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The Progressive Post

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DOSSIER

The art of progressive governance in turbulent times

DOSSIER

Women in politics: beyond representation

Laura Boldrini

Thomas Dermine

Caroline Gennez

Nicolas Schmit

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The Progressive Post

The Progressive Post is the political magazine of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). It gathers renowned thinkers, experts and activists from the world of politics, academia and civil society, provides critical analysis of policies, and clarifies options and opportunities for decision-makers.

Our ambition is to undertake intellectual reflection and debate for the benefit of the progressive movement, and to promote the founding principles of the European Union: freedom, equality, solidarity, democracy, human dignity, as well as respect of human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.

With a focus on EU politics, our crucial interest is the state and future of Social Democracy. We offer a platform (in print and online) for finding progressive answers to climate change, uneven development and social inequality in the European as well as global context. We invite our readers to explore with us the contradictions of our time and our authors to put forward arguments for peace, sustainability and social justice.

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by Hedwig Giusto

2024 will be an exceptional electoral year: more than 2 billion people will go to the polls across 50 countries, including in the US (where the risk of the return of Donald Trump to the White House is high), the UK, India and of course the European Union, where about 400 million European citizens will be called to cast their vote to elect the new members of the European Parliament. With the rise of far-right and Eurosceptic parties all over Europe, we might witness a shift to the right. Depending on how big this shift will be, it could reinforce the changes that have occurred on the European political landscape over recent decades (including the mainstream right's tendency to align with the populist and illiberal right). It could also significantly change the trajectory of many European policies, including foreign policy.

With two months still to go before the election, however, the game is not over. We do know that, against all odds, polls may hold some surprises (as the election in Spain showed last July). For European Progressives, now is therefore the time to roll up their sleeves and play their best cards, which, in an era of shrinking welfare states, increased inequalities and rising costs of living, should include a strong return to social policies, and a boost to European social integration as well as to the process that started in Porto in 2017.

If we want the green and digital transitions to be fair, as EU Commissioner Nicolas Schmit writes in his article, we need to strengthen the social dimension. And Progressive forces are the only ones who can drive the change in this direction. That is why the **Special Coverage** of this pre-electoral issue, *The future is social*, highlights how the next elections will decide what kind of Europe we will shape for the future.

The transformative role that Progressives can play in the midst of the multiple crises we are now facing is also at the core of the first **Dossier** *The art of progressive governance in turbulent times*. Its authors remind us of how European Social Democratic governments successfully managed the Covid-19 crisis and of how European Progressive forces made key contributions to shaping European recovery. Sticking to our principles and promoting solidarity – at the European as well as the international level – must always be the beacon of Progressives' actions if we want to deliver solutions to people's problems and concerns.

The increasing strength of the radical right could also have an impact on the course of the war in Ukraine and, in particular, the support of the EU (and US) for the Ukrainians' fight against the Russian invader. The **Focus on Ukraine: two years of full-scale war** underlines this risk and the implications that the conflict is having on the Ukrainian people's difficult path to democracy.

Finally, ahead of this new electoral cycle, we are taking the opportunity to reflect on the role of women in politics, in institutions and, in particular, in the European Parliament. For some, the women's emancipation process has already been completed. We reject this narrative and denounce the continuous danger of backsliding. In the second **Dossier** *Women in politics: beyond representation*, we look at the crucial contribution that women in the European Parliament have made to key decisions that truly advance women's emancipation. We also look at the personal risks that women engaged in politics face and at the 'misappropriation', exploitation and distortion of women's rights and feminist issues by far-right parties and politicians for their own political gains.

Editorial



Hedwig Giusto,
Editor-in-chief



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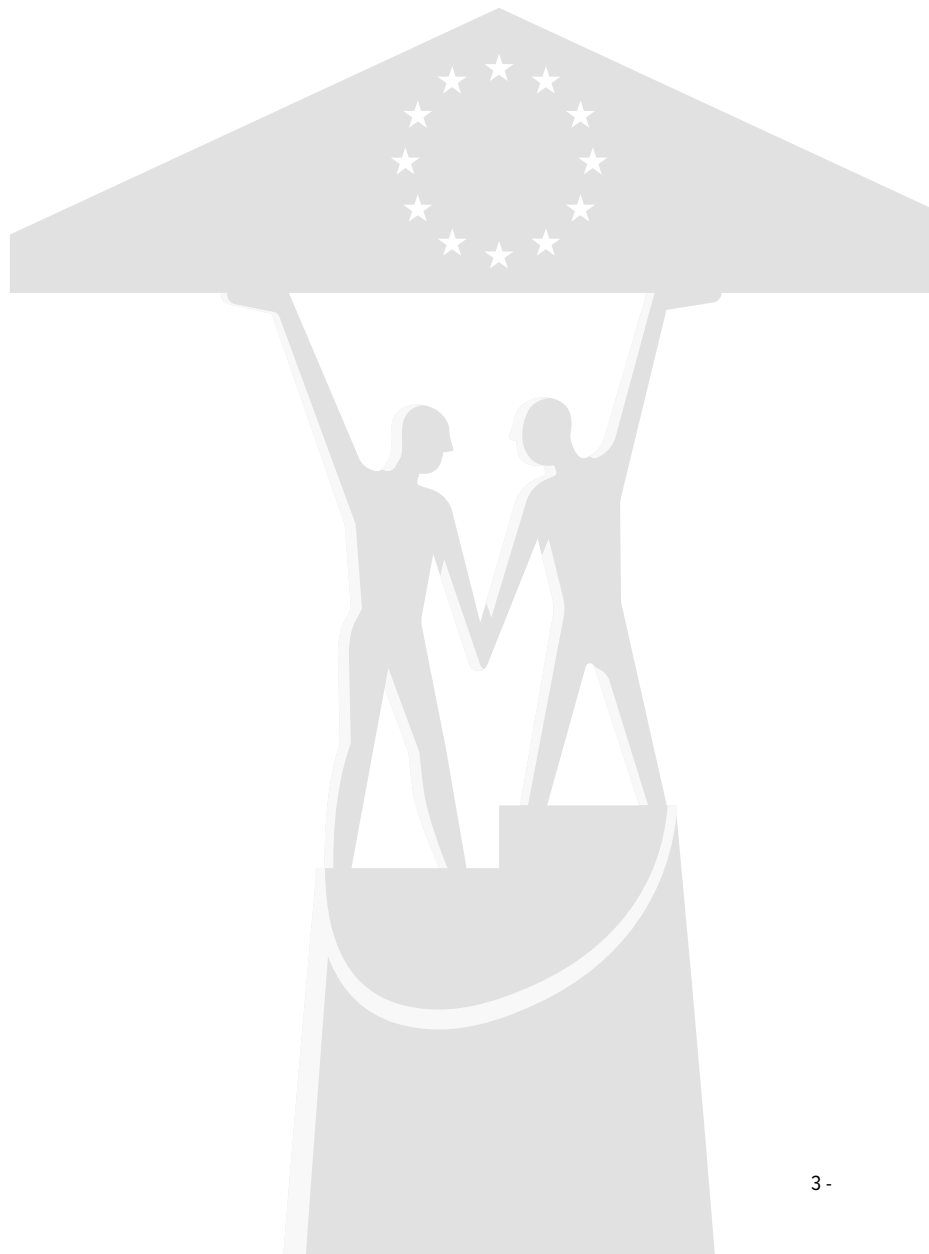
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PROGRESSIVE YEARBOOK 2024



LOOKING BACK TO LOOK AHEAD

In its fifth edition, FEPS Progressive Yearbook invites you to explore and reflect on the **most significant developments of the previous year** and imagines what the future has in store for 2024.

Within this latest volume, we prepare ourselves for a **transformative year marked by pivotal elections**. While casting a spotlight on the European Parliament elections, our attention extends to the broader political landscape within the EU, which is on the verge of transformation, shaping the Europe ahead.

This yearly edition counts on **renowned authors'** contributions, including academics, politicians, and civil society representatives.





CURRENT AFFAIRS



Jacques Delors and a new European impulse

by Maria João Rodrigues

What would Jacques Delors say today about the way forward for Europe? When a major political figure is no longer with us, this question comes up. Of course, there can be no definitive answer, but the debate it generates can be very relevant. Any attempt to answer it must start by identifying the great impulses that redefined the direction of the European project, of which Delors was an architect and protagonist.

Without any pretence of enunciating an authentic interpretation, I am participating in this debate as someone who was in direct dialogue with him for 20 years.

The first big push towards change came in the 1980s with the Single European Market, the Single European Act amending the Treaty of Rome, the enlargement to the South and the cohesion policy. The second one came in the 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the consequent need to enlarge to the East and deepen the European construction with the establishment of the Economic and Monetary Union and European citizenship, enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty in 1993.

These two great impulses have some common features. First, they both responded to a major change in the international context: the American competitive challenge and the fall of the dictatorships in Southern Europe in the first case; and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the following European unification in the second. A second common feature was the need to accompany enlargement with the deepening of European integration to avoid future paralysis: in the first case, this was done by introducing qualified

majority voting with the Single Act; in the second, the Maastricht Treaty introduced the co-decision procedure which gave legislative authority to the European Parliament. A third common feature was the concern to safeguard internal European cohesion, which was done by strengthening the cohesion instruments during the first push; by enshrining the European employment strategy in the second one, and always promoting the dialogue with social partners to find better solutions.

► *I remember well the straightforwardness with which he assessed failures, but also the determination with which he sought to overcome them with new solutions.*

The method used by Delors to prepare, influence or articulate all these decisions involved a remarkable combination of ingredients: listening to a great diversity

of groups and opinions; rigorous analysis of the facts; permanent work with teams; pedagogical and never demagogic communication; a strong ethical and social sense.

And, on top of all this, an imagination and ambition looking far and wide into the future, and the ability to mobilise a wide range of forces. We know how difficult it is to practise this method in today's governance systems, but it is good to remember and not give up.

It was with this Delors that I dealt for years. I had the privilege of consulting him when I was part of the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union in 2000, during which it was possible to adopt the first European strategy for development, employment and social cohesion, even though, following Delors' launch of this ambitious new idea in his White Paper, it had been blocked for a long time. I dealt with him again during the Portuguese Presidency in 2007, when the Treaty of Lisbon was adopted after the Constitutional Treaty was rejected by a referendum in France.

I remember well his straightforwardness in assessing failures but also the determination with which he sought to overcome them with new solutions.



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Our last contact was during the dramatic period of the eurozone crisis, when his physical presence was reduced, but not his personal one. His commitment to finding more advanced forms of European solidarity remained intact, even later, during the pandemic, when it was finally possible to create a budgetary instrument financed by the issuance of European debt.

► *A big new enlargement to East and South-East Europe has become a political and moral imperative. But this major undertaking can only be achieved if it is combined with a new deepening of the European project.*

What would Delors say of the situation we are experiencing in Europe today?

We are once again living through a dramatic change in the international context, with the emergence of a multipolar world, the strategic

rivalry between the US and China, and the urgency to reform global governance. We have wars in the European neighbourhood, notably in Palestine, and on European territory, with the invasion of Ukraine by Putin's Russia. The EU should position itself as a global actor with its own values, able to build bridges across the world and push for reformed multilateralism.

A big new enlargement to East and South-East Europe has become a political and moral imperative. But this major undertaking can only be achieved if it is combined with a new deepening of the European project, giving the EU the capacity to decide democratically and more swiftly to act and preserve its strategic autonomy, to invest in and shape the ecological and digital transitions, and to preserve its cohesion by applying the European pillar of social rights to all European citizens.

Could there be a functional equivalent of the Schengen agreement to increase mobility or of the Erasmus programme to open up education possibilities – both of them Delors' initiatives to create a sense of common European belonging? A more fundamental discussion on a theme where Delors excelled

– the very theory of European integration – is also needed, exploring *sui generis* paths, beyond simplistic views on federalism.

Given all this and the upcoming European elections, 2024 will call for historic decisions in which Delors, as a progressive source of inspiration, should remain a central reference. Will this be the case?



Maria João Rodrigues,
FEPS President



Europe's revamp is underway

by László Andor

After two years of war in Ukraine, several geopolitical consequences of Vladimir Putin's fatal decision to commit aggression against a neighbouring country are becoming clear. The expansion of NATO in the Baltic region and the enlargement of the BRICS group are certainly among the most important ones which will remain with us. A rather silent but definitely creative and perhaps even more significant fallout in the long run has been the creation of the European Political Community (EPC).

Before it could be decided whether it was a bird or a plane, the EPC had organised three summits in 2022 and 2023 (in Prague, Chişinău and Granada). In itself, this is a sign of viability, and in all likelihood this format will continue. The EPC is not a community of the same values – it actually allows leaders within the same geography to discuss important issues despite entertaining different values and ideas. It is a loose format based on the lowest common denominator that allows leaders of European countries to discuss issues of common interest on a biannual basis. Informality is key, and according to the first few gatherings, avoiding the definition of deliverables ex ante seems the right approach. Even without concrete mandates, the EPC can potentially address issues where the EU is not active or not effective.

At the same time, it remains true that the relationship between the EPC and enlargement is somewhat ambiguous. Is the EPC an enabler or a substitute for the enlargement of the EU as such? Those who believe that EU

enlargement can be (and will be) fast, do not expect much from the EPC, and those who are sceptical about fast enlargement attribute greater potential to the EPC.

► *Associated membership is the most important new proposal in the Franco-German Report, with a not-so-hidden purpose to offer a status that could fit countries as diverse as the UK, Ukraine and Iceland if they wish.*

In June 2022, the same European Council agreed both to launch the EPC and to turn Ukraine and Moldova into candidates for EU membership. Since then, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has become a

champion of fast-track EU enlargement to the East, perhaps another 'big bang'. **For many, however, and even among the supporters of such an enlargement, it is obvious that it can only happen after a reform of the EU itself, most likely one that would necessitate a change of the EU Treaty. The bigger the bang, the more necessary Treaty change becomes.**

To solve the related dilemmas and chart a way forward, an expert group was established a year ago at the request of the European affairs ministers of France and Germany. The 'intelligent dozen' delivered their report *Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century* in September 2023. The Franco-German Report (or FGR) presented a Europe of concentric circles, effectively suggesting that not all European countries can or should be integrated into the same EU in the same way. And movement should not only be possible from the periphery towards the most tightly integrated core, but from the centre to the periphery as well.

The Franco-German Report would allow a deeper integration of the euro area, and it defines the possible relationship between the EU and a ring of associated members, while the EPC would represent the widest ring, though without any form of institutionalisation. By declaring the euro area as a separate level of integration, the FGR authors propose to normalise what has so far been an anomaly: the non-accession to the euro area of countries that had committed to the introduction of the single currency when they joined the EU – a group currently including Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Sweden.

The FGR authors do not assume tabula rasa and do not want to invent things that would be totally disconnected from the current status quo. The EPC already exists, and so does the euro area. The EU also has association agreements, but associated membership does not yet exist. **Associated membership is therefore the most important new proposal in the FGR, with a not-so-hidden purpose to offer a status that could fit countries as diverse as the UK, Ukraine and Iceland if they wish.**

The introduction of the concept of associated membership is a sign of the understanding that fresh thinking is needed about the 'grey zones' located between the current EU and its strategic rivals in the wake of the Russian aggression. It is also a sign of the understanding that EU enlargement as such cannot solve all the related problems, certainly in the short run. According to the FGR authors, associated membership would mean participation in the internal market and requires the rule of law, but without full engagement in all EU policies and structures. Associated members would still remain rule-takers instead of becoming rule-makers.

However, **even if association as a concept gains traction in the coming years, defining what guides EU enlargement in the future is not a task for the distant future, but for right now**, perhaps for the upcoming European Parliament election debates. For the authors of the FGR, the Copenhagen criteria – defining whether a country is eligible to join the EU – are alive and well, and they have to be applied rigorously. However, in June 2022, when EU candidate status was awarded to Ukraine and Moldova, the pendulum swung towards geopolitical considerations.

The recent enlargement report of the Commission was called 'schizophrenic' by some experts exactly because of the ambivalence the decision created.

► *Even if association as a concept gains traction in the coming years, defining what guides EU enlargement in the future is not a task for the distant future, but for right now.*

The EU may decide to replace the Copenhagen criteria with something else. However, the approach of EU enlargement being the only policy to solve all the problems of the EU's neighbourhood will most likely prove unsustainable in the coming years. **Enlargement decisions always combine a merit-based approach with geopolitics, but it needs to be avoided that one approach is applied to one region and another approach to another region.** And it is even more important that leaders avoid creating false hopes which can only sow the seeds of future controversies and undermine the credibility of the EU as a result.



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László Andor,
FEPS Secretary General



A just transition in crisis mode

by Matthias Ecke

How do we manage to maintain a focus on long-term goals in a time of crises? When we look back, we see that crises have not broken Europe. On the contrary, they have made Europe grow closer together, identify new common tasks and acquire new competences.

Today the EU goes through multiple crises. The aftermath of the pandemic, the Russian war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis that was caused by high inflation all hit a Europe with an ageing demographic, a shortage of skilled workers and of labour in general. And against this backdrop, the Union has to master the task of the century: the industrial transition towards a climate-neutral economy while at the same time achieving strategic autonomy and greater sovereignty in the supply of energy and critical raw materials.

And, indeed, it does not all look so bright.

So, how can the EU manage the transition to a climate-neutral economy amidst these multiple crises? How can it further promote the cohesion of its regions and prevent them from drifting apart? I think this can only succeed if cohesion policy – our only long-term investment instrument – does much more in the future than simply redistribute funds. Today, the EU must promote the cohesion and growth of its regions under entirely new conditions.

COHESION POLICY AS AN ALL-ROUNDER TO COMBAT THE CRISES

Cohesion policy has proven to be an all-rounder, always ready to take up new tasks. Since 2020 we have therefore gained several new instruments deriving from cohesion funds. These instruments include the Corona Response Investment Initiative (CRII), and the follow-up CRII+, in response to the pandemic, and the Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE) and the Flexible Assistance for Territories (FAST-CARE) to support member states and regions in receiving Ukrainian refugees. **The RePowerEU programme was also topped up with cohesion funds in response to the high energy prices, and the Act to Support Ammunition Production (ASAP) will use cohesion funds as well.** Currently, we are working on the Net Zero Industry Act (NZIA) and the Strategic Platform for Europe (STEP) to boost the settlement of green industries in Europe – and here too, cohesion funds will be used.

While all these newly created instruments are necessary and relevant, it is also the case that new tasks require new resources.

It seems that using cohesion funds for every emerging crisis has become a habit – but we ultimately have to fear that this practice will counter cohesion objectives in the long term. 'New money for new tasks' is a demand we have repeatedly made in the European Parliament. Yet all these major tasks are faced by austerity-driven member states and a hesitant little courageous European Commission. The Sovereignty Fund that was once promised by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is now no longer on the agenda. Instead, money is being shifted around and ad hoc instruments are created.

► *While all these newly created instruments are necessary and relevant, it is also the case that new tasks require new resources.*



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The conditions under which we are thinking about the future of cohesion policy are therefore not very favourable. **More than ever, cohesion policy must provide its own response to the significant challenges, and it must do this while acting in permanent crisis mode.** I believe that cohesion policy can play a crucial role in meeting these challenges. The first lesson is that cohesion policy must change in order to remain relevant.

► *More than ever, cohesion policy must provide its own response to the significant challenges, and it must do this while acting in permanent crisis mode.*

To keep the long-term objectives of cohesion policy in focus – namely the cohesion of regions and the harmonisation of living conditions – cohesion policy must become a transformative tool that captures the profound

structural change that EU regions are facing. Everyone should have the same opportunities to realise their potential, regardless of where they live in the EU. No one should feel forced to leave their region because public services have been cut off or structural change has left nothing but wasteland. Europe's regions are diverse and differently equipped to deal with the twin green and digital transition. A territorially sensitive cohesion policy must recognise these differences.

I experienced the structural change in eastern Germany after the country's reunification, and today we can see where this change succeeded and where it did not. We can also see this in people's voting behaviour, manifested in disillusionment with the political centre.

| A JUST TRANSITION

Cohesion policy makes Europe tangible on the ground. It is a visible expression of the EU

growing together and, if used wisely, it can also contribute to common growth because while the transition to a climate-neutral economy will have a significant effect on employment and value chains, it also offers many opportunities through newly emerging climate-neutral sectors. **The concept of a 'just transition' is key to making the transition to climate neutrality a joint success. This concept must permeate all aspects of the transition so that distributional effects, such as the increase in regional inequalities, can be addressed through cohesion policy.**

With this in mind, I would like to make four recommendations:

1) We should understand regions and local authorities as 'transition agents'. They are the ones that carry out the transition to climate neutrality. The principle of shared management must therefore be maintained. A centralised instrument such as the Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF) runs counter to the cohesion policy objectives.



2) We should reduce bureaucracy in the administration of funds. Currently, beneficiaries can only start with their programming once the umbrella regulation, the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR), has been adopted. However, this is dependent on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) negotiations – and delays are therefore inevitable. At the European Parliament, we have proposed separating the negotiations on cohesion programmes from those on the budget. Europe's regions need to know they can rely on funding for their plans, and they then need time to be able to adapt to these plans. Yet they are currently struggling with investment backlogs and staff shortages, particularly in the structurally weaker regions, where cohesion funds are most needed.

3) We should learn some lessons from the RRF. Cohesion funds must therefore not flow to member states that violate the EU's fundamental principles. With the cohesion funds, the EU has an important instrument in its hands to enforce the rule of law, human rights and European values. The Commission should make even greater use of the leverage of cohesion funds to protect the EU budget against misuse by authoritarian governments.

4) We should expand and increase the Just Transition Fund (JTF) while integrating it entirely into the MFF. The green and digital transitions affect industrialised regions in particular. All regions should be eligible for the structural and investment funds from cohesion policy. GDP remains an important indicator, but more developed regions, too, face major challenges. Cohesion policy should therefore ensure that these regions do not stagnate or even fall behind. The JTF has great potential to fulfil this task, provided it is reformed to include more industries and support all regions in the industrial transition.

Cohesion policy is not a panacea. Yet I am convinced that it can be a transformative instrument for a just transition because it has the potential to act as a complementary policy to the EU's quest for the Green Deal goals and strategic autonomy. The current tasks must therefore be reflected in the EU's budget in order to be able to achieve a socially just and successful transition that will make Europe a model for tackling the challenges of the century.

► *The concept of a 'just transition' is key to making the transition to climate neutrality a joint success. This concept must permeate all aspects of the transition so that distributional effects, such as the increase in regional inequalities, can be addressed through cohesion policy.*

*Matthias Ecke,
Member of the
European Parliament*



European agriculture: it's about farmers' income, stupid!

by Isilda Gomes

On 6 February, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the withdrawal of the Commission's proposal to reduce the use and risk of pesticides. This unilateral decision undermines an essential part of the implementation of the European Green Deal. By the same token, French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal suspended the so-called 'Ecophyto plan', which aimed at reducing the use and risk of pesticides, only to go back to taxing off-road diesel for farmers.

Meanwhile, in both Budapest and Brussels, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán poses 'by the side of the people' on a tractor or among the protesters, in populist impulses against other European leaders. His Italian counterpart, Giorgia Meloni, hailed von der Leyen's decision on pesticides as a "victory which is also the victory of our government". At the same time, Italy has just obtained increased aid for its agriculture.

"Leave the farmers alone", as Aurore Berger, the French minister for equality between women and men, said, seems to be the mantra of European conservative and populist leaders following the farmers' protests in Europe. All these leaders, and the MEPs from their parties, have approved the latest reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the Council and the European Parliament. However, although blaming Europe for all agricultural dysfunctions is still very convenient, it will not solve the real problems of European agriculture.

For us, European Socialists, back-peddalling on plans that were carefully thought out and

agreed upon a long time ago in order to reduce our dependence on polluting agriculture is not the solution. It jeopardises the health of our farmers, our consumers and our planet. As highlighted by Iratxe García, President of the S&D Group in the European Parliament, "the agricultural sector needs the European Union as much as our Union needs sustainable agriculture".

► *The European agricultural crisis cannot be resolved sustainably if we do not drastically reduce social inequalities and stark injustices within the agricultural economic model.*

Overcoming the agricultural crisis must be done with Europe, with a fair Green Deal, with a reform of the CAP, as well as with initiatives to manage food supply chains better

and avoid sectoral monopolies and speculation on food commodities. Overcoming the agricultural crisis cannot be achieved by downgrading European standards, especially since the crisis is, above all, a crisis of agricultural income.

For this reason, at the European Committee of the Regions, we make three key recommendations:

First of all, **we believe that the European agricultural crisis cannot be resolved sustainably if we do not drastically reduce social inequalities and stark injustices within the agricultural economic model.** We therefore recommend rebalancing the direct payments of the CAP by imposing redistributive payments favourable to small and medium-sized holdings and by capping payments to larger farms, as is already done by eight member states. In 2019, a total of 80 per cent of direct payments were made to 20 per cent of large agricultural enterprises. These constant income inequalities are unacceptable. In addition, after a transitional period,



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aid per hectare must also give way to aid based on the labour intensity of farms and compliance with environmental and social conditions linked to the European Green Deal.

Secondly, **we must regulate unbridled international competition and end big multinational speculation on the international food market.** Food is not a product like others. European food sovereignty is a common good. And farmers need protection. We therefore recommend re-establishing market regulation mechanisms and regulatory protections to ensure that all food producers in the world shift towards a more sustainable agriculture. **Europe cannot ask farmers to make efforts in terms of environmental impact or public health, and at the same time allow the importation into Europe of products that do not meet our standards.** We need to bring coherence to this policy. The CAP must no longer make contradictory demands for farmers!

Thirdly, climate change is here. It is irreversible, and farmers are on the front line enduring its effects. In the context of the movement of angry farmers, some stakeholders are pushing to bring down all so-called 'barriers to growth' by calling for unlimited access to water and diesel, an unbridled use of pesticides, an end to the limits on herd size, no size specifications for agricultural buildings and so on. However, any increase in production will only aggravate the problem of farmers' income because it will primarily benefit agribusiness. **Instead, we recommend a regionalisation of the aid for greening, the second pillar of the CAP. This will enable us to support farmers by significantly reducing their costs, thus increasing their incomes.** Moreover, with the substantial increase in aid for the installation of young farmers on new farms, we would have a more sustainable model of agriculture with little or no loss of production volume at the European level.

These are the points that Ursula Von der Leyen, Viktor Orbán and Emmanuel Macron should have the courage to defend during the next negotiations on the future Common Agricultural Policy. It would end the current agricultural status quo, which just depopulates our rural areas, devalues the essential work of our farmers, nourishes discontent and destroys our planet. As European Socialists, these are the changes we are fighting for.

*Isilda Gomes,
Mayor of Portimão
(PES/Portugal), Chair of the
Commission for Natural
Resources at the European
Committee of the Regions*



Food prices are high. Why are farmers angry?

by Anna Kolesnichenko

During the last weeks and months, farmers' protests have swept Brussels, blocking the European district and crashing Place du Luxembourg in front of the European Parliament. The protests were also happening in other countries: France, Italy, Germany and earlier in the Netherlands. The range of farmers' complaints is wide: red tape from the EU and governments, the EU Green Deal, high fuel and fertiliser prices and competition from cheap imports. Many say they are being squeezed, as they struggle to pass the input cost increases on to their customers – food manufacturers and retailers – amid depressed wholesale prices. The European Commission has proposed measures to reduce the administrative burden. Though very welcome, they are clearly not enough.

There is an obvious contradiction in the situation: how come farmers are squeezed while food prices have increased so much? The food value chain is extremely distorted. The whole value chain, including food processing, trading, shipping, storage and financing is highly concentrated. For example, four companies, known as ABCD – Archer-Daniels-Midland (ADM), Bunge, Cargill and Dreyfus – control 70-90 per cent of the world grain market. In 2021-2022 these companies made stellar profits (see the Figure).

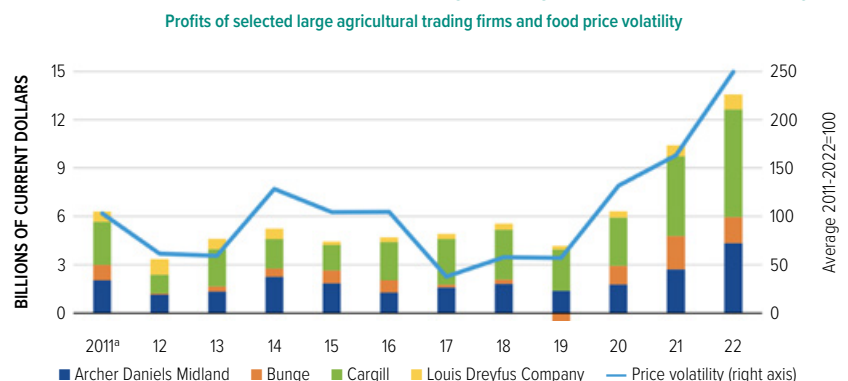
On top of controlling the food supply chain, these companies engage in speculation on the food commodity markets, without being regulated.

Most of them conduct their food trading activities in Switzerland, where they enjoy a lax tax regime. Notably, in Europe, most food commodity derivatives trading (95 per cent) takes place over the counter, that is, almost unregulated.

Then there is the global fertiliser market, which is also highly concentrated and controlled by a handful of companies. For instance, just four companies control 33 per cent of all nitrogen fertiliser production. Their profits also shot up in 2021-2022, driving the profit margins to a massive 36 per cent in 2022.

► *Most of the companies in the grain market conduct their food trading activities in Switzerland, where they enjoy a lax tax regime.*

Profits of the 'ABCD' food companies surge during periods of price volatility





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This is where all the 'upside' of food price inflation ended up. **Farmers likely benefited from the price surge initially, when wholesale commodity prices shot up, but their gain was limited due to high energy and fertiliser costs.** Now that the wholesale food prices have been falling for almost a year, farmers find themselves particularly squeezed.

- *Farmers likely benefited from the price surge initially, when wholesale commodity prices shot up, but their gain was limited due to high energy and fertiliser costs.*

To mend the situation, a serious reform of the food sector is needed. **The immediate first step is to limit the speculation in the food commodity markets.** Food commodity price volatility cannot be totally avoided, as shocks happen because of adverse natural conditions. The 2021-2022 food price shock was triggered by high energy prices, the war in Ukraine and adverse weather conditions in Europe.

But these factors do not explain the wild fluctuations in wholesale prices. As the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) shows in its 2023 TDR report, there was a clear link to commodity speculation. This problem is not new, and after the food price shock in 2008, some measures have been taken to regulate commodity trading, but obviously not enough. There is no lack of good proposals (for example, from the European Economic and Social Committee, EESC) on how to protect food prices from speculative attacks, including the prohibition for index funds to invest in food commodities, the introduction of a financial transaction tax on operations with commodity derivatives, and others. **To smooth the shocks, state strategic reserves in basic foods need to be created or increased.**

The second major stream of work must deal with the de-monopolisation of the food supply chain. This means stricter merger control, especially for vertical integration. Price-gouging practices must be punished. The state needs to facilitate new entrants in the whole value chain – in fertilisers, processing and shipping. The challenge with fighting monopolisation in the food value chain is that the companies operating in it are international. Trying to break

their monopoly power at a single-state level will have only limited success. Much more can be done at the EU level, using its competition policy. Ultimately, however, there is a need for a global mechanism to enforce competition.

Third, the whole concept of industrial agriculture needs to be rethought. The industrial mode of agricultural production, with its focus on monocultures, makes it more vulnerable to adverse weather events, weeds and pests. This makes agriculture energy-intensive and dependent on pesticides, not to mention the massive harm it does to the environment and human health. The recommendation to move away from this mode of food production is also not new, and many alternative farms have been pursuing more natural ways of production. The current crisis points to the need to speed up this transition.

As a very basic first step, the transparency of food prices and of the value added all along the value chain needs to be increased, especially for food processing companies. The Eurostat statistics on profits also need to be enhanced: they are published once per year and with a huge delay – as of February 2024, its most recent data on corporate profits was for 2022, uploaded in November 2023.

Coming back to the farmers, their frustration is being used by all sorts of political actors who tell them that it is 'Brussels and the Green Deal' that must be blamed for their plight. Clearly, Brussels has work to do – not curbing the Green Deal, but getting serious about fighting speculation and monopolistic practices in the food value chain.



Anna Kolesnichenko,
FEPS Policy Analyst on Economy



SPECIAL COVERAGE

THE FUTURE IS SOCIAL

European integration has long been skewed towards the economy. Proposals for parallel social integration have been around for many years but only really gained momentum with the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017.

In this electoral year, the EPSR's 20 principles – on equal opportunities, access to the labour market, fair working conditions, social poverty and inclusion – should prompt European institutions and member states not to forget the social dimension of the European integration process. And against the backdrop of public anger and rapidly advancing far-right movements, these 20 principles act as a clear reminder to Progressives that they must put the Pillar of Social Rights high on their electoral agenda.

In this dossier, we highlight the importance of the EU's social rights, for every European citizen. These rights need to form the centrepiece of the upcoming electoral campaign – because ultimately the next European elections will be about the kind of European society we want for the future.



Emboldening the EU's social dimension

by Nicolas Schmit

Jacques Delors passed away recently. He was one of the main architects of our Union, and he left us a strong legacy: there will be no well-functioning internal market, nor a robust monetary Union, without solidarity and without economic and social cohesion. He always regretted that the monetary Union lacked an economic and a sufficiently strong social dimension.

Building on some progress made in the past, and particularly on the foundations of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the current European Commission – of which I am the Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights – has taken many important steps in pushing the social agenda forward. These steps have been inspired notably by the Progressives and Socialists' election programme, and they have also marked a break with the policies that characterised the European Union during the difficult times of the financial crisis. The considerable transitions – green and digital – that are currently taking place cannot succeed without integrating a strong social dimension.

The EU needs to be in the driving seat to ensure that the green transition is a fair transition, where today's costs and tomorrow's benefits are distributed evenly. We need to invest heavily in people's digital skills so we can all make the most of technology and artificial intelligence in our professional and personal lives, and thus avoid further inequalities from emerging.

The Covid-19 pandemic showed the need to strengthen Europe's health policy. It also confirmed the importance of strong and

well-equipped health systems for the resilience of our societies. Health and care work must be better valued by providing higher wages and improved working conditions.

One of the steps the current Commission has taken to push the social agenda forward is to develop a new approach to wage and employment policies. First, the *Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages* is a major achievement that also promotes collective bargaining. **It is unacceptable that people who are in full-time work cannot make ends meet.** We need to recognise the value of work, and the value of the workers doing their jobs. More inclusive labour markets should reduce job precariousness, which is particularly affecting young people.

Second, the Commission has launched several new initiatives to help shift attitudes towards lifelong learning, because more than three quarters of EU companies claim they have difficulty finding workers with the necessary skills. Reskilling and upskilling policies are therefore now at the top of most governments' agendas – and this is thanks in part to the impetus of the European Year of Skills. These policies are supported by the European Skills Agenda.

Another step the current Commission has taken to push the social agenda forward is the creation of the €100 billion SURE programme, which has allowed member states to safeguard millions of jobs and protect small and medium-sized enterprises. SURE is a real success story and a pioneering measure, representing the first EU social bonds. We should now build on this positive experience and move towards a new instrument to be used in possible future crises affecting the labour market, factoring in the impact of the ongoing transition on the world of work.

A further step the current Commission has taken to push the social agenda forward is the creation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). This has not only contributed to a stronger and swifter recovery from the pandemic but, by supporting investments and reforms that aim at inclusive and sustainable growth and upward convergence, it has also prevented the internal market from breaking up and has accelerated investment in the green and digital transitions. Around a third of the RRF's €750 billion has been allocated to social investments by the member states. **The economic and social impact of the pandemic has therefore led to a major shift towards stronger European solidarity.**

Thanks to a clear political commitment from the EU institutions and the member states in response to the multiple crises of the last two decades, the ideas Delors presented in his *White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness, Employment* in 1993 have now seen some kind of implementation.

In this regard, the 2021 Porto Social Summit was an important event for the current Commission and for me personally. Thanks to the support of Portugal's then Prime Minister Antonio Costa, the Action Plan for the Pillar of Social Rights was endorsed at this summit, and three major social targets to be achieved by 2030 were approved:

- an employment rate of at least 78 per cent;
- 60 per cent of the workforce benefitting from at least one training opportunity per year;
- a reduction of at least 15 million in the number of people at risk of poverty, including at least 5 million children.

Porto represented a paradigm shift for the social dimension of the EU because it set the objective of building a stronger Social Europe in the context of the ongoing green and digital transitions. At the same time, it set out a clear roadmap for the direction of travel of social and employment policies, together with green, digital, industrial and economic policies.

The EU member states have all set their own national targets to help meet these EU-level targets. Progress now needs to be assessed, and targets may have to be adapted and enriched.

Fighting poverty must become one of the major priorities for the next mandate of the European Commission as our societies risk becoming more divided and more unequal.

The adoption of the European Child Guarantee represents an important achievement in the fight against inequality and social exclusion, as does the adoption of the *Recommendation on Adequate Minimum Income*, and of the European Platform for Combatting Homelessness. Investing in our welfare system is key not



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only to fighting for social progress but also to enhancing the resilience and competitiveness of the EU model in a very challenging international environment.

With an eye to the future, addressing the big changes in the world of work needs to be high on the agenda. Artificial intelligence is a central aspect on which the EU should set the right standards in the sense of a human-centred approach. The final adoption of the Platform Directive is of the utmost importance if we want to protect social and labour rights. **Of the 28 million people believed to be doing platform work, 5.5 million may have been misclassified as self-employed while, in reality, they are workers.** This means they could be missing out on advantages such as minimum wages, parental leave and sickness benefits.

The current Commission has also made important progress in health and safety at work, notably by setting new lower exposure limits for asbestos and other hazardous substances. In the future, more attention should be given to psycho-social diseases and the mental health of workers, an area dramatically gaining in significance.

As we have seen recently in different sectors like road transport, there is a need to strengthen fair mobility. It is, therefore, indispensable to enlarge the competencies of the European Labour Authority. We also need to promote the democratisation of the workplace. The incumbent Commission has constantly promoted social dialogue and collective bargaining. The

proposal for stronger European Works Councils is another important step which needs to be followed by new initiatives. Change can often be disruptive, but the existence of European Works Councils allows workers to be included in the decision-making process when it comes to changes such as restructuring or relocation.

The Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU has set clear social objectives for the summit in La Hulpe, which will be held in April. This will be the occasion to assess, consolidate and launch new avenues for implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. Our objective is to provide concrete answers to our citizens' needs, aiming at social progress and shared prosperity.

This will be an important message to European citizens a few weeks before the European elections. **Populists do not offer solutions to citizens' concerns. Populists only stoke citizens' fears. We need to strengthen Social Europe to show citizens that we care about their concerns.** The European elections will ultimately be about the kind of European society we want. We must defend our democratic rights, and fight for a society of equality, without discrimination.



Nicolas Schmit,
European Commissioner for
Jobs and Social Rights



A Belgian presidency focused on social anchoring and strategic investment

by Thomas Dermine

In an era of growing social uncertainties, global competition, and challenges in climate adaptation and mitigation, a progressive European Union must assert itself on the world stage and vigorously uphold its distinctive social model. The revival of strategic investment and the consolidation of social Europe is the overarching theme of Belgium's ongoing presidency of the Council of the European Union.

In the realm of employment and social policy, Belgium's presidency is committed to shaping an ambitious and future-oriented agenda. **Leveraging the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) is vital for establishing fair conditions for minimum social rights within the EU.**

The aim is to enhance job quality and ensure accessible social protection for all workers and self-employed individuals. This is crucial, especially as potential EU enlargements could widen economic development gaps within the Union.

Belgium will lead discussions on fully integrating the EPSR into the framework of European economic governance, thus reinforcing social equity. This aligns with Belgium's proposal for a social convergence framework within the European Semester, reflecting a broader intent to broaden the scope of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council into the realm of economic governance, which have been materialised through the 'jumbo' combined Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs as well as Economic and Financial Affairs Council on 12 March 2024.

Additionally, a European Charter of Rights could empower workplace democracy and collective negotiations. A significant milestone during the Belgian presidency in this domain will be the Social Summit in La Hulpe on 15 and 16 April.

► *Leveraging the European Pillar of Social Rights is vital for establishing fair conditions for minimum social rights within the EU.*

To address health crises, **the EU must fortify the European Health Union, securing healthcare personnel, bolstering resilience and ensuring swift access to quality, affordable and eco-friendly medicines.** Belgium calls for EU support in maintaining the availability of healthcare personnel amid demographic, social and technological shifts.

At the same time, Belgium chairs discussions on the Union's role in supporting investment to address future challenges. In 2020, the EU launched the NextGenerationEU initiative, with the Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF) as its centrepiece. As Belgium's member of the government in charge of the RRF, I have worked to maximise our country's allocation to this facility, which – in the wake of the war in Ukraine and the need to strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy in the energy sector – was complemented by RePowerEU.

While the design of the RRF is revolutionary in terms of funding sources and conditionality, the instrument has encountered some initial challenges. **Ensuring the optimal success of this instrument, which embodied a united response from the European Union to the health crisis, is in our best interest as it paves the way for a genuine European budgetary capacity.** Operational improvements can be introduced to guarantee the utmost success of the RRF. Belgium is dedicated to starting a dialogue with the Council



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and the Commission to extract lessons from the mid-term evaluation of the instrument, with a specific focus on streamlining procedures and prioritising critical objectives.

Beyond operational enhancements and fine-tuning, a significant concern looms over the RRF: its expiry. The final projects supported by the RRF must be completed by the end of 2026. However, it is not credible to suggest that the challenges of the dual transition (climate and digital) – not to mention other EU priorities such as cross-border interconnections, innovation, and health – can be fully addressed by this deadline. A top priority during Belgium's presidency will therefore be to elevate the concept of 'strategic investment' on the EU agenda and to emphasise the imperative of exploring every possible avenue to sustain (and accelerate) the momentum of investment in crucial sectors like climate, energy, mobility, digital, health and education. A crucial one-day high-level conference will be organised on 9 April, focusing on the theme of the RRF and strategic investment.

While the EU economic governance reform anticipated during the presidency is expected to include some limited additional budgetary flexibility, it is likely to fall short of meeting the demands of an EU that is fully committed to its climate and social priorities. Belgium therefore aims to spark a policy debate regarding the trajectory of the EU's strategic investments post-RRF. We will strive to sustain the EU's investment momentum, not only to address the aforementioned priority policy areas but also due to the direct economic stimulative impact of EU investment, both in the short and long term, as supported by a growing body of economic literature. Additionally, **Belgium is dedicated to initiating a discussion on how to integrate social mainstreaming into European investment programmes**, akin to the incorporation of the 'do-no-significant-harm' principle from the green taxonomy into the RRF.

The EU stands at a crossroads, necessitating a bold transformation to capitalise on the opportunities amidst the current emergency. Inaction is no longer an option.

As we grapple with existential threats to our planet, social model and democracy, European leaders face a pivotal question: will they rise to the transformative challenge and embrace a progressive agenda? A resilient and inclusive European future that champions both social values and forward-looking investment is within our grasp. Belgium, in its Council presidency, plays a vital role in driving this ambitious endeavour.

*Thomas Dermine,
Belgian Secretary of State
for Economic Recovery and
Strategic Investments, in charge
of Space and Science Policy*





Social Europe as a precondition for a more modern and just EU

by Björn Hacker

Since the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017, Social Europe has been put back on the political agenda of the EU. Its 20 principles on equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, social poverty and inclusion remind European institutions and member states not to forget the social dimension of the European integration process. Are we back on the convergence track and prepared to accompany future challenges with social measures?

Ever since the integration process started in the 1950s, a social dimension has been part of it, although the first common regulations were influenced rather by economic thoughts to arrange equal conditions in the planned single market. With the proceeding economic integration and the implementation of concrete provisions on equal treatment between genders, occupational safety and social dialogue gained ground at a supranational level. The Treaty of Maastricht brought majority voting and new European competencies in employment and social policies in 1992. In the run-up to the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), policy coordination appeared to be the new field where Social Europe would materialise: succeeding growth strategies and governance cycles led to the European Semester process that has been in place since 2011. Today, this policy coordination tool tries to bring together all sorts of economic, employment, social and redistributive policies.

But policy coordination was not able to heal the constitutional asymmetry of a very dominant economic integration process with the establishment of the single market

and the EMU as its major projects compared to efforts on social integration. In fact, member states were never interested in giving up their competencies in social policies. In addition, different welfare state traditions appeared to be an obstacle to developing a Social Europe on the same footing as economic integration. Nevertheless, what has been deemed necessary ever since the Communities' first Social Action Programme in 1974 is social progress. An improvement in quality of life and standards of living, a reduction in socioeconomic disparities, more social justice, and the combat of social exclusion and discrimination are important objectives of the EU, which considers itself a 'social market economy' (Art. 3 (3) TEU).

PERPETUATED SOCIOECONOMIC DIVERGENCES IN THE EU

Plans to boost social integration by forming a European Social Union, developed by Willy Brandt in the 1970s, or the establishment of a European Social Model, suggested by Jacques Delors in the 1990s, were never fully realised.

This is why the asymmetry of the integration process evolved from being constitutional and institutional into a real socioeconomic asymmetry. The orientation on social progress vanished as the years went on, and social integration completely fell by the wayside in the euro crisis between 2010 and 2015. At this time, right after the devastation caused by the global financial and economic crisis, a concentration on budgetary and competitiveness aspects led European socioeconomic convergence to turn into divergence. **Today, some member states are still experiencing the impact of austerity programmes, showing only slight improvements in household income and its distribution, unemployment figures and poverty rates.**

► *Policy coordination was not able to heal the constitutional asymmetry of a very dominant economic integration process with the establishment of the single market.*



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Attempts to complement the European Semester and the euro crisis management with some social aspects – like the Youth Guarantee to bring young unemployed back into work, the establishment of the Fund for European Aid for the Most Deprived (FEAD) and a social scoreboard to monitor employment and social trends – helped to shift political attention onto the social situations in the EU. But it was the EPSR that evolved into a compass for European social policies, as it became the central reference point for initiatives aiming to close the social provision gaps. In 2018, the principle of 'equal pay for equal work at the same place' was established and a European Labour Authority was set up. In 2022, a framework for adequate minimum wages was agreed. In the EU's revolutionary crisis management during the pandemic – putting investment opportunities above austerity with the NextGenerationEU €750 billion funds, the short-term allowance framework SURE ('Support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency'), and the temporary suspension of the Stability and Growth pact so as not to curtail national stabilisation efforts – the social dimension played an active part.

USING SOCIAL INTEGRATION FOR A STRONGER EU

Still, socioeconomic disparities remain strong. Increases in energy and food prices in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine further boost these disparities, and they will grow even stronger with the twin green and digital transitions of the economies as well as with a planned enlargement of the EU. **Bridging socioeconomic imbalances by an integrated European economic and social policy with more and better social standards is key to countering negative developments.** Another aspect of a social action programme for the years to come should be that an active framing of the social costs of the emerging new digital world of work and of the decarbonisation transition must not be left to the individual capacities of the member states. The EU will face these challenges best by developing its own supranational economic and social model – also with a view to its position in a changing global environment. And a framework of continued collective solidarity, as experienced during the pandemic, would be a driver to prevent and better recover from economic crises.

► *Public opinion is very much in favour of a more social Europe. Citizens know that the dire straits in which our European economies and society find themselves could be mitigated by the prospect of continuing social progress.*

Public opinion is very much in favour of a more social Europe. Citizens know that the dire straits in which our European economies and society find themselves could be mitigated by the prospect of continuing social progress. Looking for a recipe against the nationalistic and xenophobic claims made by the extreme right, it must be clear that social integration without economic growth is hard to achieve, but economic integration without social cohesion risks shredding the Union.

*Björn Hacker,
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from vision to vigour*





Five ideas to make the EU more social

by Marias Freitas and David Rinaldi

As Socialists and Social Democrats, we are the political force that can best contribute to building on Europe's commitment to social justice, equality and cohesion. It is in our DNA and will remain our core mission. The track record of policies that European progressives have put forward during the 2019-2024 legislature, spearheaded by EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights Nicolas Schmit as well as other progressive commissioners and MEPs, is testament to this claim.

From the Platform Workers Directive to the EU Child Guarantee, from the Social Economy Action Plan to the EU Care Strategy, from the recommendation on individual learning accounts and the adults' skills agenda to the EU Care Strategy, from the Social Climate Fund and the Just Transition Fund to SURE, and from NextGenerationEU to the EU Gender Equality Strategy – there is a lot of which to be proud. And then there is the directive on minimum wages and collective bargaining, which, after a decade of decrease in purchasing power, now signals a new era in which decent wages are no longer seen as a cost for European competitiveness, but as an essential strategy for a solid European economy.

With the mandate of the current Commission coming to an end, it is worth pondering what lies ahead for Social Europe in the next legislature. What will happen after the completion of the Social Pillar Action Plan? Will we witness an expansion of Social Europe or a regrettable backtracking?

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and its accompanying Action Plan have not been easy achievements, and it is undoubtedly thanks to the protracted political will exerted by Socialist-led EU presidencies that results have been attained – from Gothenburg to Porto and from the Spanish EU presidency to the inter-institutional declaration of La Hulpe under the Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU.

| BUILDING A SOCIAL FUTURE

With the European Union elections looming, and amidst the cacophony of divisive political discourse, it is of paramount importance for Socialists to articulate and pursue a bold vision for a fairer and more equitable Europe. By putting strong emphasis on well-being, social protection and the fight against inequalities, as well as by fighting for a Green Deal

with a red heart, Socialists can gather support for the European project and engage as of now to make these matters key priorities in the next political programme of the European Commission. No one should forget that a pivotal aspect of security, besides defence, is financial security – which is related to jobs, wages, opportunities and access to quality services.

Building on the inputs of a recent study by FEPS, Social Platform, Solidar, EPC and AK Europa, and building also on the engaging discussion that took place with prominent progressive politicians at the PES Congress in Malaga during the event organised by the PES Group in the European Committee of the Regions and FEPS, *Champions of progress – Progressives go the extra mile for Social Europe!*, we set out five proposals to substantiate the future of the European social agenda.

1) A permanent SURE which helps protect wages, incomes and aggregate consumption whilst providing a very much-needed counter-cyclical fiscal boost to member states in case of recessions. SURE is a great innovation that Socialists brought about in the darkest moments of the pandemic, but it is not yet an integral part of EU economic governance, and we still need to push to ensure that this policy becomes a safeguard against future crisis.

2) A European package for intergenerational fairness. The work on long-term care has just started and more targets need to be set. At the same time we also need to boost EU ambitions to solve the worrying conditions of young people who are not in education,

employment or training ('NEETs') by truly unlocking opportunities for youth. **Across Europe, around 15 per cent of 20- to 29-year-olds are not in work or training. It is self-evident that a fight to end unpaid internships can only be a minimum requirement.** More concrete actions are needed for the new generations to be able to find fair remuneration and good working conditions in the European labour markets.

3) An EU fund for just mobility. Mobility within the EU is still limited and should be promoted, but not to the detriment of convergence and cohesion. Persistent outflows generate a youth and brain drain and create a vicious circle: countries in a downturn lose human capital and tax revenues while better-off countries have inflows of skilled workers and income tax. The sustainability of the public finances of outflow-countries is endangered and the investment they have made in the education of locals ends up giving returns to the receiving country. The EU should be equipped with a fund to normalise the socio-economic impact of in- and out-flows. This policy would participate in the creation of new resources for the EU budget through contributions from those member states that benefit most from intra-EU mobility. The fund should be used to target investment and industrial policy in areas that, without EU intervention, risk serious divergence and impoverishment and the further loss of inhabitants.

4) An EU minimum income directive. Many member states already have some forms of support for indigent households. However, in the majority of cases, such national schemes are unable to guarantee decent standards of living, and recipients remain below the poverty line. In other cases, administrative conditions for access to such national support limit its uptake by those who need it most. A European directive on minimum income schemes could provide the framework for member states to establish sufficient minimum income levels properly. In a recommendation of 2013, the European Council recognised the shortcomings



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of national minimum income schemes: but guidelines alone are not working. What is needed is a directive with binding obligations and a timeline for member states to reach common quality criteria for coverage, adequacy and uptake.

5) EU financial support for employment innovation. It is in the interest of the European Union to facilitate the emergence and scale-up of local, national or business initiatives that have been able to address some of the most pressing problems facing the creation and quality of employment. Given the presence of several novelties in the domain of employment, the EU should engage more structurally with those actors that innovate by financing the test-phases and scaling-up processes or the multiplications of successful initiatives. The European Social Fund could be the vehicle to generate further innovation in employment policy, with a new dedicated window for employment innovation. A specific line of financing should be reserved to launch, test and scale up initiatives that promote, firstly, zero unemployment areas, secondly, shorter working week arrangements, and thirdly, democracy and well-being in the workplace.

Charting a vision for the future of the EU is a progressive mission that should be addressed head-on with bold proposals and ambitions. The Social Europe we want for the next EU mandate will respond to the needs of millions across the European continent and will contribute to a fairer, more inclusive society. As Socialists we constantly reaffirm our effort to build a more social Europe and to keep the social agenda high on the list of the European Commission's priorities.

*Maria Freitas,
Political adviser on social
policies at the Party
of European Socialists Group
in the European Committee
of the Regions*



*David Rinaldi,
FEPS Director of
Studies and Policy*

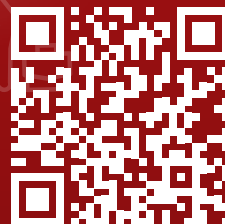


The Social Pillar and the future of the EU Social Agenda



Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights 20 thematic principles must remain pivotal in the upcoming EU agenda.

This policy study, prepared alongside *Solidar*, *AK EUROPA*, *Social Platform* and the *European Policy Centre*, offers an analysis of the EU's progress in advancing equal opportunities, improving working conditions, and strengthening social protection and inclusion as envisioned by the EPSR at both national and European levels. The importance of the Social Pillar, both as a guiding compass and counter-crisis narrative, has never been more critical.



An aerial photograph of a destroyed tank in a battlefield, with soldiers standing nearby. The image is overlaid with a dark blue filter.

FOCUS

UKRAINE: TWO YEARS OF FULL-SCALE WAR

Ukraine has entered the third year of Russia's full-scale war on its territory – and the tenth year of Russian warfare against the country. The battlefield situation looks more critical than ever, and the future seems even bleaker, as crucial US support starts faltering and as the EU lacks the capacity to step in, certainly in terms of military support. In both the EU and the US, it is mainly the impact of an increasingly influential radical right that is endangering support for Ukraine.

However, as the authors in this dossier highlight, besides the loss of thousands of lives and the evident destruction, the war has far-reaching consequences in the country's politics: democracy is under strain. And the EU has a crucial role to play in stabilising it.

Furthermore, on an economic level, much could be done to re-orient the Ukrainian economy to a fully-fledged war economy. This, however, would require Keynesian interventionism – which would go against the neo-liberal mainstream in a country that is still reeling from the hyper-state-interventionism of the Soviet past.

The situation in Ukraine indeed looks bleak – but did the EU not show in 2022, as well as during the pandemic, that when worst comes to worst it is able to mobilise? Now is another such moment!

Ukrainian democracy vs. the Russian war: how to increase resilience

by Bohdan Ferens

When facing aggression, it is paramount to maintain one's moral integrity, even amidst the fiercest war. Vladimir Putin and his inner circle have consistently viewed the democratisation of Ukraine as a fundamental threat to their grip on power in Russia. Employing various tactics over the years, they have sought to hinder Ukraine's alignment with the European Union and NATO, exerting direct influence on its internal politics. However, as these efforts proved ineffective, the Kremlin escalated its actions, occupying Crimea, invading the Donbas region and launching a devastating full-scale invasion in 2022.

The central streets of Kyiv are crowded. As always, everyone is in a hurry somewhere, going about their business. You can hear English spoken in the cafes. At first glance, everything seems to be as before 24 February 2022. But this is just an illusion. A moment later, the same streets are filled with the roar of sirens, signalling another Russian attack with drones and deadly missiles.

They say it is impossible to get used to war, especially to its consequences. Death, devastation and the crippled destinies of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians are a reality that we have to live with. Putin hoped to break Ukraine, but he has failed to do so. Do you know why?

The Russian leadership has not fully realised that for Ukrainians, living in freedom and democracy is not a set of hackneyed slogans, but a guideline in life that has been

passed down for many years from generation to generation. And for the right to determine its destiny independently, striving for democratic changes, Ukraine has to pay the highest price. Another component is the international support, including its military dimension, without which it would be even more difficult to resist the Russian army than it is now.

| WHAT WORRIES UKRAINIANS?

War significantly influences domestic politics, public demands and priorities. If, in 2022, political life practically came to a standstill, a year later everything gradually began to return to normal. Everything except elections. After all, with the introduction of martial law, holding elections in Ukraine seems impossible.

But **fair elections, as we know, are a key component of further democratisation and ensuring the replacement of political elites.**

► *The Russian leadership has not fully realised that for Ukrainians, living in freedom and democracy is not a set of hackneyed slogans, but a guideline in life.*

Differing opinions persist within society regarding the appropriateness of conducting elections against the backdrop of war. However, the prevailing sentiment reflects a growing sense of fatigue and frustration stemming from the challenging circumstances on the frontlines, and from economic hardship,

corruption scandals and recent changes in military leadership, notably the dismissal of the renowned General Valerii Zaluzhnyi.

These concerns are further compounded by apprehensions surrounding the obstacles encountered in securing timely military assistance, particularly from the US. The confluence of these factors underscores the complex and multifaceted challenges facing Ukraine as it navigates through the Russian war and strives to maintain stability and resilience in the face of adversity.

► *Democracy is a costly endeavour, particularly during wartime, necessitating substantial financial resources to enact necessary reforms.*

The demand for justice is palpable, and growing more pronounced with the ongoing war. This call for justice not only permeates heated debates on social networks and in the media, but also resonates in everyday conversations. Ukrainians are deeply concerned about the implications of the war on various aspects of their lives. Questions abound regarding the rules governing conscription and the preservation of rights, including labour rights and the right to education, under martial law. There are also concerns about the resilience of the economy and



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financial system in the face of Putin's apparent strategy of attrition.

What is more, there is a pressing need to address and bridge the gaps and tensions that have emerged between different segments of society: between the rich and the poor, those actively engaged in the conflict and those on the home front, those who have migrated abroad and those who remain in Ukraine.

Preserving unity amidst these divisions is paramount for the nation's resilience and collective strength in the face of adversity.

Additionally, trust plays a significant role in Ukrainian society. According to a survey conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in collaboration with the sociological service of the Razumkov Centre at the close of 2023, trust is predominantly placed in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, with a staggering 94 per cent of respondents expressing confidence in them. Furthermore, the Security Service of Ukraine also surpassed the 50 per cent mark, garnering trust from 71 per cent of respondents. Other institutions earning notable levels of trust include the president of Ukraine (68 per cent), the church (63 per cent), public

organisations (63 per cent), the National Police of Ukraine (58 per cent) and the local head of government (53 per cent).

The survey also reveals a significant lack of trust in various key institutions. Political parties, for instance, face substantial scepticism, with a staggering 76 per cent of respondents expressing distrust. Similarly, the state apparatus, including officials, is met with distrust by 73 per cent of respondents, while 72 per cent lack confidence in the courts and the judicial system as a whole. The parliament fares no better, with 66 per cent expressing distrust, along with 63 per cent for the government of Ukraine, and 62 per cent for the prosecutor's office and anti-corruption authorities. Additionally, trade unions struggle to inspire confidence, with 46.5 per cent of respondents expressing distrust compared to only 25 per cent who trust them.

Clearly, rebuilding trust in political parties, courts and government institutions, including the parliament and government, will require substantial time and effort. The ongoing war exacerbates these challenges, posing additional obstacles to the still-young Ukrainian democracy.

DEMOCRACY COMES AT A COST

Established democracies are characterised by a long history of functional party systems, entrenched political cultures and enduring traditions that underpin the stability of state institutions. Ukraine, however, has only recently gained its independence and has spent the past decade defending it.

The lack of institutional experience has hindered the development of a robust and sustainable political system. For the fledgling post-Soviet elite, prioritising the establishment of strong state institutions was not a primary concern. This is understandable given that effective law enforcement and judicial oversight could potentially impede the embezzlement of state assets. **Gradually, the grip of the old party nomenklatura weakened, allowing financial and industrial groups controlled by oligarchs to enter the political arena.**

► *Fair elections, as we know, are a key component of further democratisation and ensuring the replacement of political elites.*

Although the opportunities for oligarchic influence diminished during the war, the end of hostilities may see attempts to reclaim lost power. Overcoming the oligarchs domestically will prove challenging. However, international pressure, both political and economic, can serve as a potent tool in curtailing their influence and fostering genuine democratic reform.

The development of a robust middle class has the potential to foster the emergence of new political entities with clear values and ideological principles. Investing in political education and engaging with youth can significantly influence the evolution of political demands and attitudes.

When countries embark on ambitious reform agendas, they often look to established democracies for inspiration. However, simply replicating foreign models may not yield the desired outcomes. **Democracy is a costly endeavour, particularly during wartime, necessitating substantial financial resources to enact necessary reforms.**

This reality raises important questions for both international partners and Ukrainian authorities. Firstly, are international partners prepared to increase funding to support Ukraine's democratisation efforts and provide substantial resources for military needs and financial stability? Secondly, are Ukrainian authorities committed to further transformative measures to foster political pluralism, safeguard media freedom, combat corruption, decentralise governance and engage in meaningful dialogue with civil society – all against the backdrop of war?

Addressing these questions candidly is essential for a pragmatic assessment of priorities and for ensuring the resilience of democracy during conflict, while also laying the groundwork for effective post-war reconstruction. By honestly confronting these challenges, stakeholders can chart a path towards sustainable democratic progress in Ukraine.

Bohdan Ferens,
Founder of the Social
Democratic Platform of Ukraine



European integration in wartime: the EU's imperative to preserve and rejuvenate Ukraine's democracy

by Nona Mikhelidze

In December 2023, the European Union made a momentous decision: to initiate EU membership talks with Ukraine. This landmark choice unfolded amidst unparalleled circumstances. Ukraine finds itself navigating a formidable integration journey in the middle of a full-scale Russian invasion, characterised by the tragic loss of thousands of lives – both military and civilian – and the decimation of the nation's infrastructure.

Yet, amidst this turmoil, Ukrainian society has exhibited remarkable resilience and determination. It has underscored its commitment to realising its aspirations as a European democracy founded upon the pillars of the rule of law and effective governance.

Since the onset of the war in 2014, Ukraine has embarked on a transformative journey marked by significant reforms and institutional changes, including strengthening political competition through expanded parliamentary powers and a return to a parliamentary presidential republic; decentralising finances and administrative territories to stimulate regional development and increase political competition; implementing civil service reforms to instil professionalism and integrity, along with creating anti-corruption bodies to combat political corruption; introducing public funding for political parties to reduce reliance on oligarchic capital; introducing an

electronic declaration system to curb political corruption by promoting transparency; adopting a proportional representation electoral system with preferential voting to enhance fairness.

At the present time, over 90 per cent of Ukrainians endorse democracy as their preferred form of governance. The country is eager to fortify democratic institutions, undertake reforms, and align with European standards across political, economic and social domains.

Nevertheless, this ambitious agenda can only materialise once the invasion ceases. Despite Ukraine's successes in reclaiming dominance over the Black Sea and facilitating grain exports, its counteroffensive to liberate occupied territories has fallen short. Delays in Western military support have allowed Russia to fortify its positions, leading to a positional war with the potential for stalemate. After two years of conflict, we find ourselves

precisely where the Western strategy – to permit Ukraine to defend itself but not to win, employing an approach called 'escalation management' – has placed us: a situation where Ukraine fails to liberate additional territories and on the other side, Russia is unable to conquer any further territory. In the Western calculus, this scenario should have compelled President Vladimir Putin to the negotiation table by now. **However, this has not occurred yet and will not do so in the future, for one straightforward reason: Putin wants to subjugate the whole of Ukraine.**

It is evident that a mere armistice will not suffice to end the conflict. **Even the complete liberation of Ukrainian territory and cessation of hostilities will not mark the war's conclusion. The persistence of authoritarian rule in Russia, coupled with its imperial and expansionist aspirations, foreshadows future escalations and conflicts.**



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This fundamental reality significantly influences the trajectory of Ukrainian democracy both during and beyond the conflict.

The democratic strides made by Ukrainian society amidst wartime adversity have exacted a staggering toll: the loss of thousands of lives. Recognising the gravity of this sacrifice will undoubtedly shape the nation's trajectory in the long run. With many Ukrainians having endured the loss of friends and relatives throughout the war, coupled with ongoing sacrifices, the magnitude of suffering is simply unbearable. Ukraine finds itself, and will likely remain for the foreseeable future, a society grappling with the trauma of war, haunted by a pervasive sense of insecurity stemming from Russia.

In Ukraine, a prevailing sentiment is emerging: faced with present and future security challenges, Ukrainians must rely primarily on themselves. Consequently, efforts to fortify its security and defence sectors, alongside advancements in its military industry, are gaining momentum.

In a society ravaged by war and its aftermath, marked by heightened security anxieties, there is a looming risk of over-securitisation. This, in turn, could lead to a notable slowdown in the development of democracy. Such a scenario may coincide with the monopolisation of power, a trend frequently observed in post-war nations. Additionally, the stark deterioration in economic

conditions, coupled with escalating unemployment and other adverse consequences of the conflict, further exacerbates the potential deceleration of democracy development.

At the onset of the war, the national government implemented a martial law regime, imposing restrictions on constitutional rights. These measures included bans on rallies, halts to elections and referenda, curfews and limitations on domestic and international travel. **The restructuring of the state apparatus granted the president expanded wartime authority over the cabinet of ministers, thereby reducing the influence of parliament. While these measures may be deemed necessary, it is undeniable that martial law imposes significant constraints on civil liberties – essential components of a democratic society,** including freedom of speech, participatory democracy, electoral rights and political pluralism.

Considering this context, Ukraine faces several challenges. There could be the potential temptation for political elites to perpetuate the current wartime consolidation of power around the presidency into the future. Further delays in implementing fundamental reforms within the judiciary sector could be a risk. Additionally, controlling authorities may exert increased pressure on businesses. There is also the temptation to undermine certain accomplishments of decentralisation reforms,

along with the risk of continued control over the information landscape. Furthermore, the inherent weakness of the political parties, exacerbated by the suspension of political competition under martial law, may lead to the monopolisation of political activities.

The global landscape shows that democracy is under siege, evident from the United States to Europe, where external dictators exploit democratic freedoms to sow destabilisation, while internal threats from populists and radicals, both left and right, further complicate matters. Ukraine, amidst its democratic transition during wartime, is not immune to these challenges. Yet a robust democracy in Ukraine is a fundamental prerequisite for its accession to the European Union. Achieving this goal, however, necessitates a sustainable peace, underpinned by the kind of security guarantees only NATO can provide.

The Ukrainian struggle against the Russian aggression transcends mere state survival; it embodies a fight for democracy itself. At this critical juncture, the EU bears a responsibility to aid Ukraine in preserving its democratic fabric during wartime and facilitating its recovery in the post-war era. Offering prescriptive solutions is a daunting task, given the complexity of the situation. While the EU's pressure for domestic reforms through conditional approaches is underway, it may prove insufficient. To ensure the longevity of Ukraine's democracy, security assurances are imperative, necessitating NATO membership. Thus, for Ukraine, the paths to EU and NATO accession are intertwined, underscoring the vital importance of European integration in preserving and healing Ukraine's democracy amidst the trials of war.



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War economy: how economic policy can help Ukraine win the war

by Anna Kolesnichenko

The delays in the supply of Western weapons, exacerbated by a deadlock in the US over the approval of its aid to Ukraine, have introduced a sense of urgency for Ukraine to mobilise its internal resources for military production. Moreover, as the hopes for a swift victory have faded and the perspective of a protracted war has become evident, the question of transforming the Ukrainian economy into a war model becomes imperative.

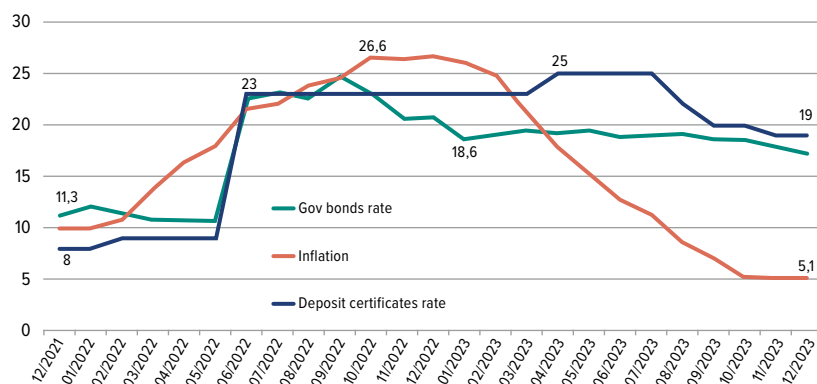
It is astounding, but after two years of war, the Ukrainian economy has not (yet) become a war economy. The central bank and the government have implemented a range of measures, but their scope and size remain insufficient for the war challenge. State defence expenses have increased several times but are still below the needs of the army and available production capacity. According to estimates, only half of the capacity of the defence industry was used in 2023. There are objective reasons for the weak production, like the destruction of certain production sites and shortages of workers. But the low volume of state procurement is the major impediment.

The truth is that **the Ukrainian state does not have enough money to finance defence procurement. This limitation, however, is partially self-inflicted and there are various resources that can be mobilised. More alignment of the monetary policy with the needs of the war would be particularly helpful.** The Ukrainian central bank (NBU) was very effective at the beginning of the war when it

introduced a range of emergency measures that prevented a banking and currency meltdown (notably, capital and FX controls). Its later policies, however, were less supportive of the war economy. In June 2022, the central bank massively increased its main policy rate from 10 per cent to 25 per cent, justifying it by the need to contain inflation. On top of that, the NBU tied the rate of remuneration of bank liquidity (the so-called deposit certificates) at

minus two percentage points of the policy rate, so that banks could get 23 per cent risk-free on their liquidity. Logically, they were not eager to lend to business at rates lower than that, while business was not prepared to pay such exorbitant rates. This was one of the main reasons behind the stagnation in bank lending: the outstanding stock of bank loans to businesses declined from 19 per cent of GDP in March 2022 to 14 per cent in November 2023.

Inflation and interest rates on gov bonds and bank liquidity





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The only corporate lending that was happening was subsidised loans under a government-sponsored programme (the so-called '5-7-9' programme). Corporate lending started gradually to revive only in the second half of 2023. In the intervening time, banks accumulated massive amounts of liquidity sitting in the central bank – 720 billion Ukrainian Hryvni (17.6 billion Euro) as at February 2024.

► *Ukraine has come to a point where it cannot successfully wage a war if it does not switch its economy into war mode.*

The high-interest rates on liquidity also discouraged banks from investing in government bonds. After the rate increase, banks almost stopped buying government bonds in the summer of 2022. The central bank had strongly encouraged the Ministry of Finance to increase rates on government bonds. These rates eventually increased from 10.3 per cent in May 2022 to 17.3 per cent by the end of 2022 and were in the vicinity of 19 per cent for most of 2023 (see graph on the previous page). Consequently, the government faced a much higher cost of servicing its domestic debt: in 2023, it spent 200 billion Hryvni (3.6 per cent of GDP) on interest payments on its domestic bonds.

The policy of high remuneration for bank liquidity also led to a substantial reduction in the amount of central bank profits that was transferred to the state budget. In 2023, banks received 92 billion Hryvni (2.3 billion Euro) of income from deposit certificates, the equivalent of 1.7 per cent of GDP. This is what could have been the government's income. After the deposit certificates became a matter of public discussion, the central bank introduced a windfall profit tax of 50 per cent on banks' excessive profits, which they had to pay on their 2023 profits. This was a welcome step, but stopping the whole scheme of liquidity remuneration would have been a much better solution.

The biggest elephant in the room, however, is the monetary of the deficit. In Ukrainian policy circles, this is taboo, not without pressure from foreign partners, notably the IMF. During the first months of the war, the NBU did such financing but stopped as soon as foreign aid started arriving. It is not quite clear why Ukraine is discouraged from using monetary financing when it has been widely used by other countries when they have fought wars (for example, the UK, during the second world war, had 61 per cent of its budget financed this way). The usual objection is that it can be inflationary or lead to devaluation. Yet there are answers to that: Singapore, for example, learning from the Keynesian policies deployed in the UK during and after the second world war, has established a very effective system that allows for monetary deficit financing without currency destabilisation.

To sum up, there is a great deal of room for finding domestic resources to finance the war and reinvigorate the economy. For this, the central bank needs to be on board with the war effort and should:

- end exorbitant rates on bank liquidity;
- stimulate the credit flow in the economy, especially to the military production sector (for example, by reducing interest rates);
- help reduce the interest rate on government bonds;
- do monetary financing of the government deficit. This could be targeted financing of defence industries and should be accompanied by smart liquidity-absorbing policies.

The Ukrainian policy space is now very charged, as the economic needs of the war are not being met. President Volodymyr Zelensky has questioned the possibility of mobilising an additional 500,000 soldiers, as requested the army. This would cost circa 700 billion Hryvni. The ambition of the military to switch to a high-tech war also requires substantial financing. **Ukraine has come to a point where it cannot successfully wage a war if it does not switch its economy into war mode.**



Anna Kolesnichenko,
FEPS Policy Analyst on Economy

How the MAGA right came to reject Ukraine

by Robert Benson and Johan Hassel

The second anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has underlined the remarkable resilience that the transatlantic alliance has shown under Joe Biden's leadership. However, severe threats from the far right are now putting that unity in jeopardy. In the United States, MAGA Republicans threaten to block critical aid to Ukraine. In Europe, the far right openly expresses its affection for Vladimir Putin. Viktor Orbán's resistance to EU support for Ukraine highlights that the illiberal right on both sides of the Atlantic is veering toward a dangerous isolationism.

Ever since the United States committed to ensuring the security of Europe under the Truman Doctrine, America has been a cornerstone of peace and stability for its partners and allies across the Atlantic. Over the decades, Democrats and Republicans have shared a core belief that mutual political and security support between the US and its allies fundamentally serves American interests. To abandon Ukraine now would upend this doctrine, jeopardising not only the immediate stability of the region but also the credibility of the United States as a reliable ally.

The rise of the MAGA right ('Make America great again') has prompted the Republican Party to re-evaluate its foreign policy priorities, particularly concerning Ukraine. As a result, some Republicans in Congress with a track record of supporting internationalism and democracy abroad – like Senator Mitt Romney (Utah) or Senator Joni Ernst (Iowa), a former US Army Reservist – now find themselves at odds with the increasing far-right, inward-looking politics in their party.

This once-in-a-generation realignment of the Republican Party is best embodied by former President Donald Trump. His tenure was marked by an unorthodox approach to foreign policy, which often involved intimate interactions with autocratic leaders, including Russia's President Putin. **At best, Trump and his congressional supporters have viewed alliance relationships and agreements as transactional. At worst, they have seen them as a burden to be offloaded.** Consider recent remarks by South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham, a one-time stalwart supporter of Ukraine who now suggests that any further financial support for Kyiv should be issued in the form of loans.

In MAGA land, everything is reduced to a zero-sum game. This cynical view of global politics is complemented by an even bleaker view of the American homeland, described by Trump as 'American carnage'. They perceive decay everywhere and criticise an international system that, in their view, favours distant global elites over ordinary Americans – a point Ohio Senator JD

Vance took great pains to emphasise at this year's Munich Security Conference. "We live in a world of scarcity", he repeatedly told his interlocutor, asserting that American interests must always come first.

► *At best, Trump and his congressional supporters have viewed alliance relationships and agreements as transactional. At worst, they have seen them as a burden to be offloaded.*

Vance is mistaken. **America first should not mean America alone. Transatlantic cooperation through bolstering NATO, supporting Ukraine against Russia and focusing on strategic competition with China aligns with core American interests. We are stronger when we act together.**



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Yet there are those who would rather America retreat. The tentacles of far-right exceptionalism are advancing across the United States and Europe, characterised by a sovereignty discourse steeped in anti-globalist tropes. **For them, Ukraine barely registers as a concern. Their ideology is rapidly evolving into a global movement, with its network of thinkers and leaders like Orbán presenting themselves as the beleaguered saviours of their nations.** Strong, sovereign, and unbound before the Washington and Brussels blob, Orbán and his ilk rail against so-called open borders and faceless European technocrats. Here they ask: why does Ukraine deserve support while our own citizens face hardship?

To counter the spread of this dangerous rhetoric, Progressives and Social Democrat leaders on both sides of the Atlantic must advocate for and adhere to a more equitable, rules-based international order that champions transatlantic cooperation. They must compellingly show constituents the real-world advantages of such a strategy, connecting the dots between democracy and security on the one hand and economic prosperity and resilience on the other. **History has proven that the rules-based international order delivers conditions**

for growth, but far too many in our societies have been left behind. Governments must work to address their needs.

As for Ukraine, the United States must remain steadfast in its support for its ally and resist the inward-turning impulses of the MAGA right. In parallel, **it is imperative for European NATO members to uphold their commitment to allocate 2 per cent of their GDP towards bolstering Biden's vision of transatlantic unity proactively**, rather than as a reactionary measure to US political discourse. Furthermore, leaders like German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Biden must persist in championing the principles of liberal democracy and internationalism at home, standing firm against the rising tide of isolationism and authoritarianism that threatens to divide our Western alliance.

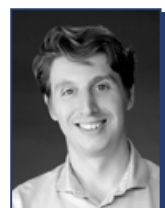
The stakes could not be higher. Ukraine is in urgent need of ammunition and artillery shells, and resilient political support from the West. **Should Ukraine succumb – or more accurately, be abandoned in her greatest hour of need – the failure will be more than moral. It will be strategic.** Other autocracies around the world, including China, will surely take note.


► *Should Ukraine succumb – or more accurately, be abandoned in her greatest hour of need – the failure will be more than moral. It will be strategic.*

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El Gobierno de la Gente / ♥
PSOE

DOSSIER

THE ART OF PROGRESSIVE GOVERNANCE IN TURBULENT TIMES

There is a pertinent question that often recurs: can one govern in a distinctly progressive manner in turbulent times such as now?

It is frequently suggested that this would be difficult. A situation of profound global changes mixed with many external and internal pressures occurring alongside various crises (described even as a 'polycrisis') would make it close to impossible. And as if these factors were not sufficiently disruptive, there is also the fragmentation of the party-political spectra, and the radicalisation and vulnerability of various coalition governments whose members continually need to seek compromises, which disappoint their respective electorates.

But against all these odds, Social Democrats in power successfully managed to navigate the Covid-19 pandemic and to go beyond just managing the situation. Progressive governing parties succeeded in co-designing recovery according to their political principles. It was not just about rebuilding but about

paving the way ahead to accomplish social progress for all. In that same spirit, they are now approaching other major challenges head-on, trying to ensure the primacy of progressive ideas when it comes to coping with the triple transition – digital, climate and demographic. The achievements of these progressive governing parties have been remarkable and should be reiterated, even if the actual electoral results for Progressives have not been the most encouraging in recent years.

In this very busy electoral year, there are many signs that the political map in Europe will once again be changing. But although the centre-left has suffered some recent setbacks and is again faced with some tough national elections, there is a strong belief that what can elevate Progressives and keep them in power is their integrity and daring political imagination. When they are in power, their inspiring and innovative ideas and determination enable them to bring a sustainable, socially just and democratically endorsed change for all.



The bottleneck of the Green Deal

by Anita Sowińska

The Green Deal is a series of projects that need to be implemented simultaneously in a very short time. The problem is that we lack the resources to carry them out. People are the most valuable resource in the green transition, but at the same time they are the biggest bottleneck.

Every change has its limitations in scope, time and resources. If we draw a triangle whose sides represent these three elements, we obtain a project management tool. If we increase the scope of the project, this will increase the time and/or the resources that are needed, be it people or money; if, on the other hand, we have fewer resources, then we will have to limit the scope (and thus the quality of the project) and the time. The triangle must be closed – we cannot change one side without changing the others. The tool works well for simple projects (although even 'simple' projects can be very challenging).

But what if the project is huge, like the Green Deal? If it were a question of one specific change, such as 'just' a change in energy sources, or 'only' a change in the transport system, then humanity would doubtless be able to cope – just as it managed to cope with the ozone hole, even though it was a big challenge. But there are a lot of changes: energy, transport, construction, the circular economy, forest protection, water management, agriculture, our eating habits... So, how are we supposed to manage such a huge and multidimensional change?

Going back to our triangle, let us take the element of time. We know that we do not have much of it – climate change is progressing very fast. The window of 26 years until 2050

(the target year to achieve climate neutrality according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC) is very short and we cannot extend it. So why not reduce the scope of the green transition? This, however, is impossible too, because we will not achieve climate neutrality if we neglect any of the elements, be it transport, construction, forests, agriculture or production.

► *The understandable fears of the people are exploited by populists, as well as by hostile states, which use disinformation to fuel resistance and to provoke conflicts.*

So, if we want to achieve the climate neutrality target (the scope) by 2050 at the latest (limited time), we need to adapt resources accordingly. And these are also limited, and not only monetary resources. People are the most valuable resource of the Green Deal and, at the same time, they are the biggest bottleneck. This is because the scope of the 'project' is so huge that it exceeds our capabilities.

For many people, the multitude of changes in a very short time is a big challenge which can lead to reluctance and denial of the need for change. **The understandable fears of the people are exploited by populists, as well as by hostile states, which use disinformation to fuel resistance and to provoke conflicts.** To deal with them, we must use tools to familiarise people with the necessary change and then gain social support.

Each change requires leaders, not necessarily formally empowered: people who are convinced of the need for the given change, who absorb new solutions and convince other people to do so – this is a natural, human process. In every town, village, school, social organisation (for example a group of pensioners or a group of rural housewives) and in every family. The problem is that these leaders simply cannot keep up because there are too many changes and there is too little time.

For the green transition to be successful, we need to put much more effort into educating and sharing the experiences of local leaders to equip them with knowledge and skills – for example, how to deal with disinformation. There is much work to be done, for example in sharing information on good practice. There are many cities that can boast actions worth implementing in other cities,

- *For the green transition to be successful, we need to put much more effort into educating and sharing the experiences of local leaders to equip them with knowledge and skills – for example, how to deal with disinformation.*

but this is not happening, or it is happening too slowly. The same is true of good practice at the national level. Some states are doing better with nature protection, others have a well-functioning IT system for tracking waste, and still others are doing good work with deposit systems. Unfortunately, these good practices are not passed on to other states or are passed on too slowly. Consequently, we are not making enough use of the wisdom of all the members states of the European Union.

I am not saying that there is no exchange of information at all – the European Union is doing a lot, for example in the fields of student exchanges or scientific cooperation. Nevertheless, cooperation should be strengthened at the working level – among governments and NGOs. The prevailing attitude is one of competition rather than of cooperation and attempting to achieve a common goal. Without breaking down our current silos of thinking, the green transition will take too long, if it will be completed at all.

There is another way to support the leaders of the green change: artificial intelligence (AI).

We could use AI to persuade people to change their habits. For example by giving people an alternative – in the same way as when companies advertise their products. If customers are looking for a dress online, they



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are shown dresses from various companies, encouraging them to buy a newer and more fashionable one. But maybe they should also see information about second-hand dresses or information that cheap dresses from China can only be worn for up to three washes before they turn into rags. Or another example: someone is looking for a dinner recipe for guests. Usually, he would make a meat roast, but maybe the system could suggest a tasty vegetarian dish made from local products. Of course, the information should only be a hint that allows you to choose, because it is the person who ultimately makes the decision.

Perhaps someone will say, 'well, yes – but what does artificial intelligence have to do with it? After all, these are just advertisements'. Well, because each of us is different, each of us has different knowledge and different habits.

AI could notice these micro-differences and encourage us to change our attitudes in a way tailored to each individual. It could act as a 'change leader' or look for new change leaders among the people. AI can help us implement the Green Deal and achieve the necessary changes. Maybe it is time to get used to it.



Anita Sowińska,
Deputy Minister of Climate
and Environment, Poland



Practise solidarity and stay engaged – it is that simple

by Caroline Gennez

In turbulent times, acting in accordance with your progressive values and staying engaged in finding compromise beats getting compromised in a game of zero-sum geopolitics. The EU's international cooperation should be based on a few simple progressive pillars: international solidarity, clear and well-defined principles and objectives and continued engagement with our partners.

Europe is at a turning point. The international order established after the second world war – the same international order in which European integration flourished – has been shaken to its core lately. Global power dynamics are shifting, veering away from Western centrality. At the same time, we are grappling with increased conflict, unrest and widespread suffering. The call for social and environmental equity resonates more strongly than ever. International solidarity should therefore be at the core of our foreign policy, to ensure that foreign policy becomes progressive policy.

We need to convince policymakers of this, as well as everyone who is engaged in the international solidarity movement. Some people who are engaged in international solidarity are not necessarily into politics. They say: 'we just want to do good, we are engaged in good deeds'. That commitment is necessary and admirable. But it is equally important to understand that politics does matter. Politics is about power relations. It is about impact and about having a seat at the table. **You have to claim that seat at the table, whether we are talking about Ukraine or discussing Gaza.**

And that is only possible when you work with and act according to clear and well-defined principles and objectives. That is my second pillar for progressive development policies.

► *You have to claim that seat at the table, whether we are talking about Ukraine or discussing Gaza.*

The European Union and its member states have increasingly aligned their development policies with their geopolitical priorities. But this has not been without its challenges.

The military coups in Mali and Niger taught us that having many different 'geopolitical' responses to undemocratic tendencies proves to be of little strategic value. **The split positions on the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza contrast starkly with the principled and united response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.** This amplifies the frustrations of the Global South over the lack of solidarity during

the pandemic and in the fight against climate change, as well as their frustrations over insufficient progress on the sustainable development goals (SDG). It also enhances accusations of double standards.

All this contributes to Europe's soft power facing huge challenges. And yet, it is crucial to remember that Europe is still the largest donor of official development assistance (ODA) in the world, contributing a very significant 43 per cent in 2022.

In a world where geopolitics dominate, Europe must play to its strengths. We can bolster our international partnerships if we focus on and leverage our unique selling proposition: international cooperation grounded in universal international human rights standards and, of course, democracy – this, together with a strong emphasis on socioeconomic development and based on the experiences of European welfare states. Both make up a core part of our shared values.

My third and final pillar for progressive development policies is 'staying engaged'. An example: last summer, the Ugandan parliament



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introduced a harsh anti-LGBTQ+ bill. This bill establishes tough sentences for a range of homosexual acts, including the death penalty. The World Bank, Uganda's most significant development lender, halted loans to the country after President Yoweri Museveni signed the 'Anti-Homosexuality Act'. Now, Uganda is negotiating with China for a loan to finance the construction of a pipeline to help the country export its crude oil to international markets. And there will be no further discussion about the 'Anti-Homosexuality Act'.

Belgium used another approach with the Ugandan authorities. We decided to stay engaged after Ugandan human rights defenders asked us explicitly to do so. But, for the first time in the history of Belgian development cooperation, we triggered a specific clause in our partnership agreement (article 11). This clause states that if one of the partners deems that the other has failed to respect one of its fundamental obligations, such as the respect for human rights, the other partner has the right to start diplomatic consultations. Our triggering of this clause sent a strong signal that Belgium will not tolerate any kind of discrimination in its development projects. At the

same time, it entailed starting a discussion to see if a way forward can be found. Since July, we have therefore been having an open and constructive conversation about human rights with the Ugandan government.

► *Widespread inequality leads to instability and conflict, but Europe will only be safe in a safe world. The global pursuit of human rights, social welfare and equality for all should therefore be at the forefront of our international partnerships.*

By staying engaged we can have a fair debate as equal partners, and we can listen carefully to the other's arguments (which is relevant as Europe is not 'without sin'). At the same time, we have strengthened our support of human rights defenders in Uganda.

We need to do this more. Democracy is more than just organising elections. We must actively engage with local civil society by strengthening

its capacities, and by supporting regional mechanisms for dialogue and institutions linked to democracy, good governance and the rule of law – institutions that citizens can trust and that are open to greater citizen involvement. That is why I introduced the Civic Space Initiative, which aims to strengthen civil society, as an advocate for human rights, and to foster democracy in our partner countries in Africa and the Middle East.

Widespread inequality leads to instability and conflict, but Europe will only be safe in a safe world. The global pursuit of human rights, social welfare and equality for all should therefore be at the forefront of our international partnerships.

It is often said that the state of human rights and democracy in the world is dire, as doubts grow about their ability to deliver concrete positive outcomes for people's lives. But human rights and democracy are ingrained around the world. More than half of the world's population will cast their ballots in elections around the globe in 2024 – from Mexico to Rwanda, and from the EU to the US. These common values will therefore be at the forefront of international debate.

We need to tackle this debate with a clear narrative and positive engagement.

Europe can remain a strong and credible partner in achieving deeper democratisation. Emphasising the EU's work in upholding a value - driven development cooperation, and in maintaining a strong focus on socioeconomic welfare, offers a counterweight to fading faith in democracy and human rights.



Caroline Gennez,
Belgian Minister of
Development Cooperation
and Urban Policy



Progressive industrial policy: an antidote for troubled times

by Miguel Costa Matos

These are hard times. People are struggling with the cost of living and, disillusioned with things as they are, they are turning in increasing numbers to the far right. Progressives need to go beyond redistribution. We need a 'thick industrial policy', with strategy, cooperation and conditionality to deliver a future-proof economy, resources to sustain the welfare state and green investment and, crucially, opportunity for our generation.

"It's the economy, stupid!" James Carville's timeless words were key to Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential victory, after focusing his campaign on the deepening recession. This was probably the first of a new generation of progressive victories, ranging from Tony Blair in the UK to Wim Kok in the Netherlands and Gerhard Schröder in Germany. Their 'Third Way' project brought a different perspective on economic policy, arguing that Social Democrats should accept the mechanics of the market and its political hegemony after the fall of the Berlin Wall. At most, we could be capitalists with a conscience, using social policy to redistribute the dividends of growth. But, often, it was our political family who implemented privatisations, labour market and financial market deregulation, as well as strict welfare reforms.

The success of this political movement was short-lived and had its shortcomings. Not only were governments underwhelming in their transformative impact, but crucially, they stopped winning. This happened for three key reasons. **Our mission as Socialists is to improve the lot of working people.**

But, all too often, we took them for granted, leaving low-income voters to either stop voting, or turn to other political outfits. Thomas Picketty has described this poignantly with his concept of a 'Brahmin Left'. Democracy was not, as Anthony Downs had suggested, an economic function where voter share was maximised as a 'catch-all party' teasing centre and centre-right voters. Between the original and the copy, voters preferred the real deal and voted for the right anyway. Last but not least, the 2008 economic crisis came along, calling into question the intellectual and moral authority of the market and its steadfast advocates, both on the left and the right. In the famous image of W. B. Yeats, "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold". With no succeeding policy consensus, the economic crisis has been outlasted by a crisis of political ideas. As Antonio Gramsci noted, a "crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear". Among these morbid symptoms are the rise of the far-right across much of the Western world and the deepening of neoliberal governance with the socialisation of risk and privatisation of reward.

At the current time, we are called upon to be midwives of Gramsci's 'new'. Beyond the political importance of winning the battle for ideas and pushing back the radicalisation of the right, we face pressing challenges in climate change, migration, ageing and the digital transition that require investment, on the one hand, and a rewiring of the economy, on the other. Redistribution and palliative measures are not enough. Rather, **we need to usher in a new economy that is future-proof, sustainable and delivers for working people. A stronger economy is, of course, capable of achieving more resources for welfare and investment.** More importantly, it can sustain better jobs that give our generation not only the freedom to move but the freedom to stay, as proposed by Enrico Letta, who is drafting the High-Level Report on the Future of the Single Market.

"What is to be done?" we often hear, as if decades of 'laissez-faire socialism' made us forget how to intervene in the economy. Thankfully, there is hardly a need to reinvent the wheel. The policy instruments are much like those used in the present neoliberal paradigm. We, too, will use tax and financial incentives.

We, too, will lower the cost of doing business through reform. Our policies will, however, come with a twist; rather than lowering taxes and wages across the board, we can direct incentives to firms that invest in R&D, decent wages and disadvantaged territories. Rather than reducing dismissal costs by embracing labour market flexibility, we can lower training costs and invest in skills. In short, we can deploy conditionality to ensure that there is socialisation not only of risk but also of rewards.

- *We need to usher in a new economy that is future-proof, sustainable and delivers for working people. A stronger economy is, of course, capable of achieving more resources for welfare and investment.*

Portugal has managed to multiply its annual economic growth tenfold, from an average of 0.2 per cent over the period 2000 to 2015, when the Socialists came to power, to an average of 2.1 per cent since. The country has outpaced other survivors of Eurocratic austerity not only by restoring confidence in the economy, but by resorting to this toolkit. In 2022, the government signed a pact with trade unions and employers' confederations to increase wages by 20 per cent over the next four years. Chief among its policies was a 50 per cent tax credit on the costs of wage hikes above 5 per cent. This, however, did not come for free. Of course, the state won by subsidising permanent wage increases for a single year, but, crucially, this incentive only paid out if firms reduced wage disparity and had signed a collective bargaining agreement in the last three years. This agreement has led both to the highest rate of wage growth since the start of the millennium and a boom in collective bargaining.

This, of course, cannot be done without strategy. **We are not indifferent to the kinds of industries we are supporting. By upgrading incumbent sectors and developing a**



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comparative advantage in new products, we need to look to where we can compete through high value rather than low cost.

This can be achieved both vertically, integrating industries upstream and downstream, and horizontally, in related industries. For instance, Portugal has today expanded from being a 'simple' car manufacturer to producing components for most car plants across Europe, hosting the R&D for many of these parts, developing the software that goes into our cars and, even, attracting related industries, such as the flourishing aviation sector.

This does not come without risks, chief among them is the danger we might pick losers rather than winners. The very process of picking is vulnerable to private interests, or at least the perception these might be at play. This can only be counteracted by a 'thick industrial policy'. Thickness is needed at both ends. Projects ought to involve cooperation between firms within an economic cluster and also with the innovation ecosystem. Governments, too, need to mobilise experts to help choose which projects to support. By broadening the pool of people with stakes in the enterprise, we not

only call upon a broader pool of resources to help the project succeed. We also filter out those that are not viable.

Over 30 years on, 'it's (still) the economy, stupid'. The economic troubles brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have mobilised an unprecedented level of corporate welfare. Progressives need to think out a strategy and build up the policies that can foster sustainable and shared prosperity. Ultimately, **this is about much more than growth. It is about offering the working-class better living conditions and an alternative to democratic disillusion and far-right protest.** It is about reclaiming a future for Social Democracy and our planet.



Miguel Costa Matos,
Member of Parliament, Portugal



THE FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY PROGRESSIVE VOICES COLLECTIVE (FFPPVC)



Much more than a mere rhetorical gesture, Feminist Foreign Policy has demonstrated significant potential for reducing global inequalities.

In October 2023, FEPS and FES, supported by an active network of dedicated partners and experts, launched 'The Feminist Foreign Policy Progressive Voices Collective'. This project aims to question traditional approaches to foreign policy to enable an alternative account of foreign relations from the standpoint of the most disadvantaged.

For this project, we are exploring this transformative potential, identifying existing challenges for a "European feminist policy" and seeking concrete policy recommendations.

'A European feminist foreign policy?' is the first publication of the series.





DOSSIER

WOMEN IN POLITICS: BEYOND REPRESENTATION

Women in politics do make a difference. It is not just a question of the fair representation of half of humankind, or of quotas and seats in parliament. While the underrepresentation of women at all levels of decision-making obviously constitutes a severe democratic deficit, and while gender parity is still far from being achieved all over the world, the participation of women in politics, their presence in institutions and government, and their leadership in all spheres is also crucial because the different experiences of women can bring forward actual political change.

Ahead of key European elections, we want to take a moment to reflect on the role and added value of women in politics, as well as on the darker issues that the growing – albeit still insufficient – participation of women in decision-making is raising.

We look at the current European legislature to see how women's actions have turned into concrete legislation. But we also peek into the dark side: women in politics, like women in every field, can be subject not just to discrimination but even to violence. In a first-hand account the former president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, who has been the victim of a ruthless character assassination by her political adversaries, tells her plight. We also look at how far-right parties – in Europe and beyond – have seized and distorted women's rights and feminist topics in public discourse (while at the same time championing anti-gender rhetoric) for their own electoral gains and not for the benefit of women's advancement.

Women in politics do matter

by Evelyn Regner

Even if the role of women in politics is sometimes perceived as mainly a matter of representation, we know that in reality it is much more. It is important for women to be represented at all levels of politics because women make different decisions than men. There are numerous studies showing that heterogeneous teams outperform groups that represent only one worldview. That is why it is long overdue that politics for our whole society be not only done by and for old white men. Female politicians can bring forward real political change. Looking back at past years, it is clear that strong women in politics have achieved great steps forward for the livelihood of women and girls all over Europe.

A slow but sure structural transition has taken place at the top of the European institutions over the current legislative term. The European Commission, the European Central Bank and the European Parliament are now all led by women, for example. In the latter institution, eight of the 14 vice-presidents are female. I am proud to be one of them. Although there is still much work to be done to make female voices heard in European politics, we can already see positive change being brought by all these strong women in positions of power. The fact that more legislation on gender equality has been passed in the current legislative term than ever before is already a good indication of this paradigm shift.

To name just one of many examples, the Women on Boards Directive is the first binding set of rules to establish EU-wide mandatory quotas for female representation on corporate boards. This is a file that had been blocked in the Council for over ten years – but **as a team of many capable and eager women, we have finally been able to get these rules set in stone.** As this law was very close to my heart,

I encouraged European Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli to reopen the law and work on it with us.

► *As a team of many capable and eager women, we were finally able to get these rules of the Women on Boards Directive set in stone: from 2026 onwards, there will be clear rules on female representation on boards.*

Our hard work paid off because from 2026 onwards, there will be clear rules on female representation on boards. Large companies will have to meet the target of 40 per cent representation of the under-represented sex, usually women, on non-executive boards, or 33 per cent among all directors. With these rules, we also commit ourselves to objective and

transparent hiring procedures, breaking away from hiring patterns based on an old boys's network. These rules will change the culture of companies and will have a spillover effect on the whole labour market. From Big Tech companies to the supermarket next door – we want, and we will see, women at the top.

Another example of a recent political achievement for women is the Pay Transparency Directive. It is well-known that women still earn less than men. Indeed, the gender pay gap is currently stagnating at around 13 per cent in the European Union. It was therefore high time to give women the necessary tools to change that imbalance and finally claim equal pay for equal work. This law has received significant pushback from conservatives and, in particular, from men in the European Parliament. I did not expect to encounter so much resistance when bringing transparency to employee salaries, but realpolitik taught me again that there are many voices – especially from the right of the political spectrum – that try to hamper every step taken to strengthen the position of women in our society.

Nevertheless, with a very engaged team of female policymakers, we managed to push the legislation through. This means that **women will finally be able to request information about the salaries of their colleagues in similar positions and to compare them.** We managed to enshrine in law the prohibition of clauses forbidding salaries to be discussed. Moreover, we are doing exactly the opposite: we encourage all women to talk about their salaries and compare them. This is the first step to gender-equal pay in the EU.

- *Women will finally be able to request information about the salaries of their colleagues in similar positions and compare them.*

Additionally, the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention has been a milestone for women's rights in Europe. This is a particularly important step as the Istanbul Convention serves as the gold standard for preventing violence and for protecting women against it. As still not all member states have ratified this important document, the EU had to intervene. Although our chances of winning this battle seemed very low, we did not give up and ultimately succeeded. This means that women and girls all over Europe will finally have a minimum level of protection. But we are counting on women's organisation and strong allies to continue the fight in member states until every one of them has ratified the Istanbul Convention at national level.

Internally, we have also managed to stir up some change. Women are frequently victims of harassment in the world of work. This is also the case in the European Parliament, where a recent anonymous survey by MeTooEP showed that of 1,000 respondents, 48.35 per cent have experienced psychological, 15.88 per cent sexual and 6.69 per cent physical harassment or violence.



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The anti-harassment package aims to change this. Unfortunately, there was also a great deal of backlash, especially by men, in the Committee for Constitutional Affairs. However, I was able to use my position as Chair of the Committee for Equality and later as Vice-President to successfully pass reforms, which not only take victims seriously and allow us to talk about the issue openly, but which will also significantly improve safety and respect for everyone working in and for the European Parliament.

- *It makes a real difference when women are part of the political game.*

In a nutshell, **it makes a real difference when women are part of the political game. However, at the same time, I have to admit that it can sometimes be tough being the only woman in a room full of men.** That is why I want to reach out to all my allies in the political sphere: help us make legislation that works for everybody in our society.

Whatever gender, ethnic or societal background, it is worth fighting for an inclusive agenda, for a female agenda, because the outcome will have an impact on the lives of millions of women in the EU, all with diverse backgrounds. It will have an impact on the female employee who earns much less than her male colleagues, or the single mum who will finally be paid a minimum wage and who will be better able to support her family.

The fight for women's rights always pays off. We need more women in positions of power, as well as male allies to help us bring this change about.



Evelyn Regner,
Vice-President of the
European Parliament



Digital misogyny and character assassination

by Laura Boldrini

"Laura Boldrini must be raped!"

"If I meet her, I'll beat her up and then call her African friends!"

"Let's go get her at home!"

"I would throw Boldrini out of the car running into the guardrail!"

"I'd open her skull with a hatchet to see if there's a brain inside!"

"Watch out, Boldrini: we'll hang you in the square!"

Until I entered politics, I always thought that being a woman had no bearing on my personal path. I had worked in international contexts – often difficult and risky ones, such as places of crisis and conflict – which were frequently considered, by a certain worldview, as exclusively male. But in the United Nations system, I did not experience any limitations due to gender. The jobs there are not made more or less difficult for women to access, just because they are women.

When I came to chair the Italian Chamber of Deputies, I was surprised to discover how much my female status mattered – because the attacks I suffered were directed at me not so much for my role or my work, but because I was a woman. **Threats of death and rape were ubiquitous on my social profiles: violent, aggressive and vulgar comments were aimed at me through the lens of sexism. It thus became immediately clear to me that in Italy there is still a deep-rooted male chauvinist, patriarchal and misogynistic mentality,** according to which women should

not deal with certain issues or hold certain public roles, as these should continue to be reserved for men.

► *Threats of death and rape were ubiquitous on my social profiles: violent, aggressive and vulgar comments were aimed at me through the lens of sexism.*

It must be emphasised that **what was done to me was the result of a deliberate political strategy – a so-called character assassination. This is a deliberate process of destroying a person's reputation in order to get her or him out of the way because she or he is considered to be an obstacle or a competitor.** Every time I took part in initiatives

at the local level I was targeted by the Italian neo-fascist and neo-Nazi galaxy, who shouted insults and slogans dating back to the Mussolini era. In 2014, the 5 Star Movement used me as an 'experiment' to test the reactions of the internet. Through a hate campaign typical of those used by populists, they hurled personal attacks at me using vulgarity and violent language. And then there is Matteo Salvini, the leader of the League, who in terms of hate campaigns is second to none. His highly efficient propaganda machine concocted two operations against me.

First, just like the 5 Star Movement, Salvini's propaganda machine pushed the pedal of sexism so hard that Salvini himself went as far as to appear at a rally accompanied by an inflatable doll, shouting to his people: "There is a Boldrini look-alike here on stage!" This was very serious, not only towards me as a woman, but also towards the third office of state that I held. However, not content with that, he also attacked me for my commitment on migration, and he systematically altered and manipulated



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my thinking: **in his narrative, I became the one who wanted the invasion of Italy, ethnic replacement and the Islamisation of the country**, and therefore he exposed me as an enemy of the Italians to those who follow him.

► *What was done to me was the result of a deliberate political strategy, a so-called character assassination. This is a deliberate process of destroying a person's reputation in order to get her or him out of the way because she or he is considered to be an obstacle or a competitor.*

What is perhaps more serious is that Salvini set up a campaign against me that I have no

qualms in calling criminal because he associated my name with every crime committed by migrants, as if I was the instigator of those misdeeds. Through his social networks, reaching millions of people, the leader of the League spread the message that migrants who commit crimes are linked to me. He associated me with episodes of bloodshed, rape and violence, and coined a hashtag: '#risorseboldriniane' ('Boldrini's resources', as a reference to my statement that migrants represent a resource for Italy). And many of his MPs, mayors, regional and municipal councillors followed him on this path, as did millions of their followers. This was **hatred to the nth degree, which generated – and still generates today – hundreds of thousands of messages full of unrepeatable epithets, rape and death threats.**

Today, we are living in a time of hatred in politics as well as the politics of hatred. There is a part of politics – the sovereigntist and populist right – that needs a scapegoat, almost always a woman, an enemy to lash out at by

resorting to every means, from artfully created news stories, to slander and posts that contain questions that appear innocent, but that in reality are constructed to stir up the worst instincts. And if a woman occupies a leading role, she is immediately pilloried indecently.

Implementing this intimidation strategy serves to relegate women to the lowest point in the chain of power, to discourage them from having a leading role of their own, and to reaffirm that their place is in the private sphere of the family. It is pure misogyny. To trivialise and underestimate the danger of what happens online, to think that feeding misogynistic hatred is a normal practice of confrontation, to believe that virtual violence is not real, is a very serious mistake – because words give rise to actions and behaviour that can have harmful consequences. If it is the leader who is responsible for the incitement, those who follow him feel entitled to do the same. And there is no telling where this may lead. In recent years I have not only seen an exponential increase in threats against me,



but even against my daughter! Tags against me have been found on the walls of Rome. Bullets have arrived. And when children are involved, the reaction is constant anguish, suffering and apprehension. There is also the danger of emulation that is always lurking.

When I was President of the Chamber of Deputies, I dedicated a great deal of effort to the issue of fake news, given the enormous distortions it produces in the functioning of democratic life. Hoaxes pollute public debate and have a very bad effect on people's lives. I therefore launched campaigns and appeals against this phenomenon, I set up two parliamentary committees (on disinformation and xenophobia, respectively), I organised awareness-raising initiatives, seminars and conferences – and, perhaps most importantly, I dedicated them to young people, to make them fully understand the dangers of disinformation.

After my time as President of the Chamber, as a member of parliament, I have presented a law against revenge porn – which is the new frontier of violence against women. I have also put forward a proposal for a law on hate on the internet – a law which, in my opinion, is fundamental for preventing the restriction of freedom of expression of those who, for fear of being attacked, prefer to keep quiet or leave social networks, thus depriving themselves of freedom and the right to express themselves. This damages democracy, consensus and even dissent, and affects the outcome of election campaigns.

It is not true that regulation and the internet are incompatible. Deviance can indeed be fought through the introduction of appropriate regulations because the absence of rules does not mean a guarantee of a free web, but rather the prevalence of the interests – if not abuses – of the strongest.

The road is long, as it is for every cultural and societal change, if we want to respect the real meaning of the internet and bring it back to what it originally was, namely an extraordinary 'agora' of exchanges and opportunities. The rules must not be established by the strongest – the web giants – or by the violent. The web must not be hostage to these. And above all, it should not be forgotten that there is, unfortunately, a movement of 'digital squadism' which is political in nature and located in the right-wing populist universe, and which politics and civil society should question. What we hear instead is a deafening silence.

Women who experience such a reality are often told: 'let it go', 'step aside for a while'. This is the premise for saying, immediately afterwards, that 'you partly brought it on yourself', as if it were a sin to do one's job and express one's ideas. What we would expect, as women, as politicians and as professionals, is the support, backing and encouragement of our colleagues, of the working world in which we are engaged, and of our parties.

Therefore **women must no longer remain silent. The violence and intimidation they suffer online must be denounced publicly and in the courts. And men must be at our side in the journey towards a change in mentality** that can no longer be postponed – a change focused not only on equality, but also on a mature digital consciousness, especially among the younger generation.

► *Implementing this intimidation strategy serves to relegate women to the lowest point in the chain of power, to discourage them from having a leading role of their own, and to reaffirm that their place is in the private sphere of the family.*

Laura Boldrini,
MP and Chair of the
Standing Committee on
Human Rights of the
Chamber of Deputies, Italy



Far-right feminists?

The exploitation of women's rights and what lies behind it

by Viola Dombrowski

For the past decade, far-right parties and mobilisations have been prominently – but selectively – championing women's rights in public discourse. Considering their otherwise salient anti-gender rhetoric, their increasingly traditionalist family policies, and often blatant disdain for feminism, the question arises as to whether they really do care.

To some extent, 'women's rights' have been a staple in global far-right discourse, both in party politics and in non-parliamentary mobilisations, for longer than the recent rise in populist radical right parties over just the last decade. However, more recently, an increasing number of women leaders and MPs representing these populist radical right parties, a growing presence of specifically female mobilisations, and a steadily closing gender gap in voter support, have transformed the image of the far right. This egalitarian 'face-lift' has added to the confusion felt by many, and it requires the question of the far right's intention to be posed anew: do they actually care?

An examination of the recurrent invocations of women's rights by Europe's far right reveals a shared narrative that gives insight into what lies behind these invocations. **In this narrative, an overarching juxtaposition is created between a 'civilised', enlightened and egalitarian Europe on the one hand, and a racialised, inherently backward and misogynistic Islam or broader Global South, on the other.**

► *In Europe's far-right narrative, an overarching juxtaposition is created between a 'civilised', enlightened and egalitarian Europe on the one hand, and a racialised, inherently backward, and misogynistic Islam or broader Global South, on the other.*

This juxtaposition is narrated through the fear of the 'cultural other', who is sometimes described as Muslim, sometimes as Roma, or sometimes as migrant of colour, depending on the regional context. The far right portrays these 'cultural others' as 'carriers' of patriarchal violence and values, threatening the long-won rights and liberties of women in the countries that welcome them. As a symbol of this looming demise, the figure of the 'veiled Muslim woman' is frequently brought forward and misused: unlike the 'native women' whose

liberties must be protected, the 'migrant women' have yet to be liberated.

Although not new, this crisis narrative gained traction in far-right and even mainstream politics, particularly following the so-called 'refugee crisis' and the mass sexual attacks in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015. Indeed, the narrative spread far beyond Germany's and even Europe's borders. Even today, almost ten years later, the same actors continue to employ these events as cautionary tales.

However, it is important to highlight that this racialisation of specifically sexual, and more generally patriarchal, violence serves two distinct purposes within far-right agendas. Primarily, and very obviously, it aims to exclude racialised migrants by marking them as 'culturally incompatible'; secondly, it aims to call for their expulsion from the respective host nations. Coincidentally, this racialisation positions women's rights as the 'gatekeepers' of European societies and their identities as liberal, egalitarian nations.



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- *In light of the persistence of many systemic inequalities and gender-based issues, ranging from the gender pay gap, over contestations of abortion rights, to the shocking number of femicides, we reject the narrative of concluded emancipation.*

As a (possibly less obvious) result of this narrative, feminism is conveyed as a concluded project – as long as 'the other' is kept at a distance. **The only women still in need of feminist intervention and equality policies are 'their' women: Muslim women, migrant women and women of colour.** This is a task that the far right frequently claims as its own in the name of 'women's rights'.

In this way, the far right reconciles its discrediting of feminism with its simultaneous affirmation of women's rights through feminist rhetoric and female representation. In fact, the mobilisation of a supposed crisis of women's rights, as a result of the immigration of 'culturally other' men, kills two birds with one stone. Studies indicate that the main incentive to vote for far-right parties in Europe is their anti-immigration stance and their rejection of multiculturalism. At the same time, 'gender' is an effective *affective* mobiliser, cutting across political issues, and serving as 'symbolic glue' between otherwise divergent, transnational mobilisations.

Returning to the initial question of whether the far right *actually* cares about women's rights or not, the short answer is both yes and no.

To expand, the far right does care about white, 'native' women. In some cases, this care might be limited to women's role as the 'bearers of the nation', while in other cases, such as that of the German AfD, a more complex image of national femininity between traditionalism and modernism is created.

However, from a feminist perspective, the issue is not necessarily whether the far right 'means' this extremely limited conception of women's rights and feminist topics, but rather the consequences that this conception has for *all* women.

Not only should we care if women's rights are co-opted for racist rhetoric and legislation, we must also be wary of whitewashing gender-based violence that is committed by 'natives', and we must be wary of whitewashing threats to women's rights from the very actors who claim to champion them, in circumstances that only serve their own agenda. Moreover, in light of the persistence of many systemic inequalities and gender-based issues, ranging from the gender pay gap, over contestations of abortion rights, to the shocking number of femicides in Europe and around the world, we reject the narrative of concluded emancipation. Women, who are not white, cis,

heterosexual, or able-bodied are, at best, disregarded by the specific affirmation of women's rights by far-right parties. More often, these women are actively excluded, antagonised and disenfranchised.

To conclude with a quote by the feminist researcher Stefanie Boulila, the appropriation of women's rights and the partial adoption of feminist rhetoric by the far right acts as a mere 'liberal smokescreen' to refute multiculturalism and to block further, much-needed progress for all women.

Viola Dombrowski,
PhD student at the University
of Koblenz, working on the
antagonisms and ambivalences in the Alternative für
Deutschland's discursive construction of collective identity





INTERVIEW



Brexit: a cautionary tale

Interview with Catherine Barnard
by László Andor

Brexit is not only an issue of the past. It is also one of the present – and it will remain with us for the foreseeable future. Professor Catherine Barnard thinks that while the pro-Brexit side voted against EU membership in 2016, it was not in favour of any clear vision of the UK outside the EU. Indeed, the UK is still working out today what it wants to be as a country and what it wants to do. Animosity against the EU had developed over time and across political spectrums, not just among Conservative backbenchers. Without the UK, however, the EU is finding it easier to move towards a Social Union, to ensure that welfare states can be made more resilient.

László Andor: Do you think that Brexit has become a kind of cautionary tale for European Union member states, to prevent the typical blame-game against the European Union: the Union is blamed for everything, and people actually believe that it is because of the EU that this or that aspect of life has become overly complicated?

Catherine Barnard: I think that Brexit is a cautionary tale. Now that the UK cannot blame the EU for everything anymore, the responsibility for things that go well and go badly rests at the door of the British government. Look also at what happens in Scotland: when things are going badly, they blame Westminster and London. Of course, you also see other states doing just that. Macron has been blaming the EU for the difficulties he's been experiencing. However, I think Brexit is a cautionary tale in a different way: you could say that Brexit was a bit like a canary in a coal mine. Of course, **there were many reasons why people voted to leave the European Union. Quite a lot had nothing to do with the EU at all; they had to do with widespread unhappiness and the fact that the state, the government, wasn't listening.**

Some things were going wrong, and the government was not addressing them. Migration was one of them. During that time, what was meant by 'migration' was migration from other EU member states. Inside the EU, however, the main concern revolves around migration from outside the EU and border control, which is also why we are seeing a rise in parties on the right.

LA: Would you say that migration was a kind of discussion that was easier for many in the UK government at that time than discussing austerity and developing an alternative to it?

CB: I have been working in Great Yarmouth, which is an impoverished seaside resort on the east coast of England. There were many EU migrants working there. They were working in chicken factories and in the fields and farms around Great Yarmouth. And Great Yarmouth had the fifth-highest leave vote in the United Kingdom. It was easy to say, well, that was because of uncontrolled migration. But in fact, the coastal seaside resorts were far more heavily hit by austerity than the centres.

It was a lethal cocktail: the cake was already shrinking because of austerity, and the perception was that the cake was actually being divided up ever more thinly because there were more mouths to feed, not just local mouths, but also immigrant mouths. However, things are more complicated, as the EU migrant workers were of course working. They were contributing to the economy, and they were doing jobs that British people did not want to do. And the striking thing post Brexit is that some of those factories are now closing down.

► *There were many reasons why people voted to leave the European Union. Quite a lot had nothing to do with the EU at all; they concerned widespread unhappiness and the fact that the state, the government, wasn't listening.*

LA: *If we look back to 2016, it seems that in reality the British people, those 52 per cent, had voted against something, but not necessarily for something. Do you think the UK has found what it wants to be or what it wants to do, in a positive sense?*

CB: The answer is simple: no! **The genius of the Leave campaign was that it could be all things to all people. If you wanted a sovereignty-first Brexit, it was there. If you wanted a mercantilist free-trading Brexit, it was there too. If you wanted a big-state Brexit, take back control, keep migration down, it was also there.** Of course, these things were often mutually exclusive and perhaps somewhat naive in the modern world. And what we saw post Brexit is all the talk about the UK being a regulatory super-power and setting standards. But this has not happened – because the EU does it better and is more powerful. In fact, there has been very little substantive regulatory divergence from EU rules. Just before Christmas, the Treasury said we are not proposing to diverge further on sanitary and phytosanitary standards. So we are staying very close to the EU. The timing for Brexit could not have been worse, because just when the UK was talking about being an outward-looking and trading nation, making free trade agreements with other parts of the world, it happened that other parts of the world were closing down and looking inwards. For example, all the talk about a trade deal with the United States – something that the EU does not have – is for the birds. The trade deal with India may happen,

but the EU is getting there too. The trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, which were seen to be quite big prizes, will only deliver 0.01 per cent of GDP compared to about 5 per cent loss of GDP as a result of Brexit.

LA: *This creates the impression that Brexit is a never-ending journey. One after the other, the UK governments would negotiate and quarrel with the EU institutions, sometimes bringing up Northern Ireland, sometimes fish, sometimes migration, and sometimes something else, and no settled relationship between the UK and the European Union is ever reached. How do you see this?*

CB: Brexit is certainly a process and not an event. However, there is a mood shift in recognising that the UK needs to have good relations with its closest and largest trading partner – and all the more so in light of the current geopolitical situation. There is much talk in the UK that if there is a change of government at the end of the year – if the Conservatives are voted out and the Labour Party is voted in with a substantial majority – there might be an opportunity to reset the agenda. Keir Starmer has already ruled out returning to the single market and customs union, so that already rules out quite a lot of proximity. But he has not ruled out some role for the European Court of Justice. His red lines are less sharp than Theresa May's red lines or Boris Johnson's pretty tough ones.

LA: *But, if we compare the current situation with the capacity of the United Kingdom to pursue its interests within the European Union when it was an EU member, there is no comparison. We should not forget that the United Kingdom had a kind of tailor-made approach to many policies like Schengen, the single currency, the working time directive, and a budget rebate. It also maintained a sceptical view on what we call the political economy of the continent: the social market economy, in which there is a very clear case for social policy coordination and social legislation. So, what role did the social questions play?*

CB: Indeed, the strong advocates of Brexit laid a lot of blame at the door of EU social policy, particularly the rules on working time and the rules on agency work. It was widely thought that after Brexit, the UK implementation of those rules would be ripped up and that would be the end of it. The trade union movement was also somewhat divided because, on the one hand, they appreciated the good EU directives and were supportive of the EU, particularly when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister as she appeared to be hell-bent on dismantling our social model. Having EU rules there to try and provide some sort of safety net was a good thing for the trade union movement.

However, the trade union movement was upset by the question of to what extent collective action could be used to resist social dumping within the EU. This led to quite a strong 'Lexit' movement – 'Labour, or the Left, for Brexit' – which also pointed to the decision by the Court of Justice about the four freedoms being applied to strike laws in Scandinavia (Sweden and Finland). According to them, the 'four freedoms' actually meant that the UK could employ cheap foreign labour from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania and so forth.

It is remarkable that those working time regulations and the agency worker regulations have not been torn up. Recently they have been amended, but only slightly. And even the Conservative government is saying it will maintain workers' rights.





LA: Which is a good thing.

CB: Certainly for workers, it absolutely is a good thing. And the UK government would say that they go further than EU law with new legislation.

LA: In the EU, there is an expectation that every political cycle allows for some further development of employment law. Is the idea of a social union, in your view, an academic discourse? Or is it a kind of genuine programme that can be fulfilled by more and more robust EU social policy coordination or by the EU social dimension?

CB: I think the pillar on social rights has delivered some good things, not least the minimum wage directive. It is still somehow struggling because it was difficult to reach an agreement on the platform work directive that is intended to give rights to those working in the gig economy. I think the EU has let workers down to the extent that, throughout the period of the crisis, the social dimension of the EU, and thus in the member states, was being significantly eroded, in Portugal or Greece for example.

I think the very fact that there was not a clear commitment to some form of social union meant that the economic union could always trump any social considerations. I also think it is complicated because when the EU was first established, social policy was very much seen as a national competence. And the delivery of the four freedoms was seen as an EU competence. And it was never thought the two would mix. That was probably naive, or maybe it was just because they had a very limited vision of what the European Economic Community, as it then was, would deliver. But with the European Union in its much more sophisticated state, a single currency for the majority of the states, it was always likely to be the case that social would get trampled in favour of the economic priorities – as we saw in the period just after the financial crisis. And that had a legacy effect and, of course, also fed into the Lexit debate I mentioned before. It is important that the EU is also a social union,

with a very strong social commitment, and that is where the pillar on social rights is a good thing. The interesting question is how far the EU can go, particularly if the next European Parliament is dominated by the right and the centre-right.

LA: In the last five years, some would argue that the EU has gone beyond what was expected of it. So in what field do you think the EU can still evolve, also considering the legal debate and whether something is possible on the grounds of the existing treaty or not?

CB: If you had asked me five years ago whether we would have a directive on the minimum wage, I would have laughed at you, not least because of the legal basis issues. There are areas where the EU could go a bit further. For example, in respect to the equality directives, they could cover goods and services. You can tinker around the edge with existing measures. The question is, what could be the next big stage? The trade union movement would say that where the EU really has not delivered is in respect to social dialogue. But of course, again, there is a competence issue, which makes it more difficult for the EU. **Where I think the EU is doing something very interesting – and I think it has been unrecognised and not even the EU has perhaps recognised the implications for labour law – is the platform work directive, if it gets adopted.** But also, the Digital Markets Act and particularly the Digital Services Act, which is helping those who are not traditionally seen as workers, but also influencers and content creators. All of these people are selling services online, and they depend on these platforms. And what happens is that the platform suspends them for whatever reason, because they have breached the community guidelines, for example. The EU is already providing remedies for these people. But they are not shouting this from the rooftops, or saying, look, we are doing good things, not just for traditional workers, but for those who are in the new world, which is the digital provision of services.

LA: Social policy should not be looked at as a fringe policy, but as a sector in itself. We need to look at a broader social dimension of all EU policies, whether we speak about the single market, trade or the monetary union.

CB: Absolutely. And I would say further that we need to recognise that the traditional forms of work, the employer-worker divide, affect many millions of workers across the EU. But there are an awful lot of people who now consider themselves self-employed, who may be genuinely self-employed, but who are still very dependent on certain platforms or certain workgivers. What protection are they getting? That is where the Digital Services Act is interesting – because they can get some protection under that. The problem is that we risk getting stuck in a rut if we think about employment law entirely in the context of what we saw in the last century, which is the sort of employer/worker dependency. Lots of people are in that situation, but an awful lot are not. An increasing number of people are self-employed, and pretty dependent self-employed. We therefore need to think more broadly about who should be protected by employment law.

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László Andor,
FEPS Secretary General



The image features a vintage television set with a stack of four books resting on top of it. The entire scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter. The title 'PROGRESSIVE READS & VIEWS' is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font across the middle of the image. A thin white horizontal line is positioned below the title.

PROGRESSIVE READS & VIEWS

White Europe?

by Elena Calandri



Hans Kundnani

Eurowhiteness. Culture, Empire and Race in the European Project

London, Hurst Publishers, 2023

In today's critical assessment of Europe, European integration and European institutions, the colonial legacy plays a pivotal role. This follows a widely perceived estrangement between Europe and the Global South and difficulties in handling cultural diversity in European societies, the consequences of human exchanges, globalisation and migration. It also follows an academic trend pointing to the nexus between European integration and the two major processes in European post-1945 history: decolonisation and post-colonial relations. Although this nexus was acknowledged by historians long before the recent spike in interest, in this newest incarnation, it has been given absolute centrality. Indeed, it is considered not just as one component in a complex set of events and ideas, but as a crucial driver, and sometimes even the main driver. The field is crowded and to "contest the absence of (post)colonial awareness from the process of European formation and to rewrite it into its narrative" (Ponzanesi 2018) is now the choice of many of those writing in post-colonial studies. Hans Kundnani's 'long essay' *Eurowhiteness. Culture, Empire and Race in the European Project* is to be read in this framework. **It is a denunciation of the 'hidden' ideas lying behind the origins, the development and the**

present of European integration, rhetorically construed as a confutation of "what 'pro-Europeans' say". Kundnani's first key argument is that Europe and the EU are an 'imagined community'. He rejects the "pro-Europeans' standard narrative" of the integration process as a choice for peace and against nationalism. Instead, he defines the post-war idea of Europe and the integration process as nationalism at a continental level, that is 'regionalism', and its 'universalism' as an updated version of the old 'civilising mission'. Kundnani stresses how the integration process launched in the 1950s was Eurocentric and reserved for Europeans, and how its 'civic' component, based on territorial belonging and civic values, coexisted with an ethno/cultural vein based on racialised bias and 'whiteness'. It is this vein that re-emerged after the so-called 'migration crisis' of 2015 and that, disturbingly, is now shared outside 'populist circles'.

To support his theses, Kundnani provides first a historical excursus from ancient Greece to the second world war to show how the idea of Europe, and European identity, has "formed in opposition to multiple non-European Others": from the Greek poleis confronting the 'barbarians', to the Holy Roman Empire

opposing Islam in the Middle Ages and the early modern period – Islam in both its Arab and Ottoman incarnations. However, it is in the Enlightenment that Kundnani finds the roots of the current civilisational vision, including race and whiteness, and the idea of European superiority which inspired colonialism and its culture. This legacy informed colonisation in the 19th and 20th centuries, and was very alive as the second world war set the stage for the continental integration process. The book develops as an overview of the history of continental integration from 1945 to the present. **It gives colonialism a central role in driving the Paris and Rome Treaties, which were inspired by "a colonial project", and it traces the vanishing role of colonial preoccupations in the ensuing decades of the cold war, when the flourishing integration process became a "vehicle for colonial amnesia".** During these decades,

► *Kundnani's first key argument is that Europe and the EU are an 'imagined community'.*

de-politicisation and economic development allowed the Christian Democrat 'fathers of Europe', followed by the Social Democrats, to consolidate the narrative of a civic identity, based on territorial belonging, as well as the narrative of a "European model" based on the social market economy.

► *Human rights and the rule of law perpetuated the idea of the universal value of European civilisation. It is in the 20 years between the end of the cold war and the financial crisis, however, that a renewal in the 'civilising mission' reached its apex.*

Human rights and the rule of law perpetuated the idea of the universal value of European civilisation. It is in the 20 years between the end of the cold war and the financial crisis, however, that a renewal in the 'civilising mission' reached its apex, with the EU imposing this mission on Eastern Europe, through the enlargement process, and in relations with the rest of the world, where economic and political conditionality was increasingly embedded in the EU's identity and international profile. Indeed, it is also present in the current policies of the Union. However, the financial crisis and, to an even greater extent, the so-called migratory crisis of 2015 saw reversals in the imposition of this mission. Indeed, Kundnani detects the shift towards a defensive attitude and the revival of emphasis on external threats. There is 'othering', the re-assertion of an ethno/cultural identity and a self-definition of civilisation, to provide an alternative after worsening economic conditions, the end of redistributive policies, and the crisis of the 'social model'.

Scholars of European studies widely accept many of the arguments in Kundnani's book. The discussion of leading French historian René Girault in the late 1980s, with regard to the colonial preoccupation marking the beginning of the integration process, is well known. The role of the French colonials in the European Commission's General Directorate 8 'Development' is particularly discussed. Nobody doubts either, at least among historians, that Europe's post-war political leaders defended their national interest both in the European institutional framework and in their national and collective relations with the rest of the world (just think of Charles de Gaulle!) Of course, continental integration was as much a way to govern mutual relations as to collectively retain a degree of independence in the age of superpowers. And yes, **the nations tried to keep bonds alive with their former empires, although they did so much more as individual countries than collectively, and they did so with a degree of continuity with old topics and cultural biases which were a legacy of colonial times.** Certainly, European integration was, and was understood to be, a pioneering form of regionalism. From the 1970s, diplomats and political scientists discussed a 'European identity': the 'European model' of economic integration was, meanwhile, put forward in Latin America and South East Asia. Moreover, the 1990s and early 2000s are now widely accepted as a period of 'Euro-intoxication' and hubris, although proper historical research is limited. Certainly, the 'universalist' language, the normative approach and the systematic inclusion of economic and political conditionality have been acknowledged as a mark of the times and of the much-heralded, and ill-fated, 'Global Europe'. To some these points were supposed to compensate for the lack of legitimisation for an international role for the EU and for a role that was to be of benefit of citizens.

The problem with Kundnani's book, and its willingly abrasive posture and revisionist ambition, is not in its individual arguments, but in its general, unproven theses. These, at best, confuse a part of the picture with

the whole, and adopt an exceptionalist attitude, in particular towards recent European trends. The thesis concerning the pivotal role of colonialism and of a racialised post-colonial culture in European integration is unconvincing, as is the claim that universalism represents a revived 'civilising mission'. The wealth of quotations, and examples are cherry-picked to support Kundnani's argument: the omissions are also telling. Historical generalisations and simplifications are just too grandiose and one-sided. The whole seems to lack evidential and methodological foundations. Kundnani's arguments are to be found at the crossroads of where four academic trends meet: the history of ideas, identity, post-colonial studies and critical race theory. While all offer essential insights, all too often, there is no interest in checking whether and, if so, how those ideas led to concrete choices before taking them as *the* reality. Minor figures are given exaggerated importance as interpreters of their time, philosophers are given exaggerated importance as governors, and ideology becomes the structural foundations. Provincialising Europe is a lesson which probably needs to be more widely understood.

► *The problem with the book, and its willingly abrasive posture and revisionist ambition, is not in its individual arguments, but in its general, unproven theses.*

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Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb

Stanley Kubrick, 1964

It was over 60 years ago that the world was as close to nuclear war as it is now. The best film to tackle this greatest anxiety of the time was released shortly after the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Producing a hilarious black comedy about this deeply distressing period of history required two outstanding cinema personalities: Stanley Kubrick and Peter Sellers.

The 36-year-old Kubrick (co-writer, director and producer) had spent years studying the politics as well as the technology of war. He thus had an exact knowledge of both the functioning and the effects of the bomb. However, he believed that the most effective way to tell people about the risk of nuclear weapons was a satirical comedy. This required a top-class comedian. And so it was that the 39-year-old Sellers, the world-renowned Inspector Clouseau from *The Pink Panther*, came to be cast in *Dr. Strangelove*. With much improvisation, Sellers played three leading roles: Group Captain Mandrake, who discovers that disaster is imminent; US President Mufflay, who in principle should be the most powerful character, but in reality is not; and the titular character himself, Dr. Strangelove. Much of the film is played inside a mock B-52 bomber and war room, which never existed in reality, but which became so real in viewers' minds that when Ronald Reagan became president, he looked for it in the White House.

The film presents a slightly exaggerated scenario in which erratic human behaviour and technological failure can trigger the most destructive weapons, while all efforts to avoid the impending catastrophe fail, with madness then prevailing. The madness of loving the idea of total annihilation is impersonated by Dr. Strangelove, a scientist of German origin, who occasionally manifests eruptions of his suppressed emotional and intellectual loyalty to the Führer. His figure is a fusion of ex-Nazi rocket engineer Werner von Braun and Los Alamos alumnus Edward Teller, who during the cold war went on to design and increasingly advocate destructive nuclear weapons.

Kubrick was not the first artist to elaborate on a nuclear nightmare. Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt had already done so in his 1961 drama *The Physicists*. But, drawing inspiration from Sigmund Freud, Kubrick takes us to the psychoanalytical side, where a sense of weakness can trigger disproportionate aggression. His film also invites discussion about science in general, and connects to the question of our time: can human inventions, including the most destructive, take control over humanity? At a time of wall-to-wall jingoism and military escalation, this question still resonates with viewers today.



Oppenheimer

Christopher Nolan, 2023

Even three viewings might not be enough to grasp the astonishing complexity of Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*. I watched it twice, but probably missed many essential details of this sumptuous movie. The complexity, far from being a flaw, is the film's strength. The viewer is challenged to keep up with a vortex of sophisticated dialogues that move from the personal to the scientific and political levels in three different timeframes. The elaborate screenplay gives the film a thriller-like pace that provides no time for distraction or moments of boredom.

Three hours disappear fast while the audience is drawn into the massive Manhattan Project, under the pervasive surveillance of the US army; into the rise and fall of the 'father of the atomic bomb', and into the historical and political events that, triggered by the nuclear option, led to the end of the second world war, the descent of the iron curtain and McCarthyism's witch hunt.

The protagonist is surrounded by an abundance of characters, primarily scientists and politicians, interpreted by an exceptional cast, including an extraordinary Robert Downey Jr in the role of the 'villain', and an obnoxious Gary Oldman. The latter appears on screen only for a few minutes to play an extremely cynical President Truman who, in a brief but key exchange with Oppenheimer, exposes how even the most authoritative scientist of that era was only a small pawn in a much larger and destructive game.

These characters act as a chorus and exalt Oppenheimer's ambiguity, who is initially consumed by the ambition of being the first to build the atomic bomb in a military and scientific competition against the Nazis and the advanced German physics community; and then by the fear that his invention might unleash an atomic race with America's new enemy, the USSR, against which he finds himself powerless. Oppenheimer's deeper motives, though, remain hidden behind the character's vanity, hypocrisy and unfathomable face.

Less hidden are the Americans' motives. The film subscribes to the (largely accepted) view that the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki not to end the war but as a warning to the Soviets. The characters in the movie act with the understanding that the choices they make are existential and that the bomb represents a turning point in human history. But eventually they give in to the awareness that the folly of 'mutual assured destruction' is a horrifying concrete possibility in the hands of a few unscrupulous politicians, both yesterday and today.

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