



# Progressive proposals for the turbulent times:

How to boost the political, organizational  
and electoral potential





**PROGRESSIVE PROPOSALS  
FOR THE TURBULENT TIMES:**

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## PROGRESSIVE PROPOSALS FOR THE TURBULENT TIMES:

### How to boost the political, organizational and electoral potential

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Andreas SCHIEDER, László ANDOR, Maria MALTSCHNIG & Ania SKRZYPEK

**Progressive proposals  
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and electoral potential**

It has been frequently repeated that these have been turbulent times. But for the social democrats, the last two decades have been particularly tormenting and toxic. Following their rise to power at the beginning of the new century, their political strength and hence hegemony began to fade away. Consequently, they started facing electoral defeats, of which gravity seemed to have been legitimising the predictions of further decline. And though the situation of the respective parties varied, there has been a sense that this once mighty movement was trying to perform a balancing act on a downward spiral. In the new reality of a fragmented political landscape and volatile voters, it would have to get accustomed to being simply one of many, and narrow it down to an aspiration to be central to any progressive coalition.

That understanding has had a profound influence on the movement and the mood among both members and supporters. At every election there would be a sense of anxiety and a strategy focused on not falling below the already lowered level of expectations. This heavily altered the criteria of what would be perceived as a political success and frequently hindered an ability to make bolder choices. As it weighed on the confidence, it only magnified for social democrats the problem that all actors have been facing in the years in which so many developments seem to have been depicted as *out of political control, unpredictable and overwhelming*.

Understanding these internal dynamics is key to grasping why the win of Olaf Scholz in Germany, which in just a matter of weeks was followed by the victory of Antonio Costa in Portugal, was so significant. It was not only because of the size of the country in which it happened and the role that this state has played in Europe. It was more because it

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offered other sister parties viable hope, which they very much needed in order to change their way of thinking. It allowed them to believe that a *traditional* party, which was very much *part of the system* and spent years as a junior partner in a coalition government, could rise to the top. And that meant that progressives could in the future aim higher and move away from the defensive positions. They could afford to do more than try to resist the negative consequences of the perpetual crises. They could redefine and pursue a modernising agenda of social justice. And the question of what this could entail – when it comes to programme, organisational and electoral strategy – became the inspiration for the Next Left Focus Group members, with whom FEPS and Renner Institute launched a new cycle in 2020. The result of their research and debates is this Volume 13 of the *Next Left* book series, the twin to Volume 12 – and which as the editors of both we feel privileged to present here.

This book has 11 articles, divided among five chapters – each of which looks at a different aspect and proposes an avenue that could reinforce the movement. Consequently, it starts from ideological matters, looking at why the narrative combining the two notions of *rights* and *respect* has been resonating so strongly among the European electorates. Part of the answer is that it has been an empowering message, which captured the spirit of our times in which people faced with dangers found a way back together. And they let solidarity, even if it was far from sacrifice-free, dictate the way of dealing with pandemics. But there is another aspect: that it was also a positive framing that was much the opposite of the forces trying to use the momentum to inflict further backlash, especially of democracy. To that end, the three articles point to the fact that being straightforward when it comes to principles and not shying away from exposing what is inadmissible in democratic politics is the best way forward through the complexities and contradictions of contemporary times.

This relates strongly to Chapter 2, which includes suggestions that can help social democrats in ensuring the primacy of progressive ideas over the recovery period. Though the articles included here were completed before the invasion of Russia on Ukraine and before the European economies were faced with the consequences of the ongoing war, the points they raise remain valid. They show what it takes to build a coherent, politically distinctive economic response and articulate it into a convincing narrative. This is the defining task of contemporary times, which are not, and will not be, be an era of prosperity. If anything, this will be a time of hard, frequently unpopular choices. And progressives in particular will face a handful of dilemmas. They will need to define how to modernise, green economies and benefit from digitalisation, while simultaneously ensuring that *nobody is left behind* and the benefits of progress are equally shared by all.

Evidently, ensuring a just transition is not only a matter of political economy. And that is why Chapter 3 looks at some important changes that need to be introduced to the world of politics, whereby authors argue that social democrats are in a position to pioneer a new connection between grassroots activism and institutional dimensions. In recent years, several of the sister parties dared to experiment with opening up the structures, creating more spaces for internal deliberative democracy and re-empowering members in leadership contests. Consequently, Chapter 3 offers some good examples from the organisations that turned the tide, started attracting young people once more and have become vibrant again. Inspired by these organisations, the authors offer suggestions on how to *movementise* the parties in the long run, how to restore the sense of membership, and how to enable social democrats to bridge between the street, protests, and the podium kinds of politics.

Many of these conclusions correspond with the recommendations made in Chapter 4. This chapter focuses specifically on communication

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between centre-left parties and the citizens. In recent years, social democrats have frequently resorted themselves to as somewhat comfortable that part of the reason why they have been losing elections was connected with the way they reach out – which understanding would be encapsulated in comments such as this one: *all was good, but citizens didn't hear and understand us*. Evidently, in the times in which politics is heavily mediatised, shortcomings in communication constitute profound weaknesses. How to overcome them is the leading thread for the texts included here, with special attention paid to which strategies can work to successfully combat the radicals and extremes without compromising any ethical standards.

Building on this, the contributions included in the final chapter, Chapter 5, help examine the evolution of the electorates and electoral circumstances, with an underpinning question of how far the next decade could see a further rise of social democrats in respective countries in Europe. The research leads to an important set of conclusions, which help envisage how social democrats could navigate in a dynamic context of changing electoral preferences. And in that context, where new kinds of majorities could emerge from, how they can be consolidated in the realities of endangered democracies, and how they could be stabilised to ensure the primacy of the progressive ideas in the long term.

All in all, this book depicts a very accurate picture of social democracy and the issues which it would need to resolve as a global and European movement. The book offers a handful of instructive examples, which when examined in detail can offer either inspiration for how to regain position or reinforce the organisations elsewhere or, to the contrary, which traps the centre left should avoid and how. This ensures that this volume can be seen both in terms of being a contribution to an ideological debate, and as a very practical compendium. In both these capacities, we hope it will be considered as a relevant and useful input,

by the progressives in power and in opposition, as well as those simply in search of hope and encouragement.

*Andreas Schieder, Chair of Next Left  
and Head of SPÖ Delegation in the EP*

*László Andor, FEPS Secretary General*

*Maria Maltschnig, Director of Renner Institut*

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Andreas SCHIEDER

## **For a Just and Social Democratic Future**

In my time as Chair of the FEPS Next Left Programme since 2020, I have been leading with the ambition of bringing science and politics together. This is key for my work as a politician and seems even more important in times of crisis. Exchange, debate, and conversation are vital tools for building a common future. We must not think within our own 'boxes' and in separate camps such as those of politicians, scientists, or researchers, but we must instead come together and form policy proposals based on shared values and ideas.

Many would argue that these are hard times in which it is difficult to predict anything, and that one should focus on evident and immediate solutions and not on the programmatic debate. Yet in fact it is the contrary because the opposite is needed – namely a profound ideological debate, more than ever before. If we only ever pursue immediate solutions, we will never get ahead of preventing the preventable consequences of crisis. Programmatic debate is key to establishing new norms and models to help us become less affected by economic instability or pandemics. New measures must include investing in public services and building a true social market economy. The European future must lie in a real European welfare state. This is also vital for stabilising our democracy and protecting our common values. If we do not think ahead, we may lose too many of our voters to populist movements, which are always ready to give simplistic solutions.

Contrary to their propaganda we must explain that the challenges of the current times cry out for social democratic answers. It is in the DNA of our movement to find the needed crisis response. And time will prove us right. Indeed, there are now new ideas that perhaps were less evident even just a couple of years ago – and following these new

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ideas today seems like the way to go. Examples of these ideas range from increased public spending (which was huge during the height of the COVID pandemic), to more investment in research and public services, to common European responses (which were regarded very differently only a few years ago – for example during the financial crisis of 2008-2009). In general, the mantra of austerity and GDP-led policies has been abandoned all together, and we can observe a different and more social policy model already on the way.

Additionally, we must focus on three important topics that can build a just and social democratic future. First, the focus on human rights and the rule of law. Rights of minorities are human rights. Diversity and gender equality are to be respected, and migrants must be treated as human beings without being denied their basic human rights. These are essential points that the EU needs to guarantee – obviously in its own member states as well. How else should the Union lead as an example? Second, we need to focus on women's rights as women make up more than half of the world's population but are still not equal in every respect. Women's rights are human rights – including the right to decide over their own body. Recently, we have observed a conservative backlash against this, which must not be tolerated. Third, we need to focus on ourselves as social beings, and having learned from recent experiences such as the pandemic we need to renegotiate areas like a (new) work-life balance or our perspective on mental health and include them in new policymaking.

Taking all of this into account, how will social democracy be able to work in the future? The mixed election results on the national level influence the chances of the progressives to steer the EU debates. What we currently see is that the three top jobs in the EU institutions are in the hands of the conservatives. But what we also see is that cooperation at the European level works differently from at the national level. Conservatives such as Ursula von der Leyen see the need for

common EU-crisis responses, support the enhancement of citizen participation, the outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe in general, or even the need for a Convention. What progressives need to do now is already prepare for the 2024 elections. We need to show European citizens in the upcoming year that we take their proposals seriously, and that we are fighting for treaty changes and more transparency for the EU elections. If citizens see that a difference can be made and that they are heard, it can start a new wave of involvement.

I believe that the key for all of this is communication. Voters need to know exactly what social democracy stands for, in order to be able to trust and vote for the progressives. We have the right answers within ourselves, but we need to develop them into a narrative, a programme, and concrete measures. Above all, we need to communicate in concrete ways and with easy lines of content. Social democracy must learn to be catchy! As one title of this New Left volume articles argues, [populist] communication trumps [our] policy. The fact is that we already have good policy, but we need to learn to communicate it better. I observed the same issue when I had the honour of being a member in the Conference on the Future of Europe. The comprehensive work of the citizens' panels and debates brought out so many excellent and valid proposals for changing the Union, but in reality a fair number of these ideas had been already worked on at the EU level. As Commission staff or parliamentarians, we work on these ideas mostly behind closed doors however, instead of showing the citizens (our voters!) what we plan to do for them.

This is even more valid for the progressive movement, as we need to show how we distinguish ourselves from other parties – especially in times of crisis, when all politicians seem to promise to end poverty and hunger or fight the rising cost of living. What we currently see gives reason to pay very close attention, as we are observing a shift

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within the conservatives to liaise with the far-right and to help them gain power, wanting to profit from their success themselves. Here, more than ever, progressives must show that they are a real alternative, because in terms of values and proposals it is not true that 'traditional' parties all offer the same. Maybe some ultimate goals such as 'ending poverty' are similar — but it is the angle that is important because there can be all-inclusive approaches to that end, without the ever prominent populist witch-hunt for migrants or 'the others' in general. We progressives are different because we focus on synergies instead of divergence and we put energy into inclusive solutions instead of applying the principle of exclusion. Our values are justice, solidarity, and equality. And in order to broaden the electoral appeal we must be more modern in our communication of these values. Instead of formulating complicated ideas we need catchy messages and concrete solutions. 'The people' need to understand how we intend to solve their everyday problems. We therefore need to reply in concrete ways about what we intend to do about these problems, instead of hiding in our ivory towers (be they in the EU institutions, the parliaments, or the party centrals).

This starts on the personal level. We are all human, politicians too, and showing this is crucial in order to be able to connect with those who are not primarily interested in politics or in following it in their everyday life. My way to engage with people is also through the communication tool of social media. In these times of crisis, we need to come up with serious solutions to the big challenges people are facing such as the energy crisis, the climate crisis, and the cost of living crisis – but we also need an attractive angle from which to communicate the political work we do every day, otherwise it will not be heard.

Although the articles in this Next Left volume were completed before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and it could be argued that Russia's act of aggression then changed everything, this is not the case. It is true that progressives have a particular responsibility, with their comrades in the

leading posts of the UN Secretary General, NATO Secretary General, and the EU High Representative. Still, the objective to pursue above all else is peace and preventing Russia from further gains. And we need to do this while the whole time offering support to Ukraine. This is the historical momentum for unity, which is in the social democratic DNA. For all the goals set out above, the Next Left programme can serve to stimulate and provide new impulses, but at the same time revive the progressive roots and values. The centre-left needs to show that we can do it, and to win the voters' trust back. For this, we especially need to focus on crisis management and on long-term proposals, while also explaining the importance of democratic values and the rule of law, and fighting for women's rights and equality.

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**PROGRESSIVE  
PROPOSALS FOR THE**

# **TURBULENCE**

**TIMES:  
HOW TO BOOST THE POLITICAL,  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
AND ELECTORAL POTENTIAL**



**Promoting Rights and Respect:  
the Translation of Core Values  
that Works**

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Ania SKRZYPEK

## **The Narrative of Respect and How It Revamps the Progressive Values**

## **Keywords**

**SPD, core values, respect, cohesion and confidence,  
rights and responsibilities**

## **Abstract**

In 2021, SPD noted an electoral victory that elevated the party and enabled it to lead the formation of the new government. The result was an unexpected one, as the polls at the beginning of the campaign had been predicting a loss. Consequently, the article tries to identify the reasons behind the success of the Chancellor Olaf Scholz and his team, focusing on the programmatic offer and discourse. The detailed analyses of the “Future. Respect. Europe” manifesto included here allow to draw important conclusions regarding what choices had been made, what lessons had been learnt and to that end what defines modern social democracy in the post-COVID context.

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When describing the times of COVID, many European commentators refer to the incredible solidarity that people manifested. It turned strangers into neighbours and community members, as also individuals into citizens, and inhabitants of the EU into Europeans. In the hard times of imposed separations, the humane instincts were about forging connections beyond the limitations of respective lockdowns. People tried to provide support to one another. And they kept recognizing the efforts that those brave at the front lines of the fight against the pandemic – such as doctors, nurses, and employees of the care sectors – were making. Consequently, the path to perseverance was paved by a sentiment of “we are in that together”. And at the end of the day, these were indeed the joint endeavors that made humanity pass these long months.

In that sense, the pandemic was also a formative and empowering experience. It had a different character than any other crash before – and it’s hard to argue that there had been a shortage of these in the last two decades. What made the COVID-induced crisis dissimilar was the extent to which it was sudden, multilayered, and universal. That last characteristic is important, even if, of course, the impacts of the pandemic affected some groups and individuals more than others. Indeed, they magnified the existing challenges, topped them with some new ones, and make the vulnerable even more exposed (Brown 2021:10). But, altogether, the COVID situation was undoubtedly so profound that it changed reality, prospects, and the perception of the world for everyone. And as such, it marked a new momentum – which translated into a new kind of opening in the sphere of politics.

Unlike in the aftermath of 2008, this time it was not taken by anyone for granted that the altered public mood would either become a new norm or by default provide fundamentals for a shift. This was a great metamorphosis in approach, visible also among the social democrats. A decade and a half earlier, they made the mistake of assuming that a crash within a neoliberal system would translate into the crash of neoliberalism (Crouch 2011). One could try to excuse their wishful thinking back in those days. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they had been experiencing an overwhelming sense of political loss since they had been almost permanently noting electoral defeats (some of which were new record lows). And they were rather desperate for any hope they could cling to and boost *morale* instead. Still, their anticipation that the pendulum would just swing was unjustifiable. They had been incorrect, and it resulted in some rather misguided decisions consequently. That in turn saw them sink even lower, electorally speaking.

While the awaited pendulum swings never happened, there was another kind of tectonic shift taking place instead of it. For the progressives, it meant that they were no longer in a two-folded competitive strive against the centre-right. But that instead they had to face a new kind of political setup. On one hand, it derived from the deepening fragmentation and polarization of the political stages. They were not new processes, but their speed accelerated in the 2000s. On the other hand, it was a result of a new dynamic in the externalities of the party systems. Particularly in Europe, the number of social mobilizations grew (Ortiz et al., 2022: 14). What may have started as apathy and electoral abstention, turned out to be a time for increased self-organization. Citizens took to the streets and the workplaces to demand respectively a transformation within socio-economic policies and production models, a different quality of democracy, and a change in the political direction. The subsequent years saw some of those

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movements give birth to parties (such as Podemos or Ciudadanos), altered priorities (as it happened during the climate strikes), and/or transformed the attitudes (as it was the result of the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter). That is how it stopped being a matter of swinging votes between right and left and started being a question about the future of representative democracy.

In that new environment, progressives had all the reasons to be anxious. Many studies published in the 2010s revived the hypothesis about the crisis of all traditional parties and the shrinking of the moderate middle. On top of these, social democracy was considered an aging idea, which could not convince younger voters and could have little new to offer. They appeared static, system-embedded, and insecure about their own future. And that is how it was possible for them to see that the worst-case scenario in which they would be eliminated from the heart of politics was no longer unrealistic, but actually happened in some states. This was a wake-up call that serves as an opening for an important, historical lesson. As a result of it, they were no longer assuming any automatisms in 2020 – 2021. Instead, in most cases, they were ready to actively turn the momentum (in its diverse aspects) into an actual political opening for them. This meant on one hand translating weaknesses into strengths, and on the other, devising a strategy that would permit the movement to comfortably redefine itself as a stable force ready to lead in the new times. And that is what many parties accomplished, which lead to several electoral gains (Hoffman et al: 2022).

There are of course several instructive cases that could serve here as telling examples. But it seems to be valuable to focus here on SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands), as it is a formation that raised to power and provided its own version of the Third Way at the end of the 1990s (Neue Mitte); it was in the first Merkel cabinet as a junior partner when the 2008 crash happened; it argued for austerity

at the given moment; plunged to historical lows and then, against all the odds noted a serious come back in 2021. The latest was of an incredible magnitude, making progressives in Europe dare to speak about a full-fledged return for the first time in more than a decade.

## **SPD: from the traditional party to the party of respect**

The electoral campaign in Germany started taking off at the beginning of 2021. This was the time when the pandemic was still spreading and there were new COVID variants emerging. The vaccines had just been developed, but it was only the first weeks of their administering, and it looked like there was going to be a long time before the respective restrictions could be elevated. Exhaustion was the dominant mood. The Federal Government had been led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, who even at the end of the term had been considered the strongest, iconic leader in Europe. Even though there were voices about the fatigue with CDU/CSU, this did not translate to a belief that SPD should be entrusted with the federal government and would emerge as a winner of the autumn elections. On the contrary, the polls looked at best worrying and indicating a prospect of yet another loss. The SPD members were nervous, as they expected that they wouldn't be able to run a person-to-person kind of campaign, and this made them feel out of touch. Fortunately for social democrats, the situation was dynamic, and it wasn't too late to turn the tide.

Though the internal mood wasn't good, the external image was of a party that is rather steady. The composure it had was a key to transforming the image of being a *slightly boring, worn-off* stakeholder to being a *reassuringly predictable political organization* (Merkel 2021). This kind of expectedness had been somewhat undervalued political capital, which many spin-doctors disregarded, miscalculating how

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much voters tried by the pandemics alongside diverse doomsday scenarios would long for stability. Seeing matters differently was one of the first successes of Lars Klingbeil and Wolfgang Schmidt, who, instead, decided to turn SPD's legacy and experience in government into a competitive strength. This gave the party a smooth warm-up, which was a decisive period as many of the members were still rather doubtful about the campaign. So, when more than 600 delegates connected for the party congress "on the weekend of the 9<sup>th</sup> of May", there was overwhelming support for the very well-known, and very experienced Olaf Scholz to run as a candidate for a Chancellor. And along came the adoption of the party's manifesto "ZUKUNFT. RESPEKT. EUROPA" (SPD 2021).

The document wasn't yet another campaign text composed of a handful of carefully crafted slogans coined to serve just at that specific moment in time. Though it didn't have a status of a *Grundsatzprogramm* (fundamental programme) and hence it would be perhaps too far-reaching to compare it with the famous Bad Godesberg programme, still "Zukunft. Respekt. Europa" was intended to become one of the most important programmatic papers of modern time. One reason to think that is the sub-title, which describes it as "The SPD's programme for the future" (*Zukunftsprogramm der SPD*). The other is that on nearly 50 pages, which are then divided into 5 chapters and several subsections, the party tries to respond most comprehensively to a leading question encapsulated in yet another document's headline: "What we stand for. What drives us. What we are striving to achieve".

The text is very easy to dive in, and this is yet another striking feature – since the document in question isn't short and it definitely spells out strategies to deal with the most complex issue of contemporary times. But unlike usual propaganda materials, it does not resort to pathos which is a feature of the language of political advertising. Instead, it is written in a style that reminds one of a conversation that one could

easily have with a neighbour or colleague. The tone is bold and decisive, and the analyses and pledges are rather straightforward, but the narrative is still comfortably ordinary. And that helps accomplish the goal of depicting SPD as a party by the people rather than the party by professionals. This is relatable language that makes the organization sound humane.

## **Respect as a transformative concept**

The programme departs from the recognition of *the general willingness of people to practice solidarity to protect us all and to accept restrictions in personal freedoms*. It further refers to the experience of COVID and how it changed the perceptions and consequently the attitudes. Especially, since the tough times made many realise that much of the work upon which delivery daily lives depend, *up to now has not received the recognition and certainly not the financial rewards and job security it deserves*. The document names among them the education sector, public services infrastructure, and several other elements, which are traditionally the building blocks of welfare states. In that descriptive way, SPD introduces two aspects. First, there is an awareness that the pandemic changed behavioral patterns and hereafter created momentum. And second, while the programme's anchoring point is undoubtedly a traditional one, the way forward will be framed alongside a new triad of guiding values. They stand for modernizing and they are respect, cohesion, and confidence.

In that context, the *respect* that SPD is advocating for is a transformative value, which in connection with *cohesion* (fighting inequalities) and *confidence* (a belief that *we can influence the course of our lives and society*) inspire critical assessment of today that is key to forging a way towards "a better tomorrow". Although the triad above

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is formulated initially within the socio-economic context, already within the first pages it is clear that they transcend and translate for example *new respect* for democratic values, civic participation, and institutions. And precisely that multidimensional aspect is what makes them guide SPD a vision for society, state, and Europe.

The more detailed definition of "respect", as also how the concept applies to specific policy fields are clarified in the program's point 1.2. The introduction to the section reiterates the point about society's dependencies on the work of many, whose incomes and working conditions are poor. It is coupled with an assessment that welfare state provisions are still too weak, both to deliver on the goal of ensuring equality (also between men and women), as also to protect those most vulnerable. Their precariousness is what makes them always suffer more amid any crisis. For SPD it is the opposite of what they would like to see as *respect for the dignity of all citizens, which should mean that everyone has the right to equal opportunities and a secure existence*. The latter should translate into some basic rights such as: *place to live, childcare facilities, access to free education, mobility, culture, sports, a fast Internet connection, the means to access knowledge, reliable digital services for an active civil society, healthcare, co-determination at work, a reliable pension, and good old-age care*.

These couple of phrases are rather crucial. They clarify why SPD considers *respect* to be a modern and more powerful concept. It is for them the answer "respect" is a commanding response to a criticism that social democrats have become a party of minimums. Such an image was a result of the behavior in the aftermath of 2008, where progressives in power stopped governing and moved into pure crisis management operational model. And many progressives, also in the opposition, got convinced by the narrative of the scarcity of means and the rationale of cuts. From these perspectives fighting for minimum standards was about determining the absolute bottom lines. And

though it was important, it overshadowed the other matters such as how to define social justice and consequently ensure social progress for all. To that end, the new SPD Future Programme bids farewell to austerity, arguing instead for universalism and economic democracy. It picks up the issues such as gender equality (which was so frequently sided amid financial crisis as “a non-priority issue”) and paves way to full emancipation. And finally, it also strikes the balance between the earlier debates on if to focus more on redistribution or redistribution. It argues for both, without acknowledging any eminent limitations (i.e. in terms of resources).

## **Respect as a social determinant**

The early sections of the programme focus on how the new definition of *respect* is a way for SPD to describe desirable relations between the state (society, collective) and the citizens. The subsequent ones provide a complementary explanation about how it should define the interactions among the individuals.

SPD declares: *We advocate a society based on mutual respect; one which is free from prejudice and in which all citizens experience equal respect. We all owe each other respect, whether someone has gone to university or not, was born in Germany or elsewhere, in the East or West, whether female, male or diverse, whether young or old, rich or poor, with or without disabilities. None of these things should make any difference to the personal dignity and esteem in which each and every person is held. We want a cohesive society and resolutely oppose hatred and agitation, any form of exclusion or discrimination, and the strengthening of extreme right-wing forces.* Furthermore, the text refers to the task of completing the unification of Germany and equalising the living conditions all across the territory. It spells out that: *(r)espect for and recognition of specifically “East German” life experiences and*

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*achievements are central to boosting trust in democracy. One of our objectives is to increase the visibility of East Germans in all walks of life.*

These few sentences are representative of many aspects of the new, or here one would rather say “revamped” way of thinking. First, *respect* explained as a guideline on how to act in the contemporary political context is evidently familiar, as it sounds like a reiteration of the proud traditions – which exist inside of SPD since the early days, which were advocated by i.e. Eduard Bernstein and which Willy Brandt famously coined as *Mehr Demokratie Wagem*. In other words, the conviction remains that the most effective way to preserve and promote democracy is to accelerate it. Secondly, and consequently, it is a declaration of readiness to effectively oppose all the un-democratic forces – by tackling not them, but the root causes of their upsurge. This connects with the recognition of persisting – still, after so many years – divisions between the former East and West. Again, the answer from SPD here is about acknowledging issues, which makes them politically outspoken. To that end, the way forward that they propose is focused on eliminating the reasons for the discontent, which leads to forging mutual respect and ensuring the rights of each and everyone to decent life in dignity. And this approach, translated then into specific policy proposals – turned to be the most effective guideline for both - the short-term electoral and the medium term political – strategies. In the pieces written after elections, several authors admitted later “kept right wing at bay” (Howe et al. 2022).

## Respect starts at work

This understanding of *respect* connects with an ambition to activate different behaviors among the citizens. *A society based on respect* is the one where people recognize their differences, and

regardless of them appreciate and accept one another. Anything else, any discrimination, any hate speech is considered erosive. In that sense, respect is not given and cannot be taken for granted. And while the catalogue of principles included in the document is a long one (including, among others: equal participation and opportunities, equal political rights and civic duties etc.), the starting point of where *respect* needs to be manifested to all is work. There, SPD states (*w)e respect the dignity of every job and every life achievement.*

This translates for SPD in a goal is to ensure full employment with fair wages. This was a clear priority in the 1990s and led to a number of ambitious national and European employment strategies. Although it has never been doubted in public, in the last two decades there have been questions posed even among the social democrats if this objective is still realistic. There was also a question how to realize the goal and fight precarity at the same time, which inspired in the 2010s a lengthy debate about the meaning of good life, well-being, and how to restore an understanding of work as a value. What SPD proposes may be seen as therefore as a reiteration of some earlier pledges, but against the backdrop of more of the recent debates, it should be considered more as a revolutionary statement. The party states here what makes them social democrats and hence part of the labor movement, as also yet again shakes off the hesitations that derived from the post-2008 debate about shortage of means.

Consequently, SPD believes that full employment is not only possible but also desirable. In their understanding, this should be the principle to guide progress, especially since so much change is taking place. Globalisation, digitalization, demography, and many other factors make the world of labour alter, and it is the responsibility of the social democrats to make sure that advancements are to the benefit of all. This requires assuring that everyone has opportunities to accelerate skills accordingly.

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For SPD there is no trade-off between equality and efficiency, but to the contrary – fairness is better for everyone. This echoes the arguments from the progressive literature of 2000s and 2010s, including here the writings of Joseph Stiglitz and Tony Atkinson, translating the proposals into policies that they would argue for in case of electoral victory. To begin with, there is a need to ensure *fair wages*. Social democrats argue that this is about giving people security and enabling them to make long-term plans, including those about how to provide their kids with a better future. This makes the proposal ambitious and also emancipatory.

But there is more to what constitutes fairness understood as the embodiment of the values of respect for work and workers. And this is about setting appropriate rules and making the state together with public institutions accountable to the people for their reinforcement. Those policies should aim at: securing *decent* (hence increased) minimum wage; abolishment of fixed-term contracts, where there is no justification for them; ensuring that pay is the same for the same job by the permanent and temporary workers; and that there are better mechanisms for transition periods (for example between employment and pensions). What is not less important is the safety net and social policies, which support the workers at any given time, can help especially in the post-COVID era to those who need assistance in areas of mental health or simply reintegration. Quite clearly therefore, the SPD programme for the future is driven by the activation paradigm (for more on the paradigm: see Hemerijk 2017).

## **Socialising the labour market**

As noted, for SPD equality and efficiency are the two sides of the same coin, and this makes it even more interesting that within that context they refer to public services provision and the work delivered

inside of the public sphere. They speak in the programme about the *socialization* of the labour market, changing the narrative from the discussion on “spending” to the discourse about essential quality investment. That goes beyond floating on the post-COVID mood. This is an attempt to restore the credibility of the promise of the welfare state for all – for those, who need its support and for those, who work to provide it.

Consequently, the programme reiterates that it was the “social professions” that ensured that societies could persevere in the times of the pandemic, but even more importantly currently many young people would see their professional future as employees of the sector providing social goods and services. This translates into additional pressure for the state to make sure that those jobs are *respected* and hence also gratified accordingly. There is a wide range of ways in which this can be achieved, starting of course with decent pay schemes. But beyond, it is key to improve the working conditions. This means: overcoming the current staff shortage (in care, education, and other services) by, among others, making the jobs attractive. The definition of the latter may vary for respective individuals, but SPD is certain that the common aspects would include: universal access to vocational training, possibilities to develop skills, and perpetual career opportunities. While this is not specifically mentioned in the Programme, this part of the text is illustrative of what SPD thinks the criteria for a good employer are and how a state could become a champion on that field.

The further sections of the programme specify the policy proposals and make them even sectors specific (as it is the case for the Deutsche Post). Importantly, the party continues repeating that these are the new times, in which there are new challenges and there is a need for new answers. This philosophy has been characteristic of SPD in the times in which the party was seizing power, so returning to it and manifesting

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readiness to embrace the changing context is yet another sign of regained self-confidence.

While addressing the factors that are responsible for the ongoing transformation, the gross of SPD's attention is directed to digitalisation and how much it would require framing. The programme acknowledges that the German labour management laws are too outdated and require snap revisions to enlarge their scope. It would need to include answers to such questions as: how to regulate the usage of AI; what constitutes the rights of platform workers; in which ways everyone can benefit from the transformation of the world of work; how to enshrine and enact the right to disconnect; what the latter means also in the light of the laws on working time and flexibility.

These very precisely articulated challenges showcase how *respect* for SPD in the context of the labour market is a matter of creating conditions for a better work-life balance. And this is a valid preoccupation, which social democrats have not been ready to debate after somewhat bitter experiences regarding flexicurity. As their idea, it was supposed to bring empowerment at the end of the 2010s and they were convinced it could become a modernising option, looking at the experiences of i.e. Denmark. Instead, promoting flexicurity became yet another point for which social democrats got to be criticised in several EU member states as the enablers of flexibilization that in practice was turned against the workers. Even if in Germany flexibilization wasn't a failure – also due to tight market regulations, in a programmatic sense, SPD is relevant for a party to move on.

## Return to rights and responsibilities

As mentioned, several times before, for SPD *respect* is about regulating interactions among individuals, as also the mutual relations between collectives (society, state) and persons within them. Therefore,

within the programme *respect* is translated also into a set of rights and responsibilities. It is relevant to underline that the party names both, as again the narrative of rights and responsibilities had been exposed to a pertinent kind of criticism in the 1990s. And many social democratic parties tried to avoid articulating it so straightforwardly in their programmatic papers.

When it comes to rights, it stands for a universal entitlement to access a better social security system, which in turn must be reorganized to respond to the new needs (which include: more and faster transitions, demographic challenges, etc.). And when it comes to responsibilities, everyone has to contribute to the pension system. Which is to be made easier by changing some of the conditions (like lowering the costs of the minimum health insurance). SPD reiterates that both apply to people employed and self-employed and that especially for the latter SPD plans to create a new security allowance programme (which could help in the situation of distress (such as the pandemic in the last two years).

Thus, *respect* means that there is a need to strengthen solidarity. Certainly, many manifested it in the times of COVID, but it should not be taken for granted. It must be nurtured and recognising this SPD indicates again how much it learned from the post-2008 experience and how differently it approaches the current crisis and prepares for its aftermath.

For SPD, solidarity is an expression of a readiness to join forces, as also it is a manifestation of acknowledging diversities. This is also why the welfare state based on (social) rights and responsibilities, must act to enhance social cohesion and make the goal of full employment translate into professional engagement accessible to all. So, though there is much to be done to simplify the procedures to obtain unemployment benefits the system's focus should be stimulating employment. This is also why more efforts should be invested in the creation of *social*

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*employment market. And that links with another urgency, namely to revise the regulations for basic income schemes and transform this into a citizens' income scheme. The new approach would better reflect the new concept of a citizen-oriented welfare state providing support to the population. It would permit combin(ing) forces in order to overcome situations in which help is needed and enable everyone to find a job and, if necessary, gain a qualification or undertake further training.*

In that sense, while everyone is expected to contribute, *respect* dictates that all efforts are adequately recognised. Part of “how” is covered by those fragments of the programme, which refer to decent pay, and working and living conditions. But a complementary explanation is provided in the sections that refer to for example pensions. *Respect* is also about the principle that *(a)fter a long working life, one can expect to receive a decent and reliable pension.* The pensions should therefore be about safety, and that comes with the ability to maintain one's achieved standard of living. As also with a reassurance that conditions will not change, and hence SPD opposes any deliberations about raising pensions age. The foundation for payments has to be sustainable and should be embodied in the statutory pension scheme with its reliable pension benefits and solidarity-based funding.

But more than that, SPD underlines that the party has been campaigning for minimum pension, which is a progressive achievement and remains an important instrument in preventing poverty in old age. What correlates with that is the necessity to make the system gender-equitable, which is about recognising the contributions women have brought through decades outside of the formal contracts – frequently taking upon themselves the jobs of looking after relatives (kids, elderly, disabled etc.) *Respect* for them, and those whom they have been supporting without relying on anyone else is why it has to be reflected in adequate pension gratifications. This is also part of the argument as to why SPD believes that more people should be covered by statutory

pensions, and the supplementary private ones should only be seen as a choice and not a substitute.

While in the case of pensions SPD argues to act retroactively and recognise the care work that has been delivered, the party aims to change the conditions for the delivery and advance with new regulations regarding domestic work. In the previous legislative terms, SPD ensured that citizens with income lower than 100 000 per year wouldn't have to pay for nursing care services. That brought some relief, but more would need to be done to reform the scheme, allow more targeted state subsidies, and expand the provision. The programme states the ambition that the *nursing care infrastructure must be expanded in a demand-oriented way*. This would mean: a decentralised management system, building more service centres in rural areas, as also legislating on regulating nursing care and assistance provided in patients' homes. In the context of the objections that have been raised in Germany regarding the ILO domestic work convention, this is a very noteworthy set of proposals. SPD makes it consciously, underpinning it with ideological reasons (a *society based on respect is the one within which people care for one another*) and very humane ones (*people should be helped to stay in their own homes as long as possible*).

## **Defining a better future for all**

The concept of *respect* has been translated into several policies. This points out that SPD understands it as a complex, comprehensive, and multidimensional term. It was mentioned earlier that some of its aspects were about acknowledging people's rights to enjoy security and plan a better future for themselves, and evidently this also further echoes in the proposals regarding training, education, and housing.

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Regarding training and education, consequently with what the programme states in the introduction and in the other sections (i.e. regarding the labour market and the welfare state), SPD argues that the aspiration be active and to learn should be valued. And that is why it is necessary to guarantee universal access to apprenticeships and training programmes. The responsibility lies not only with the state, but even more so with the companies – which should have an obligation to offer learning possibilities to all its employees and in case they fail to do so, fined. The right to further education should be there for everyone, which is why SPD talks about the “right of workers over 40 to learn a totally new profession”, of “subsidized educational leave and part-time educational leave model”, and also about new approaches to working schemes. Training remains an answer to the question of how to try to avoid redundancies as well, stating that companies that are facing difficulties and need to restructure should be able to count on the state’s support. It could have a form an extra allowance to realign their business concept and have to see their staff members retrained.

Furthermore, SPD reiterates also its belief in the dual-training approach, which can only work if there is an effort made to strengthen and further support vocational schools. Germany may look strong as a state that invests a lot in professional education, but there are striking inequalities among the regions and a more cohesive approach is essential. To that end, in modern times multiplication isn’t sufficient. Instead, there is a need to get new technical equipment, refurbish the training facilities, and educate a new generation of teachers. These are relevant when thinking about *training for the future*, but also while trying to secure help for those made redundant. To coordinate these and other efforts, SPD wants to transform the German Federal Employment Agency into the Federal Agency for Employment and Qualification.

Equal opportunities when it comes to access to education start evidently from early childhood education, which has to be universally accessible. This principle goes beyond the entry point, mentioning of which is a point of difference between this SPD programme and the political documents from a decade or two ago. The access point is not only about having a place in an educational facility but also about being able to get there – for which purpose SPD proposes i.e. free travel on local buses and trains. Another relevant aspect is about creating material conditions for children to follow – whereby a list of policy proposals is again long, including reorganizing and increasing the child allowance and providing affordable lodgings and housing (that will enable young people to complete their training and university educations).

As in the previous sections, also here respect translated into rights and responsibilities pinpoints that young people should be given all the opportunities to develop, but also to contribute. Therefore SPD wants to ensure a right to opt for a voluntary youth year, which would be connected to a legal entitlement to funding and in turn would also see many young people involved within the voluntary work sector. Next to that experience, SPD would like to see young people empowered and seen as *respected* young individuals. This is where a strong commitment to protecting children rights derives from, but also is why the party argues for: lowering the voting age to 16, as also supporting more existing youth organisations and institutions such as youth parliaments.

The subsections on education and training connect with many other issues, such as how to overcome the post-pandemic educational gaps (i.e. Equal Opportunities in Education initiative); how to support children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; how to prevent children crimes and protect victims; how to organize better youth health services. But while those are dealt with from the perspective of *respect for young people as individuals*, there is an important fragment, which

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looks at young people from the perspective of the communities and families they grow in. The text there is so specific, that it legitimises the following longer quote: *(ch)ildren and adolescents need strong families. They need love, attention and parents who spend a lot of time with them. The sustainability of our society depends on people electing to have children and then giving them the best possible support so that they are able to lead an independent adult life. For many people, trying to reconcile family life and a career is still a constant balancing act and parents need more support in this respect. This is especially true if, in addition to bringing up children, they also have to help or care for elderly relatives.*

The citation above has several aspects to it. First of all, it supports the observation made earlier, namely that the SPD document is written in a very straightforward, humane language. The explanation offered here as to why there needs to be a better balance between private and professional life is phrased as if it was just a conversation (with the voter). Secondly, while being consequent with the rationale 'equality and efficiency are two sides of the same coin', the programme states that everyone needs to work, but while doing so, has to be able to count on a system that allows him/her make any life decision they wish and enjoy all that life has to give when it comes to having family and raising children". This is consistent with the activation principle but is also a signal of understanding the personal and societal dilemmas of contemporary times. This SPD showcases also in its model, which would try to offer tailor-made solutions for the diverse societies of today. Hence, a four-pillar model to "create more time for family life" would include new regulation: for parental leave; for part-time parental leave and the subsidies for it; for additional leaves for sick children; for family care model (for caregivers to be able to combine their responsibilities and paid employment).

Finally, *respect* is also about guaranteeing affordable housing. Providing it will require cooperation among diverse stakeholders,

*municipal housing companies and cooperatives, private housing firms, landlords who are committed to socially responsible rents, as well as the building industry and trade unions.* This is where SPD clearly sees the benefits of reviving some of the PPP (Public-Private-Partnership) strategies.

The subsequent sentences offer an insight into how SPD would see it realised, as also where it sees improvements in the governmental policies to regulate the housing market and prevent any further outbursts. The ambition of SPD would be to ensure the construction of 100,000 new social housing per year and to make all the construction projects environmentally friendly. That principle should remain binding also for both rural and urban policies. Moreover, there will be a temporary moratorium on rents in heavily built-up residential areas, which means that, for a certain period of time, rents will only be increased in line with inflation. Further actions will involve: preventing exorbitant rents, developing the qualified rent index tool according to standardised and legally binding criteria, and enhancing its significance. SPD would promote policies that would help young to acquire properties, such as rent-buy schemes. Any kind of housing speculation should be curbed. SPD believed that land policy should be oriented toward the common good, which necessitated putting a stop also to speculation there.

## **Picking up the fight against inequalities**

The introduction to this article offered a summary of the impacts of COVID. Beyond any doubt, the crisis magnified the existing challenges, among others, deepening inequalities. And this was what SPD was also most concerned about, arguing that *respect* is about striving for cohesion and for equal rights. This is a reaction to all the backlash

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observed, as also an answer to all social mobilisations and calls for a profound change.

To start with, the programme includes a specific section regarding gender. It tackles several issues, but it also underlines that the task to implement gender equality is for the whole society and should be understood as transversal. To that end, as the pandemic was a moment of regress and SPD sustains its commitment to making this *decade to be about gender equality* instead, it calls for a new governmental strategy. It would enhance the implementation of the EU Gender Equality Strategy and EU Pay Transparency. The new government agenda would translate the principles of emancipation and empowerment into rules, which for example would ensure better representation starting from parity on all the levels of governance and parliamentarism, as also inside of within the society and economy (here seeking to ensure equal representation of women on the respective companies' boards). Then, it would also seek to provide instruments to close pay gaps, review legislation, and enhance transparency.

SPD underlines that there are several fights that have been conducted now for a long and are neither won nor could ever be considered resolved permanently. An example of that is the struggle to eliminate violence against women, which calls for improving laws and attending to the obligations deriving from the Istanbul Convention. The other is the question of sexual and reproductive rights, where SPD calls for access to education and contraceptives on one hand, and on the other for accelerating care and full support for pregnant women (with the one-to-one midwife-patient ratio in the delivery room). Finally, the document also warns that in the changing context there is a need to help the advancement of all, which is why it is crucial to consider how to support women amid digitalisation.

Furthermore, SPD declares its conviction to be that the legal concept of marriage is for everyone. It wants to reinforce PACS,

enhance support for rainbow families, and guarantee the right to adopt kids for same-sex marriages. Consequently, the programme includes a promise of reform of Transgender Law, which would lead to more recognition of LGBTIQ\* and would help fight against *homophobia*, *biphobia*, *transphobia*, and *interphobia*.

Although the document repeats that *respect* is universal and that it is a task for the entire society to ensure that it is there for each and every one, still there are sections – like the one on gender equality – that refer to selected vulnerable groups directly. Another two examples are fragments that speak about *respect for people with disabilities*, and *for migrants*.

To that end, the narrative evolves around the fact that living together is simply about the coexistence and collaboration of people with and without disabilities. As much as it is natural that societies are diverse, *the principle of equal rights and opportunities requires that more is to be done to see people with disabilities fully active and integrated inside of the labour market*. SPD proposes several actions, which include: creating contact points to connect disabled employees and SMEs looking for employees; providing state subsidies for employing people with disabilities; and making accessibility a vital issue when debating any urban, rural, or infrastructure strategy.

In the case of how *respect* defines the policies towards migrants, the programme here is perhaps a little brief. That is a little astonishing considering the context and the legacy of the government's decision under the leadership of Angela Merkel. But it may also be a strategy not to allow the campaign to evolve primarily around this question. The programme states that *respect* is about living together in *the certainty that each individual is part of that society and feels accepted, regardless of any immigrant roots a person might have*. This is what makes SPD argue about the positive effects of migration and acceptance for those searching for a new home in Germany.

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Consequently, to what has been argued all across the document, this means that migrants must have the same rights, opportunities, and possibilities. To ensure these, there is a need to fight discrimination, which starts with making laws more effective. Then it is about access to support and safety nets – enabling migrants to learn the language, place their children at schools and nurseries, and seek unification of the families. For SPD this is a matter of equality and hence after the party underlines that any prejudice, racism, or phobia must never be allowed – and instead, rights and freedoms (such as religious freedom) must be protected.

## **Respect is a fundament of democracy**

The notion of *respect* – as described earlier on – was a key to connecting with the citizens in the COVID aftermath. It was about showcasing that the party has a clear understanding regarding the impact the pandemic has had on individuals and communities. This has been creating an opening, which in turn allowed SPD to overcome the criticisms of which it as a traditional, embedded in a system party had also been a subject of. Succeeding meant preventing the others to fish out and collect the voters, who would consider themselves disenchanted or angry even. And that is a partial explanation of the result of the 2021 vote – during which (as mentioned earlier) *right wing has been kept at bay*.

For SPD it wasn't just a matter of a default result. To the contrary, the party programme offers a number of reflections regarding the state of democracy and what they as (social) *democrats* consider to be a necessary course of action to strengthen it. The document begins with the statement that *(d)emocracy is fragile and needs protection, and so we must make our democracy strong enough to resist all attacks*.

SPD believes that society has to offer everyone the opportunity to live in freedom and security, to be part of an open society, and to be raised as a critical and aware citizen. This approach refers to the centre-left empowering traditions to believe in people and their abilities to belong as active members of a larger community. This is also where the party draws the motivation from to argue for more support for the NGOs, non-profit and voluntary organisations, and sports associations (describing particularly the latter ones as relevant spaces of interaction and hence after inclusion).

In that context, the rhetoric and actions of the right-wing extremists are the opposite of what SPD's respect is about. The programme states that clearly, consequently reiterating the necessity to fight first and foremost root causes: *we will continue to rigorously combat right-wing extremism in security agencies and in the German armed forces. We are working to prevent and counteract the emergence of racist attitudes in everyday police work by providing more supervision, further training opportunities, and good working conditions. We support the establishment of dedicated prosecutor's offices to deal with anti-Semitic and racist offenses.*

With *respect* in focus and as a fundament of the desired *open societies*, the attention of SPD turns into the media and culture. Both are the tools to build a better mutual understanding among the people. But when it comes to the latter, culture has been the area that for a long while remained either outside or only scarcely referred to within the programmatic documents. It has even been lamented that the centre left has lost the connection to arts and culture (Damaso 2022), which also then negatively affected ability to bond with different demographic group (for example young people). Therefore, also the paragraphs in the SPD programme are particularly interesting.

SPD pledges willingness to *promote culture*, which the party considers 'a source of inspiration and a catalyst for debate'. That

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said, SPD believes that it is necessary to hold a nationwide exchange to define what role cultural policies should play (on different levels). In parallel, still, there should be efforts undertaken to foster art and support artists. As a group of professionals, they suffered under the pandemic, but also they have seen insufficient progress in regulating areas important to them: such as working conditions in the field of culture, protection of intellectual property or investments in the future. Furthermore, culture must also be made more accessible – which requires on one hand more funding and more creative centres, on the other more ways to use digital culture and its institutions (as online libraries, exhibitions etc.) . And to that end, for the culture to fulfil the expectations regarding it serving in building an open society, it has to become a part of the school education, as also it has to be organised in a way it can set an example. For instance, this means that all the artistic awards should see the juries composed with attention to parity. Finally, culture also has to be the tool to deal with the past - and here the role of culture of remembrance (of victims of nazi era and of colonialism) is particularly relevant.

## Revamp of the progressive values

The result of the German parliamentary elections was received with incomparable enthusiasm by social democrats across the Globe, and in Europe in particular. It was considered by the progressives as the turning point, marking the beginning of a new chapter. After two hard decades of movement's existential crisis, it simply seemed possible to win again against, one could say, all the odds. Olaf Scholz was considered almost a superhero and the regained confidence could be heard loud and clear already at the first European event to which he arrived as an incoming Chancellor (PES Council in Brussels on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2021). So much so, that the PES leadership called 2021

a good year for social democracy – despite the fact that next to SPD gain, there have also been several rather desperate defeats (like in Czech Republic, where CSSD found itself outside of the parliament) and in several EU Member States the situation looked complicated at best (like for example in France).

There have been many analyses written about the campaign, the leading candidates, and the electoral outcome. And this is great material, as undoubtedly there are many lessons to draw. But among them quite under analysed remains the impact that the new programme had and in how far it provides a description of something new, something that could be named an agenda of *renewed* social democracy. Realising that vacuum became an inspiration for this article, which was additionally boosted by an observation that the themes from the SPD electoral programme “Future. Respect. Europe” have transcended and started being used elsewhere. A telling example of that is the recent PES Congress resolution, which uses the concept of *respect* extensively.

Following the detailed analyses conducted for this paper, the new SPD programme and the choice of three defining concepts (respect, cohesion, and confidence) are not just clever makeover. They are evidence of a profound reflection, of having drawn important lessons from the developments of the last two decades (with special attention to the ones deriving from the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008) and of having made some bold choices. In that sense, though the electoral programme was drafted in a different process than any Grundsatzprogramm is being written, the content it includes predestined it to be considered as equally relevant to the most relevant documents in the party’s history. Beyond any doubt, it is a manifest of a different generation.

Furthermore, it has several key characteristics. First, using *respect* is about building connection – which has been a complicated and

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incredibly relevant mission for any political force during and after the pandemics. As a term it is emotionally loaded. But even more importantly, it (re)defines in a very smart way relations among the individuals and community (society, state); it is a basis to describe rights and mutual responsibilities as also it represents a conviction about indispensable things (such as security and ability to define one's future). It is an expression of the traditional focus known from the past programme's as "people first", but is articulated in a fresh, straightforward, humane manner. The whole text sounds like a voice in a conversation and this makes the traditional party (of which SPD is certainly a definition of), look like an open, accessible and relatable stakeholder.

Secondly, *respect* is applied as a multifaceted concept. The article depicted the ways in which SPD translates it into several policies and there could have even more been added, as the original text uses *respect* as guiding value i.e. for policies, which are needed to ensure *living in safety for everyone* (and hence strategies for crime prevention) or for just transition strategy (respect for nature). Still, the departing point for all the deliberations is always the question of labour, active welfare state and necessity to make each and every one equal, respected and active member of a society. SPD takes a position that there is no trade-off between equality and efficiency, which translates into arguing for adequate working conditions, as also for a robust public goods and services provision. The programme reiterates strong commitment to full employment, but while doing so – it also makes clear cut on what it considers to be a quality employment and decent living conditions. The programme shows therefore confidence in building on some of the proudest traditions of the movement, rejection of many faulty policies from the last two decades and boldness in looking into the future. It is a statement that shows how SPD liberated itself from politics of limitations, and instead looks at ways to mobilise resources and potential, becoming the party of empowerment and emancipation.

Thirdly, the new programme of SPD uses the COVID momentum, in which there is a debate about the role of the state. Through the diverse sections, one can clearly detect eagerness to review and to introduce new legislations – which would make the public administration capable of more efficient actions, equipped to answer new challenges (i.e. connected with digitalisation) and ensure that the universal provision of public goods and services. The latter connects with two questions. First is the accessibility, where SPD argues for much of simplification of the existing procedures. And second is about affordability, which the party is determined to define in the framework of the rights and responsibilities. It is a matter of a social contract that everyone has to have a right to pension, to healthcare or care – but it is also the case that each must contribute to its funding. Whenever appropriate, the PPP (Public Private Partnerships) can be considered, but they must be a subject of very strict legal provisions. Because in different sections SPD also quotes its legislative legacy, it creates a sense of reassurance. There is a skilfully crafted balance between continuity and change, between experience and innovation. And this is what turns the party's predictability and embeddedness in the system a competitive advantage. It is not "the same old part of them", but instead it is a trustworthy actor in these fickle times.

To that end, what the SPD programme needs to be acknowledged for is that it defines the premises of a political fight. SPD is clearly for respect, for an open society, for prosperity and welfare for all. It is unmistakably against anything that may undermine this vision, which is where it expresses strict opposition to the right-wing extremists. But the readiness to take on the political fight isn't defined in terms of one party against the other. Instead, the concept of *respect* is a key to recognise the root causes for which the radical movements can raise, for which people are disenchanting and angry. And because that approach changes the premises of the battlefield, it has proven to be

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smart way in addressing the eminent danger of elevation of the anti-democratic forces (especially in the East Germany) and undercutting the bases on which they had been making their claims. It is the move, which other authors described, as the one that *kept extremists at bay*.

All in all, analysing of the SPD electoral programme offers much of inspiration; because it is illustrative to what the new generation of social democrats decided to do with the movements' legacy, how it turned the weaknesses into strengths, how it renewed narrative and how it succeeded in building it in and out of the momentum. That said, *respect* worked as a multi-layered concept, providing an important revamp and hence re-interpretation of the progressive values. It is debateable in how far it can be picked up and re-used by other sister parties in their different national circumstances. For some it may work, but even then, it wouldn't be by default – as the programme analysed here points to the importance of contextualising. Nevertheless, the question can definitely be further studied, especially that it goes beyond any doubt that the document is the most stimulating material. It describes the dilemmas and the choices, being an answer to what social democrats hoped and strived for in the post-COVID world.

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**PROGRESSIVE  
PROPOSALS FOR THE**

# **TURBULENT**

**TIMES:  
HOW TO BOOST THE POLITICAL,  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
AND ELECTORAL POTENTIAL**

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Andrius BIELSKIS

## **Social Democracy, Human Rights, and Social Justice**



## **Keywords**

**Ideological debate, Social democratic values,  
institutional rights, Social justice**

## **Abstract**

This paper poses the question of whether social democratic parties in Europe can bridge the growing gap between the socially-progressive agenda framed in terms of human rights and the traditional social democratic quest for economic democracy. Since the shift from class politics to identity politics in the 1970s, social democracy has embraced the liberal discourse of human rights. It is argued that the concept of human rights is predominantly liberal and individualistic. When a person claims that they have a "right to life" or a "right to express their opinion", an autonomous space – a space free from the interference of other people – is being demanded. Following John Searle's philosophy of language, this paper argues that the ontology of "human rights" is best understood in terms of a declaration as a specific speech act, thus the utilitarian critique of human rights is naïve and one-sided. Being part of an institutionalised international legal practice, "human rights" presuppose a club of political communities which accept them as valid and agree to inscribe them into their legal systems. Given that the nature of human rights is one of individual entitlement, this paper concludes that the language of social justice and solidarity should be preferred in the struggles of socialists against the ongoing discrimination of marginalised groups.

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Social democracy has been in a state of crisis for quite some time. Despite the painful banality of this observation, the fact of the matter remains. One of the reasons why social democratic parties have struggled to win elections in recent years has been their inability to address the cultural and ideological split within their traditional electorate. Since the 1970s, a shift has taken place within European societies: the traditional working class – blue collar workers engaged in manual labour – has diminished considerably, while the middle class – white collar individuals working in service industries – has grown in number. The class politics prevalent during the era of social compromise has given way to identity politics and the liberal discourse of human rights. In this paper, the conceptual, philosophical, and historical reasons for the growing tension between traditional socialist demands for social justice achieved through attempts to democratise the economy are examined on the one hand, and the progressive discourse of human rights in our struggle for the recognition and non-discrimination of gender, ethnicity, and cultural identity are considered on the other. This rift is evident across the globe: in disillusioned, white, working-class men who voted for Donald Trump; in Labour supporters who elected Boris Johnson to deliver Brexit; and in Lithuania, where marginalised workers voted for the socially-conservative Farmers and Greens party to oppose the Istanbul Convention whilst, following the Polish Law and Justice party, favouring an economically left-wing agenda. Thus, if socialists and social democrats want to be electorally- and politically-successful in the future, they need to understand the reasons for an emerging political and cultural alliance today – the alliance between social conservatism and economic progressivism.

## **Our Material Conditions**

Marx's famous materialist conception of history, formulated in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), is important as a starting point for this analysis. The forces of production and the relations of production which constitute the material base of a given society should be prioritised over "a legal and political superstructure", to which "correspond definite forms of social consciousness" (Marx 1993). Although this is first and foremost an epistemological claim – as we do not "judge an individual by what he thinks about himself", so we cannot understand societal changes by studying what society thinks about itself; rather, we aim to explain it by considering "the contradictions of material life" – it is also important politically. That is, political action should be informed by the analysis of the material conditions of our societies.

What, then, are the key aspects and contradictions of our material condition? In short: a lack of private investment in the real economy; the enormous concentration of power and wealth in the hands of the economic elite; stagnating wages; hyper-financialisation; the digitalisation of the economy and the failure of market relations within it; and the looming climate crisis. Authors as diverse as Thomas Picketty (2014), David Harvey (2005; 2006; 2010; 2014), Joseph Stiglitz (2012), Asbjørn Wahl (2011), and Paul Mason (2015) have demonstrated the long-term unsustainability of the current economic regime. Neoliberal capitalism has not produced the level of growth that its proponents envisaged (certainly it never attained the level of post-war growth), while private investment has remained relatively low over the last several decades (Harvey 2005, Mason 2016). The concentration of wealth in the hands of the few has reached unprecedented levels. One of the consequences of this is the enormous growth of morally-unjustifiable wealth inequalities, which threaten the political fabric of democratic

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societies by engendering right-wing populism, resentment, political apathy, and the collapse of public trust in the political establishment. Meanwhile, real wages have stagnated since the 1970s, while the capitalist tendency towards overproduction was mitigated by the growth of the financial sector, which injected credit-backed money into the market, thus contributing to the enormous growth of public and private debt. It is estimated that at the time of the 2008 financial crisis, the sum of the world's financial assets was three times larger than total global gross product (Wahl 2011: 49). Rogue speculative practices such as credit and stock manipulations and asset-stripping through acquisitions and mergers made the economy volatile, and stripped entire sectors of the capacity to create real wealth. Digitalisation and the growth of digital giants such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, Netflix, Spotify, fostered – to use Shoshana Zuboff's term – surveillance capitalism, which functions not due to the self-regulating price mechanism of supply and demand, but instead through arbitrary rent-seeking. Recent Facebook privacy scandals demonstrate how powerless and vulnerable governments can be when faced with these giants. Australia's attempt to tax Facebook's news feeds, shutting them overnight until the eventual agreement of a deal, demonstrates that the battle for democracy with the overlords of digital surveillance is in its infancy, and will not be resolved easily. Earlier forms of capitalist accumulation by dispossession, as David Harvey put it, have now been transformed into surveillance capitalism, which "claims its right to ignore every boundary in its thirst for knowledge of and influence over the most detailed nuances of our behaviour" (Zuboff 2016). Yet the biggest challenge, of course, remains the ecological crisis, which requires immediate international action. We know that even the minimum requirements necessary to avoid an ecological disaster are extremely demanding. Limiting the rise of global temperature and achieving climate neutrality require serious commitment and immediate action on the part of the international community.

It is against the background of these material contradictions – the marginalisation of part of the working class, wage stagnation, wealth concentration and inequality, and the ecological crisis created by the system of modern capitalism – that we should aim to explain the fact that neoliberal elites, as Walter Baier (2020: 37) acutely put it, came out of the 2008 financial crisis strengthened, while part of the working class voted for nationalists and other right-wing populist parties. One of the reasons for this, this paper argues, lies in the ideological obfuscation of the concept of and discourse surrounding human rights. That is, when ordinary working-class people have their active membership of the labour movement and its robust culture revoked, then they look for simple answers and find them in the ideological masquerade of right-wing populists (e.g., Brexit, Donald Trump, AfD). This is the first and most obvious form of ideological obfuscation. A more complex layer of ideological obfuscation rests within the human rights discourse that is advanced and adopted by socialists and other progressive political forces. It is this second layer that will be the focus of attention for the remainder of this paper.

## **Marx on Human Rights**

At the end of chapter six of the first volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx, after laying down the conditions of commodity circulation when labour power is one such commodity, ironically concludes that:

This sphere that we are deserting, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the *innate rights of man*. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by *their own free will*. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they

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exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself (Marx 1999; emphasis added).

The primary sphere of “human rights”, according to Marx, therefore, involves market and private property relations. These relations are essential for our commercial transactions – the sphere of commodity circulation – while the subject of these “innate rights of man” is the “Free-trader *Vulgaris*”, who sees in property relations perfect equality, freedom, and utility. The view of the Free-trader *vulgaris* is, of course, important, but it hides from us the fact that behind the formal freedom and equality of “human rights” there is fundamental inequality: “he, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but – a hiding” (*ibid*). Marx saw the discourse of rights as a product of classical liberalism, which both reflected on and legitimised the establishment of new capitalist property relations. As John Locke (2003: 102, 111) put it, “all men may be restrained from invading others’ rights”, every man has the right to “life, health, liberty, or possession”, and “men, being once born, have a right to their preservation”. We now know that the establishment of capitalist relations of production was based on the illegal enforcement of private property – such as the theft of communal feudal land in the form of enclosures and the colonisation of the common land of indigenous peoples in North America. Locke’s arguments of “natural rights” were thus used to justify colonialism (Parekh 1995). By the end of 17th century, the process of illegal theft was legalised and thus finalised, allowing Adam Smith (1977: 239) to claim “the sacred rights of private property” in the *Wealth of Nations*.

That “human rights” for Marx meant, or were at least intertwined with, property rights is also evident from *On The Jewish Question*. Starting from the issue of what are today called cultural rights – the right of a community to assert its distinct religious and cultural identity – Marx juxtaposed political emancipation with human emancipation. It is not enough to achieve the political emancipation of the Jews through the emancipation of the state from religion by abolishing the state religion – even if “political emancipation (...) is a big step forward” (Marx 2008). What is needed instead is human emancipation. This requires the ability to go beyond the Hegelian civil society, beyond market society, and beyond the separation of democratic politics from the economy, in which human rights are asserted to preserve one’s egotism and self-interest. “What are these human rights?” asks Marx. They are defined in negative terms. The “so-called rights of man, the *droits de l’homme*” can be distilled into freedom from harm *and* the avoidance of harming others: “the limits within which anyone can act without harming someone else are defined by law, just as the *boundary between two fields is determined by a boundary post*. It is (...) the liberty of man as an isolated monad, withdrawn into himself (...); the right of man to liberty is based *not on the association of man with man*, but *on the separation of man from man* (...); *the right of the restricted individual, withdrawn into himself*; [while] [t]he practical application of man’s right to liberty is man’s right to private property” which in turn means “the right to enjoy [it] (...) and to dispose of it at one’s discretion (...), without regard to other men, independently of society, the *right of self-interest*” (*ibid*, emphasis added).

Not everything that Marx wrote on human emancipation in this essay is equally convincing. Yet his claim that true human emancipation is possible only if we recognise and manage to organise our powers as *social powers*, as belonging to and stemming from non-alienated social relations – the relations of *solidarity* – is important today. The

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emphasis on solidarity and the intersubjective, collective nature of our individualities is important because of its sharp contrast to today's toxic social environment of culture wars (even if it is important to acknowledge that the rhetorical device of "culture wars" is first and foremost an ideological invention of the Right<sup>1</sup>). Thus, a shift from the discourse of human rights towards that of solidarity and social justice would not only be more attractive to the working-classes who turned away from socialists because of, among other things, their elitism, individualism, and "social progressivism". It would, hopefully, also heal the rift between two sections of the working class: well-educated, white-collar professionals (the so-called middle class) who are also being squeezed by neoliberal capitalism; and the traditional, blue-collar working class who have been greatly disillusioned and alienated from the labour movement of which socialist and social democratic parties were once an essential part. In short, the key thesis of this paper is that if socialists want to overcome the rift between the socially progressive agenda (LGBT+ rights, feminism, the non-discrimination of minorities, etc.) and socialism in economics (economic democracy, support for trade unions, progressive reform of the financial sector, etc.), they need to shift their language from human rights, which is liberal and individualistic in its essence, towards social justice, and to address the key marginalised groups – women, racial and ethnic minorities, members of the LGBT+ community – through the discourse of social justice rather than through the language of human rights.

## **The Good Old Erfurt Programme**

It is important to remember that it was socialists rather than so called bourgeois parties – including the liberals – who first started the campaign for universal suffrage and equality. Whilst liberals now boast that they have always been the champions of individual rights, and that

socialists incorporated the demand for individual rights and freedoms into their political manifestos under the influence of liberalism, these claims are misleading<sup>2</sup>. The Erfurt Programme, written and directed in 1891 by Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein, and August Bebel, demonstrates the progressive character of the historical Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) which, as Rosa Luxemburg (1915) put it, was “the pride of every socialist and the terror of the ruling classes everywhere”. Not only did it demand the “[a]bolition of all laws that place women at a disadvantage compared with men in matters of public or private law”, it also claimed that the mission of the party was to fight “the exploitation and oppression of wage earners in society today” and “every manner of exploitation and oppression, whether directed against a *class, party, sex, or race*” (The Erfurt Program, 1891, emphasis added). It is instructive that these “human rights” demands (as we tend to call them today) – the demands to end racial and gender-based discrimination – are expressed through the language of social justice. Thus, the authors of the programme saw these demands as an integral part of the fight against the capitalist exploitation of labour. Demands to end the oppression of women, ethnic minorities, and members of the LGBT+ community are demands of social justice; they are of the same nature as the political struggle of the working class against capitalist exploitation.

## **The Ontology of “Human Rights”**

What does it mean to say that one has an inalienable “human right”? What kind of claim is this? It is certainly not an ordinary ontological claim, because individuals are not born with these rights. Instead, they are conditional: they depend on the political and legal *status quo* in which an individual exists. To put the notion of human rights in these terms is not new, of course. Jeremy Bentham was perhaps among the

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first to ridicule the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” as “rhetorical nonsense – nonsense upon stilts” (Bentham 1987: 53). This criticism is well known, yet it overlooks the radical nature of this declaration: it was an attempt by the French revolutionaries to reject the hierarchical structures of the *Ancien Régime* and instead lay the foundation for egalitarian political order without hereditary privileges. In a similar way to John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau – whose theories of the social contract prefigured the modern political order of popular sovereignty rather than describing the ontological state of the political world – the authors of the declaration prefigured the subsequent institutionalisation of the political and legal order based on the equality of the rights of individuals. In this sense, Bentham’s critique was short-sighted and naïve. Utilising John Searle’s (2010) philosophy of language and his social ontology, we can say that the declaration of 1789 as a *speech act* gave birth to the social reality of political equality whereby all citizens, irrespective of their birth, were *said* to have equal political status. Thereby, the idea of the modern state based on the notion of popular sovereignty became possible and was gradually established. Thus, the ontological status of these rights is not that they are *natural entities* or *natural conditions*, but that they are *constructed social institutions* inscribed in the constitutional (legal) form of the modern democratic state. In other words, their basis lies in the historical public declaration: we declare that *from now on it will be so* that all individuals will have equal political status. Thus, all privileges, talents, and gifts that people are born with (hence the ontological difference and uniqueness of each person) *should and will* be treated as irrelevant as far as their political status is concerned. Yet, because declarations as specific speech acts<sup>3</sup> *both* express our desire to see the world changed according to what is being declared *and* require our commitment to change the world according to what was declared, declarations of equal rights require our commitment

to enforcing them through positive law. They also presuppose an international alliance of political communities which treat them as relevant and authoritative. In this respect, “human rights” presuppose a group of political communities which accept these declarations as valid and agree to inscribe them in their legal systems. Hence, human rights are an institutionalised (international) legal practice.

## **The Ideological Obfuscation of “Human Rights”**

That being said, the institution and the legal practice of “human rights” are first and foremost liberal ideological constructions. This, as we have seen, was evident for Marx. After the revolution in France, the ideals of the “rights of man” and the “rights of the citizen” were adopted by the emergent liberal parties (Knight 2021: 6). However, liberal parties in Europe did not apply these rights universally to both men and women until socialist parties demanded universal suffrage in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The history of human rights shows that claims for human rights were advanced as the self-defence of different marginalised groups. They were and are individualistic and have been construed in *negative* terms. When an individual claims that they have a right to “life”, to “conscience”, or to “express their opinion”, they are demanding an autonomous space – space away from the interference of other people. This is a rhetorical and legal mechanism for *individual* self-defence against both the potential and actual encroachment of the authoritarian state.

Herein lies an aspect of human rights discourse that is potentially detrimental to the politics of the Left. “Human rights” are essentially liberal, and the nature of human rights is that of entitlement which carries a negative aspect: in having this entitlement, an individual is at liberty to do what they please. Given this, liberals will always be

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more suited to defending human rights. More importantly, “human rights” do not convince either philosophically or conceptually – they are obscure and are open to cynical misuse in that they do not have a terminus: where do our “human rights” end? What is a human right and what is not? Why do we prioritise certain rights over others? Are the rights of cultural minorities, intended to preserve the uniqueness of a communal way of life, human rights? If they are (as Article 22 of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights suggests), how are they to be reconciled with other individual rights when in conflict? All of these questions, irrespective of their perceived simplicity, pose yet more questions as soon as we attempt to give detailed answers to them. While human rights, as suggested above, are primarily an international legal practice (hence their arguments are most effectively advanced by professional human rights lawyers), the popular political discourse of human rights is often contradictory and susceptible to politically-charged misuse. That is, they often become somewhat of a “hot potato” of partisan politics: certain rights are claimed against another group’s rights, and different social groups enter cultural conflict. As Charles Beitz put it:

*[I]t can be difficult to construe certain human rights (e.g. those to work, to an adequate standard of living, or to periodic and genuine elections) as grounds of claims assertable by individuals taken seriatim against particular other agents. This might be for any of several reasons: for example, because no agent or group of agents controls sufficient resources to satisfy the claims or because the claims can only be satisfied by some ambitious change in institutions and policies. Human rights like those just mentioned may not seem to be genuine rights at all (Beitz 2009: 46).*

The supposed universality of human rights also appears in conflict with their specific history, “western values”, and the fact that they are part of an institutionalised practice which requires the assent of political communities. Although this objection can be easily dismissed,

their practical application to daily political struggles – e.g., by LGBT+ activists claiming that a proposed law banning the sharing information on the LGBT+ community with under-18s is a violation of universal human rights – often sounds arbitrary. Finally, it is necessary to consider whether progressive politics and policies should be based on the vague idea of individual human entitlements (including the entitlement to consume) in an era of ecological crisis.

## **Appeal to Social Justice rather than to Human Rights**

The previous example, although it is a direct reference to Hungary, is not to suggest that members of the LGBT+ community do not have a legitimate claim against their ongoing discrimination in different countries. Rather, the suggestion is that the language of the left should be rooted in the notions of solidarity and social justice rather than in the deontological rhetoric of (human) rights. It is also instructive to note that we find cultural radicalism framed in the language of social justice throughout the history of socialism – namely in the early stages of Bolshevik communism, that is, prior to the advent of the totalitarianism of Stalin. As Gerassimos Moschonas acutely put it, “communism as a vehicle of modernity was more daring (...) than its contemporary social democratic parties of the West. (...) Abortions became legal and free in 1920. Women’s freedom of choice was also strengthened by the Soviet law, adopted in 1922”, and homosexual relations among consenting adults were also legalised (Moschonas 2018: 537–538). Thus, the key question is: is it possible *today* to frame political arguments for the emancipation of women and the LGBT+ community from the point of view of social justice rather than by using the language of “human rights”? To answer this question, a brief overview of how social justice may be conceptualised is necessary.

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Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, socialist arguments and rhetoric have emphasised the essential sociality of human existence. There is a long tradition of political thought emphasising the social, political, and cooperative nature of human life. Aristotle's thesis that a human being is a *zoon politikon* – a political animal only able to live a flourishing life in a well-functioning political community – was a considerable influence on Marx and other socialist authors. The ideas that human existence is marked by intersubjective cooperation, that our subjectivities are formed through the social networks of giving and receiving, and that human life cannot flourish without social justice and the recognition of the fundamental equality of human beings, have been the key to socialism. While Aristotle drew an ontological distinction between *oikonomia* and *politikē*, between the management of the household and the life of politics, Marx's analysis showed how capitalism reinforced the compartmentalisation of economy and politics, and argued for the transformation of the economic system of wage-slavery into the community of social humanity. Marxist feminists from Silvia Federici (2020) to Johanna Oksala (2018), inspired by Rosa Luxemburg, expanded Marx and Engels' analyses (especially Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*), and argued that the critique of the sphere of capitalist production should be supplemented with the critique of patriarchy within the domestic sphere of social reproduction. Indeed, the foundation of the socialist conception of justice should be based on the idea that the sphere of social reproduction – the birth of a new life, care for children, and the maintenance of our lives – ought to be the focus of our attention: patriarchy should be rooted out through the system of socialised reproductive labour. The latter not only means a comprehensive, publicly funded system of nurseries and quality primary education that allows both men and women to have meaningful jobs and raise their children, but also involves socialised domestic labour (cleaning and cooking) through

communally- and publicly-funded organised services. Sharing these tasks of reproductive labour in the spirit of solidarity and fairness is essential for a socially-just, flourishing (socialist) society because, among other things, of their educative character. Cooking, raising children, and caring for the weak and disabled is important for the development of individual and communal empathy. Empathy, rather than the language of human rights as “natural entitlements”, should be essential for socialists. Carol Gilligan’s ethics of care (or the more philosophical notion of asymmetrical responsibility conceptualised by Emmanuel Levinas) and its language is a much more effective approach to tackling the prejudice and discrimination suffered by historically marginalised groups – ethnic minorities, women, members of the LGBT+ community, and immigrants. The emphasis on social reproduction is also important, since the notion of caring for a home has a strong ecological aspect in modern society: our planet, which has become endangered by industrial capitalism driven by the exploitation of fossil fuels, is also our home.

Following the thesis of second-wave feminists that “private (personal) is political”, politicising *oikonomia* – the principles (*nomoi*) of production and the reproduction of life which happen in the “private” and “domestic” spheres, at home and at work (the *oikos*) – ought to be the key principle of socialists. The struggles of women and the LGBT+ community for recognition against their discrimination are *class struggles* – they are our (socialists’) struggles. Globally, more affluent members of the LGBT+ community *are much less frequently* discriminated against. It is unlikely, for example, that Elton John has suffered as vitriolic a level of discrimination as that experienced by an impoverished gay man in a Lithuanian village. At the very end of *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx, admiring the genius of Shakespeare, describes the very essence of money in bourgeois society:

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[W]hat I *am* and *am capable* of is by no means determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most *beautiful* of women. Therefore I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness* – its deterrent power – is nullified by money. I, in my character as an individual, am *lame*, but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet. Therefore I am not lame. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honoured, and therefore its possessor. Money is the supreme good, therefore its possessor is good. (...) I am *stupid*, but money is the *real mind* of all things and how then should its possessor be stupid? (...) Does not my money therefore transform all my incapacities into their contrary? (Marx 1988: 138; emphasis in the original).

Thus, the people who are most often discriminated against are working-class members of the LGBT+ community who work hard to make ends meet; single mothers who struggle at home and in the workplace to feed their children; ethnic minorities who, when targeted by the police, are discriminated against twice: first because of their poverty and second because of their perceived otherness, their ostensible difference. Who can understand their plight and the injustices inflicted on them better than socialists – ordinary working-class people whose existence is also defined by the struggle to subsist? Why should liberals – the very people whose ideology and policies were used to create the neoliberal economic regime of enormous inequality at the expense of the working-classes – be permitted to fool our LGBT+ brothers and sisters with their language of entitlement? They ought not!

Therefore, to paraphrase Marx and Engels, all working men, women, ethnic minorities, and members of the LGBT+ community, unite!

## Endnotes

- 1 I am grateful to Kuba Jablonowski for reminding me of the point about “culture wars”
- 2 As Donald Sassoon (2010: 22) acutely put it: “Liberal or conservative parties defended an electoral system that allocated votes in terms of the wealth possessed or earned by each individual. Throughout Europe they also accepted and defended an upper chamber that over-represented or represented only the members of the upper classes (...). Furthermore, liberal and conservative parties were not only guilty of ‘class-ism’, but

also of sexism. Not only did they oppose the disfranchisement of the working class, they also opposed that of women".

- 3 According to Searle (1969, 2010), declarations, contrary to other speech acts such as assertives (which explain how things are and have the word-to-world (↓) direction of fit) and commissives (through which we commit ourselves to doing things and which have the world-to-word (↑) direction of fit), have both directions of fit (↕): through a declaration as a speech act we express our desire to see the world changed (↑), and thereby initiate change; by performing this change, we also describe the world as changed (↓). All socially constructed institutions (schools, states, banks, property, money, etc.), according to Searle, are created through declarations.

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Maria SKÓRA

**“Our Bodies Are (Still) Battlefields”  
Conservative Backlash on Women’s  
Rights And Why It Matters  
For Our Democracies**

## **Keywords**

**Women's rights, minority rights, voter mobilization, populism,  
conservative backlash**

## **Abstract**

This paper wants to analyze the recent conservative backlash targeting the concepts of gender equality and women's rights. It focuses on the battle around reproductive rights serving as the most prominent example of ideological mobilization. It also looks at women's rights as part of democratic regimes and explain why protecting them is vital for the quality of our democracies. Finally, it concludes in drafting ideas for the protection of women's rights that could be launched at the EU level.

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In recent years, the women's suffrage centennial was celebrated in many European countries. The 20th century was indeed marked by female empowerment in politics, economy, culture. In particular, third-wave feminism, which originated in the United States in the early 1990s, opened up this struggle also for the notion of intersectionality, recognizing various women's experiences and overlapping forms of discrimination due to e.g. race, sexual identity or orientation. With more and more women in positions of power, it seemed that not only women's rights were finally recognized as fundamental but also that patriarchal social structures yielded to more inclusive, democratic, progressive social norms and values.

Yet, with the emergence of populist right-wing parties, we've witnessed gendered arguments playing a central role in their rhetoric, for example when questioning economic models of the family based on partnership or reproductive rights of women. Debates around gender norms and gender policies, including not only women but also the LGBTQ+ community, have proven not only to have great mobilizing potential but also to resonate well in public discourse, drawing a lot of media attention and helping the otherwise fringe movements to enter the mainstream. Regardless, if only a result of political cynicism or coming from true beliefs, by objectifying women and putting their rights on the political agenda, this rhetoric not only targets a specific social group but also undermines the democratic fundamentals of modern societies.

This paper wants to analyze the recent conservative backlash targeting the concepts of gender equality and women's rights. It focuses on the battle around reproductive rights serving as the most

prominent example of ideological mobilization. It also looks at women's rights as part of democratic regimes and explain why protecting them is vital for the quality of our democracies. Finally, it concludes in drafting ideas for the protection of women's rights that could be launched at the EU level.

## **Around Women's Emancipation**

In the last decade, there has been an upheaval in women's emancipation. The share of women in power positions has been on the rise. Compared with two decades ago, the number of female heads of state or government has increased and women's membership of parliaments rose to 24 per cent at the end of 2018, representing an increase of 13 per cent points (EPRS, 2019). But visible disparities persist. In 2018, women served as heads of state or government in only 21 countries globally; on average, only 25 per cent of all national parliamentarians were women, and women constituted ca. 36 per cent of elected members in local deliberative bodies (UN Women, 2019). Even in the European Parliament only 36 per cent of all MEPs are female. To give the EU credit, the structure of the European Commission is fully gender-balanced. Yet, the five portfolios most commonly held by women ministers are stereotypically female: "Family/children/youth/elderly/disabled; Social affairs; Environment/natural resources/energy; Employment/labour/vocational training, and Women affairs/gender equality" (UN Women, 2019), and the new European Commission is partially mirroring this trend. Although there is progress, globally women are still under-represented in leadership and largely excluded from the executive branches of government.

This perceived underrepresentation as well as the ongoing erosion of patriarchal patterns in culture and society have resulted in the rebirth of social movements in favour of women's rights. For example, in 2017

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in the United States, the #metoo mobilization sparked off against sexual abuse of women in show business, later taking into society, also outside America. The core statement of this justice movement was to break the silence and empower the victims “through empathy”( Corsi, Thissen & Zacchia, 2019) and solidarity in numbers, rather than a mere protest against sexual harassment. In Europe, a prominent example of mobilization for women’s issues materialized in Poland, resisting the national-conservative “cultural counter-revolution”<sup>1</sup>. After the effective ban of abortion had been announced by the ruling of the Constitutional Court in 2020, massive protests broke out on the streets mobilizing thousands of people across the country and enjoying numerous solidarity gestures abroad.

Women’s rights movements often seek synergies and alliances with other justice and empowerment movements, standing in defense of other minorities and their rights under attack, such as #BlackLivesMatter in the United States or the LGBTQ+ community in Poland or Hungary. They are not only contesting the existing inequalities (e.g. institutional discrimination) but also challenge the power structure. Even in Belarus, the uprising against Lukashenko was called “a female revolution”(Walker, 2020) thanks to its impactful female leaders and mass demonstrations held in the streets of Minsk by women against the dusted regime. Although the mobilization of parts of the society was directed at the autocratic regime, the juxtapose of gender and age of the old President and the opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, made that clash even more symbolic: a longing for a modern democratic leadership to replace the old authoritarian regime.

Yet, despite the growing role of women in the public sphere and power structures, we must take a more nuanced look to spare us from the trap of gender essentialism. More women in politics and on the streets is a sign of civic activism and political participation. At the same time, more and more women are rising to leadership in far-right

movements/parties, like Marion Maréchal-Le Pen in France, Alice Weidel in Germany, Dora Duro in Hungary or Kaja Godek in Poland. Whereas in egalitarian progressive societies like the Nordic ones, Spain, France or New Zealand more women find their way into the structures of representative democracy, yet authoritarian countries - such as Belarus, or Nicaragua - with one of the most restrictive abortion rights, also demonstrate above-average participation of women in politics (OECD Data, 2019). The far-right and alt-right often put gender issues on their agenda as highly polarizing and engaging, with female leaders as tokens granting their anti-feminist rhetoric solid legitimacy. Reproductive rights are often at the very centre of this (political) battle.

## **The Anti-Feminist Backlash**

A decade ago, the European Institute for Gender Equality developed a tool to assess the progress of gender equality in the EU. The Gender Equality Index looks at six core domains (work, knowledge, power, money, health, time) and two extras (violence, intersections inequalities), each year taking a special thematic focus. It was designed to support policy-making in the EU with regard to gender mainstreaming, by observing and comparing the developments in member states (Gender Equality Index, 2019). In a nutshell: there seems to be a slight progress since the first measurements according to the current methodology were conducted. At the same time, we are looking at an increase of 4 points on a 100-point scale within 7 years<sup>2</sup>. "Advances in gender equality are still moving at a snail's pace", EIGE warn.

While there still is space for improvement for gender equality to proceed quicker, parallel we witness a rising tendency against it. In the past decade, anti-feminist backlash has been strongly visible in Europe as well as in the United States<sup>3</sup>. In particular, the concept of

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hostile *gender ideology* was coined, “adopted by a global movement to articulate opposition to gender equality, abortion, sexual education, and LGBTQ rights in areas such as marriage, adoption, surrogacy, and reproductive technologies” (Toldy & Garraio, 2020). As other researchers put it: “*gender* as a symbolic glue integrates anti-EU, anti-liberal, anti-communist and homophobic attitudes, which can produce voters for the rightists. In the case of far-right anti-government, anti-Semitic and anti-immigrants attitudes are also included into the discourse of *gender*” (Kováts & Pöim, 2015).

In other words, *gender ideology* has become far more than just an argument against female emancipation. It is a collective denominator for progressive social changes, challenging the conservative worldview based on tradition and patriarchal structures. An umbrella term that mobilizes people against “cultural Marxism, Gayropa, political correctness” (Grzebalska, Kováts & Pető, 2018). A blurry buzzword, allowing space for individual interpretation, applied in political messaging with the aim to stir public debate and mobilize voters. Many advocacy and watchdog organizations, such as Open Society Foundation (Gallo, 2017) or Human Rights Watch (Reid, 2018), have warned that instigating moral panic over gender and sexuality can have dramatic consequences and do real harm by questioning the right to living free from violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender or sexual identity. As a result, NGOs dealing with these issues fall victims of smear campaigns or intimidating acts of vandalism. Nevertheless, their concerns prove to be right. In countries with national-conservative governments in power, there have been attempts to petrify conservative moral order through law, for example by pronouncing marriage/family as a union of exclusively a man and a woman (Dunai & Komuves, 2020) or redefining/relativizing domestic violence<sup>4</sup> (Amiel, 2021).

To sum up, even if overall progress has been made, there is a constant threat of backlash, or as claimed by some: a “lashless

backlash" - steps backwards in the absence of any meaningful move forward (Juhász & Pap, 2018) Speaking of the EU, its founding principles, guidelines when implementing projects, and finally the direct funding for civil society organizations dedicated to support women rights are significant. But in practice, such intergovernmental bodies like the EU have little leverage to implement its policies and recommendations at the state level. Gender equality, as a horizontal issue, spans across various aspects of life and specific policies, often either difficult to grasp in legal terms or remaining within the competences of member states. Good example is the health care policy, and the ongoing wrestling of the pro-choice movement with the pro-life lobby for enabling all women access to safe abortion. The issue of dignity, bodily autonomy, access to information has been an ongoing battle and exemplifies how women's rights can fall victim of political cynicism and ideology.

### **Spotlight: Access to Legal Abortion**

The anti-feminist backlash manifests among societies in various shapes and forms. In some, it remains at the level of fierce political rhetoric and discourse, in others it has taken the form of policies or even legislation. Questioning or even curbing the access to safe and legal abortions can exemplify how this strategies work in practice.

Looking at the United States, a prominent case for using the mobilization potential of debating reproductive rights was Donald Trump's strategy to ally with evangelical pro-life organizations in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election. In the late 1990s, Trump was very vocal about his pro-choice attitudes in TV interviews (Trump, 1999). Twenty years later, in 2018, he was the first president to speak on-site at the annual March for Life anti-abortion rally. During his campaign he called for a nationwide abortion ban. He also appointed conservative judges to the Supreme Court (Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, Amy

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Coney Barrett), known for their restrictive positions on reproductive rights (Tracking Trump). This sudden change of heart was part of a broader strategy to rather mobilize fringes and non-voters instead of the undecided centrists. In this case, the target was fundamental evangelical pro-life organizations, next to the QAnon movement and the left-overs of the Tea Party morphing into Trumpism.

In Europe, a blatant example of utilizing women's rights for political gains was the restriction of abortion laws in Poland. Since 2016, they had been at gunpoint of the governing national-conservative coalition of Law and Justice (PiS) and its junior coalition partners. This battle revolved around limiting the access to abortion by rigorous preconditions, that is: excluding the termination of pregnancy for fetal anomaly. As it had turned out impossible to pass the proposed amendment in the Parliament, the passage of the Act on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions for permitting termination of pregnancy referring to fetal malformations was ruled unconstitutional by the Polish Constitutional Tribunal. The freedom of the judiciary in Poland has been questioned since 2016, in particular, the decisions of the Constitutional Tribunal are considered to be politically driven to support the government's positions. In this case, an effective ban of abortion introduced in Poland (as 90 per cent of legal terminations were performed in the event of fetal abnormalities) can also be interpreted as scouting for new supporters in fundamentalist organizations as well as petrifying the political backing by the Catholic Church.

Restricting reproductive rights of women feeds into a broader narrative of *coming back to normality* and *returning to Christian values*, which inevitably calls for a revised role of women in society. These claims are also emerging in other countries. For Sweden Democrats (SD), lowering the legal limit of abortions (from 18 to 12 weeks, although the vast majority of all is early terminations) is "a question of principles"<sup>5</sup>. In Viktor Orbán's Hungary, fears emerged after the country supported

the anti-abortion Geneva Consensus Declaration. Since 2010, the Fidesz government has embarked on promoting pro-life positions, not changing the laws on abortion itself but, for example, by introducing the protection of life from conception in the Constitution (Szerekes, 2020) or considerations of introducing financial hurdles to access abortion care within the public healthcare system (which in the end did not come to effect)<sup>6</sup>. A similar approach is shared by the German Alternative for Germany (AfD): the party announced it would be fond of introducing “soft tools” to prevent women from terminating pregnancies as their primary goal was to improve the fertility ratio among German women (probably meaning ethnic Germans, not people with migration background) (Rheinische Post Online, 2019). Making abortion financially less accessible was also a position represented by Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, a French rising star of the back-then National Front (FN, today National Rally - RN), going against the party line in demands of a clearer conservative agenda (Vinocur, 2016) - just to name another example of politicizing women’s reproductive rights in Europe.

## **Women’s Rights and Political Agenda**

As argued before, in recent years, in the United States and some European countries, we have witnessed a conservative backlash calling for reinstalling *traditional* values and norms when it comes to basic institutions of social life, like family or marriage. These claims directly affect the status of women in society, for example by questioning their reproductive rights or painting outdated visions of gender contact, favouring a male-breadwinner model over the economic activity of women. They are contesting societal changes and emancipation processes of the last century, often representing a combination of excluding views: anti-feminist, homophobic, xenophobic/racist. Not

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surprisingly, all those different axes of stratification such as gender, sexual orientation, race, correspond with attitudes and normative beliefs about social norms and hierarchy, exclusion or privilege.

Often, the arguments in favour of *returning to traditional values* and revisiting gender contract come from organizations and actors representing the right corner of the political scene, standing in opposition to progressive values as well as the achievements of women's emancipation, originating from social-democratic and socialist movements. Therefore, in this context, parties representing fringe positions like the far-right in Europe or alt-right, a newer movement that has recently emerged in the United States, are of particular interest. The activities launched by populist right-wing parties may vary, depending on their leverage on legislative influence (lawmaking), nevertheless the language they use and the electoral effects they want to achieve through the mobilization of radical pro-choice rhetoric/movements seem very similar.

The politicization of women's health is two-folded. On the one hand, it stems from a normative belief in the authoritarian-conservative social order, but on the other hand, it also has a high instrumental potential. The far-right and alt-right are keen on utilizing political sentiments around gender for voter mobilization and mainstreaming of other elements of their political agenda. The gender dimension often serves as a bridge between radical movements, extremist groups and political parties. Most commonly, contested issues include abortion, family policy, sex education or teaching of gender studies at universities (Fangen & Skjelsbæk, 2020). Across borders language and common terminology unite the resistance against the *gender ideology*, *sexualizing our children*, *confused sexual identity* and general defence of *natural law* as opposed to legal (human) rights, enacted by a state or society.

Another trend that has become visible when addressing reproductive rights of women and pushing the pro-life agenda is highjacking the

language of women's rights. Comparing research conducted in English-speaking countries (the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom) suggests there is a visible trend of "extending frame" (Rose, 2011) - changing the discourse around abortion, shifting the focus from the rights of the fetus to the language of women's rights, pro-woman rhetoric has reemerged (Rose, 2011). The new anti-abortion discourse aims at changing cultural values more than legislation: it's explicitly framed as *pro-woman*, largely avoids appealing to religious grounds, and relies on a the *abortion-harms-women* argument that has transformed traditional fetal personhood arguments (Saurette & Gordon, 2013). Anti-abortion activists are also increasingly using a broader shift from morals to risk, claiming to be the *savers* of women, constructing *harms* and *vulnerable victims*, which are components of moral regulation campaigns (Lowe, 2018). This tactic highjacks the slogans of minority movements, just like the #blacklivesmatter was countered by #alllivesmatter, or even the travesty to #babieslivesmatter.

Be it for ideological reasons, political campaigning or political clientelism, the issue of women's reproductive rights has been brought high on the agenda in recent years by right-wing populists, in particular representing far-right positions or willing to gain the support of the organizations locating themselves at the right fringe of the political spectrum. According to the Perry Under national survey commissioned by Supermajority Education Fund, the anti-abortion voters are likely to hold inegalitarian views in general (PerryUnder National Survey, 2019). The current backlash of morality policy against the feminist policy is not only an act hostile to gender equality but also questions democratic standards protecting the fundamental rights of all individuals. It hinders the way to the empowerment of other minorities too, such as the LGBTQ+ community.

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## Reclaiming Women's Rights: Why It Matters?

The above-mentioned phenomena paint a worrisome picture, or at least highlight the tendencies that should put progressive thinkers-and-doers on alert. We observe instrumentalization of the issue of women's rights that can dangerously erode the fundamentals of our democracies founded in human rights and civil liberties.

For example, abortion - a matter of medical character and individual choice (and dignity) - again becomes a tool of voter mobilization. This attempt proceeds through a highly polarizing and personal topic, instigating moral panic and populist claims (tradition vs liberal elites, replacing knowledge with ideology). In extreme cases, we even observe the objectification of women, reducing their role in society to biological functions, depriving them of a right to decide over their own bodies. Similar mechanism was employed in other highly polarizing topic: the refugee debate. It was dominated by images of the "strangers at our door" - as Zygmunt Bauman put it, not facts and figures. The language embarked on various stereotypes of refugees spread via fake news, such as "the terrorist migrant", "the migrant rapists" or "the strong, muscled migrant to wage war" (Mas, 2018). The resemblance with anti-choice rhetoric lies in turning the debate from fact-based to powerful images and emotionally loaded visuals, triggering discomfort by playing with very basis feelings, such as of fear (refugees) or protection of children (abortion). These dehumanized images sideline the fact that behind polarizing topics there are people's stories and individuals whose rights and liberties are questioned.

Secondly, questioning women's rights belongs to a broader phenomenon of relativization of human rights. This is even more visible in debates over gay rights and the recognition of same sex couples. Counter-arguments often take us back to the narrative of human rights

as a matter of *opinion*, undermining the normative fundamentals of our democratic regimes and the founding values of the EU. At the very end of those debates are citizens at risk of being deprived of basic liberties, forced to fight for their dignity and recognition of their right to self-determination. Meanwhile, the power of democracy is not about the majority rule but the protection of minorities. Undermining human rights is undermining democracy: dismantling brick by brick the fundamentals of liberal democracies, back to patriarchal structures and oppression, step back in emancipation of societies as a whole. That clearly contradicts the values of the progressive political family.

Another aspect of political actors launching on highly polarizing topics instigating moral panic is political clientelism. Seeking alliances in the realization of goals with other institutions of public life is not uncommon. Depending on their agenda, some political parties engage with business, private sector, labour movement, environmentalists. Others seek backing in the institutions of spiritual or religious character, like New Evangelics in the United States or the Catholic Church in Poland. This latter alliance ended up in the effective ban on abortion, introduced by the decision of the politicized Constitutional Tribunal, declaring the preexisting regulation on termination of pregnancies unconstitutional. In fact, the alliance of national-conservatives with the Catholic Church in Poland has had a long tradition. As reported by some scholars, polls conducted after the 2011 parliamentary election revealed that parish priests had openly indicated which party was worth a Catholic's vote. Other reports indicate that in 2015 election the political interference of the Church was even more intense (Markowski, 2019). In a country where on the one hand there is practically a monopoly on the religious market, but on the other hand the laicization of society progresses with an unprecedented speed, the Catholic Church is in a desperate need to secure its position in power structures and access to resources (land, capital). Here, proving useful and effective in mobilizing voters,

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for example by spreading moral panic and engaging in morality policy, can be the key to success. Sadly, Poland is a blatant example how such political clientelism can cost half of the population their right to self-determination.

Last but not least, the conservative backlash we have observed for the last decade is not a coincidence. According to news reports as well as policy analysis, Vladimir Putin's Russia consequently attempts to use religious soft power in its foreign policy (Henne, 2019). Positioning itself as a counterweight to the Western culture, Russian conservative activism claims to be protecting Christian values against *homopropaganda* and *gender ideology* (Juhasz & Pap, 2018). There is evidence of close links between conservative right organizations both in the United States as well as in Europe (Porter, 2018). Far-right parties and their sympathizers look with awe at the restoration of *Christian family values* in Russia. Clearly, supporting the spread of moral panic and questioning the fundamentals of the EU, based on civil liberties and protection of minority rights, contributes to the polarization of moods among societies. This culture clash is meant to destabilize and weaken the EU from the inside.

## Four Ideas For The Way Forward

The recent conservative backlash, targeting among other also women's rights, is a serious challenge for the social-democratic family and for all movements and political actors defining themselves as progressive. Reclaiming both the language and the agency when it comes to women's rights is key. Women's rights are not only about one group, a single-issue politics. Women's rights are part of our democracies, based on civil liberties, protection of minorities, and dignity for all. These values should be at the very heart of progressive politics.

To accomplish that, the progressive family must take a closer look at the following issues and try to incorporate them into their agenda as well as operationalize them in their policies:

- A new narrative, outlining clearly that women rights are not only a single issue *for women*. When questioning their emancipation and right to self-determination through reproductive rights, anti-feminist backlash has a far broader resonance and does not harm only women in our societies.
- An agenda seeing minority rights at its core, looking at inequalities through the intersectionality perspective, taking not only class relations into consideration. Instead, any oppression and discrimination should be perceived as a manifestation of a more general attempt to undermine the fundamentals of liberal democracies in the name of ideology or political cynicism.
- Building alliances with civil society organizations, formal and informal citizen initiatives, watchdog and advocacy organizations. Reaching out to active citizens would allow first-hand knowledge transfer on the situation of minority groups, giving those organizations a backing in return, making their voice heard in the public sphere as well as educating and mobilizing citizens around fundamental rights. Keeping the public eye on changing environment for human rights defenders in member states exhibiting signs of shrinking spaces or exercising other forms of persecution/spread of anti-NGO measures.
- Examining the possibilities of European action for protection of minority rights or exercising pressure on countries curbing these, for example by cracking on women's reproductive rights. In that respect, the European Parliament resolution of 11 March 2021 on the declaration of the EU as an LGBTIQ Freedom Zone (European Parliament, 2021) served as a blueprint of how the EU could handle when facing blatant violation of civil liberties and fundamental rights.

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The following European Parliament resolution of 24 June 2021 on the situation of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU, in the frame of women's health (European Parliament, 2021) was definitely a step in the right direction. The recent Motion for a resolution on the first anniversary of the *de facto* abortion ban in Poland, from 3 November 2021 (European Parliament, 2021), exemplifies well a joint action of EU countries concerned over worrisome developments in one member state. By issuing this document, the European Parliament called for more effective cooperation in cross-border access to abortion for Polish women as exercising their right to essential healthcare. Another milestone would be to develop effective tools to execute such commitments, as adopted resolutions are non-binding.

The conservative backlash operates at various political levels, building fit structures and not wasting any opportunity to push their agenda forward. Therefore, it is so important to combine grass-root action with activities at the European level to contain and counter those worrisome tendencies aimed at the stability of the enlightened European project. It is only the progressive movements and political parties that have the sensitivity, legitimacy as well as tools and leverage to counter those tendencies. With power comes responsibility and social-democrats should play the major role in facing this challenge with success.

## Endnotes

- 1 Cultural counter-revolution is a term used by Jaroslaw Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán to describe their ideological position toward the EU in 2016, see: Henry Foy, Neil Buckley, Orban and Kaczyński vow 'cultural counter-revolution' to reform EU, Financial Times, 7 September 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/e825f7f4-74a3-11e6-bf48-b372cd-b1043a>
- 2 Based on the Gender Equality Index - data available for 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020

- 3 See analyses emerging as early as 1990s, e.g. Susan Faludi, (1991) *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, examining the resistance of mainstream in the US against the advances women made in 1970s.
- 4 See the ongoing struggle in Poland to leave the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the so-called Istanbul Convention)
- 5 Åkesson wants to ban abortions after week 12, Radio Sweden, 19 maj 2013 kl 09.03, <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/5538626>
- 6 Open letter by European women organizations to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán

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**PROGRESSIVE  
PROPOSALS FOR THE**

# **TURBULENCE**

**TIMES:  
HOW TO BOOST THE POLITICAL,  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
AND ELECTORAL POTENTIAL**



**Regaining Confidence:  
the Sound Narrative that Explains  
the Economic Context**

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Gerassimos MOSCHONAS

**Economic crises as game-changing  
events – or not any more?  
The social democratic response  
to the financial and sovereign debt  
crises in the light of the 1929 Crash**

## **Keywords**

**Economic crises, European Social Democracy, Political Change, PES, Center-Left, Great Recession, Sovereign debt crisis, Great Depression, EU, Austerity-Emergency Keynesianism, Programmatic change**

## **Abstract**

The chapter sets two interrelated goals:

- To understand why the Great Recession brought about minor political and policy changes, while the 1929 crisis renewed political and economic ideologies and changed the political landscape for many decades.
- To describe the programmatic response of the European social-democratic parties to the financial (2008-2009) and sovereign debt crises (from 2010 onward), and to construe their failure to differentiate themselves in a politically relevant way from their right-wing rivals.

Great economic crises are perceived as cataclysmic events which bring about significant long-term changes to the economic-political system and rifts in the programmatic profile and governmental action of political parties. This view has been strongly influenced by the economic crisis of the interwar period, whose transformative character made it the archetype of modern economic crises. However, this was hardly the case in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis (and its extension as a debt crisis in the European Union). The then anticipated tectonic changes were not actually realized. And if in hard times “politicians are obviously able to stretch considerably the institutionally defined corridor for political action” (Armingeon, 2012: 19), the post-crisis stabilization came along with minimal innovation. The Great Recession, “the most severe economic downturn since the 1930s has not produced dramatic political consequences within or among nations” (Kahler and Lake, 2013: 20). The major upheaval in the financial markets which violently broke out in 2007-2008 showed that, in spite of their destabilizing dynamics, huge crises may be less determining turning points or game-changing events than the 1929 crisis (Moschonas 2020a; Moschonas, 2020b). It also showed how the destabilizing momentum of economic crises can deceive protagonists and observers; it creates the illusion that “big changes”, whether sectoral or systemic, are coming, although these “changes” will probably never materialize.

The same is true –by analogy– for social democracy. In the 1930s, new perceptions and policies evolved against the gloomy backdrop of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism. These new policies led to the (partial) refoundation of the European social democratic family (Moschonas, 2018: 529-531). In contrast, the social democratic

response to the 2008-2009 financial crisis and to the European debt crisis was fragmentary, incoherent and weak in ideological and programmatic terms. Social democracy was unable to renew its profile and, in spite of a limited programmatic turn to the left, it did not manage to escape from the trap of the neoliberal convergence with centre-right parties. The identity deficit brought about by the great withdrawal of economic leftism in previous decades was far from repaired.

The present essay sets two closely interrelated goals:

- (a) To understand – through a macroscopic perspective – why, after “the devastating failure of the free market” (Wolf, 2018), the Great Recession brought about minor political and policy changes, in comparison with the Great Depression.
- (b) To describe the programmatic response of social democratic parties to the financial and debt crises and – to some extent – to construe their failure to promote ideas and choices that would be more in line with their own historical identity. This response transpired at two levels: at the EU level, mainly via the PES, and at the national level, via the programmatic agenda of national social democratic parties.<sup>1</sup>

The first section briefly describes the measures taken by governments and central banks to address the financial crisis (2008-2009) and outlines the key weaknesses of the EU management of the European debt crisis (from 2010 onward). Why were the political and policy changes that followed the Great Recession particularly modest by comparison to the consequences of the Great Depression? This key question is investigated in the second section. The third section traces the response of social democratic parties to the financial crisis and to the European debt crisis and evaluates its impact on the social-democratic programmatic profile. The final section attempts to understand and – to some extent – explain the broader political and programmatic context within which social democratic parties

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were driven to choices which converged with those of their neoliberal rivals.

The analysis provides support for the following theses:

- 1) The depth and length of the recession, along with the nature of international constraints, are the three most important factors which contribute to the emergence or not of a political opportunity structure conducive to the formulation of new ideas and policy alternatives in the post-crisis period.<sup>2)</sup>The policy response to a crisis is of great significance because it has a considerable impact on the duration and intensity of the recession dynamics and, hence, widens (as was the case after 1929) or restricts (as was the case after 2008) the space for ideological and policy change which could be taken up by opponents of the status quo.
- 3) In particular, after the huge failure of neoliberalism in the 2007-2009 period, the potential for an “anti-neoliberal change” was substantial. Despite this, however, there was less available room for ideological and policy novelty than in the period of the Great Depression, precisely because the efficacy of the policy response by governments and central banks, especially the American ones, but also, partly, by the European ones (but only in the period 2008-2009), limited the length and depth of the crisis.
- 4) The management of the debt crisis was very problematic. The European Union – and its most powerful states – stood as a tight constraint for the majority of member states, placing important limits on any significant programmatic alternative and policy innovation.
- 5) During neither the financial crisis *stricto sensu* (2007-2009) nor during the debt crisis (since 2010) were social democratic parties able to formulate or implement a distinct social democratic agenda. In the initial phase of the crisis (2008-2009), precisely because all governments (even neoliberal administrations)

adopted a kind of emergency Keynesianism, the available room for policy divergence was significantly confined. In this phase, social democracy's "ability to differ" was limited from the beginning. Then, during the European sovereign debt crisis, despite the PES policy agenda for supranational "re-social democratisation" (Bailey, 2014: 239), the national social democratic parties adopted – to varying extents – the budgetary rigour rationale, converging on this crucial point with their right-wing rivals. This choice placed them on the status quo side. The conservative EU was a key influencer in this direction.

Overall, during and after the Great Recession, social democracy was unable to renew its profile, in spite of the programmatic leap forward of the PES and the *post-third-way* agenda it presented in the years 2009-2012 (Moschonas, 2014), in spite of the new programmatic elaborations, and a certain shift to the left, of many national socialist parties. Divided between fiscal consolidation policies, mild anti-neoliberal rhetoric, core neoliberal policy norms, and the advocacy of national priorities, social democracy came out of the crisis without a programmatic alternative and particularly enfeebled in electoral terms (Delwit, 2021). This rather surprising turn of events is analysed in the lines that follow.

## **The 2007-2009 global meltdown: Big crisis, small changes**

There is wide consensus that the great deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s allowed the financial sector an almost limitless amount of freedom, especially with regard to the creativity of "investment" finance capital<sup>2</sup>. In the USA, the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act in 1999 was the emblematic decision which definitively eased a supervisory framework which was "already slowly killed in reality

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through [previous] regulatory changes” (Gourevitch 2013: 261-262). Ironically, under the Clinton presidency, the “investment-bank culture” had won (Sassoon, 2021: 57-58). The invention of complex and obscure financial products<sup>3</sup> which only a very small group of people within investment banks and hedge funds knew how to handle (as a result of which financial giants relied on the actions of small groups), the high leverage and the blind competition among “institutional” financial investors led to financial anarchy and speculative chaos. Self-regulation, which was founded on the hypothesis that the representatives of the financial sector should actually be the ones to set the rules in a highly innovative financial environment on account of the know-how they possessed, brought about the underestimation of risks and paved the way for the 2007-2009 crisis (see Kolliopoulos, 2018: 7-8, 12). Credit rating agencies, on the other hand, played an instrumental role in underrating risk. In effect, the “shadow” banking sector – which had rapidly grown alongside the official sector – represented “two-thirds of the US financial system on the eve of the outbreak of the crisis” and was largely outside any regulatory framework (Cohen 2010: 105). In terms of field dynamics, “microeconomic regulation in finance enabled the macro forces of the bubble to explode” (Gourevitch 2013: 255).

In Europe, EU leaders liberalized financial markets without putting in place an efficient EU-level system of banking regulation. Instead of a centralizing regulatory authority, a complex system was preferred which combined self-policing by the financial services industry with the maintenance of national sovereignty and the coordination of national regulators supervisory practices through bodies such as the Committee of European Banking Supervisors (CEBS) (Jones *et al.* 2015: 10-11). In effect, “EU leaders agreed to a decentralized and ineffectual regulatory regime for banking that left national regulators and European monetary authorities dangerously exposed to the threat of

financial instability – as the crisis would soon reveal" (*ibidem*). Indeed, in October 2008 the utter failure of the financial sector's regulatory systems was blatantly exposed. The USA and Europe were literally on the verge of a complete disintegration of their banking system, widespread panic and catastrophe.

From a technical point of view, both in 1929 and in 2007-2008 there were considerable similarities in the mechanics that generated the crisis. In fact, within the first year after the outbreak of the 2008 crisis, crucial indices (industrial production, international trade, stock exchange markets) collapsed as fast as – or even faster than – they had collapsed in the first year after the outbreak of the 1929 crisis (Almunia *et al.* 2009: 4-8; Crafts and Fearon, 2010:286). However, while the mechanics that generated and spread the crisis had much in common, the reaction of public authorities was quite different.

### **Is the whole world becoming Keynesian again?**

The "good" responses to the 1929 Crash came in rather late. They were not implemented until 1932 (Sweden) and 1933 (in the context of the New Deal) – and then, again, not consistently (new recession in the United States in 1937). There is a consensus among experts that the mistakes and shortfalls in monetary and fiscal policies in the early 1930s aggravated the effects of the depression and fuelled the escalation of the disaster. As Eichengreen and Temin eloquently pointed out, after 1929, "central bankers continued to kick the world economy while it was down until it lost consciousness" (Eichengreen and Temin, 1997: 2).

However, in contrast to 1929, the response of governments and central banks in 2008 was decisive. In the United States, the use of monetary tools – both conventional, such as the reduction of interest rates, and less conventional, such as quantitative easing – and of significant and costly multilevel fiscal interventions was quick and

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effective. In particular, Ben Bernanke's strategy to flood the system with liquidity ("Helicopter Ben") played a pivotal role (Cohen 2010: 78; Wigglesworth, 2016). Stabilizing the banking system, which was on the edge of the abyss, and boosting economic activity were both accomplished rather quickly. Without these interventions, it is estimated that the GDP drop in the USA – which slightly exceeded 4% in the crucial period from the end of 2007 to the beginning of 2009 but which stood at 8% in the last quarter of 2008 – would have reached the dramatic level of 14% (Blinder and Zandi, 2015).

The response of European countries and the EU was less effective for the entire period. The EU, after adopting a recovery plan at the initial critical phase of the crisis, became fiscally prudent and resisted the calls to adopt a US-style massive fiscal stimulus (Cameron, 2012; Armingeon, 2012; Papadimitriou and Zartaloudis: 37)<sup>4</sup>. European states did, however, manage to rescue their national banking systems and to contain, with national stimulus programmes, the great shock. The role of UK Premier Gordon Brown was significant inasmuch as he presented – before the Americans – the first structured plan to rescue the collapsing financial sector (Cohen 2010: 72)<sup>5</sup>. The UK government "saved the country from the apocalypse of a total banking collapse" and, moreover, in the critical and rife-with-fear moments of October 2008, it "successfully set an example to the world" (Rawnsley, 2010). However, the management of the second phase of the European crisis – the sovereign debt crisis – was exceptionally problematic. It intensified conflicts and inequalities within the eurozone, gave rise to different speeds for the various countries' exit from the recession, and allowed the systemic risk (disintegration of the eurozone) to pose a threat to – or at least to delegitimize – the entire European edifice until 2016.

In Europe, economic activity dropped by about 5% from the end of 2007 to the beginning of 2009 and the recovery began in 2009, in parallel with the USA. However, the strong restrictive policies to

address the debt crisis and the subsequent transformation of the crisis into a crisis of the European integration brought about a considerable slowdown in the 2011-2013 period. The eurozone was only able to resume its 2007 growth rate in the fourth quarter of 2015, unlike the United States which accomplished this in 2011 (Piketty 2016. See also: Cameron, 2012: 122; Jabko, 2019: 1). Hence, in 2015, while the EU was – still! – struggling to resolve the Greek debt problem, in the USA the cumulative GDP growth in the 2007-2015 period was over 10% (Piketty 2016). It should be noted that the ECB only proceeded to quantitative easing in 2015 (expanding its 2014 programme), while the FED had launched a similar programme as early as October 2008 (Laye 2018).

Overall, the decisive management of the crisis by the US authorities and, to some extent, by their European counterparts (yet only in the 2008-2009 period), prevented the world from plunging into a crisis as catastrophic as the one that broke out in 1929. State authorities launched major programmes to rescue and boost their countries' economies, successfully engaging in the battle against panic, the rapid disintegration of the financial sector and recession dynamics. During the years 2008-2009, for a brief moment, "the whole world became Keynesian again", as was aptly formulated by Yiannis Kitromilides (Kitromilides, 2012: 8). The floundering economic system was stabilized. The death spiral was averted.

### **An (almost) status quo event**

How far did the 2008 crisis change the relations between the state and the markets and, more broadly, the economic model? Speculation that the crisis would lead to a new balance between the markets and state regulation was not confirmed. The fiery declarations and philippics against profit-driven capitalism by prominent mainstream political leaders, such as President Sarkozy, were quickly forgotten when the

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emergency became less pressing. Changes did indeed occur, but they were “sectoral”, confined to the financial sector, and of questionable efficacy. The reform of the international and European regulatory framework (Basel III, European Banking Union) was aimed at improving the overall security of the financial system. Especially in Europe, the still imperfect banking union does amount to progress, although the critical pillar of the European Deposit Insurance Scheme is proceeding “at glacial speed” (Kolliopoulos, 2020). Another sign of progress comes in the now permanent character of the ESM (European Stability Mechanism), which – in spite of the market criteria it may be imposing through the folly of the notorious conditionalities (see the Greek case), thereby fuelling recessionary dynamics by its intervention - is, actually, an extra-market mechanism with a strong stabilizing capacity in high-risk economic conditions. In effect, the international interconnection and, hence, the extensive interdependence among banks have been confined and, as a consequence, the likelihood of banks collapsing through a potential domino effect is reduced. On the other hand, the imperfect and – as widely seen – “bank-friendly” character of the new regulatory framework, as well as the banks’ low post-crisis profitability, do not radically change the former picture. Banks are more efficiently supervised but they are still a hazard for the system.

In conclusion, the impact of the 2007-2009 crisis was limited both on the actual operation of the international economic system and on ideas. The post-crisis reforms were primarily sectoral, largely focused on the financial sector and aimed at shaping a less toxic version of the financial architecture of the pre-2007 period. In spite of the great expectations that the rampant capitalism model would be rectified, the balance between markets and states did not really change. Martin Wolf described the situation in brief: “The financial system is much as before, albeit with somewhat lower leverage, higher liquidity requirements and tighter regulation [...] policymakers have barely questioned the

relative roles of government and markets” (Wolf 2018). Likewise, the extensive electoral punishment of governments and the change of administrations – in the first six months after the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy, the number of governments that fell was almost double the number of those that fell in the six months prior to the bankruptcy (see Chwieroth *et al.* 2010, diagram 1:3) – did not bring about any radical political changes. Particularly in Europe, specific European goals, such as the much talked about financial transactions tax (which was passed by the European Parliament in 2011 and was adopted by eleven governments, including the German and French ones, Lemaire, 2016), the establishment of an independent rating agency and the – invariably supported by a minority – Eurobond, were not promoted. Moreover, the dangerous speculative behaviour that was typical of the pre-crisis period seems to be gaining traction once again in the financial arena, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, even before the easing of the regulatory requirements.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the post-1929 years, after 2008 things did not drastically change. The economic and political consequences were “surprisingly conservative”, in the sense of maintaining the status quo (Kahler and Lake, 2013: 23). Overall, the impact of the crisis on the operation of the entire system was hardly visible. The Great Recession turned out to be “much more of a *status quo* event [...] than a transformative one” (Helleiner, 2014: vii).

### **From Keynesianism to austerity mania: the European exception**

Why were Europe’s political elites – which, just like their American counterparts, successfully drew on the lessons learnt from previous crises – unable to effectively address the debt crisis which broke out in 2010, although they had been able to effectively manage the 2007-

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2009 financial crash? The question becomes more interesting if it is assumed that, in managing the crisis, European – just like American – elites took into consideration their political interests (Kahler 2013: 44), which makes perfect sense in representative democracies.

The answer to this question should be sought in the special structure of the European Union and, in particular, in the unique “asymmetry” which is closely interwoven with the multicentred and multistate character of the Eurosystem. One part of the elites which participated in – and often determined – the decision-making process came from countries (and was accountable to electorates) which had not been impacted by the sovereign debt crisis, while another part (mostly the elites of the south), which also participated in the decision-making process, came from countries (and was accountable to electorates) which suffered the harsh effects of the crisis. As a result, in trying to address the debt crisis, Europe’s policymakers had largely diverging political priorities.

The divergence in priorities was the product of differing perceptions about the national and the European interest which – to some extent – were linked to the question whether the crisis is “ours” or “theirs”. It was also bred by the differing roles (closely related to national economic interests) which resulted from the new distinction between lending and borrowing countries. Moreover, it was fuelled by the differing electoral cost and benefit among countries, inasmuch as the containment of the political cost of the crisis involved very different strategies for the elites of surplus countries and for those of indebted countries. The accumulation of these differing perceptions, roles, interests, and electoral calculations had brought about clear divergences within the executive bodies which managed the crisis<sup>7</sup>. This same divergence of goals was seen in the electorates of creditor and of debt-ridden countries. The emergence of “anti-austerity” coalitions in the south and of coalitions which advocated austerity

(but mainly for the others) in the north reflected the diverging priorities among eurozone countries.

The asymmetry was “unique” and specifically European, exceeding the known polycentric and multilevel character of European governance and introducing new imbalances and further complexity within Europe. Moreover, it fuelled the development of severe democratic uncertainty because, when conditions became extreme (as was often the case, especially for Greece and Cyprus), it was other elites that made the critical decisions and other elites that were expected to incur the political cost for them.<sup>8</sup>

As a result of the above, the most important priorities for the northern leaderships which controlled the European decision-making system were safeguarding compliance with fiscal and economic rules, avoiding debt mutualization (that threatened to turn the EU into a Transfer Union), and securing creditors vis-à-vis the borrowers. Strange as this may sound, a speedy exit from the recession was not the most important and urgent priority of the governments of the surplus countries. The prolongation of the crisis in the heavily indebted countries and the prolongation of the toxic destabilization of the eurozone were the two main consequences of this idiosyncratic hierarchy of priorities.

The diverging perceptions, interests and goals relativize – but far from eliminate – the role of economic ideologies. The European elites who reacted in a Keynesian way during the first phase of the crisis (2008-2009) when the crisis was pervasive and affected all, including the electorates of the surplus countries, were no different from the elites who reacted in a “hyper-procyclical” way – reminiscent of Chancellor Brüning’s “wrenching austerity” amid severe recession – during the phase of the debt crisis (when the latter affected the weakest European economies and only the electorates of the debtor countries). The fact that – almost – the same people promoted fiscal stimulus programmes (2008-2009) and policies with quite the opposite goals

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(after 2010) – in other words, on two occasions which were very close in terms of time – cannot be explained sufficiently from an ideological perspective. It can be better accounted for by the change of national and European priorities and the differing perception of economic and electoral interests from one period to the other.

Ideas did, of course, carry significance. After 2009, the budgetary rigour and fiscal consolidation goal became important almost everywhere and led to the adoption of austerity policies in all European countries, both rich and poor. The “expansionary austerity” advocated by neoliberals, which was inextricably linked to EU’s brand name, legitimized and facilitated the European “austerity mania” (Kitromilides 2012: 10). However, the imposition of extreme austerity in countries such as Greece was incompatible with the most fundamental crisis management toolbox and, indeed, inconsistent with the policies which the same European elites had adopted in the 2008-2009 period. But this austerity was highly consistent with the policy contradictions of the European elites, who are in favour of neoliberal policies in normal times, in favour of massive state intervention in times of crisis at home and, again, in favour of even more neoliberal policies towards foreign countries’ crises (cf. Chwieroth and Walter, 2021). This “policy schizophrenia” is part of a wider ‘Western hypocrisy’, to use Chwieroth and Walter’s expression, and manifests itself in the divergence in dealing with domestic and foreign crises (Chwieroth and Walter, 2021). Obviously, in this constellation of contradictory policy preferences, the debt-ridden eurozone nations, including Greece, were treated by the dominant elites of the Eurosystem as (almost) “foreign countries”. All things considered, the European Union managed to turn a complex but manageable debt problem into a major European crisis. This was something of a tour de force, especially if one takes into consideration the fact that only the Greek - and in some extent the Italian - debt crisis was due to the government’s fiscal policies. Europe became

the exception to the broader trend of efficiently managing the 2008 crisis and its repercussions. The strong influence of national interests and domestic political priorities in decision-making, the divergent état d'esprit of national public opinions, and the different perceptions about the desirable features of European integration exacerbated the persistent collective coordination problem and the governability problem which have always plagued the European Union.

## **Understanding Crises and Political Change**

Both the Great Depression and the 2007-2009 financial crisis brought about changes in the relations between the state and markets.<sup>9</sup> In both cases the state strengthened its position and enhanced its role, though the degree of enhancement varied considerably. After the Great Depression – and much more so after World War II – the state extended the scope of its economic, social and regulatory actions to the long term. Economic and political ideologies were also renewed. Conversely, the changes that were introduced after the 2008 crisis were mostly sectoral, moderate, and did not impact key structures of the system. In both cases, the internationalization of economies receded, dramatically after 1929 (leading to the end of the early age of globalization), and to a very limited extent after 2008. The impact on economic and political ideologies after 2008 was even smaller, although there was some reinforcement of values and ideas from the “statist” or social democratic matrix of priorities (greater distrust of markets, more favourable stance vis-à-vis the state, greater emphasis on reducing inequalities and on addressing tax evasion). However, this reinforcement was not decisive and, in any case, did not change the orientation of policy makers and international economic organizations.

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The “conservative” – on account of their limited extent – effects of the 2008 crisis are quite surprising. The scale of the systemic threat and the reward of moral hazard – the use of public funds to bail out the private players who caused great harm to the common good – would warrant far more profound changes. What prevented such changes from happening? Why did the 1929 crisis mould a new era worldwide, while the 2008 global meltdown only precipitated hardly discernible changes? The easy answer is that this was due to the different character of the two crises. However, the intervention of public authorities in addressing a crisis is a component of its character.

Let us have a look at the facts and their logic.

### **Crises and the marketplace of ideas**

After the outbreak of the 1929 crisis, public powers and, in general, the “ancien régime” forces failed to renew their economic philosophy and policies. The severe GDP shrinkage in the USA (-8.5% in 1930, -6.4% in 1931, -12.9% in 1932 and -1.2% in 1933) was not reversed before 1934 (+10.8%) (Braun 2020) – and only after four waves of bank collapses. The big policy change to restore growth prospects in the economy brought about by Roosevelt’s administration after 1933 (see Crafts and Fearon, 2010: 304) and the corresponding economic change in Sweden (after the SAP’s rise to power in 1932) both came in very late. The inadequacy of monetary and fiscal policies in the early 1930s prolonged and deepened the crisis, exacerbating its catastrophic impact.

The huge economic and social cost of the interwar crisis, its great length, the development of a vicious circle of (currency, banking, stock exchange, political) sub-crises within the crisis, the prolonged persistence of with old solutions, the absence of any visible way out of the crisis and the absolute need for “something to change”, all helped alternative ideas and alternative policy proposals emerge, mature and

converge. The numerous twists and turns of this long crisis combined to prompt both old and nascent players (leaders, political parties, heterodox economists, trade unions) to either press for big change or become themselves its actors (Moschonas, 2020b).

There is no doubt that the development of a favourable setting for change does not suffice. As Sheri Berman very aptly said, "in some countries, interwar crises did not lead history to turn. In others, they did – but in dramatically different directions, depending on which politicians and parties had the plans and power to make this happen" (Berman, 2020). After all, political parties and leadership constitute the bearers of political and party change. To become policy, "ideas must link up with politics – the mobilization of consent for policy". (Gourevitch 1989: 87). The protraction and the severity however of the interwar crisis – this is our argument – expanded the space for political struggle, ideological novelty and policy experimentation (Moschonas 2020b). In Sweden and in the USA, it was the progressive forces which brought ideological and policy change, while in Germany it was Nazism, which pursued policies to boost demand and, generally, implemented a strongly interventionist economic policy whose efficacy was enhanced by the regime's authoritarian methods.

In sharp contrast to the inadequacy of the responses to the 1929 crisis, in the 2008 crisis, the decisiveness and efficacy of monetary and fiscal interventions reduced both the length and the depth of the crisis. The policy responses to the Great Recession contained – with the exception of the management of the European debt crisis – the recessionary shock and bolstered the swifter return to recovery. Thus, they averted a "cataclysm without precedent" (Rawnsley, 2010). The prompt and much broader – compared to the interwar period – protection of banks and deposits, which was founded on lessons learnt from previous crises and on the "mass financialized wealth" of affluent societies, shielded much better the

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highly sensitive-to-downward-risks large mass of the modern middle classes.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the presence of a solid welfare state, which had hardly developed in the 1930s, contributed to the partial containment – compared to 1929 – of the economic and social costs of the 2008 crisis.

The response to a crisis, then, is so important that – technically – it becomes an integral part of the dynamics of the crisis and a component of its character. This can largely explain why the two major economic crises – in 1929 and in 2008 –, which shared many similarities in their causes and manifestations, as well as in their initial catastrophic force (similar drop in production, similar drop in stock markets, similar international spread of catastrophic consequences), eventually had so different effects. By reducing the length and severity of the 2008 global downturn, public powers dampened or somehow “relieved” the pressure for major economic and political change. If the potential for an anti-neoliberal change was significant, there was less available room for ideological novelty than in the period after the 1929 Crash.

Let us examine the question of available room for potential ideological renewal from a different point of view. According to Miles Kahler, the unprecedented interventions of central banks and governments – and especially those undertaken by the US authorities – were, after all, aimed at reducing the political cost of the 2008 crisis for national political elites (Kahler 2013: 44; see also above: “From Keynesianism to austerity mania: the European exception”). In effect, the “unprecedented interventions” eventually did, indeed, accomplish their goal: a reduction of the cost for national political elites – a reduction which *ipso facto* entailed the simultaneous reduction of the potential benefit for alternative players and, hence, the preservation of the status quo. Not surprisingly, there was profuse social and political frustration leading to contentious politics and to the

extensive electoral punishment of governments in office. However, in view of the aspects described above (efficient monetary and fiscal interventions, protection of savers, stabilizing role of the welfare state) and on account of international constraints, resentment and protest failed to lead to “durable new policy formulas”, which could have been represented by equally long-lasting political coalitions (Kahler and Lake, 2013: 21). The room for heretical views, unorthodox players and “experimenters” (Gourevitch 1989:100), and, hence, the room for “solutions which realign established paradigms and power structures” (Karyotis and Gerodimos, 2015: 6), was confined. Social frustration, popular mobilization, alternation in government and reinforcement of “peripheral” political parties (mostly - yet not only - populist), however, did not bring about any significant changes in economic philosophy and politics. There was no paradigm shift.

The post-2010 extremely problematic management of the debt crisis by the European Union confirms the hypothesis that the severity of the crisis is an indirect yet significant factor of political renewal. The protraction of the crisis gave rise to major political and social disruptions and thus facilitated the emergence of alternative policy proposals and new political actors, especially in Southern European countries. The case of Greece, however, was a paradigm. Specifically in Greece – and only in Greece – the crisis assumed dimensions which fully matched the extent of the 1929 crisis. Therefore, any comparison of Greece with countries such as Portugal, Spain and Ireland would be wrong for numerous reasons – but, above all, for a central one: the length and depth of the recession and the extent of the fiscal adjustment were not equivalent to those of any of the aforesaid countries (Dellepiane-Avellaneda and Hardiman, 2015: 210, Moury et al. 2021)<sup>11</sup>. By the end of 2012, an electorally critical year marked by the vertiginous emergence on centre stage of SYRIZA, “the Greek economy was in depression for a fifth year in a row, while in five years

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(2008-2012) it had shrunk by 20 per cent" (Sotiropoulos, 2014:199) – with a cumulative 2008-2016 contraction of 26% (Iordanoglou, 2021). The recession was devastating, lasting over an unusually long period. Greece, and Greece alone within the euro area, experienced a crisis which was comparable to the Great Depression. Hence, the prolonged and deep recessionary dynamics undermined the legitimizing basis of old ideologies, dramatically increased the political cost for the established national political elites (especially for PASOK, an authentic majority party and the great protagonist of the 1981-2012 period) and contributed – in the same way as in the post-1929 years – towards providing more room for ideological novelty. All this paved the way for the development of "unconventional" ideas, new political actors and the emergence of an anti-austerity coalition. In Greece, one of the most stable party systems in Europe was more or less blown sky high. The emblematic case of SYRIZA has shown how the protracted plummeting of the economy favours political change. The content and quality of the alternative policy proposals brought by SYRIZA are of little consequence in the context of a macroscopic argument. And the fact that this attempt to bring about alternative politics failed is also of little consequence, given the exceptionally restrictive EU framework.

In conclusion, the depth and length of the crisis seem to be two central components – along with international or "supranational" (the EU case) constraints - which considerably impact the scale of post-crisis changes. However, they do not actually determine such changes. Crises do not alone generate new ideas and policy novelty. Agency, ideas and political action count. The ability of a political actor to take advantage of a crisis, or his inability to do so, is ultimately the decisive factor (Berman, 2020). The elaborations and strategy of the Swedish social democrats in the 1930s (Berman, 1998) and the excellent tactical skills of SYRIZA's leadership in convincingly representing a government alternative in Greece in the 2010s - SYRIZA's opportunism, according to

the insightful analysis of Kostas Kanellopoulos (2018)– are two tangible examples which demonstrate the critical role of political agency. If, however, agency, ideas and leadership count, they are not, this is our argument, the whole story. The character of an economic crisis - its transformative impulse and potential - either facilitates or hampers the emergence of game-changing players. Downplaying the significance of a favourable or less favourable setting does not help in understanding the relation between an economic crisis and political and policy change.

## **The social democratic response to the Great Recession**

The 2008 crisis came – and was widely perceived – as a result of the excessive liberalization and financialization of the economic system. As such – and in spite of the fact that social democratic governments had contributed to the establishment of the neoliberal financialized capitalism - the crisis seemed to be offering a real opportunity for the renewal of the social democratic ideological and programmatic profile. In particular, the debt crisis shifted the “terrain of struggle” to an intermediate and proximate arena – Europe – within which social democratic parties had more weight and potential to take initiative. The debt crisis, which quickly escalated to a crisis affecting the entire European edifice, could have prompted social democracy to renew its own project for the future of the European Union. The fact that, in their majority, social democratic parties were in the opposition’s ranks was both a problem and an opportunity, inasmuch as it would be easier for social democracy to reorient its reformist agenda and escape from the trap of the neoliberal convergence with centre-right parties. Moreover, the continuous ups and downs of the European crisis, the persistent state of emergency which drove decision-making, the “cacophony of ideas over the nature of the problem” (Papadimitriou and Zartaloudis

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2015: 37) and, last but not least, the toxic air which prevailed within the eurozone were conducive to the development of initiatives which could overturn the social democratic routine policies that had drastically curtailed the policy distinctiveness of social democratic parties. In addition, the soaring production of policy-oriented ideas within the European public sphere – resulting from the ideational fever bred by the double crisis – was yet another factor which could have contributed to the rebranding of centre-left parties.

The European debt crisis did, indeed, seem – at least in the beginning – to act as a critical juncture in expediting the programmatic change within social democratic parties, especially if one takes into consideration an aspect which is often downplayed or even disregarded in literature, viz. that the process of programmatic rebuilding transpired at two levels: at a European level, mostly via the PES, and at a national level, via the action of national social democratic parties.<sup>12</sup>

### **The programmatic leap forward and the failure of the PES**

In the 2009-2012 period, the Party of European Socialists (PES) presented the key features of a new programmatic agenda which had two characteristics: on the one hand, it was much more advanced compared to the previous minimalist programmes of the party (and of all Europarties); on the other hand, it was different from the established – and delegitimized, on account of the crisis – third way repertoire of national social democratic parties. Given the complexities and limits of any transnational party action at the European level, it was a programmatic leap (Moschonas, 2014).

The new programmatic formula has been developed around four major themes: firstly, the establishment of a 'European mechanism for financial stability'; secondly, financial regulation (the strengthening of

European supervisory authorities, a stricter control over derivatives and speculative funds, regulation of the private ratings agencies, creation of an independent European ratings agency); thirdly, a reflationary programme called a “European pact for jobs and social progress” (a European pact for a minimum wage, a more extensive use of European structural funds, active employment policies, inclusion of a social clause in every piece of European legislation etc.); finally, a left-wing strategy for repairing public finances (tax on financial transactions, green tax, European cooperation for resolving the issue of tax evasion and fraud) (Moschonas, 2014: 255-256. Also: Bailey, 2014: 238-240; Holms and Lightfoot, 2014).

We have elsewhere referred to this set of new programmatic elaborations as a *post-third-way* agenda because their core rationale, focused on the market regulation and the rejection of austerity, transcended the programmatic choices and government policies of social democracy in the 1990s and 2000s (Moschonas 2014). The voluntarist role of French socialists, the active support of the new orientation by Belgian, Italian and Greek socialists, and the positive stance of the German SPD contributed to the final outcome (*ibidem*).

The implementation of the agenda, however, was far from successful. Socialist parties which were in office and participated in the European Council adopted austerity policies in utter contrast to the programmatic platform of the PES which, in many cases, they had actually endorsed. In effect, the leadership of the PES, under President Poul Nyrup Rasmussen and General Secretary Philip Cordery, led the PES on a programmatic course which many member parties were either not willing, or unable – on account of their programmatic elaborations and domestic party competition – to follow. Moreover, the need for compromise within the European Council contributed further to transform this programmatic success story into an implementation failure (French President Hollande’s U-turn and the stance of the SPD

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played a crucial part in that direction). The PES “failed” even as it assumed its role: such is the “paradox” which emerged during the debt crisis period (Moschonas, 2014: 257). The gap between the economic strategy of socialist governments, aimed at stabilizing public finances through fiscal consolidation policies, and that of the PES, aimed at growth policies and policies to regulate the power of markets, was huge. In short, the “supranational social democratic response to the crisis” (Bailey, 2014: 236) was contradictory and largely failed to materialize. And the PES’s response to the European meltdown proved to be weak (Holms and Lightfoot, 2014:216). The PES, despite the innovative activism of its leadership, has not proved capable of going beyond the congenital weaknesses of the “Europarty” form (Moschonas, 2014: 264). It was and still is a weak player.

### **Social democratic parties at the national level : joining the chorus of austerity**

How did national social democratic parties respond to the crisis from a programmatic point of view? And how did their post-crisis identity evolve? In the first years of the crisis (2008-2009), the response of governments – both social democratic and others – to the Great Recession was much faster, effective and uniform than that of the 1930s. Emergency Keynesianism prevailed everywhere<sup>13</sup>, though in some countries more than in others.

According to Pontusson and Raess, the menu of policy options which governments chose “can be characterized as ‘liberal Keynesian’, combining tax cuts and some spending increases with monetary easing, while resisting protectionist measures and eschewing targeted interventions as well as devaluations” (Pontusson and Raess, 2012: 14).<sup>14</sup> In the context of a – more or less – uniform and Keynesian response to address the crisis, the articulation of a specifically social

democratic response to the Great Recession never occurred. Given that all governments pursued various forms of Keynesian-style policies, the social democrats – who historically advocate a Keynesian rationale – found it difficult to make their added value obvious. This difficulty became more challenging because in the years 2008-2009 the majority of social democratic parties were in the opposition (e.g. in France and Sweden) or participated as minor partners in coalition governments (e.g. in Germany).

The Keynesian spell, however, was rather short. From 2010 onwards, the austerity measures were brought back on governments' agendas, indeed "with a force not witnessed in earlier decades" (Armingeon *et al*, 2015: 3). Fiscal discipline "has been proclaimed a paramount aim, thus making austerity the driving principle of the EMU as a whole" (Lapavitsas *et al*, 2017: 13). The course of social democratic parties was not very different. According to data from 11 countries, in the immediate post-crisis period European social democratic parties "shifted to the left with regard to issues relating to welfare/redistribution and economic liberalism (deregulation and privatizations) but they largely accepted the need for budgetary rigour and austerity policies" (Data from Bremer, 2018).<sup>15</sup> Thus, after the critical but short period when "the whole world became Keynesian again", fiscal consolidation prevailed and many social democratic parties "joined the chorus of austerity that became the dominant tune during the Euro crisis" (Bremer, 2018:24).

Undoubtedly, the ideational foundations of social democratic austerity are different from the neoliberal and ordoliberal matrix of ideas. As Bremer and McDaniel argue, the social democratic austerity is part of a composite fiscal consolidation strategy, according to which safeguarding the fiscal capacity of the state is a prerequisite for social democratic reformism. The state's capacity to act in a social democratic perspective in the mid- and in the long-term presupposes

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fiscal consolidation (and, hence, a form of austerity) along with policies largely inspired by supply-side economics and the social investment paradigm (Bremer and McDaniel, 2019)<sup>16</sup>.

However, the intellectual framework and ideational roots of social democratic austerity were unable to avert the development of a widespread belief that economic leftism was clearly declining. The semantics of action (versus the semantics of discourse) set the tone. In terms of government policies, the rationale of austerity prevailed. Let me refer to some indicative but emblematic cases.

The PASOK administration, under George Papandreou's premiership, which was elected in 2009 on a mild anti-austerity program (Sotiropoulos, 2014: 197) was very soon trapped in a muddle of big deficits and debt. Under extreme pressure from the EU and the IMF, in May 2010 it implemented the biggest programme of front-loaded fiscal adjustment which had ever been realized in post-war Western Europe. The PSOE administration, on the other hand, led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, after its re-election in 2008, implemented initially a Keynesian-style moderately expansive programme. However, it was led, in mid-2010 - under the fear of the contagion effect of the Greek crisis and the strong pressure from European institutions - through a "Copernican shift", to a strong restrictive programme (Deleplianne and Hardiman, 2012: 18-20; Moury et al., 2021: 110-113). In the United Kingdom, if the very determined management of the crisis by Labour Premier Gordon Brown should again be underlined, the Labour party adopted, fairly quickly and in order to demonstrate the economic competence of the Labour administration, a cuts and austerity strategy in "a deliberate attempt to sound like the Conservatives on the issue" (Marlière, 2014: 106).

However, President Hollande's case is the most typical example of divergence between programmatic statements and government action. After being elected in 2012 on the basis of an anti-austerity

platform, yet with the commitment to redress France's public finances in parallel, for some time he seemed to be a "game changer" within Europe (Andor, 2020: 645). His failure to change the European and clearly disciplinary Fiscal Compact and his turn to policies of fiscal consolidation marked the end of any hope for a progressive exit from the European crisis<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, the SPD, in a fiscally conservative country and under the influence of electoral calculations, supported in 2009 the vote for the "debt brake" as part of Germany's Basic Law. It also endorsed the so-called "black zero" budget rule, seeing as a great success the fact that, in 2014, Wolfgang Schäuble managed to attain the *Schwarze Null*. In effect, then, the social democratic austerity seemed to be evolving into austerity tout court.

In addition, the quick tightening of fiscal rules (Fiscal Compact, Six-Pack and so on) within the EU (the Fiscal Compact was signed on 2 March 2012) sealed – once again - the defeat of historical social democratic ideas at European level. Likewise, the social democrats' initial support of brutal austerity policies, such as the austerity imposed on Greece in the post-2010 years, made their differentiation from right-wing governments even more difficult. In a typical example, the Dutch Finance Minister Jeroen Dijsselbloem, who comes from the Labour Party (PvdA) and was President of the Eurogroup from 2013 to 2018, became, and not only for the Greek public opinion, the emblematic advocate – together with, but a little less than, Wolfgang Schäuble – of austerity measures. The policies pursued by surplus countries – often with social democratic governments or with social democrats participating in the administration – vis-à-vis the indebted countries contributed to the identification of socialist governments with the austerity logic.

As a result, the battle to redefine the social democratic reformist imaginary was quickly lost. In effect, it was a battle which was only fought in an incomplete and fragmented way, with no political inspiration,

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coordination or cohesion. The differentiation of the PES and of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) Group in the European Parliament, just like the differentiation of the opposition parties, such as the French PS (prior to 2012) or the Belgian PS, did not suffice to make a difference. Even if the centre-left retracted parts of its third way policies and to some extent distanced its rhetoric from the neoliberal convergence of the period prior to the Great Recession, this repositioning was far from decisive. The twofold acceptance of competitiveness as master policy paradigm (Miró, 2017: 7) and of fiscal consolidation, in spite of the differentiation of the social democrats from the neoliberal version of both, largely overlapped with the neo- and ordoliberalism ideas (Bremer and McDaniel, 2019: 18). Thus, the post-crisis social democratic narrative was not convincing. The neoliberal bias and the status-quo bias of the austerity and competitiveness rationales were (and still are) very strong<sup>18</sup>. Hence, a distinctly social democratic policy for the economy, the state and social welfare was never actually articulated. As a result, the European social democracy became “one of the primary political casualties of the crisis” (Ryner, 2014: 72). And not just in terms of election results.

## **From the refoundation of the thirties to the self-defeat of the Great Recession**

The tumultuous 1930s renewed political and economic ideologies and changed the political landscape for many decades. Social democracy was a component and partly a crucial actor of this momentum, inasmuch as, amid the crisis, it revised and redefined its identity.

However, the transformation of social democracy did not come about easily and was neither fast nor consistent. Historical Marxism did not offer practical tools and techniques for managing the economy in the short term. And even less did it have any solutions for dealing with

economic crises. The great crisis that erupted in 1929 exposed this deficit in economic policy in a violent and – particularly in the case of defeated and debt-ridden Germany– dramatic way. Initially, the failure of the British Labour and the SPD (the two important socialist parties in power when the crisis broke out in October 1929) to formulate an alternative economic policy for confronting the crisis had severe consequences. Their economic and social policies proved to be ineffective and ideologically self-defeating.

In Sweden, on the other hand, the rise of the SAP to power in 1932 –some three long years after the outbreak of the crisis– laid the foundations for the famous social-democratic model. The pillars of the new policy were: a mild Keynesianism *avant la lettre* (Notermans, 2000: 120-121), the promotion of innovative social policies, alliance with the agricultural parties, cooperation between social partners, protectionism (Frieden, 2006, Chapter 10; Sassoon, 1996: 42-46; Telò, 1988: 168–180) – and, last but not least, an inclusive vision of Swedish society as the “people’s home” (Berman 2006: 162-167).

SAP’s heterodox crisis program engendered heated political debates. Many political and academic observers argued that the crisis program would be a disaster. In spite of ferocious criticisms, objections and predictions warning of catastrophes by conservative political and financial circles (Anderson and Snow, 2003: 95-98), SAP’s bold economic policies proved to be a great success. In contrast to what happened in Britain and Germany, or in France under the Popular Front (1936-1938), the SAP “became associated with strong economic competence, which gave the party a major advantage over its political opponents” (Tsarouhas, 2013: 348). It was the first time in the history of the Western European Left that a social democratic party combined left-wing identity and economic efficiency. The new social democracy had been born (Moschonas, 2018: 529-531).<sup>19</sup> It would continue to be present for decades to come – just like the ingredients of a new

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economic policy mix.

However, the success of the SAP did not come out of the blue. After the outbreak of the 1929 crisis, the quest for a new economic model had become part of an intellectual agenda which transcended the pre-crisis ideological and party divisions. The belief that an economic phase –free enterprise and the free market – was coming to an end and another phase was beginning was deep-seated in the thinking of a considerable part of the economic, technical, intellectual and political elites of the time. Many, and very different, people converged in the pursuit of a new economic rationalism, which should encompass some kind of “social economic planning”– a trend that was further enhanced by the resilience demonstrated in the crisis by the centrally planned economy of the Soviet Union (Horn 1996: 74-75). The prolonged inefficacy of the responses to the crisis, the numerous impasses, and the new ideas which were gradually gaining ground, all contributed to the emergence of a political opportunity structure which was conducive to the formulation of policy alternatives. However, although it was the numerous twists and turns of this sharp and long crisis that facilitated the process of the ideological reorientation of the social democratic parties, it was the programmatic beliefs, the structured agenda and the leadership aptitude of the Swedish social democrats that actually transformed the new economic and political culture into a successful political strategy (Berman, 1998). What was growing in a disorderly and unsystematic manner – in many countries simultaneously – acquired strategic content and transformative power and led to a paradigm shift.

### **Failing backward: Understanding social democratic programmatic stagnation**

In contrast to the Great Depression, the duration of the cataclysmic phase – the chaotic effervescence period – of the Great Recession was much shorter than the protracted disruption of the post-1929

period. The Pandora's box of uncontrolled economic dynamics closed quickly – at least in the USA and in the majority of European countries, as emergency Keynesianism stabilized floundering economies. Hence, within the political opportunity structure created by Keynesian policies (pursued even by neoliberal governments), social democracy's "ability to differ" was limited from the beginning. Indeed, despite the turn of many social democratic parties to the left, a political alternative was never articulated in a structured form. The social democrats, confronted with flexible and, for a brief moment, "Keynesian" opponents, did not manage to propose a distinct agenda to exit the crisis.

Would this have been easy? Not at all. Keynesianism, as a generally accepted economic strategy to address the emergency of the crisis, confined the scope of alternative economic proposals for all parties and not just for social democratic parties. In essence, the historical opportunity for the left in the first phase of the crisis (2007-2009) was less "historical" than it appeared in the dramatic weeks of the autumn of 2008. A successful programmatic and policy strategy with a social democratic seal could not easily be articulated.

From 2010 onward, with the swift transition from the financial crisis to the sovereign debt crisis, the national social democratic parties adopted – to varying extents – the austerity approach. Their rhetoric did become more pro-welfare and more anti-neoliberal<sup>20</sup> compared to the pre-crisis period, but they became even more supportive of budgetary rigour than they had been before the crisis (Bremer, 2018: 33).

The socialists' strategy which was focused on fiscal consolidation needs some explaining. The increased deficits and debt in the years 2008 and 2009 had strengthened the belief among policy makers and mainstream economists that fiscal consolidation should be a key priority. The debt crisis made this belief exceptionally strong. The

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economic and political mainstream, both in the creditor and in the debtor countries, largely became austerity oriented.

Especially in the countries of the north, the rule violation, the weak taxation regime and the fiscal populism of Greek administrations (Moschonas, 2020c: 383-387) provided the *argumentum ad nauseam* in favour of fiscal consolidation. The argument was decisive because it linked national interests (the taxpayers of the more affluent members of the eurozone should not have to pay for the consequences of the fiscal irresponsibility of other countries such as Greece) with European interests (the EU, with stricter fiscal rules, ought to avert the moral hazard of the fiscal unreliability of individual national governments). Thus, the founding pillar of the conservative economic philosophy which rules in the EU, viz. that fiscal rigour is a prerequisite for competitiveness, assumed a critical *moral dimension* (which greatly appealed to the public opinion of eurozone creditor countries): fiscal rigour was not just correct from an economic perspective; it was also essential from a moral perspective<sup>21</sup>. *La boucle a été bouclée*.

This ideological atmosphere which prevailed within the “Good north” delegitimized important voices within social democracy and within the broader left, which were either distrustful of or very negative towards both national austerity policies and the European austerity which was imposed on the peripheral European countries. The quest for credibility and respectability, with a view to enhancing their influence on the national political arenas, prompted social democratic parties to adopt the budgetary rigour rationale – much more than in the pre-crisis period. The defeated but still vivid ideology of the third way, on the one hand, and national interests and domestic electoral considerations on the other, prevailed.

Moreover, the fact that the social democrats adopted policies that were strongly influenced by “national interests” (economic, electoral, etc.) prevented them from presenting a specifically –and coordinated

– social democratic response to the debt crisis. In a way, the change of leadership in the PES (Sergei Stanishev was elected as President of the PES in 2012 thanks to the German's support) signalled the end of any ambitious attempt for a transnational social democratic response to the European crisis. Still, it was François Hollande's decisive U-turn in October 2012 to endorse the "Fiscal Compact" that definitively detached social democracy from the prospect of a European policy which would be closer to its own core ideology. It was in the same way, *mutatis mutandis*, that François Mitterrand's U-turn had definitively detached social democracy from Keynesian politics in 1983. "In France they turned and turned again", wrote, with a certain sarcasm, Donald Sassoon, in reference to Mitterrand's U-turn (Sassoon, 2021: 64). Historically, mainstream and less orthodox views go together within French socialism. As a consequence, the French economic U-turns, given the influential role of France within the EU, may have done the most to damage the programmatic prospects of the European social democratic family.

Overall, neither during the financial crisis (2008-2009) nor during the debt crisis (after 2010) did social democratic parties articulate in a politically clear and structured manner their own distinct response to the crisis. For the social democrats the outcome of the Great Recession was very different from the outcome of the Great Depression. This time they failed to redefine their identity in a post-liberal direction and to thus renew their reformist project and imaginary. If "the EU appears to "fail forward" [...] again and again responding to the failures of incremental reforms by taking new steps to expand the scope and intensity of integration" (Jones et al. 2015:3), social democracy failed backward. The social democratic failure had a negative impact both on the overall profile and politics and on the electoral performance of the European social democratic family.

## **Conclusions: Whence is the renewal of social democracy to come?**

The social democratic response to the crisis was composite and full of internal inconsistencies. It transpired at two levels.

At a strictly EU level, the debt crisis energized the PES, prompting the party to adopt a post-third way and largely anti-neoliberal agenda. However, also at a strictly European level and specifically in the European Council, the socialist parties which participated in it supported the austerity oriented and fiscally conservative policies of this central European body. Thus, the Socialists' European response *sensu stricto* to the debt crisis was neither uniform nor consistent.

At a national level, in the first phase of the crisis (2008-2009), social democratic parties, "contrary to common perceptions in the media" (Bremer, 2018, 24), took a turn to the left: they enhanced their pro-welfare profile, affirmed more than in the past the importance of the active state, and shifted – at least in their rhetoric – towards positions which pointed at the necessity to control the markets' unbridled dynamics. However, the crisis response of the social democrats, based on a kind of liberal Keynesianism, did not differ significantly from that of the neoliberal parties. In the second stage of the crisis, unique to the euro area, social democratic parties adopted – especially ruling parties – fiscal consolidation policies. Given the constellation of different and divergent positions inside the European socialist family, the overall response to the crisis was weak, pale and devoid of political robustness and intellectual force. At no point in the course of this chaotic and full of ups and downs crisis did national social democratic parties manage to substantially differentiate themselves and send out a strong message that social democracy was present, with its own agenda and voice. Social democracy did

not manage to differentiate itself in a politically relevant way from its right-wing rivals.

On the whole, without a coordinated and powerful message, without “any authentic rhetoric for change” (Brunkhorst, 2011:135), and trapped in the vicious circle of European constraints, the programmatic “offer” of the social democratic family lacked cohesion and political distinctiveness. If at times of uncertainty, disruption and chaos a political force has the opportunity – more than at times of normalcy – to renew its profile, social democracy did not manage to do so. Instead of recovering lost ground, in the end it emerged even weaker.

“The moments of greatest freedom are crisis points [...] Choices are more constrained in stable times,” Peter Gourevitch wrote in his seminal book on economic crises (Gourevitch, 1986: 240). However, if economic crises are not as much the game-changing events they used to be, whence is the renewal of social democracy to come? For social democratic parties, this is the critical question which emerges from the entire experience of the Great Recession. It is a question that remains relevant and also extends to the pandemic crisis. During the COVID-19 period, in order to address the economic impact of the pandemic, public authorities took extremely bold steps and they adopted the 2008 crisis management model. Even the structurally conservative European Union, which has turned low expectations into a cultural and policy *mentalité*, have adopted ambitious expansionary fiscal and monetary policies (Moschonas, 2020b). Thus, the actions of central banks and governments are more daring than those seen in 2008. In fact, it is the 2008 crisis, the first crisis of the new era, much more than the Great Crash, that serves as a benchmark (Moschonas, 2020b). It is therefore possible that the crisis responses to the pandemic shall limit – as they did in 2008 – the marketplace of ideas and, hence, the space for ideological and policy novelty.

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Parties are sites of ideological and policy distinctiveness. Only by differing can they endure and dominate their opponents. Globalization and, in a much more structured way, the EU, have considerably confined the scope for programmatic and policy innovation, as well as the reform potential for centre left parties (as well as for all mainstream parties). This is not equally true for US parties, which more than their European counterparts preserve their capacity for programmatic renewal and policy distinctiveness, as demonstrated by the policies of Trump and currently Biden.

Major economic crises are moments of great disruption that accelerate economic and political time and push in the direction of economic and political change. The argument of this paper is that this was much less true in the crises that occurred from 2007-08 onwards. Major economic crises, though experienced as turning points, are no longer such big breakthrough moments as was the crisis of 1929, even if this might still be possible under certain circumstances. As far as social democracy is concerned, the weakening of the transformative impulse of the crises is - until proven otherwise (crises, per definition, tend to disrupt the status quo) - an important development that particularly affects reform-oriented political forces. In an era in which globalisation and European integration affect mainstream parties' ability to perform primary functions, such as the ability to formulate and implement distinct economic policies, the debilitation of the economic crises' transformative potential decreases further the social-democratic parties' capacity to renew themselves.

## Endnotes

- 1 An initial assessment of the topic “economic crises and economic and political change” was provided in Moschonas 2020a and Moschonas 2020b. These two interrelated articles took into account the 1929 and 2008 crises with the aim of formulating informed hypotheses about the impact of the COVID crisis on the relations between the state, markets and politics. Sections 1 and 2 of the present essay, though substantially reworked, draw from these two earlier papers, with some excerpts taken verbatim from them. However, the thematic and research focus of the present essay is considerably different; emphasis is now placed on the Great Recession (and not on the COVID-19 crisis) and the social democratic response to it (sections 3 and 4). This last topic – which is key in the present analysis – falls outside the scope of the two earlier papers.
- 2 This section, largely reworked, has its origin in Moschonas 2020a
- 3 The “Mountains of derivatives” (MBS, CDOs, CDS, etc.) (Blinder and Zandi, 2015) and “shadow banking” are two examples of financial innovation.
- 4 [...] it was the U.K. government—together with the U.S. administration—that called for a coordinated expansive fiscal response at the G20 meetings in London and Pittsburgh, while both France and Germany bluntly rejected the idea of a massive stimulus program (Armingeon, 2012: 10).
- 5 Relying heavily on the financial services, “the British economy has been one of the hardest hit in Europe by the collapse of the banking industry” (Marière, 2014: 99).
- 6 Especially in the USA, the easing of the Volcker Rule (which had been introduced in the context of the Dodd-Frank Act in 2010 and was primarily aimed at the protection of deposits from traders’ risky games), announced in August 2019, once again allows room for Wall Street to partly resume the risky practices of the past (see [www.ft.com/content/aa8f28f4-c43a-11e9-a8e9-296ca66511c9](http://www.ft.com/content/aa8f28f4-c43a-11e9-a8e9-296ca66511c9) and [www.ft.com/content/df55ff14-c8ad-11e9-a1f4-3669401ba76f](http://www.ft.com/content/df55ff14-c8ad-11e9-a1f4-3669401ba76f)).
- 7 Even the content – and not just the extent – of the monetary easing policies of the ECB, which is considered to be the most independent among central banks, was affected by the differing pressures of national political elites (Reisenbichler 2019).
- 8 The often cynical handling of the Greek case has shown, from the perspective of democratic theory, that consensus systems are not always “kinder and gentler” forms of government.
- 9 This section is based on previous analyses and arguments partly reworked (see Moschonas 2020a and 2020b).
- 10 The “mass financialized wealth”, largely linked to the rising wealth of the middle classes, has decisively shaped the trend in favour of extensive bailouts during crises (Chwieroth and Andrew, 2019 and 2021).
- 11 Greece was the only country where three Economic Adjustment Programmes were implemented. As a consequence, post-conditionality scrutiny has been stricter in Greece than in Portugal, Spain, Ireland and Cyprus (Moury et al. 2021: 61, 157).
- 12 Scholars specializing in party programmes usually study the programmatic production of parties at a national level. The weakness of parties at European level (of the so-called

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Europarties) and their minimalistic programmatic production can largely explain this tendency. However, in the first phase of the debt crisis the PES transcended standard practices and proposed a structured set of ideas as a response to the crisis but also – to some extent – for the reform of the EU.

- 13 Nonetheless, among 34 countries included in a study, a group of nine countries opted, for a number of reasons, for fiscal policies intended to scale down public expenditure (Armington, 2012:17).
- 14 "Whereas social Keynesianism emphasizes public spending and redistributive measures to sustain long-term prosperity, liberal Keynesianism focuses on demand stimulation during economic downturns and favours tax cuts over spending increases" (Pontusson and Raess, 2012:31).
- 15 These countries include seven northern European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) and four southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) see Bremer (2018: 27).
- 16 Even before the financial crisis, in the 1990s and 2000s, the social democratic programmatic rationale and actions – even in the most liberal versions of third way politics – did not fully adopt the neoliberal agenda. The social democratic logic of the 1990s and 2000s was composite and combined themes and ideas which can be tied in with the neoliberal matrix of priorities with traditional (and less traditional) leftist values and policy goals (Moschonas, 2005: 36-38. Also: Fulla and Lazar, 2021: 50, 84-86). The state's regulatory activism in sectors such as human resources, research, education, culture, or social mores remained central (Fulla and Lazar, 2021:84-86). In terms of economic strategy, however, neoliberal policies and the retreat of economic leftism largely set the tone and determined the overall ideological orientation.
- 17 It is worth noting, however, that the French (and Portuguese) socialists adopted a weakly negative position towards budgetary rigour during the crisis after they had shifted their positions towards the left compared to the pre-crisis period (Bremer, 2018:33).
- 18 The methods to raise competitiveness "include primarily wage compression, privatisation of public assets and deregulation of markets" (Lapavistas et al, 2017: 13). For the countries that asked for a bailout, such as Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Cyprus, see Moury et al. (2021:17-18, 153).
- 19 Historically, the two *major* formation periods of social democracy are: the classic Erfurtian one (1889-1914) and then the 1930s (Moschonas, 2018).
- 20 With few exceptions, such as the Dutch PvdA and the Italian PD, which adopted a more ambiguous position towards the welfare state (Bremer, 2018: 32).
- 21 A typical reaction can be seen in the words of Social Democrat and Germany's Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, as reported in *Bild* (15 June 2015): "The game theorists of the Greek government are in the process of gambling away the future of their country.... Europe and Germany will not let themselves be blackmailed. And we will not let the exaggerated electoral pledges of a partly communist government be paid for by German workers and their families" (cited by Varoufakis (2017).

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Cornel BAN

**The Political Economy of Wage  
Growth in FDI-Led  
East-Central Europe:  
Towards a Kaleckian Stand-off?**

## **Keywords**

**Growth model, Central and Eastern Europe, Export-led,  
FDI-led, Capitalist diversity**

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the consolidation of an FDI-led exportist growth model in the Central and East European region by drawing on an alternative school of thought to Varieties of Capitalism: growth regimes. The paper shows that despite marginal shifts towards consumption-led growth through personal debt or wage increases, the core of the region's economic model continues to be heavily dependent on exports. This growth model absorbed even countries that were consumption-led before 2008 and generated GDP, consumption and export growth rates well above those in core European countries. These changes consolidated the export-led model that remained in place even amidst political reconfigurations that, at least rhetorically, aimed to fight the economic dependency of the region on FDI. After the 2008 crisis ended, however, the closing of the debt-finance consumption channel combined with the German export boom to the rest of the world and local demographic decline to put upwards pressure on wage-financed consumption increases without inflationary or external balance problems. Until the 2022 anti-inflationary policy turn, despite historically low spreads in the region's bond markets, the wage growth spurt did not count as a full Kaleckian turn, however, with the region's contribution of consumption to GDP growth remaining far below both consumption-led growth regimes and balanced ones.

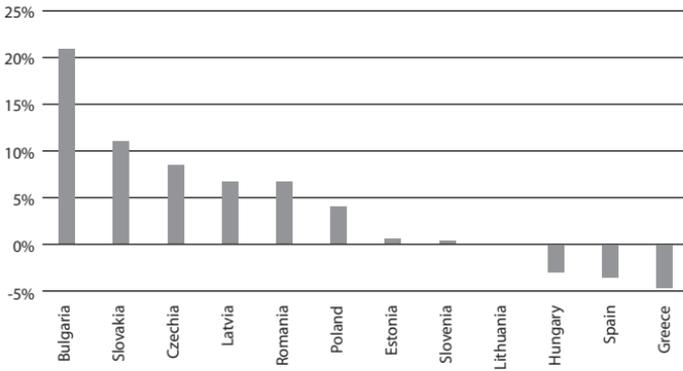
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According to Baccaro and Pontusson (2016), the Kaleckian path to growth should be consumer demand stimulated by real wage increases, deficit spending and income redistribution via both taxation and government expenditure. An increase in the wage share means that real wages increase while labour productivity remains constant. In this regard, the case of ECE is interesting in the sense that after the crisis ECE states have used, on average, a quasi-Kaleckian path via real wage increases at constant productivity but with few improvements in terms of taxation and government spending. The consumption boom seems to have been predominantly of the wage-led kind, with minimum wage and public sector increases playing a key role. The CEECs led the wave of wage increases above 2018 levels, with growth rates 2 to 3 times larger than in the average Eurozone member states. Hungary and Croatia proved to be the only counties where internal devaluation was taken seriously. The result of unilateral minimum and public sector wage increases, this incomes policy was not reliant on deficit spending or higher debt as a share of GDP. Indeed, all countries cut debt levels as a share of GDP and with the exception of Romania (second highest real wage growth) and Hungary (negative real wage growth), where the budget deficit ran close to 3 percent, they ran deficits close to the EZ average and, increasingly, surpluses.

Of these, Poland, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia and Bulgaria have had the most pronounced Kaleckian edits, as they increased the adjusted wage share, their annual net earnings per worker and hourly pay (figures 1,2,3). At the other end of the spectrum stands Hungary, where wage increases during the past few years have been insufficient to return to 2009 levels. Still, with hourly labour costs in Greece still far above the

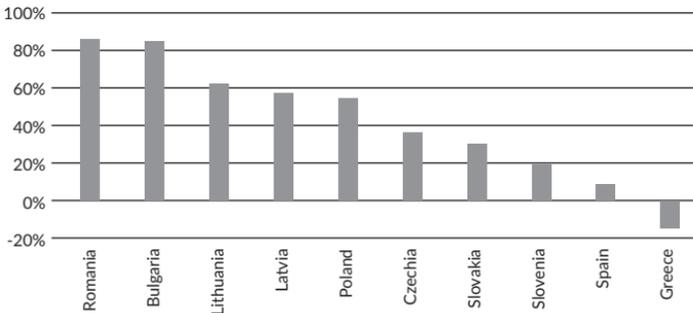
highest ECSEE costs (Czechia and Estonia), there is still room for wage appreciation (figure 15).

**Figure 1: Change in adjusted wage share 2009-2019.**



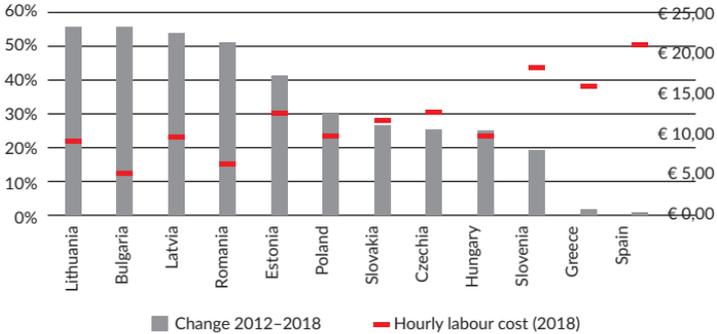
Source: AMECO.

**Figure 2: Change in annual net earnings (100% of average worker) 2009-2018.**



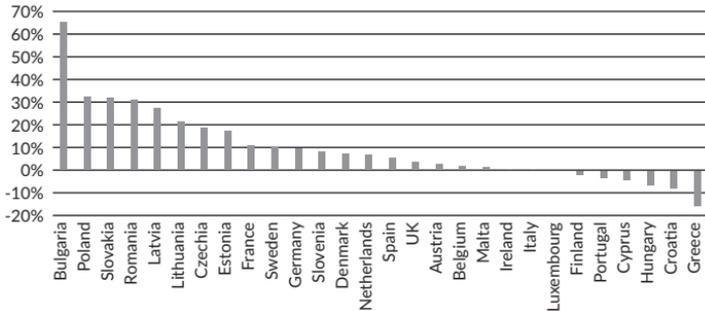
Source: Eurostat [earn\_nt\_net].

**Figure 3: Increase in hourly pay (left axis) and hourly labor costs (right axis).**



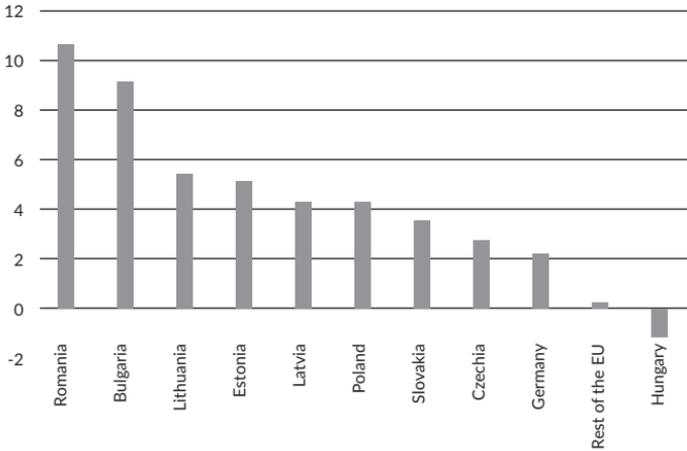
Source: Eurostat [lc\_ici\_lev].

**Figure 4 Change in real wages between 2008 and 2018. Source: Ameco.**



In contrast to wage increases, social expenditures were cut from already low levels in five ECEs (Poland, Slovenia, Hungary, Czechia) and increased in the other five (Romania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Slovakia), with no apparent pattern. How about redistribution towards labour via taxation? To increase consumption, governments increase wages in the public sector among other measures (minimum wage increases,

**Figure 5: Real minimum wage growth (yearly average 2010-2017)**

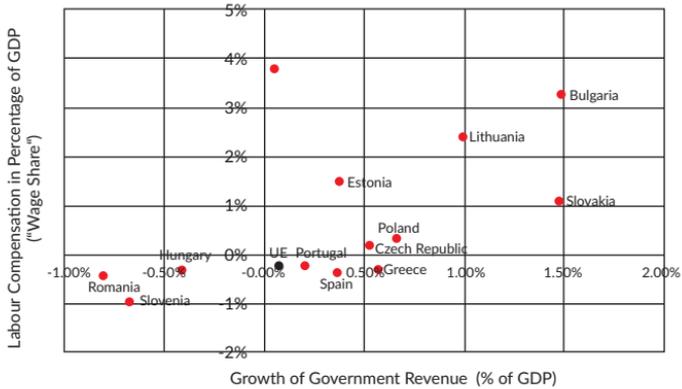


labour union laws) and this particular measure can have multiplier effects in the private sector. To do this, they can take on more debt or raise more revenues. All ECE countries cut their public debt to GDP ratio and all but Romania, Hungary and Slovenia increased government revenue as a share of GDP (figure 6), a pattern that suggests that wage increases via the public wage bill are macroeconomically sustainable in most of the region.

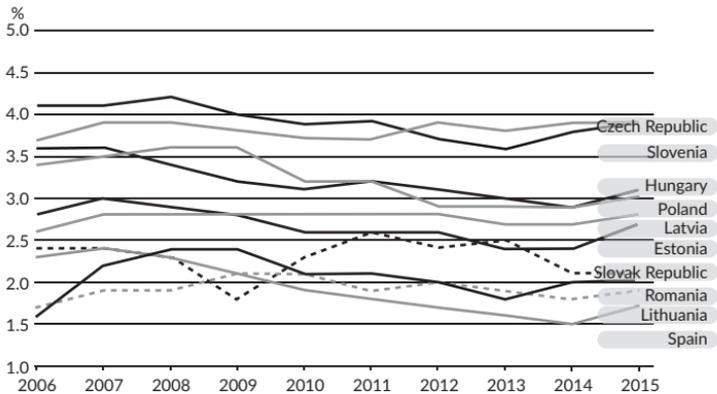
However, unlike in the case of Sweden analyzed by Bacarro and Pontusson, it turns out that in the ECSEE’s growing export earnings and the wage increases far above Eurozone levels did not boost demand for less skilled labour, shoring up real wages at the lower end of the earnings distribution. As the figure below shows, the income share of the “bottom” 10 percent ranged between stagnation and decline, an outcome that we suspect has to do with the underdeveloped welfare states in the region, with crisis time inequality increases caused mostly by loss of employment (Brezezinski 2018).

**Figure 6: Growth of government revenue as a share of GDP and growth of wage share**

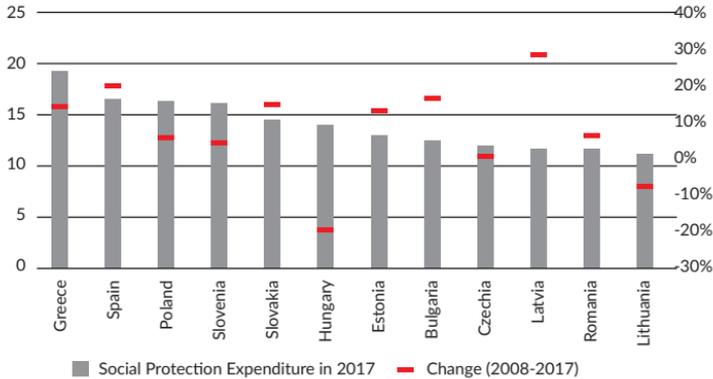
Growth of Government Revenue v Wage Share (2013-2018)



**Figure 7: Income share of the lowest 10 percent**



**Figure 8: Social protection expenditure change**



How stable is a wage-led editing likely to be? For Baccaro and Pontuson, to have long-term growth and no external crises, these wage-led increases in consumption should be accompanied by (a) increases in profits and investment as well as by (b) increases in highly competitive and price inelastic (i.e high value added, high complexity) exports of goods and tradeable services as a way to forestall a deterioration of the current account balance. If the former condition does not hold, growth will be short term. If the second does not hold there will be a current account crisis and, therefore, cuts in consumption, output and employment as a way to recover competitiveness. Finally, from a macroeconomic regime perspective, (c) wage-led consumption increases may destabilize the growth regime via inflation spikes.

The figures below show that while wage shares have increased between 2009 and 2018 in most CEECs corporate investments have generally declined while in some countries profits have also dwindled. Amongst CEE countries, Romania and Slovakia stand out in terms of decline of both investment and profit levels while Poland, Hungary and lberia are remarkable cases of profit recovery. These are the countries

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that have also registered amongst the highest increases in wage shares. Does this mean that the wage-led editing of the CEEC regime is doomed?

We performed a simple regression analysis on the data and found a statistically significant and negative correlation between real wage increases and investment (figure 9). However, when the outliers on wage growth (Bulgaria) and investment (Ireland) were added, the correlation became statistically insignificant at 0.3. Of course, the fall in investment can be attributed to a wide array of factors, from the draining of the labour pool to the disproportionate effects of the crisis on investment flows in the periphery). Yet overall the results are not decisively in favour of the argument that wage-led consumption increases are necessarily doomed by an investment ceiling.

In contrast, there seems to be a profit ceiling limiting the editing of the CEECs growth model: we found a statistically significant and negative relationship between wage increases and profit decreases, which suggests that although the gap between wage adjusted productivity and pay provides more technical room for wage increases, the CEECs may have reached the frontier of possibilities when it comes to reconciling wage increases with corporate profit maximizing opportunities. The notable exception seems to be the “nationalist” path in Hungary where, for all the rhetoric, there seems to have occurred

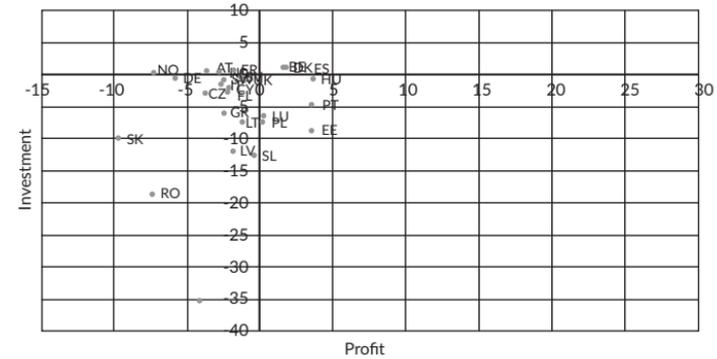
**Figure 9 Change in corporate investments and profits: 2008-2018.**

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. pwcorr wage_incr investment, sig star(.05) obs
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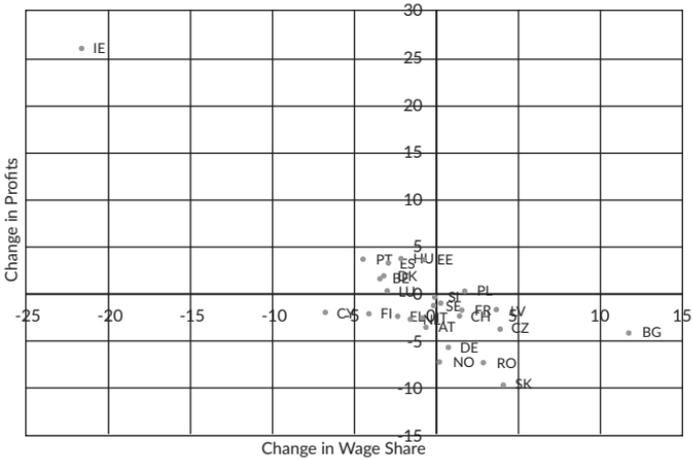
	wage_i-r	invest-t
wage_incr	1.0000	
	25	
investment	-0.2069	1.0000
	0.3211	25
	25	25

	ws_cha-e	profit
ws_change	1.0000	
	25	
profit	-0.8693*	1.0000
	0.0000	25
	25	25

**Figure 10: Change in wage share (2009-2018) and profits (2008-2018).**

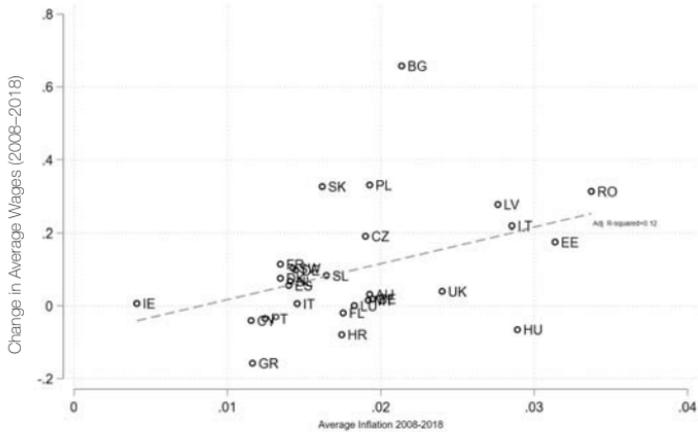


(a)



(b)

Figure 11: Average wages and average inflation



an exceptional restoration of corporate profits which, given the exceptionally FDI-dominated nature of the Hungarian economy, must have accrued disproportionately to foreign shareholders. If indeed Hungary was the financially nationalist regime of Central Europe par excellence and the regime there sought to gain political legitimacy by showing the macroeconomic success of Hungary compared to the failure of Southern Europe, when it comes to corporate profits Hungary has indeed gone the Southern European way.

Regarding inflation, the scatterplot below shows that there is no link between inflation and wage growth in Europe (even in Romania, at 3 percent average inflation, the wage growth was somewhere around 30 percent), with no statistically significant relationship between the two variables. In short, the wage-led editing of the growth model did not have a significant inflation problem overall.

The wage-led consumption did not result in a clear deterioration of the current account. Poor wage growth in Hungary resulted in surpluses, but so did robust wage growth in Czechia Estonia and

**Figure 12: Current account balance**

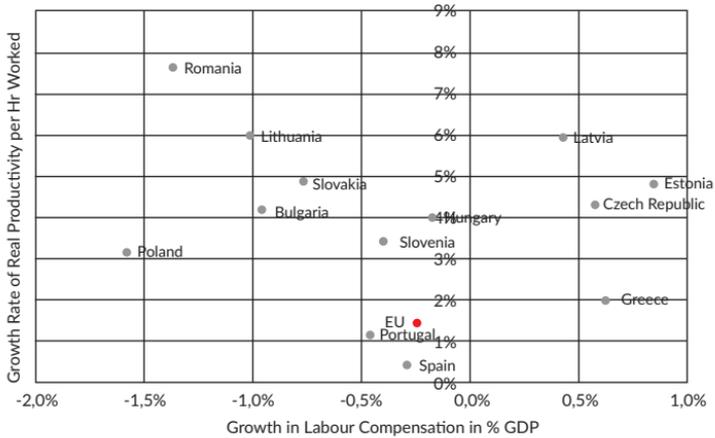
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Bulgaria	1.2	0.1	3.2	3.5	5.4
Czechia	0.2	0.2	1.6	1.7	0.3
Estonia	0.7	1.8	1.7	2.7	2
Greece	-0.7	-0.8	-1.7	-1.9	-2.8
Spain	1.7	2	3.2	2.7	1.9
Poland	-2.1	-0.6	-0.5	0.1	
Portugal	0.2	0.2	1.1	1.2	0.4
Romania	-0.2	-0.6	-1.4	-2.8	-4.4
Slovenia	5.1	3.8	4.8	6.1	5.7
Slovakia	1.1	-2.1	-2.7	-1.9	-2.6
Hungary	1.2	2.3	4.6	2.3	-0.5
Latvia	-2.3	-0.9	1.4	1	-0.7
Lithuania	3.5	-2.4	-1.1	0.5	0.3

Slovenia. The largest wage increases and current account surpluses came from Bulgaria, while Romania's strong wage growth came with persistent current account deficits that are nevertheless far from posing refinancing problems. To top it off, this incomes policy was not reliant on higher debt as a share of GDP. Indeed, all countries cut debt levels as a share of GDP and with the exception of Romania (second highest real wage growth) and Hungary (no real wage growth), where the budget deficit ran close to 3 percent, they ran deficits close to the EZ average and, increasingly, surpluses.

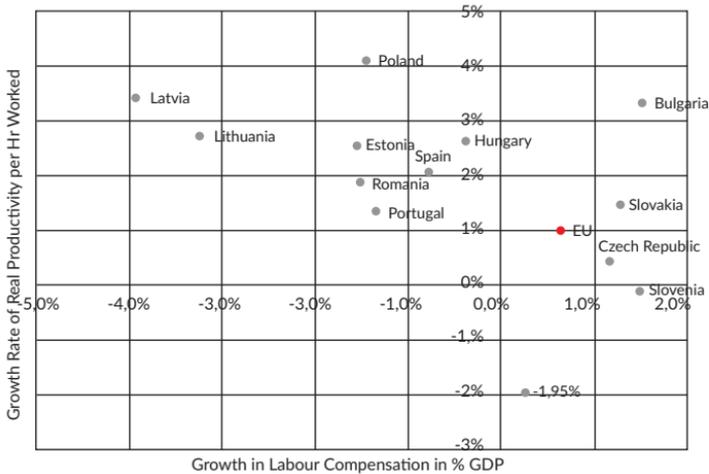
Finally, the CEECs growth model relies on a labour productivity gap that far exceeds the EU average. As the figures below show, throughout the region, between 2000 and 2008 wages fell behind productivity but while labour compensation in GDP increased slightly in Estonia, Latvia and the Czech Republic, the labour compensation fell dramatically



**Figure 13: Growth Rate of Wages in GDP v. Productivity (2000–2008)**



**Figure 14: : Growth Rate of Wages in GDP v. Productivity (2009–2012)**



behind productivity, and particularly in Romania (+8 percent productivity per hour and -1.4 wage growth). The internal devaluation of the crisis years (2008-2013) reproduced these patterns, but the recovery years (2013-2018) led to wages tracking productivity performance and even exceeding it in Bulgaria and Latvia, with Romania as the only country where labour was squeezed, with nearly 4.7 percent growth in productivity per hour and negative wage growth of 0.2 percent.

## Conclusions

The 2008 crisis proved to be an opportunity to put an end to the hybridization of export and consumption-led growth in ECE and reinforce the export-led component of growth through short-term austerity measures and deeper labour market reforms. These changes consolidated the export-led model that remained in place even amidst political reconfigurations that, at least rhetorically, aimed to fight the economic dependency of the region on FDI.

After the crisis ended, however, the closing of the debt-finance consumption channel combined with the German export boom to the rest of the world and local demographic decline to put upwards pressure on wage-financed consumption increases without inflationary or external balance problems. Yet despite historically low spreads in the region's bond markets, this did not count as a full Kaleckian turn, as the region's contribution of consumption to GDP growth remained far below both consumption-led growth regimes and balanced ones. Moreover, the pandemic has already begun to reverse these Kaleckian struggles, perhaps resetting the export-led growth engine, with all its contradictions, to its central importance.

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**PROGRESSIVE  
PROPOSALS FOR THE**

# **TURBULENT**

**TIMES:  
HOW TO BOOST THE POLITICAL,  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
AND ELECTORAL POTENTIAL**

3

**PROGRESSIVE  
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# **TURBULENCE**

**TIMES:  
HOW TO BOOST THE POLITICAL,  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
AND ELECTORAL POTENTIAL**



**Reviving the Movement:  
the Organisational Design that  
Engages the Individuals**

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Felix BUTZLAFF

**Opening up and centralising  
at the same time?  
The democratisation of European  
party organisations**

## **Keywords**

**Political Parties, Social Movements, Social Democracy,  
Christian Democracy, Conservatism, Modernisation,  
Individualisation, Democratisation**

## **Abstract**

Since the 1980s, parties from almost all party families in established Western democracies have debated how to encounter shrinking trust, declining membership and dissolving social milieus. As a consequence, political parties have incorporated different elements of social movements into party organisation. Yet, the way that parties face changing demands and the way they seek to adapt the idea of a political party differs greatly between countries and party families. Based on a series of qualitative interviews with organisers and functionaries from social democratic and Christian democratic/conservative parties, I explore which changes in their members' and voters' demands they perceive and how parties envision a modern form of representative democracy. Using the lens of social theory to gain an empirical perspective on the relationship between parties, affiliated members, and sympathisers the paper scrutinizes how parties reflect individualisation, fragmented identities, and the ideal of parties becoming movements. Whereas social democratic parties are confronted with rising demands for formal influence of members and grassroots as well as an increasing expectation for political leadership at the same time, Christian-democratic/conservative parties experience much less tensions arising from shifting supporter expectations. The paper concludes by revisiting the political possibilities for different party families in addressing these different modernisation-induced ambivalences and tensions.

## The pressure to become movements

Since the 1980s, parties from almost all party families in established Western democracies have debated how to encounter shrinking trust, declining membership and dissolving social milieus. As a consequence, political parties have incorporated different elements of social movements into party organisation. As bureaucratic and hierarchical party organisations began to look clumsy and inflexible, parties facilitated more direct forms of membership participation, individualised participation opportunities, and centralised their structure in order to provide more efficient political decision-making. A short glimpse at political parties left and right shows that, apparently, the promise of political and social change today is required to be more movement-fuelled than ever before: from UK's Momentum movement to the French LREM, from the Austrian ÖVP to the contemporary right-wing populists in many European countries. Several party scholars have therefore suggested that political parties increasingly turn to social movement as an organisational role-model for themselves (Della Porta et al. 2017). The bottom line is that political parties seem to feel the urge to pretend to not be party organisations anymore, but to facilitate more flexible and less committing forms of citizen involvement and mobilisation.

A perspective on the organisational change of political parties sheds light on how parties react to changing social surroundings – and how expectations and hopes for democratic participation, representation and political leadership have evolved. In order to analyse these, we might resort to social theory approaches on the development

of Western societies, which have suggested a deeply remoulded meaning of democracy, participation and individual identity. Inter alia, the concepts of “liquid identity” (Bauman 2012), “post-politics” (Wilson und Swyngedouw 2014) and the “post-democratic turn” (Blühdom und Butzlaff 2019, 2020) have conceptualised how established mechanisms of democracy are being considered more and more ambivalent. On the one hand, these concepts suggest that democratic values are thriving and that the direct participation of members and citizens has become a public norm (Saurugger 2010). On the other hand, and very prominently during the current COVID-19 pandemic, these approaches emphasise that democracy no longer entails an emancipatory promise and that representative democracies have greatly lost public support and trust (Mair 2013). Consequently, scholars working on political parties have detected several tensions and paradoxes between inner-party democratisation and the centralisation of leadership (Faucher 2015; Gauja 2017; Katz und Mair 2018) They have asked whether the realised organisational changes were genuinely democratic, or if they were only staging and simulating democratisation.

In this contribution, I examine how parties react to changing societal conditions and expectations of members, sympathisers, and voters. Through the lens of social theory, I argue that growing democratic ambivalence and new political subjectivities have changed democratic expectations altogether, yet affect parties and party families differently. Different party families seem to perceive of and react to modernisation-induced pressures for reform in very different ways. For instance, the social democratic notions of what a social movement is and if it is desirable to be one, differ considerably from its conservative counterpart. Participatory preferences of supporters of right-wing parties might be easier to accommodate than the demands made by supporters and members of left-wing parties (Bennett et al. 2018). Left wing parties and right-wing populists – at least rhetorically – seem

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to advocate measures of direct democracy much more readily than parties of the center-right (Correa-Lopera 2019).

This paper uses the lens of social theory to gain an empirical perspective on how the relationship between parties, affiliated members, and sympathisers is evolving – and on how parties reflect individualisation, fragmented identities, and the ideal of parties becoming movements. Based on a series of qualitative interviews with party organisers and observers in Austria, Germany, and the UK, I scrutinise how parties perceive, discuss, and confront shrinking trust and approval and how ideals of political organisation have shifted.

### **Fragmenting political identities**

Theorists of social modernisation have circled around the development of individualisation for a long time in an attempt to put a name on how societies evolve. Since the 1980s, they have described the dominating trend in Western societies as the crumbling of previously established certainties (Beck und Lau 2005) and solid social structures (Bauman 2012). Consequently, social modernity in Western societies is characterised by growing complexity and decreasing social predetermination of values and lifestyles. Furthermore, many scholars agree that it has led to an all-embracing imperative of flexibility and to a reluctance to be bound long-term to a social group, organisation, or other individuals (Sennett 1999).

Some scholars have described these developments as the result of ongoing emancipatory processes that free the individual from traditional social, economic, political boundaries and suppression (Beck 1992). Others in contrast have emphasised that individualisation has led to a growing gap between *de jure* and *de facto* liberties (Bauman 2012) and that a perceived imperative of flexibility brings social relations under increasing pressure (Sennett 1999). The task of establishing and

maintaining an individual identity, Beck, Bauman, and Sennett agree, is a permanently ongoing and never complete task. This is an important one which the individual in contemporary Western societies has to achieve alone, not within a social collective. As a result, social and collective organisations are experiencing a growing pressure (Beck 1992) and are losing legitimation to debate on matters of public and collective concern (Bauman 2012) as well as on visions and criteria for a future society (Sennett 1999). Others have followed up and have noted that individual identity has grown less socially predetermined and has increasingly turned into a matter of individual choice and self-construction (Cortois und Laermans 2017; Giddens 1991).

Kellner (1992), Gergen (1995) and many others have pointed to the rise of the 'fragmented subject' (Reckwitz 2010, S. 125) in modern consumer societies. They have argued that contemporary individuals no longer pursue traditional notions of identity – centred, consistent, stable and rationally integrated – but maintain a fragmented and dynamic patchwork of multiple identities that do not add up to a coherent and unified self. Rather than a pathological deviation, a 'corrosion of character' (Sennett 1999), or the failure to realise an aspired ideal, this shift towards new notions of the self, arguably, signals the liberation and emancipation from constraints imposed by traditional ideals of identity or their respective organisational equivalents.

This does not mean, as some critics suggest (Dawson 2012), that there is no hope for a certain re-collectivisation. Beck points at new, individualised classes (Beck 1992), Bauman at new nationalist tribes around the social campfire (Bauman 2017), and Sennett at a contemporary communitarianism (Sennett 1999). However, these perspectives underline that increasing dis-orientation and dis-embedding of the individual might lead to a rising demand for orientation, and a strong desire for symbolic belonging, community, and a "we" (Sennett 1999). To avoid the feeling of a total loss of control,

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the dissolution of boundaries makes new and provisional boundaries all the more necessary (Beck und Lau 2005; Sennett 1999).

For the functioning and legitimization of political parties, this has significant implications: on the one hand, ever-rising expectations for self-realisation and self-determination, paired with declining confidence in existing political institutions, lead to ever more vociferously articulated demands for more direct participation and representation. On the other hand, societal differentiation and the fragmentation of identities render social organisation, consensual decision-making and collective action ever more difficult. To the same degree that values and interests of the single individual are becoming ever more diverse, inconsistent and volatile, their organisation and consistent articulation – through political parties or movements – turns into a formidable challenge. Yet, in a modernising and ever more complex world, the expectation that parties provide orientation might be more important than ever.

Modernisation theory gives us an idea of how these changes in identity construction are making any collective form of organisation increasingly difficult. It might be highly interesting to see how different party organisations perceive, discuss, and adapt to these changing social surroundings. As party organisers and functionaries are subject to the same modernisation processes themselves, and as parties seek reforms and change on the grounds of an intra-party perception of shifting societies, consulting the parties' own perceptions might be promising.

### **Different modernities: how parties react to changing societies**

In order to understand how different party families perceive, discuss, and adapt to modernising social surroundings, I chose a qualitative empirical approach. Qualitative semi-structured interviews

with party functionaries, organisers, and experts in Germany, Austria, and the UK provide the basis for a better understanding of how intra-organisational perspectives seek to process and cope with societal modernisation and shifting social surroundings, and of how changing notions of democracy and participation might remould the institutions of representative and democratic decision-making.

In the UK, Germany, and Austria, social-democratic and conservative/Christian-democratic parties have – to a varying degree – debated and pursued processes of organisational change, of opening up and democratisation of inner-party decision-making, since the 1980s. For instance, the process of organisational renovation in the SPÖ (Tieber 1991) had already raised the issues developed in the previous section by the end of the 1980s, and has been ongoing since then with periodical processes of inner-party democratisation and an opening-up of structures (Micus 2011). The same applies to the German SPD where the debates around organisational reform have come back time and again since the beginning of the 1990s (Michels und Borucki 2020). The Labour Party's sharp rise in membership due to the Momentum movement has been observed with great curiosity by party planners all around Europe (Bale et al. 2020; Whiteley et al. 2019). Looking at the conservatives, the German CDU/CSU has been much more reserved when it comes to granting participation rights and influence to party members or even non-members. Still, the party increasingly organises regional conferences and more open processes when it comes to an election of party leaders and candidates as a result of increasing pressure from its members (Walter et al. 2011). Similarly, UK's Conservatives have traditionally granted very little formal influence to their members, but have still seen rising demands to open up structures for more intra-party democracy (Bale 2016; Bale et al. 2020). The most compelling example of organisational renovation in the European party landscape is the Austrian ÖVP, which transformed

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from an established and highly hierarchically structured *Volkspartei* into a political “movement”, and which presents itself as a loose movement of sympathisers concentrated round its charismatic leader, Sebastian Kurz (Bodlos und Plescia 2018). Therefore, differences regarding the research question can be expected across party families as well as across parties from different countries.

A short overview reveals that functionaries and observers of all parties agree that participatory expectations and democratic demands of citizens have shifted and are not easily matched anymore by traditional and hierarchically structured organisations. Regarding the diagnoses made by sociological theories of modernisation, the respondents share the opinion that citizens are much more hesitant to participate in a political party and rather aim for a project-based and temporary engagement than for a long-term membership commitment. New members, in the eyes of all six parties, have become an increasingly ephemeral phenomenon, which creates a series of organisational challenges. However, significant differences between parties and party families remain regarding the specific character of shifting demands, and how these developments affect the party’s organisation, political culture, and relationship with supporters and members.

### **Opening up the organisation?**

Demands of citizens to be involved have increased. Still, different party families and parties have interpreted these impressions in very different manners. The general picture is that for social democratic parties, the pressure to open up their traditional ways of organising is felt much more strongly, whereas Christian-democratic functionaries and observers agree to the finding, but underline that for their members and supporters, increasing intra-party democracy might not be of top priority. Also, rising participatory demands of members and supporters often appear to contradict social democratic party organisations more

harshly, as social democratic organisational self-understandings are still connected to the hierarchical and bureaucratic idea of a traditional class organisation. Consequently, the three social democratic parties appear to struggle most with demands for more and more direct participation of members and supporters.

For instance, functionaries of the SPÖ describe a long-term change of the Austrian social democracy from a party that had once aimed at revolutionary changes in society but has by now become a fierce defender of the status quo (see also Micus 2011; Sassoon 2010). In this perspective, the party's organisational structure and many of its functionaries have become self-referential and reluctant to open up for new members or new ideas. This could be understood as a heritage from its own organisational experience, when due to the exclusion and persecution of socialists a closed and tightly knit milieu-based organisation was crucial. *Not* opening up is what had made social democracy successful as a class organisation. However, it contrasts with the impression of many of the social democratic interviewees that in the contemporary scene people demand to fight not for a societal status quo but for a better, more equal and changing future.

To integrate seemingly contradictory demands for participation and orientation, the SPÖ party leadership has proposed several processes of opening up and deliberations on programme and visions. Yet, in the eyes of the interviewees, these processes often remain superficial and symbolic, whereas any serious reorganisation of power is clearly avoided. As with the SPÖ, SPD interviewees blame a clumsy and outdated hierarchical structure for inhibiting organisational change, yet to a considerably lesser degree. In contrast to the SPÖ, many of the interviewees, even more so with organisers and functionaries from local branches, emphasise the bottom-up culture of the German SPD, which in their views helps to incorporate changing participatory expectations.

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Yet, they also emphasise that (with the exception of a few experiments with trial membership and recent open working groups) the party remains firmly committed to the idea of a traditional membership organisation, thus increasing participatory opportunities for the members but not so much for supporters and sympathisers.

As for the Labour Party, many interviewees highlight that the unprecedented rise in membership figures following the campaign for leadership of Jeremy Corbyn was due to a similar perception of the “old”, established party structures. A party that had been considered out of sync with modern day progressive demands suddenly appeared to be open to new demands and policies, and even promised a new radicalism in politics. As many emphasise it was exactly this lure of a radicalism against the bureaucratic organisational principles of moderated compromise and hierarchy that made hundreds of thousands of mostly younger people join the ranks via grassroots campaigns such as Momentum or as registered supporters. More direct forms of participation of members and supporters promised to bypass the traditional established logics and to transform the party into a more progressive and left-wing political movement.

In all three social democratic parties, many interviewees point to a seemingly old-fashioned idea of organisation as a key hurdle for party change. Many agree about a tension between the bulk of the “old”, long-term members that focus on a traditional sense of loyalty and hierarchical structures, and “new” and younger members and supporters that do not accept organisational hierarchies anymore and demand more, more flexible, and more direct participation. These mechanisms are even more pronounced when it comes to the relationship between the party and the “outside”. Integrating supporters and non-members is often viewed with strong suspicion and makes the organisation turn inwards. Therefore, the parties have often relied on ideas of democratisation that focus on expanding participation of

members and not so much expanding the membership.

In contrast, functionaries and observers of the Christian democratic/conservative parties point to the fact that, on the one hand, their members *do* expect more involvement, but also, on the other hand, that they have always maintained much more informal and flexible understandings of membership. (Scarrow 1996).

For instance, the CDU/CSU has opened up carefully during the last decades (Bösch 2002; Walter et al. 2011) and has experimented with more open and transparent leadership and candidate selection processes (Neumann 2013). These developments appear to be a departure from the party's organisational history, which for a long time was characterised by quasi-autonomous sub-organisations, mediated compromise, and a careful balance of interests. Yet, the interviews show that the party maintains an organisational self-understanding as a seemingly unideological voice of reason and a guarantee for government efficacy, and that their members and supporters would primarily demand the same. Consequently, as long as both are assured, increasing member participation would not be necessary. For the case of UK's Conservatives, too, their organisational self-understanding relied on local informal networks notability and not on the formal influence of members or supporters. As with the German CDU/CSU, the question of running the country in government is much more important.

The interviewees of the Austrian ÖVP also emphasised that tearing down and de-formalising bureaucratic hierarchies and opening up participation opportunities and communication channels would address the contemporary demands of their members and supporters. In their view, citizens would seek access to political decision, but would refrain from long-term commitments and the idea of a membership compromise. In turn, member participation understood as the collection of citizens' preferences would foster policy efficacy. Still, this deeply

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remoulds the idea of democratisation, if participation is framed as a tool to collect resources for top-down decision-making. Therefore, in the light of societal modernisation, the Christian democratic or conservative idea of organisation might be much closer to what sociological diagnoses suggest as a modern and contemporary form of interest aggregation.

### **Focusing on individual members?**

Following the impression of participatory demands of citizens, many interviewees of the social democratic parties emphasise that members and supporters search for more individual ways of being heard, and for less collective or binding forms of commitment. Following shifting understandings of what is perceived as emancipatory and progressive (Butzlaff 2021), the notion of *individual* participation as opposed to collective forms of organisation has been regarded as liberating and more democratic. Many parties have introduced more direct forms of intra-party participation that have individualised and atomised the individual members and by-passed the traditional middle ranks of functionaries and intermediation (see also Faucher 2015; Ignazi 2018; Wolkenstein 2019).

Functionaries of the SPD stress that they witness shifting motivations to be engaged, and that people are more and more willing to be part of temporary single-issue projects of limited scope only. Furthermore, that many approach the party with specific ideas in mind. Once frustrated or accomplished, they drop out again. Interviewees of the SPÖ and Labour agree that this “project-isation” of membership creates big challenges for the organisation. It becomes more and more difficult to motivate members to invest time not only in their personal projects but also in the bread and butter business of local affairs and the party on the ground. What is more, in the social democratic point of view, it makes the establishment of a commonly shared ground of what is

considered as social democratic almost elusive. Still, social democratic interviewees underline the importance of collective values and beliefs for their members and supporters. To them, the conviction to be part of a social collective appears to be a key element of social democratic membership and support. However, this conviction is increasingly hard to organise, and even harder to maintain over time.

Christian-democratic and conservative interviewees also share the experience of people approaching with a specific project or an individual concern in mind that wish to pursue this in the context of a political party. They, too, emphasise that people become active in a less formalised, self-seeking and eclectic manner. However, compared to the social democratic party family, these expectations show against the background of less formal ideas of a social collective or membership as the backbone of a political organisation. Therefore, Christian democratic or conservative interviewees hardly sense a contradiction here, and increasingly blur the distinction between members and supporters.

In the case of the Austrian ÖVP, for instance, the interviewees seek to portray such an atomistic and individualistic understanding of member and supporter involvement as a much more efficient and satisfying form of democratisation. In their view, people would shy away from the idea of a democratic engagement as a constant citizen duty, and would instead seek a rather individual and flexible engagement, often via social media and digital channels. In the conservative interviews, creating the impression of asking and involving people is often all that is needed. It is about staging democratisation without the burden that often comes with increasing participatory processes.

### **New visions for the future?**

One issue that distinguishes social democratic and conservative parties is how they experience a modernisation-induced fragmentation

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of member or supporter demands. The way this fragmentation is processed and poses organisational challenges (or not) is one of the key differences between the two party families.

Almost all interviewees agree that the demands for political orientation have grown as the development of societies is increasingly perceived as complex and disconcerting. Political leadership is expected to deliver this much-needed orientation yet meets a series of challenges. For instance, functionaries of the SPÖ have the impression that the demands of their membership with regard to participation and political programme have grown more and more heterogeneous and are increasingly difficult to integrate into a coherent vision of a political party. Interviewees describe how people approaching the party and eventually becoming members demand to be part of a political project to change their society and show a strong wish to contribute towards a change. However, they also show less willingness for compromise when it comes to integrating their ideas into a collectively formulated vision. What is more, the *very individual* political project has become crucial and the testing point; not that the member is contributing to the party's collective struggle for a better tomorrow, but the party is expected to facilitate opportunities for the members to realise their own personal projects. If these projects are frustrated, people drop out again easily. The interviews show a perception of societal modernisation challenging and sometimes overwhelming the party's capacity to integrate increasing social heterogeneity. Furthermore, the party organisation itself, which had once been the social democratic pride and fortress, is now viewed as inhibiting a successful adaption to shifting societies' demands.

When looking at the SPD, both the perception of rising heterogeneity and the party's orientation towards individual members make a strategic organisation increasingly difficult. Establishing a coherent and stringent programme and strategy has become much more demanding and

tiring. Contemporary processes of programme deliberation are less likely to lead to a coherent result when individual demands expect to be integrated in a more and more direct and undistorted manner.

In a similar way, interviewees of the Labour Party underline that it was becoming more and more difficult to integrate the newly won members and attached social movement organisations into a coherent and strategically feasible framework of contemporary social democracy. However, and this distinguishes the three social democratic parties from their Christian-democratic or conservative opponents, the expectation to provide such a coherent framework was felt strongly. Social democrats think of their parties as a collective bound by shared values and beliefs and a common idea of a better future. The parties still root in the idea of a collective struggle of those joining or sympathising with the party. Yet, the realisation of such a collective organisation is proving ever more difficult as the members and supporters are perceived to be less willing to accept that any collective demands a compromise. Social democrats have the feeling that their supporters demand, and crave, the formulation of a social collective and the provision for belonging. Yet, they also feel that the party organisations lack the legitimation to draft and realise such a collective, and furthermore that their supporters are hardly able or willing to commit to such a collective.

In contrast, compared with the social democratic parties, conservative functionaries perceive their supporters' and members' motivations quite differently. They report demands for more flexible, less binding and more single-issue oriented participation. However, they emphasise that members and supporters most of all expect the party to be able to efficiently organise "good governance". Instead of providing political orientation by designing a collective vision for the future, the functionaries of the three conservative parties perceive members demanding pragmatic and efficient governance in the face of growing social complexity and acceleration. The prospect to win

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and remain in public office are the cornerstones that members and supporters expect.

For instance, functionaries of the ÖVP report the party would *not* go out of its way to integrate different and heterogeneous demands and expectations (as opposed to the social democratic cases, which emphasise the importance of integrating a coherent programmatic vision). They would collect people's wishes and suggestions and then pick what was needed. Modernisation in the eyes of the ÖVP would mean to lower the hurdles of engagement and to facilitate opportunities to be engaged. Beyond that, it promises policy efficacy and – most importantly – political success without the endless quarrelling over parliamentary politics or member participation. People are asked to voice their suggestions and to turn in so-called "declarations of support" (*Unterstützungserklärung*). This would include many different activities such as commenting on social media or baking a cake for a local gathering. The ÖVP offers that people might join in a single-issue interest without having to accept the whole programmatic spectrum. Different political issues that people might be interested in are not necessarily integrated into a coherent version of conservatism (as this would endanger a frustration of single-issue interests). Instead, they are treated separately. In this fragmented understanding of organisation, the ÖVP embodies the flexible and almost liquid dissolution of commitments emphasised by sociological observers of social modernisation.

### **Centralising the organisation?**

Party researchers and democratic theorists have underlined that opening up does not necessarily mean more power to the members, sometimes quite the opposite (Bennett et al. 2018; Borz und Janda 2018; Wolkenstein 2019). Individualised participation of members is perfectly congruent with the contemporary neoliberal paradigm and might easily be reconciled with a highly top-down steered or

even manipulated post-democracy within the party organisation (Wolkenstein 2019). Broadening the electorate might give much more de facto decision-power to the party elites (Cross und Pilet 2015) or even cater to the power demands of a more autocratic party leadership (Katz 2001).

Yet, the experiences and perspectives shared in the interviews show a somewhat nuanced picture. Firstly, especially the social democratic interviewees across all three countries agree that more and more individual and isolated member participation leads to more steering power of the party leadership and that this has led to a centralisation of the organisation. However, this is contrasted by opportunities for bottom-up initiatives to gain (at times massive) influence, such as the rise of Momentum in the UK, whenever it is possible to overcome the atomised character of member participation and to a certain extent re-collectivise it.

Secondly, many interviewees understand that members increasingly seek to become active temporarily, project-oriented and in a flexible way, and that they therefore expect a party to provide orientation from above. Therefore, in the social democratic perspective, it is not that centralisation as a consequence of opening up is necessarily manipulative or authoritarian. It is not a question of “true” against “false” democratisation, but one that reflects the ambivalences of social modernisation.

In contrast, the Christian democratic or conservative interviewees describe members feeling very pragmatically about top-down introduced organisational and programmatic changes, as long as they can be justified with electoral successes. What is more, especially the local branches (which are organised much more loosely, compared to social democratic grassroots) are very much oriented towards local level politics, the local administration, and towards organising local mandates and mayors. As a result, the task to open up the party organisation and

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to facilitate more direct formal participation opportunities is assigned to the national leadership. Furthermore, opening up is felt to be more like an imperative to attract voters and supporters who would not otherwise be attracted, and as a strategic tool and marketing, but not so much as a necessary way to overhaul the political culture in the party on the ground. New digital participation opportunities, surveys, direct mailings etc. are organised by the national headquarters. In comparison with the social democratic parties, the results of these new participation channels are described as a strategically important window dressing for people to feel included. It appears that in comparison with SPD, SPÖ, and Labour, the feeling of being involved and included and to be part of a Christian democratic/conservative political project is satisfied much more easily through an efficient administration of governmental affairs. Modern party organisation in the eyes of conservative members and supporters, so the interviews suggest, means first of all governance efficacy and speed. Against this background, to introduce manifold bottom-up and binding mechanisms of intra party democracy sounds highly contradictory, as it might compromise this very efficiency and rationality.

The Austrian ÖVP has gone furthest in the direction of a movement-isation of its organisation, programme, and structure. Since Sebastian Kurz took over party leadership in 2017, the party has changed on many levels, from its name (now: *Die neue Volkspartei* (The new people's party) or *Team Sebastian Kurz* until 2021) to colour, appearance, strategy, structure, member- and non-member participation. At the core of the ÖVP's movement-isation lies the perception that years of a *Große Koalition* (a grand Coalition) in Austria had amounted to a political rigidity that only allowed for minimal compromise and needed to be surmounted. Sebastian Kurz took the opportunity to propose opening up the party in many ways, designing an electoral campaign (in 2017 and again in 2019) that focused on non-binding and temporary

non-membership participation, a movement-isation of politics and portraying himself as a sharp contrast to the structures of traditional large member organisations that were overburdened by their own path dependencies. Functionaries of the ÖVP describe these opportunities as something that addressed exactly what people expected: that they could join without hurdles for a couple of hours to support a cause they considered important. Supporters, not only members, were aware that they were being heard without being asked for a long-term commitment. As a result, the organisation of Austrian Christian democracy has been highly centralised and professionalised, yet it has been framed as an opening up of party bureaucracy and would now truly represent contemporary citizens' demands for democracy.

### **Dealing with ambivalence**

Since the 1980s, political parties in Western countries have sought to present themselves as increasingly flexible, modern, and movement-like organisations by facilitating more and more direct participation of members and sympathisers; by individualising political participation, and by promising more efficient and strong leadership decision-making.

The opening up and democratisation of party organisations follow patterns that have been diagnosed in social theory. However, different party families are affected differently by pressures arising from modernisation-induced shifts of participatory and democratic expectations. Supporters of social democratic parties show growing demands towards flexible and non-binding, yet direct and individual participation. Nevertheless, they still expect a party programme to draft a coherent version of society's future, as political orientation in an increasingly complex world is a second highly important demand. They expect participatory decision-making *and* a political leadership that is able to take swift, efficient and strictly value-based decisions. Social

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democratic parties, so the interviews show, struggle most with these contradictory expectations.

In contrast, the three Christian democratic/conservative cases have shown much less tension arising from shifting supporter expectations. They, too, describe changing demands in the direction of more direct influence and flexible single-issue orientation. However, as the interviews show, in the eyes of conservative functionaries and observers, conservative supporters are first and foremost favouring governance efficiency and electoral success. This way, the parties gain much room to manage modernisation-induced contradictions and ambivalences. Christian-democratic and conservative parties, it appears, have a constituency that has a much higher tolerance for contradiction and ambivalence, whereas social democratic supporters still cling to the notion of a political movement that drafts a better and coherent future vision of society on the grounds of a contradiction-free analysis of today.

Furthermore, both party families show different self-understandings as membership organisations. Christian democratic parties have never placed a similar emphasis on the individual member and their emancipation. As a result, they emphasise democratising the organisation by facilitating feelings and emotions of being included and heard, without necessarily giving away control and steering capacity. Possibly, this way of staging reform action might help deal with ambivalences of modernity that are closely intertwined but increasingly difficult to reconcile. A simultaneous democratisation and centralisation of party structures, for example, appears to be contradictory, but under conditions of modernity might thrive in harmony with and cater to demands of the modern flexible subject.

Yet, it is not only that party reforms *cause* democratic ambivalences and a tension between, on the one hand, providing participation and, on the other hand, centralised and strong leadership. Organisational

change, as has been developed earlier, also *mirrors* social change and democratic ambivalences within Western societies. By emphasising more democracy *and* more leadership efficiency simultaneously, parties might reconcile growing paradoxes and ambivalences societies and individuals face today.

In the contemporary, some parties and party families seem to manage the described ambivalences better than others. Prior to their crisis in government 2021, which was caused by widespread corruption, parties like the Austrian ÖVP presented themselves as truly modern and powerful movements. As I argue, scrutinising party reforms through the lens of social theory reveals that assumed tensions such as between opening up and centralising organisations, may not (only) be the result of authoritarian and oppressive party elites, but the consequence of growing democratic ambivalences in Western societies in general. Conflicting demands may be reconciled by the staging of democratic empowerment while parties emphasise their capacity for providing much-needed political orientation and leadership. From this viewpoint, it is not the question of whether parties are truly democratising or are deceptive simulators of empowerment. Rather than calling for a "genuine" and undistorted democratisation, the focus of further discussion should be on how collective identities and demands for participation and political efficiency might be integrated in the practice of parties under conditions of increasingly fragmented subjectivities.

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David J. BAILEY and Bradley WARD

## **Social democracy at a crossroads: between protest and the polls in the British Labour Party**



## **Keywords**

**British Labour Party, protest, social movements,  
progressive social democracy**

## **Abstract**

This chapter explores and compares the linkages between the British Labour Party and progressive social movements; comparing the approach taken by Starmer with that of the Corbynite wing of the Labour Party. The chapter identifies a considerably less wholehearted support for social movements under Starmer's leadership when compared with the Corbynites, suggesting a shift in terms of party-movement links as a result of Starmer's leadership. This, we argue, suggests that the current Labour Party is unlikely to pursue a 'left-rhetoric-left-policy' programme which aims to strengthen the solidaristic ties between the Labour Party and progressive social movements. As such, a 'virtuous circle' of expanding and sustainable electoral support for a progressive form of social democracy in the UK seems unlikely to come about under the current Labour Party leadership.

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The strategic options facing social democratic parties in the present are centred around the question of whether to appeal to the so-called 'median voter', or to move leftwards to appeal to those who benefit from progressive policy outcomes but who otherwise have lost faith in the promise of social democratic politics (Häusermann 2021). At face value, Labour's last two leaders, Jeremy Corbyn and Keir Starmer, represent opposite poles on this spectrum. On the one hand, Corbyn sought to revive Labour's socialist tradition by connecting the party to unconventional leftist traditions stemming from the anti-austerity movement, demanding a more direct vision of internal party democracy and promising a more transformative policy programme (Ward and Guglielmo, 2021). On the other hand, Starmer has pursued a cautious approach that has distanced Labour from Corbyn's more radical rhetoric, portrayed the party as 'responsible' opposition, and asserted a top-down parliamentarist vision of party management.

The two distinct visions represent the latest rendition in a long-term struggle for the heart and soul of Labour's brand of social democracy. Like its sister-parties in Europe, the Labour Party originated, in part, to promote the interests of labour movements within the parliamentary sphere. The original hope for many of Labour's formative traditions was that this would provide the party with the opportunity to propagate socialist ideas, as well as providing an opportunity to lobby for legislation and policies that would benefit the working class constituents that socialist and social democratic parties sought to represent.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the relationship between social democratic parties and labour movements changed considerably, and the Labour Party was no exception. Major changes to the nature

of global capitalism which took place during the 1970s and 1980s – including the demise of the Bretton Woods System, the experience of ‘stagflation’, the rise of a new neoliberal consensus, and processes of deindustrialisation – raised major questions for social democratic parties. On the whole, this saw a move, especially during the 1990s, to what many commentators considered to be a ‘Third Way’ position, one of the central aspects of which was an explicit attempt to put distance between social democratic parties and the labour movements which had historically been their most important allies within society.

While the Third Way move appeared to revive the fortunes of social democratic parties, this proved to be short-lived. The distance placed between labour movements and social democratic parties resulted in a decline in traditional working class votes which worsened following the 2008 global economic crisis. The crisis appeared to wrongfoot social democratic parties, as they were uncertain about whether to maintain or abandon their Third Way position in light of the crisis and the subsequent decade of austerity (and anti-austerity) which followed it.

Jeremy Corbyn’s victory in the 2015 Labour leadership contest was one of the more notable developments during this period of seeking renewal in the post-2008 context. Corbyn’s supporters hoped he would resurrect the Labour Party’s original socialist mission by strengthening the ties with the labour movement, in addition to deepening the linkages with a younger cohort of social movement activists who felt estranged from the party prior to his victory. To his critics, however, Corbyn epitomized an outdated form of social democracy which threatened to doom Labour to electoral oblivion by alienating the ‘median’ voters that were crucial to building an electorally successful coalition.

While the Corbyn experiment appeared to offer hopes of electoral renewal in 2017, by 2019 a second general election saw the experiment perform dismally in the polls. This prompted yet another rapid reversal,

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seemingly back to the more moderate position that had been adopted by the Labour Party prior to 2015. Starmer has seemingly distanced the party from the coalition of social movement actors and left trade unions that sustained the previous leadership, throwing the party into a stark division between a small left-leaning rump of Corbynites within the Parliamentary Party who remain popular with many of Corbyn's previous supporters, and the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and Labour's new Shadow Cabinet who seek to put the experience of the Corbyn period behind them.

The new Starmer leadership raises two related questions for those interested in the relationship between social democratic parties and progressive social change. First, to what extent will the new leadership seek to maintain a close link with the policy goals adopted under Corbyn? And second, how will the relationship with the anti-austerity social movements that sustained (and gave credibility) to Corbynism now develop? The answer to these questions, it seems, will play a key role determining the direction of social democracy from this point forward.

The paper seeks to flesh out these considerations through exploring the linkages between the Labour Party and social movements under Starmer and Corbyn's leadership. In particular, it is interested in the extent to which Starmer's leadership represents a rupture with his predecessor's approach to social movements, and what effect the ensuing party-policy-social movement relationship is likely to have on Labour's electoral performance. The first section will outline the theoretical perspectives which have guided the paper. The second section explores Corbynism's relationship to social movements and the transition from Corbynism to Starmerism. The third section investigates how the Starmer leadership has so far responded to episodes of contention. The final section concludes with a discussion of how this is likely to impact on the party's electoral performance.

## **Theoretical questions**

In considering the relationship between the Labour Party under Starmer and the various social movements that exist within British society, we should be cognisant of a number of important theoretical debates. Perhaps most importantly, there exists a body of literature which views the potential for social democratic parties to achieve substantial and meaningful social change, largely in the form of redistributive policy outcomes, in terms of the degree to which solidaristic social relations exist within wider society. This is the crux of the so-called 'power resource model' of social democratic party capacity associated with Korpi (1983, 2003, 2006) and Huber and Stephens (2001). According to this understanding of social democratic parties' capacity to adopt and implement substantially redistributive policy measures, the key question that social democratic actors face is that of the degree to which 'power resources' exist within wider society. These power resources have typically been most closely associated with the degree of union density in a country, considered both a proxy for left-leaning public opinion but also a reflection of the extent to which organised labour has an influence over key aspects of contemporary capitalist society, including wage negotiation and corporatist policymaking. In a high-union-density country, social democratic parties are able to build upon a higher level of electoral support, and the greater level of support within the socio-economic institutions of the national socio-economy, to adopt measures which act in a redistributive manner. This creates a virtuous circle, in which redistributive measures create additional support for left-leaning policies/votes, and the confidence and capacity amongst members of society to contribute to solidaristic institutions within that society. In low-union-density countries, in contrast, the opposite applies: low electoral support for left parties, infrequent redistributive policy outcomes, and higher levels of poverty and inequality which act to discourage people

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from engaging in the work involved in contributing to labour movements and labour mobilisation.

Perhaps one of the key problems that has faced social democratic parties over the past forty years, and which has posed a considerable challenge to the power resource approach, is the decline of the industrial working class in many of the advanced capitalist democracies where social democratic parties were previously most successful (Benedetto, Hix and Mastorocco 2020). This has created a context in which trade union density has generally declined, as has the broader electoral support for social democratic parties.

From the perspective of the power resources approach, therefore, we might look to alternative forms of social mobilisation to build solidaristic social movements and institutions, especially those which are able to mobilise those members of the post-Fordist economies that suffer from the typical hardships associated with these new service-oriented socio-economies. This includes over-educated/under-employed young graduates, those on highly flexible employment contracts, or what Standing (2011) has termed the 'precarariat'. It might also include those campaigning around so-called post-materialist issues such as climate change and racial justice.

From this perspective, the route to social democratic rejuvenation is not simply to appeal to the 'median voter' in the (static) contemporary electorate, but rather to mobilise sections of the electorate who have the potential to support progressive policy goals and benefit from the realisation of those policy goals. In doing so, the party would facilitate the expansion of that constituency and therefore form a new 'virtuous circle' in which the progressive constituency enlarges, and in turn expands electoral support for social democratic (or more generally left-leaning) parties, and the policy achievements that they are therefore able to achieve, all over time.

## **From Corbynism to Starmerism**

Adopting this approach, therefore, we are interested in the degree to which the Labour Party has been willing to strengthen its ties with existing social movements under Corbyn and Starmer's leadership. This section will investigate Labour Party-social movement relations under Corbyn before exploring the transition from Corbynism to Starmerism. For the purposes of this paper we look at three dimensions: 1) public statements of support and encouragement for social movements; 2) institutional linkages between social movement groups and the party; and 3) policy commitments that speak to particular socio-economic groups and social movements' expressed concerns.

### **Corbynism: the 'movement'?**

During the 2015 leadership campaign Corbyn pledged to build a 'movement' that could propel the Labour Party to an elusive electoral victory. Throughout his career, Corbyn had been part of a tradition that sought to modernise the party by forging new political solidarities with liberatory social movements that were often overlooked by the party mainstream, leading supporters to the hope that he would be more willing to represent social movement claims than previous leaders, and would strengthen the linkages between the extra-parliamentary and parliamentary party. In particular, Corbyn's advocacy for anti-austerity inspired hundreds of thousands of new members to join the party who would not have countenanced doing so before 2015 (see Seymour, 2016). Some activists speculated that Labour might even be transformed into the type of 'movement-party' which was springing up across Europe at the time – Podemos and Syriza were often cited as two examples – giving hope to the idea that a broad 'social movement' could be sustained for years to come (della Porta et al, 2017).

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This shift was reflected by policy commitments during the 2017 and 2019 general elections which included a number of promises that echoed earlier demands of the anti-tuition and anti-austerity movements of the 2010s, as well as longer term goals of the labour and cooperative movements, including an elimination of tuition fees, renationalisation of the train service, electricity and postal services, the pledge to increase industrial democracy through inclusive ownership funds, and a proposal for greater move to co-ops and mutualisation along the lines of the so-called 'Preston model' (Brandal and Bratberg 2021). Despite the appeal that this set of policies sought to make to a new generation of social movements, they were simultaneously (and ironically) seen by some as harking back to an older version of social democracy with links to the Fordist era and the so-called *Trente Glorieuses* (see, for instance, Meadway, 2021). As Watts and Bale (2019) put it, this was the pursuit of 'a "new politics" which is, ironically, an old politics' (p. 104). In contrast, however, we would be more inclined to view the policies adopted by Labour under Corbyn in terms of what Gamble (1974) terms a 'politics of support', whereby the symbolism of a commitment to policies such as redistribution and nationalisation sought to appeal to those constituents within anti-austerity social movements that equated such policies with progressivism, rather than being simply an attempt to rejuvenate an outdated policy programme. Advocating such policies enabled Corbyn to gather the support of a broad constituency of social movement activists who hoped that the policies signalled the conclusion of austerity, and the beginning of a more progressive agenda that would last long into the future.

In terms of institutional linkages, Momentum was launched in October 2015 to provide a platform for the various party based and movement based groups that had converged around Corbyn's leadership campaign. Momentum's founders identify four key strands:



1. Extra-parliamentary, social movement activism — particularly post-financial crisis movements along the lines of UK Uncut and Occupy.
2. More traditional left-wing protest coalitions, such as the People's Assembly and Stop the War Coalition.
3. The existing Labour left - its remaining MPs, its organisations such as the Labour Representation Committee, and others who 'kept the flame alive' in the party.
4. The left of the trade union movement, including both unions that have been affiliated to Labour all along, and those such as the Fire Brigades Union that are now re-affiliating' (Klug et al, 2016: 37).

Momentum initially pursued a combination of 'insider' (party based) and 'outsider' (movement based) strategies that attempted to influence the direction of the Labour Party and make it more receptive to social movement demands (see Muldoon and Rye, 2020). The 'insider' strategies included conventional factional goals to strengthen the left's control over the party, the introduction of participatory democracy, and lobbying on behalf of social movements at the party's annual conference. 'Outsider' strategies included the provision of organisational support for social movement groups, direct action tactics, and the launch of the annual 'political education' festival *The World Transformed* to provide a space for pro-Corbyn social movement groups. By pursuing a hybrid strategy Momentum hoped to strengthen solidaristic Labour Party-social movement relations which could in turn sustain a long-term 'virtuous circle' of electoral success.

The integration of insider and outsider strategies represented a shift in how social movement actors engaged with the Labour Party. Before Corbyn became leader many activists in the anti-austerity movement were critical of the Labour Party – the protests were as much a critique of the party's perceived failure to oppose austerity as they were a criticism of the Conservative government's advocacy for

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austerity (see Gerbaudo, 2017). However, Corbyn's leadership altered the perception that many social movement actors had, encouraging them to join Momentum in the hope that the party might now be an instrument for their demands. This transition led Muldoon and Rye (2020: 5) to usefully define Momentum as a 'party-driven movement' – they are a movement that began within the party, but which maintains a distinctiveness from it. According to the authors, by potentially reconnecting the party with social movement organisations in civil society the party-driven movement had the potential to enhance Labour's electoral prospects.

### **From Corbyn's 'movementism' to Starmer's 'parliamentarism'**

Up until the 2017 election Corbyn's solidaristic approach to social movements helped to restore Labour's brand of social democracy. The Labour membership ballooned to over 500 000 members – making it the biggest social democratic party in Europe – and Corbyn sought to redistribute power towards them through several party reforms and the commissioning of a wholesale Democracy Review to look at all aspects of decision-making (see Ward, 2021). This was followed by a 2017 election result in which Labour achieved their biggest swing in the vote since 1945 and forced the Conservatives into a minority government (see Dorey, 2017). Although Labour did not win, they appealed to a broad enough coalition of progressive voters to reverse the party's recent fortunes and increase their number of seats for the first time in 20 years. Evidence has indicated that this was in part underpinned by what became known as a 'youthquake' with a higher turnout among young people, and a majority for the Labour Party in every age group under 50 (Curtis, 2017; Sloam and Henn, 2019)

However, the Corbyn leadership could not cement the self-sustaining 'virtuous circle' to continue the party's revival after the 2017 election. In the end, Labour slumped to defeat in the 2019 election – the Conservatives consolidated the Leave vote whilst Labour lost voters from both the Remain and Leave camps. Following the defeat, Keir Starmer was elected as leader after standing on a relatively left-leaning agenda that echoed many of the same principles of the Corbyn era, albeit with a style that promised professionalism. In this sense he was clearly seeking to appeal to a membership base that was highly sympathetic to the left turn under Corbyn. Starmer's campaign included ten pledges that covered fiscal redistribution (higher tax rates for top earners and corporations), a reversal of many of the austerity measures introduced (including abolition of tuition fees and Universal Credit), commitment to a Green New Deal, and continued commitment to common ownership, the rights of migrants, workers and trade unions (Starmer 2020a).

However, despite these pledges, the first twelve months of Starmer's leadership saw a reversal of many parts of Corbyn's agenda in favour of a return to the 'median' voter strategy. Whilst Starmer has not explicitly departed from the Corbyn/McDonnell policy commitments, he has been reluctant to openly state his policy agenda, which represents a significant move away from his predecessors more ambitious policy programme. Commenting on his first 100 days as Labour leader, Eunice Goes remarked, 'the fact he has kept his agenda under wraps has unnerved the Left of his party' and that beyond the ten pledges Starmer 'has said very little about his vision for Britain' (Goes 2020). As Martell (2020) also described: 'What Starmer proposes in ideology and policy is unclear, deliberately so.' In terms of economic policy, for instance, Labour's Shadow Chancellor at the time, Anneliese Dodds, sought to position the Labour Party as committed to public investment (and therefore distanced from a straightforward commitment to economic

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orthodoxy or austerity) but at the same time committed to ‘responsibly’ balancing the books in the longer term and being cautious over the length of time that interest rates would remain low, as well as ensuring value for money in public spending by empowering the National Audit Office (Corry 2021).

There were concerns that Starmer was moving rightwards following the online party conference speech that he gave in September 2020. Starmer used the opportunity to highlight his commitment to patriotism, national security and family values, as well as distancing himself from Corbyn’s leadership: ‘Never again will Labour go into an election not being trusted on national security, with your job, with your community and with your money’ (Starmer 2020b). This was a move largely driven by a perceived need to appeal to the so-called ‘Red Wall’ traditional working class voters who had shifted to support the Conservative Party, largely as a result of Brexit but also due to hostility to Corbyn. More generally, Starmer’s Labour Party has sought consistently to portray itself as the ‘responsible’ party that would have managed the pandemic crisis better, whilst at the same time avoiding any outright criticism of the Johnson Government, often on the grounds that to do so would be seen as being too overtly ‘political’ in the midst of a crisis. This stance has also seen one of the key pledges – to raise corporation tax – dropped (albeit not entirely, but at least for the medium term). It has also seen yet further moves to adopt a patriotic tone and focus on making “use of the [union] flag, veterans [and] dressing smartly” (Chakraborty and Elgot 2021).

Finally, Starmer has appeared to relinquish the ‘movementist’ claim which characterised the Corbyn years in favour of a return to a more traditional form of ‘parliamentarism’. Starmer has reasserted what Pettitt (2018) has described as the ‘parliamentary independence’ view of party management, which seeks to preserve the autonomy of the parliamentary Labour Party at the expense of the party rank-

and-file. The reassertion of parliamentarism has led Starmer to dismantle the Community Organising Unit, one of Corbyn's only significant 'movementist' reforms, and introduce rule changes at the 2021 party conference that significantly redistribute power towards the parliamentary labour party and away from the party membership (see Stewart, 2021). This has considerably reduced the likelihood that the current leadership will represent the demands of the extra-parliamentary party and by extension social movement campaigns.

### **How can we explain the transition from Corbynism to Starmerism?**

Despite Corbyn's pledge to build a movement his leadership was ultimately unable to introduce the tangible reforms that would have strengthened Labour's solidaristic relations with social movements. The Democracy Review (Labour Party, 2018) only tinkered around the edges, the ties with social movements had not been strengthened as much as Corbyn supporters hoped, and the party-union link had not been restored despite Corbyn's close relationship with left union leaders. One of the most significant reasons for this was the increasingly transparent contradiction between 'members led' democracy on the one hand, and the need to prioritise conventional factional goals on the other (see Ward, 2021). Whilst the Corbyn leadership and their supporters in Momentum were initially drawn to 'members-led democratisation', they were forced into a gradual retreat away from any controversial reforms under the pressure of Brexit and an imminent general election (Ward, 2021). There was an endemic tension between the demand for grassroots party democracy, and the risk that such reforms might amplify internal party splits and potentially even strengthen the hand of competing factions. Indeed, the aborted attempt at 'members-led democratisation' raises several important questions around whether it is plausible to pursue internal party democracy in a party that contains

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a broad-church of competing visions heralding from the trade unions, the party membership, and the party representatives (Pettitt, 2018; Ward, 2020).

From the perspective of the power resources model, Corbyn's inability to strengthen the solidaristic ties between social movements, grassroots activists and party representatives may have contributed to the decline seen after the 2017 election. In the absence of tangible linkages between the Labour Party and progressive constituencies likely to vote for the party, the mobilisation observed between 2015-2017 might prove to be only a temporary blip in Labour's downward trend. It would be an exaggeration to say that the failure to reform the party was decisive in the 2019 election result, but it may provide one explanation for Labour's failure to assemble a sufficient electoral coalition in the 2019 election.

Moreover, the lack of reform under Corbyn's leadership provides one important explanation for the solidification of Starmer's more 'parliamentarist' vision of social democracy. As Ward (2021a) has written elsewhere, Starmer is able to ignore the protestations of the grassroots left because there remain few means to hold Labour's representatives to account after they been elected. The continued absence of formal institutional linkages between the party grassroots and their parliamentary representatives means that the Labour leadership can engage with social movement demands on a voluntary basis: Corbyn lent his ear to their concerns, but in the absence of internal party democracy, Starmer is free to go in a different direction despite the popularity of Corbyn's programme among the party membership.

In order to explore, in more detail, the relationship between Labour under Starmer and various social movements across British society, the next section considers his responses to some of the key episodes of social contention witnessed since his election as leader

of the Labour Party. This section can then turn to discuss whether Starmer is likely to instigate a resurgence of Labour's brand of social democracy.

## **Responding to episodes of contention during the Starmer era**

Perhaps the two most significant episodes of resistance witnessed in Britain since the pandemic started were: The Black Lives Matter protests that swept the country from May 2020, including the movement to remove statues associated with Britain's colonial past; and the attempt by teachers' union, the National Education Union, to oppose the return to in-school teaching at several points in the pandemic on the grounds that the Government was exposing teachers to excessive levels of danger. It is of interest, therefore, to consider the responses of Starmer's Labour to each of these episodes of contention, in order to assess the stances taken and how this has (if at all) consolidated these nascent forms of social mobilisation and their potential to form part of the social base of the Labour Party.

### **Black Lives Matter**

Following the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, and the subsequent rise of the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, similar events began to take place in the United Kingdom. One of the first demonstrations took place in London on 3 June, with thousands of mainly young demonstrators marching from Hyde Park to Westminster, highlighting instances where other black people had suffered at the hands of the police, including Mark Duggan (Mohdin et al. 2020). Protesters also focused on the decision by British Transport Police not to bring charges in the case of Belly Mujinga. Similar events took place across the country over the following days, including Manchester, Watford,

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Newcastle and Belfast (Busby 2020a). As this happened during the lockdown, moreover, it prompted the need for public authorities to take account of the fact that protests were happening which were technically prohibited. In the case of the London demonstrations, Labour London Mayor, Sadiq Kahn gave a slightly ambivalent statement, dividing his support between the 'good' protesters who did so peacefully and the 'bad' ones who used more disruptive methods:

To the thousands of Londoners who protested peacefully today, I stand with you and I share your anger and your pain. George Floyd's brutal killing must be a catalyst for change worldwide [...]

To the tiny minority who were violent and threw glass bottles and lit flares – you endangered a safe and peaceful protest and let down this important cause.

(Sadiq Kahn, London Labour Mayor, quoted in Busby 2020a)

Despite objections from some over the risks relating to the pandemic, protests continued throughout early June in cities across the UK, including protests outside the US embassy, graffiti damage to the Winston Churchill statue alleging that he was racist, and a blockade of the motorway near Coventry. Beyond London, mass gatherings took place across the country, including Glasgow, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Sheffield and Newcastle, in Carlisle and Dumfries, in Derby, in Chester, Wolverhampton, Middlesbrough, Lytham, and Wrexham. These continued for several weeks throughout June (Busby 2020b). The act that perhaps got most media attention was the removal of the statue of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, which was subsequently thrown into the city harbour (Topping et al. 2020).

Perhaps predictably, the responses from the Labour Party representatives diverged between the Corbyn-supporters and those who were now aligned with Starmer's leadership. A key example of

this can be seen with the response of Dawn Butler MP, who was a key left-leaning supporter of Corbyn's leadership, and who at the time of the Black Lives Matter protests wrote an article in the Metro which rejected the fears expressed by some that the BLM protests should be opposed as they would encourage the spread of COVID-19:

What concerns me is not the actions of these protesters, but that some are pushing a narrative that the people taking to the streets will somehow be responsible for a second wave of the virus. This, in my view, is a cynical attempt to not only discourage people from using their right to protest but an attempt to shift the blame away from this Government's incompetence if there is a second wave.

(Butler 2020)

Starmer, for his part, 'took the knee' in the early stages of the movement in a show of solidarity with the protestors. However, like with Sadiq Khan, the focus quickly moved to a critical stance on the direct action taken by the BLM protestors. On the question of the pulling down of the Colston statue, Starmer accepted that the statue was worthy of the criticisms that it had received, but he was also explicitly opposed to the method of direct action through which the protestors had removed it. This was most clear in a radio interview he gave; when questioned he responded:

It shouldn't have been done in that way, completely wrong to pull a statue down like that [...] Stepping back, that statue should have been taken down a long, long time ago. We can't, in 21st century Britain, have a slaver on a statue. A statue is there to honour people.

That statue should have been brought down properly, with consent, and put, I would say, in a museum."

(Starmer, quoted in Walker 2020a).

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In the same interview Starmer took the directly opposite view to the one that had been expressed by Dawn Butler MP over the question of whether to attend BLM protests or not, stating that Barry Gardiner MP had been wrong to attend one of the protests: “No, he shouldn’t have done it. He was wrong to do it [...] If you’re a member of parliament, you lead by example, and that means we maintain social distancing, in accordance with the government’s guidance” (Starmer, quoted in Walker 2020a).

This also was quite different to the view taken by many of the pro-Corbyn Labour MPs who were much more supportive of the pulling down of the statue (Stewart and Proctor 2020). The contrast in this case is indicative of Starmer’s more parliamentarist vision in comparison to pro-Corbyn MPs more social movementist vision.

As the Black Lives Matter protests continued throughout the summer of 2020, demands also grew to ‘defund the police’, which had become a common demand made by BLM protesters in the United States. In a much remarked-upon response, Starmer responded by claiming that:

That’s nonsense and nobody should be saying anything about defunding the police, and I would have no truck with that – I was the Director of Public Prosecutions for five years.

[...]

I worked with police forces across England and Wales bringing thousands of people to court. So my support for the police is very, very strong and evidenced in the joint actions I’ve done with the police.

(Starmer, 2020, quoted in Chappell 2020).

In the same interview he also seemingly accidentally referred to the BLM movement as a ‘moment’, which was also criticised on the grounds that it appeared to reduce its importance.

Efforts were also made by the Conservative Government to implement a range of repressive measures designed to quell the Black

Lives Matter protests. This included moves to prohibit what was termed 'extremist' literature from being taught in schools, which the Women and Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch pointed out included the Black Lives Matter movement, which she castigated as being informed by 'critical race theory', noting that "I want to be absolutely clear that the Government stand unequivocally against critical race theory," she declared, saying that it refused to support "the anti-capitalist Black Lives Matter group" on the grounds that it was "a political movement" (HC Deb 2020). In response, Corbyn-supporting MP, Bell Ribeiro-Addy, who is also a member of the Corbynite Socialist Campaign Group noted that:

As my right hon. friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) pointed out, slavery ended because of the slave revolts. It ended because of those people who were willing to risk their lives. Colonialism ended because people were no longer willing to have this country rule over them.

We need to applaud those sheroes and heroes in history.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP, (HC Deb 2020)

In contrast, Starmer has remained circumspect in his opposition to these measures. In an earlier contribution to this debate about teaching black history, Starmer noted somewhat tentatively that, 'this week I called on the Government to ensure Black British history is taught all year round, as part of a truly diverse school curriculum that includes and inspires all young people and aids a full understanding of the struggle for equality. Black history is British history' (Starmer 2020c).

Similarly, when moves were made by the Conservative Government to outlaw damage to statues, which was a direct response to the pulling down of the Colston statue, the Labour Party was relatively ambivalent. The shadow home secretary, Nick Thomas-Symonds, supported the measures as they were billed as response to the daubing of Churchill's statue with paint, which was also conducted by BLM protesters:

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"I would support the government in creating a specific offence for protecting war memorials, and I would be willing to work with the government on that". At the same time the moves were denounced as a form of 'deflection' by the shadow justice minister, David Lammy MP (Walker 2020b).

The Conservative Government's introduction of repressive policing measures has been taken to new heights with the proposed 'Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill' which looks set to pass through parliament in the coming months. The bill proposes a wide strengthening of police powers which many on the left have condemned as an authoritarian attempt to crackdown on the right to protest (see Gilmore, 2021). It sparked nationwide 'Kill the Bill' protests across the country, which has taken numerous actions in opposition to it, with hundreds of thousands of people signing petitions condemning the bill (see Gilmore, 2021: 4). As expected, Pro-Corbyn MPs have shown support for the protests in the strongest possible terms:

The right to protest is under attack from the Conservatives' #PoliceCrackdownBill. This evening I joined women in Parliament Square to say: We will not be silenced. We don't accept more police powers. Let's #KillTheBill and defend our rights.

(Zarah Sultana MP)

Stamer, meanwhile, was originally planning to instruct his party to abstain on the bill – as he had done with previous controversial measures that had been opposed by many pro-Corbyn MPs – before changing his stance after further protests were triggered against police violence in the aftermath of the tragic death of Sarah Everard at the hands of a police officer (see Walker, 2021). Shortly afterwards Stamer highlighted the bill's disproportionate impact on women and black communities as the reason for the Labour Party's opposition (White, 2021). However, in line with previous protests, Stamer (quoted in

Gafton-Green, 2021) subsequently condemned the ‘inexcusable’ and ‘completely unacceptable’ direct action by protestors in which property was damaged, and police officers and protestors have been injured. Pro-Corbyn MPs meanwhile, including Nadia Whittome and Zarah Sultana, have challenged the assumption that the protestors started the violence, instead highlighting the risk that ‘more police power is a recipe for repression’ (Sultana, 2021).

Starmer leadership-aligned statements	Corbyn-aligned statements
To the tiny minority who were violent and threw glass bottles and lit flares – you endangered a safe and peaceful protest and let down this important cause. (Sadiq Kahn)	What concerns me is not the actions of these protesters (Dawn Butler)
It shouldn't have been done in that way, completely wrong to pull a statue down like that (Starmer)	I celebrate these acts of resistance. We need a movement that will tear down systemic racism and the slave owner statues that symbolise it. And we need to win a government that will always be on the side of this movement. (Nadia Whittome MP)
this week I called on the Government to ensure Black British history is taught all year round, as part of a truly diverse school curriculum that includes and inspires all young people and aids a full understanding of the struggle for equality. Black history is British history (Starmer)	slavery ended because of the slave revolts. It ended because of those people who were willing to risk their lives. Colonialism ended because people were no longer willing to have this country rule over them. We need to applaud those sheroes and heroes in history. (Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP)
I would support the government in creating a specific offence for protecting war memorials, and I would be willing to work with the government on that (Nick Thomas-Symonds)	The #BlackLivesMatter movement has shown that the time for empty commitments is over. Now is the time for leadership within the UK and across the world, to meaningfully and immediately address the scourge of racism (Corbyn, 2020)

## **School teacher union's opposition to re-commencing in-school teaching**

In addition to the activities of the Black Lives Matter movement, perhaps the second most prominent form of resistance witnessed during the pandemic was the efforts by the teachers' union, the National Education Union (NEU), to prevent an unsafe return to the classroom. Throughout the pandemic teachers have been understandably concerned about any potential health risks associated with teaching, as social distancing and maintaining safeguards such as wearing masks has been more difficult: the NEU managed to stage a 20,000-strong online meeting, and they organised a mass petition opposing the early re-opening of schools (Waugh 2020). On several occasions this form of collective action was sufficient to force a government U-turn on the question of opening schools, for instance reversing a plan to re-open all primary schools before the summer break, as the Government was forced to acknowledge that it could not do so safely (Weale 2020).

This tension between the Government and the teachers' unions continued throughout much of 2020 and culminated in January 2021 when at the peak of the second wave of infections the Government announced its intention to re-open schools after the Christmas break. In response, the NEU issued legal advice to its members advising that they should not return to schools and that they would be supported by the union in upholding their rights to refuse to work in a dangerous workplace, if any teachers were subsequently disciplined as a result of not entering the classroom (Ferguson 2021). This was ultimately a major contribution to the decision of the Government to end its attempt to re-open schools, after only one day of re-opening. The organising campaigns of the NEU were therefore widely recognised as having been a considerable success in terms of the scale of

union mobilisation and capacity to challenge and ultimately prevent Government policy over the pandemic.

Perhaps the most notable position of Starmer's Labour Party on the issue was that it consistently sought to emphasise the importance of returning to the classroom and setting out a clear timetable through which this would happen. In responding to the confusion that surrounded the Christmas break, Kate Green MP, Labour's Shadow Secretary of State for Education, said:

There has been a consensus across Parliament that keeping schools open to all pupils should be a national priority, but it appears that the government have simply lost control of the pandemic, and children are now paying the price in the closure of their schools and disruption to their education.

(Labour Party 2021)

This position therefore put the Labour Party directly at odds with the NEU, requiring clarification over whether Starmer would support the NEU's advice to members not to return to school. On this point Starmer was explicit:

I don't want to call for the closure of schools tomorrow morning and add to the chaos, but we do need to recognise that it's inevitable that more schools will close, and we need a plan in place to deal with that.

(Starmer, quoted in Murphy 2021)

Later in 2021 Starmer was directly asked whether he would support industrial action taken by teachers' unions and explicitly rejected the suggestion: "I don't think there should be industrial action but the teaching unions are right to stick up for their members who have been through a really hard time for the last 12 months" (Starmer, quoted in Bloom 2021).

This echoed the Labour Party's official position following the call by the NEU in December 2020 for the Government to agree to delay

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the re-opening of schools until January 18th, which the Labour Party formally opposed. Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy was asked outright whether she would agree with the NEU position, to which she responded:

No, we want schools to reopen and children to be back in the classroom. But we want to make sure that happens safely and we want the government to bring in much more support over the next couple of weeks to make sure schools can do that.

(Lisa Nandy, 20 December 2020)

The position adopted by Starmer's Labour Party also put it directly in opposition to much of the Corbynite wing of the Labour Party. This was perhaps most clearly evinced by a publication by a large grouping of Corbynite MPs and NEC members on 2 January 2021, in which they openly called on the Labour Party leadership to change direction and instead to back the NEU:

We support the position of the National Education Union. We want you to do the same.

Schools should not re-open on the 4th January save for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. This is about the lives and safety of working people, children and the safety of our communities. Nothing should ever come before that. Do the right thing.

(Signatories 2021)

This set the tone for the ongoing discussions throughout early 2021, with the question of exiting the first lockdown period that began on 5 January, which was scheduled to take place in March 2021, again raising the question of how and at what pace teachers would return to the classroom. During this discussion, nine education organisations (including the NEU) issued a statement highlighting that a full return to school for all pupils would be 'reckless' and that instead what was

needed was ‘a cautious approach with wider school and college opening phased over a period of time’ (NEU 2021). When questioned directly on whether he agreed with this position, Starmer was clear that he did not: “Ideally I’d like to see all schools back open on 8 March and all children back in schools on 8 March” (Starmer, 21 February 2021). Interestingly, when questioned on this apparent standoff between the teachers’ unions and the Labour Party leadership, key Corbynite John McDonnell MP was clear which side he stood on: ‘I can’t think of anyone better to listen to than those on the frontline, and that is the teachers’ unions’ (McDonnell, 21 February 2021).

Starmer leadership-aligned statements	Corbyn-aligned statements
Children are now paying the price in the closure of their schools and disruption to their education. (Kate Green MP)	We support the position of the National Education Union. (Tribune Letter signatories)
I don’t want to call for the closure of schools tomorrow morning and add to the chaos (Starmer)	I can’t think of anyone better to listen to than those on the frontline, and that is the teachers’ unions (McDonnell)
I don’t think there should be industrial action but the teaching unions are right to stick up for their members who have been through a really hard time for the last 12 months (Starmer)	
we want schools to reopen and children to be back in the classroom. (Lisa Nandy)	
Ideally I’d like to see all schools back open on 8 March and all children back in schools on 8 March (Starmer)	

## **Discussion and Conclusion: Where does this leave British Social Democracy?**

As this paper has sought to show, earlier efforts to theorise the potential for a left-leaning turn to be successful have focused on the degree to which social democratic parties seek to connect with the solidaristic social movements that prevail across society. By connecting with social movements, social democratic parties have the potential to create a 'left rhetoric-left policy-left voter' virtuous circle. For this reason, the current paper has sought to consider the degree to which Corbyn and then Starmer's leadership has sought to consolidate links with progressive goals, progressive voters, progressive party members and progressive social movements.

The first part of this paper explored the transition from Corbyn to Starmer. Up until the 2017 election Corbyn gathered the support of a broad coalition of social movement actors by pledging to build a grassroots social movement, pursue an anti-austerity policy platform, and strengthen the democratic links between Labour's parliamentary and extra-parliamentary wings. Although Corbyn never discarded rhetorical support for social movements and pursued a policy programme more amenable to their demands, he was not able to tangibly strengthen the position of social movements activists, party members or trade unions at the base of the party. From the perspective of the power resources model, this may have contributed to Labour's inability to build a progressive coalition of voters at the 2019 election. In addition, the failure to reform the party together with the defeat at the polls in 2019 paved the way for Starmer's relinquishment of movementist rhetoric in favour of a more parliamentarist approach.

The lack of substantial party reform has left the Starmer leadership relatively free to engage with social movements and progressive demands on a voluntary basis. In both of the two cases under

investigation in this paper – Black Lives Matter and the NEU's opposition to re-commencing in-school teaching – we have seen a considerably less wholehearted support for social movements than that expressed by the remaining Corbynite voices within the Labour Party.

In this sense, Labour under Starmer represents an attempt to create distance between potentially supportive social movements and the Labour Party. Starmer is targeting so-called 'Red Wall' constituents in the former Labour heartlands – today's 'median' voter – who are often framed as socially conservative and hostile to progressive causes, although recent YouGov polling has cast doubt on this assumption (English, 2021). Pro-Corbyn MPs, meanwhile, have remained supportive of social movement causes and criticised Starmer's eagerness to drop progressive demands, but neither they nor the extra-parliamentary left have been able to exercise leverage over the leadership due to the relative autonomy of the parliamentary leadership once they have been elected.

This is not to say that there is an easy option for social democracy in Britain, whereby working class voters are simply waiting to vote for a mobilised progressive alternative, if only one was offered to them. Instead, and echoing E.P. Thompson in that the working class must be 'made', our argument is that there needs to be a progressive alternative and analysis available; and that such a viewpoint needs to be expanding, in terms of its availability, viability and plausibility, *if* such a 'good sense' is to be widely adopted by those who do (and/or should) consider themselves part of the contemporary working class.

Starmer's appeal to the 'median' voter suggests that he is unlikely to pursue such a 'left-rhetoric-left-policy' programme which aims to strengthen the solidaristic ties between the Labour Party and progressive social movements. Indeed, in his more recent statements he has gone further still: heralding the Labour Party's renewed endorsement of 'business' under his leadership (Wearmouth 2021), at the same time as

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castigating more disruptive challenges to business that might otherwise be considered an attempt to prevent the self-destruction of our species (Soteriou, E. 2021). A 'virtuous circle' of progressive voters, under the leadership of Starmer's Labour Party, therefore, seems improbable. From the perspective of the power resource model, a resurgence of an expanding and sustainable electoral support for a progressive form of social democracy in the UK seems unlikely to come about under the current Labour Party leadership.

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**PROGRESSIVE  
PROPOSALS FOR THE**

# **TURBULENT**

**TIMES:  
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**PROGRESSIVE  
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**Connecting with Citizens:  
the Communication  
that Makes Ideas Heard**

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Konstantin VÖSSING

# **Value Based Policy Communication in European Social Democracy**

## **Keywords**

**Political communication, values, groups, party strategy, justifications**

## **Abstract**

Value-based policy communication entails proposing policies and invoking values to justify these policies. This article explores how we can study the extent to which European social democracy practices this kind of communication. This is important because the use of value-based communication allows social democracy to reinvigorate its electoral appeal. Currently, social democratic parties still rely predominantly on appeals to social groups (instead of values) to justify their policies. However, on its own, this approach becomes less and less effective during a period in which the relevance of group belonging for vote choices continues to decline.

Value-based policy communication entails *proposing policies* and *invoking values to justify these policies*. This article investigates whether European social democracy practices this kind of communication. Value-based communication is an essential feature of the *party of values* that social democracy ought to become to reinvigorate its broad public appeal.<sup>1</sup> During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, social democratic parties emerged as class parties, appealing to supporters and voters on the basis of their class affiliation (Vössing 2017). After 1945, Western European social democracy replaced its class-based approach with a broader appeal to coalitions of social groups. Social democratic parties offered more extensive policy agendas that were designed to satisfy the needs of these combinations of social groups and to negotiate a compromise between them. The *social compromise model* remains until today the dominant approach used by social democratic parties to formulate electoral strategies and policy agendas.

In political communication, social compromise parties attempt to highlight the specific benefits they offer to targeted social groups. For example, during federal parliamentary elections in 1998, the German SPD used the slogan “innovation and justice” to appeal to workers (“justice”) and middle-class voters (“innovation”). After the electoral victories of third way social democracy during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the social compromise model ceased to be electorally successful. The heavy decline of social democratic vote shares during the past 20 years has made abundantly clear that the social compromise model fails to attract voters. Decades of research on voting behavior show that people simply do not vote based on their

social structural locations anymore. Values are a considerably more powerful predictor of vote choices, and social democratic values in particular are widespread in Europe.<sup>2</sup> This is why social democratic parties should become parties of values and abandon the social compromise model. Parties of values make values instead of target groups the decisive rationale for their actions. They say *what they want* rather than *which voters they want*.

The party-of-values principle can be translated into all domains of party activity. Most importantly, a party of values needs value-based communication. In this paper, I investigate the extent to which European social democracy relies on values in its communication with voters. First, after this brief introduction, I develop in more detail the model of value-based communication. Second, I outline a method that can be used for the empirical analysis of the scope, content, and quality of value-based communication. Third, I illustrate the usefulness of this method by applying it to a selection of illustrative cases, I briefly summarize some preliminary findings and discuss how the empirical scope of the analysis can be extended in future research using the concepts developed in this article.

## **The concept of value-based policy communication**

Value-based policy communication constitutes the core of a value-based communication strategy, and it is an essential feature of the social democratic *party of values*. A party that relies on value-based communication highlights specific policies (rather than global positions) and justifies the desirability of its policies in reference to universal values. A party of values tries to convince its voters that the policies endorsed by the party have a positive effect on mutually shared values (see figure 1).

**Figure 1: Value-based policy communication**



The value-based policy justification is a particular type of “connection claim” which establishes a causal connection between two “component claims” (Vössing 2020).

Specifically, the constitutive component claims in value-based policy communication are “this is a desirable policy” and “this is a desirable value.” The two components can be communicated separately, or they can be used as a value-based policy justification by connecting them through a term indicating causality (“this desirable policy advances that desirable value.”). The statement “raising the minimum wage advances social justice” is an example of a value-based policy justification invoking a core social democratic value.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to a policy justification, a policy excuse does not claim that a policy is desirable. In addition, a policy excuse does not invoke a desirable goal to explain a policy, but rather a mitigating circumstance that can help explain why an undesirable policy should be supported. For example, the argument “we need to reform the welfare state (policy), because globalization leaves us no choice (mitigating circumstance)” constitutes a policy excuse.

Perfectly crafted policy justifications would maximize recipient support for all three claims they entail. They would contain a popular policy, a widely accepted value, and a claim about an effect of the policy on the value that the audience believes to be valid. Each of the positive impressions created in the minds of message recipients by the three components then contributes to raise the overall satisfaction of recipients with the policy justification. After that, high satisfaction with

the message will have positive effects on support for the justified policy and support for the political actor communicating the message. This model of “cumulative impression formation” (Vössing 2021a) is based on political psychological research about public opinion and persuasion (McGuire 1985, Zaller 1992, McGraw 2002) as well as studies of political explanations (Grose et al. 2015, McGraw 1991, 1990, 2002, McGraw et al 1993, 1995, Esaiasson et al 2017, Vössing 2015, 2018, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2021a, Burlacu und Vössing 2018, 2018a) and social explanations (Schönbach 1990). Studies of political and social explanations offer a wealth of evidence for the increased support for a policy and a political actor that comes from a satisfactory explanation, and a value-based justification in particular (McGraw 1991).

However, crafting policy justifications that maximize support for all three of its components at the same time will only be possible on very rare occasions. Typically, political actors will have to make judgment calls. They have to decide, for example, whether they would prefer to invoke a popular value or claim a plausible policy-value effect, given that people often do not believe that the values they cherish are truly advanced by a particular policy. Empirical social science research can inform these decisions, but they are also determined by political considerations and democratic processes in political parties related to choice of both policies and values.

Through a process of cumulative impression formation, value-based policy justifications can raise support for social democratic parties and candidates as well as the policies they propose. In addition, value-based communication can build long-term identification with social democracy. Value-based party identification can replace identification patterns of the past, eroded since the 1970s, which were founded on group belonging and buttressed by secondary associations. And finally, pushing party leaders as well as rank and file party members to think through the consequences of their



policies by formulating value-based justifications strengthens social democracy's identity as a policy focused party. It is also a potent mechanism for steering social democratic parties away from being tactical parties and re-transform them into *political* parties with a clear political identity.

## The method of explanation analysis

I will investigate the value-based communication of European social democracy using the method of explanation analysis. I have previously used explanation analysis to investigate justifications for policies of European integration. Explanation analysis is based on the model of political rhetoric developed in Vössing (2020). In this model, different types of political statements are composed of unique combinations of component claims and causal connections that create connection claims. Value-based policy justifications constitute a connection claim that consists of two component claims ("this is a desirable policy" and "this is a desirable value") as well as a term indicative of causality that links the components ("because", "given that", "this is why"). "Raising the minimum wage is a desirable policy because it advances social justice" is an example of a value-based policy justification.

I will use explanation analysis to determine the *scope*, *content*, and *quality* of policy justifications in the communication of European social democracy. *Scope* refers to the extent to which social democratic parties rely on value-based policy communication as opposed to other communication techniques, specifically benefits-based justifications, justifications invoking other (and less effective) norms, and policy excuses. The analysis will determine the absolute and relative number of value claims, policy endorsements, and policy justifications in a given body of text. Calculating the number of component and connection

claims in relation to the overall size of the text makes it possible to compare different political actors and times.

The *content* of component claims refers to the policies a party endorses and the values it invokes to justify its policies; the content of connection claims refers to the observable policy-value combinations. Explanation analysis can classify the content of component and connection claims at varying levels of specificity. For example, in my research on European integration, the value “internal security” is a specification of the value of “security”, which in turn is part of the even more abstract value of “physical integrity.” Policies can conveniently be classified in reference to committee structures, for example by identifying the committee of the European Parliament to which a policy would be assigned.

The *quality* of value-based communication will be judged in reference to three standards outlined in Vössing (2020), that is intelligibility, relevance, and validity. Policy justifications can suffer from a lack of intelligibility in several ways. In some cases, the policies endorsed in the justification and the values invoked to justify a policy are stated with a lack of clarity or specificity. In other cases, the connection between the two is not highlighted in a clearly intelligible fashion. A policy justification suffers from a lack of relevance when it is stated in an ill-fitting context or when it is combined with additional information that lacks relevance.

A lack of validity is currently the most frequently discussed deficiency of political statements. The terms fake news, misinformation, and disinformation identify the most egregious form of invalidity. Social democratic parties are much less likely to commit these types of invalidity. However, invalid statements are not limited to outright lies. Invalidity can also occur through “argument stretching” (Vössing 2020, 2022), which identifies political statements that stretch the truth while falling short of full-blown lies. Argument-stretching is frequently the result of an overzealous idealism, which attributes all sorts of positive

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effects to a cherished policy, which turn out to be spurious upon closer inspection. Argument-stretching is quite common, for instance, when Europhile politicians justify policies of European integration (Vössing 2022b).

### Case studies of value-based communication

I will apply explanation analysis to determine the *scope*, *content*, and *quality* of value-based policy communication for an illustrative selection of documents from social democratic parties, including “A new social contract for Europe” (Party of European Socialists 2019 Manifesto. PES Election Congress, Madrid, 23 February 2019); “It’s time for real change. For the many, not the few” (UK Labour Party manifesto for the 2019 general elections); “Aus Respekt vor Deiner Zukunft. Das Zukunftsprogramm der SPD” (Manifesto of the German SPD manifesto for the 2021 federal elections); a speech of Keir Starmer, MP, Leader of the Labour Party, at Labour Connected, 22 September 2020; and a speech of Olaf Scholz, Candidate of the German SPD for the office of chancellor, at the party congress, 9 May 2021.

The data set created by coding these (and later more) documents will have a multilevel structure<sup>4</sup>. At the most basic level, the data set contains all *component claims* made in a document that can be classified as a *measure* (policy or general action), a *value*, a *benefit*, an *unspecified (other) norm*, or a *mitigating circumstance* (this is the corner stone of an excuse, the polar opposite of a justification). At the second level, the data set records the *policy justifications* (and *policy excuses*) that emerge from the various components noted at the lowest level. This makes it possible to determine, for instance, the extent

to which social democratic parties demand policies with respectively without justification to do so. It also allows me to determine the extent to which social democratic parties invoke values without linking them to policies. Moreover, it is at this level where the quality and content of justifications will be coded. The third level recorded in the data set is the *document*. Aggregating information about components and justifications (and excuses) at this level makes it possible to compare documents (and parties issuing these documents) on a wide range of indicators, including for instance the number of policy justifications relative to a certain number of words in a document, the relative number of excuses, the relative number of value-based policy justifications, and the relative number of unjustified policy demands and non-connected values. It is at this level where the scope of value-based policy communication will be coded.

For an illustrative implementation of this mode of analysis (recorded in the attached data set), see the first section of the 2019 PES Manifesto:

"The European Union must better serve its people. The May 2019 European elections are our opportunity to change the EU and build a fairer Europe. Our societies are still bearing the social costs of the 2008 economic crisis, and we have urgent challenges to face. Europe needs to overcome inequality, fight for tax justice, tackle the threat of climate change, harness the digital revolution, ensure a fair agricultural transformation, manage migration better, and guarantee security for all Europeans. Europe needs a change of leadership and policy direction, leaving behind the neoliberal and conservative models of the past, and focusing on quality jobs for its people, a healthy environment, social security and an economic model which addresses inequality and the cost of living. The status quo is not an option. Radical change is required to build a project for the future which all Europeans can believe in. Nostalgic nationalists are selling nothing but dangerous illusions,

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putting past progress and European values at risk. We – Socialists and Democrats – must guarantee citizens' wellbeing and ensure social and ecological progress, leaving no person and no territory behind in the green and digital transitions. Europe must move to a circular model of production and consumption that respects our planet's limits. We want to strengthen Europe's unity while respecting its diversity. As Socialists and Democrats, we propose a new Social Contract for Europe."

This section contains five measures, ranging from general actions to policy packages (but no specific policy): "an economic model", "radical change", "strengthen Europe's unity", "respecting its (Europe's) diversity", and "a new social contract for Europe". The section contains eight references to values: "build a fairer Europe", "Europe needs to overcome inequality", "(Europe needs to) fight for tax justice", "(Europe needs to) ensure a fair agricultural transformation", "(Europe needs to) guarantee security for all Europeans", "(Europe needs to focus on) social security", "addressing inequality", and "European values." In addition, the section contains five references to benefits: "(EU must) serve its people", "quality jobs for its (Europe's) people", "a healthy environment", "(addressing) cost of living", and "citizens' wellbeing."

Finally, the section contains no mitigating circumstances (hence no excuses), but still 15 unspecified norms (that is, norms which are neither values nor benefits): "change the EU", "tackle the threat of climate change", "harness the digital revolution", "manage migration better", "change of leadership, (change of) policy direction", "build a project for the future which all Europeans can believe in", "past progress", "social progress", "ecological progress", "leaving no person behind in the green transition", "leaving no territory behind in the green transition", "leaving no person behind in the digital transition", "leaving no territory behind in the digital transition", and "circular model of production and consumption that respects our planet's limits."

However, the large number of component claims are only rarely connected to one another, so that the section contains very few explanations, or more generally speaking, very few arguments. A total number of three justifications can be found: “an economic model (policy) to address inequality (value)”, “an economic model (policy) to address the cost of living (benefit)”, and “Radical change (general action) to build a project for the future which all Europeans can believe in (other norm). More specifically, only one of these explanations is a value-based justification (the first one). In addition, that justification uses the weak verb “address” rather than terms expressing stronger notions of change and causality such as “solve” and “advance”. And finally, the measures mentioned in the section remain at a fairly general level of specificity, or in other words, they are vague (“economic model”, “radical change”). The full analysis of the SPE manifesto and the other documents will show whether this preliminary conclusion about the limited use of value-based policy communication holds up to a larger scope of evidence.

## Endnotes

- 1 In a series of articles, Sebastian Jobelius and I have outlined the *party-of-values* model, and we have explained why social democratic parties should adopt this model (Jobelius and Vössing 2019, 2020, 2020a, 2020b).
- 2 Important examples for this research are detailed in Jobelius and Vössing 2019, 2020.
- 3 Additional components of value-based policy communication include goals that mediate between policies and values as well as evidence. Other aspects of a broader value-based communication strategy includes highlighting the competence and credibility of leaders, pointing out problems, characterizing political opponents, and issue selection.
- 4 The data set is appended to this article (as a means to clarify the logic of data collection with the illustrative data that has already been coded)

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Mafalda DÂMASO and Eric SUNDSTRÖM

## **When their Communication Trumps Your Policy: What Progressives Must Learn in the Age of Populism**

## **Keywords**

**Political communications, relational rhetoric, campaign strategy, networked organising, virtual campaign, relational organising**

## **Abstract**

In many ways, American and European politics could not be more different. But is there anything that European Progressives can learn from Joe Biden's campaign? And what about Trump's communication style – does it teach us anything valuable about political rhetoric in the time of social media? In this chapter, we examine the principles behind Trump's rhetoric and Biden's successful campaign. We argue that – despite being on opposite sides of the aisle – Trump's communication style and Biden's approach to campaigning suggest that there is an emerging shift in political communications. This leads us to propose that European Progressives should implement what we call a relational and networked approach to communications and organising.

Donald Trump has been defeated. But his communication style has created acolytes around the world, who use to their own advantage the logic of social media and the weaknesses of a media system that is increasingly dependent on clicks. Despite this paradigm shift, which makes political positioning and communication strategies increasingly indissociable, some progressives continue to work under the assumption that the strength of their policies alone will win them elections. In doing so, they run the risk of being squeezed out by communication-savvy populists on the one hand, and energised green actors on the other hand. If this scenario is to be avoided, progressives must be open to learning both from their opponents (especially, the best communicator of them all: Donald Trump) and from innovative progressive campaigning methods (Biden's 2020 successful approach).

There is an increasing body of research focused on combatting disinformation, regulating big tech and redefining ownership of personal data (eg Aho and Duffield, 2020; Arogyaswamy, 2020; Rochefort, 2020). However, until new policies are implemented, politics must operate within this technological and communicative structure. The potential of such tools is something that populists understand – and is their main if not their only strength. If progressive actors are to maintain relevance in a changing media landscape, they must *also* be more strategic in how they approach communications. We argue that they can – and should – learn from Trump's and Biden's strategies.

The paper will begin by identifying the main characteristics of Trump's communication style and strategy. First, we discuss his rhetorical style, which combines push and pull tactics to disturb the opponent, occupy the centre of the political and media debate with attacks and fait divers,

and thereby redefine the communicative (and political) landscape. This is followed by a discussion of the central role of supporters in the success of Trump's media strategy and politics, which leads us to see his approach as fundamentally relational. That is, contrary to what polarisation and the reinforcement of social silos by social media might lead one to conclude, Trump recognised that political identities are flexible, and that the organic dissemination of political content helps to generate trust among dissatisfied or politically orphan voters. Therefore, a smart use of social media is one that sees existing supporters not only as voters but also as actors central to the growth and success of political campaigns. Progressives must learn this lesson.

Then, the paper will identify areas in which progressives can best combine their values and strengths with recent and emerging technological developments as well as traditional communication tools, and therefore counter the Trumpian way of communicating and making electoral gains. US presidential campaigns always break new ground in the field of digital communication, organising and social media. This section will include lessons learned in the Biden Presidential campaign 2020, including how to detect and counter misinformation – an area where vast improvements were made compared to 2016. The increased use of relational organizing – how to make full use of your personal networks as COVID-19 made door-to-door canvassing less common – will be described. Other technological improvements to communicate more directly with voters will also be covered, for example through traditional text messaging, but also via platforms such as Instagram and Twitch. The role of digital partnerships and micro influencers will also be discussed.

The final section connects the findings of the first two sections – the analysis of Trump's communication style and the lessons taken from Joe Biden's virtual campaign – to identify a number of fundamental principles that could help progressives develop a relational and



networked approach to communication and, in doing so, win hearts and minds in the age of post-Covid populism.

## **Trump's Relational Rhetoric**

If progressives are to take any lessons regarding political rhetoric from Trump's years in power, they must understand the main characteristics of Trump's communication style and strategy.

These include: simple messaging, the clear rhetorical positioning of his campaign (in his case, as anti-establishment), and the deployment of rhetoric to support the organic dissemination of his content (e.g. by being suggestive or entertaining). Finally, Trump understood that communication is no longer exclusively content-based; rather, it is now also (if not mostly) energy-based. This explains his repeated efforts to divert attention towards (and disturbing) the opponent, e.g. by making personal attacks rather than focusing on policy.

## **Rhetorical Demagoguery**

Recent work by Jennifer Mercieca, an historian of American political rhetoric that has analysed Trump's communication style, provides further detail regarding the main rhetorical tricks used by Trump in his 2016 campaign. In the 2016 campaign against Hillary Clinton, Trump's language was highly effective. "Make America Great Again" was simple and full of energy, and this slogan was regularly accompanied by catchy soundbites. Charismatic, and a good communicator with dozens of years of experience in the media, Trump also recognised the power of social media to disseminate his messages.

In *Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump* (2020b), Mercieca describes the former American president as a rhetorical genius that uses suggestive language to gather public support and avoid accountability. Progressives have nothing to learn

from this. But his use of rhetoric is only one part of the paradigmatic shift in political communications whose potential populists identified and subsequently unleashed.

To be clear, our use of the term populism in this chapter is aligned with Cas Mudde's definition of the term as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2004, 543). The oversimplification of political challenges on the one hand and its exclusionary approach to the citizenry on the other hand is in opposition to the values of progressives. Therefore, we understand and engage with populist rhetoric as a topic that is worthy of critical examination rather than political support.

Mercieca identifies six central rhetorical strategies used by Trump since 2016: three to gather support from his followers (creating what one can call a pull effect) and the other three to alienate such supporters from everyone else (which we will call a push effect). On the one hand, the supportive strategies used by Trump were *Ad populum* (through which he suggested that the crowd's wisdom had more value than the elite's); *Paralipsis* (statements made as jokes, sarcasm, rumour, allowing the speaker to maintain plausible deniability); and a narrative of American exceptionalism that redirected his supporters' feeling of pride towards Trump as "the apotheosis of American exceptionalism". On the other hand, Trump's alienating strategies aimed to divert attention towards and disturb the opponent. They were *Ad hominem* (attacks on people rather than on their arguments, delegitimising the latter); *Ad baculum* (threats of force or intimidation used to silence opposition), used when he suggested that Democrats were going to take away the guns of Trump supporters; and *Reification* (treating people as non-human), which he repeatedly used when addressing his opponents.

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These strategies combined “to unify his followers against everyone else and to make Trump the fulcrum for all political discussion and debate. All of the strategies are used to set the nation’s agenda, distract the nation’s attention and frame how we understand reality” (Mercieca, 2020a).

The ethics of this approach, which Mercieca describes as authoritarian, are abhorrent. Trump directed (or, as others would say, manipulated) the frustration and emotions (including hatred) of his followers towards support for his campaign. This handbook is being followed step-by-step by European populists. If progressives are to not allow them to win, the former must understand the rules of the new communication landscape.

The six rhetorical tactics identified above served Trump’s broader strategy: to increase polarisation and distrust in policy solutions. He used simple messages to energise his supporters towards him and against his opponents. Progressives and, more broadly, liberal politicians and experts have been divided in how to respond. Some think that demagogue rhetoric requires constant responses. However, this strategy runs the risk of reinforcing the language and therefore the grounds of populists. The work of British political scientist Alan Finlayson (1998) helps us understand how such a response can backfire. Analysing speeches by Tony Blair, Finlayson argues that New Labour’s rhetoric of modernisation aimed to:

“legitimise modernisation as a political object [and to] locate the impetus for it [...] in the British people themselves. Thus any potential conservative argument that reform necessarily foists unwarranted change on the nation is trumped in advance by the construction of a story where change, renewal and modernisation are intrinsic to the tradition of the nation” (Finlayson, 1998, 14).

That is, Blair’s narrative of modernisation forced his opponents to position themselves in relation to it. With his demagoguery, and

despite having opposing political aims to those of Blair, Trump's communicative strategy had the same goal: to redefine political discourse. Focusing politicians' or the media's attention on populists can contribute, even if unwittingly, to reinforcing the perceived legitimacy of their statements.

### **Redefining Political Rhetoric**

This is why a second approach, focused on creating the conditions to tell a different story, and hence to be proactive rather than reactive, is to be preferred. This leads us to a second, more direct lesson, that progressives can take from Trump's communication style. Twentieth century rhetoric studies were structured around a central debate: whether the success of rhetoric is to be explained by the rhetorical situation (Lloyd Bitzer, 1968), that is, the political context, or by the rhetor (Richard Vatz, 1973), that is, the politician.

Barbara Biesecker's work (1989) aims to overcome the classic deadlock. She states that meaning is neither fully discovered in situations (as argued by Bitzer) nor fully created by the individual rhetor (as argued by Vatz). Instead, she argues that rhetorical discourse contributes to establishing the identities of both rhetor and audience – and defines successful rhetoric as being able to influence or redefine the relations between them. That is, the audience is not a “sovereign, rational subject” with a predefined identity (Biesecker, 1989, p. 123); rather, rhetoric is “a complex interactive process whereby persons and collectivities articulate their shifting identities to each other within changing historical circumstances” (Biesecker, 1989, p. 126). This analysis is influenced by Jacques Derrida (1981), whose work of deconstruction demonstrated that meaning is always established within an economy of relations (*différance*).

In this relational framework, the rhetorical situation co-creates audiences. “If the subject is shifting and unstable [...], then the

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rhetorical event [...] marks the articulation of provisional identities and the construction of contingent relations” (Biesecker, 1989, p. 126). Deconstruction has an inherent politics of relations and affinities and social media is its privileged site. Sadly, this political potential was grasped by Trump and other populists long before progressives.

### **Social Media and Relational Rhetoric**

Social media is more than technology alone. At its best, it can raise and extend conversations beyond interest and activist groups – as was the case with Black Lives Matter or the Me Too movements. At its worst, it can be used to foster division, doubt, hatred.

Trump recognised the potential of social media, but he combined it with a populist, demagogic rhetorical handbook. This allowed him to reject the idea that the context – political reality – is fixed and unquestionable. Rather, in Trump’s world facts can be interpreted, questioned and even denied as required by politicians – a strategy that can only be successful with the active support of citizens as disseminators of messages first and, subsequently, as co-creators of narratives supporting the populist leader (as exemplified by QAnon, a self-organised conspiracy theory and cult). In this context, the rise of the concept of fake news is to be seen as a symptom of a broader paradigmatic change in the relation between politicians and supporters. Politicians can no longer be effective on their own. Rather, political communication is increasingly a relational practice, which requires the active contribution of the public to be effective.

To summarise this section, Trump’s communication style (using pull and push rhetorical strategies to develop strong affective relations with his supporters, which he subsequently used to disseminate disinformation and lies about his opponents) stresses the increasing interdependence of politicians (as effective communicators) and the

audience (as active contributors to political campaigns via their use of social media).

\* \* \*

This context provides several challenges for progressives. As is now well known, the algorithms that structure social media support a polarising logic of clicks, likes and dislikes, often for purposes that are at the opposite of dialogue (Zuboff, 2019). This logic is increasingly important in the economic model of traditional media, which also chases the attention and the clicks of viewers as its funding model – known as the attention economy (Simon, 1971). More research shows that algorithms support polarisation by privileging content with which users are likely to agree, reinforcing echo chambers (Takikawa and Nagayoshi, 2017) that not only exclude but also discredit different voices. Navigating this context requires a strategic approach focused on bursting the inward movement of (social) media feedback loops. To do so, progressives should combine the relational approach to rhetoric mentioned earlier with a broader, networked understanding of communication suggested by Joe Biden's campaign, which we will now discuss.

This paradigmatic shift has consequences for the governance of campaign organising. In practice, it requires a more decentralised approach to political communications. The following section will identify specific ways to implement this approach in terms of campaign organising and management.

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## **Learning from Joe Biden's campaign: How do you get 81 million votes in a pandemic?**

### **The US Election in 2020: A view from February**

As the election year of 2020 started, the overall situation looked rosy if your aim is to be re-elected as president of the United States. In February, the US Bureau of Labour Statistics reported that the unemployment rate was 3.5 percent. Economic growth was solid; the real gross domestic product (GDP) increased by 2.9 percent in 2018, and by 2.3 percent in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

When Gallup conducted their regular Presidential Approval Poll in the beginning of February 2020, the polarized nature of American politics was evident. 49 percent of US voters approved of the way Donald Trump was handling his job as president, while 48 percent disapproved.<sup>2</sup>

Donald Trump's re-election campaign had already been launched in June 2019, and as a sitting president he had the platform and power that comes with the White House. He was about to reach 80 million followers on Twitter and used his account to dictate the public discourse. Together with his allies in the conservative media universe, Trump had created an impressive ecosystem that combined traditional media (not least cable television) and social media (using Facebook "like a Swiss Army knife to raise money, amplify his message and mobilize voters"). He had an energized grassroots army of followers, and 93 percent of Republican voters approved of him as president.<sup>3</sup>

Within the Democratic Party, a record number of no less than 29 major candidates had declared their interest in becoming a candidate

for president and challenging Trump. On February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020, the Democratic primary season began with chaos and controversy in Iowa, where a technical breakdown delayed the vote report by three days. The large Democratic field had no clear star or frontrunner, and the party who wanted to govern the nation looked inept to even arrange a caucus in a state with only around three million inhabitants.<sup>4</sup>

History has proven that most often a sitting US president gets re-elected. If 2020 was to become an exception, the race needed to change dramatically.

### **COVID-19 and the size of a victory**

Hindsight is a beautiful thing, and we now know that COVID-19 – and the economic recession and rising unemployment that followed – totally changed the US Presidential election campaign of 2020.<sup>5</sup> Trump mishandled the response to the pandemic – and most other challenges – and Joe Biden emerged as an empathic and experienced leader in the Democratic primaries. Moreover, the team around Joe Biden ran a smooth campaign, and won the election convincingly.

But the time required to count the record number of votes tended to give the impression that the election result was a close call. The nature of American media coverage – constant, dramatic, and polarized – enhanced the feeling of a close election. And the outgoing president famously and repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of the election result, which eventually led to the riot and violent attack on the US Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 – just as Congress was about to certify the election results.<sup>6</sup>

There was never any “steal”, of course. But US Presidential elections have often been very close affairs – for example in 2000 and 2016 when the losing candidate won the popular vote but lost the electoral college. So, how close was 2020?

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Given the outlook in February 2020, it is interesting to note the rather impressive size of Joe Biden's victory in November that very same year. The turnout was a record high: 66.6 percent of eligible Americans voted. Biden won the popular vote by a large margin; he received over 81 million votes – the highest numbers of votes ever – compared to Trump's 74 million. Biden's margin of 7 million votes is bigger than the entire state of Massachusetts. He won the electoral college very solidly: 306-232.

In total, Biden got 51,3 percent of the votes cast. That is the largest percentage of votes won against an incumbent president since Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. If we look at Biden's popular vote margin by percentage, his victory over Trump is bigger than Barack Obama's over Mitt Romney in 2012: 4.4 percent margin for Biden, 3.9 percent for Obama.

In comparison with the gold standard of modern presidential elections – Obama's victory in 2008 – Biden's vote total outdistanced Obama by over 11 million votes. And compared to Hillary Clinton in 2016, Joe Biden won over 15 million additional votes.<sup>7</sup>

But how do you mobilize, convince, and incite voter turnout in the middle of a pandemic, in a country where it is notoriously difficult to vote? How do you get 15 million new votes in the middle of COVID-19?<sup>8</sup>

### **How to analyse a presidential campaign operating under COVID-19**

One of the aims of this chapter is to contribute to the discussion about what can be learnt from Joe Biden's 2020 presidential campaign. The focus of this section will be on how the campaign adapted its operations due to the pandemic, and developments in the general field of communication and social media.<sup>9</sup>

To structure the analysis, five basic questions about campaigning were formulated. The nature of the questions has been developed and formulated by the present author. For obvious reasons, there is (yet) no

manual for how a presidential election during a pandemic should be analysed. Instead, the main questions often addressed in the literature describing presidential campaigns provided a base.<sup>10</sup> Thereafter, previous experiences of US political campaigns were added.<sup>11</sup> Finally, observations of the presidential campaign were considered. The result was a list with the following five questions:

1. Political campaigns are often built on physical voter contact and door-to-door operations. How did the Biden-campaign adapt its operations and main strategies to a reality where voters could not be contacted face to face?
2. The on-going pandemic underlined the necessity to both mobilize voters and inform them about the actual act of voting (*how, when, where*). How did the Biden-campaign use digital developments within the fields of communication and social media to increase voter turnout?
3. In 2016, Hillary Clinton's campaign was a constant target of online attacks and accusations. How did the Biden-campaign handle online misinformation?
4. Presidential campaigns are huge operations where new ways to communicate and use social media are tried, developed, and used. What are the main additional and positive lessons learnt for future campaigns?
5. Presidential campaigns are huge operations where mistakes are made, and there is always room for improvement. What went wrong in 2020, and what are the current trends that should be observed for future campaigns?

To be able to answer these questions, four post-elections seminars were attended. These seminars lasted for around 360 minutes in total and featured ten key persons who worked in senior positions in the Biden campaign or for the Democratic National Committee (DNC).<sup>12</sup>

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All four seminars have been transcribed, whereafter relevant information to the questions above could be analysed and grouped together as tentative answers. Where indicated, additional research and information from written sources have been added. The information gained through this method, will then contribute to the analysis in the concluding section of this paper.<sup>13</sup>

### **Question one: How did the campaign adapt its operations and main strategies?**

As the pandemic swept across the US during the spring of 2020, all in-person campaigning had to be stopped. Joe Biden had won the Democratic primary but was mostly confined to his basement in his home state of Delaware. As the “Joe Biden for President” campaign was being reinforced and better staffed, major issues had to be addressed. One of the major issues was the following: how do you organize a campaign when you cannot meet voters face to face?

As a result, three principles were adopted. First, it would have to be a *virtual campaign*, which implied a larger scope than a campaign that is *only digital*. Phone calls and text messaging would play an important part, given that in-person meetings would only take place once absolutely safe to do so.<sup>14</sup>

The “pole star” of any American election campaign – your overall aim – has always been knocking on as many doors as possible. To meet the challenges of a virtual campaign, the second principle needed to define a new goal. The solution became a new concept: having as many *meaningful conversations* as possible, regardless of whether they took place on phone calls, text messages, or through social media.

A natural ingredient in any American campaign is the colourful bars written on large chunks of paper and put on the wall in the local

campaign office. They show how many doors that had been knocked the very same day, and how many phone calls that the volunteers at the phone bank within the office had completed. Now, the trend towards digital data measurements was complete. The *meaningful conversations* were done by volunteers through their own phones and apps in the digital world, wherever they chose to campaign.

The first time a volunteer engages in a political campaign, he or she tends to have a specific candidate or specific issue in mind. When the volunteer returns to help out again, it is normally because of how much fun it was. The challenge, thirdly, was therefore to create a sense of belonging – a very difficult task in a virtual campaign.

The solution was to create virtual election offices using the Slack app. Through this channel – called “Victory 2020” – volunteers could meet, exchange experiences, and get to work, while a small team of employed election workers were in the background to help when needed. Slack became the campaign office for no more than 200 000 volunteers.

In conjunction with these basic principles, two traditional campaign strategies melded into one: community organising, often associated with Barack Obama, and distributed organising, which is associated with Bernie Sanders.

Community organising is dependent on specific geographical confines: campaigners team up with other community members under the guidance of a local organiser/captain. Distributed organising, on the other hand, is driven by self-starting campaigners in multiple locations, who coordinate through technology across geographical boundaries.

Thanks to the virtual Slack-offices, volunteers could choose the campaign model they preferred and were used to, with the level of guidance they needed. The Slack channel “Victory 2020” simply became a digital field office.

This meant that many volunteers virtually campaigned in the states where they lived. The national campaign kept in close touch with

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these in-state campaign organisations. Volunteers who did not chose to campaign in a specific state were brought together in a national team called *the fire hose*. In October this group was made up of over 150,000 volunteers whose efforts – engaging voters primarily through phone calls and text messages – could be directed to any area within 17 key states where the campaign required additional effort.

In a country with around 230 million eligible voters, 700 million attempts were made to contact all the voters – of which 332 million were telephone calls. The goal was to find and contact every single voter at least once, and to do so every volunteer needed to find their own place and focus-area in the campaign, regardless of where they lived.

In this context, the digital platform Mobilize must be mentioned. During the last couple of years, Mobilize has been the digital tool for progressive grassroots and volunteers to arrange all kind of physical meetings. Now it became the foundation for online activism and virtual meetings; during the four days leading up to the election 8,000 Mobilize-events were organized by volunteers in the Biden-campaign.

If a virtual campaign with meaningful conversations became the answer to the challenge posed by the pandemic, the buzz word to remember from the 2020 campaign is relational organising. Instead of knocking on doors and talking to strangers, you were now – with the pandemic as a backdrop – encouraged to talk to your relatives, friends, co-workers, and other acquaintances. Having a meaningful conversation with someone you know was found to be three times as effective as knocking on doors, and it could be done while social distancing.

To make this happen practically, the volunteers were advised to use the campaign app called "VoteJoe". A trust gap that needed to be bridged was to get volunteers to share their private contacts with the app. This was supposedly done in a secure way, and only with

the volunteer's consent. Thereafter, the opportunity arose to match these personal contacts with voters who, according to the campaign's other data, were important and in need of a *meaningful conversation*. In the app, volunteers could see which of their contacts lived in a battleground state, because the symbol of a little ballot would appear next to that contact. If the name of your contact had also requested a ballot, a green star would be attached to the name.

To summarize: Relational organising was able to overcome the campaigning limitations imposed by COVID-19 and social distancing. The framework was a virtual campaign organised through the *Victory 2020* channel on Slack, the "Vote Joe" app and the program *Mobilize*. The new pole star was meaningful conversations – phone calls, text messages, interaction in social media – which aimed at informing voters (and possible acquaintances) about how to vote, and vote for Joe Biden.

### **Question two: How did the campaign use digital to increase voter turnout?**

The fight for the right to vote is as old as the United States itself – and it is an ongoing battle. The eligibility to vote is regulated by the United States Constitution, federal laws, and state laws; voting regulations and procedures can vary substantially between different states. The most important task for the virtual campaign – due to COVID-19, the increase in both early voting and postal voting, and the different election laws – was to educate state volunteers so that they in turn could help people to vote.

One notable development in this election cycle was that The Democratic National Committee – the governing body of the United States Democratic Party – had recovered after the scandals in 2016 when Russian hackers infiltrated their computer network. The DNC had invested in its digital infrastructure and was ready to work closely work

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with Joe Biden's presidential campaign. Moreover, the DNC digital organizing program had a crown jewel: the website [iwillvote.com](http://iwillvote.com).

The main goal with [iwillvote.com](http://iwillvote.com) was to create a one stop shop for every voter who needed any kind of information about their individual voting process in the area where they lived. And when you chose your home state and entered your personal information on the website, you were treated as if you were visiting an advanced e-commerce website.

The webpage was built as a very specific and detailed chase system. If you entered the system without finishing what you intended to do – check if you are registered, register, or proceed to vote in your state – automatic e-mails and text messages would encourage you to proceed. The system had what is called different “layers programs”: depending on the action the voter took or did not take different automated responses would be sent out. Similar systems are of course used by commercial firms.

If you got stuck on how to vote, instructions could also be sent to your home with pre-paid postage. At that point, the postal service could be tracked, and the voter received an SMS or a call if the campaign noticed that the mail-in ballot had still not been sent in. This kind of *ballot chasing* may have been crucial in states that were won by small margins.

But an advanced webpage is one thing – directing traffic to it is something else. During the first presidential debate, Joe Biden told the viewers to “*go to [iwillvote.com](http://iwillvote.com), decide how they are going to vote, when they are going to vote, and what means by which they are going to vote*”. As the campaign took the opportunity to instruct its candidate to promote the webpage in front of 73,1 million people, you must only ensure that the site does not crash (it did not).

But as a matter of fact, [iwillvote.com](http://iwillvote.com) received even more traffic during the vice-presidential debate between Vice President Mike Pence and Senator Kamala Harris. A fly landed on Mike Pence's

head during the debate – and decided to stay there. The fly was very visible against the Vice President's white hair; the Internet exploded – and the Biden campaign acted quickly. A tweet was sent from Joe Biden's official Twitter account, formulated as an active link: [flywillvote.com](http://flywillvote.com) – which led to [iwillvote.com](http://iwillvote.com). The tweet spread quickly, and the impressive amount of traffic to the site during and after the Vice-Presidential debate was only achieved again during the actual Election Day – beating all presidential debates and the final night of the Democratic convention.

These two examples – mentioning [iwillvote.com](http://iwillvote.com) during the first Presidential debate and reacting quickly during the Vice-Presidential debate – underlines how important it is to have a clear goal (increase voter turnout); to use your most important moments to achieve that goal (73 million viewers during a presidential debate); and to remember your overriding goal when the heat is on and something unexpected happens – while being creative at the same time ([flywillvote.com](http://flywillvote.com)).

But in all campaigns, there are voters who do not watch debates. They are difficult to reach, especially when you cannot knock on doors. These voters do not reply to phone calls and text messages, and the campaign might lack all forms of traditional contact information to reach the voter.

One solution was to run targeted Facebook ads that with one click led users to Messenger. The ads could be formulated as a quiz, or just with a question asking the Facebook user about the most important issue in the up-coming election. This led to a new question about the actual act of voting.

In these conversations the voter would start talking about the election with an AI-programmed bot. Are you going to vote? When, where and how? Important data was collected. If the voter asked a question that the bot did not understand, or if the voter answered in Spanish, a volunteer would take over the conversation. This way, there

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were 250 000 additional cases of voter engagement for those voters that could otherwise not be reached.

But the most interesting possibility arose – as has already been explained – when the data from the volunteers who had shared their private contacts with the campaign, could be matched with data from prioritised voters who had not yet completed their act of voting.

No less than 10 million synchronizations of this kind were made during the final month of the campaign. And 84 percent of the *meaningful conversations* during the last 10 days were with voters in key battle ground states, conducted by volunteers living in non-battle ground states.

The main goal was to ensure that the right voters voted for Joe Biden. 81 268 924 people did so.

### **Question three: How did the campaign handle online misinformation?**

How could Hillary Clinton lose to Donald Trump? One of many explanations is that rumours, slander and pure conspiracy theories influenced the outcome of the election. The Biden-campaign wanted to avoid the mistakes of 2016, and the antidote was internally called *The Malarkey Factory*.

Online misinformation should primarily be handled by the platforms that spread the lies and hatred, of course. But the Head Quarters of the DNC did not dare to wait. After 2016, important investments were made in social listening tools that monitor the online discussions. The infrastructure that had been built up was integrated with the Biden-campaign.

The most effective countermeasure is to quickly flag misinformation and force the platforms to remove the content, for example by demonstrating how the specific post is not compliant with terms of use. Educating those who work for the campaign, and all volunteers,

regarding how to handle disinformation, is a must. The campaign had an ongoing dialogue with journalists who covered the elections. Representatives working for tech giants were constantly reminded of the need for further actions.

But a major task at *The Malarkey Factory* was to combine *social listening* with research and traditional campaign work. False narratives that had many mentions and interactions online were immediately included in the campaign's own opinion polls. Analysts could then assess which groups of voters were affected by the data, and in what way. Is the data just circulating in a right-wing bubble? Or are important constituencies affected?

To be able to back-up the campaign's analysis and to design various effective counterarguments for each affected group of voters, focus groups as well as existing knowledge about voter behaviour were used. The results formed the basis of a *digital remediation campaign* that also considered the websites and keywords that the relevant target group usually uses. The campaign's counter-message could then be directed in real time to relatively narrow groups of voters who were receptive to the disinformation that had begun to spread.

Take for example the attempts to create a scandal surrounding Joe Biden's son, Hunter, or the claim that Osama bin Laden could still be alive. The campaign's analysis showed that such conspiracies did not affect undecided voters, and the motivation among core voters was unchanged. The decision was simple: the campaign would not waste any time and energy on this matter.

If an attack turned out to be harmful, the principle of *do not treat the hit, treat the wound* was applied. So, when Biden was accused of being controlled by left-wing radical forces, or when his age and mental health were questioned, the answer was not to get into polemics about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or the public view of the elderly. The campaign would not repeat, and therefore risk reinforcing, the false messages in

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the eagerness to respond to false claims, and fact checks would just lead to more rounds of finger-pointing.

Instead, messages, images and films were produced with Biden represented as an alert, strong, experienced, and genuine leader who speaks clearly about political reforms and makes his own decisions. The campaign's research showed that a voter who could be influenced by an attempt at mudslinging, but who at the same time had *not* made up his or her mind, was receptive to a positive and holistic message.

If the campaign analysis showed that it was appropriate, the *digital remediation campaign message* could also be conveyed to a relevant group of voters via one of the 5,000 influencers with a large social media following that the campaign collaborated with.

The combination of politics and the Internet will never give you the possibility to go to bed at night once you have answered everyone who has written something bad about your candidate in social media. But the Biden-campaign offered a method in principle with regards to how you can start addressing online misinformation in politics.

### **Question four: What are the main additional and positive digital lessons learnt?**

All campaigns are different, but huge American Presidential campaigns can serve as buffet tables where one ingredient can be very interesting – or totally irrelevant – in your own political context. However, no buffet table could ever offer a complete view of lessons learnt during these enormous campaigns. But let us put some experiences on the table.

One development that will impact many spheres of our societies is AI-robots, which were used in several parts of the campaign. During the days following Joe Biden's announcement of Kamala Harris as his

Vice President, there were 10,000 new Slack accounts created every day. Because of the rapid growth of new accounts, each new volunteer received a first *artificial* guide into the world of campaigning.

Through the digital tool Mobilize, volunteers created around 100,000 events on their own. Zoom was used for all meetings and training sessions, as well as during roundtable discussions for outstanding volunteers in key states. The purpose here was to anchor the work with *relational organising* and *ballot chasing*, as well as to get these star-volunteers to grow and involve more people. The key was to educate, empower and trust volunteers to organise activities on their own.

Trusting the volunteer was also the foundation of the massive and important text message program – a traditional but still important communication channel: research showed that 90 percent of text messages are read within three minutes. As a start, volunteers were allowed to contact voters in a more allowing way compared to the Clinton campaign in 2016. The 160,000 volunteers ended up sending more than 300 million text messages. Eventually there was bigger demand from volunteers to text voters, than there were texts to send.

With the help of Soapbox, an app which works as a free webcam and screen recorder, volunteers and voters could easily record their own video stories. Some were so authentically engaging that they were used as paid ads in local media markets. Others spread organically and became news articles in traditional media (so-called earned media).

Twitter was Donald Trump's scene, and the main ambition was *not* to engage or compete with the sitting President there. Joe Biden's presence on Twitter was operated by a team separated from other social media teams, and the ambition was to treat it as a "calm strategy platform". Other actors were engaging and fighting with Trump on Twitter – Joe Biden's presence was supposed to be Presidential, thus creating a contrast with Trump. You need to pick your fights and accept that the back seat might be better sometimes, also in the digital world.

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The platform that had some of the most impressive growth in terms of both audience and engagement in 2020 was Instagram, not least because of the ability to create Instagram stories and reels. One lesson learnt is that you constantly need to ask your candidate to make content that will work in these formats. But the campaign also had more informal “Team Joe-accounts” on both Twitter and Instagram, and one story is especially interesting. The @TeamJoeBiden-handle on Instagram was already taken by a young person in California, who created content that mimicked in an edgy way what the official campaign was doing. The solution? The campaign asked if they could take over the account – and if the young person who was running it would like to join the campaign as an intern? He accepted and continued to handle the account when he was done in school every day – but as a part of the campaign’s Social Media and Audience Development team. Moreover, the name of the account was changed to @VoteJoe.<sup>15</sup>

Video content has been growing for a long while, and in 2020 YouTube had 2 billion active monthly users. One observation made by a journalist at Bloomberg was that “at times, YouTube is so inundated with election ads that it has been unable to place as many as three quarters of the amounts campaigns would like to spend on a given day”. Among other trends were that the most requested ads by the campaign were the ones that you as the viewer cannot click through; that YouTube has improved its targeting abilities, but that it is still somewhat limited compared to other platforms; and that the new system “Instant reserve” allowed you to purchase and reserve ad-time early and electronically.<sup>16</sup>

A Presidential candidate needs their own presence on all major social media platforms. Joe Biden even joined Snapchat in July 2019, and the campaign used Snapchat’s geotargeting tool to target voters in battleground states, encouraging them to vote. Images of wildfires in California, combined with an attack on Trump’s lack of policies on

climate change, was also used – as were clips of Biden's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention. This mix supposedly engaged the platform's young audience, while also introducing Biden as a candidate.<sup>17</sup>

Another area that is likely to grow is to promote your candidate in the enormous area of online video games. This time around, the Biden-campaign had its own Fornite map ("Build Back Better with Biden") with 20-30 minutes of content to play. In Animal Crossing: New Horizons players could decorate their lawn in front of their virtual house with Biden-Harris yard signs, and you could also visit a Biden-themed island. Most importantly the players could visit a complete Biden HQ – a virtual field office – where you could learn about why and how you could vote for Biden in the real world.<sup>18</sup>

In 2020, the platform Twitch had 15 million daily active users. This is a platform on which you broadcast yourself playing video games to a live audience. Joe Biden never visited Twitch, but Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez did, playing *Among Us* – a multiplayer social deduction game that grew rapidly during the pandemic. Ocasio-Cortez played the game for some 3.5 hours, talking about healthcare and instructing viewers to "make a voting plan" on [iwillvote.com](https://www.iwillvote.com). 430,000 people watched the stream.<sup>19</sup>

Just when you think you have an overview of the major social media platforms, there might be new ones emerging. Through digital partnerships the campaign worked with digital spaces where they did not have their owned presence. One example is TikTok, where the campaign did not have an official @JoeBiden channel. The solution was instead to work with a distributed creator approach – to work with existing actors and digital publishers and provide them with pro-Joe Biden messaging.

To work with digital partnerships, or content partnerships, is thought to have been very successful. A message from your candidate

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on a digital platform can often be regarded as expected propaganda. To search, find and build relationships with digital outlets, accounts and actors who can support you – and who have large audiences of their own – is a strategy that might take time, but the reward can be substantial. Within this large category you can find examples such as having Demi Lovato as your supporter and validator, promoting [iwillvote.com](http://iwillvote.com) to her 118 million followers of Instagram. These celebrity endorsements were gathered under the hashtag #TeamJoe and saw – for example – Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift encourage their followers to vote for Joe Biden. Their posts on Instagram gained 7.36 million and 2.89 million likes respectively.<sup>20</sup>

But more important is the trend to work with micro-influencers (1,000-40,000 followers) in prioritized geographical areas, vis-à-vis a specific demographic group, or around a particular policy issue. There are several digital tools that can be used to find micro-influencers which might be of interest for your digital strategy. The real work is to go through the results and reach out to the right micro-influencers who will agree to support you. Once there, the campaign provided content that looked like material that an influencer would use. And with regards to political issues, the campaign was happy to provide influencers with talking points and policy positions.

One concrete example of a partnership that has been described as successful was with the digital news outlet BuzzFeed. Kamala Harris made an interview with the presenter Curly Velasquez (who cooked with his mum) on Pero Like; a channel popular among the Latino audience. The campaign also used the trademark of BuzzFeed: quizzes, most often targeted to battle ground states. If you took the quiz: “Five ways you really know you are from Pennsylvania”, you could be sure to run into information about how early voting or the system with mail-in ballots works in the Granite State – or how to vote if you have moved elsewhere.

The campaign started its own podcast – “Here’s the deal” – since a format based on the candidate talking was likely to suit Joe Biden. Only a few episodes were recorded. Another official podcast – “Biden’s Briefing” – offered content (news stories) from selected news outlets that Biden supposedly had chosen. None of them gained much traction. Something that proved more successful was to appear on popular podcasts that already had a large audience; the discussion with Brené Brown on the podcast “Unlocking us” about empathy, unity and courage is a good example.

A final, telling story is the polling the campaign did across all demographics – not specifically politically engaged voters – asking them who they would like most to hear a message from. The internal betting was on the likes of LeBron James, Demi Lovato, and George Clooney. But the actual winner was Barack Obama – a reminder that you often can settle with a simpler solution when one exists.

### **Question five: What went wrong, and what are the trends in the future?**

Many Presidential campaigns are remembered by their mistakes, and 2020 will go down in the history books. Donald Trump ignored warnings about COVID-19, proposed ultraviolet or “just very powerful light” and “disinfectant” as a potential remedy, before contracting the virus himself and ending up in hospital. An estimation done by researchers at Stanford University concluded that Trump’s 18 physical election rallies led to “more than 30,000 additional cases and at least 700 deaths.”<sup>21</sup>

In retrospect, the Joe Biden-campaign can look back in relief and conclude that no major gaffes or scandals occurred. The avoidance of blatant own goals is largely attributed to a robust internal approval process. But many parts of the campaign could and should have been much better, of course.

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One common thread when the campaign is analysed in retrospect with regards to digital and social media, is time and investments. Many of the key persons in the campaign team worked for other Democratic candidates even during the early spring of 2020. In a re-election campaign, you can build your whole campaign team and invest in technological tools and platforms much earlier. More time, planning and early investments would have improved a virtual campaign that had to be assembled very quickly once Joe Biden emerged as the candidate for President.

In the beginning of the Biden-campaign, just putting a 78-year-old in a digital context did not work particularly well, as this summary explains:

*“Biden’s first virtual town hall was riddled with embarrassing technical problems and his podcast failed to find listeners and only lasted seven episodes. Livestream events and interviews recorded in basement that were posted to YouTube typically only received a few thousand views, a paltry number compared to those of Trump and his Democratic primary opponents.”<sup>22</sup>*

As we saw earlier, the campaign found ways to organise an impressive virtual campaign, but the initial challenges and the disadvantage to Trump in the digital sphere must be underlined.

A concrete example where the campaign failed was in South Florida, where Trump and the Republican party made strong inroads with Latino and other minority voters.<sup>23</sup> Here, it is acknowledged that the nut was not cracked in terms of how the Biden campaign ought to have worked with digital targeting, persuasion, mobilization – and not least misinformation and counter-messaging, as the accusation of Biden as a “Trojan horse for socialism” won substantial ground among voters.

One observation made is that the work done with distributed content partnership is only likely to grow in the future, both in political

campaigns and in the private sector. Another interesting area is the field of Virtual reality/Augmented reality. The campaign tried it to a certain extent, primarily on Snapchat and Facebook, and are supposed to have witnessed positive results. But the campaign is supposed to have had a shortage of enough producers, videographers, and designers with the right skillset to implement a bigger effort.

Within the field of fundraising, one point in the rear-view-mirror could be applicable to campaigning in general: individuals who donate regularly to the campaign could also be empowered and educated to become fundraisers themselves. This was tried during the end of the campaign, but should have been done earlier.

One major point of debate, which only can be touched upon here, is Facebook. This discussion has only grown after Election Day, not least due to the attack on the US Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup> and the "Facebook files" leaked by a whistle-blower. One should also note the general debate about the need for regulations to address problems such as misinformation, polarization, hate speech – but also harmful effects on teenagers and the possible fanning of ethnic conflicts.

If we restrict ourselves to the Biden campaign, it spent \$85.2 million on advertising through Facebook properties – an amount of resources that is impossible to describe and judge fairly. One ingredient in the discussion about Facebook and what can be understood and done better is the "black box of Facebook algorithms"; how to use the platform in the right way to achieve what you have planned, and how to accurately measure the impact you had.

In this analysis, it is imperative to differentiate between your objectives when planning your activities on Facebook and other digital platforms: persuasion, support building, and get out the vote (GOTV). And when you make a strategy, you must separate between which audience you want to reach, accordingly which channel you should

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use, and how the right content then must be produced. Moreover, you ought to work with a strategy template and a tactical calendar. And before you even start, you should arrange how you measure the impact of your time, efforts, and your money spent.

Parallel with the need to understand how to make strategies in the digital landscape, a few trends can be observed. With regards to content, video is likely to expand further. Livestreams became more popular during the pandemic and will most likely continue to grow. An increase can also be noticed among content that disappears within 24 hours (InstaStories, Snapchat). Facebook will launch Project Aria – a research device that is worn like regular glasses – in the near future, which will stimulate the development within VR/AR and its presence on social platforms.

Younger generations – including many volunteers and voters in this campaign – have grown up online. They are likely to expect future campaign to be digital, transparent, and easy to take part in. And they will not only demand that digital has a seat at the table where decisions are taken – digital should be at the absolute core of future campaigns.

Most political campaigns operate with limited resources. Facebook is still the giant, but a giant in turbulence. Already, smaller actors offer campaigns to use programmatic advertising: to target digital ads versus very specific audience without using Facebook or Google Ads. In this way, you are supposed to be able to achieve better results with your digital campaigns at a lower cost.

One possible and likely trend is therefore, once the pandemic is under control, the total integration of traditional political “offline-activities” such as meetings, rallies, and canvassing, with digital platforms and online tools. And when almost all parts of our political lives become a hybrid reality, the lessons of the 2020 Biden campaign can hopefully serve as an inspirational toolbox for progressives across the world.

\* \* \*

The question we all need to ask is how this successful virtual campaign will affect Europe. The answer is that the novelties of American presidential campaigns – for better or worse – always find their way into our political life.

But will all of this still be relevant when we are vaccinated against COVID-19, and everything hopefully can go back to “normal”? While we cannot know what the new normal will be, the art of convincing, communicating and courting your audience will inevitably remain at the core of successful European political parties and campaigns.

## **Progressive Communication in The Age of Populism**

Before we conclude our paper, we want to address a potential point of criticism. Why do we think that European progressives have something to learn from American politicians like Trump and Biden, who were successful in a political and socioeconomic context that differs significantly from European countries? Although we acknowledge those differences, we also want to highlight two important patterns that are common to both sides of the Atlantic. Such patterns make the analysis of recent innovations in American political communications relevant to the European context.

First, the communication landscape in which American and European progressives operate are more similar than dissimilar. That is, American and European politicians and citizens use the same social media platforms, which are increasingly important in the media ecologies of both sides of the Atlantic. Additionally, the expansion of the attention economy into the functioning of traditional media is also evident in Europe.

Second, Europe has witnessed the slow but steady emergence of Trumpian politicians throughout the continent. In making this statement,

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we have in mind populists and celebrity politicians – that is, technology-savvy operators willing to do whatever it takes to gain visibility through social media, acquire platforms in traditional media, and be perceived as legitimate political actors by citizens.

This said, we do recognise a fundamental difference between the American and the European contexts: the gradual erosion of catch-all parties in Europe has contributed to the loss of support by most centre-left parties to centrist parties on the one hand and to green parties and the radical left on the other hand. In the United States, the electoral system has slowed down this process to a significant extent. The increasingly complex relationship between socioeconomic characteristics and voting behaviour that can be witnessed in most European countries remains far from becoming the political norm in North America.

Nonetheless, the relational and networked approach to communications suggested by Trump and Biden provides an important solution to the challenging context in which European Progressives operate. If they are to speak to diverse constituents that do not identify as a common group, progressives must establish and employ effective but flexible systems to engage multiple groups in meaningful relationships while also keeping those relationships and content connected by a positive, holistic message that provides a hopeful alternative to the reductionist and reactionary worldview of populists.

\* \* \*

Any European political party would like to know more about how to find 15 million new voters. To find them, it is important to be heard in times of populism, polarisation and social bubbles. To do so, we have identified a set of key principles below.

- **Less is more:** “Lock her up”, “Make America great again”, “Take back control”. Like any populist, Trump always had a key message.

Progressives should create catchy slogans that summarise what they stand for and are easy to grasp and disseminate. Also note the obvious link between a perceived problem (migration, closed factories) and a “solution” (build a wall/rip trade deals) in Trump’s way of communicating.

- **Communication as storytelling:** the communication of all specific policies should be framed within a positive, holistic story.
- **Know and speak with the audience:** in difficult races, investing resources into developing targeted (and, if needed, long) conversations is more likely to be a good use of resources than in creating ads for the general audience. To segment your audience and use targeted communication to “core voters” on the one hand, and “switchers” on the other, will only grow in importance.
- **Relational organising:** encourage supporters to have meaningful political conversations with relatives, friends, co-workers, and other acquaintances. This shouldn’t replace traditional knocking on doors but, rather, accompany traditional campaigning approaches.
- **Understanding social media:** social media is an amplifier. In campaign times, it should be used not to repeat/retweet/repost/respond to criticism but to disseminate positive content – both organic and from the campaign.
- **Conviction, energy and the power of authenticity:** this applies not only to the content of political communication but also to the management of the campaign in terms of timing, building momentum, etc.
- **From centralised, top-down to distributed organising:** supporting self-starting campaigners distributed throughout the territory by giving them tools without establishing targets. This is also connected with the recognition and deployment of existing relationships (e.g. in terms of existing volunteers and their own networks).

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- **Building and maintaining trust:** considering ongoing discussions regarding privacy and data-ownership, this is an increasingly important principle. Progressives should recognise the challenges associated with this issue and be open about their chosen technical and political solutions.
- **Addressing disinformation in real time:** this is important but should only be used when there is evidence that voters are likely to be influenced; additionally, responses should be directed at relevant groups of voters to avoid reinforcing the message of opponents.
- **Social media as networks:** the networks created by progressives and their allies distribute content and energy throughout social media platforms. Future campaigns should incorporate social network analysis in their planning. This would allow them to identify the main nodes of such networks and support the tailored distribution of content as needed.
- **Follow every campaign cycle:** political communication and campaigning are currently being reshaped both by technological developments and the ways we are forced to live our lives during the pandemic. Progressives are encouraged to learn from every major European election and campaign cycle in the US – the next major one being the midterm elections on 8 November 2022 – in order to learn from the emergence of news models to win elections.

## Endnotes

- 1 Unemployment: [www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/19-point-2-percent-of-the-unemployed-had-been-jobless-for-27-weeks-or-more-in-february-2020.htm](http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/19-point-2-percent-of-the-unemployed-had-been-jobless-for-27-weeks-or-more-in-february-2020.htm). GDP: [www.bea.gov/news/2020/gross-domestic-product-fourth-quarter-and-year-2019-advance-estimate](http://www.bea.gov/news/2020/gross-domestic-product-fourth-quarter-and-year-2019-advance-estimate)
- 2 Gallup: [news.gallup.com/poll/203198/presidential-approval-ratings-donald-trump.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/poll/203198/presidential-approval-ratings-donald-trump.aspx)
- 3 Re-election campaign: [www.npr.org/2019/06/19/733973677/trump-launches-re-election-campaign-with-familiar-themes](http://www.npr.org/2019/06/19/733973677/trump-launches-re-election-campaign-with-familiar-themes). Twitter: [www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/05/28/trump-twitter-by-numbers/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/05/28/trump-twitter-by-numbers/). Conservative ecosystem and Facebook-quote. "The social media campaign of 2020" by John Allen Hendricks and

- Dan Schill, p. 83 in "The 2020 Presidential Campaign. A communications perspective" by Robert E. Denton Jr. (2021).
- 4 Iowa: [www.nytimes.com/2020/02/04/us/politics/what-happened-iowa-caucuses.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/04/us/politics/what-happened-iowa-caucuses.html). According to the 2020 census, the population of Iowa is 3 190 369.
  - 5 The US economy contracted 19.2 percent during the first phase of the pandemic recession (the fourth quarter of 2019 through the second quarter of 2020). Many issues impact an election campaign, and the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matters movement, as well the extensive forest fires and concerns about climate change, should also be mentioned. [www.reuters.com/business/us-economy-contracted-192-during-covid-19-pandemic-recession-2021-07-29/](http://www.reuters.com/business/us-economy-contracted-192-during-covid-19-pandemic-recession-2021-07-29/)
  - 6 The events of 6 January 2021 – and president Trumps role in the build-up – are portrayed in the documentary "Four hours at the Capitol", directed by Jamie Roberts (broadcasted by HBO and BBC, among others).
  - 7 Victory margins: [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/12/04/size-bidens-win-matters-it-is-huge/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/12/04/size-bidens-win-matters-it-is-huge/)
  - 8 It should be noted that many Republican lawmakers have responded to the highest voter turnout ever by making it more difficult to vote. The aim is supposedly to suppress turnout among groups – for example ethnic minorities – that tend to vote for Democratic candidates. According to the Brennan Institute for Justice, "at least 19 states enacted 33 laws that make it harder for Americans to vote" (as of 2 September 2021). Other states have responded to the eagerness to vote by making it easier. See the regular updates: [www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-october-2021](http://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-october-2021)
  - 9 It should be noted that the Trump campaign had a bigger presence in almost all parts of the digital landscape. For example: During the last 100 days of the campaign, Trump had 354.4 million interactions on his official Facebook-page, compared with 52,2 million for Biden. However, this chapter is based solely on the Biden campaign.
  - 10 Relevant books on US Presidential campaigns and the role of data and social media in campaigns: "The boys on the bus" (Robert Crouse, 1973); "What It Takes: The Way to the White House" (Richard Ben Cramer 1992); "The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns" (Sasha Issenberg 2012); and three books by John Heilemann & Mark Halperin: "The way to win: Taking the White House in 2008" (2006); "Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime" (2010); "Double Down: The explosive inside account of the 2012 presidential election" (2013).
  - 11 The present author has followed US Presidential elections on American soil in different states in 2000; 2004; 2008; 2012; and 2016. In addition, congressional and gubernatorial races were followed in various parts of the US in 2002; 2006; 2010; 2014 and 2018.
  - 12 The four online post-election seminars featured the following staff from the Biden/Harris campaign: Rob Flaherty (Digital Director); Caitlin Mitchell (Senior Advisor for Digital); Jose Nunez (Director of Digital Organizing); Becca Rinkevich (Director of Digital Rapid Response); Timothy Durigan (Data Security Analyst, DNC); Clarke Humphrey (Deputy

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- Digital Director for Grassroots Fundraising); Sarah Galvez (Director of Social Media and Audience Development); Christian Tom (Director of Digital Partnerships); Aalok Kanani (Digital Communication Director); Patrick Stevenson (Chief Mobilization Officer, DNC).
- 13 The two most important books were: "The 2020 Presidential Campaign: A communications perspective" (2021), edited by Robert E. Denton Jr; and "Battle for the soul: Inside the Democrats' campaigns to defeat Trump" by Edward-Isaac Doveve.
  - 14 The Biden campaign started to knock on doors only in October 2020, and only in a limited number of states.
  - 15 [www.theverge.com/2020/9/7/21426090/joe-biden-campaign-instagram-votejoe-teen-animal-crossing-stories-memes](http://www.theverge.com/2020/9/7/21426090/joe-biden-campaign-instagram-votejoe-teen-animal-crossing-stories-memes)
  - 16 "The social media campaign of 2020" by John Allen Hendricks and Dan Schill, p. 81 in "The 2020 Presidential Campaign. A communications perspective" by Robert E. Denton Jr. (2021).
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  - 18 [www.polygon.com/2020/11/2/21545771/joe-biden-fortnite-campaign-creative-map](http://www.polygon.com/2020/11/2/21545771/joe-biden-fortnite-campaign-creative-map), and "The social media campaign of 2020" by John Allen Hendricks and Dan Schill, p. 83 in "The 2020 Presidential Campaign. A communications perspective" by Robert E. Denton Jr. (2021).
  - 19 Ibid pages 86-87.
  - 20 Ibid p. 86.
  - 21 Trump and COVID-19: [www.newsweek.com/fact-check-did-donald-trump-suggest-people-inject-poison-cure-covid-1619105](http://www.newsweek.com/fact-check-did-donald-trump-suggest-people-inject-poison-cure-covid-1619105). Trump rallies including quote: [www.latimes.com/science/story/2020-10-31/super-spreading-trump-rallies-led-to-more-than-700-COVID-19-deaths-study](http://www.latimes.com/science/story/2020-10-31/super-spreading-trump-rallies-led-to-more-than-700-COVID-19-deaths-study).
  - 22 "The social media campaign of 2020" by John Allen Hendricks and Dan Schill, p. 86 in "The 2020 Presidential Campaign. A communications perspective" by Robert E. Denton Jr. (2021).
  - 23 Joe Biden had a lead in the opinion polls in Florida leading up the election, averaging around 3 percentage points. But Trump won by 3.4 points, which was the largest margin since 2004, and a larger margin than when Trump beat Hillary Clinton in Florida in 2016.

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### **Election seminars:**

The four online post-election seminars featured the following staff from the Biden/Harris campaign: Rob Flaherty (Digital Director); Caitlin Mitchell (Senior Advisor for Digital); Jose Nunez (Director of Digital Organizing); Becca Rinkevich (Director of Digital Rapid Response); Timothy Durigan (Data Security Analyst, DNC); Clarke Humphrey (Deputy Digital Director for Grassroots Fundraising); Sarah Galvez (Director of Social Media and Audience Development); Christian Tom (Director of Digital Partnerships); Aalok Kanani (Digital Communication Director); Patrick Stevenson (Chief Mobilization Officer, DNC).

**PROGRESSIVE  
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5

**PROGRESSIVE  
PROPOSALS FOR THE**

# **TURBULENCE**

**TIMES:  
HOW TO BOOST THE POLITICAL,  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
AND ELECTORAL POTENTIAL**



**Preparing for a Fight:  
the Electoral Strategy that Carries**

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André KROUWEL

## **Working and Middle Class Precarity, Status Loss and Political Discontent**

## **Keywords**

**Social democracy, class-voting, economic precarity, populism**

## **Abstract**

Social Democratic parties have long been political giants in Europe, obtaining a vast proportion of the popular vote together with Christian Democratic parties for an extended period during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Best, 2011; Krouwel 2012). However, for quite some time the Social Democratic vote has been on the decline. It has been suggested that this is due to a change in the composition of the core social democratic electorate and their motivations. In this paper, we seek to examine the changing nature of the drivers of the Social Democratic vote. Many authors have argued that mainstream Social Democratic parties no longer attract members of the working class, who they have traditionally been linked to (Spies, 2013) (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). This is partly due to the declining influence that traditional cleavage groups, such as social class, have on politics. The electoral relevance of the working class has declined largely due to changes in the size and behaviour of cleavage groups (Best, 2011). This transformation of society led to the formation of a body of work - that gained notable traction in the 1980s - which stated that class no longer impacts politics. A newer body of work has disputed these claims, arguing there has been a political realignment of the working class, understood in terms of individual occupation (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). This new "service proletariat" is much more varied in composition and in political interests than the traditional working-class.

## **The electoral vulnerability of social democratic parties to the populist challenge**

The rise of new party families over the past two decades has altered the traditional political landscape, posing a threat to traditional parties such as social democrats. The new parties that have emerged, often bold and brash in their nature, have fewer constraints than traditional ones, giving them more freedom to attract new supporters (Cole, 2015). This means that social democrats are more electorally vulnerable than before, with their traditional electoral base being lured by extremes on the left and the right of the political spectrum. While it may be intuitive to think that the main threat for social democrats comes from radical left parties, they are also vulnerable to the radical right, whose core electorate is the traditional voting class (Gidron & Hall, 2017). A large reason for the rise of populist attitudes is due to citizens' grievances associated with the economic crisis of 2008 (Rico & Anduiza, 2017).

This vulnerability varies per country. Abou-Chabi & Wagner (2018) find that modern social democratic parties, who have embraced liberalism, are more vulnerable to the threat of the radical left in countries where trade unions are strong and have the capacity to mobilize workers against them. This showcases how the image social democratic parties have cultivated for themselves across their history can, in the current political climate, increase their vulnerability, as traditional state-provided welfare services have steadily decreased in many European countries. This of course, has to do with the transformation of Social Democratic parties. As society changed,

so too did Social Democratic parties. During the 1990s, left-wing governments across Europe began to yield to international pressure to liberalise their markets (Mair, 2008). This led to a new era for Social Democratic parties, in which they began to pursue neo-liberal policies, a change of agenda that in the long run has proved costly in terms of votes (Lavelle, 2016). This has left many people under-represented and susceptible to populist appeal, and social democratic parties more vulnerable as a result.

## **Economic precarity. Still a driver of the Social Democratic vote?**

Most readers will be familiar with evidence of the electoral decline of the major mainstream political parties. In most European countries, members of traditional party families suffered electoral defeats in recent elections and this electoral demise coincides with the emergence of successful anti-immigration populist mobilisation. Over the three most recent decades we can see a clear downward trend for Christian democrats and social democrats (Bale and Krouwel 2015 and Keating and McCrone, 2013). Centre-right liberal, and some conservative parties have – in most countries - outperformed the traditional moderate centre-left, yet have also seen a weakening of voter support and loyalty. However, many centre-right parties have also used the economic crisis that ensued in 2007 as an electoral opportunity to shift their emphasis to immigration in their campaigns. Downes and Loveless (2018) have shown that particularly non- incumbent centre-right parties can benefit electorally from emphasising immigration, even outperforming the radical populist right. The centre-left has a much harder time in finding an answer to the increased saliency of cultural issues, in particular immigration. In many recent elections across Europe, parties belonging to the more radical political currents - anti-immigrant populists, the

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radical socialist left and environmentalist parties - have seen their electoral fortunes rise.

Clearly, if any attempt has been made by traditional parties to form a cartel (Katz and Mair, 1995), it has failed badly. In recent decades, European party system change has accelerated and many national political landscapes in European democracies have been dramatically reshaped. Outsider parties have been able to appeal to significant sections of the electorate over the last two decades (Pelizzo 2007) and many new parties have been able to disrupt any attempt at cartelization (Hino 2012). Most importantly, voters that have for decades supported the centre-left and centre-right are abandoning their traditional parties for new parties that offer either economic or cultural protection, or both (Otjes and Krouwel 2018).

Mainstream political parties of the moderate left and right have become electorally most vulnerable as core voter groups that previously supported centrists for decades are increasingly defecting to radical alternatives, particularly in the wake of the global financial crisis (Hobolt and Tilley, 2016). Contrary to expectations in the 1990s that a liberal consensus was in the making, we see instead that illiberal forces are gaining strength and radical populist competitors are ripping mainstream, centrist politics apart. But does this mean that all parties are equally vulnerable to populist mobilisation? Not necessarily. In fact, we should surely expect variation in the ways and the extent to which political parties of different ideological orientation across Europe are affected, depending, for instance, on differences in the number and type of populist parties emerging in each national party system, the traditional electoral coalition of the centre- left and centre-right, and the response of all parties to the populist challenge.

The welfare policies favoured by Social Democrats have also undergone a transformation and are now more in line with the preferences of their new constituency, with more of an emphasis

on public education and on family policy services than on providing a decent standard of living for the unemployed (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). The transition of Social Democratic parties towards more centrist positions gave way to an under-representation of a segment of the electorate, which provided other party families with an opportunity to attract these voters. Populist radical right parties have been especially successful at attracting voters with lower socio-economic positions (Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018), claiming to defend the interests of workers by emphasizing an anti-immigration agenda, populist rhetoric and nativist ideology. They can be attractive to nativist workers due to the appeal of chauvinist welfare policies, which aim at restricting welfare so that it only benefits natives. Such ideas have gained more and more importance over the years, even with neo-liberal populist parties such as the SVP in Switzerland (Mosimann, Rennwald & Zimmermann, 2019). This shift in economic positions shows how both the social democratic and the radical right parties have changed their identity in order to capture certain segments of the electorate.

Although they have been less successful than radical right parties, radical left parties have also absorbed some of the former Social Democratic vote. These parties perceive socioeconomic inequalities as the major political challenge of our time and argue that more redistributive economic models should be introduced to address inequality. Studies of the radical left vote have shown that those who experience economic difficulties are most likely to vote for such parties (Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018). Although traditional radical left parties never enjoyed the widespread support of the working class, their electorates have been mostly comprised of members of the working class (Ramiro, 2016). It is possible that the ideological transition of social democratic parties has led to radical left parties absorbing some of their traditional electorate.

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Therefore, research suggests that the vote for Social Democratic parties has declined among citizens in a precarious socioeconomic position, and is now predominantly distributed among radical parties, both on the left and the right side of the political spectrum. Why did this change happen? The last three decades have seen a sharp rise in inequality in Europe (Partington, 2019). With Social Democrats being one of the two main party families in power during this period, it is natural for the losers of this process to distance themselves from the centre-left, and for those in comfortable positions to support them. This has transformed the drive for the Social Democratic vote:

### **Cultural anxiety. Dividing the competition?**

The transformation of Social Democracy resulted in a transformation of its core constituency, which is now mostly composed of well-educated professionals interested in socio-cultural issues. One important characteristic of this group is their cultural libertinism, acquired from the social interactions in their work environment, which require cultural tolerance (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). This has transformed the very meaning of voting for a Social Democratic party, as what was once an economic vote has become a cultural one. In spite of radical right parties increasingly favouring a welfare state, the literature suggests that the cultural drive is still stronger than the economic drive when it comes to the far-right vote. This is because their main support base is found amongst citizens that reject cultural modernity, the so called "losers of globalization" (Bornschieer & Kriesi, 2012). In spite of the welfare policies they propose, voters of radical right parties are mainly driven by issues such as immigration and Euroscepticism (Evans & Mellon, 2016).

This is not the case for radical left parties, whose position on cultural issues is not as strong as that of the party families mentioned previously. That said, this does not mean that cultural issues are ignored on the radical left - they are simply given considerably less importance than economic ones. At a local level, undocumented migrants can forge alliances with radical left organizations (Cappiali, 2016), while at European level radical left MEPs have a high tendency to support pro- migration legislation (Hix and Noury, 2007). Hartevelde, Kokkonen & Dahlberg (2017) show that when people start voting for the radical left, their stances on immigration become less restrictive.

Thus, it seems that the segment of the population that is in a precarious socio- economic situation, once the stronghold of Social Democracy, is now divided into two groups; one that blames their situation on immigration and one that does not see this as a particularly relevant issue to their wellbeing.

## **Does traditional ideology still matter?**

The shift of positions of social democratic and radical right parties over the years suggests that these parties are more flexible with regards to ideology, as they have changed their positions to appeal to new segments of the electorate. This is not the case with radical left parties. The survival of these parties over the years can be attributed to the existence of a radical left political subculture sustained by certain social groups, characterized by ideological and behavioural traits such as radical activism and trade union membership. Indeed, voters professing a traditionally leftist ideology have been found to have an increased likelihood of voting for the radical left (Ramiro, 2016). This conception of ideology refers to the traditional conception of ideology in conception of the left-right dimension. Abou-Chadi & Wanger (2018)

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suggest that ideology can no longer be only conceived in these terms, and that the left-right dimension matters as much as new ideological dimensions such as the liberal-authoritarian dimension, related to cultural tolerance.

With our hypotheses, we create a tripolar configuration model similar to that of Kitschelt (1994, as in Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). This tripolar configuration has previously been applied to define voter's attitudes in previous work (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018) (Van der Brug & Van der Spanje, 2009) (Kriesi et. al, 2008)). However, our model has some key differences compared to the one traditionally used. Kitschelt's model incorporates two dimensions of political conflict; an economic dimension and a cultural one. The economic dimension in the traditional conception of the tripolar configuration is based on the economic preferences of an individual; it is an axis with socialist on one end and capitalist on the other. We have based the economic dimension not on citizens' preferences, but on their economic situation; on how close they are to living in a situation of precarity. Furthermore, we examine how ideology impacts this configuration.

## **Traditional core support for Social Democratic parties and the populist challenge**

Historically, Social Democratic parties have had a strong linkage with trade unions, and a mass voter base as a result of such institutional and ideological affiliation (Karreth et al., 2012; Krouwel 2012). In some part due to these ties, the social democratic voter-base originally incorporated a large segment of working-class voters, employed in blue-collar occupations, combined with substantial support from the (lower) middle classes. These ties with the working and middle classes were especially strong in the mid-20th century, with social

democratic parties resembling the mass party model (Krouwel 2012). However, as Kirchheimer (1954) noted very early on, with the advent of economic growth, modernisation and the transformation of party politics, Social Democratic parties had to broaden their reach to remain competitive (Giddens, 1998). In order to do so, the Social Democrats shifted their ideological positions towards the political centre at the end of the 20th century, in what came to be known as the Third Way. The centripetal shift of British Labour under the leadership of Tony Blair is a good example of this ideological and organisational change (Kitschelt, 1999). This transformation made it possible for Social Democratic parties to appeal to middle class voters even more, enabling them to compete with the centre-right (Giddens, 1998).

By adopting the 'Third Way' strategy, Social Democratic parties transformed themselves from mass parties with strong ideological and electoral roots in the labour movements into 'catch all' parties (Kirchheimer 1954, see also Krouwel 2003). The original ties with unions and mass party organisations helped Social Democracy to maintain bonds with its electoral base, and expand its electoral appeal (Karreth et al., 2012). Since this catch-all strategy required ideological moderation, it also created a dilemma, as Social Democratic parties underwent a process of 'de-ideologisation' (Przeworski and Sprague, 1986). The strong ties to the lower working class posed a challenge to ideological coherency, as social democrats attempted to expand their appeal to the more well-to-do social strata. In order to attract centrist and middle-class voters, social democrats de-emphasised and even abandoned their trademark Keynesianism and adopted a more neo-liberal approach to economic policy making (Giddens, 1998). The transformation proved to be successful in the short term, but subsequently a challenge (Allen, 2009).

This centripetal strategy initially broadened and diversified the voter base of social democrats, particularly in the 1990s, yet it made

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them less automatically the main representative of traditional working-class segments and voters with traditional left wing, redistributive policy preferences. It also meant that traditional leftist socio-economic policy became increasingly combined libertarian positions on non-economic issues. The emergence of new radical left and libertarian parties in particularly the 1960s-1970s, green parties in the 1980s and anti-immigration parties in the 1990s have all eroded the once dominant position of social democratic parties on the left side of the political spectrum. Radical left parties capitalise on discontent among voters who adhere to orthodox left-wing policies such as redistribution and generous welfare provision, and those disillusioned with social democratic ideological moderation and often, adoption of neo-liberal tendencies. In addition, green parties have attracted large swathes of higher educated progressive and libertarian voters, further eroding of the core voter base of the moderate left. Moreover, even radical right, anti-immigration populist parties have successfully appealed to lower educated working class voters, who feel increasingly threatened in their labour market positions because of more globalised market competition, who feel that their neighbourhoods have transformed beyond recognition due to the influx of immigrants, and who feel they are competing for ever scarcer resources of social and economic support coming from the state.

This catch-all strategy and appeal to a broader range of middle-class voters has had important repercussions for social democrats. The section below discusses how the social and economic world, as well as the mindset of middle classes in advanced capitalist democracies has transformed over the last decades as a result of welfare state retrenchment and austerity.

## **Lower- and middle-class anxieties**

### **Relative deprivation and status anxiety among the middle classes**

The theory of relative deprivation is key to understanding how certain groups react to the threat or experience of status or material decline. Relative deprivation states that when individuals compare themselves to salient others and they perceive a violation of their expectations, either through lacking, discrimination or disadvantage, it leads to feelings of discontentment, resentment and feeling of injustice (Runciman, 1966; Smith *et al.*, 2008; Pettigrew, 2016; Power, *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, worsening socioeconomic conditions lead to negative social comparisons, arousing a sense of relative deprivation (RD) whereby groups perceive that, relatively, they are less well off than they would expect compared to other groups.

Psychological accounts linked relative deprivation to intergroup hostility and prejudice, suggesting that the angry resentments generated will most likely be emotionally directed towards 'out-group' members (Moscatelli, *et al.*, 2014). The group targeted as the 'other' can vary enormously, but these can include from immigrants, ethnic minorities, the rich, 'welfare- cheating' poor or even political institutions (van der Waal and de Koster, 2018; Van Oorschot, 2008). Moreover, it represents a powerful motive for social protest against the status quo and for attempts to preserve it (Grant, 2008; Jetten *et al.*, 2019).

Status hierarchies are also central to relative deprivation. Social status is separate, but similar to class and is understood as 'a person's position within a hierarchy of social prestige': this correlates with income but is a distinct form of stratification, varying within income and class groups (Gidron and Hall, 2017; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007; Nolan and Weisstanner, 2020). Subjective social status is related to these

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conditions because they influence people's beliefs about their own status. But those beliefs are analytically and empirically distinct from objective markers of socioeconomic status (SES) because they embody subjective feelings about where one stands relative to others in society (Miyakawa *et al.*, 2012; Singh-Manoux *et al.*, 2003). Social status invokes the psychology, as differences in the hierarchy are tied to the resources that individuals hold, be they economic or cultural (Anderson *et al.*, 2012; Dubois *et al.*, 2015; Magee and Galinsky, 2008). Moreover, as Fiske (2013) notes, a comparison is also essential to these structures, as people judge their position in relation to others, which serves to enhance their social esteem. Social esteem is identified as a crucial motivation for action and is key to one's self-esteem as well as many aspects of well-being (Fisk, 2010; Marmot, 2005). The innate search for power and social esteem through comparison within social status leads individuals towards status-seeking, a desire for higher relative standing in the hierarchy in terms of esteem, respect, and influence (Anderson *et al.*, 2015). However, when individuals compare themselves negatively to others and experience relative deprivation, it can result in status anxiety, a dissatisfaction regarding one's achievements and a feeling that their position within the social hierarchy is being eroded (Schneider, 2019; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Loughnan *et al.* (2011) suggest status anxiety can cause self-enhancement whereby people attempt to reassert their position through feelings of superiority in relation to others. They argue this is not a reflection of high self-esteem, but instead reflects a desire to compensate for their insecurity through an inflated presentation of themselves. Although certain scholars, such as Layte and Whelan (2014: 6), suggest this is best applied to low-status groups feeling 'looked down on', (Paskov, *et al.*, 2017) asserts that the middle classes, in particular the upper middle, still feel concern about their position in society.

## **Inequality and relative deprivation**

Rising inequality over the last few decades is key to understanding relative deprivation, especially among the upper middle class. The UK has seen the some of the sharpest increases in top income shares and is one of the most unequal countries of the global North (Atkinson *et al.*, 2011; Piketty, 2014). In Britain, the share of the top 1 percent doubled – from 6 to 13 percent – to become the third highest within the OECD (Alvaredo *et al.*, 2017). Crucially, disparities between the top 10, top 1 and the 0.1 percent of incomes have become increasingly large (Atkinson and Piketty, 2007; Atkinson *et al.*, 2011; Hect, 2017; Dorling, 2019). Hect (2017) argues significant income divides within the workplace, especially given the previously noted comparative nature of social relations, results in feelings of ‘relative disadvantage’. These income changes, Savage (2015) notes, lead to increased distance between the upper middle and the richest in society. Savage, therefore, suggests the UK has a clearly defined wealth elite at the top and the precariat at the bottom, alongside huge numbers of people located in five middle-class structures that are likely to develop a sense of injustice about the socio-economic structuration.

Much of the scholarship on inequality indicates that such increasing disparities in UK incomes has exacerbated feelings of relative deprivation (Jetten, 2019; Lynch *et al.*, 2004; Snowdon, 2010; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2017; Engler and Weisstanner, 2020). It has shown that economic inequality shapes high and low incomes, but in different ways and with some common features. A key idea is that income inequality intensifies status hierarchies, as individuals are increasingly conscious of their position in social hierarchies (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Jetten *et al.*, 2017). This increased importance of socioeconomic status increases the likelihood that people will compare themselves to others and, simultaneously, individuals rank

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themselves lower in the social hierarchy in more unequal society when compared to those in more equal settings (Schneider, 2019; Boyce, *et al.*, 2010). Layte and Whelan (2014) suggest that income inequality is positively associated with experiencing status inferiority and therefore more insecurity about their social position. This is reflected in arguments that inequality leads to heightened consumption and greater material needs which needed to be met to feel satisfied as a way of self-enhancement to compensate for this increased insecurity (Kapeller, and Schütz, 2015; Payne *et al.*, 2017). Research has linked domestic economic inequality to a range of indicators, including trust in national political institutions, satisfaction with how the political system works, and support for democracy (Anderson and Singer, 2008; Kriekhaus *et al.*, 2014; Zmerli and Castillo, 2015). The findings from these studies indicate that rising income inequality contributes to negative feelings towards the functioning of the national political system, and reduces support for public institutions, making it key to understanding the link between relative deprivation and the anti-establishment sentiments of the Leave campaign.

### **Middle-class feelings of precarity and relative deprivation**

While classic relative deprivation studies predict those with less are more likely to feel deprived, recent research has illustrated that high-status groups also experience these feelings (Mols and Jetten, 2017). Ridgeway (2014) demonstrated that those higher up the socioeconomic hierarchy, such as the upper middle class, are more likely to have greater perceptions of their own competence and self-worth. This high social self-esteem leads to a greater desire for wealth and status compared to lower status groups; a 'having more and wanting more' effect (Wang, *et al.*, 2020). Not only do middle-

and high-status groups hold greater ambitions, but crucially they also feel stronger entitlement and expectations to meet their status goals compared to those in lower social backgrounds (Paskov, *et al.*, 2017; Bude, 2017). This reflects a wider literature, which states that, although the middle class are more likely to have similarities to lower status groups than their aspirational high-status outgroup, they engage in a range of cultural and socioeconomic behaviour which justifies their sense of exceptionalism and cements their place in the social hierarchy. Importantly, the middle class are more likely to define themselves in terms of their socioeconomic status and less inclined to explain social events in situational terms, as a result of having a higher sense of personal control (Manstead, 2018). People from middle- and higher- status backgrounds define and categorise themselves in terms of wealth and status to positively differentiate from other groups (Bude, 2017). These factors have caused the middle class to feel the pressure of individual achievement and social expectations without the resource protection of high-class individuals, which can engender a sense of anxiety (Ivcevic and Kaufman 2013). Therefore, when these expectations are not met, their subjective status and well-being will be more negatively impacted in comparison to those with lower expectations, as the previously high- status individuals continue to compare themselves to their peers or an aspirational higher group. From this perspective, high status-seeking would refer to a self-image of being of instrumental value to the group. Increasing inequality and middle-class attitudes are crucial to understanding relative deprivation amongst the upper middle class due to their aspirations to join the top social group, their increasingly disparate incomes and their proximity, which are likely to aggravate feelings of relative deprivation.

## **Middle Class' Double Anxiety: "The sky is too high" and the fear of falling**

The combination of greater life expectations in high-status groups and the UK's rising economic inequality are crucial to experiencing the first aspect of upper middle relative deprivation: a fear that they cannot reach the top as 'the sky is too high'. In addition to inequality intensifying social hierarchies, as discussed above, it crucially also increases individuals' tendencies toward upward comparisons, often using top incomes as an upper anchor for their status comparison, adding to the stress of this experience (Boyce, *et al.*, 2010; Leigh *et al.*, 2010). This has been used to associate inequality with relative deprivation (Osborne *et al.*, 2015; Payne *et al.*, 2017). It also helps to explain why, relative income rather than absolute income is a better predictor of life satisfaction (Boyce *et al.*, 2010; Gasiorowska, 2014). This is especially important to the upper middle class, as the huge differences in income, between the top 10, 1, 0.1 percent would form the points of comparison for the upper middle (Angeles and Kemmerling, 2020). For Veblen, (1931) this results in the 'Keeping up with the Joneses' phenomenon—people compare themselves with others as a benchmark of wealth and social status. When upward mobility is limited due to the increasing disparity between elite incomes and upper middle, relative deprivation will be increasingly acute. This led Hect (2017) to suggest top earners experience 'relative disadvantage', in which despite their incomes being well above average, their daily interactions are often made up of higher earners which underlines the vast economic inequality at the top and creates a sense of relative deprivation. Consequently, the upper middle classes may closely interact with elite status individuals or hold aspirations to join this group, yet the growing income disparity means

their ambitions seem increasingly distant, resulting in frustration and perceptions of injustice.

The second anxiety afflicting the relatively deprived upper middle is a 'fear of falling'. This is understood as the perception of having a worse social or economic status in the future resulting in a steep decline on the social ladder. It is triggered when the negative social comparisons that provoke relative deprivation give rise to status insecurity. The fall in social status particularly concerns the upper middle class, as they have a long way to fall but have not accrued enough wealth to fully cement their position, which makes them particularly anxious about their social position. Fear of falling is particularly prevalent at times of rapid social crisis, economic instability and high inequality. Crises highlight the permeability of group boundaries while inequality underlines the possible distance people can drop, and reduces feelings of stability. Moreover, 'fear of falling' reflects the broader aim of the wealthy to consolidate and maintain their high status (Wang, *et al.*, 2020). This fear has been linked to outgroup hostility, as individuals seek to self-enhance and reassert their position in the social hierarchy (Jetten, *et al.*, 2017; Scheepers, *et al.*, 2009). These findings were replicated in recent studies, providing evidence that amongst those who are relatively wealthy, the fear of downward mobility or actual downward mobility enhanced anxiety that one's earlier economic gains might be lost in the future, feeding discontent and hostility towards minorities who they perceive as potential usurpers of their position (Jetten *et al.*, 2017).

Status anxiety and relative status deprivation are highly relevant to the study of populism and anti-establishment mobilisation. People who feel they are not given the respect or status they deserve will lose trust or even develop hostility towards incumbent elites. It is very common for anti-establishment politicians to characterise elites as incompetent or betraying the interests, preferences and needs of common people (Clarke and Newman, 2017).

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Moreover, the sense that one's own position in the social hierarchy or has not achieved their aspirations prompts feelings is off from the desired state can trigger feelings of injustice and lack of control over their lives. Earlier work on Euroscepticism shows the impact of such discontentment and frustration about unresponsive of national elites, particularly among those experiencing relative deprivation (van der Waal and de Koster, 2018; Startin and Krouwel 2013). Moreover, as Burgoon, *et al.*, (2019) Populist parties capitalise on these frustrations and mobilise voters to blame supposed 'privileged insiders' or derogate 'undeserving outsiders' creating scapegoats to redress grievances about status deprivation (van Prooijen et Al 2015; Gidron and Hall, 2020).

People are more likely to act when they perceive injustices when comparing themselves to others that they believe should have a lower social status, particularly minority groups (Maddougall *et al*, 2020; Golec de Zavala, 2017; Jetten *et al.* 2019). In fact, high-status groups may become more prejudiced toward minority groups in the face of perceived status loss (LeBlanc *et al.*, 2015). The more affluent who experience relative deprivation are more likely to hark back at 'times when things were better and they oppose change to protect the status quo out of fear of losing even more in the social hierarchy (Grant, 2008; Jetten *et al*, 2019). For many, modern societies have become very complex and 'hostile' due to cultural shifts that changed not only the social structure but also the public debate and elite-mass relationships, visible in multiculturalism and LGBTQ rights (Gidron and Hall, 2020; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005).

Most importantly, however, anxieties about relative social status have accelerated because of the increased wealth gap between the upper middle and richest in society. In such a context of high inequality, deprived individuals with a sense of low social status are likely to seek both economic, social and cultural protection from populists

who promise to restore their lost sense of social identity, economic status and relevance (Spruyt *et al.* 2016; Gidron and Hall 2020).

## **First very preliminary analyses**

### **Data and Method**

The data we use was collected in 2018/2019, within the framework of the European Voter Elections Survey (EVES) (collected for PES). The countries where data was collected are Austria, Belgium (divided into Flanders and Wallonia), Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Hungary, Denmark, Poland and France. Data collection was conducted by Kieskompas (“Election compass”), a Dutch political research organization that fully adheres to the GDPR and regulation of the Dutch Authority for the protection of personal information

(“Autoriteit persoonsgegevens”) and within the ethical norms of VU University Amsterdam. Kieskompas coordinates large research panels in multiple countries; these were acquired through online Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) prior to elections. Participants received an email invitation with an online link to participate. In countries where panel responses were insufficient: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Sweden respondents were (also) recruited via social media, where they were invited to take the same survey as panel respondents. The study was conducted in each participating country’s native language. The full dataset is referred to as the European Voter Election Study (EVES) data (Krouwel, Kutiyanski, & Thomacsek, 2019). The survey was comprised of three waves, with data collection taking place from February to November 2018.

The data has been collected predominantly via online panels, with the exception of Poland, Hungary, and Denmark, where it was obtained exclusively through social media. Using data collected online could prove problematic, as it usually suffers from problems of under-

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coverage and self-selection, which can produce biased estimates (Hooghe and Teepe, 2007). In the case of this sort of study, often younger, highly educated, and politically interested respondents are recruited. In spite of this, it also has several benefits: the capacity to reach voters of fringe and radical parties who might not be represented in standard probability samples (e.g. Hooghe et al, 2007; Wall et al, 2009); the diminishment of the measurement error in comparison to other data collecting methods, which enhances the report accuracy of the opinions and attitudes of respondents (Kreuter et al, 2008; Sakshaug et al, 2010); and an increased accuracy in responses when compared to other methods, as respondents answer their questions in private without being influenced by the peer pressure introduced by interviewers (Olson, 2006).

To solve the problems online data collection poses, the data has been weighted by post-stratification and Iterative Proportional Fitting (see Valinan, 1993; Rao et al, 2002, which accounts for respondents' age, gender, and level of education). The extent of our sample imbalance was determined by comparing its observed geographical and demographic characteristics with those of the likely voter population as of 2011 – the Eurostat Census – to our knowledge the best publicly available data source across countries. We also calculate additional weights based on the vote recall in the last Parliamentary Elections that took place in each country included in the dataset, to adjust for partisan bias.

## Questionnaire and instrumentation

In order to assess to what extent feelings of economic precarity/insecurity and perceived cultural anxiety affect the likelihood to vote for each of the parties we perform a linear regression analysis, with economic precarity and perceived cultural anxiety as independent variables, and the vote propensities (PTV) for various political parties as

the dependent variable. We also include a structural model with three background characteristics: age, gender and educational attainment. We run separate models for parties belonging to social democratic, radical left, and radical right party families in the countries included in this study.

We measure economic precarity and perceived cultural anxiety by creating indices composed of multiple items. To measure economic precarity, eight items were used and indexed:

- During the next year, how likely is it that there will be some periods when you don't have enough money to cover the necessary expenses for your household?
- How anxious are you about these situations affecting you at work?  
- Being dismissed without good reason
- With regard to your job(s) to what extent do you agree with the following statements? - I fear I might be fired in the near future
- How would you generally describe your current personal economic situation? (recoded)
- How likely it is that during the next year you will be unemployed and looking for work for at least a month?
- How anxious are you about these situations affecting you at work?  
- Future changes that may reduce my pay
- How does the financial situation of your household now compare with what it was 5 years ago? Has it: gotten better or worse? (recoded)
- With regard to your job(s) to what extent do you agree with the following statements? - My total hours of paid employment are likely to decrease in the next six months.

Reliability tests were performed to assess whether the items measure the same construct. In 11 out of 13 countries, Cronbach's – was higher than 0.75; it was lower than 0.70 only in one country (Sweden). We coded the items so that higher scores represent higher

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degree of economic precarity. Subsequently we create an index score by computing the average score of each respondent on all these items

Seven items were used to create the cultural index are (all answer categories are a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree through neutral to strongly agree).:

- There are too many immigrants in <Country>
- To what extent do you agree with the following statements? - Immigration is enriching our country culturally (recoded).
- The relationship between Europeans and Muslims is bound to become violent in the future
- Immigration makes our streets less safe.
- Immigration polarizes our society.
- Immigrants enrich the cultural life of my country.
- Too many immigrants enter this country without following the proper procedures.

Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was above 0.80 in all countries except for Poland (0.66). We coded the items so that higher scores represent higher degree of cultural anxiety.

As the dependent variable we used the propensity to vote (PTV) for each party. PTV was developed to measure party preferences in multi-party systems (van der Eijk 2002; van der Eijk et al. 2006; van der Eijk and Marsh 2007). It contains more information than merely asking respondents which party or candidate they would vote for, as it inquires how likely it is that each respondent would vote for a certain political party. Respondents were asked, on a 11-point scale with "0" meaning "not likely at all" and 10 meaning "very likely", how likely it is that they would ever vote for a party.

Left-right orientation was measured by a self-placement on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right).

The regression analyses are a stacked model, with a first structural model including age, educational attainment, and gender, while the second model estimated the effect of the economic and cultural index. Finally, the third model measures the effect of ideology (left-right orientation).

## Results

### Economic precarity and radical versus moderate voting

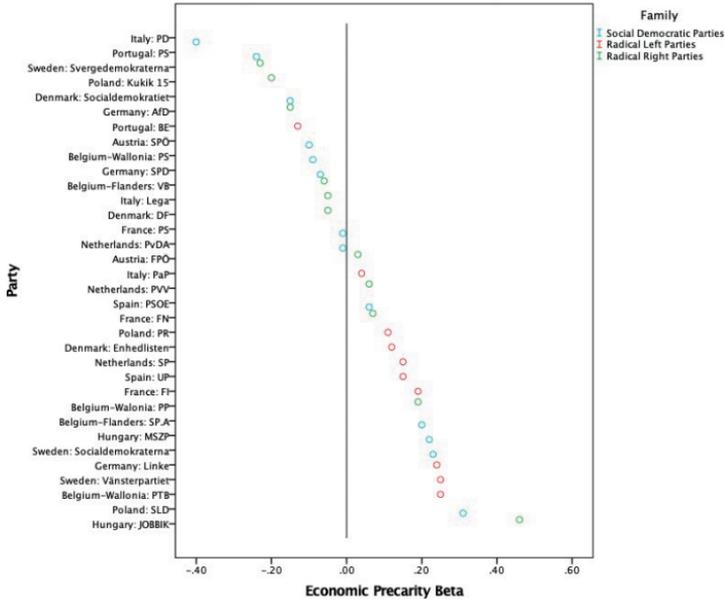
To summarise our findings on the effects of economic precarity on voting for social democrats, the radical left, and the radical right, we present all beta coefficients of the precarity-index on vote propensities for each of these 3 parties in all 13 countries. These results are displayed in figure 1, which shows the standardized beta coefficients in order of lowest to highest.

As can be seen in figure 1, the results for the social-democratic parties are mixed across Europe. In Hungary, Belgium (Flanders), Poland, Sweden and Spain, feelings of economic precariousness have a significant positive effect on the propensity to vote for the social democrats, while in Italy and Portugal we find a significant negative impact of precarity on voting for the centre left. In the remaining countries, economic precariousness has an insignificant negative effect on voting for social democrats.

With regard to the effect of precariousness on voting for the radical left, we find a much clearer and uniform picture. With the exception of the Portuguese *Bloque do Esquerda*, economic precarity has a significant positive effect on voting for all parties belonging to the radical left.

Substantial variation is again found for radical right parties across Europe. In Sweden, Germany, and Poland there is a significant negative effect of precariousness on voting for the radical right, while there is

Figure 1: Effect of Economic Precarity on PTV

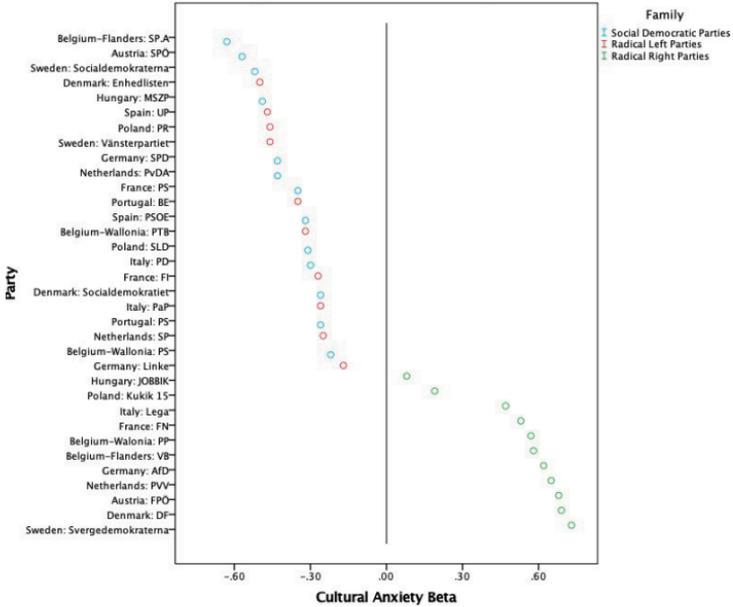


a positive and significant effect of precariousness and voting for the radical right in France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Wallonia. These results force us to reject our first hypothesis as we only find the expected pattern for the radical left, yet our expectations for the centre left social democrats and the radical right (populist) parties are not corroborated by our findings.

## Cultural anxiety and radical versus moderate voting

Regarding our expectations for the effect of cultural anxiety on voting for the centre left and radical left and right, overall we find very strong

**Figure 2: Effect of Cultural Anxiety on PTV**



support. As can be seen in figure 2, which displays the standardized betas of the cultural anxiety variable on propensity to vote, we find that cultural anxiety increases the vote propensity for all radical right-wing parties across Europe. The more voters perceive that their culture is threatened by immigration, the more likely they are to vote for a far-right populist party. We find a significant effect for every country included in our analyses, with the exception of Hungary. Also confirming our expectations, we find that for all centre-left and radical left parties there is actually a negative effect of cultural anxiety on vote propensities for the radical and moderate left. Clearly, it is culture, not economics that divide the radical right from the combined left.

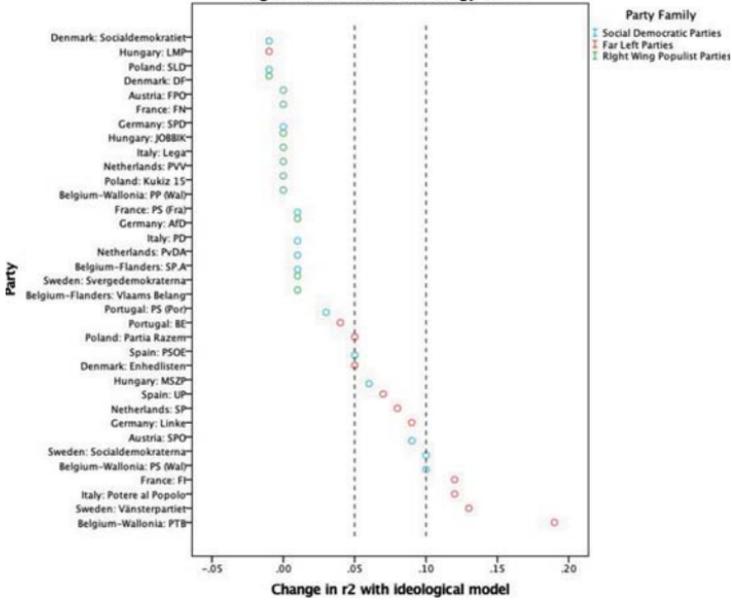
## Ideology and radical versus moderate voting

Our third hypothesis is very straightforward: ideology matters. The more voters confess to a left-wing orientation, the more likely they are to vote for the radical left, and to a lesser extent to the moderate left. A radical right-wing political orientation of a party should deter such left-wing voters. In order to determine this effect of ideology on the propensity to vote for one of the parties included in our analysis, we looked at the change in effect size caused by the insertion of a model containing an ideological variable (see regression tables in appendix). This change in effect size is shown in figure 3.

As can be clearly seen, with the exception of the Portuguese *Bloque do Esquerda*, the inclusion of an ideological variable leads to an increase in explanatory power of at least 0.05. This confirms our hypothesis. Additional confirmation of our expectations is found in the fact that for the radical right the ideological model has virtually no effect on the explanatory power of the model. For the social democrats there is more of a mixed picture, as was expected. A marginal negative effect is found for the social democrats in Denmark, Poland and Germany, a marginal positive effect for the French, Italian, Dutch, and Flemish social democrats and a substantial positive effect for the centre left in Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Austria and Wallonia.

A similar pattern emerges in figure 4, which summarises the beta coefficients of ideological self-placement on vote propensities for the centre and radical left and radical right. Note that we now scaled the ideological orientation of voters to the right, which means that the radical and moderate left should have negative coefficients. As can be seen, the coefficients of the radical left are most negative, followed by the social democrats. Note however, that also for radical right parties in Austria (FPÖ), Flanders (Vlaams Belang), Hungary (Jobbik), Italy (Lega),

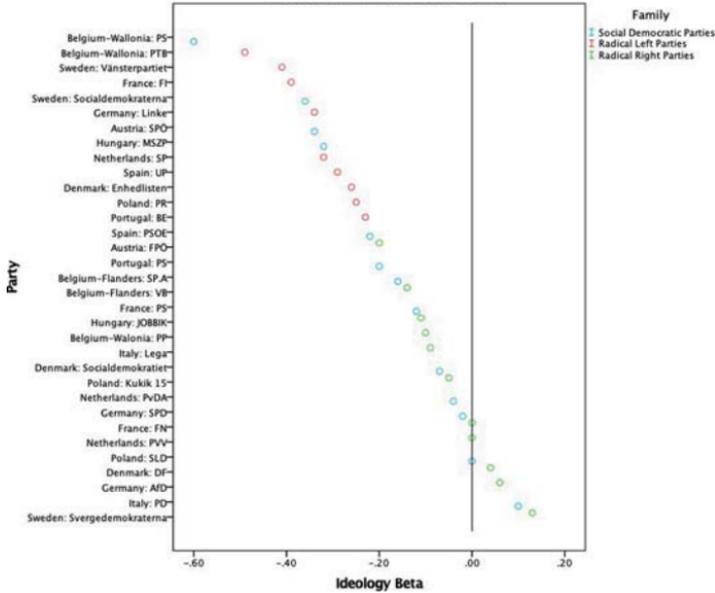
**Figure 3: Effect sized of Ideology on PTV**



Poland (Kukiz) and France (FN/RN) all have negative coefficients, meaning that right-wing orientations do not increase (but actually decrease) the proclivity to vote for these parties. The only 'really right-wing' parties on the radical right are the Sweden Democrats, the AfD and the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti). Interestingly enough, the Italian PD also ends up at that end of the distribution.

To summarise our findings, we combine the effects of economic precarity with cultural anxiety in figure 5, which provides 4 quadrants of differential effects. In both the top and bottom right quadrants, we only find radical right parties, indicating that what separates voting for the radical right from the overall left is cultural anxiety. Voting for the centre

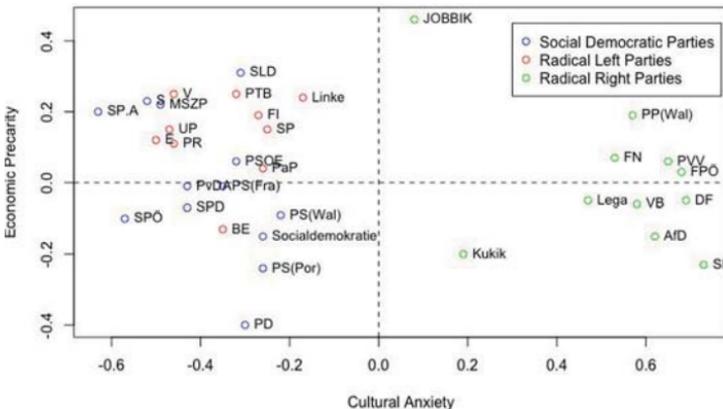
Figure 4: Effect of Ideology on PTV



and radical left is not primarily driven by immigration anxiety, whereas feelings of economic precarity have very differential effects across the European left and radical right. However, there are radical right parties in the top right quadrant - whose voters are driven by both strong economic precarity and strong culturally anxiety - while the radical right parties in the bottom left quadrant are the pure 'cultural mobilisers'. There seems to be two types of left-wing parties: those for whom economic precarity is an important mobiliser (top left quadrant), which includes almost all of the far-left parties (again with the exception of the Portuguese *Bloque do Esquerda*). Most importantly, there seems to be two distinct social democratic party groups: in the bottom left quadrant the social democratic parties that have neither a strong economic nor

a strong cultural driver of the vote (the Italian PD, the Portuguese PS, The French PS, the German SPD, the Dutch PvdA and the Danish social democrats. In the left top quadrant we find the social democratic parties that can still mobilise voters by appealing to economic precarity: the Flemish Sp.A, the Polish SLD, The Hungarian MSZP, the Spanish PSOE and the Swedish social democratic party.

**Figure 5: Economic Precarity vs. Cultural Anxiety Scatterplot**



Our results indicate that the drivers of the social democratic vote are far more varied than those of radical left and radical right parties. In the case of radical right parties, the high degree of cultural anxiety among their core voters sets them structurally apart from the radical left and social democratic parties. An interesting finding is that ideological self-placement sets the radical left apart from the centre left and the radical right (for which ideology matters much less in most cases). We find what many studies before have found: that cultural issues trump economics for the staunchest supporters of the radical right, who are clearly positioned on the authoritative pole of the spectrum.

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What prevents radical right parties from being a fully homogenous group across Europe is the different effects of economic precarity for their voters. These differences could be the result of totally different economic circumstances in the various countries. Parties such as Jobbik in Hungary, with from its onset an anti-capitalist creed (Varga, 2014), or the FN, who under Marine le Pen have become staunch supporters of a strong (nativist) welfare state (Ivaldi, 2015), both having strong support from voters in an economic precarious situation. On the other hand, the message of the AfD in Germany, which adopts a pro-market orientation (Kim, 2018) does not resonate with citizens living in economic precarity. We see that Die Linke is much better able to woo the support of precarious voters in Germany. In fact, we can look at each country and assess whether it is the radical right or the radical left that is best able to mobilise those who feel economically left behind: in Hungary, Italy, France Austria and Wallonia it is the radical right that is better able to mobilise on economic precarity, while the radical or even the moderate left is a better precarious mobiliser in Denmark, Germany, Poland, Netherlands, Flanders and Sweden.

An important finding is the high homogeneity among radical left parties across Europe, even more so than among the radical right. Supporters of the radical left show strong effects of economic precarity and ideology, as well as a high level of tolerance towards immigrants (evidenced by the weak cultural effect). The radical left thus poses another threat to the social democrats than the radical right. While social democrats already face the triple challenge of the radical right (see Bale et. al, 2010), the radical left seems to take all the political oxygen that is in the economic hardship of voters.

Moreover, that fact that the radical right vote is driven by cultural anxieties, while the radical left vote is driven by economics and ideological orientations, results in a highly polarised environment for the social democrats. Moving towards stricter immigration policies

will immediately result in loss of voters to the radical left, while moving too far to the left – including the progressive ideas and acceptance of multiculturalism that goes with it – will drive traditional lower- and middle-class voters into the hands of the radical right. Our – admittedly still very rudimentary study - may explain the fact that the Spanish and Swedish social democrats are doing relatively well (the effects of economic precarity and ideology were strong here).

Yet, Sweden is an interesting case in the sense that we found a strong negative effect of economic precarity on the propensity to vote for the Swedish Democrats, while this party defends progressive taxation and the welfare state (Hellström et al., 2012; Kohutova & Horvat, 2018). Either something is wrong with Swedish voters, or with the methodology of this paper (in Sweden the precarity index – alpha 0.62 - was not reliable, so it is probably our measurement). Or is it simply that in Sweden – with its renowned and extensive welfare state – all parties must simply defend it as it is widely unpopular to reduce welfare provisions, even among middle classes.

Yet, in France and the Netherlands we see relatively weak effects of economic precarity and ideological orientation, meaning there is very little political artillery that the PvdA and Party Socialiste can throw onto the electoral battlefield.

Portugal is the most deviant case, with the Bloque coming out almost continuously as the outlier, with a strong ideological effect and a negative effect of economic precarity for its voter base. One explanation could be that Portugal is the only case where the radical left (BE) is facing stiff competition from a party that is even more orthodox left-wing: the Portuguese Communist Party. While both PCP and BE have entered into a coalition with the PS and having very similar policy positions, these two parties have traditionally opposed each other (Lisi, 2016). It could be that the PCP is the party most associated with economic precarity in the eyes of left-wing voters.

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Social democrats across Europe show substantial heterogeneity in terms of appeal, with some being able to appeal to economically precarious voters, while others are failing to appeal to the economically vulnerable. These differences are partly caused by historic legacies (like connections to labour unions) and governmental experience. Across Europe, social democratic parties have coalesced with the centre right and implemented cutbacks in social welfare. Those left-wing voters hardest hit by this welfare state retrenchment may find it difficult to support the centre left at election day. This governmental responsibility does not burden most radical right and radical left parties that can thus present a 'purer' form of their appeal, untainted by practical politics and pressures to compromise their election pledges.

## Tentative conclusions

This paper delved into the drivers of the vote for social democratic parties, as well as the radical right and left that compete for voters on the lower end of the socio-economic ladder, but also for an increasingly precarious middle class. It is difficult to conclude if a greater danger comes from the radical left (whose electorate shares many ideological characteristics) or the radical right (that appeal to working class authoritarianism), as it is the interplay between the two 'pulls' that create such a thorny political predicament for social democrats. The relative coherence in appeal of the radical right (that can capitalise on cultural anxiety) and the radical left (that is able to appeal to economically precarious voters) is less pronounced for the centre left social democratic party family.

That said, there is little indication that mobilising on cultural anxieties would be a beneficial strategy for the left in general. In the 2010's social democratic parties have lost (through defections) large numbers of their voters. Most of those defectors are not, contrary to popular belief,

hosted by the radical right. Most defectors (and remaining centre left loyalists) are generally left-wing in their political orientation and have defected largely to left wing alternatives (Green, radical left and progressive/libertarian centrists). Also, and often forgotten in research on social democracy, many of the middle classes also have high vote propensities for the centre- right. Someone who understands this well is Macron and his En Marche (Macron was a former Minister in a Socialist government and able to appeal to the centre right). There is very little evidence that many of these defectors will soon 'return to the social democratic fold'. They are far more likely to stick with their choice of new hosts, unless social democrats give them a reason to return (such as possible participation in or control of government). However, the electoral weakness and continued decline of the centre left makes such a proposition to voters unconvincing. Where such a power claim is credible, as for the Spanish and Swedish social democrats, they seem to be better able to hold on to their core voter base than the centre left in for example France and the Netherlands.

Social democrats are increasingly the party of the more well-to-do middle classes, state dependents, urban progressives and Euro-enthusiasts with a multicultural and cosmopolitan outlook. The slow process of detachment of blue-collar, lower educated workers on the lower end of the income spectrum, transforms 'labour' parties into political movements without support of the people they were founded for in the first place. This creates another problem of credibility.

It seems that trying to explain this defection from the centre left by merely pointing to an educational gap and all its ensuing divisions (like Goodhart or Piketty) or only precarity (as this study tried to do - and see also Abou-Chadi) provide insufficient explanations for the likelihood of defection from social democratic parties. If social democrats want to win back the traditional support at the lower end of the ability/ education and income spectrum, they need to find the right mix of

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ideological positions (economically left/pro-redistribution, moderate progressive) and distinguish themselves from the radical options (or align themselves in a broad left progressive movement around a new and radical agenda?).

On a positive note, there is still a broad and large progressive-left voter base in most European countries (bar some East European nations). It seems that the social democrats face a myriad of challenges from both flanks of the political spectrum, with both extremes being far better able to capitalise on economic hardship or cultural anxiety of voters. That said, in several countries, the centre left still has some of its old arsenal left to woo voters. This left-progressive base can be mobilised with a political agenda for a fairer (economic redistribution, taxing the wealthy/global enterprises) and sustainable (green and economic long-term solutions in housing and work) future. What immediate and long-term chances there are to recruit new and younger voters remains unclear (at least from this study). The sometime lengthy absence from power of social democratic parties or low likelihood that they will alter the direction of national policies will make progressive voters seek more potentially powerful options. The Dutch 2021 elections and the polls for the German 2022 elections seem to confirm this strategic outlook of left-wing, progressive voters in these two countries.

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**The Polish and Hungarian Left in the  
Authoritarian Populist Regimes.  
The necessity  
of the emergency exit?**

## **Keywords**

**Social democracy, Illiberal democracy, Authoritarian populism, Kaczyński, Orbán, MSZP, SLD, NL, COVID-19, State of exception, Class politics**

## **Abstract**

For many years, the Polish and Hungarian left has faced a common challenge of right-wing authoritarian populism. Jarosław Kaczyński's and Viktor Orbán's parties have made several illiberal and authoritarian changes around the Vistula and Danube, which have significantly influenced the political rules of the game. The main objective of this paper is to verify the research thesis that in order to regain their former electoral significance, social democratic parties in both countries need to make far-reaching changes to their strategy. Besides the traditional cleavages, both the Hungarian Socialist Party and the Polish New Left should critically analyze the new fields of conflict with the Central and Eastern European (CEE) authoritarian right-wing populism. Moreover, the social democracy should be aware that the autocracy is a common regional challenge.

In this joint paper the political situation of the Polish and Hungarian left has been analysed. It has been argued here that there are several common political challenges which have been shared by these left-wing parties. The main reason behind it is that these left-wing parties face very similar authoritarian populist right-wing governments. It can be said that the investigation of the Polish and Hungarian cases can provide very important lessons on how to fight authoritarian tendencies in Central and Eastern Europe. In recent years, Polish and Hungarian authoritarian populism showed very similar tendencies (Krastev-Holmes, 2019). This paper contains proposals on how the left can create a cross-border strategy against unifying authoritarian populism.

## **Historical Background of the Current State of Affairs in Poland**

### **The Challenges of Governance**

SLD is a party that ruled twice, in 1993-1997 and 2001-2005, and had a president of its hand in 1995-2000 and 2000-2005. The Alliance was the party responsible for several key issues that defined Poland's political model (the 1997 Constitution), geopolitical (it supported Poland's entry into NATO in 1999), and developmental (Leszek Miller's government was responsible for Poland's entry into the European Union in 2004).

Each time the Alliance took over after the governments of the Polish right-wing, it found the economy in trouble, facing the disastrous opinion of western creditors regarding the condition of the Polish

economy after the hyperinflationary crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s. With the SLD's participation, the governments were, willy-nilly, forced to pursue a rather neoliberal public finance policy<sup>1</sup>. In addition, Poland's accession to the European Union entailed further cuts in state aid to state-owned farms, and the closing of coal mines, which must have entailed a loss of credibility, especially among the popular and working class and among the losers of the transformation. In addition, Poland, entering the EU with high structural unemployment of up to 20%, had to deal with massive economic migration, especially to the United Kingdom and Ireland. The phenomenon of so called "Euro-orphans" and the breakdown of family ties also played into the hands of the then ruling social democrats.

SLD lost power in 2005, remaining an opposition party outside the parliament from 2015 to 2019. Thanks to creating a single electoral list, the Polish left-wing returned in spectacular style to the top political league in 2019 with 12.56% of the vote, reaching third place. Since then, Polish social democracy has been an enduring element of Polish political life, reaching 8-10% in monthly polls.

### **The Determinants of the Decline**

The described decline of the Polish left in Polish public life has several determinants. Above all, they concern outdated or replacing socio-political cleavages, which define political disputes, collective emotions, and elections at the ballot box. In order to better understand the structural challenges faced by both the SLD and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), it is worth starting from the historical cleavage, which has lost its significance in recent years, also influencing the scale of support for groupings originating from the former parties in power (Bartkowski, 2003). As it is called, the post-communist cleavage was more of an opportunity than a threat for the Polish left in many election cycles of the 1990s. Politicians of the Social Democracy of the Republic

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of Poland (SdRP) and later of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) consistently defended the good name of the builders of the People's Republic of Poland, people who achieved social advancement under authoritarian socialism (Chwedoruk–Rydliński, 2018).

Additionally, the defence of social achievements of People's Poland (mass free education, urbanization, industrialization of the country, an increase in life expectancy) was a reference point in political fights at the dawn of the new, capitalist, and democratic Poland. After 1989, the neoliberal hegemony immediately wanted to implement massive privatization of Polish public life under the "Shock Doctrine." The social history of socialist Poland was thus a weapon in the left's hands, which opposed the marketization of health care, education, higher education, and the pension system.

The historical cleavage between the post-communist and all other political formations helped social democracy play with emotions related to the past (Syska, 2011). In 2005, due to the fall of SLD to the political second league, a new historical cleavage took place between conservative-nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) and neoliberal Civic Platform (PO). PiS has, in a sense, appropriated the tradition of the Polish Underground State, the Home Army, and the myth of the Warsaw Uprising to lend credibility to its policy. In this vision, indomitable Polish patriots face external (Germany, Russia) and internal (former communist agencies, German loyalists, foreign capital) threats. On the other hand, in its policy of remembrance, PO refers to the Polish success of transformation, the first non-communist government led by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and Lech Wałęsa's role in the overthrow of real socialism in Poland and all of Central and Eastern Europe. With these symbols, the Civic Platform lends credence to the liberal myth of entrepreneurship and self-determination of Poles who, like the icons of the Solidarity movement, are destined for great things, including building sustainable economic growth.

The second socio-political cleavage, which accounted for the high and stable support for the left until 2001, had a modernizing character (Syska, 2011). The SdRP and SLD young leaders were often graduates of good public universities in Poland, scholarship holders of foreign academic centres, or think tanks. In other words, they were more “westernized” than the liberal or conservative politicians of the post-Solidarity parties, despite their communist background (Paczeński, 2014). Consequently, during Poland’s rapid march to the West through the OSCE, NATO, and the EU, the left appeared to be a grouping well established abroad, understanding global trends and the civilized world’s challenges. Therefore, voters who were not fond of the historical background of the Polish social democrats were inclined to vote for them because of their desire to satisfy Poland’s European, western ambitions. Against this background, only smaller liberal groupings could threaten the left’s importance in this socio-political cleavage.

However, as long as SLD was the leading party, with support above 20%, it posed no threat. In this case, the year 2005 proved to be crucial, when the Civic Platform surpassed the left in electoral results and when it stepped into its European and modernization shoes. In 2003, the faces of Poland’s entry into the European Union were Prime Minister Leszek Miller and President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, both from the post-communist left. In 2014, former Civic Platform chairman Donald Tusk became head of the European Council. This represents one of the most evident symbols of the sweep of the left and the neoliberal centre-right in a primary modernizing force position.

At the same time, the Law and Justice party has positioned itself as a conservative party in the discussed socio-political cleavage. Like Viktor Orbán, Law and Justice is consistently in favour of the traditional family model, the Europe of Homelands (Program Prawa i Sprawiedliwości 2019), and is against deeper cooperation within the European Union,

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for example, in jointly addressing political and economic immigration challenges from the Middle East and North Africa (Paruch: 2021).

### **The “Organic Crisis” of the Hungarian Left and the Authoritarian Orbán Regime**

It has been analysed here that the Hungarian left is in “organic crisis” in Gramscian sense. This form of crisis means the confluence of crises in several political forms (Thomas, 2011). Originally the term organic crisis has been applied by Gramsci to capitalism, more precisely the concatenation of crises “organic” insofar as they threaten the very foundations of capitalist stability (Levenson, 2020). The enduring crisis of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), moreover the organized left and the left movements, proved to be organic. First of all, the source of the organic crisis has been investigated here; it is rooted in the negligence towards the neoliberal austerity measures applied by the social-liberal governments before 2010. After the supermajority of Orbán’s Fidesz, the organic crisis has evolved in an authoritarian populist regime and it has been enhanced by the regime’s class politics, the government’s extraordinary measures, COVID-19 neoliberal crisis management, and moreover the regime’s slowly unfolding green turn. In the light of the upcoming elections in 2022 and the enhanced cooperation among the opposition parties, the future of Hungarian social democracy depends on its ability to overcome its own crisis and the difficulties posed by the Orbán regime.

### **The Source of the Organic Crisis**

The Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) has suffered enormous political losses in the last decades (Stetter–Boros–Freitas, 2018): the burdens of the collapse of left-liberal governments of 2002-2010, the

landslide victory of the Fidesz in 2010, and the emerging autocracy of the Orbán regime pushed the left into very vulnerable position. However, the crisis of the left dates back earlier. After the Hungarian regime change the social democracy was not able to distinguish itself from the liberals and that is why the social and political ties that bind the left to workers have been drastically weakened. The MSZP has renounced organising its traditional social background and class politics, all because it has subordinated itself to the implementation of the politics of austerity. That is, the left in Hungary has lost in the eyes of society the centuries-old message of social democracy; in all circumstances, to stand up for social emancipation and fight against social inequality. All this was a tragedy not only for the left, but for the whole society, as many of the workers and middle-class people gradually became open to the far-right.

As Gábor Scheiring puts forward: "The socialists suffered the most significant setback as a result of the austerity measures introduced after their electoral victory in 2006; the party's popularity rating plummeted from 37% to 26%... the elitist communication in connection with the austerity measures ('Don't be scared, it won't hurt!') further exacerbated the massive defection from the party. The last neoliberal push towards healthcare reforms, such as the partial privatisation of health insurance, the closing down of hospitals and the introduction of co-payment, were also profoundly unpopular measures." (Scheiring, 2020: 169.). It has been said that the MSZP represented the elite, instead of the salaried employees and wage earners, pensioners and the youth. The party lost its brand and credibility, and the vast majority of its working-class voters left the party. By then the Fidesz and Jobbik had become heavily over-represented among workers. Losing the support of working people, and this electorate's appearance at the Orbán regime (and the Jobbik) was the point at which the political crises of the left became organic crises: "In 2013–2014, the only occupational group where support for

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Fidesz was lower than for the Socialist Party was the group of senior and mid-level managers, while the left was least supported among skilled workers, blue-collar workers and small business owners...” (Scheiring, 2020: 170.).

### **The Class Politics of the Orbán Regime**

The Hungarian political left, because of its liberal and neoliberal orientations and pathological compliance constraints, from the second half of the 2000s did not represent the interests of the working-class. The electorate of the left had collapsed before 2010, and due to the absence of a left-wing political project it was possible for national and local political entrepreneurs to channel the frustration, fear of the future and slippage of the working-class people, through the strategic application of historically prepared cultural narratives (Scheiring, 2020).

Before analysing the authoritarian class compromise, it seems to be crucial to emphasise the social philosophy behind the class politics of the Orbán regime. The social policy of the Orbán regime (tax policy, family policy, family support systems, reduction) is based on an unprecedented redistribution of public goods in favour of the middle-class and upper middle-class, to the detriment of the poorest. The Orbán system, thus, operates as a social “Taygetus”, the essence of which László Bogár, an economist advising Orbán, described in 2013 as giving up a third of Hungarian society: “at least a third of society is completely lost, it can no longer be brought back from misery. Nor could this be changed... they can't, but they don't want to work, and the job market doesn't ask for them either.... and for these people we also have something to say. Viktor Orbán sees this trap, he just can't talk honestly about reality. It cannot be revealed that, unless a miracle happens, a cruel future awaits them in order to keep those who still have a chance.” (Illisz, 2020). The Orbán regime expects unconditional political and social loyalty from supported classes.

The “neo-feudal” class of national capital has no interest in democratizing the work, instead “[c]ompanies participating in labour-intensive production, or production that does not require technology, have a vested interest in an institutional structure that enhances the vulnerability of the labour force and decreases the tax burden, as they do not require skilled labour, nor do they use complicated technology.” (Scheiring, 2020: 327.). The danger of the emerging autocracy of the Orbán regime can be seen in the reallocation of enormous social resources in favour of national big capital and its allied upper middle class, while these resources were taken away from the most vulnerable social groups, whom the regime literally abandoned. In addition, the government made a pactum with the international capital and financial sphere, which also provided huge subsidies to the expense of Hungarian society.<sup>2</sup>

So even before the outbreak of the epidemic, significant progress had been destroying the lower middle-class and other lagging social groups. The Orbán regime after 2010 is, in fact, based on the dual recognition that, on the one hand, the Eastern European semi-peripheral form of global capitalism can be operated in an authoritarian way, and on the other hand, the capitalist system of the centre will contribute to this. Orbán’s concept can be seen as the most serious assassination of society, as people are simultaneously exploited by the national bourgeoisie and global big capital, all of this is legitimized by the upper middle class, and the system seeks to pacify abandoned social groups with institutional hatred. The destruction of workers’ interests, trade unions, the right to strike, and the new Labour Code, which serves the interests of employers, are related to the positioning of the national capital class and the international capital.

## **Governing by the Permanent State of Exception: Migration and Pandemic Crisis**

The Orbán regime took the authoritarian position by implementing an authoritarian capitalist model which is based on the institutionalized hate politics against the 'others'. Authoritarian populist regimes have started to manage the effects of the crisis made by them, and this is a considerable change not just in the concept of government, but in penal politics. The emergency measures in normal circumstances are far from unknown in Hungary. The government during this biopolitical hate campaign against refugees and migrants introduced and prolonged the formal state of exception. The Orbán regime is constantly using the extraordinary measures since 2015 to maintain its political power (Antal, 2019). This puts the Enabling Laws upon the pandemic case into a different light, because the real danger, in my view, is not just the indefinite power of Orbán and the rule by decree, granted by the new regulation, but the fact that he gained nearly half a decade of experience in exceptional governance. What is worrisome in this situation, is on the one hand the dangerous way the regime handled the epidemic crisis and made a political crisis out of it, on the other the neoliberal measures applying before and during the crisis

The global pandemic crisis has thoroughly rewritten Orbán's original political plans for the next general election of 2022 (Antal, 2021). The Orbán regime did not expect such a crisis to evolve and spread as it has. Orbán was able to change his political strategy and started to take the pandemic seriously. At first, given the fact that Orbán did not know exactly how devastating the crisis would be, the regime tried to continue the exceptional measures evolved for the refugee situation. On 6 March, Orbán spoke of migration and the coronavirus as equal challenges (Orbán, 2020a). Moreover on 10 March he argued: "there is a clear link between illegal migration and the coronavirus epidemic"

(Orbán, 2020b). After that there was a tipping point, because Orbán and his communication strategists perceived the fear of the Hungarian people and the fractions behind the government, and this proved to be crucial, because the people recognized there was no link between immigration and the epidemic. Nevertheless, Orbán has found the political potential of the epidemic and started to manage it in a military and policing way. The Prime Minister has seen a higher political risk in economic, and less in epidemiological consequences, that is why the introduced measures are about protecting the economy first and not the workers. Orbán argued that: “we should fight against this crisis by not giving up our goals... the workfare economy and the possibility of a proud life” (Orbán, 2020c).

### **COVID-19 and the Neoliberal Crisis Management**

It is true to say that direct help for the working people is not a high priority for the Orbán regime. The main explanatory factors behind this are the workfare concept and the neoliberalization of public services of the past years. This neoliberalization goes hand in hand with ultimate political power, because emergency powers are required to maintain the neoliberal agenda which characterizes the Orbán regime. The Orbán regime has always been much more afraid of the economic consequences of the crisis than of its epidemiological ones. The neoliberal and state-capitalist approach have always been decisive after 2010: strengthening the private health sector, a huge withdrawal of funds from public health, downsizing the epidemiological administration, a significant proportion of Hungarian doctors and nurses work abroad, and in addition, the regime began to dismantle the universal insurance system and expelled the poorest from the healthcare services. These are well-known phenomenon and reveal how neoliberalism intensifies deep social-economic problems.

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This “embedded” neoliberal atmosphere remained essential from the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis and most the government’s economic measures are about saving the employers and capital, instead of directly protecting the workers (Bohle-Greskovits, 2007). Across Europe, from the very beginning of the epidemic crisis the state helped with wage subsidies to avoid mass unemployment, except Hungary. In most countries, at least half of wages are taken over by the state, in many places up to 80 percent, or more. It seems to be that the Orbán regime is waiting to the last minute with direct help for the people (so far, health workers will receive a once-off wage supplement). This attitude has already resulted in significant social tensions, and the hopelessness of people unemployed as a result of coronavirus. The tax exemption for small businesses (Orbán, 2020d) and the moratorium on loans will hardly be enough to save the hundreds of thousands of Hungarian workers who have lost their jobs and have no savings. While this rigorous policy may be surprising, it fits exactly into the regime’s neoliberal workfare concept, which was introduced by Orbán in 2014 as a concept counter to social-welfare systems, and it seems to be that the epidemic crisis is an excellent opportunity to eliminate the remnants of the welfare state (Orbán, 2014).

Epidemiological, health and social destruction shows the increasingly authoritarian nature of the system, but at least as tragic is the economic crisis management program put together by the Orbán regime. The essence of this is a neoliberal policy, the main goal of which is to directly help capital and large corporations, while the state provides direct help to workers only as a last resort. Behind this is the rather hypocritical, wild capitalist statement of Orbán that “there is no going back to a social aid-based economy”. Thus, in an authoritarian system serving the interests of capital, any help for working-class can only reach workers through the filter of capitalists. This is exemplified

by the 70 per cent wage support for part-time workers announced on 7 April 2020 (Hungarian Government, 2020a), but this measure represents only about 10 to 35 per cent of public wage subsidies in terms of total wage costs. “In return”, the Orbán system introduced the Slave Act in the event of an epidemiological emergency by providing employers with a freely ordered 24-month working time frame (meaning that anyone can be required to work overtime in telework at any time). Thus, neoliberal tendencies continue to strengthen in all areas, and this has significantly undermined the pandemic management.

### **Green Conservatism in the Era of Ecological and Climate Emergency**

From 2010, the Orbán regime elaborated on a controversial attitude toward green politics; on the one hand, it can be characterized by climate denialism and demolition of environmental institutions, on the other hand, a green Fundamental Law has been accepted. In the second half of 2019 and early 2020, the regime started to create a new conservative green agenda. There was a seminal change in the pattern of attitude in terms of green politics of the Orbán regime from late 2019 and early 2020. In June 2019 Minister of Innovation and Technology, László Palkovics argued at a launch event for a solar power station, that Hungary will back an EU plan to go carbon neutral by 2050. A few days later on 21 June, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic blocked EU moves toward 2050 zero carbon goals (Rankin, 2019). This showed that the Orbán regime sees the greening as a kind of blackmail option in conjunction with the EU, moreover Orbán and his staff realized that the climate issues, mitigation, and climate emergency are very important for the Hungarian people. That is why, before the epidemic, social and economic crisis caused by COVID-19, the Orbán regime stated to (re)create a new conservative green agenda based on Christian values, and nuclear energy. However, this change cannot

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be considered sudden, as its forerunner appeared in the Fundamental Law adopted by the regime as far back as 2011. Given the fact that the coronavirus outbreak can be seen as one of the most devastating outcomes of the climate and ecological disaster, it can be said that COVID-19 crisis will have a huge impact on the pre-COVID-19 green agendas.

At the beginning of 2020, Orbán started his climate populist project and argued that he has always been a green politician: “Even adopting the most conservative – for us the most unfavourable – view of climate change, we shall be able to sustain the shared life of Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin. For this we must adapt to climate change smoothly, calmly and systematically. If we adapt to climate change smoothly, calmly and systematically, the Carpathian Basin will be capable of producing all the food we need, the Carpathian Basin will be capable of supplying all the drinking water we need, and it will be capable of creating a clean environment for the people living here.” (Hungarian Government, 2020b). The government adopted a National Energy Strategy and the new National Energy and Climate Protection Plan. After a few months of the veto, Orbán stated that Hungary could be converted into a country with a climate-neutral economy by 2050 relying on solar and nuclear energy. Moreover, the Prime Minister elaborated the pillars of his populist climate agenda: “This shows that climate protection is extremely important, but also extremely expensive. It is possible and it is worth it, but this is the amount of money we must raise... we have four criteria upon which we will represent Hungary's position in this debate. The first is that the costs of a climate-neutral economy should primarily be borne by the climate wreckers: the large polluting countries and large companies. The burden must not be placed on the shoulders of the small ones. The second criterion is that the implementation of this policy must not result in increases in the prices which families pay for either energy or food. The third criterion is

that money must not be taken from poorer countries. This means that in the European Union's next budget it would not be acceptable for money to be taken from the Cohesion Fund and reallocated to climate protection purposes, because this would mean that the funds needed to fight climate change would be taken from poorer countries. The fourth criterion is that we must openly state that in Europe we cannot build a climate-neutral economy without nuclear energy, and the use of nuclear energy should be supported, not restricted." (Hungarian Government, 2020c).

### **Election in 2022: Unity in Diversity?**

After the outbreak of COVID-19, the emerging economic and social crises have made Hungarian society more insecure than ever and has plunged it into a financially and mentally hopeless situation. Bíró-Nagy, Laki and Szászi (2020) have detected that in the face of the coronavirus crisis the Hungarian people regard the quality of healthcare, low wages and excessively high living expenses as the biggest challenges facing the country (2020: 2.). Moreover their research revealed that: "The depth of the social crisis caused by the coronavirus is well indicated by the problem map of Hungarians, as concerns about living expenses grew the most out of those listed... socio-economic issues showed a stronger dominance than before as similar topics are in fourth and fifth place: growing social inequalities (37%) as well as the issue of low pensions (22%)." (Bíró-Nagy–Laki–Szászi, 2020: 2.). What this means for the Hungarian social democracy is that the social emergency caused by the coronavirus could provide an opportunity for social reorganisation as a party and as a socially embedded movement as well – especially when this can be coupled with anger over the government's inhumane crisis management. Even more so, the Hungarian citizens have been heavily hurt by not just the COVID-19 crisis, but the Orbán regime as well. The research of Policy Solutions showed this double pressure:

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“When asked to name the greatest public policy failures of the past decade, Hungarian voters overwhelmingly opted for the worsening quality of public healthcare (57%...). In fact, almost a quarter of those surveyed listed it as the most critical failure of Orbán's tenure in office... even 46% of Fidesz voters were critical of the government's record on healthcare, suggesting that it is an issue that cuts across party lines. A similar trend can be observed with the second most mentioned failure of the Orbán government during their decade in power – the failure to tackle ever increasing social inequalities. 34% of those surveyed listed increasing inequality as one of the greatest problems to emerge during the last ten years in Hungary...” (Bíró-Nagy, 2021: 19–20). In other words, irrespective of the coronavirus, a very serious social discontent has emerged in recent years against the Orbán regime, which has been greatly exacerbated by the way the government has managed the crisis in the interests of capital rather than the people.

In principle, this could be an opportune moment for the rise of the left, but paradoxically this could be weakened by the very constraint that has been the political innovation of the last decade against the Orbán regime: the opposition's unity. Policy Solutions warns: “...it was high time that the opposition parties declared their intention to join forces, as this was actually long expected by the voting public. This decision of the six parties is widely considered an important and reassuring message to those voters who are dissatisfied with the current regime. Critics had continuously warned that a united opposition could not work because many voters would not cross party lines to support the candidates of more controversial formations. Yet the local elections results of October 2019 clearly dispelled this notion; there was no suggestion in any major region that cooperation had cost the opposition seats that would have been otherwise attainable, while the number of mayoralties and municipal assemblies won, by contrast, were substantial. The opposition has learned over the past

years that divided it will fall. But the converse is not necessarily true, that is how unity is achieved and what form it takes remains supremely relevant and, if outside influences allow for a potentially competitive electoral situation in 2022, this issue will decide the election.” (Bíró-Nagy, 2021: 26–27.). The unifying opposition is undoubtedly the most important political innovation of recent years among the parties, but the 2022 electoral failure also showed that opposition voters want a clear system alternative and will not tolerate internal power struggles between opposition actors. It is required after the defeat of 2022 to act as a new allied political force, but this will hurt the independent opposition agendas. There are significant political tensions within the opposition, which is complicated by the fact that the left wing of the coalition (MSZP and Párbeszéd) is opposed by a very strong liberal side (DK and Momentum). Any left-wing issue can therefore only be a matter for the coalition of the opposition if the left wins over the former far-right Jobbik, which will result in further significant internal tensions and a strong platform for the Orbán regime to attack. In other words, unity in diversity can only be successful after the election of 2022 if all parties can let go of the agenda they would otherwise agree with, and this does not mean that the left cooperation can necessarily assert its agenda on social crises of recent years.

The primaries have significantly changed the position of the left in the opposition coalition. The Hungarian Socialist Party and its closest ally, Párbeszéd, together won 24 (18 and 6) single seats, while their joint candidate for prime minister withdrew in favour of the conservative Péter Márki-Zay.<sup>3</sup> All this has significantly weakened the left-wing pole of the opposition coalition and strengthened the liberal and conservative power groups in the opposition. In this situation, the task for the left is to develop a strong ideological and political programme and to highlight the key role of the left in replacing the Orbán regime. The failure of the united opposition in the 2022



elections showed that a neoliberal and neoconservative policy cannot credibly replace a left-wing, social agenda.

## **Proposal for the Polish and Hungarian Left: An opportunity for the future**

Thus, the current poll results of the left in Poland (and Hungary) affect changes and partial obsolescence of socio-political cleavages, not narrative and marketing errors. The rules of politics do not change, but the role and place of social democracy do. In order to try to rebuild its significance, it is worth considering refreshing the existing cleavages and taking advantage of new axes of dispute.

The historical cleavage paradoxically returned to the Polish public sphere with the COVID-19 pandemic. It turned out that 32 years of abandoning well-funded public services, including health care, proved to be a deadly threat to Polish society. In People's Poland, a frontline state in the "Cold War," the vast majority of schools were built with an eye toward their rapid conversion into field and infectious disease hospitals (Szkoły, które miały być szpitalami). In this respect, the left could point to the civilizational advantages of undemocratic socialist Poland over the democratic and free-market reality after 1989. The same applies to housing, which before the turn of the millennium was the state's responsibility, but for the last three decades has been continuously privatized (Gierek największym deweloperem w historii).

A cleavage not often used is class differences. The left, somewhat out of fear of being labelled a Marxist party, has moved away from a class-based understanding of politics, even though this is one of the main factors influencing elections. While Law and Justice is the primary representative of the popular class (Gdula: 2018), and the Civic Platform of the middle and upper class, the attempt to drive a leftist wedge between these parties is one of the greatest hopes

for Polish social democracy. It is about winning back a part of the popular class, especially those coming from the group of losers of the political transformation and neoliberal globalization, who voted for Jaroslaw Kaczynski's party on the principle of the "lesser evil." It is an attempt to effectively show this group of voters that PiS - especially in the face of a pandemic - does not represent their interests, that the social policy of Mateusz Morawiecki's government does not fully serve them, that the social democratic demand to create well-functioning public services is as essential as cash transfers implemented by the right-wing government (*Przyszłość jest teraz*).

In the same way, one can appeal to the lower middle class, whose representatives also need a well-functioning public hospital, school, kindergarten, or nursery. In this respect, the free-market policy proposed by Civic Platform runs counter to the interests of this class, as it assumes further commercialization (and, by implication, privatization) of these services. The postulate of a social-democratic welfare state, being an adequate response to the period after the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, may constitute a fair and inclusive electoral offer for these two social classes.

As it has been pointed out, the Hungarian left is under the pressure of several kinds of "organic" crisis (Table 2). Some of these crises originated in global capitalism and globalization (climate and ecological emergency, COVID-19), others reveal the internal crisis of the left (the loss of the electorate, working-class radicalization) and there are challenges posed by the authoritarian Orbán regime (overlapping extraordinary measures, election of 2022). The left is facing multi-faceted challenges, as a part of the coalition against the Orbán regime, and on the other hand as left-wing forces creating their own political agenda and electorate.

The main challenge is for the Hungarian opposition to make a much more functional "enhanced cooperation" than the current one against

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the emerging authoritarianism of the Orbán regime. It is an enormous task, given the facts that the regime is based on permanent hate politics, and is open to modifying at any time the Fundamental Law and regulations concerning the election. At the same time, it is also a problem to be solved as to how to strengthen the positions of the weakened left in forming the controversial coalition which consists of the former far-right Jobbik and many liberal parties. It can be said that it is very difficult to imagine that the Orbán system can be defeated without a strong left-wing agenda, and this requires that Hungarian politics finally go beyond the pre-2010 liberal constraints. It should be emphasized that Orbán recognized that globalized capitalism can be operated in the semi-periphery in an authoritarian way. The left should elaborate a new class of politics which can be used as a counter concept against Orbán's class politics, which creates deep social cleavages and helps the wealthiest. There is no political force among the Hungarian opposition, only the left, which would emphasize that we entered the era of global ecological and climate emergency, and the main cause of anthropogenic climate change is globalized capitalism itself. This would also be crucial because the left might be able to formulate an alternative concept to the Orbán regime, which is about to conquer ecological issues. In this alternative agenda the breaking out from the authoritarian exceptionalism and social reconstruction during and after the pandemic are essential. As it has been argued, the socio-economic issues started to show a stronger dominance even before COVID-19. If the left is able to formulate its own policies in these areas, it can be successful not only as part of the emerging anti-Orbán coalition, but also as an independent actor after 2022. The key for the left is to show that the Orbán regime cannot be replaced without a socio-political turnaround to help the worst-off social groups, who are the real victims of the Orbán regime, the climate and pandemic disaster.

**Table 1 The challenges and opportunities of the Hungarian left**

The "Organic Crisis" of the Hungarian Left and Proposals		
Factors	Orbán's position	Left Proposal
The loss of the electorate, working-class radicalization	Authoritarian class politics/compromise	A new class politics as a counterpoint of the regime
Overlapping crises	The permanent state of exception, extraordinary government measures	Breaking out from the authoritarian exceptional measures
COVID-19	Authoritarian and neoliberal crisis management	Social reconstruction with a focus on the health and education systems
Climate and ecological emergency	"Green conservatism"	A policy based on global climate and ecological emergency, which highlights that the main cause of global climate change is the current version of capitalism
Election of 2022	Increasing autocracy and intimidating political opponents	The representation of left-wing agenda in the coalition, claiming that without these issues the regime cannot be replaced

All in all, a new socio-political division that Polish, Hungarian and European social democracy should pay attention to is the increasingly visible division into so-called globalists and localists (Kuź: 2017; Héjj: 2020). The first group consists of cosmopolitan citizens of the world, enjoying the benefits of open borders, economies, and blending of cultures. On the other hand, we can see whole social groups who, as a result of neoliberal globalization, feel a number of fears: about their social security, about a stable workplace, about their national and regional identity. The left has recently found itself in a bit of a squeeze. It would like to defend the openness, the freedom to choose one's path in life, the individual way of expressing oneself, which are the peculiarities of the globalists. However, seeing the immense harm

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that neoliberal globalization has done to nation-states and the entire model of the welfare state, they do not want to leave the locals alone. All the more so, as they are opening their arms to the right-wing populists by becoming their large and loyal constituency. To counteract this, progressive parties in Hungary, Poland and the EU as a whole should find ways to better address in a non-xenophobic way, in public debate, the needs of localists. One of the key issues here is immigration, which is generating several concerns among indigenous groups in Europe, both in the “new” and “old” EU states. Fears of social dumping among the newcomers are often confirmed (Tesfaye: 2017). Immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, in pursuit of a better life and significantly higher wages, competed with workers from Great Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands or Germany with lower wages, acceptance of abuses by employers, and permission to break the social dialogue in workplaces. The economic conflict of interests between old and new workers, those who belong to the trade unions and those who are “freelancers” has been exploited for over 100 years, first by factory owners and now by company bosses, contractors, and start-ups. Therefore, it is worthwhile for social democracy to defend the civilizational achievements of the European labour movement by calling for high economic and social standards of the labour market, where every worker should be guaranteed a high salary by law and where membership in labour organizations should be promoted by the state (Judt, 2011). In cultural matters, too, European social democracy should uphold the democratic state, its secular dimension, and human rights. No European citizen should be deprived of his or her right to education or to decide about their life for religious reasons. The left should not be afraid to use various legal means of coercion against those who do not respect European rules and customs.

The issues described above are inextricably linked to the management of the visible rise of emotions in European politics.

Politics and its antagonistic nature did not end in 1989 as global liberals wanted. The outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008, less than two decades after the triumph of liberal democracy, coupled with free-market capitalism over authoritarian socialism and planned economies, brought us back to a time of conflict. Subsequent armed conflicts, tensions between states, centres and peripheries of globalization make it abundantly clear that in the third decade of the 21st century, the political is doing well. Therefore, it is high time for a renaissance of the bold language of Polish, Hungarian and European social democracy. Let's not be afraid to raise difficult issues, such as economic exploitation, violation of workers' rights, double standards of salaries in the European Union, and the hypocrisy of western corporations which behave in a neo-colonial way in Central and Eastern Europe. Without 'social democratic populism' we will not be able to rebuild our high support, while a weak left in the region is the best guarantee of illiberal hegemony on both the Danube and the Vistula.

## Endnotes

- 1 it should be noted, however, that in the years 1993-1997, the progressive privatization of state-owned companies was slowed down, and an actual social dialogue with trade unions was initiated (Kolodko, 2007)
- 2 I have analysed (Antal, 2021) that historically the main reason for the success of emerging Fascism during the interwar period was class politics, which is based on the compromise of the upper middle-class and national bourgeoisie. Contemporary authoritarian populism relies on these tendencies. In his book, *Fascism and Dictatorship*, Nicos Poulantzas examined the emergence of Fascism in Italy and Germany between the two World Wars, with reference to the class relations that created these systems. Poulantzas (2018), who argues that the Fascist state is an exceptional capitalist state, assumes that there is a bloc of power in the functioning capitalist state, in Gramscian sense, by which the capitalist class or a faction thereof exercises hegemony. Fascist regimes are embedded in the political disintegration of the dominant German and Italian classes and the fact that a revolutionary breakthrough of the working-class has failed; the bourgeoisie had not been defeated before the Fascist takeover. This double failure liberated smallholders, traders, and paid employees, that is the petty bourgeoisie, to function as an autonomous social force in Fascist parties (Poulantzas, 2018: 237–268; Antal, 2021: 132.).
- 3 Source: <https://elovalasztas2021.hu/eredmenyek/> (in Hungarian).

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