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The quarter of a century mark

It was repeated time and again that 2024 was a groundbreaking year, if not for any other reason than the number of elections, which involved half of the world's population. For all democrats across the globe, this was a reason to cheer. However, sadly, this time around, it was not a wave of euphoria that would see celebrations for succeeding in politically empowering the citizenry worldwide. Far from it: many observers watched the polls and trends with growing anxiety. Precipitously, Francis Fukuyama's old classic[1] was back at the top of reading lists – for all kinds of reasons. Ultimately, we did not reach the end of history. If anything, we seemed to have briefly reached it at the beginning of the 1990s, which, after roughly two generations, is now seeing its dawn.

The war in Europe, EU member states with authoritarians in power and the rise of the far right – these and many other aspects of contemporary life seem to indicate that, indeed, it was not the end of history but a transition. The older amongst us may wonder how that is possible, since vivid memories of the Second World War are still alive, and many remember the experiences of living on both sides of the Iron Curtain. But then – did we not say that the world is moving at a different speed? Did we not say that reality is created by the information, true or otherwise, that can travel within a split second to recipients all over the world? Did we not say that Covid-19, which was just a few years ago, would change us forever? Now, we see ourselves happily forgetting all about any precautions. It seems, indeed, that, as politically involved individuals, we should finally do better than watch the world spinning out of control, blaming all possible circumstances and disempowering whatever is left of the democratic system with notions such as a polycrisis. Colm Murphy is very correct in that sense;[2] it has become an excuse to indulge in nostalgic thinking about the reality and about us in it.

It is a time like no other when it is no longer about a few points up or down on the electoral scale. Especially while accepting that the political landscape is fragmented and polarised on the one hand, and on the other, being willing to think about ourselves

1 Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of the History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press).
2 Murphy, C. (2024) "The polycrisis diagnosis and its problems", in Diamond, P. and Skrzypek, A. (eds) *Next Left Vol. 16: The Politics of Polycrisis* (Bonn: Dietz).

alongside the parameters of the reality of traditional mass parties, frankly there is not even any potential to continue offering a shred of comforting truth. It is high time to realise that a quarter of a century has passed, and that from the beginning of it, or after the electoral cycle around the previous German general elections,[3] it is far from becoming a social democratic century. Social Democracy is facing a massive predicament – which has been sealed by the 2024 voting results, with some exceptions, making it more a force of the past than of the present. If the movement is to have a future and aspire to define the remaining 75 years of this century, it will need to start by emancipating itself and thinking of a great project for the future.

The European and American elections

The key to turning the tides is to embrace another kind of thinking. History has enabled the movement to think about itself as a force able to win elections, and it would understand victory as a landslide. In the past, social democratic parties could obtain enough votes to form single-party governments or define the composition of coalition cabinets, in which they played a decisively dominant role. The political and, hence, party systems have changed so much that it seems less and less possible to hope for such results of the past. Today, a party can improve its electoral result, even finish first, and still be ousted from the government – which was the case for the Swedish Social Democratic Party in the previous elections. A party can also find itself completely out of the parliament, like CSSD (now SocDem) in the Czech Republic, whose chances of returning are small.

There are volumes written about why progressive parties are losing ground. A relatively new one, edited by Silja Häusermann and Herbert Kitchelt,[4] explains this slow and intermittent electoral erosion by quoting two streams of hypotheses – one that focuses on nostalgia (suggesting that Social Democrats have changed too much, drifting away from their core) and the other on how parties are 'stuck' (lacking the ability to adjust and face contemporary challenges). Either of the two, or both together, imply that learning lessons from the defeats is the first step in doing better. However, that alone does not seem to be enough. The challenge is to dare to imagine ourselves completely anew. There should be no fear that a proud legacy of core values or of consistency will be forgotten. These values will always be part of the DNA, especially since core values are the compass for everything – and so, by default, they are at the heart of any initiative. But what will give Social Democracy a chance today is not to dwell on how to repackage these values – but rather how to articulate a project that responds to the progressive ambitions of contemporary societies and is able to garner majorities in the new type of block politics that is emerging.

3 See: Hoffmann de Moura, K., A. Skrzypek and R. Wilson (eds) (2022) *Towards a Social Democratic Century? How European and Global Social Democracy Can Steer a Course through Crises* (Berlin and Brussels: Social Europe, FEPS and FES).

4 Häusermann, S. and H. Kitchelt (eds) (2024) *Beyond Social Democracy: The Transformation of the Left in Emerging Knowledge Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Therefore, one must be honest about what happened in the 2024 European elections. Of course, as every five years, they were announced as being 'historic' – and they lived up to those expectations, but not in the way the narrative would have it.[5] Yes, the European People's Party (EPP) emerged as a winner. They undoubtedly succeeded, not only because they could claim the largest number of seats but also because they could overcome the internal crises that had been consuming conservative and Christian democratic parties just two or three years ago. But they claimed their victory on election night, promising to lead a pro-democratic coalition, which appeared to have been a hasty announcement. The narrative did not surprise, considering that only two sitting prime ministers across the 27 member states won these European Parliament (EP) elections in their respective countries – Donald Tusk (EPP) and Georgia Meloni (ECR) – so it was about making the point. But perhaps the EPP themselves underestimated the dynamics of the new EP and the Council, and perhaps, as with everyone else in Europe, they did not quite believe that they would have three competitors on their right: the European Conservatives and Reformists, the 'Europe of Sovereign Nations' group and the 'Patriots for Europe'. This has been a turning point, and the EPP crossed over it with the attitude of a cold-headed, pragmatic, power-seeking force. They would seek the votes where they could find them, which was painfully proven by the first votes of the new legislative period – to start with the law on deforestation.

This all seems to have caused cognitive dissonance among Social Democrats, leading them to rebel against the EPP for their disrespect of the rules of the '*cordon sanitaire*'. Social Democrats were relieved they still are the second-largest group in the EP, with the number of MEPs comparable to that of the previous legislature. They found themselves in a new kind of political play, without mastering its rules. Their size did not guarantee the same position as in the past. Their other traditional democratic allies noted massive losses (especially the Greens, but also liberals and the left), making it impossible to see Social Democrats as leading any type of progressive camp. They can also only count on four members out of 27 in the European Council and four commissioners. Despite the call for great rebalancing from their side, they had no possibility of enforcing the same setup as they did in 2019 (when their leading candidate, Frans Timmermans, even stood a chance of leading the new Commission). Indeed, the new Commission would not even see Nicolas Schmidt's return. And then, during the EP hearings, Social Democrats were confronted with two extraordinary developments. Their calls not to make the ECR candidate, Raffaelle Fito, vice president remained unheard, and they saw the committee's votes suspended on the question of the vice president with the argumentation that the social democratic candidate for first executive vice president, Teresa Ribeira, needed to answer a hearing at the national parliament first. The latter was to define if she, in fact, was responsible for any aspect of the disaster caused by the floods that devastated Spain last October.

5 Skrzypek, A. (2024) "The 'historical' European elections 2024: Dramatic moments, moderate outcomes". *The Progressive Post*, 20 June.

The situation at the EU level kept escalating: the presidents of EPP, S&D and ALDE met to discuss the crisis and left the meeting with a new accord, enumerating the priorities of their continuing alliance. The Commission was eventually voted on without much further delay, as there was a sense that the EU could not afford for the new college to drift away, when, on the other side of the Atlantic, US citizens – to the disbelief of so many – re-elected Donald Trump as president of the US. Surely, those like Arancha Gonzalez, who wrote that the faith of Europe should be decided by Europeans and in Europe, had a valid point, but the news still had impetus. Progressives tried to underline that there were some wins, like adding the missing 'social' to the portfolio of Vice-President Roxana Minzatu, or having, for the first time, 'Housing' as a part of Dan Jørgensen's portfolio (something they had campaigned for) and appointing Glenn Micallef as Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness and Youth. It was also pointed out that Olivér Várhelyi's mandate had been adjusted. The new Commission was voted in with the slimmest majority in its history. This may not be, in itself, the worst thing, as it reflects, on one hand, the many tensions that emerged during the approval process and, on the other, the progressive politicisation of the process. That is a development towards the increased transparency Social Democrats have been arguing for. However, what they had not anticipated was to what extent such a dynamic would affect them and their internal cohesion.

Hardship of the new political season

This new political season sees the social democratic family as part of a game with a new set of rules. The grand coalition may be such in name only, and being the second-largest group in the EP no longer means what it used to. It is hard to weigh our political family's current leverage, given that it will be exposed to ruthless and previously inadmissible attacks, not only from the EPP – which may not be a trustworthy ally but still, in general, abides by the rules of parliamentary democracy – but even more from those to the right of ECR. The S&D Group may try to resort to calls to constrain and disallow the practices that would normally be considered as falling out of the scope of democratic politics. However, they have already been tested, as everything and anything can be included within these brackets. The unspeakable attacks and vicious allegations against Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and his family under the shield of 'anti-corruption' are an example of such practices. And to that end, would Social Democrats have the power to re-define and re-enforce the boundaries of, for example, freedom of speech and pluralism, and to what extent do pro-Putin positions fall within them?

To make things more complex, Social Democrats are divided internally. In his outstanding lecture held for FEPS ahead of the EP elections,[6] Simon Hix argued that though S&D has been very consistent in several key votes during the past mandate, as a family, it remains internally split about the strategic issues that will define the next five years, such as

6 Hix, S. (2024) "The likely political and policy consequences of the EP 2024 elections". FEPS, 21 March.

international trade and trade agreements. These divergences can be overcome, even if the EU's national realities could suggest irreconcilable differences in national approaches. For that, the progressive family still has a network of organisations and, above all, one structure that is meant to be the place to debate, namely, the Party of European Socialists (PES). But what seems even more worrying at this point is the very emotional divide about the strategy – which is partially related to the very unequal capacity within the movement.

Coming back to the map of the EP election results, there are only two countries in which Social Democrats won: Sweden and Portugal. In both countries, progressive parties are in opposition. The PES family has been disproportionally weakened in Central and Eastern Europe, where some of the sister parties have obtained a very meagre representation (Nowa Lewica, for example, has won three instead of seven MEPs) and others have not entered the EP at all (for example, Czech SOCDEM or Hungarian MSZP). Thus, while the total number of S&D MEPs is almost unchanged, the size of the delegations is very diverse and tension-inducing. Furthermore, while this is a factor that influences how representatives engage in the European debate, sister parties still face very different dilemmas on the national front. To offer some examples, the Austrian SPÖ entered governmental negotiations driven by the sense of responsibility to prevent the winner of the September elections – FPÖ – from forming one. The French Socialists entered the Front Populaire and succeeded in resurrecting the party, but, soon after the EP elections, faced early national elections, whereby the Rassemblement National risked winning the majority within the National Assembly. In the end, the new parliament emerged as a stage for 'three-block politics' – a possibility the French political system was unprepared for and that is leading to perpetual tensions and governance crises. These are just two cases that illustrate why sister parties disagreed on whether to vote for the new Commission or not. Those who voted in favour underlined that there was hardly any chance for a better proposal. And those who voted against it claimed it was a matter of principle. Both had valid points, but such an open rupture is a potentially dangerous political liability when it comes to calling on other issues in the future. Especially, in the face of the ruthlessness, cold and calculating state of mind on the centre-right part of the hemicycle.

The composition and dynamics of the EP are not the only things that have changed. Another important aspect is the quality of politics, how it is being judged and what citizens expect. Social Democrats tend to think of citizens as clusters of voting groups and give much importance to the criterion of 'delivery'. Certainly, citizens define themselves according to certain characteristics (level of education, income, place of residence, age, gender etc.), but these are somehow becoming more and more fluid, as reflected in voters' volatility. So, Progressives have been focused on why people refrain from voting for them and have tried to appeal to them based on the tendencies identified in previous votes, hence playing mostly defence and being slightly out of touch. This aspect, if added to the 'delivery' approach, unavoidably transforms the relationship between social democratic parties and the electorate into a transactional one. That will continue being problematic because, what Progressives may consider as a show of respect and preparedness – to offer alternatives and to stick to boundaries of political correctness – may not be a competitive advantage in

the contemporary reality, when often it is not soundness but scandal that sells. Even more so, when it comes to social media, an environment where Progressives still find it hard to persevere (in spite of the fact that social media is no longer new). Progressives are told that they broadcast instead of engage. In that sense, the usual social democratic strategy – 'we may not have the numbers, but we have the competence and will strive for primacy in European politics this way' – may require some further adjustments. It allowed the lead on many dossiers and improved the lives of Europeans in the previous mandate, but it will not be effective by default now if applied in the exact same manner.

Out of gloom and doom

The previous pages may be seen as a very dark portrait of European Social Democracy, which finds itself in an unusual position. Hardly anything is what it seems or used to be. There are serious issues that will have to be faced internally and externally, and, unlike in the past, there is no return to the comfort connected to proud legacies or wisdom, as the pendulum will not turn back, making things electorally right. While this is all true, astonishingly, it may be the key impulse to finally take the movement out of the brackets where politics has put it. Maybe this is the moment to let go of nostalgia and dream big, almost in a subversive way, to conceive a new project worth being the vision of a better future for all in the 21st century.

This is a moment to shake off self-pity about the social democratic electoral standing and let go of the shy jealousy of how others, in particular right-wing radicals, master the universe of social media and attract young people. Nobody wants to adhere to the losing side and definitely not to those who forge the language poised by disempowerment. In a world that is as frightening as the current one – with people fearing not just the big picture or their kids' future, but their bills and whether they will be able to last until the next payday – it will be useless to offload on them social democratic misfortunes and the complexity of the polycrisis, or scare them with fascism re-approaching. It is not the social democratic nature to compete as doomsayers, but rather, as Donald Sassoon[7] once wrote, it is to state what is wrong, how to change it and why Progressives are the ones to be entrusted with that mission. To do so, European Social Democracy will need a new combat strategy, with a very modern arsenal of programmatic, organisational and communication tools.

Secondly, Social Democracy needs to understand what it wants to be. Certainly, it cannot remain what it used to be, and it cannot keep thinking about itself as 'the second, possibly opposition, party'. This is far too narrow. Here, there is an attempt to number the reasons why this will not work on the EU level, but it also hardly seems to be a way forward in a national context. Perhaps this is a time to accept that a new kind of block politics is emerging, whereby political fight will be defined according to very different rules, and

7 Sassoon, D. (2010) *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris).

coalitions will have other dynamics as well. It would be unnatural for the centre-left to try and imitate the power politics of the centre-right, similarly, for the centre-right, it would be impossible to compete with Progressives when it comes to creating a real, multilayered, vibrant and intellectually critical movement. This is where the potential for renewal and reinvigorating lies. There are successful examples of that happening already: the Dutch PvdA-Groen-Links approach and investments in mechanisms of deliberative democracy inside the party; the organic work that Lithuanian LSDP completed meticulously; the path Elly Schlein's PD embarked on; the new approach to local canvassing that Austrian SPÖ mastered; and many others. The PES could help collect these experiences and build on them. There is much potential here, which can be boosted remembering the spectacular, pre-electoral consultation that PES ran with trade unions and non-governmental organisations.[8] They could be forged into fora, becoming a more permanent feature within the legislative period, as it is increasingly evident that democratic resilience will not come from rules but from participatory politics.

Thirdly, this is a time for a new, bold and ambitious project, which would bring hope, respond to both people's fears and ambitions, and be a bridge across the diverse experiences of the past years. In that sense, Social Democrats perhaps underestimated the disempowering effect that the 2007-2008 crisis had (also on them as a movement), pushing them into the rhetorics of fighting inequalities through policies of minimum rights and standards. The 'minima' are relevant to set the limits; these are times of unprecedented developments – which do not need to be described only in terms of how they harm but also how they can harness processes. From this point of view, the PES Manifesto 2024 was an excellent compendium of good policies, but ahead of 2029, the PES family and its allies will have to think more about a project, a grand vision. Assuming that digital capitalism is unavoidably the next stage of capitalism, then it must be dealt with together with the world of labour. The approach of 'I am not an expert' must be dropped, as it needs to be mastered and shaped – something the PSOE manifesto is a great example of. There is also the question of societal and demographic changes. Here, Social Democrats need to sketch what kind of community they want – bridging differences, solving distributional conflicts and empowering all. This takes the deliberation out of cultural war and places it where the debate needs to be – how to construct and enact the social contract for the new age. And in doing so, one must be more hopeful, as societies and the individuals within them are often more progressive than one thinks. This is what makes processes, such as the programmatic revision of Swedish SAP, so inspiring. It is about turning over every stone, with no prejudice – and with openness about potential new directions. One may face many detours and not always get the answers that polling agencies or spin doctors would advise, but what is known and familiar will certainly not suffice for passionately convincing citizens in 2029 – when the EU will have been profoundly changed again.

8 Skrzypek, A. and K. Konig (2024) "Ahead of the European elections 2029: Note to ourselves". Policy study. FEPS and FES, November.

And on that note, Social Democrats may, of course, look back at 2024, look at each and every election that took place, and ponder. It has been hard not to frown, but there have also been good moments: the unexpected returns of PS France, PASOK and the Irish Labour Party; the landslide of the Labour Party in the UK; and a grand victory in Lithuania. The next 12 months will see further changes of the EU political map, and especially the outcome of the German federal vote will resonate. But however hard and demanding this new legislative term will be, however out of control Social Democrats may feel tempted to see themselves – they cannot afford it. In practice, the countdown to 2029 has already started – and Progressives are still the only force that will keep the EU focused on its primary goals: a community of peace and prosperity. And that is the one responsibility that, regardless of anything else, should keep Social Democrats focused on the search for a historical page turn.