

Progressive Person of the Year

Overcoming crises is part of the parcel of progressive politics in Europe. But the best standard of socialist politics is when short-term challenges are tackled while keeping our eyes on the long-term development goals.

Spain is not the only country where the rise of the far right was observed in the past decade, but here it was truly dramatic and alarming, pushing the country to the brink of moral and political crisis. However, the extraordinary elections held in July 2023 saw the Socialist strategy succeeding in pushing back the far right, giving hope to the rest of Europe that the tide can be turned around elsewhere too.

The Socialist government consolidated its positions which was greatly needed during the Spanish presidency of the Council of the European Union. This took place at a time when the centre-right, sometimes in cooperation with the far right, was trying to mastermind a backsliding from ambitious policies like the Green Deal, despite civil society organisations widely endorsing the concept of a Just Transition. What needs to be highlighted here is the collective success of PSOE but also the individual achievements that should inspire others in our movement.

Teresa Ribera Rodríguez is an outstanding socialist leader in Spain. She has been a member of the government since 2018 and has also become a renowned international policymaker in the fight against climate change. She has helped European socialists to



develop a robust climate agenda during the past decade. As a deputy prime minister, she has also been responsible for overseeing questions of demography which is another policy area that the EU would need to consider more seriously in the future.

If we need to name a wise and charismatic leader on climate policy, with deep and thorough knowledge of the field, Teresa Ribera certainly is among them. She has resolutely worked on questions of the environment and sustainability in government, in opposition and in government again. In the judgment of FEPS, she is FEPS Progressive Person of the Year in 2023.

LÁSZLÓ ANDOR
interviews TERESA RIBERA RODRÍGUEZ

Climate justice and social justice are connected

László Andor: *We speak about climate emergency with increasing urgency. We are in the 24th hour, regarding climate change, and so much needs to be done and quickly. Why, in your view, do many people not accept or understand this?*

Teresa Ribera Rodríguez: I think that everybody understands that climate is changing and that scientists have provided an explanation that makes sense. This is no longer something being challenged by a large majority. But what is true is that too often we have the impression that there's not a clear understanding of the importance of what is happening and of the need to react in a very quick and profound manner, with a very cross-cutting approach to climate policies. To a certain extent, it is like a kind of self-protection. It is difficult to accept that we need to change so many things in such a short period of time. So, unless it is reasonably easy to make the necessary changes in our behaviours, we try to stay in our comfort zone and not accelerate these changes. With the personal conviction that politics need to serve citizens, we are obliged to find a way to make the decisions easier, not to hide the reality, not to act as if nothing is happening, which could be very dangerous and could be backtracking, but to facilitate the transformation in a socially fair and just manner and to allow people to experience the benefits of doing things in a different way.

LA: *Could you give us a few examples, from recent years, of what measures and what main steps the socialist government of Spain has been taking under your leadership in the field of climate policy?*

TRR: There have been many positive experiences. Some of them were not easy. When we entered into power in government in June 2018, we knew that we had to phase out coal in Spain. There was not much mining activity already, but there was some, and there were a significant number of coal-fired power plants. And of course, for the people working in these coal areas and for union people this was an important thing.

For generations, it was the most relevant way of making their livings, and, apparently, there were not so many alternatives around. We decided to go ahead trying to promote a fair transformation, a just transition, in this area – ensuring that the social policies brought the creation of new opportunities for work. And it has happened!

The other thing that was very important was the discussion on energy transition to experience a new approach to how we could produce and consume energy differently, how this could be a good reason to feel – again – proud of what we do, because there was the innovation approach, the skilling and reskilling approach, new jobs creation, the lower share of the big utilities in the electricity market, and the capacity to reduce bills thanks to self-consumption and renewable energy solutions. And this was also very important. But these are not the only cases. Energy is a very important piece of the climate and environmental policies that create positive or negative effects. But on the side of the environment, connected or not connected to climate, there are very relevant things that have an impact on people. I'm thinking about water planning and identifying what types of infrastructure and what type of water management we need.

Because climate change does already exist and creates a different distribution of water, it may mean lots of water flooding, so the flood risk changes, or it can mean severe and longer droughts, and it creates tensions around the availability of freshwater for households or for agriculture or other consumptions. We need to think in a different manner about how to be very effective and very efficient, how we can reduce water, how we can introduce additional infrastructure and how we can create a different culture dealing with water. The same for the relationship with biodiversity, ecosystems, and the social and territorial development in those areas that are directly connected to Natura 2000 sites. So, how can we ensure that having an environmental protection label for any particular site does not prevent activities and economic prosperity in the surrounding areas? And again, this requires much investment at the local level. How can we ensure that the local population and the local authorities embrace the alternatives and do feel part of the final decisions? How can we ensure that they take ownership of their own future? This is what should be tackled at the national level, but what has been very impressive in these last years is that we have experienced that the world is very small, and that a very small virus can stop whole activities all over the world and create very serious problems not only in terms of health but also in economic terms and in terms of social impact. We should take notice of the importance of counting on resilient public services to be in a position to provide care, protection and alternatives in these difficult moments. The pandemic has been quite an experience for all of us, and we know that all the different side effects that it triggered in Europe and its member states could have been solved in different ways. The pandemic and its management could have provoked the implosion of the European project, the implosion of the internal market; they could have triggered selfishness instead of solidarity. I think that thanks to the progressive thinking that was at the very beginning of this European cycle – how we can build a new social green contract with the citizens, how we could bet on the new Green Deal, how together we could make a much better response to the current challenges – we were in a better position to face these problems.

LA: *I wanted to ask you about the EU dimension. You emphasise local action in different regions of Spain, but the EU Green Deal is probably something that opened a new chapter. How do you assess, because it's about four years behind us, the aim of the Green Deal, but also its implementation, so far?*

TRR: We Europeans are pretty demanding. We always ask ourselves to do everything very well. And from that perspective, there may be people thinking that what we have done is not enough. But I think that what we have done collectively is very impressive. I think that we have rapidly made it clear that green is a European value, and that the social dimension of the green transformation is a European value. This was also a very good opportunity to support our values and how we think we can relate to other partners elsewhere in the world through multilateralism while enhancing these green social values.

The Green Deal has been quite a good representation of what all of this means. It is through regulation, but it is also through a different perspective on how to build European policies, and I think it has also been very important, and again when we had a particular crisis – and now I'm not referring to the Covid crisis, which had a very different response when compared to the previous economic financial crisis – the energy crisis. With the energy crisis, which impacted the member states differently, we all knew that we had to react in a consensual manner, acting together but with the flexibility and solidarity that the situation required. And I think that this was part of what we had been learning by doing through the previous crisis experience, but also through the anticipation and the developments that we had already promoted around the Green Deal. We knew what we had to do; we knew that it probably required additional flexibility, but we had a response on how to address these questions, avoiding energy poverty and providing what could be needed in certain countries more than in other countries.

LA: *Beyond the EU level, there is also the global one. How do you see the development of the global diplomacy of climate change in which you also have participated?*

TRR: This is something we need to invest much more in. I think that this is very important, and that Europe has the capacity to play hard in this agenda because climate diplomacy is very close to our own values. There have been very relevant moves: now everybody understands that building adaptation is not just a local issue and that there are transboundary effects connected to climate change impacts. If there are huge droughts in Africa, there could be problems with access to water by foot and these could create tensions, which, in turn, could cause migration and additional local problems, violence, for example. There are issues at play here that can easily transcend borders. So, yes, we need to work at the global scale!

And in these turbulent times, we miss governance platforms that allow us to discuss how to solve certain problems, violence and wars for instance. I think that we have the chance to count on a platform, the COP, to facilitate governance on climate as a global problem. And we need to pay attention to that, and to take care, and to build around this platform. And yes, adaptation, resilience, losses and damages being suffered in the most vulnerable countries do knock on our door, and we Europeans need to craft how we

can respond to this carefully; how we can facilitate a broader investment in a much more climate-safe future.

We need to think about how private investments could be used differently; how we could move the development banks towards something that is much more consistent in development terms, so as to be resilient, sustainable in the long run; how we can ensure that this is something that is taken increasingly into account in other capitals. I think that this perspective is much more evident right now, so the concept, the mere concept of climate justice, as something that does relate to the countries among themselves but also citizens within the same country or generations in any country, is providing a new type of approach to climate policies at the international level.

LA: *When you say there is a generational dimension, do you mean that young people are more sensitive to the question of climate change, and, if this is true, should they not have a greater say in the consultations and the development of the policy?*

TRR: I think that many young people experience, understand and have a much more real intelligence about climate change. It is something that is not new in their concerns; it is something that they have grown up with. So, yes, I believe that the way they think of this problem and the solutions they could formulate to face it are different. This is why we see the anger of some of the young activists. Once they understand the depth of the problem that we are already facing, and that will be increasingly bigger, they react with anger. They say, "Why the hell don't you react as you should?" So, yes, I think that there is a much clearer understanding.

The second point is that we need to ensure that the way young people may shape the problem or provide answers to it is taken into consideration. We are talking about something that will be part of their day-to-day lives. So, the way they think today and the way they own the problem and the solution are very important. Sometimes, we are tempted to say, "Yes, I listen to you, but then I forget about what you say". No, I think that it is very important to keep this dialogue between generations in a very committed manner. Because, in fact, we need them in the decision-making process and we need them to feel ownership of the solution.

The first element I still miss is a much clearer conversation. I mean, the general public conversation is still either quite vague or defensive; it's not so assertive in terms of proposals on how to solve the problem. I think it is important to be honest when dealing with the information and with the assessment being made by researchers and scientists. But that is only the first stage. Then we need to say, "Then what? How can we solve this?" And here young people have a very important role to play. We must not overcharge young people who need to be studying, working and making their vital decisions, and not just solving problems that have been created by others, but I think that there is great room for improvement.

LA: *Very often we highlight the importance of making the transition to a sustainable economy and society just and fair, but what do you think would need to be brought forward*

in addition to the existing ideas? Some measures to ensure that people are compensated or reskilled have already been introduced, but what could be done in addition to ensure that the transition is fair and just?

TRR: This is a concept that was used for a very long time related to coal. It was generated not in the context of climate affairs in general, but in that of the coal industry, because that sector was the first to be phased out. Then we understood that, as the transition is going to be very intense and very quick, we need to prepare workers for the new skills required by the market, and reskill and retrain those who today are working in sectors that will not last for a long time. This is when we introduce the second dimension. The transition may have a distributional impact that is unfair, and transitional costs that may be unfair. For instance, market instruments and price signals may be very effective in terms of the cost signal to make decisions on investments. However, they may not be fair for consumers because this cost could be finally paid by consumers, and those who have more difficulties when it comes to an investment in change would be paying for a longer time and a larger share of their family income, and could have a hard time thinking in the long run when facing difficulties in their own households.

There are other dimensions that relate to the physical aspects of the climate impact. The cost of the physical impacts of climate may differ for different groups, depending on their own vulnerability – physical vulnerability or social vulnerability. Hence, it may be worth opening up the conversation about how we can organise the urban agenda for the future, or how we can retrofit homes or how we can reshape infrastructure. Anyway, in the very short term, there may be transitional costs that cannot be covered by people with fewer resources.

These are some of the dimensions that need to be taken into consideration when designing future policies and updating the fiscal and tax policies, and when approaching social policies in general. I do think this is a beautiful opportunity for progressive thinkers, inspired by activist, scientist and even ethical experts, but based on a pragmatic approach.

This should be part of our agenda: How are we going to live in a hotter world? What type of social impact might that have? How can we ensure justice and fair access to essential resources and services for everyone? I think that there are dimensions that are related to justice and to this climate challenge. The reason why they concentrate on climate challenges and not on other big changes is that we cannot manage more in this short period of time. There is so much to be done in such a short time span and the transformation and the will are inevitably intense. We could cause a massive injustice if we do not consider the uneven impact that it may have on the different groups of society, depending on their own capacities to face this challenge. It is our goal for environmental justice to go hand in hand with social justice.

LA: *So, are we in a defensive struggle? I'm asking this question because 2024 is going to be a European election year, and we are witnessing some stakeholders and organisations stepping back from the commitments to climate policy, and we are observing various political tendencies that may lead to a reduction of the determination needed to carry out*

the Green Deal. So, are we now in a phase when we simply defend the policies, or is it also possible to bring forward new ambitions and further necessary measures?

TRR: To me, it would be a great mistake to stay defensive and cowardly. The ones asking to do nothing are the ones that could be accused of being responsible for the injustice that will be created by not tackling climate as it must be tackled. And I think that what is very important is for us to sound and to act in a convincing manner. We know what we have to do. We need to stress the social dimension: we could not act without a very committed social policy and social values behind us, so people are at the centre, but taking into consideration what climate means. We need to ensure that people have early access to the benefits of the change, so if we are investing in the energy transition, we need to ensure that people have early access to lower energy prices because the operational cost of renewable energy is lower than the traditional way to produce electricity. If we are talking about water security, we must make sure that water is accessible and ensured everywhere. When we are talking about the urban agenda and healthy cities, we must start in popular neighbourhoods to ensure that those who have poorer houses and higher bills in relative terms because their houses are badly insulated or live long distances from the centre of the city, can count on green neighbourhoods and well-insulated houses.

We need to build something that not only inspires hope and a willingness to do more, but recognises that this solidarity and social justice are very much connected to the green agenda.