

ANIA SKRZYPEK

The progressive doctrine for European integration: It is not only the EU that needs a convention...

These are unprecedented times, in which there is a need to find new ways to organise political parties and enable a space for both critical analyses and political creativity. This is also true for the European level. These past years have seen many crises, which triggered further integration, but also revived some of the grander ambitions for the parallel processes of enlargement and deepening. To be able to guide them alongside progressive ideas, there is a need for a doctrine that would be developed in a deliberative, participatory process and would unite progressive governments, parties, activists and electorates across the continent in a common understanding of the future. This is an important momentum with profound challenges – which call for an equally grand response.

The return of the pre-electoral season inside the European Union means the revival of the claims that these upcoming elections will be the *most important* in the history of the continent's integration. Without wishing to sound cynical, this and similar statements have become part of the *bon ton*, and they hardly result in an implicit mobilisation to think more profoundly about the upcoming struggle. They are repeated, and there is always sound evidence that they are true; nevertheless, they have also turned into certain platitudes. And this may be perilous. Even now, anticipating the political conversation that will be taking place within the next six months, it is evident that there is no reason to be complacent about anything. Neither is it a context in which repeating clichés would make up for the feeling that it's getting too close to the date itself to stand a chance to profoundly amend any course of developments. But the opposite is true – these are the dire circumstances in which bold ideas are needed.

A complicated legacy

The legislative period 2019-2024 has been vastly turbulent. If one believes in omens, it began with rather mixed tides. On one hand, there was a rise in turnout in European elections. This was enthusiastically noted at the time, as the first increase since the first direct voting took place in 1979. Certainly, there were still member states with alarmingly low levels of participation. Moreover, the new European Parliament (EP) had a tricky composition, reflecting growing fragmentation and polarisation within the European electorates. But as an institution, the EP seemed to have enjoyed a stronger democratic mandate. On the other hand, it felt like that result was getting overlooked. None of the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* succeeded in becoming the president-designate of the European Commission. The European People's Party conveniently replaced the unpopular Manfred Weber with Ursula von der Leyen. In parallel, the centre-right politicians silently consented to the Party of European Socialists (PES) candidate, Frans Timmermans, being kept hostage by the resentment of countries known for failings when it comes to the rule of law. Although Timmermans ensured the first vice-presidency and a key portfolio (which allowed him to make a significant difference in the field of the European Green Deal) for himself, the process was disenchanting. It was as if there was neither interest nor patience from the side of the Council to continue entertaining the expanded understanding of Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty. It appeared as if there was a drive towards stronger intergovernmentalism, which would be happening at the cost of the communitarian method.

But, as also seen on countless occasions in the past, the European Parliament was not inclined to go down without a fight. It followed the noble tradition started by the Assembly (the EP's predecessor), whose determination was the reason that it transformed from the consultative gathering of national delegations into the current institution. And since need is the mother of invention, in 2019, the political groups – S&D included – sent a set of letters to the European Commission president-designate. Within these documents, they spelt out the priorities that would need to be included in the new Commission work plan – should Ursula von der Leyen wish to secure their support. This strategy was a little bit hazardous, as the division of seats in the EP meant that a majority to support the new Commission could also have been found in a centre-right and right alliance. Social democrats took that risk, and rightfully so. This increased their leverage, whilst also becoming one of the overlooked, but great constituting moments. With its four chapters (namely, sustainable development; justice and equality; a value-based foreign policy; and enhanced EU democracy and transparency), the letter was an abstract of the governing agenda, tangibly establishing the missing link between the electoral narrative (encapsulated in the manifesto) and the drafting of the Commission's work plan. In 2019, it was an implicit connection, but, ahead of 2024, it could be considered as a fundamental step of the post-electoral strategy – imposing a different approach from the side of the PES as the socialist transnational party.

The lessons hopefully learnt

Contemporaries see the existence of the PES manifesto as an indisputable feature of the European campaign. Truth to be told, arriving at this tradition was a turbulent adventure. With the acceptance of European integration as a process that should lead towards the creation of a Social Europe (Congress in Bonn in 1973) and with the transformation of the Liaison Bureau into the Confederation of the Socialist Parties of the European Community (CSPEC, established by nine parties in 1974, it is the predecessor of the PES), there was a sense that the new organisation required a consolidated guiding document. And that it should not simply be the expression of the lowest common denominator. Consequently, a steering committee was established with a composition that was a mix between the CSPEC leadership and member parties' representatives, each of whom was entrusted to lead on an assigned dossier. They drafted four reports, gathered in a 30-page document, which, however, was severely contested. Aside from the content, even the proposal to have something called a *manifesto* was disputed, since every party had a very different understanding of what a *manifesto* was and how it was meant to be adopted.

This created a political impasse, following which an electoral committee was founded under the leadership of Sicco Mansholt and with the direct involvement of personalities such as Joop den Uyl. They got a mandate to come up with a 'political declaration'. The themes they looked at were labour, human rights, women's rights and enlargement. The deliberation resulted in a 31-point declaration, which spelt out the mechanisms of cooperation and highlighted the CSPEC's guiding principles of "freedom, social justice, equality, and harmonious economic development". The paper was adopted in Brussels in 1978 but did not escape criticism either. It was resented for its ambiguous character. So, this one was also dropped and, for the sake of the campaign, an "Appeal of the electorate of the countries of the European Community for the first elections in the European Parliament (7-9 June 1979)" was adopted to serve as the first electoral platform. It included three priorities: peace; a democratic economy that supports workers; and care of the government for its citizens. These priorities guided the campaign, which, under the slogan "Spring of European Socialism", saw a 200-candidate event in Luxembourg and 20,000 activists at a rally in Champs de Mars in Paris (under the leadership of Willy Brandt, François Mitterrand and James Callaghan).

Indeed, these beginnings were rough. They are now almost ancient history. Nevertheless, recalling the experiences of the manifesto processes that span a period of almost half a century is very instructive. And summarising these events leaves the impression that there are still several unanswered issues. First of all, creating a visionary and representative text, which does not fall into a trap of ambiguity, remains a challenge. This is a predicament with which the social democrats have been struggling ever since. Perpetual footnotes were one of the legacies of the 1980s, especially due to the British and Danish parties, who insisted on disclaimers regarding the sections of the text they would opt out from. To avoid them and appear more united, the PES preferred more general and, hence, consensual documents, although this led to another pitfall. The PES adopted a footnote-free manifesto

“221 Commitments for the 21st century” ahead of the 1999 elections, but in parallel (after the Malmö Congress), the so-called Blair-Schröder paper was delivered. This exposed the depth of the ideological conflict inside the progressive family and how much national perspectives ruled the views that sister parties had on Europe.

Secondly, there is a valid question about the function a europarty’s manifesto should have. The insufficiently defined purpose of manifestoes was perhaps what led to the above-described detours in 1978-1979. Later, this unresolved struggle meant that, from election to election, there was a different format – in some years resembling a programme and in others just a longer leaflet. These tensions still remain unresolved, revealing that perhaps further creativity is needed. The manifesto is currently the most important periodically adopted document at the level of the PES. Perhaps with the emergence of the ‘Group letters’ (mentioned above), one could think about the differentiation that would allow the party to have a complex and coherent programme (building on the revised fundamental programme), which then would free the manifesto from the necessity to address all issues and would enable it to focus on the strategic questions to be addressed in the campaign.

Thirdly, and as a consequence of what has been discussed above, there is a valid point to be made on how a manifesto can connect national campaigns. The EU elections have frequently been classified as second-order ones, which means that they were still a sum of 28 (now 27) national mobilisations, with a focus on national rather than European issues. Additionally, as the manifestos are drafted in English and in the context of ‘Brussels bubble politics’, they frequently prove simply untranslatable. There is also a concern regarding the use of manifestos by the *Spitzenkandidaten*. For example, Martin Schulz, who ran in 2014, presented a platform that was not in contradiction to the manifesto, but simply functioned in parallel. This meant that the PES document was overshadowed by default, and its promotion was not an evaluation criterion of the campaign itself.

The new mechanics

One could argue that there is no reason to articulate these reflections now when the process toward 2024 is well underway. The PES Congress in Berlin (October 2022) adopted the resolution “With Courage. Leading Europe through change” – which revealed the guiding principles in four chapters that were then used to frame the PES Congress in Málaga Resolution “Europe in the lead. Progressive solutions for global challenges” (November 2023). The latter was drafted in a lengthy cycle involving debates on hundreds of amendments by the PES coordination team and PES presidency, in consultation with civil society and trade unions. The two papers together present a coherent whole, and they were written with a very traditional process, in which the PES secretariat played a central role. The aim was to consolidate ranks. It also aspires to reassure with its predictability and to offer a guarantee of a safe *home run*, when the new manifesto is disclosed at the election congress in spring 2024.

Indeed, it is possible to feel more comfortable with this clean agenda, in which all is in place to resolve any potential disparities and broadcast the message of the centre-left family's unity. As it is now, the process clearly indicates the path towards a manifesto. Without much need for political manoeuvring, this could then be supplemented by a progressive version of the Commission's working plan (building on the two above-mentioned resolutions) and offer an anchor for the European parliamentary group's letters (should the 2019 tradition be continued). This could also help identify the key priorities (dictating strategic moves for social democrats, when it comes to striving for portfolios and positions), be the background file during hearings of potential Commission candidates (adding to the existing EP ones and the inner-party ones), and contribute to making the European political negotiations more transparent. While this is undoubtedly correct, the question is whether, in future, there should be space for even more inventiveness. There is a solid reason to believe that the answer is yes, both because of the situation of social democracy and traditional parties in Europe, and because of the altered EU-level context.

There has been a profound change. The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE, April 2021-May 2022) finally took place and, though it may be criticised for many reasons, it was an impressive endeavour, which brought together so many European citizens. So much so that, even though it has been several months, the European Parliament keeps insisting that a new convention is needed and that there is a need to pave the way to crucial Treaty changes. Without these, the EU will not be able to either rise to the challenges it is facing or to expand – which is a moral commitment that the Union has made and at the core of its geostrategic interests.

A similar stand has been echoed in the famous report by the Franco-German working group on EU institutional reform (“Sailing on high seas: Reforming and enlarging the EU for the 21st Century”, September 2023) and has been supported by other actors (such as FEPS’ “EU Treaties – and why they need targeted changes”, November 2023). The social democrats as a political family have been outspoken in promoting ‘deepening and enlarging’ as parallel and inseparable. They have argued in favour of reforms of the decision-making processes (especially qualified majority voting replacing unanimity), and they have been proponents of diverse mechanisms that could help defend European values (such as the recently incorporated ‘conditionality mechanism’). Hence, though there is much resistance, and analysts say that the chance to make progress at the upcoming summit is less than meagre, social democrats should not only argue in favour of a convention, but also anticipate it and/or a possible intergovernmental conference. If they take place, a ratification process will follow, which will gear up a broader debate and should reach beyond the party-elected top stakeholders and functionaries involved in international affairs. Having learned from the experience of the Constitutional Treaty and having grasped that there is now a public European sphere (both at the EU level and within national contexts), one should try to conquer and assure the primacy of progressive ideas. The CoFoE may already be a thing of the past, but it also showed that there are new ways of involving citizens in a dialogue that aims to raise the quality of democratic debate. The answer cannot be to resort to old mechanics and the simply explaining Europe. The response must be empowering, broadly

engaging and enable a real discussion – while moulding it around progressive vision, themes and standards. To that end, if one does not try to conquer that sphere, the real danger is that right-wing radicals, nationalists and fascists will try to invade it instead.

Though there may be those who would argue that this is still a very Brussels-based debate, there are reasons to believe that European integration as a topic has transcended into national debates. Due to all the incomparable challenges that the world is facing currently, there has been an incentive to act more jointly within the Union, and European topics have transcended into national politics. Topics such as the Health Union, NextGenerationEU or the Defence Union have become internalised, because they relate to the fight against the pandemic, the recovery and modernisation plans, and the common reaction in the face of the brutal Russian aggression against Ukraine. To that end, the old patterns that the European heads of state frequently resorted to – blaming the EU for unpleasant measures – have been abandoned. Instead, many prime ministers (such as Pedro Sánchez and Sanna Marin) spend a great deal of time on multilateral and bilateral relations and in making clarification statements at press conferences. Though there is no empirical data that would allow a straightforward correlation, surveys by Eurobarometer suggest a significant increase in the trust that citizens have in European institutions. For progressives, this implies that they would need to think about the outreach that allows them to be a transmission belt for diverse ideas. European citizens do not require much of an explanation of what the EU is and what it does (which the centre-left usually sees as the first task in the campaign), but more about why there are different political visions and what makes the progressive one stand out.

These two observations – regarding the legacy of the CoFoE and the ‘domesticisation’ of European politics – seem to suggest that there is a need for another format that would allow both debating a progressive vision for Europe and connecting better with citizens across the Union. Within the PES, there have already been many different strategies that have tried to cater to that goal, such as the Berlin Reform (based on the paper “Strengthening awareness and internal cohesion of PES” drafted by Ruari Quinn and Ton Beumer, and adopted in 2001), the project of the Global Progressive Forum (with the report by Paul Nyrup Rasmussen from 2003) and the Vienna Reform (declaration “For Stronger PES” adopted in 2005). Since then, there have been statutory changes connected with the change of European political parties’ regulations for political parties at the EU level and additional adjustments to accommodate the procedure of selecting *Spitzenkandidaten*. But there has not been a grander project to discuss the role that the europarties could play, externally and internally, in the context of such profound EU reform debates. Internal reform (also in the context of the crisis of traditional parties and of the classical form of political participation), procedures (and meaning of gatherings, such as congresses), roles of documents (manifesto, resolutions etc.) and ways of engaging with external actors (members, individuals etc.) deserve to be tackled in a more coherent and comprehensive manner. Perhaps in that sense, openness to discuss new formats could be part of it, including such a dare-to-imagine, hopeful, encompassing, grand and mobilising project as the progressive convention for Europe.

The new doctrine

The political momentum for such a progressive convention has been explained in the institutional context so far; however, earlier in this chapter, references have been made to the circumstances that have altered the trajectory of European integration in the legislative period 2019-2024. The global pandemic, the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent energy crisis, the cost-of-living crisis, the climate emergency, the Hamas terrorist attack and eruption of the conflict in the Middle East – these and more have been the challenges that the EU has been confronted with. In the opinion of the vast majority of European citizens, the EU stood tall and, working in sync with member states, gradually managed to ensure a handful of viable solutions. Some of them have proven that the old sayings, such as ‘when there is a will, there is a way’ have not lost their validity.

Social democrats at the European level have ensured that the agenda they came up with and kept working on since 2019 did not bend to the terms of simple crisis management. Notably, the progress achieved and the proud legacy that they are bringing ahead of the next European elections is not a mere consequence of momentum. Yes, the context has been conducive to the idea of acting together at the EU level – but the actual results were possible because of the determination to pursue a political direction. The record is robust, but perhaps among the most emblematic are leading in the strive for a just transition (seen against the climate, digital and demographic evolution), advancing on essential aspects of Social Europe (within policies that helped cushion against the impact of the Covid crisis, such as SURE; the adequate minimum wage directive; efforts to ensure equal pay and representation; and the right to disconnect), promoting gender equality and egalitarian rights (with the proposal of a new directive to combat domestic violence and the fight against discrimination, such as LGBTQI+ zones), trying to revive thinking about global solidarity and justice (with a pro-active approach to new trade agreements and legislative proposals on due diligence), arguing strongly for further enlargement, and being the ones at the forefront of the defence of democracy and the rule of law.

These are just a few proud examples from a long list that S&D family could present to voters as a record of achievement, many of which correspond with the chapters of the 2019 manifesto “A new social contract for Europe”. The notion was built on the reflection that the EU should serve its people better (the opening sentence of the document), for which purpose it would need to abandon the “neo-liberal and conservative models of the past”. The following six chapters of the manifesto are filled with lists of proposals (in the format of bullet points): “A Europe of solidarity for the many, not the few”; “A progressive Europe with a youth plan”; “A feminist Europe with equal rights for all”; “A sustainable Europe that protects our Planet”; “A Europe of equality and fairness”; and “A strong and united Europe that promotes a better world”. The rationale was that the EU needed a change of direction and that progressives would be the ones to provide an alternative. This logic was a consequence of the understanding from 2014, in which the manifesto “Towards a new Europe” was a statement against “The right-wing (that) has created a Europe of fear and austerity”; this was also echoed, to a certain extent, in the Málaga Congress resolution –

which stated that “we need a strong parliamentary group of our family in the next European Parliament to push forward a progressive agenda and to counter worrying alliances between conservatives, liberals and far-right parties in the different member states”. The text of the resolution is divided into three chapters, again typical of social democracy “Protecting citizens through transitions”, “Promoting democracy and gender equality” and “Securing Europe’s position in the world” which are then broken up into 25 objectives.

Reading these documents brings a sense of comfort – social democrats certainly appear coherent in their narrative with the motto ‘People first’, competent and fluent in the language of European terms and reforms, and rather confident too. The programmatic stand is distinctively traditional, and it offers a response on the premise of a structured partisan system at the EU level. But the question whether this is a time to see these kinds of documents as a good directory of the policies that should further be developed into a format that would enable them to form the content of a solid progressive work plan for the next legislative period. As such, they would also enjoy greater visibility and support, having been discussed minimally by the respective sister parties’ international circles. That said, there could still be a space and need for a more in-depth conversation about the actual vision for (progressive) Europe. The documents at hand show the issues that have already been agreed on for now, but the challenge is to think ahead. What is the pivotal mission that social democrats want the Union to be both a response and a proponent of?

To answer, progressives need to develop a concept that would be of an equal intellectual gravity as that of Social Europe back in 1973. There are three reasons for it to be relevant. Firstly, when that original notion was put in place, it was to offer a path on which both the parties in favour and sceptical of integration (describing it as liberal, market-driven integration) could converge. In the 1990s, the main project deriving from this was the agenda of full employment, quality jobs and growth (see the 1999 and 2004 manifestos). In the wake of the financial crisis, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen and Jacques Delors tried to revive the notion by adding ‘new’ to it – procuring an important report, engaging sister parties’ leaders as chairs of three working groups, organising a set of expert seminars across European regions, publishing two pamphlets and three off-shoot campaigns. This legacy remains most relevant, despite the fact the subsequent crises made it very hard to uphold and implement. Even more so, today while (the New) Social Europe remains an essential anchoring point, there is a need for a new narrative, which would recognise the challenges ahead and offer directions to answer the pressing questions of contemporary times.

Secondly, while the EU seemed capable of gearing up a consensus in critical moments – for many member states these have been extraordinary measures, which should not be considered permanent and should be revisited, sooner rather than later. These positions are not only in the intra-governmental sphere but also in the intra-partisan ones. There, it is repeated timidly by some and openly by others that, paradoxically, the more globalised and Europeanised the debate, the more compelled social democrats have felt to stay within the realm of national politics. For instance, the rise of the radical right is considered by

many as a general trend, which, however, must be fought within the domestic context first. In other words, when the extremists and nationalists make European integration their target, the centre-left parties are likely to respond with a set of answers that are particular to their national circumstances. This partially excused several important ideological shifts (for example in Scandinavia) exempting them from the broader debate amongst sister parties, which they would deserve and demand. This strategy may be effective now, but it is bound to create further friction on functional questions – such as the EU budget and own resources, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, specific aspects of the new industrial strategy and cohesion policies. Recently, the PES has been trying to provide a connection between the national and EU levels, by elevating some of the successful slogans – it was “Respect” in 2022 and “*Adelante (Europa)*” in 2023. But perhaps a discussion on a new doctrine would enable the trend to be reviewed and a compelling, unifying and jointly elaborated notion be offered from the EU level instead.

Thirdly, the new doctrine should be bold in defining the premises for enlarging and deepening Europe. It is not only a historical necessity, but, as one could argue, a moral obligation. In the 1999 manifesto, the PES stated that “we say ‘yes’ to market economy, but ‘no’ to a market society”. It was a simple claim that referred to the alternatives and their implications. Ever since, there has been a growing impression that the pro-European parties (and hence, the europarties) have to project positive messages, with as many ‘concrete deliverables’ as possible, to defend the EU. But the era of ‘catch-all-parties’ seems to have come to an end. Programmes framed alongside a transactional approach toward voters are neither responsible nor persuasive. And neglecting people’s fears and objections, by not naming and addressing them directly, makes traditional parties appear out of touch. What citizens want is understanding and a connection. This is not built through a managerial approach, but by vision, an articulation of a common aspiration and by offering hope that Europe of the future can be a better place for many more countries, for their societies and for the benefit of the world.

To summarise, in the same (as quoted above) 1999 manifesto, the PES included “A well prepared, comprehensive and inclusive enlargement process is in the best interest of current European Union member states and applicants. Enlargement will enhance the democracy and stability of our continent and strengthen Europe’s voice in the world”. At that moment in time, social democrats were in the majority of EU governments, embraced the unification and integration agenda, and were ready to stand tall and look confidently to the future. Without discussing what happened afterwards and how the situation has proven to differ from PES expectations, it is evident that the Union and the social democratic family are in rather dissimilar positions. Many existential questions have been asked about the future of the EU, for example, in the context of the Constitutional Treaty’s failure or Brexit. Still, equally, many words have been used to ponder which way to go, which shape to set and what priorities to establish. Examples of this include Olaf Scholz’s bold speech at Charles University in Prague or Pedro Sanchez’s at the last PES Congress. Hence, assuming historical responsibility means two things for the centre-left in Europe: opening up to consolidate (a progressive convention); and addressing contradictions to truly unite (a new European

progressive doctrine). It is also necessary to offer space for the current and new generation of leaders to become the same icons as the movement's giants (Willy Brandt, Olaf Palme, Felipe Gonzalez and others) to whom so many still refer to today. Succeeding would mean breaking a pattern, emancipation from cynicism and/or comfort, and thriving (yet again) – by ensuring the primacy of progressive ideas for Europe for many decades to come.

