms of vulnerability and their link to security, its understanding is highly selective and instrumental, often defined by the political or economic interests of better-off social groups. In doing so, the dominant discourse legitimises certain social and economic practices, while delegitimising others that might better reflect the needs of more vulnerable groups or communities.⁹ In effect, it can result in policies and practices that fail to address the root causes of insecurity, leaving marginalised groups disproportionately affected or exposed to higher risks.

Neoliberal resilience often reinterprets what makes society susceptible to security risks, prioritising certain risks over others based on selective economic and political agendas. For example, European liberals and conservatives may overemphasise the impact of third countries' disinformation campaigns on the EU's political process. This is not to say that such disinformation is not a problem, but it shifts focus away from other causes of declining trust in public institutions and decision-making processes, such as the failure of the dominant neoliberal governance model to address the social and economic aspirations of a large part of the European population.

Additionally, the neoliberal approach tends to resign attempts to control change or address the emergence of risks, instead promoting the idea that individuals, communities and society as a whole must first and foremost adapt to new risks and future changes.¹⁰ This can be seen as the reluctance to address economic risks and anxieties asso-

ciated with the negative impacts of economic liberalisation. Neoliberals expect individuals and communities to adapt, take responsibility for their future, and self-capacitate without a fair distribution of costs to address these new risks in general, or costs to adapt to shocks or extraordinary security situations. In addition, the neoliberal approach overfocuses on adaptation as a way to maintain the status quo. In doing so, it ignores the promotion of positive structural changes that could shape both the security landscape and increase social and economic justice by addressing the key causes of vulnerabilities at the same time .

This approach extends beyond economic governance into the realm of security and security-related policies, where individuals and communities are often expected to adapt, for example, to climate-change impacts by employing local resources first. For illustration, let me list two examples of resigning control or preventing risks. One can be seen in the increasingly reluctant view of many proponents of the neoliberal perspective to make the effort to reform and strengthen existing multilateral security frameworks, not to mention a lack of willingness to support multilateralism as an organising principle for addressing at least some security challenges, including disinformation. Another is in the wave of “green backlash”, where many representatives of the far right, but also centre-right, call for stepping down efforts to mitigate climate change, while knowing that there is a clear link to the future of European security.

Lastly, the neoliberal approach to resilience undermines collective action in strengthening security. By promoting individualism and self-reliance, it questions the importance and feasibility of collective action to address the root causes of structural vulnerabilities. It also undermines the fabric of solidarity, which is central to the ability of any society to support individuals or communities unable to shoulder the costs of adaptation to changes. The resulting lack of solidarity weakens social cohesion, leading to societal fragmentation and polarisation. From

a security perspective, this makes it much more difficult for society to agree on the main threats and strategies to address them. In essence, less solidarity, less social cohesion and less strategic convergence within society hinder effective resilience-building efforts that foster mutual support and create truly resilient societies.

To conclude this part, the assessment of the neoliberal approach to resilience can be captured by what many critical scholars and thinkers expressed in their work: making resilience a buzzword represents a nihilistic moment in the evolution of neoliberalism and its governance model, which capitulates on addressing root causes of vulnerabilities and shifts responsibility to individuals or communities to tackle existing or emerging risks.¹¹

4. Progressive reframing: Building resilience by addressing structural causes of vulnerabilities

In the contrast to the neoliberal approach, the progressive resilience-building strategy has to focus on vulnerabilities and its root causes, instead of symptoms and results of vulnerabilities. Moreover, the strategy needs to aim at promoting collective action rooted in principles of solidarity, respect and mutual responsibility, as well as in the deeper systemic changes that strengthen and promote social justice and social security, instead of limiting it to the self-capacitation of individuals or communities. It should be considered a long-term process, in which we both evaluate risks and threats, including how to face them, but also assess what makes some social groups more vulnerable to potential harm when change, especially change in the security environment, emerges. Importantly, “resilience also requires an understanding of the needs and expectations of society, and how these needs and expectations are developing over time”.¹²

The progressive approach can be inspired by Bouchard's framework of adaptability and transformation, which distinguishes three positions.¹³ Firstly, resilience should not retreat into passivity or fatalism in the face of change. It should not be about giving up on attempts to control change. On the contrary, it should be seen as a way to resist external shocks, or to mitigate or prevent them, through deliberate action that addresses social, economic and systemic vulnerabilities. In this regard, we must explore the potential of resilience-building as a proactive tool to prevent shocks, especially those driven by structural forces such as technological disruption or climate change. However, resilience is not just about withstanding shocks – it also involves ensuring that certain risks do not disproportionately fall on individuals. This raises critical questions: what role should the state play in preventing such outcomes, and how can we equitably share the costs of resilience building? It is clear that building a whole-of-society resilience also requires strengthening our political will, building institutional capacity for foresight, and making informed, democratic decisions about our collective future. Moreover, the progressive resilience framework must ensure that the burden of addressing risks as well as building and sustaining resilience does not fall disproportionately on individuals or vulnerable communities. Instead, it needs to be based on a political vision and agenda that distributes the burden fairly, avoiding a situation where individuals or vulnerable groups bear the brunt of systemic failures. It must reinforce solidarity and ensure that public institutions play an active role in the just distribution of both the costs and benefits of resilience.

At the same time, we should explore whether we can build a form of progressive deterrence through resilience. This would involve demonstrating societal strength and cohesion in ways that deter external actors from actions that could undermine our security. For example, by strengthening the social cohesion of our societies, we can limit societal

fracturing and fragmentation, reducing vulnerabilities that external actors could exploit against us.

Secondly, we should evaluate resilience as an effective capacity to adapt to new situations. In doing so, we need to avoid shifting the responsibility for adaptation to individuals only. Instead, we need to promote adaptation as a whole-of-society process, rooted in the principle of solidarity and guided by a renewed social contract—one that ensures everyone, especially those most vulnerable, is supported, protected, and empowered. A truly progressive approach to resilience demands that we go beyond compensatory measures and invest in the capabilities of all individuals and communities to thrive amidst change. In this respect, the resilience-building requires the development of credible instruments that address socio-economic sources of anxiety of the most vulnerable parts of our societies. Moreover, the progressive approach must involve long-term policies that enable people not just to cope, but to participate in shaping the transitions ahead. Resilience, in this sense, must be not only protective, but aspirational—a means of unlocking both individual as well as collective potential in the face of uncertainty.

At the same time, it also involves strengthening the agency of vulnerable social groups and different communities to be able to contribute relevantly to the decision-making on security issues, to be able to be part of the compromise, not to feel excluded, and hence, less able to adjust when change arrives. Moreover, it will require more empathy and willingness for dialogue on the side of the political and economic elite, as well as on the side of the security community, to voices that are often excluded from the process of threat assessment and evaluation of strategic options.

Thirdly, Bouchard claims that we can understand “resilience as the opportunity to creatively respond to new challenges, demonstrating innovation and thriving in the face of adversity”.¹⁴ Instead of a neoliberal

way, which frames resilience as making individuals cope with risks and eventually hardship or shocks, the progressive way would mean resilience as the ability to deal with a problem, be it changing the situation, not letting us be affected so much, or being able to address it or adapt to it in a way that results in positive change or in improvement of our security situation or welfare in the end.

I believe that the progressive resilience-building strategy presents an opportunity to organise a broader coalition and network (also epistemic community, discursive community) that joins forces to propose, introduce and work on the implementation of key social innovation that can substantially reduce vulnerabilities and provide a long-term framework for addressing their root causes. In doing so, we can imagine integrating innovations targeting existing problems – such as affordability of housing; job insecurity; inequalities in the education system; the development of public services; or reshaping the existing economic model, including burden sharing, within European society – into the resilience-building strategy.

In a more specific way, the progressive approach to resilience should emphasise three principles that have to navigate both the way we speak about resilience and political, economic and security practices. Firstly, we need to promote resilience as a community-centred approach. Unlike the individual-centric neoliberal approach, a progressive resilience model should focus on empowering whole communities and try to strike a balance between individual freedoms on one hand and the need for collective action on the other. It can involve supporting deliberative processes in society to increase ownership of citizens. It also expects that strategic communication aims to be as inclusive as possible. Or it involves, among other possible options, investing in local leadership; fostering community networks; and encouraging grassroots, bottom-up participation in decision-making processes. In the historical tradition of social democracy, we should also develop

a framework where mutual aid and support networks can thrive. And again, it is not about transferring the responsibility of the state to communities to take care of risk preparation by themselves; instead, it means that the state and communities need to be partners, the state needs to provide tangible support to these mutual aid initiatives, community support networks and grassroots organisations.

Secondly, we need to organise a resilience agenda around social and economic justice. While the security of our democratic societies is threatened by external pressures and risks, it is even more questioned because internal processes where trust in institutions, and more importantly in political actors and stakeholders representing them, as well as mutual trust and solidarity among individuals and different communities, is on the decline. To reverse this trend and reinvigorate the internal force of our democracy, we need to tackle the causes of inequalities and to provide social and economic justice to all. It should be at the centre of progressive resilience discourse and practice.

Thirdly, the progressive model must emphasise the central role of infrastructure in achieving whole-of-society resilience. However, unlike the existing neoliberal approach, the progressive alternative cannot limit its strategy to addressing the vulnerabilities of physical infrastructure, which faces numerous risks, such as attempts by strategic competitors to get control over critical it; cyberattacks; and climate-change-induced disasters that damage our transport, energy and communication networks. We need to prioritise the progressive development and protection of European social infrastructure, which remains underdeveloped, underfunded and insufficiently accessible to the most vulnerable groups. Firstly, the Covid-19 pandemic laid bare these shortcomings, while also revealing the critical role of both national capacity and EU-level solidarity. The ability of different member states to support individuals and communities was largely dependent on the state of their social infrastructure. However, it was also the Euro-

pean Union's coordinated response—including the mobilisation of joint financial instruments like NextGenerationEU—that helped to cushion the socio-economic impact across member states, especially those with weaker domestic infrastructures. This moment proved that social infrastructure—particularly healthcare, education, and social care—is not a luxury, but a precondition for resilience and cohesion across the Union. Another example is education, which still has barriers that prevent it from fully developing European talent and contributing to a more resilient European democratic society. By improving access and quality in education, we can better equip our society to face future challenges. This is not merely a matter of fairness or welfare—it is a strategic imperative. As Europe debates its path toward a stronger Defence Union involving increased military and defence spending, it is necessary to resolutely reject the false dichotomy between defence and social investment. Social democrats must make it unmistakably clear: there is no viable transformation of European society toward enhanced defence capacity without a robust and inclusive social infrastructure. Progressive resilience must strike the right balance between internal cohesion and external preparedness. Without this balance, Europe risks drifting toward internal fragmentation and a gradual erosion of societal solidarity—or, conversely, being caught off guard by external security shocks that could undermine its prosperity and jeopardize the sustainability of the welfare state.

By fostering resilience through stronger social cohesion within the Union, we lay the groundwork for enhancing the EU's geopolitical position in this turbulent era of polycrisis. The EU debate has focused, so far, mainly on the insufficiency of our resources and strategic capabilities to address geopolitical risks and other major security contingencies. Resilience can also strengthen the European will to strategically use our existing or newly developed resources and capabilities, which is a precondition for European strategic autonomy. A resilient Europe is

better equipped to withstand geopolitical shocks, such as conflicts in our neighbourhood or the challenges posed by global power competition. While it may be impossible to fully mitigate or prevent all geopolitical risks from impacting the EU and its citizens, a truly resilient Europe can absorb and adapt to these pressures more effectively. At the same time, resilience should be reimagined by progressives as a cooperative rather than a competitive instrument, aligning with our values of solidarity, inclusivity and mutual benefit. By doing so, resilience becomes a tool for fostering partnerships and collaborative solutions to global challenges, resisting the divisive and conflictual tendencies that often characterise international relations.

Moreover, a deeply resilient European democracy becomes inherently less vulnerable to both internal and external risks and threats. For instance, the costs of hybrid operations by adversaries rise significantly when societies are cohesive, institutions are robust and public trust is high. In this way, resilience is not only a passive or defensive concept. It can serve as an active component of progressive prevention or deterrence of shocks. By demonstrating societal strength and reducing exploitable vulnerabilities, resilience becomes a critical tool to deter external threats and maintain the EU's security and stability. Strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing digital literacy, improving media transparency, and securing vital digital infrastructure - such as election systems - are essential steps in reducing these vulnerabilities. A progressive approach must not only prioritize access to high-quality public services but also ensure sustained investment in social infrastructure. For example, access to education is key in equipping individuals with the skills and competencies necessary for personal and professional development. Expanding digital literacy programs is also crucial to ensure that low-income or vulnerable populations can navigate online public services, such as healthcare, social benefits, and education. These initiatives foster democratic participation by enabling citizens

to engage more effectively with public institutions and contribute to policy-making. By ensuring that no one is excluded from the digital transition, we reinforce the social contract, strengthen societal cohesion, and protect vulnerable groups from technological exclusion.

5. Conclusion

The progressive movement has long refused to employ the concept of resilience. It is not surprising. It has been predominantly used by neoliberals over the past couple of decades. It can be seen as a neoliberal approach to governance, including in the security area. Yet it is important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. This contribution argues that we should instead progressively reframe and redeploy the concept of resilience; one that addresses, at the same time, the need for positive social and economic changes in our society and the provision of security in broad terms. It could be the progressive answer to new risks and the complexity of challenges we are facing today. Resilience, from this perspective, should be seen not as a mere reaction to crises, but as a proactive, inclusive strategy that equips societies to confront risks in ways that promote social and economic justice and equality.

The neoliberal focus on individual self-capacitation has failed to recognise the differing abilities within societies to address risks, creating deeper inequalities. The progressive approach, by contrast, focuses on the root causes of vulnerabilities rather than their symptoms. It aims to promote systemic change, social justice and collective security through policies that empower communities and reduce structural sources of vulnerability.

A progressive resilience-building strategy should not be limited to adapting to change, but should resist shocks, mitigating them through proactive measures that address vulnerabilities unequally distributed

in European society. Drawing on Bouchard's framework of adaptability and transformation, this contribution outlines three key areas where progressive resilience can offer solutions: (1) resistance to external threats; (2) adaptive capacity in the face of new situations; and (3) creative innovation in response to adversity. By applying these principles, progressives can reclaim ground in the political struggle not only against neoliberals and conservatives but also against populists. This approach enhances the credibility of our political competence, demonstrating that the progressive movement can effectively address both the evolving challenges of national and European security in a changing geopolitical landscape, while also offering concrete solutions for improving social security, promoting active labor market policies, investing in innovation, and making European society aspirational once again.

The concept of resilience must be integrated into the progressive movement's broader storytelling. We must emphasise that resilience is a long-term process, focused on empowering communities and addressing socio-economic sources of insecurity. It should involve a collective effort to build agency among vulnerable groups, promoting solidarity and empathy from the political and security elites, and including marginalised voices in decision-making processes.

In reshaping the resilience narrative, we have the opportunity to organise a broader coalition to introduce key social innovations – such as affordable housing, job security and public-service development – that address the root causes of societal vulnerabilities. The progressive resilience strategy, therefore, aligns with social democracy's core values of solidarity, justice and collective action, ensuring that our societies are not only prepared to face future crises but are made more equitable and cohesive in the process.

Finally, this contribution proposes that the progressive approach to resilience should be based on three guiding principles. Firstly, resil-

ience must be community-centred, supporting grassroots efforts and empowering and emancipating communities, including by increasing their capacity to contribute to decision-making on a broad range of security issues. Secondly, the resilience must be organised around social and economic justice, tackling inequalities as a means of strengthening democracy and social cohesion. Thirdly, resilience must focus on the development and modernisation of social infrastructure, which is critical for supporting the most vulnerable groups during times of crisis. However, these principles need to be employed not for the purpose of merely protecting or maintaining the status quo. The resilience concept is the way for progressive movement to regain its position as a key aspirational force in Europe. The social infrastructure is central for the empowerment of individuals and communities. It fosters opportunity, enables social mobility and creates opportunities for economic and social advancement. Progressives must lead with a vision that is not only about safeguarding the most vulnerable but also about building a future that is inclusive, innovative, and full of potential. In doing so, social democracy becomes not just a safeguard against adversity, but a credible and dynamic force for positive societal transformation of Europe.

In doing so, this contribution proposes a resilience strategy that goes beyond neoliberal self-reliance and crisis management, advocating for a more just, equitable and inclusive approach. By reframing resilience as a progressive, long-term, whole-of-society effort, we can ensure that our societies are not only secure in an increasingly turbulent geopolitical landscape but also thrive in the face of future challenges.

Bibliography

- Aradau, C. (2014) "The promise of security: Resilience, surprise and epistemic politics". *Resilience*, 2(2): 73-87.
- Bouchard, G. (2013) Neoliberalism in Québec: The Response of a Small Nation Under Pressure. In *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*, ed. by Peter A. Hall and Michele Lamont. Cambridge: Cambridge.
- Cavelty, M. D., M. Kaufmann and K. S. Kristensen (2015) "Resilience and (in)security: Practices, subjects, temporalities". *Security Dialogue*, 1(46): 3-14.
- Chandler, D. (2012) "Resilience and human security: The post-interventionist paradigm". *Security Dialogue*, 3(43): 213-229.
- Hubert, C. and J. Joseph (2019) "Introduction: The politics of resilience: Problematising current approaches". *Resilience*, 3(7): 215-223.
- Joseph J. (2013) "Resilience as embedded neoliberalism: a governmentality approach", *Resilience*, 1(1), 38-52.
- Joseph J. (2018) *Varieties of Resilience: Studies in Governmentality*. Cambridge University Press; 2018.
- McAslan, A. (2010) "The concept of resilience: Understanding its origins, meaning and utility". Strawman paper. Torrens Resilience Institute, 14 March.
- McKeown, A., H. B. Dang and J. Glenn (2022) "A social theory of resilience: The governance of vulnerability in crisis-era neoliberalism". *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 1(9): 112-132.

Endnotes

- 1 Aradau, C. (2014) "The promise of security: Resilience, surprise and epistemic politics". *Resilience*, 2(2): 77.
- 2 McKeown, A., H. B. Dang and J. Glenn (2022) "A social theory of resilience: The governance of vulnerability in crisis-era neoliberalism". *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 1(9): 112-132.
- 3 Aradau, C. (2014) "The promise of security: Resilience, surprise and epistemic politics". *Resilience*, 2(2): 73-87.
- 4 Cavelty, M. D., M. Kaufmann and K. S. Kristensen (2015) "Resilience and (in)security: Practices, subjects, temporalities". *Security Dialogue*, (46)1, 3-14.
- 5 Chandler, D. (2012) "Resilience and human security: The post-interventionist paradigm". *Security Dialogue*, (43)3, 213-229.
- 6 Hubert, C. and J. Joseph (2019) "Introduction: The politics of resilience: Problematising current approaches". *Resilience*, 3(7): 215-223.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Joseph J. (2018) *Varieties of Resilience: Studies in Governmentality*. Cambridge University Press; 2018.
- 9 McKeown, A., H. B. Dang and J. Glenn (2022) "A social theory of resilience: The governance of vulnerability in crisis-era neoliberalism", p. 12.

- 10 Walker, J. and Cooper M. (2011) "Genealogies of resilience: From systems ecology to the political economy of crisis adaptation". *Security Dialogue*, 42(2), 143-160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010611399616>.
- 11 See for example: McKeown, A., H. B. Dang and J. Glenn (2022) "A social theory of resilience: The governance of vulnerability in crisis-era neoliberalism"; Neocleous M. (2013) "Resisting Resilience", *Radical Philosophy* 178, Mar/Apr 2013; Joseph J. (2013) "Resilience as embedded neoliberalism: a governmentality approach", *Resilience*, 1(1), 38–52.
- 12 McAslan, A. (2010) "The concept of resilience: Understanding its origins, meaning and utility". Strawman paper. Torrens Resilience Institute, 14 March, p. 9.
- 13 Bouchard, G. (2013) Neoliberalism in Québec: The Response of a Small Nation Under Pressure. In *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*, ed. by Peter A. Hall and Michele Lamont. Cambridge: Cambridge.
- 14 Ibid, p. 267.

THE PROGRESSIVE COMPASS



**Progressive integrity
to persevere in polarized
politics and meet
the hard choices**



Dimitris TSAROUHAS

Is a progressive migration policy possible?

1. Introduction

A knife-wielding immigrant from Syria assassinates peace-loving locals gathered to celebrate their city's history and its diversity. It soon emerges that the attacker should have been deported some time before his heinous act, yet EU rules and administrative delays blocked the process. The country's Social Democratic prime minister reacts in shock and pledges changes to the country's migration rules to prevent future attacks. The far right, emboldened by the crime, gleefully warns the worrying public of a continuation in such random attacks, unless "political change" comes to the country.

This scenario may read like an election manifesto of a far-right party somewhere in Europe, in its attempt to sow divisions and manipulate people's fears. It played out exactly as described in the small town of Solingen in Germany in August 2024 and encapsulates many of the dilemmas that progressives across Europe and beyond face when the issue of regulating or controlling migration comes to the fore.¹ A few weeks later, Germany reinstated border controls with its nine neighbouring states, reopening an earlier debate as to the principle of free movement. This is only the latest of a series of examples, whereby member states do not hesitate to go beyond commonly agreed positions and policies.

Migration seems to be one of those unwinnable policy issues for progressives. They tried to keep it off mainstream politics for years, but eventually it broke loose and became one of Europe's foremost concerns. Whenever such disturbing events take place, and their frequency in several EU countries is a cause for major concern, the focus returns to what has been described as Europe's inability to deal with the migration problem. From an electoral point of view, the beneficiary is almost always the right and the far right, the growth of which in the years following the 2015-2016 migration and refugee crisis is far

from coincidental. For progressives, on the other hand, and in contrast to issues such as the welfare state, employment or social protection, migration policy is a deeply divisive issue. It is “owned” by other political families and constitutes a symbolic reminder of social democracy’s internal divisions between cosmopolitans and communitarians, or liberals and traditionalists. The peak of such divisions took place during the 2015/2016 migration and refugee crisis in Europe, when progressives got uncomfortably squeezed between the liberal approach adopted by Angela Merkel and the rejectionist, racist attitude of Eastern Europe. Although the situation has calmed down in subsequent years, not least due to Europe’s externalisation of its migration governance to Türkiye and other neighbourhood countries, Mediterranean member states continue to face pressure through legal and illegal migration waves from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), while those that do not (say Poland or the Scandinavians) have hardened their policy stance, an issue that was not discussed at EU level.

In this context, this contribution outlines the broad contours of what a progressive migration policy should look like. It adopts a normative approach, cognisant of the diversity of approaches that exist on the issue, as well as the fact that each member state faces a unique combination of opportunities and challenges in dealing with it. The starting point of this contribution is that the current progressive approach to migration has proven inadequate and that, at the very least, better coordination among progressives across the EU is a precondition for a more successful approach. The issue is unlikely to ever constitute a “winnable” policy item for progressives, yet this contribution argues that a principled stance can reduce the damage and hinder attempts by the right to portray progressives as “out of touch” on this issue. Section 2 discusses the repercussions of the 2015-16 migration and refugee crisis, which became the catalyst for subsequent developments, while Section 3 surveys popular attitudes today, before some concrete

suggestions for what a progressive migration policy could look like are made in Section 4.

2. Setting today's migration debate in context: The 2015-16 crisis

The 2015-16 migration and refugee crisis was a watershed moment in Europe's recent history. Although migration has always been a feature of modern societies, and Europe was well accustomed to it, migration numbers used to be much smaller and considered more manageable by politicians and the public alike.² Moreover, the existing legal framework was seen as too restrictive in terms of human rights, particularly on the issue of humanitarian protection. The relevant Dublin Convention (which determines the obligations of states of first contact and that binds member states) was seen as problematic in that it did not define the concept of illegal entry clearly enough and often forced individuals to separate themselves from their family due to an overtly strict set of standards concerning family reunification in a recipient country.³

The 2015-16 migration crisis changed all that. The images of tens of thousands of migrants and/or refugees seeking to enter successive European states shocked the public and the political class alike. The early response of solidarity and attempts to assist people fleeing war and/or prosecution, mostly from Syria, soon led to media reports of a massive "influx" of people that threatened to upend European societies. For every major political figure, not least then German Chancellor Merkel, who proclaimed that their country owed solidarity to vulnerable people, and that humanitarian concerns ought to be front and centre in trying to cope with the problem, there were four or five politicians, from the alt- and far right, eager to link terrorism, crime and misbehaviour to dark-skinned migrants from far away.⁴

Moreover, the legal and institutional instruments employed since the crisis have shown little effectiveness to date, not least since several member states systematically refuse to comply with them, such as the voluntary resettlement of migrants/refugees in the context of the EU-Türkiye deal, or the implementation of the Common European Asylum System.⁵

Over time, the discourse on migration shifted from humanitarianism to securitisation, and the issue of “illegal migration” became the mantra around which far-right parties across the continent could unite in attacking mainstream parties. Progressives were split on the best way to respond. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, a west-east divide within social democracy emerged, with the former in favour of Merkel’s open-border policy and the latter adopting the opposite stance.⁶ Over time and as the far right played on people’s fears over the issue, such divisions broadened and now encompass progressive parties across the EU, with social democrats in the Nordic countries adopting a particularly restrictive stance on issues of migration and asylum.⁷ Frequently, progressive governments also inherit migration policies that they do not agree with, but they are “stuck” with and need to make into a virtue. Within this larger context, one should also add the persistent failures of Western foreign policy, especially in the MENA region, over the last few decades, which has acted as a major migration driver, and has made it yet more difficult to articulate a progressive stance on the issue. This is not for the lack of concrete suggestions; however, as Tim Soutphommasane argues, it should be perfectly possible to develop feelings of genuine patriotism and love for one’s country combined with classical liberal values centred on tolerance and mutual respect.⁸

3. Popular attitudes on migration and the social democratic dilemma

Numerous studies have been conducted, especially following the watershed events of 2015-2016, as to popular attitudes to migration, depending on age, gender, socio-economic profile, religious affiliation, education and so on.⁹ They have depicted the hardening of attitudes on migration in line with the gradual increase in issue salience on migration and the increasing capacity of the right and far right to anchor their political agenda on this issue, while simultaneously weakening the mainstream centrist parties' capacity to fend it off.

Party political affiliation plays an important role in that studies have depicted a broad division according to which left and green party voters demonstrate a broadly positive attitude to immigration,¹⁰ perceiving it more positive than not, whereas right-wing party voters demonstrate an anti-immigrant political attitude.¹¹ Yet for social democracy, things are a lot more complicated, and have become more so in recent years. On one hand, the set of progressive political values, which encompasses transnational solidarity, the respect for human rights and fundamental dignity, makes social democrats inclined towards a display of positive attitudes to immigration.¹² At the same time, the transformation of social democracy since the 1990s through the adoption of a more centrist political agenda meant that its policy convergence with the centre-right made it almost indistinguishable from it.¹³ Moreover, the new social democracy that emerged in that period means that the largest share of its electoral base today encompasses well-educated, middle-class voters with generally tolerant and positive migration attitudes.¹⁴ This, however, is no longer the case among the shrinking share of progressive party voters that stem from the old industrial working class, and whose attitudes with regard to immigration have been influenced by two main factors in

recent years. Firstly, the systematic targeting of this voter segment by the far right, which has made anti-immigrant a dominant political force in most EU states. Secondly, the rise of neoliberal globalisation and the neoliberalisation of industrial relations, which has made such voters more vulnerable in the labour market, not least through the decline in power and influence of labour unions, and has often set them in direct competition with immigrant labour on the basis of a wage-dumping spiral.

Since social democracy continues to aspire to a broad-based electoral coalition that will allow it to retain the role of a mass party, its dilemma on migration is clear-cut. How can it make sure that it can appeal both to the cosmopolitan, liberal, urban voter, whose migration experience is mostly positive, and to the more traditional voter, who is more fearful and, at least potentially, more negatively influenced by sizeable migration waves to erstwhile small, close-knit communities? This divide between cosmopolitan and communitarian attitudes is an obvious simplification, since these two groups are by no means the only ones within the social democratic camp, and a large number of voters fall in between such categorisations. However, they are indicative of some of the electoral and political dilemmas that social democrats have to contend with, as they try to come to terms with the difficult political reality on migration policy, and underscore the trade-offs that inevitably emerge between traditional notions of solidarity and the reality of enhanced diversity in modern Western society.

4. The contours of a progressive migration policy

Process and substance are two sides of the same coin when it comes to migration policy. Below, I elaborate on a set of recommendations divided into these two categories.

- 1) *Progressives cannot accept compromises with respect to the rule of law and fundamental human rights* in implementing migration policy. Not doing so risks confusing its fundamental message on migration and making it indistinguishable from other parties. Trade-offs are inevitable in such a difficult policy domain, but red lines on key values can serve as unitary factors across the progressive political family.
- 2) *Develop a clear set of criteria as to when and how migrants will be accepted* in the EU, and ensure that these criteria are accepted by all progressives. Exceptions on the basis of nationally specific conditions are certain to occur, but they ought to be time-bound and respect the first criterion. At the same time, a crackdown on people with no citizenship rights who flagrantly violate national laws is to be accepted as fully compatible with a progressive approach. The Pact on Migration and Asylum offers a platform through which to turn such principles into legislative/policy reality. The declared intention of some EU governments not to implement the Pact is yet another example of an idealized solution that dares not speak its name getting in the way of a feasible and practical solution.
- 3) *Make sure that policy works.* Social democrats frequently lose the battle when it comes to perceptions on migration because of lone-wolf incidents, such as the example mentioned in Section 1, and because the issue is framed in a way that suggests incompetence and inefficiency on the part of policymakers. Social democrats need to make sure that the electorate knows full well (1) what measures are being taken; (2) why they need to be taken; and (3) what difference they have made in the lives of all residents in the country, “natives” and immigrants alike. Migration is, among other things, a competence issue and that is where mainstream politics needs to show its superiority with respect to populist alternatives. Moreover, this type of competence gets the chance to shine at lo-

cal level, where progressives at local, municipal or regional level are able to showcase their ability to take care of people.

- 4) *Do not allow migration to be framed only as a cultural issue.* Progressives cannot win the battle the moment migration becomes about cultural values, because the issue is intertwined with a set of values (religion, skin colour etc.) that, by default, appeal to high emotions and unspoken bias. There is no denying the cultural “baggage” that issues of migration carry today, especially when newcomers come from societies and settings fundamentally different from the native ones. A monopolisation of the issue along cultural lines, however, is both dangerous and potentially distorting, concealing the basic humanity that unites us all.
- 5) *Focus on the economic and political aspects of migration.* Progressives need to remain sensitive and emphasise in their public pronouncements on the issue that the vast majority of people who end up migrants do so because of objectively harsh conditions. Migration, in other words, is fundamentally a political economy issue, and answers to it ought to be given from such a perspective. This is not to deny the trade-offs mentioned before: there will be and tough compromises will need to be made. However, progressives can only articulate a tough stance on migration to the extent they demonstrate full commitment to support countries of origin in tackling war, ethnic conflict, climate change effects and so on.

5. Conclusion

In the summer of 2024, the EU concluded a four-year prolonged process to conclude a new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which is meant to manage migration policy according to a clear set of rules and criteria. It is also an attempt to overcome the frequent problem of the

given discrepancy between member states' rebuttal of EU policies and procedures in favour of national pathways.

A compromise pact that was narrowly accepted by the European Parliament, and which has met with fierce opposition from both the left and right, the pact sets up an updated asylum and migration database to speed up processes and make them more efficient, clarifies which member states will be responsible for asylum processing, strengthens border management capacities, and institutionalises partnerships with partner countries and organisations like the UN in seeking to prevent smuggling. It is also noteworthy that the pact sets up, for the first time, an EU talent pool to make Europe a destination of desire for highly qualified persons from around the world.¹⁵ The pact represents a typical EU compromise, in that it leaves no one fully satisfied but can be accepted as the common denominator on which to rebuild a relationship of trust between citizens and political leaders on the issue of migration and asylum in Europe. By supporting the pact and voting in its favour, social democrats can ensure consistency in their approach and clearly differentiate themselves from far-right interpretations. Moreover, by adopting the set of recommendations discussed in Section 4 (which broadly fall within the parameters of the pact), they can minimise the political and electoral damage that the issue has been causing in recent years.

Endnotes

- 1 Chazan, G. (2024) "Fatal knife attack puts immigration top of German political agenda". *Financial Times*, 26 August.
- 2 Pastore, F. and G. Henry (2016) "Explaining the crisis of the European migration and asylum regime". *The International Spectator*, 1(51): 44-57.
- 3 Hurwitz, A. (1999) "The 1990 Dublin Convention: A comprehensive assessment". *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 4(11): 646-677.
- 4 Boros, T., M. Funk and H. Giusto (2019) *European Public Opinion and Migration: Achieving Common Progressive Narratives* (Brussels: FEPS/Friedrich Ebert Stiftung/Fondazione Petro Nenni and Fondation Jean Jaurès).
- 5 Loxa, A. and V. Stoyanova (2022) "Migration as a constitutional crisis for the European Union", in V. Stoyanova and S. Smet (eds) *Migrants' Rights*,

Populism and Legal Resilience in Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 139-164.

- 6 Skora, M. (2016) "How the refugee crisis splits the European social democrats between west and east". *Social Europe*, 18 January.
- 7 Fredriksson, H. (2023) "Sister parties no more: Explaining the refugee policy divergence of the Swedish and Danish Social Democratic parties". Refugee Studies Centre, Working Paper Series No.137, University of Oxford;
- Hinnfors, J. (2023) "Scandinavian social democracy: A paradigmatic shift towards 'tough on immigration'". *Renewal - a Journal of Social Democracy*, 4(31): 74-82.
- 8 Soutphommasane, T. (2023) *The Virtuous Citizen: Patriotism in a Multicultural Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- 9 Karreth, J., S. P. Singh and S. P. Stojek (2015) "Explaining attitudes toward immigration: The role of regional context and individual predispositions". *West European Politics*, 6(38): 1174-1202; Davidov, E. and M. Semyonov (2017) "Attitudes toward immigrants in European societies". *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 5(58): 359-366; Löw, A., S. Puzić and J. Bojić (2021) "Anti-immigrant prejudice in a post-socialist context: The role of identity-based explanations". *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1(45): 113-132.
- 10 There are important national differences in attitudes to immigration, co-shaped by factors such as media coverage and the incoming migrants' background. The study cited above points to the widespread negative attitude on immigration, which encompasses the Labour Party, and positive attitudes in Spain, including by more right-wing parties, as most immigrants stem from Latin America and the degree of cultural affinity experienced between host and migrant communities tends to be high.
- 11 Indelicato, A., J. C. Martín and R. Scuderi (2023) "A comparison of attitudes towards immigrants from the perspective of the political party vote". *Heliyon*, 3(9): e14089.
- 12 Hinnfors, J., A.M. Spehar and G. Bucken-Knapp (2012) "The missing factor: Why social democracy can lead to restrictive immigration policy". *Journal of European Public Policy*, 4(19): 585-603.
- 13 Berman, S. and H. Kundnani (2021) "The cost of convergence". *Journal of Democracy*, 1(32): 22-36.
- 14 Orhan, S. A. (2024) "How do intra-party dynamics impact the party elite's immigration policy manoeuvres? The case of German social democrats". *Acta Politica*. DOI: 10.1057/s41269-024-00330-0
- 15 "Pact on migration and asylum: A common EU system to manage migration". European Commission, 21 May 2024.

THE PROGRESSIVE COMPASS



Carlo D'IPPOLITI

EU fiscal capacity: Our last hope



1. Introduction

The fiscal rules for EU member states that have been reintroduced in 2024 are a disaster for the EU's progressives – as well as for European workers, the poorer strata of the population and weaker member states. They only marginally improve upon the previous version of the Stability and Growth Pact, and they still imply an austerity turn, after a few extraordinary years post-pandemic, for most EU countries for several years to come.¹ It is said that now the struggle is to create fiscal space at the EU rather than national level – like the Commission has tried to do for defence spending (but even there, pushback from frugal member states imply plans largely financed by the single countries, with the exact share that will be jointly financed and jointly managed still under discussion at the time of writing). Typically, the rationale for this position, for example, in the Draghi report,² is that public resources will be needed to meet a number of collective challenges: climate change and the green transition; defence and security; and a competitive environment that is increasingly challenging for European firms, while also being increasingly politicised.

To some extent, a “division of labour” within different levels of governance, where the federal government has more leeway than the states, is what happens in the USA and other well-designed federal democracies. However, attempts to grow the EU budget are as old as the Union itself, and what is missing is a true vision based on values and shared priorities.

What I propose here is that social democrats lay out fully and explicitly the progressive values that make a meaningful common EU fiscal capacity, not just another policy goal but actually an urgent necessity. These values could be summarized in the goal of economic democracy: both in a formal sense, of respect for the will of the majority, and of rebalancing the public and the private after many years of suffocation

of the public sector. This does not imply that EU fiscal capacity is exclusively a left-wing goal, and indeed, large political alliances are inevitable to reach this aim, but it does affect the “why” and “how” to organise a larger joint fiscal capacity.

There are two main levels at which a progressive vision for joint fiscal capacity should be based. Firstly, at the constitutional level of improving the EU institutional and financial architecture, there is an issue of enlarging the “democratic space” by reducing the (financial) markets’ ability to constrain democratically agreed upon economic and social policies and their ability to even influence the process of government formation in many member states. Secondly, at the policy level, the goal is to rebalance the market and public spheres of the economy, and to allow the public sector in a wider sense (that is, considering both the member states and the EU as a whole) to contribute to meeting the EU citizens’ needs in the face of objectively reduced public capacity after several years of (pre-pandemic) austerity.

Concretely, a proposal to marry the two levels of debate could be to create a joint EU-wide and EU-managed program of unemployment insurance, with or without a minimum income scheme. This need not be entirely financed with new debt, but that should not be ruled out, depending, for example, on the stage of the business cycle, as achieved during the Covid-19 crisis with the SURE programme. The debate on making the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funds permanent will probably be driven by necessity more than expediency, but social democrats should instead embrace all the instruments created with Next Generation EU and argue for their full integration in the normal governance of the EU well beyond periods of crisis. With all due respect, we should reverse JFK’s famous quip: stop allowing national governments to ask their citizens and firms for sacrifices in the name of the EU, and start asking what the EU can do for its citizens now.

2. The constitutional level: Member states have their hands tied

Concerning fiscal policy, the EU – even beyond the eurozone – has an institutional architecture that puts member states in a condition similar to weak developing countries.³ As seen during the euro crisis, member states do not cooperate: each follows a virtually independent policy, and all move toward the same general goal of reducing both public deficits and public debts. Member states finance nearly any disbursement over and above their cash inflows by issuing bonds on the market, which are not bought by their central bank – if not for its own, independent goals and rationale – and the possibility of a default is not ruled out in principle. The European Central Bank does not explicitly target the interest rates of single member states (or the differences between their interest rates, so-called spreads), except in “emergency mode” situations of panic. Most member states are too small to exert a strong market power, in particular, they do not enjoy a “liquidity premium” on their bonds (that is, some countries pay a lower interest rate than what would be expected given their “fundamentals”, because their bonds are very sought-after in international markets: in the most glaring case, this is the US dollar’s so-called exorbitant privilege).

Even the euro as a whole remains a second-class international reserve currency, far away from the dollar and even challenged by the renminbi. The analysis by Arslanalp et al.⁴ spurred a lively debate on this point, showing that, despite the retrenchment in the international use of the US dollar, the other major currencies did not really increase their shares, for example, in the billing or settlement of international trade or in international reserves. Notably, as the dollar fell from over 70% of international reserves in 1999 to less than 60% in 2021, the euro grew from 19% at the onset to almost 30% in 2009 and then quickly fell back to 20% during and after the euro crisis. Such a fall

is understandable given that the austerity-driven crisis was largely self-inflicted and caused by recalcitrant nationalism and lack of co-operation (let alone solidarity) among member states.⁵ But even optimistically assuming that international markets demanded more euro-denominated financial assets today, where would they find them? The lack of joint European bonds at any meaningful scale is a major obstacle here.

In short, several reasons for this state of affairs have been discussed in previous rounds of FEPS Next Left Focus Group discussions and books. Let me summarise two key points here. Firstly, in terms of fiscal policy (public revenues and public expenditures), member states face hard limits on the level of deficit they can allow, enshrined in the fiscal rules discussed in the next section, and they face soft limits on how much they can raise taxes too, given the constant push for so-called structural reforms, which in practice means market-friendly liberalisations and privatisations aimed at compressing the scope and reach of the state in the economy. As a consequence, public expenditure just cannot increase over its current level, independently, for example, of an assessment of whether it is satisfactory or even too high in some countries, or too low in others. Secondly, in terms of monetary policy (interest setting, and banking and financial markets supervision) the European Central Bank (ECB) traditionally interprets its mandate as implying that eurozone inflation is its only target, and it shies away from supporting any single member state until it has literally no other option if it is to preserve the integrity of the eurozone.

The political consequences of this institutional architecture are dire. Let us focus here on a single, important point: the question of where the limits of democracy are in our countries, and who sets these limits. Greece (and maybe Cyprus, to some extent Italy etc.) is a case in point from the last decade, but we do not need to go that far back – the problem is very much still there.

During an interview in the middle of the political campaign for the French National Assembly, François Villeroy de Galhau, governor of the Bank of France, stated that “it will be important that, whatever the outcome of the vote, France can quickly clarify its economic strategy and in particular its budgetary strategy”.⁶ Words like these are ambiguous, and the usual TINA message (that “There Is No Alternative” to the fiscal rules), whoever would go on to win the elections, is perhaps a benign interpretation. European central banks and the ECB (de Galhau is a member of its governing council) cheer their formal independence and supposed political neutrality, so it is rather surprising to hear such an overt call, especially focused on a specific party – Marine Le Pen’s *Ressemblement National* (RN) – to modify its position during the campaign, in light of what then was perceived to be probable electoral success (indeed, the party did not have much to clarify at the time, but soon after, it moved towards a more “responsible” stance on fiscal policy). The move was probably suggested by the sharp market reaction to Macron’s announcement of snap elections, and both facts are suggestive of the extreme uncertainty, if not panic, felt by financial market operators and institutions concerning the far right’s plans on fiscal policy.

Something less dramatic happened in Italy, where Giorgia Meloni had been reassuring markets and cultivated a personal relationship with Mario Draghi, a stalwart of stability, for months before her much anticipated election as the new head of government. But it is fair to say that this perceived uncertainty – evidently caused by the populist movements’ confused and superficial policy platforms, and possibly by some cultivated ambiguity – is a European phenomenon. Indeed, there are many cultural and political reasons for worrying about the far-right surge in Europe, but fiscal profligacy does not seem to be the most relevant one.⁷

The markets’ overreaction in these cases is indeed a feature of the European economy, which by design lacks an effective central govern-

ment and likes to tie the hands of its central bank as much as possible. So, tightening the market's capacity to constrain democracy in the EU is the main argument for creating a European safe asset and a functioning support mechanism for the member states' sovereign bonds (it should not matter that this time it was the right that the markets were concerned about).

In conclusion, changing the EU's financial and institutional architecture should be a goal, and to that aim, eurobonds are certainly an instrument in the toolbox. However, joint fiscal capacity does not (only) mean more EU common debt: it could and should imply more common revenues too. How much of a public deficit there should be at the EU level should be a separate decision, presumably informed by macroeconomic considerations, from the issue of expanding the EU provision of common public goods and services. Therefore, eurobonds should be seen as complementary and not an alternative, for example, to an EU-wide wealth tax.

3. The policy level: Are we really waiting for the populists to win everywhere?

The problem is the institutional architecture of EU public finances, and therefore, structural to a large extent, but it is even more of a problem in the current context. In a high-interest-rate environment (or at least with interest rates higher than they were until 2019), for the member states, simply rolling over their existing debt will be more costly and challenging than in the past. The new fiscal rules agreed upon allow for a minimum degree of flexibility, connected to structural reforms and other considerations – though not much for the most indebted EU countries, which happen to be large eurozone countries with economies that are more driven by internal demand than the others.

The main goal of these rules remains to reduce public debts and deficits indefinitely, and certainly below certain arbitrary thresholds (the infamous 90% and 60% debt-to-GDP ratios) devoid of scientific value or validation from financial markets.⁸ In a nutshell, after the temporary suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact due to the Covid-19 crisis, a new set of rules has been devised that focuses more on joining “structural reforms” with budget policy: for example, because a country can slow down its necessary path of fiscal retrenchment, from four to seven years, if it plans a set of reforms to accompany it. The new set of rules also focuses more on the quality of revenues and expenditures by focusing on the new concept of “net expenditure”, which, compared to the fiscal deficit, excludes non-structural sources of revenues or expenditures and some other entries that are beyond the government’s control. Finally, there is an attempt at preserving public investments to some extent (e.g., excluding from net expenditure the national co-funding of RRF investments). This approach marks another step back from democracy, in the sense of lack of transparency and accountability: obscure and unmeasurable concepts such as net expenditure (earlier it was the primary balance adjusted for the impact of the business cycle) imply obscure and very technical estimations, which a large degree of arbitrariness and even backdoor bargaining.

However, what I would like to focus here is that, on top of the old 3% deficit-to-GDP ratio, there is now a new rule capping the increase in net expenditure to 0.5%. Early estimates suggest that EU member states might need to undergo fiscal consolidation of up to 1% of GDP annually for four years or 0.6% annually for seven years, depending on the country.⁹ In a word, it is milder austerity, version 2.0. Strict enforcement of fiscal rules would leave little room for industrial policy, the green transition or managing migration flows, which will remain as imminent challenges, regardless of our ideas on fiscal policy. Indeed, one can apply the same forecast model used by the European Commission to

predict that this new round of austerity will, again, be self-defeating.¹⁰

From a progressive point of view, there are two main consequences. Firstly, a return to stagnation, and therefore, lacking an expansion of economic activity, any meaningful job creation would again have to be founded on lower labour costs, lower real wages and poorer job quality – a return to the old normal that neither European workers nor social democrats should look forward to.¹¹ And secondly, given a stronger desire to preserve investment (and their low value, excluding the RRF), austerity efforts under the new rules will have to focus on current expenditure, that is, largely on social expenditure (for more details and an assessment, see D'Ippoliti¹²). In a word, the ghost of Pasokisation, the drastic fall in the electoral fortunes of the left, has returned.

More flexibility exists at the EU level, where the 2020 joint response to the Covid-19 crisis, in terms of collective debt issuance for the sake of investments and recovery (the "Next Generation EU"), broke with a previously untouchable taboo. Today, there is a clear need for investments – from energy to defence and Ukraine, to innovation and healthcare, not to speak of the remote but not impossible event of EU enlargement to cash-needy countries such as Ukraine, Moldova or Albania. And there is a growing understanding that, at some point, joint debt and expenditure instruments will be ineluctable. This too, however, comes with different proposals: from new EU-level taxes to the repurposing of legacy instruments, such as the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), created during the previous euro crisis; or the RRF and the other funds created during the Covid-19 crisis, which have substantial dry powder; to the issuance of new collective debt instruments.

Indeed, already before the Covid-19 crisis, the Commission issued, on a very small scale, joint bonds to finance some activities of the EU external action; these have increased in scale, as aid to Ukraine has also partly been financed this way. But except for the one-shot and

temporary experience of Next Generation EU, by far the most significant issuers of joint bonds are the European Investment Bank, and in the future, possibly the ESM. Both issue bonds with their own capital as the main guarantee for investors. There is a lack of eurobonds issued on a large scale against the EU's own resources and/or a guarantee from the ECB, as highlighted in the last year alone by the Draghi report,¹³ the Letta report¹⁴ and the ECB itself.¹⁵

Such technocratic consensus, however, does not necessarily result in policy changes. The fragmented landscape of EU politics could prove an insurmountable obstacle on the road to joint bonds.

4. Prospects for a fiscal union: The example of eurobonds

Where it is already in power within the EU, the far right has not led to a fiscal crisis.¹⁶ Our continent was spared the nightmarish scenario of far-right parties leading the governments of both France and Germany on top of Italy. But we got (deservingly) lucky in 2024-2025, it does not mean that we should always continue testing the voters' patience. A different approach should quickly be found.

If one wishes to investigate the political feasibility of a certain policy, understanding the internal divisions within and those between mainstream parties, and where they might find support from other parties on major issues, is more important than guessing the political-economic preferences of far-right movements. Indeed, in the current European Parliament, a possible coalition of the European People's Party (EPP), Renew, and the Socialists and Democrats (SD) would secure roughly 400 of the 720 seats, achieving a slim majority of around 40 MEPs if and when there are no internal divisions within these parties. But the drama around the confirmation vote of the new Commission proposed by President von der Leyen clearly showed the EPP's determination to

proceed on a case-by-case basis, potentially siding with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) whenever it is more convenient. On the other hand, it would be difficult for the EPP-SD-Renew coalition to pass any significant new legislation without coopting a fourth group – which sometimes could possibly be the Greens.

We should therefore expect variable alliances to emerge in this legislature, depending on the issue. But it is unclear what sort of coalition or alliance could bring forward the permanent establishment of eurobonds at scale. In Europe, one must always consider both redistribution among individuals and among countries. Concerning interpersonal redistribution, let us consider two dimensions: groups' positions on taxes (and social contributions, and other revenues in general, both national and pan-European), and on expenditures, with a focus on the welfare state.¹⁷ One could then locate the main European families as in Table 1.

Table 1. European parties' positions on fiscal policy: interpersonal redistribution.

	Lower taxes	Keep or raise taxes
Lower social expenditure	Conservatives; some liberals	Some liberals; some social democrats
Keep or raise social expenditure	Far right	Some social democrats; greens; radical left

The first notable feature of a thought experiment like this one is – with all the limitations, given that we do not know exactly how these groups will vote in the new legislature – the sheer difficulty in drawing a map like this one, and in making sense of it, as a result of the internal divisions within mainstream groups. The internal division among progressives, between the traditional social democratic position that wishes to keep or raise social expenditure and third-way positions that

seek to contain it, appears to be slowly disappearing, with a shift back to the old social democratic position. By contrast, the EPP will likely try to appeal to the liberals by proposing not to increase any spending program, and to woo the far right (and liberals) by opposing new taxes.¹⁸

We thus have two fronts: on the main diagonal, between the conservatives and liberals for a small government, and the left and greens for big government; and on the antidiagonal, between the so-called populists for bigger deficits and liberals and (alas) some social democrats for lower deficits. The first issue will possibly be decided on an issue-by-issue basis, sometimes possibly seeing the convergence of the left and the far right in the attempt to preserve social expenditure and protect the welfare state.

But the levels of public deficits and debts are a macroeconomic issue and must be decided once, at least for a whole year. Here, there is less scope for improvisation and flexibility, except in moving between the national and the EU levels. As shown in Table 2, on the EU-level budget, the traditional political families are even more divided along ideological and national lines than on most other topics.

Table 2. European parties' positions on fiscal policy: international redistribution.

	National debt	Common debt instruments
National investments	Most conservatives; some liberals; far right	Some conservatives; some liberals; some social democrats
Common investments		Some social democrats; greens; radical left

The conservatives traditionally oppose common debt because of the fear of „moral hazard“ (that is, some member states starting to happily spend other countries' hard-earned money), but over time a myriad

of proposals have been put forward for joint bonds that do not necessarily imply risk-sharing.¹⁹ And some conservatives are starting to accept the idea, especially if debt can be sold to their voters as an investment in security and defence (this is also the main approach taken in the Draghi report). The liberals are traditionally even more opposed to debt (public debt, that is), but with Macron steering in the opposite direction in the name of Europe, it will remain to be seen what happens now that he is seriously weakened.

The far right, as mentioned, has a menu of new expenditures and lower taxes and should, therefore, favour any easing of the financing constraint for member states.²⁰ However, it mostly ends up rejecting common debt, due to its nationalist and anti-European stance. Finally, eurobonds and common investments are the backbone of left economic platforms in Europe, but not all social democrats happily jump onboard. So, unless (or until) a new crisis hits, despite all the talk about an existential crisis and a “mortal” EU,²¹ the most likely scenario remains more of the same: that is, tight controls on national finances, and mild and insufficient expansion at the EU level. This will, from what is understood at the time of writing this essay, imply a small fraction (presumably 150 million euros) of the new expenditure on defence, and nothing else. Among other things, this implies that the EU continues, at least for a while, not to compete seriously with the USA and China, and not to invest in industrial policy or the green transition.

5. Progressive values and joint fiscal capacity

Eurobonds are just an example, though a relevant one, but joint fiscal capacity should encompass more own resources for the EU too (this should be the topic of another paper though). The main point, more generally, is that we can expect some fiscal austerity at the na-

tional level and possibly some fiscal stimulus – but most likely not too soon nor too much – at the EU level, provided progressives become truly instrumental in bringing it forward.

To play this role, remaining open to possibly variable alliances on this topic will prove key. Some main arguments in favour of true EU fiscal capacity can and should cross political boundaries: (1) democracy requires the ability to meaningfully choose and affect outcomes, so it is necessary to dampen the role of the “bond vigilantes”; (2) there are such things as continental “public goods”, such as financial stability, security and defence; and (3) there are some objective gaps in the European financial architecture, for example, the euro is a currency without a fully operational government, and even the ECB has a limited mandate. There are reasons for optimism too: the reaction to the Covid-19-induced crisis was distinctly better than that to the Global Financial Crisis, with expansionary policies, joint procurement and redistribution of vaccines, solidarity in the use of healthcare infrastructure, and so forth.

But to play this role, it is important to both appeal to voters and overcome internal differences. Hopefully, a basic premise can help with achieving both goals: it should be a common, agreed upon value that unites progressives, that there should be a minimum level of wellbeing that the EU ensures to all citizens. To this aim, using a joint fiscal capacity, for example, to create an EU-wide unemployment benefit scheme, will be necessary. If we do not win this battle, the future of the EU in its current composition and as a democratic union is at risk, both concerning formal democracy, and substantial, economic democracy.

Bibliography

- Amato, M., E. Belloni, P. Falbo et al. (2021) «Europe, public debts, and safe assets: The scope for a European Debt Agency». *Economia Politica*, 38: 823-861.
- Arslanalp, S., B. Eichengreen and C. Simpson-Bell (2022) "The stealth erosion of dollar dominance: Active diversifiers and the rise of nontraditional reserve currencies". IMF Working Paper, no. WP/22/58. International Monetary Fund.
- Bouabdallah, O., E. Dorrucchi, L. Hoendervangers et al. (2024) «Mind the gap: Europe's strategic investment needs and how to support them". The ECB Blog, 27 June.
- D'Ippoliti, C. (2024) "Eurozone reform: A fiscal framework to rule them all". *Renewal*, 1(32): 71-80.
- Draghi, M. (2024) "The future of European competitiveness". European Commission, September.
- "Report from the Commission: Belgium, Czechia, Estonia, Spain, France, Italy, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia and Finland". Report prepared in accordance with Article 126(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, COM/2024/598 final. European Commission, 19 June 2024.
- Heimberger, P., L. Welslau, B. Schütz et al. (2024) "Debt sustainability analysis in reformed EU fiscal rules. The effect of fiscal consolidation on growth and public debt ratios". *Intereconomics*, 5(59): 276-283.
- Letta, E. (2024) "Much more than a market. Speed, security, solidarity – empowering the single market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU citizens". European Council, April.
- López Gallardo, J. (2020) "France: The political economy of discontent. The 'Gilets Jaunes' movement". *PSL Quarterly Review*, 293(73):119-135.
- Pasinetti, L. L. (1998) "The myth (or folly) of the 3% deficit/GDP Maastricht 'parameter'". *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 22: 103-116.
- Storm, S. (2022) "Labour's loss: Why macroeconomics matters". *PSL Quarterly Review*, 299(74): 249-285.

Endnotes

- 1 D'Ippoliti, C. (2024) "Eurozone reform: A fiscal framework to rule them all". *Renewal*, 1(32): 71-80.
- 2 Draghi, M. (2024) "The future of European competitiveness". European Commission, September.
- 3 López Gallardo, J. (2020) "France: The political economy of discontent. The 'Gilets Jaunes' movement". *PSL Quarterly Review*, 293(73):119-135.
- 4 Arslanalp, S., B. Eichengreen and C. Simpson-Bell (2022) "The stealth erosion of dollar dominance: Active diversifiers and the rise of nontraditional

reserve currencies". IMF Working Paper, no. WP/22/58. International Monetary Fund.

- 5 Much the same situation applies to member states that do not currently adopt the euro. They thus suffer the drawbacks without partaking in the advantages, notably greater protection from outside shocks that a large sized central bank can provide. For this reason, despite the bad name of the euro, the current non-eurozone member states should probably finally consider joining the euro.
- 6 The interview is available in a YouTube video, Banque de France, "Pour réduire les incertitudes, il sera important que la France clarifie vite sa stratégie économique", 12 June 2024.
- 7 Many commentators perceive the populist right as big spenders due to their welfare chauvinism propension and/or a more general lack of interest in financial stability: for example, the mainstream view after Trump's recent electoral victory has been that of a return of inflation. But actually, belief in the role of the market is a central component of the contemporary populist right script and, for example, the same Trump administration is considering the creation of a "Department of Government Efficiency" headed by Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy, with the mandate to "dismantle" bureaucracy (see Faguy, A. and J. FitzGerald (2024) "Donald Trump picks Elon Musk for new cost-cutting role". *BBC News*, 13 November).
- 8 This has been known since the beginning of the European Monetary Union: see, for example: Pasinetti, L. L. (1998) "The myth (or folly) of the 3% deficit/GDP Maastricht 'parameter'". *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 22: 103-116.
- 9 For 2024, the Commission established that seven countries (Belgium, France, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Poland and Slovakia) had an excessive deficit; the Council adopted decisions establishing the existence of excessive deficits for all of them, as well as establishing that the excessive deficit procedure for Romania should remain open ("Report from the Commission: Belgium, Czechia, Estonia, Spain, France, Italy, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia and Finland". Report prepared in accordance with Article 126(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, COM/2024/598 final. European Commission, 19 June 2024; see the single Council decisions on the individual member states: "Stability and growth pact: Council launches excessive deficit procedures against seven member states". European Council, 26 July 2024). However, specific recommendations will only be delivered at the end of the year and, among other considerations, some of the operational criteria of the new fiscal rules have not yet been finalised (e.g., the path of "net expenditure"), providing yet more flexibility in this first transitory phase.
- 10 Heimberger, P., L. Welslau, B. Schütz et al. (2024) "Debt sustainability analysis in reformed EU fiscal rules. The effect of fiscal consolidation on growth and public debt ratios". *Intereconomics*, 5(59): 276-283.

- 11 Storm, S. (2022) "Labour's loss: Why macroeconomics matters". *PSL Quarterly Review*, 299(74): 249-285.
- 12 D'Ippoliti, C. (2024) "Eurozone reform: A fiscal framework to rule them all".
- 13 Draghi, M. (2024) "The future of European competitiveness".
- 14 Letta, E. (2024) "Much more than a market. Speed, security, solidarity – empowering the single market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU citizens". European Council, April.
- 15 Bouabdallah, O., E. Dorrucchi, L. Hoendervangers et al. (2024) "Mind the gap: Europe's strategic investment needs and how to support them". The ECB Blog, 27 June.
- 16 At the very least, one should distinguish between the far right's platform when in opposition, for example, the RN's position in the discussions on the French 2025 budget, and when in government, for example, Italy's Meloni.
- 17 Welfare state, that is, for EU citizens. The welfare chauvinism of far-right and red-brown parties that propose to cut entitlements for immigrants is a serious matter of identity and racism, but of little consequence for the public purse.
- 18 The positions set out in Table 1 basically mirror those on the overall fiscal stance, because there is a wide, though not unanimous, agreement that taxation is very high in Europe, and the only concrete proposals to increase public revenues concern quantitatively small items, such as international digital and financial transactions taxes, minimum taxes on multinationals, carbon taxes or import duties, and in some countries property or inheritance taxes. While crucial elements of equity and fairness, all these are unlikely to raise sufficient revenue to meet the expenditure requirements of the day. Concerning expenditures, there is even less flexibility: debt service is going to increase; defence spending will have to increase, regardless of the outcome of the US elections; and when Next Generation EU elapses in 2026, national funds will have to at least partly compensate for these vanishing EU investments. There will hardly be scraps for aid to Ukraine (except for what can be squeezed from frozen Russian assets) and investments for the green transition or innovation.
- 19 For example, see: Amato, M., E. Belloni, P. Falbo et al. (2021) "Europe, public debts, and safe assets: The scope for a European Debt Agency". *Economia Politica*, 38: 823-861.
- 20 Italy and France's far right even more so, given the weight on their countries' national public finances.
- 21 "In EU speech, Macron says Europe is 'mortal' and 'can die'". *Le Monde*, 25 April 2024.

THE PROGRESSIVE COMPASS



João ALBUQUERQUE

Reaffirming an alternative: How to revive social democracy

"Despite all my rage, I'm still just a rat in a cage"

The Smashing Pumpkins

1. Introduction

In 2013, journalist and author Jackson Landers wrote a piece in *The New York Times*¹ about getting bitten by a black widow spider while fishing. Black widows are not necessarily fatal but are almost certainly temporarily paralysing. Despite knowing that, Jackson continued fishing and tried to continue his day, until he had to go to the hospital. When trying to explain the reason for avoiding going to hospital for such a long time, he described it as

a failure to accept a radically new reality – [...] most of me feels fine right after a bit, it felt like a bee sting, and the sun was still shining, and everything looks and feels the same. And, when everything looks the same, it is very difficult to accept that reality has just changed.

He added: "It is very easy to be just sort of paralysed by an unwillingness to accept that".²

If this depiction looks all too familiar, it is because it has become recurrent in describing most people's feelings when facing the period of profound and fast transition in which we currently find ourselves. The rise of climate or eco-anxiety is a testament to the overwhelming feeling of "distress about climate change and its impacts on the landscape and human existence. That can manifest as intrusive thoughts or feelings of distress about future disasters or the long-term future of human existence and the world, including one's own descendants".³ This feeling can be applied to other areas of so-called transition, mainly the digital, which tends to happen quickly and with long-lasting impacts.

Over the last few years, confronted with rapid transformations, the political right has braced itself and vowed to defend and uphold

the status quo. Unsurprisingly, the conservative response has been to promise that everything can stay as it once was. In the progressive field, however, there has been a lack of clarity as to what solutions best accommodate the unavoidable course of time with the responses to the anxiety that people inevitably feel. Moreover, after the hegemonic triumph of neoliberalism, which materialised in Western democracies over the last four decades, the progressive field has failed to distance itself from it and to provide a clear alternative model of society, especially in the socioeconomic dimension. In many cases, this has led to the need for more distinction by the electorate as to what separates the centre-left from the centre-right while, at the same time, giving way to the emergence of populist responses to overall complex problems.

This contribution attempts to find alternatives to the dominant economic model, in line with social democratic values and principles, thus addressing the impact of change in voting behaviour. Is it still possible to make social democracy appealing to the mainstream again and show that it remains the best and most viable socioeconomic and political option?

2. The hegemony of neoliberalism and the rise of inequalities

Neoliberalism thinking emerged in the aftermath of the Great Depression. Curiously enough, neoliberalism started to present itself as an alternative to the different responses to the enormous economic crisis of the 1930s – socialism, fascism(s) and the New Deal. “Neoliberalism, never too often repeated, is not an insistence on *laissez-faire*, but rather the thought of a regulatory construction following the spread of market power in capitalism, protecting it from egalitarian and democratic regulatory incursions”.⁴

It is hard to argue that any other economic thinking has had more influence and dominance over the world's political thinking and actors than neoliberalism.

The realisation of a hegemonic apparatus, while creating new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciences and methods of knowledge; it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact. In Crocian⁵ language: when you manage to introduce a new morality following a new conception of the world, you also end up introducing that conception, that is, an entire philosophical reform is determined.⁶

Despite emerging as an alternative and a counterpoint to other political views, neoliberalism succeeded in asserting itself as the hegemonic politico-economic ideology worldwide, initially through ordoliberalism and later with the rise to power of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, leading to a decade of global dominance. Since then, and particularly after the end of the Cold War, the hegemony of neoliberalism has led to profound transformations in the political alignment of almost all major European political parties. Tony Blair and his Third Way, which later came to be followed by most European social democratic parties, contributed the most to the centre-left's drift towards a vision that offers little more than different shades of the same colour, with more or less stark contrasts, depending on the period or national context.

The effects of these policies can be perceived in almost every area, but the increase in inequalities might be the most visible consequence of 40 years of neoliberalism's undisputed triumph. Hans Rosling, a notorious Swedish doctor famous for his statistics presentations, widely spread the idea that economic development became widespread since the Industrial Revolution and the advent of capitalism, leading to wealthier and healthier people worldwide.⁷ Even though acknowledging the existence of national and regional inequalities, Rosling's presentations successfully linked the spread of capitalism and poverty

reduction. It is widely undisputed that “the share of the world population living in extreme poverty has never declined as rapidly as in the past three decades”.⁸

Extreme poverty is defined as living below the International Poverty Line of \$2.15 per day. This data is adjusted for inflation and differences in the cost of living between countries.



Data source: World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform (2024)

OurWorldInData.org/poverty | CC BY

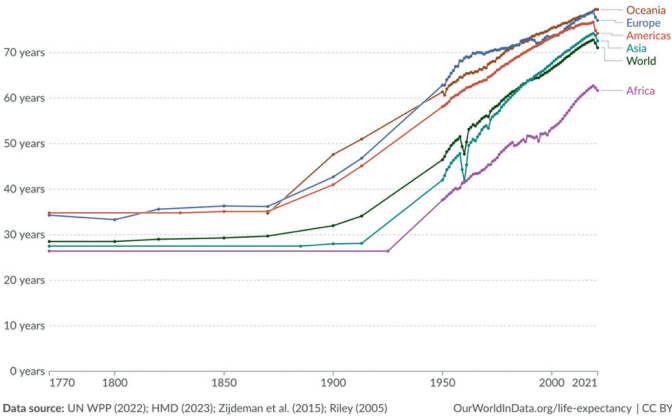
Note: This data is expressed in international-\$ at 2017 prices. The data relates to income measured after taxes and benefits, or to consumption, per capita.

Figure 1. Share of global population living in extreme poverty, including and excluding China.

According to the most recent figures, the world's population living in extreme poverty is at its lowest point since comparable data were available (Figure 1). This reduction is accompanied by an increase in life expectancy (Figure 2).

However, when we go into a more in-depth analysis of the evolution of worldwide inequalities, the numbers tell a very different story. After World War II and until the end of the 1970s, Europe and the USA went through the starkest and most unprecedented reduction in inequalities that there ever has been (Figure 3). As of 1980, inequalities in both blocks started to rise again, as Piketty demonstrates.⁹ Suppose we relate these figures to the corresponding political events. In that case, we can quickly identify that the creation and implementation of

The period life expectancy¹ at birth, in a given year.



1. Period life expectancy: Period life expectancy is a metric that summarizes death rates across all age groups in one particular year. For a given year, it represents the average lifespan for a hypothetical group of people, if they experienced the same age-specific death rates throughout their whole lives as the age-specific death rates seen in that particular year. Learn more in our article: "Life expectancy" - What does this actually mean?

Figure 2. Global life expectancy (1770-2021).

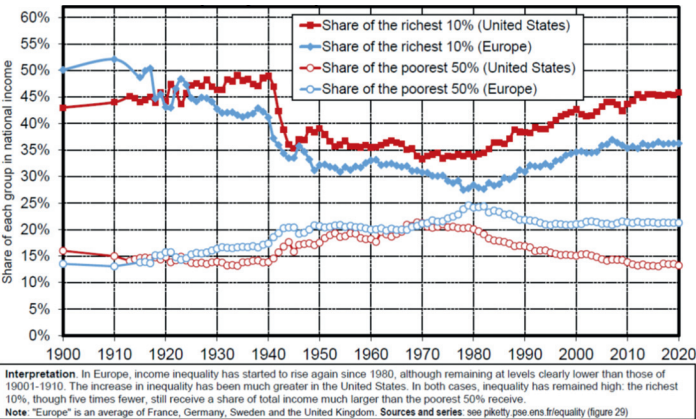


Figure 3. Income inequality in Europe and the USA (1900-2020).

the welfare state matches the period of steep inequality reduction, and that the emergence of Reaganomics and Thatcherism, more broadly speaking of neoliberalism, matches the period when inequalities again began to increase.

The neoliberal vision never had the issue of inequality at its core, nor were its policies developed to create a more just society:

Such concern with economic inequality is inexistent in the neoliberal vision of the two features that, in addition to universal public services, historically contributed most to its reduction in developed capitalism between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s: labour relations marked by strong unions and robust labour legislation, both capable of reducing the employer's arbitrariness, and strongly progressive taxes on income and wealth.¹⁰

This is not a critical appreciation of neoliberal thinking. This is explicit in the writings of two of its most prominent ideologues: Friedrich Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* and Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*. In this regard, while recognising the need of the state to fight poverty, Friedman considers that "the recognition 'with reservations' that it would be necessary to complement private charitable action with mandatory public action in the fight against poverty should not be confused with an illiberal effort to equalise results".¹¹ Moreover, suppose we dive even deeper into the thinking of an ever-growing influential author among many neoliberal politicians, Ayn Rand. In that case, we would find that objectivism was the complete denial of any selfless interest and the recognition that individuals should only pursue their own interests without regard for others.

As Figures 4 and 5 clearly indicate, inequality has not ceased to increase over the last four decades. Since neoliberal thinking became hegemonic in the Global North and then lost its main arch-rival in the 1990s, with the end of the Soviet Union, inequality has not ceased to

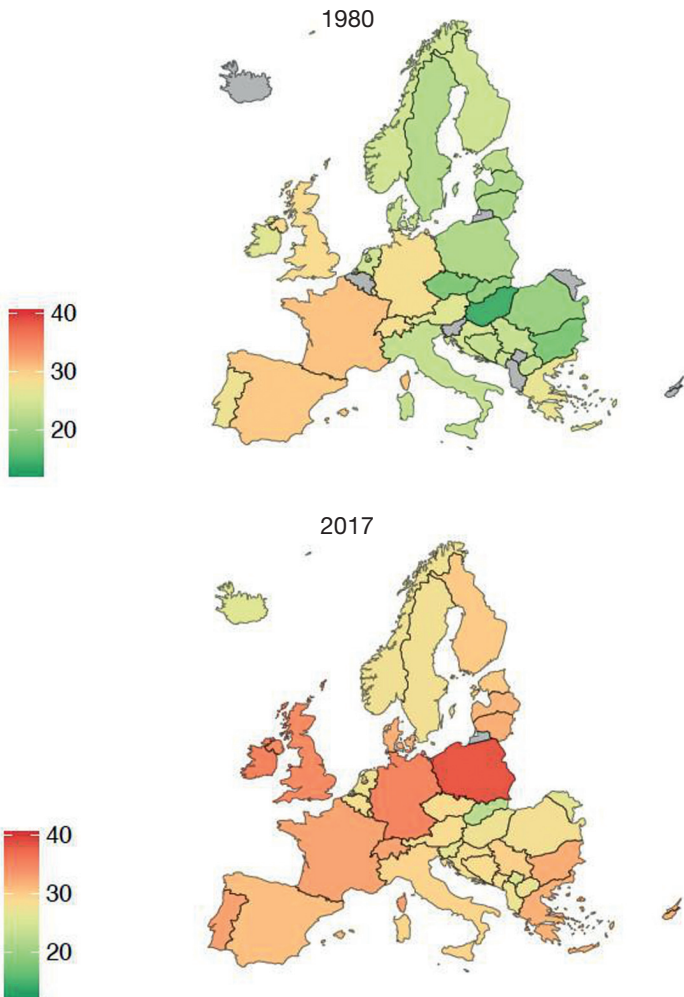


Figure 4. Top 10% pre-tax-income shares in Europe, 1980 versus 2017.
Source: Gethin, 2019.

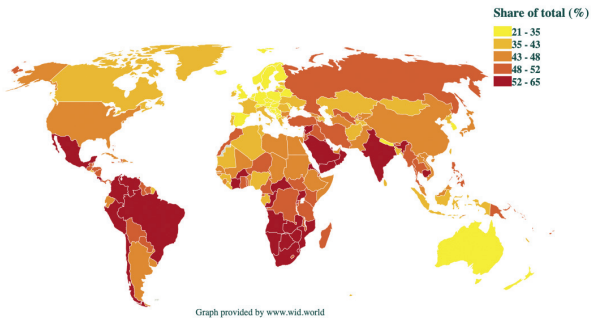
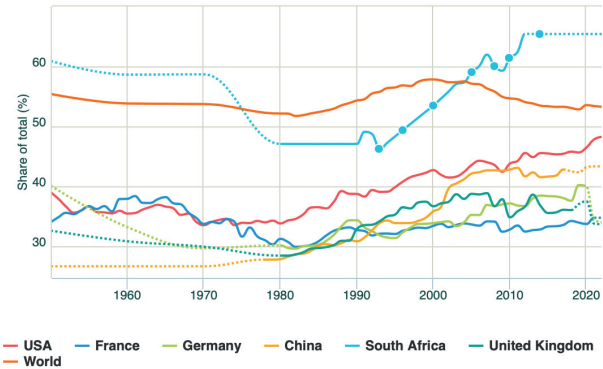


Figure 5. Top 10% income shares.
Source: World Inequality Database.

increase. After a steep decline after WWII, by the end of the 1970s, inequality started to grow in the Global North, especially concerning the top 10% of income share.

According to the UBS Global Wealth Report for 2023,¹² in Europe, the bottom 50% of the population possesses 1.6% of all wealth, the next 30% holds 15.8%, the following 10% retains 15.9% and the top

Split by wealth band in USD

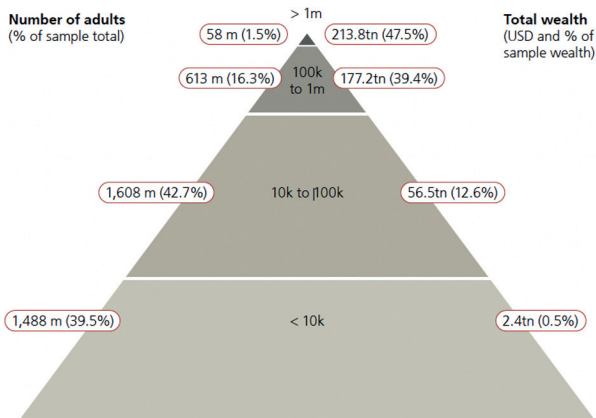


Figure 6. The global wealth pyramid 2023.

10% commands 66.7%. Looking further into the top 10%, we observe that the top 5% of the population controls 52.7% of all wealth, and the top 1% has 29.3%. These staggering figures show a large concentration of wealth in the hands of very few. Moreover, according to Statista, there are currently 3,194 billionaires in the world – persons whose wealth is worth at least 1 billion units of a given currency (usually euros or dollars).¹³ Elon Musk is the wealthiest person in the world, with an estimated net worth of \$242.6 billion. For the human mind to grasp what \$242.6 billion constitutes, Ingrid Robeyns uses a pungent example:

In 2022, Elon Musk, the owner of Tesla and SpaceX, was ranked first in the billionaires list published by [...] *Forbes*. At that point, his estimated assets were worth \$219 billion. [...] what's the lifetime hourly wage-equivalent of Musk's assets? The answer: \$1,871,794 per hour. Almost two million dollars per hour. Every working hour for forty-five years.¹⁴

The post-war period presented an opportunity to create and consolidate the welfare state in most of the Global North. The basis for it was solid labour rights and protections, demanded and enforced by strong trade unions, together with a mixed-market economy, where companies in several economic sectors remained state-owned. The neoliberal hegemony, from the beginning of the 1980s, as developed further down, aimed to destroy the foundations of the welfare state and the mixed-economy model, as well as weakening labour rights. Neoliberalism went from a minority intellectual school of economic thought pre-WWII to become hegemonic in roughly 40 years. Forty years after its first political applications, we are reaping most of its consequences and effects.

3. Addressing the impact of change

“De futuris contingentibus non est determinate veritas”¹⁵

Aristotle

I received my first computer when I was about 4 or 5 years old. I remember catching chickenpox and spending my days confined at home, playing *Space Invaders*. This was right at the start of the 1990s. By Portuguese standards, owning a computer like the ZX Spectrum in 1990/91 was quite unusual and, compared to the average Portuguese household, relatively early. Nonetheless, the first ZX Spectrum appeared nearly ten years earlier, in 1982, and the first modern personal computer emerged in 1971.

In the Global North, in a general way, and overlooking noticeable regional or national differences, the mainstreaming of personal computers happened in the mid-late 1990s at a breakneck pace. Computers have taken over so many aspects of our lives that one of the biggest fears in entering the new Millennium was whether we would survive the

“Year 2000 problem”.¹⁶ In a few decades, especially since the 1980s, digitisation became part of our everyday vocabulary, and we entered what became commonly known as the digital revolution.

While my generation grew up watching the big boom in the use of personal computers and all the paraphernalia that followed – notably, the mainstreaming of mobile phones and tablets – my youngest brother’s generation, born in the 2000s, grew up hearing nonstop about environmental issues. Recycling, reusing and reducing were the first concepts that soon introduced a broader notion of climate change and other ecological concerns. My children, on the other hand, born after 2020, will be growing up deep in the idea of irreversible climate change and all the anxiety derived from it.¹⁷ As if this weren’t enough, the spectre of a global war is once again looming over us, with many countries – including the EU – reverting to the days of an arms race.

However, discussions about the environment and climate did not emerge only in the 2000s. The first IPCC¹⁸ report on climate change is from 1990, but “scientists demonstrated the heat-trapping nature of carbon dioxide and other gases in the mid-19th century”,¹⁹ coinciding with the advent of the Industrial Revolution. We have been hearing about the impacts of humans on climate for a very long time, and consistently since the 1950s. During Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency, the Environmental Pollution Panel from his Science Advisory Committee produced the widely known report “Restoring the quality of Our environment”. The report was presented in November 1965, and it already warned of the harmful effects of fossil fuel emissions and the greenhouse effect:

The part that remains in the atmosphere may have a significant effect on climate; carbon dioxide is nearly transparent to visible light, but it is a strong absorber and back radiator of infrared radiation, particularly in the wave lengths from 12 to 18 microns; consequently, an increase of

atmospheric carbon dioxide could act, much like the glass in a greenhouse, to raise the temperature of the lower air.²⁰

Therefore, our time is one of apparent contradiction. On one hand, there is the impression of a long, endless transition period marked by climate change, environmental challenges and the digitalisation of our economies. On the other hand, there is a general feeling that those technological transformations – especially considering the developments in artificial intelligence – are happening at an almost impossible-to-follow pace. Can both be true? Is this exclusive for our time?

Reinhart Koselleck makes a compelling argument that it is not:

The future contained in this progress is characterized by two main features: first, the increasing speed with which it approaches us, and second, its unknown quality. Unknown because this accelerated time, i.e., our history, abbreviated the space of experiences, robbed them of their constancy and continually brought into play new, unknown factors, so that even the actuality or complexity of these unknown quantities could not be ascertained. This began to be apparent well before the French Revolution. [...] this self-accelerating temporality robs the present of the possibility of being experienced as the present, and escapes into a future within which the currently unapprehendable present has to be captured by historical philosophy. In other words, in the eighteenth century, the acceleration of time that had previously belonged to eschatology for worldly invention, before technology completely opened up a space of experience adequate to this acceleration.²¹

Koselleck argues that, since the 18th century, the way we have used history to predict or influence the future has changed due to the rapid technological advances that started to emerge. Quoting Tocqueville, he sheds intense light on the feelings of the contemporary working class: "As the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity".²² The evolution of technology over the last two decades, alongside its mainstreaming into

a wider group of people, created the idea of endless or continuous innovation. What is new today will soon become obsolete.

There is a valid argument that, in abstract terms, technology is neither inherently good nor bad, and that the increased digitalisation of our economies does not have solely positive or negative impacts. Nonetheless, it is also worth noting that there are associated risks with this trend. Considering some consequences of our increased dependence on technology and digitalisation, as well as the fact that it has become increasingly dominant in our personal and professional lives, we can already identify several significant reasons for concern. The capacity for global distortion by single actors – mostly due to a high concentration of global power and wealth in the hands of two or three major countries – can greatly disrupt the world order, as we have recently witnessed with trade wars or supply chain crises, such as a pandemic. Secondly, technology and, in particular, social media have contributed to the rise of misinformation and the overall mistrust in democracy and elected representatives. Connected to this is the concentration of economic power, which places the control over information in the hands of very few, thus limiting or influencing the general public's access to reliable and independent information. Lastly, increased digitalisation of work processes, or even a different organisation of labour, can lead to more effective ways to hinder workers' engagement and their ability to organise.

Despite these effects, the increasing presence of technology and the continuous digitalisation of our economies have led political actors – including in the progressive field – to increasingly push for workers to invest in their skills and qualifications thoroughly. Sandel argues that this steered contemporary democracies into technocracies and meritocracies:

At the heart of this fail [increasing populist discontent] is the way mainstream parties conceived and carried out the project of globalisation over the past four decades. Two aspects of this project gave rise to

the conditions that fuel populist protests. One is its technocratic way of conceiving the public good; the other is its meritocratic way of defining winners and losers.²³

Thus, the meritocratic trap exacerbates the feelings of those who succeed in our current economic system by fostering the notion that all success is deserved and stems from one's efforts while implying that those who fail have only themselves to blame.

Social democrats must create a more effective alternative to technocratic and meritocratic traps. The objective should be to dismantle the existing, often psychological barriers between “winners and losers” and restore faith in democracy's ability to uplift the most disadvantaged members of our societies, particularly those who feel they have lost all hope and belief. This is especially relevant given the stigmatisation of a significant portion of the electorate – the term “the deplorables,” used by Hillary Clinton during the 2016 US elections to refer to Trump supporters, serves as a poignant case study. Can Social Democrats once again present themselves to the electorate as an uplifting force? As the political party that can articulate a new vision of society, one that does not divide but instead brings people closer together in fulfilling their aspirations through fair compensation for work and a dignified standard of living?

4. Planned obsolescence – the erosion of social Europe

With some adjustments to time and context, what Marx and Engels wrote in the 19th century about the relations of production can still very well apply to our current relations of work:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes

of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.²⁴

If we look at the example of the USA, which has been at the forefront of these transformations, we can observe how the value of work has been constantly eroded over the last decades. A classic example is the widening of the gap between average workers and their respective CEOs: "In the late 1970's, CEOs of major American companies made 30 times more than the average worker; by 2014, they made 300 times more".²⁵ But it is also visible in the fact that it has consistently become more challenging for workers without a degree to be employed, and their remuneration has downgraded:

The median income of American males has been stagnant, in real terms, for half a century. Although per capita income has increased 85 percent since 1979, white men without a four-year college degree make less now, in real terms, than they did then.²⁶ [...] In 1971, 93 percent of white working-class men were employed. By 2016, only 80 percent were. [...] Of Americans whose highest academic qualification was a high school diploma, only 68 percent were employed in 2017.²⁷

In the UK, a similar trajectory took place. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made it clear that she would wage a war against trade unions and their power to regulate the labour market. "We had to fight the enemy without in the Falklands. We always have to be aware of the

enemy within, which is much more difficult to fight and more dangerous to liberty”.²⁸ In 2013, when Thatcher’s Cabinet Archives were released, the strategy she employed to weaken the power of the Unions became even more evident.

The Downing Street papers from 1983 show she [Thatcher] told Ferdinand Mount, then head of her policy unit, that she agreed that Norman Tebbit’s gradualist approach to trade union reform was too timid and that they should ‘neglect no opportunity to erode trade union membership’.²⁹

Since the 1980s, trade union density has decreased across Europe, impacting nearly all EU nations.³⁰ Notably, former Soviet countries have experienced drastic drops in membership following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and their accession to the EU³¹. France is another key example, demonstrating a steady decline in trade union membership, which currently stands at around 8%, the lowest alongside Lithuania.

This decline in worker representation continued into the new millennium. In Portugal, following the subprime crisis, the government was compelled to seek international assistance from a troika of institutions – the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Commission. This doctrine was enacted to varying degrees in most countries severely affected by the crisis. The memorandum of understanding on specific economic policy conditionality for Portugal, established in 2011, highlighted several key aspects regarding “reforms” of labour market regulations.³² A non-exhaustive list of these “reforms” serves as a classic textbook example of neoliberalism and includes:

- “[...] the 2012 Budget will include a budget neutral recalibration of the tax system with a view to lower labour costs and boost competitiveness”.

- “Reform unemployment insurance on the basis of detailed measures listed below under ‘Labour market and education’, yielding medium-term savings of around EUR 150 million”.
- A reduction on severance payments and a fight against labour stability by promoting open-ended contracts: “The Government will prepare by Q4-2011 a reform proposal aimed at introducing adjustments to the cases for fair individual dismissals contemplated in the Labour Code with a view to fighting labour market segmentation and raise the use of open-ended contracts”.
- Diminishing the protection of the worker against dismissals and increasing the “flexibility” of the working time: “Individual dismissals linked to unsuitability of the worker should become possible even without the introduction of new technologies or other changes to the workplace”; and the “revision [reduction] of the minimum additional pay for overtime established in the Labour Code”.
- There were limitations on wage increases, particularly the minimum wage, which remained frozen for the entirety of the troika period.

Weakening labour regulations and trade unions was crucial in implementing neoliberal policies. The disorganisation of the workforce became a goal, as evidenced by the numerous struggles of large companies in the USA against unionisation and the Thatcher government's crackdown on trade unions. Consequently, the lack of resistance from trade unions and the erosion of welfare-state responses – particularly concerning labour protections, such as reductions or limitations on unemployment benefits, overtime pay, unpaid internships or extended trial periods – established the conditions for the complete implementation of a neoliberal vision of the labour market, rendering it more “flexible”.

5. A new impetus to social democracy: Popular not populist

June and November 2024 witnessed the year's two most pivotal electoral moments in the Global North. Within the EU, the shift to the right was evident, characterised by the consolidation of the Popular Party as the largest group and the rise of far-right populist parties. This development led to a power shift and fresh opportunities for political majorities, disrupting the longstanding conventional centrist alliances among the social democrats, the liberals and the Popular Party. Across the Atlantic, Donald Trump solidified his influence in multiple ways. Not only did he secure the presidency by winning the popular vote for the Republican Party for the first time in nearly 40 years, but he also gained control of the Senate and the House of Representatives. This super-majority will enable an extraordinary transformation in the US political and economic landscape, particularly when shaped, if not dictated, by ultra-wealthy libertarians.

It may still be too early for a thorough analysis of the results of these two elections. However, there is a political responsibility for the undeniable rise of neoliberalism that rests with the progressive field, as Michael Sandel aptly states:

The market-friendly, technocratic conception of globalization was embraced by mainstream parties of the left and the right. But it was the embrace of market thinking and market values by center-left parties [that began in the 1980s] that proved most consequential. [...] They softened the harsh edges of unfettered markets but did not challenge the central premise of the Reagan-Thatcher era – that market mechanisms are the primary instruments for achieving the public good.³³

In addition to his case regarding technocracies, the American professor also presents a compelling argument against meritocracies and even the ethic of meritocracy:

Mainstream parties and politicians have responded to growing inequality by calling for greater equality of opportunity – retraining workers whose jobs have disappeared due to globalization and technology; improving access to higher education; and removing barriers of race, ethnicity, and gender. This rhetoric of opportunity is summed up in the slogan that those who work hard and play by the rules should be able to rise ‘as far as their talents will take them’. [...] Meritocratic hubris reflects the tendency of winners to inhale too deeply of their success, to forget the luck and good fortune that helped them on their way. It is the smug conviction of those who land on top that they deserve their fate, and that those on the bottom deserve theirs, too. This attitude is the moral companion of technocratic politics.³⁴

As mentioned, Sandel connects technocratic and meritocratic rhetoric to the recent rise of far-right populist parties and movements. The social divide in contemporary politics has increasingly progressed towards a dichotomy of democracy versus authoritarianism or open versus closed societies, rather than the traditional ideological divisions of left versus right. This shift has diminished the significance of ideological discussions and the conventional divide between the two spectres of the political arena.

5.1. How do we move forward? A draft proposal

Populism can be better described as an effort to oversimplify responses to complex issues. So far, this has proven successful, notably, as our attention span has significantly decreased and the space for nuanced debates has diminished.³⁵ Consequently, proposing a way forward is always challenging, rarely consensual and never the only option available. Hopefully, these proposals will ignite a debate and encourage others to enhance, reject or adapt them. The core idea is to make social democracy popular again without turning it into populism.

To challenge the hegemony of neoliberal thinking, which has not only spurred the rise of populist far-right movements, but also tainted the language and codes of the centre-left, social democratic movements should concentrate on three key ideas: individual freedom; security; and hope. Within these three main ideas, crucial and defining discussions on various topics can help shape the future of social democracy in Europe and the proposals that its parties present to their electorate.

5.2 Autonomy and individual freedom

If individualism is paramount in classical liberalism, then exacerbated individualism – Ayn Rand style – serves as a leitmotif of neoliberalism. There is a strong belief that, if each person acts in their best interest, it ultimately benefits the common good. Deconstructing individualism can prove not only to be an impossible task but also a counterintuitive one. Is there room for a vision of social democracy that relies on individualism and its prominence in contemporary societies?

One of the critical issues for contemporary social democrats is how to incorporate individual realisation into a political vision of the world, especially when over the last years it seems to have disregarded the idea of empowerment and emancipation. This is particularly striking when one of the most frequently reiterated concepts in social democratic discourse is equality and the paths to achieve it – acknowledging that the underlying idea behind equality is social justice and not uniformity – whether of outcome or identity – the right has successfully imposed the view that this represents the left's vision.

One of the most frequent debates among left-wing theorists and politicians is whether recent systematic losses stem from an increased focus on identity or cultural politics rather than economic issues. A recent study by Tarik Abou-Chadi and Markus Wagner demonstrates that

on the one hand, Social Democrats lost voters to the Moderate Right over questions of economic and social policy. On the other hand, Social Democrats lost voters to green and left-libertarian parties that take stronger and more credible stances on cultural questions.³⁶

The same authors reinforce this conclusion by showing that “we find several consistent pieces of evidence that show that economically left-wing voters also strongly support culturally progressive programmatic appeals and vice-versa”.³⁷

Deriving from this, an important conclusion is that the cultural politics agenda is not detrimental to social democrats. This is an important stepping stone in the build up to the narrative of individual realisation or self-fulfilment under a social democratic view of society. People can be whomever they want and have their rights and identities rightfully protected. It emphasises equality of rights, not equality of personalities or identities, and that difference must always be highlighted.

Another possible conclusion is that the idea of individualism does not have to be in opposition to the common good. Three main ideas could contribute to this view, all deriving from the concept of redistribution.

The first is the reinforcement of solidarity mechanisms and the welfare state. As part of the neoliberal project,³⁸ the erosion of the welfare state has contributed to widening the gap between the highest and lowest earners in our societies. Furthermore, the decrease in investment in several crucial areas of the welfare state directly affects the reallocation of funds to other areas that would not require it otherwise.³⁹ In 2023, nearly one quarter of the EU's population lived at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with several regions exceeding 35% of their population living under these conditions.⁴⁰ It is high time that social democrats go beyond the strong defence of the welfare state. It is time to consolidate and innovate in terms of equipping EU governments with the necessary political and economic tools to act directly

on their economies, including safeguarding vital sectors and promote expenditure in social protection and rights as an investment. As Nicholas Schmit recently affirmed in the European Parliament, referring to the liberals' and conservatives' obsession with "perfect competition":

Only with our joint efforts and commitments can we ensure that our European social market economy continues to be successful in Europe and on a global scale. It's true, yes, Europe needs to be even more competitive. But competitiveness is not an aim in itself. The real objective should be quality jobs, which means decent wages, good working conditions with social protection and the opportunity for life-long learning. (*sic*)⁴¹

The second is a solid commitment to rethinking taxation. As Piketty and Zucman demonstrated,⁴² the financialisation and globalisation of our economies have resulted in a gradual increase in wealth-income ratios over recent decades. This indicates that income and wealth have shifted largely from work to capital. In recent years, with the resurgence of high inflation, purchasing power has diminished further, negatively impacting those reliant on income from work, while benefitting those who have accumulated capital. Considering this, a potential strategy for social democrats is to reconsider the levels and burdens of taxation, aiming to make it increasingly progressive – that is, fairer in its redistributive capacity – by shifting the focus from labour income to capital taxation. This involves maintaining the objective of redistribution and investing in the common good by reducing taxation on labour and enhancing it on capital gains and accumulation, such as extraordinary gains, "super-rich" taxes or inheritance taxes, to name a few.

The third and final commitment may prove to be the most challenging one. Even in left field, the concept of limitarianism – a notion developed by Belgian-Dutch philosopher and professor Ingrid Robeyns – remains far from consensual and is often regarded as taboo in politi-

cal discussions. Many contend that introducing a limit on wealth accumulation restricts our individual freedoms and infringes on our rights. Others oppose it based on legal grounds, arguing that it contradicts most constitutional frameworks in Global North countries. However, Robeyns presents a compelling case for limitarianism. The central idea is that no one should be excessively rich, and it proposes two limits to personal wealth: a political limit, which must be determined collectively; and a personal limit, which is contingent on individual circumstances. Among the reasons she provides for imposing such limits, I would emphasise four that could translate into transformative public policies aligning perfectly with the ideals of social democracy: (1) extreme wealth undermines democracy and breeds political inequalities; (2) it contradicts principles of ecological sustainability; (3) it is wasteful, as a different distribution of wealth could address many more urgent needs; and (4) the current distribution of wealth and the significant existing inequalities are detrimental, even to the super-rich.

5.3 Security

Following 9/11, arguments prioritising security overshadowed calls for privacy protection. Over the next decade, security and defence dominated political debates. A decade later, particularly with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, migration emerged as a key topic in political discussions, especially in Europe. This shift elevated security to a primary concern for politicians and policymakers, despite many polls showing that migration was not a significant priority for voters until recently.⁴³ However, the autumn 2024 Eurobarometer Standard Survey⁴⁴ reveals that immigration's prominence in political discourse has grown, now ranking as the second-most-significant concern for Europeans – a four-point increase since spring.

Immigration has been the most dominant topic for far-right and right-wing politicians in recent years. Immigration frequently becomes

a scapegoat for explaining the poor economic situation of the most underprivileged members of our societies, often caught in immigrants' Schrodinger's paradox: immigrants are said to steal the jobs of locals while simultaneously taking their social benefits for not working. Despite official statistics not showing any direct correlation between immigration and a rise in insecurity in Europe, this notion has taken hold in the hearts and minds of many Europeans. To counter the right-wing's unity and dominance over this issue, many on the left⁴⁵ have consistently argued for a clearer perspective on the subject within the political arena – the Nordic social democrats (in Sweden and Finland) appear to be considering a shift towards the Danish approach of adopting harshly restrictive migration policies, while in Germany, the Sarah Wagenknecht movement (BSW) advocates for a more robust state intervention to determine which migrants can and cannot enter the country.

Without a doubt, social democrats need to unite to discuss immigration and security, even if the two are not directly related. The same goes for its policies regarding international trade, especially when the topic has gained such a significant relevance after the reelection of Trump. However, suppose the vision adopted by social democrats comes at the expense of abandoning their humanistic values and adhering to the same (false) pretences as the far right. In that case, the debate is already lost. Not only would this be a betrayal of their core values and identity, but it has also proven ineffective:

[T]he results suggest that too much co-optation of the radical right leads to gains for these challengers. On the one hand, where other mainstream parties already occupy restrictive immigration positions, RRP [radical-right parties] gain strongly from parties that choose to accommodate. On the other hand, accommodative strategies predict higher radical right gains and losses when employed by parties that had previously assumed restrictive positions on these issues. This suggests that vote switching in response to mainstream party policy shifts is most

pronounced in the competition of RRP and mainstream parties with a hard-line stance on immigration. Again, we see that the effects on gains outweigh the effects on losses. Accommodating radical right issue positions does thus not benefit mainstream parties even if they can claim to toughen a stance that they previously advocated. In contrast, voters defect from these parties to the radical right in remarkable numbers.⁴⁶

The first challenge is to deconstruct fear – the fear of the unknown, whether it involves cultures, religions or people – its impact on dominant cultures and find ways to overcome the resulting challenges. A race to the bottom benefits only those at the top, and the consequences of more restrictive migration policies often increase illegal activities correlated with such policies, including human trafficking, exploitation and social dumping. This should be accomplished through education, active community integration, and a political narrative that highlights and emphasises the benefits of intercultural exchanges rather than exacerbating fears.

The second challenge lies in achieving consistency. Social democrats require uniformity in their discourse, approach and public policies. Instead of merely adjusting to the proposals put forth by the right, they need to establish their own vision. This vision should encompass strategies to enhance academic cooperation and innovation, create a talent pool, and collaborate with third countries to develop regular migration pathways. Crucially, their strategy must be firmly anchored in well-financed integration policies that acknowledge and address immigrants' immediate challenges and their effects on local communities. Key investments are needed in affordable housing, language education, immediate access to healthcare and education, and efficient services to manage administrative tasks to ensure immigrants' peaceful and successful integration. Achieving all this necessitates two steadfast commitments: one political, to uphold core beliefs; and one economic, to allocate the essential financial resources for implementation.

5.4 Hope

Any individual who has ever led or participated in a campaign, whether as a candidate or not, can attest that political communication is far more than a tightly constructed set of rational ideas presented to the electorate. Emotions and perceptions significantly influence voters' decisions, especially among those who typically fall into the undecided category. Fear serves as a powerful motivator and can profoundly impact the masses. In recent years, it has been consistently waved as a flag, particularly by far-right parties, successfully leading to substantial political victories in various EU countries. The main consequence of the rise of the far right in numerous political systems has been the shift of political debate from an ideological focus to a systemic or institutional one. Challenges to democratic systems and the EU have further transformed the political discourse from traditional political ideologies to a debate on preserving democracy and its institutions. As mentioned, the accommodation of the rhetoric – and sometimes even the ideas – of the far right leads to its normalisation, with lasting implications for people's perception of reality, and consequently, influencing the emphasis placed on different areas of public policy.

Hope is also a powerful driver, as potent as fear. I would argue that this is perhaps what is most lacking in social democratic campaigns.

Returning to Michael Sandel's argument about the consequences of technocracies and meritocracies, which create "winners and losers" within the system, we can find correspondence in many analyses of electoral results. Recent analyses show significant differences in voting patterns between men and women, which played a crucial role in the recent US elections.⁴⁷ In the same direction, recent studies – notably by Case and Deaton⁴⁸ and King, Scheiring and Nosrati⁴⁹ – indicate that male disenfranchisement, primarily caused by deindustrialisation, is one of the most significant factors contributing to the increase in

deaths by despair. Additionally, it helps to explain a profound change in voting patterns:

The existant research highlighted deindustrialization as a central factor behind the deaths of despair epidemic, though it is by far not the only one. Deindustrialization is a complex, long-term phenomenon. [...] Deindustrialization creates what economic geographers call regional lock-in: a cascade of socioeconomic problems that amplify each other over the years. [...] The intensity of economic dislocation in Eastern Europe was much more severe than in the United States. Deindustrialization in the United States did not result from the collapse of an entire political and economic system; it started earlier and was more gradual. Technological change plays a more critical role in the industrial decline in the United States, though neoliberal policies such as trade liberalization contributed in both cases.⁵⁰

The insecurity arising from the paradoxically long and rapid twin transitions, which have fundamentally changed the labour dynamics of most working-class people – including the social (de)valuation of blue-collar work – requires a response of hope and the ability to set a vision for the future. For social democratic parties to differentiate themselves from the right, more is needed than mere differences in style, grade or level. Mitigating the implementation of neoliberal de-regulation programmes is not enough to regain voters' trust. As Abou-Chadi et al. state: "instead of focusing on how they have lost, social democratic parties might be better advised to devise strategies to win new voters".⁵¹

The first proposal is to reject the meritocratic trap altogether. We must continue to advocate for substantial investment in education, training and skills. However, this must follow a debate on the social valuation of work. The pandemic and our reluctance to follow through with the social recognition of essential workers exemplify our collective failure towards them. In 2023, with inflation at its highest in recent

years, “the most basic living costs, such as housing and utilities, increased up to four times faster than wages across Europe last year, new Eurostat data shows”.⁵² Therefore, in line with progressively shifting taxation from work to capital, salaries must be increased to cover the cost of living and ensure dignified living conditions.

The second proposal represents a radical shift away from the erosion of the welfare state and advocates for the reimplementation of conditionality mechanisms that underscore the significance of trade unions in social dialogue. Investment in essential public services should be central to social democratic policies, even if that means reconsidering the concepts of competitiveness and profitability. Public education and health are the primary drivers of social mobility, and access to them – or the lack thereof – determines individuals’ life opportunities. Thus, investing in quality infrastructure, services, and the careers and training of public professionals has a multiplying effect on society and must be prioritised.

The third proposal concerns reassurance – that social protection mechanisms are fair in the face of hardships and guarantee a swift recovery. This is crucial for navigating the twin transition. Forcing individuals to make necessary adjustments to socioeconomic transformations without the appropriate public financial support will only worsen existing inequalities. Support for the transition must be progressive and tailored to individuals’ economic circumstances, ensuring adequate access based on needs. This is essential to restoring citizens’ trust in institutions at all levels – local, regional, national and European.

The final proposal involves revising the current power dynamics between politics and the economy. Neoliberalism’s implementation is so deep that it has positioned itself as the only rational choice, making it nearly impossible to envision an alternative set of economic principles. Rather than allowing political decisions to be primarily based on supply and demand “laws”, politicians must regain the ability to influ-

ence economic decisions. This includes revisiting public ownership of essential sectors, determining the direction of state aid or tax benefits as leverage for enhancing specific economic sectors for the common good, and implementing effective public services and regulations that support the smooth functioning of the economy without overburdening citizens or businesses.

6. Conclusion

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, which paved the way for neoliberal hegemony, the progressive left and the social democratic movement have increasingly struggled to maintain their influence in the Global North, particularly in the EU and the USA. Following the enlargement process of the early 2000s, social democrats significantly lost their predominance in the EU's political decision-making process. As of 2024, social democrats have only four representatives in the European Council, meaning there are just four social democratic heads of government.⁵³

Social democrats must challenge the prevailing narrative regarding their loss of voters in recent years. Evidence shows that there has been no significant shift of voters from social democratic parties to far-right parties. These losses are primarily to more radical left-wing parties on cultural issues and moderate-right parties on economic matters. Understanding the electorate's voting patterns and behaviours is a crucial step in grasping its aims and expectations.

To revive the popularity of social democracy, social democrats must commit to developing new strategies to (re)gain voters' trust. In Section 5, I aimed to establish three fundamental principles that I believe can serve as a starting point for discussion and foster the necessary engagement between voters and social democracy: individual freedom; security; and hope. Beneath each of these principles, there

are several overarching ideas derived from many years of personal, political and academic discussions that can only benefit from ongoing contributions and public debate.

Bibliography

- Abou-Chadi, T., D. Bischof, T. Kurer et al. (2024) «The myth of vote losses to the radical right». Research Brief Series 1: Rethinking Progressive Politics Based on Facts Rather than Myths. Progressive Politics Research Network.
- Abou-Chadi, T., S. Häusermann, R. Mitteregger et al. (2024) "Old left, new left, centrist, or left national? Determinants of support for different social democratic programmatic strategies", in S. Häusermann and H. Kitschelt (eds) *Beyond Social Democracy – The Transformation of the Left in Emerging Knowledge Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Abou-Chadi, T. and M. Wagner (2024) "Losing the middle ground: The electoral decline of social democratic parties since 2000", in S. Häusermann and H. Kitschelt (eds) *Beyond Social Democracy – The Transformation of the Left in Emerging Knowledge Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- "Speaking of psychology: Why our attention spans are shrinking, with Gloria Mark, PhD". American Psychological Association, 2023.
- Case, A. and A. Deaton (2021) *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Coote, A. (2019) "Investment in public services is an investment in social infrastructure". New Economics Foundation, 20 May.
- "Portugal – memorandum of understanding on specific economic policy conditionality". European Commission, 17 May 2011.
- Friedman, M. (2020) [1962] *Capitalismo e Liberdade* (Lisboa, Actual Editora).
- Freitas da Costa, M. (ed.) Gramsci, A. (2024) *Antonio Gramsci: Textos Políticos: Antologia* (Silveira, Torres Vedras: BookBuilders).
- Häusermann, S. and H. Kitschelt (eds) (2024) *Beyond Social Democracy – The Transformation of the Left in Emerging Knowledge Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Kauffmann, S. (2024) "Who will construct the political narrative of the realities of migration?" *Le Monde*, 2 October.
- King, L., G. Scheiring and E. Nosrati (2022) "Deaths of despair in comparative perspective". *Annual Review of Sociology*, 48: 299-317. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-soc-030320-031757
- Koselleck, R. (2004) [1979] *Futures Past – On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Krause, W., D., Cohen and T. Abou-Chadi (2023) "Does accommodation work? Mainstream party strategies and the success of radical right parties". *Po-*

- litical Science Research and Methods*, 1(11): 172-179. DOI: 10.1017/psrm.2022.8
- Landers, J. (2013) "Dancing with black widow spiders". *The New York Times*, 16 September.
- Leiserowitz, A., E. Maibach, S. Rosenthal et al. (2022) "Climate change in the American mind: Beliefs & attitudes". Yale University and George Mason University.
- Meaney, T. and J. Rahtz (2024) "Condition of Germany – interview with Sahra Wagenknecht". New Left Review.
- "Climate change: Evidence". NASA.
- Piketty, T. (2022) "Uma breve história da igualdade". *Temas e Debates – Círculo de Leitores*.
- Piketty, T. (2019) *Capital et Idéologie* (Paris: Seuil).
- Piketty, T. and G. Zucman (2014) «Capital is back: Wealth-income ratios in rich countries 1700-2010». *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 3(129): 1255-1310. DOI: 10.1093/qje/qju018
- Robeyns, I. (2024) *Limitarianism* (London: Allen Lane).
- Rodrigues, J. (2022) *O neoliberalismo não É Um Slogan: Uma história de ideias poderosas* (Lisbon: Tinta da China).
- Sandel, M. J. (2021) *The Tyranny of Merit – What's Become of the Common Good* (London: Penguin Books).
- Smolar, P. (2024) "2024 US election: The gender gap in voting is confirmed". *Le Monde*, 6 November.
- Stiglitz, J. E. (2019) "The economy we need". Project Syndicate, 3 May.
- "Restoring the quality of our environment". Report of the Environmental Pollution Panel. President's Science Advisory Committee. The White House, November 1965.
- Their, H. (2020) *A People's Guide to Capitalism: An Introduction to Marxist Economics* (Chicago: Haymarket Books).
- "Unprepared for what has already happened". *This American Life*, 15 March 2024.
- Travis, A. (2013) "National Archives: Margaret Thatcher wanted to crush power of trade unions". *The Guardian*, 1 August.
- "Global Wealth Report 2023: Exploring the fall in global household wealth". UBS, 2023.
- "Yale experts explain climate anxiety". Yale Sustainability, 13 March 2023.
- YouTube video, BBC, "Hans Rosling's 200 countries, 200 years, 4 minutes - the joy of stats". 26 November 2010.

Endnotes

- 1 Landers, J. (2013) "Dancing with black widow spiders". *The New York Times*, 16 September.
- 2 "Unprepared for what has already happened". *This American Life*, 15 March 2024.
- 3 "Yale experts explain climate anxiety". *Yale Sustainability*, 13 March 2023.
- 4 Rodrigues, J. (2022) *O neoliberalismo não É Um Slogan: Uma história de ideias poderosas* (Lisbon: Tinta da China), p. 122, self-translation.
- 5 Reference to Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), prominent Italian politician and philosopher.
- 6 Freitas da Costa, M. (ed.) Gramsci, A. (2024) *Antonio Gramsci: Textos Políticos: Antologia* (BookBuilders), p. 301, self-translation.
- 7 YouTube video, BBC, "Hans Rosling's 200 countries, 200 years, 4 minutes - the joy of stats". 26 November 2010.
- 8 Roser, M. and P. Arriagada (2024) "Was the global decline in extreme poverty only due to China?" *Our World in Data*, 3 May.
- 9 Piketty, T. (2022) "Uma breve história da igualdade". *Temas e Debates – Círculo de Leitores*, p. 207.
- 10 Piketty, T. (2019) *Capital et Idéologie* (Paris: Seuil), in Rodrigues 2022, 35.
- 11 Friedman, M. (2020) [1962] *Capitalismo e Liberdade* (Atual), in Rodrigues, J. (2022) *O neoliberalismo não É Um Slogan: Uma história de ideias poderosas*.
- 12 "Global Wealth Report 2023: Exploring the fall in global household wealth". UBS, 2023.
- 13 Dyvik, E. H. (2024) "Billionaires around the world – statistics & facts". *Statistica*, 3 July.
- 14 Robeyns, I. (2024) *Limitarianism* (London: Allen Lane), x.
- 15 "For future events the truth is indeterminate."
- 16 In many countries, this was known as the "Millenium bug".
- 17 Several studies are emerging on climate or eco-anxiety. A 2022 study from Yale University (Leiserowitz, A., E. Maibach, S. Rosenthal et al. (2022) "Climate change in the American mind: Beliefs & attitudes". Yale University and George Mason University) showed that "about one in ten Americans report experiencing symptoms of anxiety because of global warming for several or more days out of the last two weeks. Almost as many report experiencing symptoms of depression because of global warming. About one in four Americans (27%) say they try not to think about global warming, and 15% say they try to avoid information about global warming. About one in ten say they often have trouble stopping themselves from consuming bad news about global warming (11%) or seek social or emotional support to help manage their concerns about global warming (10%). Eight percent of Americans say they are discussing their feelings about global warming with a counselor or therapist or would be interested in doing so."

- 18 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the United Nations body for assessing science related to climate change.
- 19 "Climate change: Evidence". NASA.
- 20 "Restoring the quality of our environment". Report of the Environmental Pollution Panel. President's Science Advisory Committee. The White House, November 1965.
- 21 Koselleck, R. (2004) [1979] *Futures Past – On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 46-8.
- 22 Tocqueville, in Koselleck, R. (2004) [1979] *Futures Past – On the Semantics of Historical Time*, p. 56.
- 23 Sandel, M. J. (2021) *The Tyranny of Merit – What's Become of the Common Good* (London: Penguin Books), p. 19.
- 24 Marx and Engels, "The Communist Manifesto", in Their, H. (2020) *A People's Guide to Capitalism: An Introduction to Marxist Economics* (Chicago: Haymarket Books), p. 109.
- 25 Sawhill, "The forgotten Americans", in Sandel, M. J. (2021) *The Tyranny of Merit – What's Become of the Common Good*, p. 197.
- 26 Case, A. and A. Deaton (2021) *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 7; Sawhill, "The Forgotten Americans", in Sandel, M. J. (2021) *The Tyranny of Merit – What's Become of the Common Good*, p. 19.
- 27 Sandel, M. J. (2021) *The Tyranny of Merit – What's Become of the Common Good*, pp. 197-199.
- 28 Margaret Thatcher speech to the backbench 1922 committee, July 1984: Travis, A. (2013) "National Archives: Margaret Thatcher wanted to crush power of trade unions". *The Guardian*, 1 August.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 The exceptions are Belgium and Malta.
- 31 The most significant case is that of Estonia, where in 1990, 90.6% of the employed population was in a trade union, and in 2001, it was merely 16.6%. Czechia is another example, going from over 78.7% of trade union members to only 25%.
- 32 "Portugal – memorandum of understanding on specific economic policy conditionality". European Commission, 17 May 2011.
- 33 Sandel, M. J. (2021) *The Tyranny of Merit – What's Become of the Common Good*, pp. 20-21.
- 34 Ibid, pp. 22-25.
- 35 "So back in 2004, we found the average attention span on any screen to be two and a half minutes on average. Throughout the years it became shorter. So around 2012 we found it to be 75 seconds. [...] The median [attention span over the last five, six years] is 40 seconds." "Speaking of psychology: Why our attention spans are shrinking, with Gloria Mark, PhD". American Psychological Association, 2023.

- 36 Abou-Chadi, T. and M. Wagner (2024) "Losing the middle ground: The electoral decline of social democratic parties since 2000", in S. Häusermann and H. Kitschelt (eds) *Beyond Social Democracy – The Transformation of the Left in Emerging Knowledge Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 119.
- 37 Abou-Chadi, T., S. Häusermann, R. Mitteregger et al. (2024) "Old left, new left, centrist, or left national? Determinants of support for different social democratic programmatic strategies", in S. Häusermann and H. Kitschelt (eds) *Beyond Social Democracy – The Transformation of the Left in Emerging Knowledge Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 274.
- 38 "We can thank former US President Ronald Reagan and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher for our current state of affairs. The neoliberal reforms of the 1980s were based on the idea that unfettered markets would bring shared prosperity through a mystical trickle-down process. We were told that lowering tax rates on the rich, financialization, and globalization would result in higher standards of living for everybody. Instead, the US growth rate fell to around two-thirds of its level in the post-war era – a period of tight financial regulations and a top marginal tax rate consistently above 70% – and a greater share of the wealth and income from this limited growth was funneled to the top 1%. Instead of the promised prosperity, we got deindustrialization, polarization, and a shrinking middle class. Unless we change the script, these patterns will continue – or worsen." Stiglitz, J. E. (2019) "The economy we need". Project Syndicate, 3 May.
- 39 "The report points out that poor families across the OECD would lose three-quarters of their income if they had to purchase current services directly. Indeed, public services have been found to reduce income inequality by an average of 20%. Paying for them should be treated not simply as public expenditure, but as investment in social infrastructure, just as paying for roads and railways is investment in material infrastructure. Neither society nor economy could function without both kinds of support, and there is evidence to suggest that investment in more and better public services would yield handsome dividends in social, environmental and economic terms." Coote, A. (2019) "Investment in public services is an investment in social infrastructure". New Economics Foundation, 20 May.
- 40 "Risk of poverty or social exclusion in regions". Eurostat, 15 October 2024.
- 41 "Verbatim report of proceedings". European Parliament, 22 October 2024; "Closing statement by Nicolas Schmit, European Commissioner, on guidelines for the employment policies of the member states, extract from the plenary session of the EP". Audiovisual Service. European Commission, 22 October 2024.
- 42 "We find in every country [USA, UK, Germany, and France] a gradual rise of wealth-income ratios in recent decades, from about 200–300% in 1970

- to 400–600% in 2010. In effect, today's ratios appear to be returning to the high values observed in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (600–700%).” Piketty, T. and G. Zucman (2014) “Capital is back: Wealth-income ratios in rich countries 1700-2010”. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 3(129): 1255-1310. DOI: 10.1093/qje/qju018
- 43 In the standard spring 2024 Eurobarometer survey, migration was only the fifth priority for Europeans, after security and defence, climate and the environment, health, and the economy –
- 44 “Standard Eurobarometer 102 - autumn 2024”. European Union.
- 45 Kauffmann, S. (2024) “Who will construct the political narrative of the realities of migration?” *Le Monde*, 2 October; Meaney, T. and J. Rahtz (2024) “Condition of Germany – interview with Sahra Wagenknecht”. New Left Review.
- 46 Krause, W., D., Cohen and T. Abou-Chadi (2023) “Does accommodation work? Mainstream party strategies and the success of radical right parties”. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 1(11): 172-179. DOI: 10.1017/psrm.2022.8
- 47 “The phenomenon had been anticipated for months. Yet it wasn't until Election Day, Tuesday, November 5, that it became a reality: American women largely favored Kamala Harris, but not enough to cement her victory. The various exit polls published that evening by the American media showed the expected differentiation effect: A 10-point advantage for the Democratic candidate among women (around 54% vs. 44%), but also exactly the same ratio in the opposite direction, in favor of Donald Trump, among men.” Smolar, P. (2024) “2024 US election: The gender gap in voting is confirmed”. *Le Monde*, 6 November.
- 48 Case, A. and A. Deaton (2021) *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*.
- 49 King, L., G. Scheiring and E. Nosrati (2022) “Deaths of despair in comparative perspective”. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 48: 299-317. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-soc-030320-031757
- 50 Ibid, p. 311.
- 51 Abou-Chadi, T., D. Bischof, T. Kurer et al. (2024) “The myth of vote losses to the radical right”. Research Brief Series 1: Rethinking Progressive Politics Based on Facts Rather than Myths. Progressive Politics Research Network.
- 52 “Eurostat: Basic living costs up 4x faster than wages”. ETUC, 21 April 2023.
- 53 “The European Council numbers 11 members from the European People's Party (EPP), 4 from Renew Europe/ALDE, 4 from the Party of European Socialists (S&D/PES), 2 from the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), 1 from the Patriots for Europe (PfE) and 5 independent or non-affiliated members.” “Current membership of the European Council”. EPRS, 8 October 2024.



**Progressive narrative
to forge connections and
build mighty coalitions
for change**



Anna PACZEŚNIAK

Progressive storytelling in Europe: Content, mechanisms and actors



1. Introduction

In a democracy, it is not enough to be right; it is still necessary to convince citizens. In a democracy, politicians cannot impose their own rationale either because, in response, citizens may not only reject it, but there is a risk that such politicians will also be removed from the decision-making process as a result of the next election. For people do not like to be told what to think, and this is one of the positive achievements of emancipation. Paradoxically, in this context, the rejection of the dictates of the elites is fuel for a right-wing narrative, in which the EU is portrayed as a technocratic and top-down project that organises the lives of ordinary citizens without asking them. The EU has become convinced of this, for example, with the problems in ratifying the treaties decided at the top level, or more recently, with the Green Deal. Necessary, long-awaited and long-negotiated solutions that politicians have failed to talk about clearly and convincingly may end up in the dustbin. In the third decade of the 21st century, this rejection of legitimate reasons and values that have not been properly articulated, adequately explained and accepted by citizens ends in a rising tide of criticism, scepticism and resistance.

There are many indications that top-down discourses aimed at achieving consensus on the nature and objectives of the EU, or the values we share, often ignoring the divergent socio-political dynamics that make EU affairs increasingly contentious, are bound to fail.¹ Indeed, stories about European politics are told and framed by national contexts and borrow little from semantic frameworks advocated from the top.² National narratives do not need to be nested and subordinated to the official rhetoric, not only of EU institutions but also of Europarties, as they are created and received in the national environment and remain country-specific. The use of EU narratives by political actors is never as effective as when they appeal to the interests of social groups

and national constituencies, but also to their national identity and collective memory to construct emotionally compelling stories and moral imperatives.³ This is known to populists and Eurosceptics who, often reaching for negative emotions, contest progressive values by making them suspect, to say the least.

However, the progressives should promote their narrative of Europe, even if this is more challenging for them than for those who simply deny Europeaness. It is therefore worth considering how to make a progressive story successful and which actors will be most effective in telling it. To achieve this goal, we first explain why the popularity of storytelling as a mechanism for promoting values, mobilising for them and gaining political support is so important. Secondly, we identify the most serious challenges that progressives face in constructing a credible narrative about Europe. Finally, we analyse the conditions that a good story should meet and, on this basis, make some recommendations.

2. Importance of stories in politics

Stories are part of the human tradition of communication and help people organise ideas through a narrative framework and meaningful context. Facts and developments find a comprehensible meaning when structured into a story. The word “narrative” has also gained prevalence in the vocabulary of European politics, and EU studies and narratives underpinning political discourses about European integration are increasingly being scrutinised. As Quincy Cloet points out, “few things in life are of more paramount importance than a good story, and it is unsurprising that the European Union’s (EU) quest for a narrative has burgeoned into political discourse and intellectual thought over the past years”⁴. The EU story is told by the representatives of European institutions,⁵ individual member states and their intellectual elites,⁶ but

also by European political families, such as progressives, liberals, conservatives or Eurosceptics.⁷

Research in cognitive and social psychology has documented how storytelling helps to make sense of complex phenomena, how it evokes and channels emotions, and how it sustains individual and group identities. All of these processes are central to collective action and politics. This is why storytelling in politics is the art of crafting a message in a way that connects with people on an emotional level. By changing boring statistics or analytical data and turning it into a compelling and relatable story that resonates with the audience, politicians can connect with citizens in a way that facts and figures simply cannot. Through storytelling, they can break down complex topics, of which there is no shortage in the EU after all, into accessible stories and create an emotional link, which can be a powerful tool for mobilising supporters to take action, to get involved and make a difference. This is because "(t)he story we believe in influences how we react, engage, make demands and more generally, seek to shape our social and political environment".⁸

A concept related to storytelling is framing. Both encompass the importance of shaping and presenting information in a way that appeals to the emotions, values and interests of the audience. While storytelling is the art of creating and delivering a narrative that connects with the public and illustrates the message, framing is the process of selecting and emphasising certain aspects of a situation or issue, while downplaying or omitting others, to influence how the audience perceives and interprets it. Framing is a technique frequently analysed by social movement scholars as being highly important for mobilising followers.⁹ Robert Benford and David Snow point out that the collective action frames help to make events or occurrences meaningful, and thus, organises experience and directs action,¹⁰ as well as serving an interpretive function by simplifying and condensing aspects of the

“world out there” in ways that are “intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists”.¹¹

The key to the power of narrative is that we hear stories differently from other types of messages. This phenomenon is explained by Francesca Polletta¹² by analysing the narratives used in American politics, which, however, are also applicable to Europe. For a long time, persuasion scholars believed that we process messages in one of two ways: centrally, where we really analyse the message and critically evaluate its claims; or peripherally, where we absorb the message unwillingly, judging it less on its content than on the attractiveness of the speaker or our mood. Researchers have shown that peripheral processing can change attitudes in the short term, but it is not permanent. To really get people to change their opinions, they need to process information centrally. The problem is that they can only do this if they already have a personal stake in the issue. European issues are rarely seen that way. And this is where the narrative comes into play. Recent research suggests that we also process stories in a third way. We immerse ourselves in the story, trying to vicariously experience the events and emotions experienced by the characters in a well-told story. This immersion experience can lead to lasting changes of opinion. Surprisingly, it happens even when the person is not overly concerned about an issue.

The implementation of stories into political discourse also serves, more than other discursive forms, to structure the language of one's own group (the community is to find itself in the same process of knowledge construction and recognition of issues) and to legitimise it as correctly (in a sense, truthfully) defining reality. This is especially realised by a whole spectrum of populist Eurosceptics, who consistently use the narrative to gradually mobilise the electorates of rival political communities, develop electoral niches and employ differentiation strat-

egies within the political market divide. Eurosceptics provide their voters with interpretative frames, ready-made formulations and associations, which are then invoked and repeated in specific situations and contexts, sometimes even without the involvement of the politicians themselves, but only by their supporters. The development of automatic reactions can be observed, for example, among some of Donald Trump's believers, who – relying on conspiracy theories – “know” how to interpret political reality, even without his specific guidance, and are impregnated towards the narrative told by his political competitors.¹³ The same was true in Poland when, prior to the 2003 accession referendum, the Eurosceptic right circulated the slogan “Yesterday Moscow, today Brussels”, which even two decades after accession is still sometimes cited as understandable by anti-EU voters.

Narratives are always constructed interactively with audiences and in the context of other narratives. This is why telling the story cannot be abstract from the narratives of other political actors. Most theorists agree that there is a cultural reservoir of plots, and that narratives which draw on storylines outside this reservoir, or that are incompatible with other ones, are seen as either bad stories or not stories at all. We find a story coherent if it resonates with stories we have heard before. On one hand, this observation has great potential for European progressives, as many of the progressive stories to tell could be connected with stories and plots from their own past. On the other hand, however, progressives do not operate in a political vacuum, and nowadays, the dominant narratives of other political actors are based on strong individualism, nationalism or the need for deep change, which is not a favourable context for the centre-left.

3. Challenges to storytelling by European progressives

Exploring how challenges facing progressive storytelling can help us better understand why some political narratives persuade, while others do not. Building a progressive narrative about Europe by socialists and social democrats is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, because storytelling is widely thought of as the opposite of intellectual and seems to “persuade through its appeal to emotion rather than reason”;¹⁴ the bar for telling a credible story may be higher for progressives than for, let’s say, Eurosceptic populists. As Polleta notes, some stories are more powerful than others, not because of their content or the way they are told, but because of assumptions made about their tellers. And the centre-left is perceived in the EU arena as a professional and knowledgeable mainstream actor who cannot be expected to appeal (only) to emotions. The question, then, is how to turn these positive qualities into storytelling advantages. Secondly, the discursive context of the EU is considered as technical, policy-oriented, information-driven and very serious, while stories are seen as, although normatively powerful, rather politically unserious. Thirdly, societies of many EU member states are highly polarised, dichotomised and antagonised, which does not serve to nuance, and pluralist the discourse. In such a socio-political setting, it seems easiest to build a narrative based on fear. And indeed, if we look at sovereigntist narratives on the right side, fear is often the dominant emotion there. The left does not have it in its political DNA, so it should reach for positive emotions and values. This is certainly more difficult, but not necessarily less effective. Fourthly, credibility is also the challenge for the centre-left. The progressives’ constructed image of the EU of the future is a “just Union” and a “human rights Union”. This fairness should be a feature of the main European policies, first and foremost, the resource-intensive climate

policy. The reform and implementation of climate policies should, in the view of progressives, be carried out carefully (taking into account the interests of different social groups) to avoid social backlash and excessive burdens on the most vulnerable people and groups. The main problem, however, seems to be that this narrative of justice and solidarity sounds disconnected from reality to some individuals and groups who have experienced increasing inequalities and even social cuts in their countries precisely under social democratic governments. In such a situation, even the best-prepared and told story loses credibility because of the weakened credibility of the teller.

Progressives confront yet another problem. For it is not that the centre-left does not have a narrative of a common Europe, but that it does not break through into consciousness as effectively as even the Eurosceptic narrative, for at least two reasons. Firstly, it is not clearly exposed in the traditional media. Because European socialists are categorised (and rightly so) as one of the mainstream political forces, the public perceives them mainly through the prism of the Christian-social-liberal triumvirate, that is, the establishment or the elite. This was particularly evident after the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections (but it is similar every five years), when it was mainly reported in the media that the moderate forces (including the centre-left) had managed to maintain their majority and that they would continue to deal the EU cards. This tended to perpetuate, in the minds of citizens, the conviction that there was little difference between the European conservative, liberal and social democratic narratives. Secondly, the progressive narrative does not resonate on social media.¹⁵ Their nature means that nuanced content does not attract attention, does not click, because it does not evoke enough emotion. Besides, the progressive side of the political scene still engages far fewer resources on social media than the populists, Eurosceptics or far-right politicians.

4. What to tell, who should do it and how?

EU societies are affected by growing uncertainty. A pandemic of more than two years, Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022, climate change, authoritarian tendencies in the EU's close neighbourhood and in some member states, rising energy costs, housing problems, external interference in electoral processes, or the crisis resulting from US President Donald Trump's unilateral questioning of the transatlantic alliance upon his return to the White House in January 2025 – these are just some of the items on this uncertainty register. In political communication, ways of diagnosing public emotions, fears and hopes, regarding both the future of individual European countries and the EU as a whole, are crucial. This makes use of the narratives adopted by political parties and leaders in their argumentative strategies with which political reality is defined, diagnosed and assessed. Properly constructed stories build a schema that is an organic whole. They organise the opinions, ideas and programmes circulating in public debates, integrating them into interpretative packages.

While the content of political stories varies, their structure is similar and includes four narrative elements,¹⁶ such as the setting, characters, plot and moral of the story. The setting is the context in which the problem or policy issue is located, for example, low-controversy facts, evidence and indicators, legal and geographical features, and so forth. The second element is characters. There are three general categories of socially constructed characters, such as the victims who are harmed or potentially harmed by the problem, the villains who are the source of the problem and the hero who promises relief from the harm. Then we need a plot that maps the relationships between the characters and the links between the characters and the setting. It often contains causal relations, such as “this happened because of

this” or “if we do/do this, that will happen”.¹⁷ Finally, as a fourth element, we have the moral of the story, which is the takeaway of the political narrative, and often refers to the ethical aspects of the policy solution proposed within the plot.

The narratives of the European centre-left talk about using membership to strengthen civil, social and labour rights. Solutions at the European level will make it possible to effectively protect workers and employees, combat social inequality and ensure decent working conditions for all EU citizens. A progressive narrative based on solidarity speaks of a model of a Europe where everyone feels at home. It’s a Europe where social rights related to the labour market, among other things, are gradually being unified, such as a consistent reduction in working hours. Closer integration is being called for in financial market supervision (taxation of financial transactions in accordance with EU law), energy (here solidarity with the countries seeking independence from Russian sources) and climate (gradually implemented green transition) policies. One problematic thing is that, nowadays, although many citizens demand solidarity and a collective, at the same time, they do not want to be limited by it, because it seems to them to be contrary to individual freedom. So, when progressives talk about collectivity and solidarity, about putting the brakes on neoliberal tendencies such as reducing public spending or deregulation that weakens the welfare functions, many people hear “limitation” only.

Another issue is the translation of the progressive narrative into concrete stories. Because a story should include characters, it is not enough to talk about values that are important to us, but to translate them into a story about specific people. For example, referring to Radu Jude’s latest film (*Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World*), where overworked and underpaid Angela drives around the city of Bucharest to film the casting for a “safety at work video” commissioned by a multinational company, how (and whether) the relationship between

a Romanian worker and corporate employer is or may be improving thanks to the efforts of social democrats at the EU level. Challenging, isn't it?

What is noteworthy about the narratives of the centre-left national parties is that the problematisation of issues important to this environment quite often includes a European perspective. Thus, if issues important to citizens are discussed, the adjective "European" is included in their description. The story of the EU draws this community as being more integrated, primarily in social areas. Therefore, there are demands in it: a European minimum wage; a European housing fund; or European healthcare. Thus, one can speak of an attempt to Europeanise or communitise at least some of the problems associated with the functioning of the market. This seems to be particularly relevant in the case of national parties from the progressive family, which have lost credibility among citizens due to their policies at the national level. Knowing that it is impossible to turn back the clock and eliminate the mistakes made in the past, one can try to appeal to the legitimacy of supranational actors (Europarty, group in EP, political foundation etc.) and build on their credibility.

There is, however, also another solution. The national context and credibility of the storyteller can be factors in determining the type of story well. And there are at least a few to choose from. The challenge story and frame is one that focuses on how we have faced a difficult problem or obstacle in the past, and how we overcame it. It helps to demonstrate the skills, achievements and shared values. The vision story and frame describes how we envision a better future or outcome, and what steps are being taken or plan to be taken to achieve it. Such a story enables us not only to communicate the vision and strategy, but also to motivate others to join or support. Finally, a learning story and frame reveals how we have learned from a mistake, failure or feedback from constituents, and what changes or improvements have been

made or intend to be made. This type of story and frame can show humility, responsiveness to the signals coming from citizens and the rebuilding of a damaged reputation (if we are dealing with this case).

5. Recommendations

On this basis, several recommendations can be offered for implementation by the progressive family:

- Progressive storytelling must be coherent with the existing discourse and the leftist narrative on Europe, as it is a concretisation of these, rather than the creation of a new story.
- Political actors should include setting in their storytelling, namely, cultural, social and political norms, such as the individualisation of societies, which make collective stories less and less obvious.
- *It is not only what we say, but also who we say it to*, so to use storytelling and framing effectively, it is essential to understand our audience and tailor the story to their needs, preferences and expectations.
- Progressives can take a cue from social movements, which are successful when they are able to plausibly narrate a diagnosis of what is going wrong, what and who is to blame, tell what needs to change as a result, and suggest ideas about what individuals can do to help.
- The structure and use of language should be clear and simple, avoiding overwhelming or confusing the audience with too much information, statistics and technocratic features; indeed, storytelling does not serve to educate the audience.
- The national context matters, so a one-size-fits-all progressive story is not possible. It has to be created, fostered and disseminated from the bottom up by domestic political parties, social groups and their organisations.

- Political storytelling is not about telling fairy tales, but a good story must have characters, a plot and a moral, and it has to be engaging and emotionally involving.
- Storytelling has unrivalled power to make political ideas appear significant, understandable and plausible,¹⁸ provided they are consistent with political action; otherwise, they can do more harm than good.
- It is necessary to (re)build the credibility of the storyteller, especially in those EU member states where social democracy has lost the confidence of its existing supporters.
- Before this happens, the type of story and frame should be adapted to the storyteller, and the most appropriate one chosen between a challenge, vision or learning type of story.
- The right choice of communication tools is key, which is why social media should be incorporated into the communication strategy, in addition to traditional media, where complex ideas will be broken down into digestible¹⁹, relatable content that corresponds to the actual experiences of voters, while satisfying their demand for substantive ideas.

Bibliography

- Benford, R. D. and D. A. Snow (2000) "Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment". *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26: 611-639.
- Bouza Garcia, L. (2017) "The 'new narrative project' and the politicisation of the EU". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 3(25): 340-353.
- Buechler, S. M. (2011) *Understanding Social Movements. Theories from the Classical Era to the Present* (London and New York: Routledge).
- Cloet, Q. (2017) "Two sides to every story(teller): Competition, continuity and change in narratives of European integration". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 3(25): 291-306.
- Dressler, M., Avramovska, E., Candelù, M., Denkovski, O., Eilers, N., Jennewein, M., Spöri, T. (2024). From posts to polls. Lessons from the 2024 European elections on strengthening young people's engagement through

- effective social media strategies. *Policy Studies*. The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Democracy of the Future office.
- Jones, M. D. and C. M. Radaelli (2015) "The narrative policy framework: Child or monster?" *Critical Policy Studies*, 3(9): 339-355.
- Kaiser, W. (2015) "Clash of cultures: Two milieus in the European Union's 'a new narrative for Europe' project". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 3(23): 364-377.
- Kaiser, W. (2017) One Narrative or Several? Politics, Cultural Elites, and Citizens in Constructing a 'New Narrative for Europe'. *National Identities*, 19(2): 215-230.
- Kaiser, W. and R. McMahon (2017) "Narrating European integration: Transnational actors and stories". *National Identities*, 2(19): 149-160.
- Kassim, H. and A. Schout (eds) (2023) *National Government Narratives of the EU: 'Official Stories' of Belonging* (London: Palgrave).
- Lacroix, J. and K. Nicolaidis (eds) (2010) *European Stories. Intellectual Debates on Europe in National Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- McMahon, R. and W. Kaiser (2022) "Narrative Ju-jitsu: Counter-narratives to European Union". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 1(30): 1-9.
- Nicolai, C., L. Gellwitzki and A.-M. Houde (2024) "From *Realpolitik* to *Gefühlspolitik*: Strategically narrating the European Union at the national level". *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2(31): 403-427.
- Polletta, F. (2006) *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Polletta, F. (2016) "Storytelling in politics". *Journal of the American Sociological Association*, 4(7): 26-31.
- Snow, D. A. and R. D. Benford (1988) "Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization". *International Social Movement Research*, 1: 197-218.
- Sommer, W. (2023) *Trust the Plan: The Rise of QAnon and the Conspiracy That Unhinged America* (London: 4th Estate).

Endnotes

- 1 Kaiser, W. (2015) "Clash of cultures: Two milieus in the European Union's 'a new narrative for Europe' project". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 3(23): 364-377.
- 2 Kaiser, W. (2017) One Narrative or Several? Politics, Cultural Elites, and Citizens in Constructing a 'New Narrative for Europe'. *National Identities*, 19(2): 215-230; Kassim, H. and A. Schout (eds) (2023) *National Government Narratives of the EU: 'Official Stories' of Belonging* (London: Palgrave).
- 3 Nicolai, C., L. Gellwitzki and A.-M. Houde (2024) "From *Realpolitik* to *Gefühlspolitik*: Strategically narrating the European Union at the national level". *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2(31): 403-427.

- 4 Cloet, Q. (2017) "Two sides to every story(teller): Competition, continuity and change in narratives of European integration". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 3(25): 291-306.
- 5 Bouza Garcia, L. (2017) "The 'new narrative project' and the politicisation of the EU". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 3(25): 340-353.
- 6 Lacroix, J. and K. Nicolaidis (eds) (2010) *European Stories. Intellectual Debates on Europe in National Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- 7 McMahon, R. and W. Kaiser (2022) "Narrative Ju-jitsu: Counter-narratives to European Union". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 1(30): 1-9.
- 8 Kaiser, W. and R. McMahon (2017) "Narrating European integration: Transnational actors and stories". *National Identities*, 2(19): 150.
- 9 Benford, R. D. and D. A. Snow (2000) "Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment". *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26: 611-639; Buechler, S. M. (2011) *Understanding Social Movements. Theories from the Classical Era to the Present* (London and New York: Routledge).
- 10 Benford, R. D. and D. A. Snow (2000) "Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment", p. 614.
- 11 Snow, D. A. and R. D. Benford (1988) "Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization". *International Social Movement Research*, 1: 198.
- 12 Polletta, F. (2016) "Storytelling in politics". *Journal of the American Sociological Association*, 4(7): 27.
- 13 Sommer, W. (2023) *Trust the Plan: The Rise of QAnon and the Conspiracy That Unhinged America* (London: 4th Estate).
- 14 Polletta, F. (2006) *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. XII.
- 15 Dressler, M., Avramovska, E., Candelù, M., Denkovski, O., Eilers, N., Jennewein, M., and Spöri T. (2024). "From posts to polls. Lessons from the 2024 European elections on strengthening young people's engagement through effective social media strategies", *Policy Study*, December, FEPS.
- 16 Jones, M. D. and C. M. Radaelli (2015) "The narrative policy framework: Child or monster?" *Critical Policy Studies*, 3(9): 341.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Kaiser, W. and R. McMahon (2017) "Narrating European integration: Transnational actors and stories", p. 150.
- 19 Dressler, M., et al., op. cit., p. 65.

THE PROGRESSIVE COMPASS



Konstantin VÖSSING

Logics of politics



1. Introduction

Political parties and politicians use various tools to inform, mobilise and persuade voters. They take positions,¹ stress some topics while ignoring others,² try to exude competence,³ explain their political views and choices,⁴ and cultivate a public persona with certain recognisable and desirable features.⁵ These mechanisms and their direct effects on political behaviour and public opinion are extensively studied in political science. I build on this work by arguing that the effects are conditioned by different *logics of politics*. In this chapter, I begin by explaining how I conceive of logics of politics and their consequences. After that, I illustrate my argument with brief case studies of change from one logic to another. I conclude with a discussion of the practical significance of logics of politics for social democracy.

Logics of politics can be identified as individual attributes of citizens and political elites. They describe the motives people have for engaging with politics. Some people engage with politics to achieve a beneficial policy outcome (resources), some seek greater respect for an allegedly underappreciated group (recognition), and some are in it simply to win (power). Citizens engage with politics in different ways than politicians do. Citizens learn, vote and demonstrate, while politicians campaign, negotiate and decide. But citizens and politicians have the same range of motives for engaging with politics, and both groups have expectations about the prevalent and the desirable motives of their counterparts.

The logic of politics at the level of the political system emerges from the interplay of citizens and politicians. We can use knowledge about citizens' and politicians' logics of politics to determine a logic of politics as an attribute of a given polity and time. Logics of politics change over time, but not in a linear manner. They are not consecutive stages of political development. They are a constant background

condition of politics that sometimes exists in a state of stability and equilibrium. On other occasions, logics of politics change and, as a result, the nature of political competition and the outcomes of public policy change.

2. Resources, recognition and power

Different logics of politics are a feature of the political system that emerges from the interaction of elites' and citizens' logics of politics. This means that an assessment of the logic of politics at the system level, as well as specific analyses of the conditioning effects of individual-level logics of politics, need to be based on a useful concept of individual logics of politics. The identification of resources, recognition and power as the foundational logics of politics is an initial effort to link systemic theories of politics to individual motives. One important task of research will be to verify, expand and categorise lists of motives through theoretical, conceptual and empirical analysis.

I understand individual logics of politics as a personal disposition. This status is independent of any specific list of relevant motives that empirical analysis and theoretical arguments might produce. Among different types of dispositions, individual logics of politics are more stable than a mere attitude,⁶ but less stable perhaps than basic values,⁷ moral intuitions⁸ and personality.⁹ It is possible that even the stability of individual logics of politics is subject to systematic and consequential variation.

In psychology, motivation is an established factor. It identifies the intensity of a person's desire to do something.¹⁰ For instance, cognitive psychologists studying biases in decision-making distinguish the ability of individuals to perform a certain task from their motivation, that is, their inclination to do it.¹¹ Dual-process thinking in political psychology¹² fa-

cilitates a similar distinction between political sophistication – the ability to engage political information – and the motivation to engage. By contrast, motives are the reasons for why someone does something. For instance, one well-known dual-process model of motivated reasoning suggests that people engage with political information either to learn the truth or to confirm their preconceptions.¹³

Motivation and motives cannot always be neatly distinguished, and some theories of motivation consider specific motives.¹⁴ However, motives (and particularly motives for engaging politics) are not studied as often and as systematically as motivation. When motives are studied comprehensively, it is usually in the form of communicated motive. For instance, studies of accounts in interpersonal relations,¹⁵ strategic communication,¹⁶ and politics¹⁷ analyse the reasons people invoke to explain their behaviour. However, what people say about why they do the things they do might or might not be an accurate representation of their true motives.

Theories of politics address the question of motive by establishing concepts of politics derived from one particular motive (sometimes a general condition, and sometimes closer to an individual-level need), rather than describing logics of politics as a scope condition and a variable factor. For instance, Laswell conceives of politics as the struggle for resources (“who gets what, when, how”),¹⁸ while Luhmann describes it as a social system defined by varying relations to power (government versus opposition).¹⁹ Wendt outlines a comprehensive model of international politics based on the desire of states to be recognised,²⁰ and Honneth establishes the quest for recognition as people’s fundamental political motive.²¹ He argues that even conflicts over redistribution have their roots in individuals’ need for recognition.

I distinguish these three fundamental political motives – seeking power, seeking resources and seeking recognition – which are prominently discussed in theories of politics. Other than prior work, I treat

them as variable scope conditions rather than stable foundations of politics, and I investigate them as both individual-level attributes and (subsequently) foundations of system-level variation.

Power is a means to an end for seeking resources and recognition, and an end in itself. In that scenario, where power is an end rather than a means to an end, it is what is sometimes called “naked power”. Seeking resources means to engage with politics for the satisfaction of specific, achievable and measurable needs, while seeking recognition means to do it for the non-material and less clearly identifiable need of being recognised, accepted and respected. The distinction is related but not identical to the well-known distinction between the “struggle for recognition” and the “struggle for redistribution”.²²

Each of the three individual-level motives (why someone engages with politics) can be distinguished from normative logics of politics (what someone thinks about why people ought to engage with politics) and the performance of a logic of politics (what someone wants people to believe about why he or she engages with politics). Both theorising about logics of politics and empirical analysis should watch this distinction.

The same is true for other ways in which logics of politics can be further classified. One possible classification is based on the observation that different motives, as well as their performance, can occur in more moderate and more amplified versions. For instance, when two political actors adhere to seeking resources as their logic of politics, and one of them has the upper hand in a distributional conflict, the nature of conflict and its material outcomes vary between a moderate and an amplified version of the given logic of politics. In a moderate scenario, conflict is curtailed and policy outcome would entail at most mild wins for one group and mild losses for the other. By contrast, an amplified version (of the same logic of politics with the same dominant motive) would produce economic exploitation.

As another important distinction, logics of politics might vary based on whether their foundational motives target personal interests or “the interests of others”.²³ For instance, a politician might be motivated by an individual need for recognition that is concentrated on himself, the group to which he belongs, or a larger ensemble of social actors. It is easy to imagine how this variation in a motive’s target can alter politicians’ electoral appeals and their policy choices.

3. Logics of politics as a condition of political competition

The interplay between logics of politics at elite and mass levels has two important functions: it determines the logic of politics as a feature of the political system (descriptively), and it conditions the effects of various actions of political elites to mobilise, inform and persuade citizens (moderating causal effect).

As a descriptor of the political system, the varying logics of politics are ideal types: three distant corners in a Cartesian coordinate system with values ranging from zero to one identifying their relative presence. A system-level description of the logic of politics *at large* emerges from the variation captured by the strengths of the three possible logics of politics. It is conceivable that one logic of politics clearly dominates a political system, but also that the political system is fragmented into separate corners of more than trivial size, each clinging to a different logic.

As a moderating factor, different individual-level logics of politics at elite and mass levels condition elite influence on political behaviour, public opinion, and as a result the structure of political competition and the content of public policy. They can be conceived of as an interacting variable to be inserted into existing hypotheses and analyses of the direct effects of different tools of elite influence, including party

positions,²⁴ issue emphasis,²⁵ positional clarity,²⁶ competence,²⁷ political accounts,²⁸ policy information²⁹ and personality.³⁰

For instance, party positions in favour of economic redistribution are typically associated with social democratic politics, but this association depends on a logic of politics during the postwar period in which different actors universally emphasised seeking resources and engaged in conflict with moderate intensity. Once that logic changes to one centred on recognition, demands for economic redistribution become part of a bundle of measures, to achieve recognition in a moderate scenario and ideational domination in the amplified version. When the logic of politics changes from *resources* to *recognition*, the nature of political competition changes as a result. The same demands for redistribution will have a different audience and support coalition. They might also be harder to implement, and in the amplified version, they might become “sacred”,³¹ that is, less negotiable and less amenable to compromises than demands for redistribution that are driven by the need for resources.

4. Changing logics of politics

Logics of politics at the system level experience periods of equilibrium and periods of change before they settle on a new and possibly different equilibrium. One important question is why change occurs and how it is related to specific manifestations of political competition, such as positions, competence and issue emphasis. For one, once a new logic settles, it conditions specific actions of political parties; in other words, it gives them a meaning that might be different from what it was before. From this point of view, the effects of elite action change depending on a given logic of politics. In addition, elite action also causes change from one logic of politics to another. Transformative political action is the key driver of change in logics of politics, and

it can be studied by analysing the way in which transformative leaders innovate elements of the political toolbox, the composition of tools, or their implementation.

A change in logics of politics is an important occasion to explain the causes and consequences of varying logics of politics. It is also a useful moment for illustrating different logics of politics, which I will do now using four brief empirical examples of change resulting from transformative leadership.

To begin with, during the last decade, populist leaders managed to transform the logic of politics, typically from a logic of resources with moderate levels of conflict to a logic of recognition (with sometimes higher levels of conflict intensity). For instance, in the United States, the reformed Republican Party now appeals to alienated rural, male and authoritarian-minded voters. Policy offerings conditioned by this logic of politics serve the purpose of recognising and affirming group identity more than the purpose of achieving specific improvements. Voters do not judge the new Republicans based on the implementation of a policy agenda but rather the continued recognition of identity and grievance.

The logic of recognition that now arguably dominates American politics co-occurred not only with the reshuffling of partisan affiliations, but also with a growing emphasis on non-economic issues, such as abortion, the division of state and religion, nationalism, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Maybe non-economic issues are more amenable to facilitate a logic of recognition than economic issues, but I would argue that there is no necessary connection between the two. Both economic and non-economic policies can serve the purpose of *recognition* and the purpose of *resources*.

A comparison of contemporary American populism with language politics in Québec can illustrate this point. In the United States, the growing emphasis on non-economic policies during the past decade

prompted and sustained a transformation of the logic of politics toward recognition. By contrast, the pursuit of regionalism and protection of the French language by the *Parti Québécois* during the 1970s occurred within a stable logic of (resource) politics that focused on specific policy goals.

The passing of the Charter of the French Language (in the province of Québec) in 1977 is a key policy achievement of Québécois regionalism. It is the result of a mobilisation of regional and linguistic grievances against the status quo in both Québec and Canada between 1960 and 1976. During this period, politics moved gradually away from regulating distributional conflicts (which led to the expansion of the Québécois welfare state during the 1960s) and became a vehicle for achieving linguistic gains (such as the protection of the French language in the 1977 charter). However, while the contested resource changed, the logic of politics stayed the same. It remained centred on seeking resources. In this logic of politics, people want specific measurable solutions for perceived deficits through politics. By contrast, in a logic of recognition, what voters want from politics are not policies and improvements but the recognition and affirmation of their group identity.

British politics was transformed from a resource-based to a recognition-based logic of politics through the ascendance of populism in the Conservative Party. The British Labour Party could have embraced the recognition-based logic of politics to contest the parliamentary elections of 2024, but it did not and opted for a resource-based logic instead. The key tool the party and its candidate for prime minister, Keir Starmer, picked from the toolbox of political competition was an emphasis on competence and proficient management to increase the pool of resources (economic growth) and their more efficient dissemination (administrative reform). Starmer's Labour Party was criticised for lacking a long-term policy vision, and while this is true, the extent to which

Starmer managed to transform the logic of politics from the previous recognition-based approach to his new managerial approach could not be more radical. Keir Starmer is a prime example of transformative leadership changing the logic of politics from one to another.

With its majoritarian political system³² and high frequency of radical policy changes,³³ the United Kingdom might be more susceptible to experiencing transformations of the logic of politics. Another critical example of such a transformation is the leadership of Clement Attlee, who managed to win the parliamentary elections in July 1945 against Winston Churchill, credited by voters for being a legend and hero, who played a major part in the very survival of the country. The logic of politics during his time in office was quite close to the principle of “naked” power, but Attlee managed to get himself elected by emphasising resource-based politics in a program of economic reconstruction, state planning and social provision. He transformed the logic of politics from one centred on “power” to one centred on “resources”.

5. Lessons for (social democratic) politicians and parties

Why should politicians and political parties – social democrats in particular – care about logics of politics? First, the possibility of fundamental change in logics of politics caused by the actions of political elites should remind social democratic politicians to be open to new ideas. It is a cautionary tale that the nature of political conflict can fundamentally change, and that it is better to be the change than to be swept away by it. Second, using social science tools as well as conversation³⁴ to detect existing and changing logics of politics can offer valuable insights. Understanding deeply a given logic of politics and its transformation makes it easier not just to act, but also to react when necessary.

Third, the emphasis of my argument on fundamental motives should remind social democrats to listen (deeply) to their voters. Politicians should try to understand not only voters' complaints and demands, but also their underlying motives, that is, why they express these complaints and demands.

Fourth, understanding one's own motive for engaging with politics can help politicians gain authenticity. Politicians surprised by the rise of a new logic of politics might lag behind what they perceive as a trend. However, as Keir Starmer demonstrated, not following a trend (in his case, the politics of recognition) can lead to positive outcomes, especially if the alternative would be to embrace a logic of politics that does not suit the politician's own persona. Politicians and political parties have tough decisions to make when the demand for a certain logic of politics leads in a direction that is not consistent with what they are able to offer.

Fifth, politicians can find creative ways to negotiate and integrate different logics of politics across various areas of political practice. For instance, communicating "respect" as the cornerstone of their political approach helped German social democrats win the federal parliamentary elections in 2021. The expression of respect in political communication clearly satisfied voters' need for recognition (one logic of politics). Once in government, the party implemented policies, such as raising the minimum wage and keeping pensions stable, that were designed to translate the principle of respect into measurable material improvements (satisfying voters' need for resources, another logic of politics).

Endnotes

- 1 Downs, A. (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper).
- 2 Petrocik, J. (1996) "Issue ownership in presidential elections, with a 1980 case study". *American Journal of Political Science*, 3(40): 825-850.
- 3 Stokes, D. E. (1963) "Spatial models of party competition". *American Political Science Review*, 2(57): 368-377.
- 4 McGraw, K. M. (1991) "Managing blame: An experimental test of the effects of political accounts". *American Political Science Review*, 4(85): 1133-1157. DOI: 10.2307/1963939
- 5 Fridkin, K. L. and P. J. Kenney (2011) "The role of candidate traits in campaigns". *Journal of Politics*, 1(73): 61-73. DOI: 10.1017/S0022381610000861
- 6 McGuire, W. (1985) "Attitudes and attitude change", in L. Gardner and E. Aronson (eds) *Handbook of Social Psychology* (New York: Random House), pp. 233-346.
- 7 Schwartz, S. H. (1992) "Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries". *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 25: 1-65. DOI: 10.1016/S0065-2601-(08)60281-6
- 8 Graham, J., J. Haidt, S. Koleva et al. (2013) "Moral foundations theory: The pragmatic validity of moral pluralism", in P. Devine and A. Plant (eds) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 47 (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press), pp. 55-130.
- 9 Gerber, A. S., G. A. Huber, D. Doherty et al. (2011) "The big five personality traits in the political arena". *Annual Review of Political Science*, 14: 265-287. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-polisci-051010-111659
- 10 Eccles, J. S. and A. Wigfield (2002) "Motivational beliefs, values, and goals". *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53: 109-132. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.psych.53.100901.135153
- 11 Kahneman, D. and A. Tversky (1972) "Subjective probability: A judgment of representativeness". *Cognitive Psychology*, 3: 430-454.
- 12 Chen, S. and S. Chaiken (1999) "The heuristic-systematic model in its broader context", in S. Chaiken and Y. Trope (eds) *Dual-Process Theories in Social Psychology* (New York: Guilford Press), pp. 73-96; Petty, R. E. and J. T. Cacioppo (1986) "The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion". *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 19: 123-205. DOI: 10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60214-2
- 13 Taber, C. S. and M. Lodge (2006) "Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs". *American Journal of Political Science*, 3(50): 755-769.
- 14 Eccles, J. S. and A. Wigfield (2002) "Motivational beliefs, values, and goals".
- 15 Frey, F. M. and A. T. Cobb (2010) "What matters in social accounts? The roles of account specificity, source expertise, and outcome loss

- on acceptance". *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 5(40): 1203-1234. DOI: 10.1111/j.1559-1816.2010.00616.x; Schönbach, P. (1990) *Account Episodes: The Management of Escalation of Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Scott, M. B. and S. M. Lyman (1968) "Accounts". *American Sociological Review*, 1(33): 46-62. DOI: 10.2307/2092239
- 16 Benoit, W. (2024) *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory Extended* (Albany: SUNY Press).
- 17 Bennett, W. L. (1980) "The paradox of public discourse: A framework for the analysis of political accounts". *The Journal of Politics*, 3(42): 792-817. DOI: 10.2307/2130553; McGraw, K. M. (2002) "Manipulating public opinion", in B. Norrander and C. Wilcox (eds) *Understanding Public Opinion* (Washington, DC: CQ Press), pp. 265-280; Vössing, K. (2015) "Transforming public opinion about European integration: Elite influence and its limits". *European Union Politics*, 2(16): 157-175. DOI: 10.1177/1465116515572167; Vössing, K. (2020) "How politicians ought to talk about Europe: Lessons learned from experimental evidence", in *How Referendums Challenge European Democracy, Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics* (Cham: Springer International Publishing), pp. 101-116; Vössing, K. (2020) "The quality of political information." *Political Studies Review*, 4(19): 574-590. DOI: 10.1177/1478929920917618; Vössing, K. (2021) "Shaping public opinion about regional integration: The rhetoric of justification and party cues". *Political Studies*, 3(69): 492-513. DOI: 10.1177/0032321720905130
- 18 Laswell, H. (1950) *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: Peter Smith).
- 19 Luhmann, N. (2000) *Die Politik der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp).
- 20 Wendt, A. (2003) "Why a world state is inevitable". *European Journal of International Relations*, 4(9): 491-542. DOI: 10.1177/135406610394001
- 21 Honneth, A. (2002) "Recognition or redistribution? Changing perspectives on the moral order of society", in *Recognition and Difference* (London: Sage), pp. 43-56.
- 22 Fraser, N. (1995) "From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a 'post-socialist' age". *New Left Review*, 212: 68-149; Fraser, N. and A. Honneth (2003) *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso); Honneth, A. (1995) *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- 23 Ahlquist, J. S. and M. Levi (2013) *In the Interest of Others* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- 24 Downs, A. (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*.
- 25 De Sio, L. and T. Weber (2014) "Issue yield: A model of party strategy in multidimensional space". *American Political Science Review*, 4(108): 870-885. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055414000379

- 26 Rovny, J. (2012) "Who emphasizes and who blurs? Party strategies in multidimensional competition". *European Union Politics*, 2(13): 269-292. DOI: 10.1177/1465116511435822
- 27 Stokes, D. E. (1963) "Spatial models of party competition".
- 28 Vössing, K. (2021) "Shaping public opinion about regional integration: The rhetoric of justification and party cues"; Vössing, K. (2023) "Argument-stretching: (Slightly) invalid political arguments and their effects on public opinion". *European Political Science Review*, 1(16): 35-55. DOI: 10.1017/S1755773923000164
- 29 Vössing, K. and T. Weber (2016) "The company makes the feast. Party constellations, campaign context, and issue voting in multi-party systems", in A. Blais, J. F. Laslier, and K. Van der Straeten (eds) *Voting Experiments* (Cham: Springer), pp. 43-66; Vössing, K. and T. Weber (2019) "Information behavior and political preferences". *British Journal of Political Science*, 2(49): 533-556. DOI: 10.1017/S0007123416000600
- 30 Arana Araya, I. (2021) "The personalities of presidents as independent variables". *Political Psychology*, 4(42): 695-712. DOI: 10.1111/pops.12722
- 31 Marietta, M. (2009) "The absolutist advantage: Sacred rhetoric in contemporary presidential debate". *Political Communication*, 4(26): 388-411. DOI: 10.1080/10584600903296986
- 32 Lijphart, A. (1984) *Democracies. Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- 33 Steinmo, S. (1989) "Political institutions and tax policy in the United States, Sweden, and Britain". *World Politics*, 4(41): 500-535. DOI: 10.2307/2010528
- 34 Jobelius, S. and K. Vössing (2019) "Die SPD im Wandel: Klassenpartei, Kompromisspartei, Wertepartei". *Zeitschrift für Sozialistische Politik und Wirtschaft*, 234: 70-76; Jobelius, S. and K. Vössing (2020) "Social democracy, party of values". *Renewal – a Journal of Social Democracy*, 3(28): 52-60.



Margaret HADERER

Participation!

Revisiting a progressive value and some of its critiques



1. Introduction

Transitioning towards greater sustainability hinges on participation. This “truth” is written into the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the UN; the European Green Deal, which draws on the Aarhus Convention (1998); and national climate action plans – all the way down to the regional and local levels. Countries that are committed to the SDGs and that signed the Aarhus Convention are (at least formally) required to increase public participation in environmental decision-making, and many of them do follow this formal requirement, especially at the local level. Participatory budgeting in Paris, co-creative regional planning in Germany, citizen councils in Barcelona, mini-publics at the national level, and participatory planning in cities and communes are but a few cases in point. Participation, it is commonly assumed, is good for democracy and for sustainability. It is good for democracy because it empowers citizens by including them in active decision-making. It is good for sustainability, such as climate-change mitigation and adaptation, as the acceptance of these increases with citizen involvement. Yet is participation always good?

It is one of the promises of participation to improve representative democracy, among others, on the social inclusivity front. Yet if those who are already well represented by representative democracy tend to be those who also participate in participatory and deliberative fora,¹ for which there is empirical evidence and which feeds into the right-wing narrative of elite politics, it may be important to improve representative democracy by other means than by participation. Another promise of participation is that it increases the quality of democracy, yet often – and for this there is empirical evidence – it serves the purpose of legitimization, the legitimization of predefined goals. This depoliticising instrumentalisation of participation, also known as “post-politics”, has been a common object of critique.² While I agree that participation should not be put in

the service of legitimising predefined decisions, I argue that there are good reasons for depoliticising issues – for not putting anything and everything up for debate. This is particularly important in light of the current tendency towards polarisation, also fostered by the far right.

In this contribution, I shed light on the emergence of the participatory democracy paradigm and the hopes and promises attached to it. I will also shed light on two limits of participation: social exclusivity and post-politics. The main thrust of this contribution is not to dismiss the participatory and deliberative turn in politics tout court. The main thrust is to offer a critical rethinking of a value and demand that has come to be taken for granted, especially among progressives. I do so in light of two empirical observations: (1) the social exclusivity of participatory processes, despite normative commitments to greater inclusivity; and (2) making everything in principle debateable, which critics of post-politics imply, may neither be good for democracy nor for sustainability.

The structure of this paper is as follows: after introducing the participatory turn and its promises (Section 2), I problematise demands for and debates on participation from two perspectives: social exclusivity and (de-)politicisation (Section 3). Each problematisation is followed by concrete suggestions for ways out: namely, to not forget about “improving” representative democracy by other means and beyond participation; and a plea for also depoliticising issues, such as climate science, especially in deliberative and participatory settings – regardless of the dominant framing of depoliticisation as post-politics. The problematisations and re-framings of participation are also to be found in the abstract for policymakers.

2. The participatory turn

From a participatory democracy point of view, the dominant form of democracy in modern, liberal societies, namely, representative democ-

racy, is lacking. It is perceived as insufficient because of its emphasis on rational autonomy, and its fostering of a type of citizenship that is characterised by narrow self-interest and naïve claims that any infringement on the rights of the autonomous individual must invariably lead to authoritarianism and totalitarianism.³ Liberal democracy, according to Barber – one prominent proponent of participatory democracy – is a “weak” and “thin” form of democracy that fosters distant rule, bureaucratic centralisation and that demotes citizenship to rampant individualism.⁴ From his perspective, it is not the Hobbesian notion of freedom, defined as the “absence of external impediments to motion”,⁵ that is the core feature of a democracy but – as Aristotle and Rousseau had already suggested – civic virtues. The formation of the latter, Barber argues, hinges on participation. “Strong democracy”, by contrast, depends on

politics in the participatory mode where conflict is resolved in the absence of an independent ground through a participatory process of ongoing, proximate self-legislation and the creation of a political community capable of transforming dependent, private individuals into free citizens and partial and private interests into public goods.⁶

From Barber's perspective, the local level – cities in particular – are the natural venues for citizen participation. From his perspective, civic leaders – mayors and their counterparts – are the representatives who can act in a suitably democratic manner on behalf of their large and dense populations. This is why Barber calls for a parliament of mayors, a representative body whose leaders would be more likely at once to defend the “local liberties” of their urban citizens, while seeking a shared path to the solution of a number of transnational and global problems, including climate change.⁷

Barber's take on participatory democracy may be regarded as a take that is shaped by communitarianism, which some conceive of

as an alternative to liberalism, while others understand it as a mere variant of liberal political thought. Jürgen Habermas' embrace of participatory or, as he calls it, "deliberative democracy" takes its inspiration not from Aristotle, Rousseau or Hegel (to whom communitarians often resort) but linguistics – speech act theory in particular. Starting from the linguistic insight that any speech act aims at mutual understanding (*Verständigung*) and that humans are (in principle) capable of reaching agreements (*Einverständnisse*), Habermas makes the case for deliberative forms of politics.⁸ Deliberative democracy means improving the quality of the debate through participation for the sake of exchanging and accounting for arguments and forming agreement – consent – in an, ideally, fair, inclusive and power- and distortion-free setting. Instead of legitimising political decisions solely by the aggregation of citizens' (individual) preferences, as tends to be the case in electoral processes based on majority rule, deliberative processes foreground intersubjectivity and (the experience of) pluralism as key to democratic will-formation and decision-making.

Whereas some consider participatory and deliberative democracy (understood as a specific kind of participatory democracy) as an alternative to representative democracy,⁹ others conceive of participation and deliberation mainly as a means to complement, enrich and improve decision-making in representative democracy.¹⁰ Since the participatory and deliberative turn in democratic theory decades ago, democratic decision-making on the ground – democratic practice – has seen countless innovations. Deliberative opinion polls, citizen budgets, citizen counsels and public consultations, and participatory planning are just a few cases in point. Whether they live up to the expectations of enhancing democratic politics is an empirical question that is answered by the study of concrete contexts and settings. What various empirical studies do, however, hint at is a tendency that could and arguably should worry progressives: the

continuity and reproduction of well-established patterns of interaction, among others, interactions with “class character”¹¹ despite best intents to change the latter. In what follows next, I draw on a recent empirical study of participatory fora in the city of Vienna. This study hints at an urgent need for “improving” participatory democracy, as well as revisiting the preconditions for and possible forms of representative democracy.

3. Problematising participation

3.1. Empowering the already empowered?

Any type of democracy is committed to the ideal of political equality, the ideal that citizens have an equal right and opportunity to partake in collective decision-making.¹² Affectedness by political decisions is one criterion for (claims to) inclusion in political decision-making. Yet the ideal of political equality is often undermined. This may be the case due to a lack of citizenship status despite long-term residency at a given place and/or integration into a given labour market. This may also be the case due to non-participation – the abstinence from political decision-making by people who dispose of the formal rights to participate. This is particularly prominent among citizens who belong – socio-economically speaking – to the lowest income third.¹³ Exclusion based on legal status and estrangement from political processes due to low socio-economic resources has turned current representative democracies in “two-thirds democracies”,¹⁴ that is, democracies that represent only two thirds of the electorate and in some (local) contexts even less.

In light of this democratic deficit, cities in particular have implemented a great array of deliberative and participatory fora – mini-publics, citizen councils, participatory budgeting and planning – to work against this trend. They offer opportunities for political participation beyond

elections. What an in-depth study of participatory and deliberative fora in the city of Vienna has, however, revealed is that these fora largely replicate forms of exclusion based on legal and socio-economic status that often also overlap. They do so despite best intentions to include these groups to make their experience, voices and interests heard and “count” politically, yet (often) fail to do so.¹⁵ In other words, those whose interests are already well represented through electoral politics also tend to make their voices and interests heard in participatory and deliberative fora. Socio-economically speaking, this corresponds with the middle and upper income thirds.¹⁶

The insight that political participation is, to a considerable part, a social question leads to quests for how to improve participatory and deliberative processes. Not all participatory and deliberative fora are equally exclusive. Selecting participants based on representative sampling, as opposed to trusting in the inclusivity of participation by its openness towards anyone interested, is one promising means to improve social inclusivity. Another promising means to increase the inclusivity of participatory and deliberative processes is to lower the thresholds for participation by ensuring accessible language and to reach out to social groups disinterested in or disillusioned by politics by putting everyday issues centre stage and “traditional” politics to the backstage.

Considerable attention is being put to “improving” participation, arguably because it has become a central value in (progressive) politics.¹⁷ Yet what about also “improving” representation, for which participation is hardly an alternative in mass democracies? If “more” participation and deliberation remain insufficient responses to democratic deficits, such as the two-thirds democracy and the fact that taking part in democratic processes was and continues to be a social question, it may be worthwhile to go beyond the promise of participation and deliberation and (back) towards the question of what could be done

to make representation itself more inclusive and responsive to citizens, regardless of their socio-economic background.

One possible way towards changing the “poor political representation of the poor”¹⁸ is “descriptive representation”.¹⁹ Whereas substantive representation aims at treating the members of its electorate – regardless of the latter’s composition – formally the same, descriptive representation emphasises personal background. It does so against the backdrop of the fact and experience that historically disadvantaged groups who are numerically underrepresented in a legislature need specific representation for their voices to be heard. There is empirical evidence that the probability of policies that are sensitive to a given underrepresented group rises if members of these groups are present in parliament. This applies to women and minority groups, but also to class (understood in terms of income).²⁰ Descriptive representation, albeit more difficult to realise for class than for women or minority groups, does bring problem perceptions and innovative thinking that would otherwise be missing into legislative discussions. In this sense, descriptive representation has the potential to help correct the marginalisation of working-class people in politics, if facilitated wisely.

Yet how is it possible to mobilise working-class citizens for parliamentary work, given that they tend to dispose of rather different resources than citizens from the middle and upper income thirds? Social justice organizations such as SOLIDAR and unions may play a key role. One important finding across countries is that, in places where social justice mobilization and unionization is high, more working-class citizens become parliamentarians.²¹ Without suggesting a causal link, there is evidence that suggests social justice mobilization and unionization serve as a bridge between workers and political elites,²² encouraging and supporting workers to become candidates. Conversely, this means that, with decreasing civil society mobilization and unionisation, an important route into politics becomes blocked. This is particularly the

case for workers in less-organised sectors, such as the service sector.²³ Thus, overcoming a two-thirds democracy, for which the political abstention of the lower income third plays a major role, progressives may take to other, and maybe also traditional, means besides participation and deliberation: social justice mobilization and unionisation.

3.2. From participatory post-politics to deliberate depoliticisation

Participatory and deliberative fora, when put in the service of “manufacturing consent” and legitimising pre-set decisions and goals, clearly undermine the promise of democratisation.²⁴ If instrumentalised this way, they are handmaidens of post-politics. The latter

reduces politics to the sphere of governing and polic(y)ing through allegedly participatory deliberative procedures [...] within a given distribution of places and functions [... It] prescribes what is possible or acceptable and is driven by a desire for consent. The stakeholders (that is those with recognised and legitimate speech) are known in advance and dissent is reduced to debate over the choreographies of instituted modalities of governing.²⁵

From a democratic perspective, participation in the service of the legitimisation of pre-set goals is clearly problematic. Yet what the post-politics debate overlooks is that putting anything and everything up for debate, at least in principle, may itself harm democratic processes. This applies in particular to the radical democratic take on progressive politics, which regards dissent in distinction to consent as a core feature of politics and that puts more trust in social movement actors than in representative democracy.²⁶

The post-politics debate emerged at a point in time of a (neo-)liberal hegemony: 20 years ago.²⁷ While neoliberalism is still in place, liberal democracy – including its institutions – has come under enormous

pressure from the far right. One of the far right's core features is the politicisation and polarisation of existing norms and rights. It also does so in participatory and deliberative fora. Against this backdrop, a key challenge for the quality of political life may not only be post-politics, but also "the problem of overly permissive pluralism"²⁸ that regards any intervention against, for instance, hate speech or science denialism as an illegitimate intervention. Precisely at a point in time at which hitherto existing norms regarding the question of what can and should be negotiated publicly and politically are under massive attack, redefining the norms may itself be a perquisite for increasing the quality of political life and safe-guarding democracy. Arguing for closing off some debates that do harm to political culture does not mean arguing for taking an elitist perspective on given beliefs and their motivations. Given beliefs and their motivations should be heard. Hearing them, does, however, not mean giving up on the very possibility of distinguishing between "good" and "bad" politicisation, between legitimate and illegitimate political adversary. Criteria for doing so are neither to be found in universal reason nor in absolute truth. They are found in and through social practices that are open to fallibility, an openness that is a key feature of democracy itself.

4. Why revisit participation now?

Right-wing parties are currently particularly well positioned to mobilise those who are normally politically abstinent, and they do so through a narrative that speaks to this group: that the "political system" is elitist. Without signing up to the right-wing party's narrative of them embodying a non-elitist, anti-establishment alternative to the narrative itself, there is empirical evidence. Representative and participatory democracy serve those who are well off and underserve those who struggle socio-economically. Thus, progressives, including progressive parties

that have historically “operated” in the name of the less well off, are hard-pressed to reconnect with those who operate at a distance to or have given up on the political system. If the hitherto prominent pathway to reconnect with and mobilise citizens often does not do the trick, “more participation!”, other pathways have to be chosen.

Also, in light of right-wing political actors, another phenomenon that accompanies the participatory and deliberative turn in politics needs revisiting: the post-politics critique of participation. Without supporting depoliticised, post-political constellations that engage participants without equipping them with decision power, there are good reasons for not putting everything up for debate and direct democratic decision-making. Having clear, yet context-sensitive, criteria for deciding on what can and cannot be debated may be essential to safeguard democratic political culture or, with a view to climate change, evidence-informed politics. The latter would be key to actually reach climate goals and realize SDGs. This is to say that in contexts that are charged with the politicisation of basic democratic principles or with a fundamental politicisation of scientific knowledge, judgements between “good” and “bad” politicisation – which vocal critics of post-politics deliberately avoid – may be the way to go. Today’s political landscape is less shaped by singular stories of politics, which critics of post-politics are particularly concerned about, such as the story of techno-scientific progress or the of neo-liberal managerialism, than by the politicisation of the very foundations of democracy. What is also highly politicized are the biophysical conditions of any social order, including democratic orders. Denying the need for greater sustainability, a need stressed by the SDGs may make political sense; it does, however, neither make scientific sense, not – on the medium and long run – social sense. In highly politicized landscapes, deciding on acceptable and unacceptable politicisation may actually be essential to safeguard the very possibility of democratic political encounters. It may also be essential

to safeguard the biophysical conditions that are essential to the very possibility of a democratic order such as sufficient resources or precautions against and resilience towards extreme weather.

Bibliography

- Aytac, U. (2021) "On the limits of the political: The problem of overly permissive pluralism in Mouffe's agonism". *Constellations*, 3(28): 417-431. DOI: 10.1111/1467-8675.12525
- Barber, B. R. (2009) *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Barber, B. R. (2013) *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Barber, B. R. (2019) *Cool Cities* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Carnes, N. (2018) *The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office – and What We Can Do about It* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Ehs, T. and M. Zandonella (2024) "Mehr zusammenbringen: Zur Verbesserung politisch wirksamer Beteiligung in Wien". *Standpunkte*, Band 47. Foresight and AK, April.
- Elsässer, L. and A. Schäfer (2022) "(N)one of us? The case for descriptive representation of the contemporary working class". *West European Politics*, 6(45): 1361-1384. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2022.2031443
- Fagotto, E. and A. Fung (2006) "Empowered participation in urban governance: The Minneapolis neighborhood revitalization program". *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 3(30): 638-655. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2427.2006.00685.x
- Fishkin, J. S. (2009) *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Giger, N., J. Rosset and J. Bernauer (2012) "The poor political representation of the poor in a comparative perspective". *Representation*, 1(48): 47-61. DOI: 10.1080/00344893.2012.653238
- Habermas, J. (2001) *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Hobbes, T. (2017) *Leviathan* (Milton Keynes: Penguin Classics).
- Landemore, H. (2017) "Deliberative democracy as open, not (just) representative democracy". *Daedalus*, 3(146): 51-63. DOI: 10.1162/DAED_a_00446
- Lessenich, S. (2019) *Grenzen der Demokratie: Teilhabe als Verteilungsproblem* (Ditzingen: Reclam).
- Mansbridge, J., J. Bohman, S. Chambers et al. (2010) "The place of self-interest and the role of power in deliberative democracy". *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 1(18): 64-100. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9760.2009.00344.x
- Mouffe, C. and E. Wagner (2013) *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso).

- Petring, A. and W. Merkel (2011) "Auf dem Weg zur Zweidrittel-Demokratie: Wege aus der Partizipationskrise". WZB-Mitteilungen, 134: 30-33.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2014) "Where is the political? Insurgent mobilisations and the incipient 'return of the political'". *Space and Polity*, 2(18): 122-136. DOI: 10.1080/13562576.2013.879774
- Swyngedouw, E. (2018) *Promises of the Political* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- von Busch, O. and K. Palmås (2022) "Betrayal", in O. von Busch and K. Palmås (eds) *The Corruption of Co-Design* (New York: Routledge), pp. 33-49.
- Wilson, J. and E. Swyngedouw (eds) (2014) *The post-political and Its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

Endnotes

- 1 Ehs, T. and M. Zandonella (2024) "Mehr zusammenbringen: Zur Verbesserung politisch wirksamer Beteiligung in Wien". *Standpunkte*, Band 47. Foresight and AK, April.
- 2 Swyngedouw, E. (2014) "Where is the political? Insurgent mobilisations and the incipient 'return of the political'". *Space and Polity*, 2(18): 122-136. DOI: 10.1080/13562576.2013.879774; Swyngedouw, E. (2018) *Promises of the Political* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- 3 Barber, B. R. (2009) *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- 4 bid.
- 5 Hobbes, T. (2017) *Leviathan* (Milton Keynes: Penguin Classics), p. XIV.
- 6 Barber, B. R. (2009) *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, p. 132. (Hobbes 2017; Barber 2009, p. 132)
- 7 Barber, B. R. (2013) *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities* (New Haven: Yale University Press); Barber, B. R. (2019) *Cool Cities* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- 8 Habermas, J. (2001) *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- 9 Barber, B. R. (2009) *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*; (Barber 2009; Landemore 2017)
- 10 Fishkin, J. S. (2009) *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Mansbridge, J., J. Bohman, S. Chambers et al. (2010) "The place of self-interest and the role of power in deliberative democracy". *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 1(18): 64-100. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9760.2009.00344.x
- 11 Fagotto, E. and A. Fung (2006) "Empowered participation in urban governance: The Minneapolis neighborhood revitalization program". *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 3(30): 638-655. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2427.2006.00685.x

- 12 Lessenich, S. (2019) *Grenzen der Demokratie: Teilhabe als Verteilungsproblem* (Ditzingen: Reclam).
- 13 Giger, N., J. Rosset and J. Bernauer (2012) "The poor political representation of the poor in a comparative perspective". *Representation*, 1(48): 47-61. DOI: 10.1080/00344893.2012.653238; Elsässer, L. and A. Schäfer (2022) "(N)one of us? The case for descriptive representation of the contemporary working class". *West European Politics*, 6(45): 1361-1384. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2022.2031443
- 14 (Petring and Merkel 2011)
- 15 Ehs, T. and M. Zandonella (2024) "Mehr zusammenbringen: Zur Verbesserung politisch wirksamer Beteiligung in Wien".
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Fishkin, J. S. (2009) *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*.
- 18 Giger, N., J. Rosset and J. Bernauer (2012) "The poor political representation of the poor in a comparative perspective".)
- 19 Elsässer, L. and A. Schäfer (2022) "(N)one of us? The case for descriptive representation of the contemporary working class".
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Carnes, N. (2018) *The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office – and What We Can Do about It* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- 22 Ibid, p. 151.
- 23 Elsässer, L. and A. Schäfer (2022) "(N)one of us? The case for descriptive representation of the contemporary working class", p. 1371.
- 24 von Busch, O. and K. Palmås (2022) "Betrayal", in O. von Busch and K. Palmås (eds) *The Corruption of Co-Design* (New York: Routledge), pp. 33-49.
- 25 Swyngedouw, E. (2014) "Where is the political? Insurgent mobilisations and the incipient 'return of the political'", p. 127. Click or tap here to enter text.
- 26 Mouffe, C. and E. Wagner (2013) *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso).
- 27 Wilson, J. and E. Swyngedouw (eds) (2014) *The post-political and Its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- 28 Aytac, U. (2021) "On the limits of the political: The problem of overly permissive pluralism in Mouffe's agonism". *Constellations*, 3(28): 421. DOI: 10.1111/1467-8675.12525



Biographies

◀ **NEXT LEFT** ▶





László ANDOR is Secretary General of FEPS. An economist and former EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (2010-2014), Andor has been Head of the Department of Economic Policy at Corvinus University (Budapest), Senior Fellow at Hertie School of Governance (Berlin) and a visiting professor at ULB (Brussels) and Sciences Po (Paris). He was editor of the journal *Eszmélet* and a regular columnist for *Figyelo* and *Népszava*. He has authored, edited or coedited a dozen books in Hungary. Andor has also taught at Rutgers University as Visiting Fulbright Professor, worked as an advisor for the World Bank on SAPRI, the Budget Committee of the Hungarian Parliament (1998-1999) and the prime minister's office (2002-2005), and was also a member of the Board of Directors of the EBRD. He holds a degree in Economic Sciences from Karl Marx (now Corvinus) University, an MA in Development Economics from the University of Manchester and a PhD from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He was awarded Doctor Honoris Causa at Sofia University of National and World Economy and the Legion of Honour by the President of France (2014).



João ALBUQUERQUE, born in Barreiro in 1986, has a degree in Political Science and International Relations from Universidade Nova de Lisboa and a Master's degree in History, Defence and International Relations from ISCTE-IUL, with a thesis on

International Humanitarian Law and the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda. He was a MEP (2022-2024) and assistant to the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Pedro Silva Pereira. He was president of YES – Young European Socialists, between 2017 and 2019. He was assistant to the Minister of Internal Affairs (2017 and 2019) and to the President of the Lumiar Parish Council (2014-2016). More recently, he participated in several research projects at FEPS – Foundation for European Progressive Studies, where he developed work in the area of remote work and on the future of progressive parties in Europe.



Lorenza ANTONUCCI is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology and Deputy Head of Research (Methodology) at the College of Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham (UK). She was

a German Kennedy Memorial Fellow at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University in 2022–2023 and a visiting Associate Professor at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics (CEE) at Sciences Po in Spring 2022. Her research focuses on how societies are changing and responding to growing socioeconomic insecurity and inequality in Europe and around the world. Her forthcoming book, *Insecurity Politics*, will be published by Princeton University Press and offers a deep exploration of the role of insecurity in the political sociology of populist voting.



Felix BUTZLAFF is a political scientist at Vienna's Central European University (CEU). He received his PhD for his research on contemporary civil protest groups in Germany. In his work, he focuses on the development of social

movements, political parties, and citizen participation in representative democracies. After working at the Georg August University in Göttingen/Germany, and the Vienna University of Economics and Business, he joined the CEU in 2023. Felix.Butzlaff.de



Patrick DIAMOND is Professor of Public Policy at Queen Mary, University of London and Director of the Mile End Institute. He was formally Research Fellow in the Department of Politics at the University of Manchester, and Gwilym Gibbon Fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford. He is a Visiting Fellow at Kellogg College, Oxford and an Associate Member of Nuffield College.

Patrick is on the Scientific Council of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and a board member of the Campaign for Social Science. He held a number of senior posts in British central government between 2000 and 2010, and was formally Head of Policy Planning in 10 Downing Street. He was a Local Councillor in the London Borough of Southwark from 2010 to 2014



Carlo D'IPPOLITI is a professor of political economy at Sapienza University of Rome and editor of open-access economics journals “PSL Quarterly Review” and “Moneta e Credito”. He holds a joint Ph.D. in economics from the Goethe Uni-

versity of Frankfurt-am-Main (Germany) and Sapienza University of Rome (Italy), and is the recipient of the 2018 “Feltrinelli Giovani” prize for the social and political sciences awarded by the Accademia dei Lincei, and the 2011 Myrdal Prize awarded by the European Association for Evolutionary Political Economy. D'Ippoliti is a member of the Global Young Academy, and of the Next Left Focus Group of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies.



Eunice GOES is a Professor of Politics at Richmond, the American University in London. She is co-editor of the journal *Renewal: A Journal of Social Democracy*, and the author of *The Labour Party Under Ed Miliband: Trying But Failing to*

Renew Social Democracy (Manchester University Press, 2016) and of *Social Democracy* (Newcastle Upon-Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2024). In 2022 she won the Michael Freeden Award for the best article published in the *Journal of Political Ideologies* in 2021 entitled “Ideas and Party Change: Predistribution and Socialist Renewal in the Labour Party Under Ed Miliband”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, June 2021 Vol. 26, 2, 180-200.



Margarete HADERER, is a University Assistant at TU Vienna. She studied philosophy and social sciences in Vienna, Paris, and Budapest, and holds a PhD in political science from the University of Toronto. Her book *Rebuilding Cities and*

Citizens (Amsterdam University Press, 2023) explores the relationship between political ideologies and the production of space. Her research focuses on how norms and ideals shape urban space, and on the limitations of current approaches to socio-ecological challenges such as climate change.



Maria MALTSCHNIG serves since 2016 as Director of Karl-Renner-Institut, which is the political academy of the Austrian Social Democratic Party. She is graduated from Vienna University of Economics (having a degree in socioeconomics)

and she has an extensive political experience, having started her involvement in VSSTÖ (Federation of Socialist Students) – of which organisation she also was elected a chair of in 2008 -2009. Subsequently, she had worked as consultant for Chamber of Labour and for Federal Ministry of Finance, after which she had been appointed as the Head of the Cabinet of the Austrian Chancellor in 2016. In parallel with the diverse responsibilities, she also was a member of the supervisory board of the publishing house “Facultas Verlags-und Buchhandels AG“ in 2014 -2016.



Anna PACZEŚNIAK is Professor of Political Science at the Institute of European Studies, University of Wrocław. Since 2018, she has been a member of the FEPS Scientific Council. Her research interests focus on political parties, the

process of Europeanisation and the political dimension of European integration. Her recent books (with co-authors) are: *Electoral Defeat and Party Change: From Makeover to Retouching*, Palgrave Macmillan 2022, and *Party Organisation and Communication in Poland*, Palgrave Macmillan 2021.



Tomáš PETŘÍČEK is a senior non-residential fellow at the Centre of Global Political Economy at the Institute of International Relations in Prague and an associated researcher at the Sciences Po Paris. He is also director of Progressive Ana-

lytical Centre, a Prague-based think-tank. Since 2022 he has been a member of the Board of Trustees of the Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom. He received a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, and M.A. degree in International Political Economy from the University of Warwick. He served as a Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic between 2018 and 2021. His research interests lie in the areas of international political economy, geoeconomics, and geopolitics.



Andreas SCHIEDER is a member of the European Parliament and the Head of the Austrian SPÖ-EU-Delegation. Before that, he served as parliamentary leader of the Social Democratic Party in the Austrian Parliament. He was also state secretary in the Ministry of Finance from 2008 to 2013. Andreas Schieder holds a master's degree in economics from the University of Vienna. In the European Parliament, Andreas Schieder is Member of the Conference of Delegation Chairs, a full member on the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Committee on Transport and Tourism and the Coordinator of the S&D group for the Special Committee on the European Housing Crisis. Furthermore, he is a member of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Norway and Iceland and on the European Economic Area (EEA) and is on the Delegation for relations with Central Asia. Additionally, his engagement for a progressive way forward brought him to being Co-Chair of the Progressive Forum and Chair of the FEPS Next Left Program.



Ania SKRZYPEK, (Skrzypek-Claassens), PhD, is Director for Research and Training at the Foundations for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). She obtained her Ph.D. cum laude in political sciences from the University of Warsaw, her thesis "Cooperation of the socialist and social democratic parties in uniting Europe. From Liaison Bureau to PES. 1957 – 2007." (also published in book format in 2010). Before joining FEPS in 2009, A. Skrzypek worked as a PhD researcher and taught at the Faculty of Journalism and Political Sciences at

the University of Warsaw (2003 – 2009). In parallel, she served as twice consecutively elected Secretary General of Young European Socialists (ECOSY, 2005-2009). She was a co-founder of the united youth organization FMS (in 2001) and was a co-host of the TV studio of SLD-Unia Pracy 2004 European election campaign.

She is an author of over 100 published pamphlets, papers and articles, available in English, German, French, Spanish, Bulgarian, and Polish. She is an academic reviewer for “Przegląd Europejski” of Warsaw University and regularly appears on the radio (TOK FM) as the expert on EU affairs.



Dimitris TSAROUHAS, Prof. is Research Director at the Center for European Union and Transatlantic Studies (CEUTTSS) at Virginia Tech and Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University's Security Studies Program. A Jean Monnet Chair

in EU Politics, Prof. Tsarouhas is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) in Athens, Greece, a Scientific Council Member of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) in Brussels and a World Bank Consultant. Tsarouhas is the co-editor of *Crisis in the Eurozone Periphery: The Political Economies of Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland* (London: Palgrave 2018), author of *Social Democracy in Sweden: the Threat from a Globalized World* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008) and co-editor of *Bridging the Real Divide: Social and Regional Policy in Turkey's EU Accession Process* (METU Press 2007). His research has been published in numerous book volumes and journals such as *Regulation & Governance*, *New Political Economy*, *Journal of European Integration*, *Public Administration*,

Comparative European Politics, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, Social Politics, Social Policy & Administration, Political Studies Review, Armed Forces & Society, European Journal of Industrial Relations and Southeast European and Black Sea Studies.



Kaisa VATANEN is Head of policy and research of the SDP Finland. She is responsible for the party's policy preparation, programme work and research. She is also Vice President of the progressive think tank Kalevi Sorsa Foundation focusing on research on inequality, democracy and fair transition. She has graduated in International Relations and Political Science from the University of Southampton, UK and University of Helsinki, Finland.



Konstantin VÖSSING is Reader (Professor or Associate Professor outside the UK) of Comparative Politics in the Department of International Politics at City University of London. He was a student at University of Bonn and the University of Reims, and he received his PhD from the Ohio State University. He has had previous appointments at Humboldt University Berlin, the European University Institute, Harvard University, and Ohio State. He studies how people form preferences about controversial issues, how elites shape opinions and the behaviour of citizens through mobilisation, persuasion, and information in different political environments, and how these processes relate

to critical episodes of major political conflict, such as class politics, regional integration, the transformation of the welfare state, and the current challenge to democracy.

Lina GALVEZ MUÑOZ, MEP, S&D Group, Chair, FEPS Scientific Council

"The Progressive Compass" sheds light on the challenges social democracy is currently facing and offers innovative ideas on how progressive forces can inspire hope for a better future amidst turbulent and polarized times. By exploring strategies such as forming alliances, reengaging with citizens, and restoring trust in politics, the book sparks a crucial debate on the path forward to building more equitable and resilient societies.

Zita GURMAI, PES Women President

"The Progressive Compass" is a call to action for those determined to shape a more inclusive and democratic Europe. As we confront systemic inequality and a backlash against progress, this volume provides much-needed direction to anchor our values and renew the social democratic promise, for this generation and the next.

Christian KRELL, Professor, University of Applied Sciences for Police and Public Administration, North Rhine-Westphalia

"The Progressive Compass" is a must-read for policymakers, academics, and anyone committed to or interested in progressive politics. It offers an inspiration for social democratic parties to regain credibility, engage voters, and implement a progressive agenda.

Mikael LEYI, Secretary General, SOLIDAR

"The Progressive Compass" offers a most welcome contribution to the ongoing and much needed discussion on what progressive parties and movements should do faced with the current multiple and parallel crises. It gives us as to what we could weave our dreams of and what material to use for our political project."

Isabelle HERTNER, Senior Lecturer, King's College London

This edited volume will hopefully become a compass for progressive parties and voters in contemporary Europe. It provides plenty of direction on the political issues that progressives care about. As populist radical right parties are gaining more support, progressives need to raise their game, understand voters better, and offer fresh, fair, and sustainable visions for today's challenges.

Pedro SILVA PEREIRA, President, Res Publica Foundation

"The Progressive Compass" is another remarkable and timely contribution of the Next Left Research Programme to the renewal of social-democratic thinking, from values to political action. When too many simplistic and misleading answers are given to the very complex problems we face, it is a good idea to listen to what scholars and young politicians have to say, enlarging and deepening the debate in search for new ideas and better progressive policies for our common future.

Enma LÓPEZ, Councillor, City of Madrid, PSOE Executive Member

In a world awash with misinformation, polarization and disenchantment; surrounded by technofeudalism and growing threats to our democracies, it is more important than ever to renew our program and bring together the brightest minds. The remarkable duty of FEPS in addressing these challenges gives this 16th volume its true historical relevance.

Aleksandra IWANOWSKA, FMS, Vice President, Young European Socialists

The Next Left 16th volume provides a compass for the European progressives to follow. As someone from the first generation of Poles who grew up as an EU citizen, I have been witnessing the European project begin to crack under the blows of populist and far-right forces. Social democracy, must evolve to remain relevant. Europe's future depends on our courage to act.