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SUMMER

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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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PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

by Hedwig Giusto

It is no mystery: European Socialists are struggling. They are struggling to make sense of a world that is changing at an extraordinary pace, and to adapt to it. It is a world where the traditional roles and alliances of the West – as well as Europe's – are being questioned. European Socialists are thus struggling to balance their institutional responsibilities with the need to take bold, unprecedented positions and actions in the face of major European and international crises. And they are struggling to reconnect with voters who are increasingly gripped by concerns over the rising cost of living, their security, the conflicts now looming near the EU's borders and the threat of climate change – along with the costly measures required to address it.

Many European citizens have lost confidence in the state as well as in the European institutions, and their ability to protect and provide for citizens. This is reflected in the increasing success of far-right political parties – which are gaining influence not only in national parliaments and governments, but also in the European Parliament, where a new right-leaning majority is challenging the long-standing dominance of the mainstream parties.

Against this gloomy backdrop, defeatism is not an option. While it is certainly time for reflection, we should not dwell on our misfortunes or retreat into a defensive stance. It is time to take action and to forge a path towards a Socialist renewal. Therefore, in this new issue of the Progressive Post, we offer European progressive forces some food for thought around some of the key issues that Social Democratic parties need to take into account when defining their strategies.

The **Special Coverage** *European Social Democracy – A transformative force for the future* includes compelling analyses and proposals of the concept of the state, work, internationalism, digital capitalism, democracy and leadership.

As we imagine our future, we must also recognise how the far-right is shaping the world and future generations. In the **Focus** *The far right and its conquest of education*, we tackle a largely overlooked aspect of the far right's agenda. While we tend to understand education as an instrument to achieve equal opportunities, it can also be a tool to promote values that are far removed from ours, and even as a tool to further reinforce inequalities. It all depends on the way education systems and programmes are designed. The far-right governments in countries like Hungary, Serbia and the United States are prime examples of the attempt to redesign education systems to serve their own political agenda.

The far right, both in Europe and globally, is also targeting LGBTIQ+ rights, using a coordinated strategy to rally opposition against them, especially targeting the rights of transgender people. Our position – outlined in the **Dossier** *Stronger together! LGBTIQ+ rights vs anti-gender movements* – is clear: LGBTIQ+ rights are fundamental human rights and therefore non-negotiable.

The final **Dossier,** *BRICS: navigating global ambitions and geopolitical tides*, focuses on the BRICS group, which has sought to challenge Western-dominated multilateral institutions since the 2008 financial crisis. Following the group's expansion to eleven countries in 2024-2025, this dossier offers a glimpse into the BRICS' internal and external dilemmas, as well as the opportunities that, more in general, engagement with the Global South may present for the European Union.

Editorial

Hedwig Giusto,
Editor-in-chief

The Progressive Post

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CURRENT
AFFAIRS

Multilateralism, between shock and rebirth

by Maria João Rodrigues

Europe has a choice between accepting pressure to align with the Trump administration, remaining in the inertia of the previous multilateral system, or becoming an active player in reforming global multilateralism.

Can we sense historical regression? Yes, this regression would be undeniable if a civilisational achievement of humankind as a whole started to be dismantled. And this is currently happening to some of the multilateral system's critical components: peace and security, climate, health, poverty, human rights and digital transformation.

▶ *The Trump administration is disengaging from multilateral work on climate, health, food, sustainable development goals, peace and, most recently, open and regulated trade – with a tariff war that can bring enduring stagflation.*

Can this regression be led by those who also led the civilisational progress in the past? Paradoxically, yes. This is what is happening now as the **Trump administration disengages from multilateral work on climate, health, food, sustainable development goals, peace and, most recently, open and regulated trade – with a tariff war that can bring enduring stagflation**

(combining inflation with recession and job losses across the world) and a tariff bargain that will turn the world into a big bazaar for everything.

Can it become even worse? Yes, if a rules-based order is replaced by a power-based order, where great powers fight for areas of influence and access to resources, whatever the cost, and bring a systemic shock to multilateral governance.

Do we really need multilateral global governance? Yes, we most certainly do. This has become an issue not only of inclusion and representativeness in global governance, but also of effectiveness when dealing with the current global challenges. Multilateral global governance has become a matter of common interest and of survival for humankind.

To prevent the historical regression that is currently underway, is it enough to defend the multilateral system as we have it now? Not at all, because the current system is ineffective, non-representative and unfair. **The only way out is to advocate a deeply reformed multilateralism – one that is stronger to enforce peace and security, fight climate change, prevent pandemics, reduce poverty, frame**

the digital transformation and implement the Sustainable Development Goals with much more powerful financial means. We also need a fairer distribution of these means and of access to resources and knowledge, enabling developing countries to have a real chance to catch up and leapfrog to a new development strategy, making the best of the green and digital transitions. This can only be possible if the multilateral system reflects a more inclusive and representative global governance giving a stronger voice to developing countries and to a large range of civil society actors.

▶ *The only way out is to advocate a deeply reformed multilateralism – one that is stronger to enforce peace and security, fight climate change, prevent pandemics, reduce poverty, frame the digital transformation and implement the Sustainable Development Goals with much more powerful financial means.*

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> ▶ *In September 2024, the Summit of the Future in New York managed, after a complex negotiation process, to adopt a Pact for the Future which identifies key reforms to better implement the Sustainable Development Goals.*

There is a blueprint to guide this reform of the multilateral system, which was adopted by a large majority of UN member states just before Trump's election. **In September 2024, the Summit of the Future in New York managed, after a complex negotiation process, to adopt a Pact for the Future which identifies key reforms to better implement the Sustainable Development Goals, to change the global financial architecture, to improve the access to science and technology, to define a global frame to govern the digital transition and AI, as well as to update the composition of the UN Security Council, and to push for a new peace agenda.**

This is also a year of opportunity, which will be created by a sequence of United Nations summits that will focus on critical components of this Pact for the Future and bring about more precise and operational plans to implement it: the UN Conference on Financing for Development in Seville in July; the UN Summit on Information Society in Geneva also in July; the COP on climate change in Belem in November, and the UN Summit on Social Development in Doha also in November 2025.

It is vital to organise coalitions of the willing, develop new alliances and partnerships for concrete commitments at these summits, and introduce new methods to improve multilateral work. Europe has a choice between accepting pressures to align with the Trump administration, remaining in the inertia of the previous multilateral system, or becoming an active player in this reform of multilateralism. European progressive actors, in political institutions as well as in civil society, have a particular responsibility to push for this third choice.

Can this succeed? Yes, because despite a powerful and organised far-right international, there are many other forces pushing in a good direction: an increasing range of actors inside and outside the US, more informed citizens (despite the misinformation on social networks) and a general rebalancing of the world limiting the power of the established hegemon. In addition, there is also the compelling argument that the global challenges ahead cannot really be met without much stronger international cooperation. There is a high chance that the regression in the short term can be overcome by a progression in the long term. Let's work to make this happen!

Maria João Rodrigues,
FEPS President

A new EU budget cycle begins

by László Andor

The EU budget is based on convention. Theoretically, it is possible to rewrite everything every seven years, but there have been established methods, tools and quantities on both the revenue and the expenditure sides. The next Multiannual Financial Framework will need to be agreed well before its implementation starts in January 2028. However, this time it is unlikely that relying on convention will help meet the institutional deadline.

As always, a critical question is how the EU can ensure that the objectives of balanced growth are supported by an adequate fiscal capacity with the necessary degree of flexibility to ensure that the EU revives its growth potential ('competitiveness') and improves its capacity to respond to the new realities and occasional shocks. While the questions are old, the circumstances have changed – a lot. A broad consensus around the findings of the Draghi Report suggests that the EU needs to do more for competitiveness, also in its budget. The ongoing war in Ukraine and the apparent withdrawal of the US from old security commitments compel the EU to invest more in defence. At the same time, the recent pandemic, which decimated our elderly, and the housing crisis, which particularly hits the young, prescribe greater attention – but also resources – to social investment.

The past five years have already seen a kind of budget revolution in the EU. An important lesson of the Covid-19 period is that EU financial tools are needed for stabilisation. NextGenerationEU was an important step forward, but the jury is still out to evaluate its main component, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). The May 2025 report of the European Court of Auditors remained sceptical regarding some key aspects of the RRF, including the intended 'result orientation'. **While there are still mixed views about the merits of the RRF, it should not be doubted that, given the increased level of uncertainty, hostility and volatility in the world economy, EU budgetary tools serving internal stabilisation need to be strengthened (the globalisation adjustment fund, for example) or newly established (an unemployment reinsurance fund, for example).** Permanent tools for stabilisation should follow the pattern of SURE, which was a crucial invention at the time of the Covid-19 shock.

▶ *The future of EU cohesion policy is one of the key questions in the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework debates. This is the only redistributive policy of the EU budget on the expenditure side.*

The future of EU cohesion policy is one of the key questions in the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) debates. This is the only redistributive policy of the EU budget on the expenditure side. The deeper that market integration in the EU goes, the more sophisticated and robust the cohesion policy that is required. If new priorities are pursued without awareness of their impact on regional disparities, we may end up with the poorer regions paying for the conflicts in our neighbourhood.

The EU cohesion policy has been the EU's main investment policy serving competitiveness. It is an effective tool for promoting sustainable growth in European regions. Territorial imbalances are often underestimated, since convergence measured in GDP can hide divergences in working and living conditions, and the quality of public services. **Without a strong commitment to cohesion, Europe risks deepening inequalities, which can fuel more anti-European sentiment in regions that are lagging behind** – at a time when economic integration and geopolitical instability demand greater unity.

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▶ *Without a strong commitment to cohesion, Europe risks deepening inequalities, which can fuel more anti-European sentiment in regions that are lagging behind.*

At the same time, **it is also true that cohesion policy itself must evolve. As the EU prepares for enlargement, existing members must prepare for receiving less in the future**. Opening programmes to new thematic priorities is an opportunity rather than a threat, and today defence-related investment may count as well. Learning from the RRF experience (the simplified implementation and result orientation) can be useful, as long as a distinction can be made between inspiration and replacement. As always before MFF debates, the drive for simplification reappears in new forms. But it makes a big difference if the new rules and implementation methods simplify life for national governments, or for the final beneficiaries at the local and regional levels. One possibility to simplify the revenue side of the MFF is to do away with obsolete rebates (following the example of the 2018 decision to cut the rebate of the United Kingdom, which in the meantime left the EU).

It is important to clarify that the MFF cannot be a tool for solving all the problems of Europe. For example, the EU must help raise funds for the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine outside the EU budget. When it comes to investment for strategic sectors such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology and space, the role of the European Investment Bank Group needs to be explored in pole position. And the main answers to US President Donald Trump's trade war should not come from fiscal, but from monetary policy (by strengthening the external role of the euro).

The last time a group of independent experts appointed by the European Commission presented a report on the role of public finance in European integration was in 1977. The Mac-Dougall report – named after the Scottish economist and civil servant Donald MacDougall who acted as chief economic adviser to various UK finance ministers and was responsible for

the report – should be a reminder that at some point the 1 per cent glass ceiling of the MFF (the conventional limit of public finance expressed as a percentage of the total EU GDP) must break. Alongside its function of delivering public goods, the EU budget needs to do much more for stabilisation, and also for redistribution. The negotiations on the next MFF will be crucial for strengthening European financial and investment capacity, which today is part of the effort not only to revive Europe's growth performance, but also to boost its strategic autonomy.

*László Andor,
FEPS Secretary General*

The European miracle

Why Europe's future is built on the ruins of the past – and what is at stake today

by **Martin Schulz**

As the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II was commemorated, my thoughts turned to the stories of my family, who lived in the border triangle between Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. In my study, there is a family photo, taken in 1943, showing four serious young adults: my mother, born in 1920, her sister and two of her brothers – both in Wehrmacht uniform. Her husband, my father, was a soldier – they had married in 1940 just before his first deployment to the front. At the time of the photo, both the Dutch and Belgian parts of my family were living under brutal German occupation.

At 18 years old, the youngest person in this photo is my uncle Josef, who was sent to the Eastern Front shortly after the photo was taken. Miraculously, he returned physically unharmed at the end of the war and promptly volunteered to clear mines with the Belgian armed forces. In the process, he stepped on one of those mines. He was 20 years old and is buried in a military cemetery in Belgium.

Such stories were not uncommon in my parents' generation. Being born in 1955, I considered it practically impossible that those events could occur again in my lifetime. The reports of the war and its horrific consequences marked my entire childhood and youth, and the terrible crimes committed by the Germans played a major role in my politically committed family.

Driven by fantasies of great power and racial ideology, Germany had instigated the war, a rupture of civilisation that made millions of people suffer – terrorised, abducted, starved or killed – and that made pure evil an everyday reality for millions. A generation of young men throughout Europe and beyond returned home from the war severely traumatised – if they returned at all.

▶ *The history of the Europe we know today is based on rubble and ashes, hatred, dehumanisation and the most monstrous escalations of violence.*

The history of the Europe we know today is based on rubble and ashes, hatred, dehumanisation and the most monstrous escalations of violence, collective hunger and collective fear among the civilian population. Despite this, just five years after these crimes against humanity, the unification of Europe started. It was the hope for a better common future brought about by a gesture of France to Germany: this is nothing short of a miracle.

The longing for a lasting peace was powerful in those years – more powerful than hatred and the desire for retribution. **In a major speech on 9th May 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman laid out the bold idea of jointly managing French and German coal and steel production, both vital to the war effort, and offered other European states the opportunity to join.** Only five years after the end of the unprecedented destruction caused by World War II, this was a bold and courageous act. Instead of humiliating the enemy, as had been the case with the Treaty of Versailles after the first world war, the French statesmen took a personal risk by offering Germany a hand of

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reconciliation and thus making Germany's integration into the European community of states possible. What a gift to the young Federal Republic – and what an obligation!

Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, the only German who knew of Schuman's plan beforehand, saw the historic opportunity for Germany and seized upon it immediately. Schuman and Adenauer made their courageous decision against the mutual, and still existing, resentment of the people of their two countries – and thus against the mood of the majority. For too long, hatred had been fuelled by the decades-old narrative of the alleged hereditary enmity between France and Germany. The hope was that those who work together closely and transparently will not shoot at each other.

The men and women who set out to integrate Europe socially, economically and organisationally carried the memories of the two world wars. They had learnt that war and its consequences can only be ended

and overcome with pragmatic reason. **At the same time, they knew that only those who are prepared to act with vision can secure peace in the long term.** They sensed that democracy in Germany, after years of dictatorship, must become strong and attractive in order to secure lasting peace between the European peoples – also economically. This was the only way to establish a stable peace between the peoples of Europe. Economic relations became a peace project.

France, in particular, as one of the allied victorious powers, showed very impressively that it is possible to build a future on forgiveness even after the most serious enmity, if both sides share the same goal: to ensure peace and security for their populations.

To build mutual trust, the new partners also rely on instruments of soft power: town twinnings – the oldest dates back to 1950 – and youth exchanges, for example. This was the spirit of encounter and rapprochement

through dialogue, later emphasised in the Elysée Treaty of 1963. Because those who speak to each other as equals understand each other better.

The Schuman Declaration led to the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community within a year. The six founding states – besides France and West Germany also Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg – set aside their nationalism and laid the foundations for European unification through joint cooperation and confidence-building. This gave rise to the EU we know today: a force for peace and a guarantor of prosperity, democracy and freedom. For me, this is the most outstanding civilisational achievement of the last century!

And yet, **there is no guarantee that this European project will last forever**. Ten years ago, when I was honoured with the Charlemagne Prize of Aachen for my special commitment to Europe, I made this clear: **it is dangerous to regard the EU as having no alternative.**

Of course, there is an alternative: re-national-isation. That is why the European states must constantly come to a joint decision: do they want to jeopardise their special alliance of states for short-term national advantage, or do they want to jointly defend the democratic model of society, the rules-based order and competitiveness in globalisation, even if they have to make compromises to do so?

▶ *Despite all the crises and criticism, the 450 million EU citizens have built the richest economic area in the world together.*

Europe is currently held in higher esteem by its citizens than it has been for a long time. Indeed, 75 per cent of Europeans identify themselves as EU citizens; more than half of young people in Europe rate their respective country's EU membership as positive. And for good reason. **Despite all the crises and criticism, the 450 million EU citizens have built the richest economic area in the world together.** Within the EU, the idea of individual fundamental rights applies – rights which the state guarantees its citizens: social security, freedom of opinion, freedom of research and teaching, freedom of movement of persons, respect for the individual, the prohibition of torture, the prohibition of arbitrariness. This makes the EU a place of longing for many people worldwide.

Nevertheless, concern is growing in the EU. Around a third of young people are pessimistic about their future. **The enemies of democracy are on the rise worldwide, including in Europe and especially in Germany, where misanthropic attitudes are gaining more and more acceptance.** The new German

government has two major tasks. The first is to protect our Constitution against all its enemies. This will only work out if politicians make tackling people's everyday concerns their programmatic guiding principle, set an example of respect and tolerance and at the same time demand it, and declare war on hatred and intolerance, especially online! The second major task is to do everything in its power to make Europe stronger than ever. **At a time of growing global systemic conflicts** – with Russia's war of aggression literally on Europe's doorstep in violation of international law, with the USA and also with China – **Europe must take a clear stance in favour of a rules-based order, reliability, a democratic constitution, integrity** – and the protection of the dignity of each individual. This is the only way to secure prosperity and peace in our region and beyond.

For this, we still need visionaries like Schuman, who are prepared to risk building almost unimaginable bridges for their idea of a better tomorrow, to secure peace and prosperity in the long term.

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*Martin Schulz,
President,
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*

The housing crisis: cities at the frontline

by Jaume Collboni

The European Union is at a crossroads. We are living at a crucial time, with threats to our way of life both from outside – such as Russia's growing assertiveness on our Eastern borders – and from inside – the increasing social unrest caused by the rise in the cost of living, in which housing plays a prominent role. Our citizens are calling for urgent and bold action to tackle the ever-increasing prices and the lack of affordable and decent housing.

We, the cities, are taking the question of housing very seriously – but we need the European Union institutions to do the same. This is the spirit of the opinion the plenary of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) has voted recently, and for which I have been the lead rapporteur.

▶ *We, the cities, are taking the question of housing very seriously – but we need the European Union institutions to do the same.*

But let us take a step back. Why has housing become a major source of concern for European cities and regions? The answer is simple but extremely relevant. It is because the democratic regime that we have been building since the end of the second world war is at stake. The right to housing is recognised in several treaties and conventions that underpin this democratic regime – from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the global level to

the Spanish constitution at member state level. **We, the public representatives, therefore need to ensure that our institutions are able to protect and uphold this right – otherwise citizens will start questioning the legitimacy of the very institutions themselves.** This is particularly worrying in the current global context, where populist extreme right-wing authoritarianism is winning ground relentlessly. A similar threat hangs over the European project: if the EU fails to deliver a bold response to the housing crisis, Eurosceptics will continue to gain ground.

We therefore need to act fast to deliver a substantial response. **We need to change the rules of the game because the current game is not working.** Barcelona has implemented ambitious measures to revert its current housing situation. These include our decision to ban tourists from rentals of shorter than one month by 2028, and our implementation of a price cap on rents. The latter is already working well, with a decrease of 6.4 per cent in rents between March 2024 – when the cap was implemented – and December 2024.

The European Commission has shown positive signs about its commitment to a more ambitious European policy on housing. The appointment of the first-ever Commissioner for Housing, and the intention to publish a European Affordable Housing Plan, are promising signs. But cities need more, and we need it now.

The CoR opinion on housing notes that we require an ambitious, progressive European policy on housing with two elements at its core: resources and decision-making. **We need the EU to up its game on resource allocation to public investment in housing, and this investment needs to be directly channelled to the cities and regions** – we cannot waste time on bureaucratic procedures that prevent money from reaching its final destination, the citizens.

At the same time, we believe that the EU should truly recognise cities and regions as the frontrunners in the fight against the housing crisis. After all, it is cities and regions that are in the front line when it comes to the growing discontent among citizens, and it is therefore cities

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▶ *Since last December, 15 major European cities, with Barcelona at the forefront, have gathered as the Mayors for Housing alliance, an informal coalition of mayors who are calling for swift action on housing from the European Union.*

and regions that should have a greater say in the design of the solutions. The CoR opinion on housing is a strong, useful instrument for conveying this message through the Committee of the Regions, the voice of cities and other subnational entities in the European Union. But the opinion on housing is not the only arrow in our quiver to ensure that housing is at the top of the Commission's agenda: **since last December, 15 major European cities, with Barcelona at the forefront, have gathered as the Mayors for Housing alliance, an informal coalition of mayors who are calling for swift action on housing from the European Union**.

What both the opinion and the alliance note is a simple yet powerful idea: while the European Union is focused on addressing its external threat – the geopolitical danger of Russia at our Eastern borders – we also need to address with the same sense of urgency and gravity our internal threat – the increasing risk of social unrest caused by the housing crisis. In practice, this means that while EU ministers agree to remove public spending on defence from the fiscal rules in the stability pact, they should do the same for investment in public housing. Both risks should receive equal treatment because both entail an existential threat to the systemic foundations of our democracies.

We are just at the start of the road. We still need to go a long way to ensure that the right to housing is completely upheld everywhere in the European Union. The European project requires a clear social agenda. And to build a social Europe, we need ambitious and effective housing policies. Several voices suggest this will be the mandate of Europe's competitiveness – we believe it should be the mandate of Europe's housing capacity. **There is too much at stake not to take bold action – and to do it now.**

Jaume Collboni,
Mayor of Barcelona

Sanction Israel now: Europe's long overdue moral reckoning on Gaza

by Aodhán Ó Ríordáin

Gaza is in ruins. Europe is out of excuses. As the EU finally begins to review its ties with Israel, the time for vague and toothless statements is over. What is needed now is action, sanctions and moral clarity.

My first-ever words in the European Parliament plenary in September 2024 were clear and deliberate: "Sanction Israel now!" I chose those words with full knowledge of their weight and urgency. A plea to give substance to the claim – and to my own hope – that this Union stands on the side of human rights and humanity. Even then, it was already too late for tens of thousands of people in Gaza. And yet, here we are – months later – with no meaningful action from the EU institutions. **Gaza lies in ruin, its people starved, its hospitals destroyed and its children buried beneath the rubble. Israel's war crimes are clear, its goal chillingly explicit: to "entirely destroy" Gaza**, as Finance Minister Bezael Smotrich openly said, and to erase any hope of a Palestinian state. And the European Union, a project born from the ashes of war and genocide, still dithers.

▶ *For the first time, the European Union is officially questioning whether our relationship with the Israeli government is compatible with the very values our Union claims to uphold.*

But perhaps, just perhaps, we are beginning to see the first chink of light pierce the moral fog that has surrounded Brussels on this issue.

On 20 May 2025, High Representative Kaja Kallas announced that the EU would initiate a review of Article 2 of the EU-Israel Association Agreement which makes this agreement conditional on respect for human rights and democratic principles. This is no small step. **For the first time, the European Union is officially questioning whether our relationship with the Israeli government is compatible with the very values our Union claims to uphold.**

The move follows 18 months of livestreamed evidence of genocide and unprecedented public outcry. It also follows a formal request made as far back as February 2024 by the Irish and Spanish governments for the European Commission to urgently review Israel's compliance with human rights provisions due to its blatant and brutal violations of international law in Gaza.

And now, though a review is finally underway, delay and ambiguity continue to define the response of our institutions. There is no published timeline, no clear criteria for assessment, and no indication of when – if ever – tangible consequences will follow. Kallas has said it is now up to Israel to "unblock humanitarian aid". As though a single act of strategic charity might wash away the past nine months of slaughter and siege.

▶ *It is business as usual for the EU-Israel relationship. The Association Council continues to meet. Trade continues to flow. Israeli ministers implicated in genocidal rhetoric remain unchallenged.*

Meanwhile, **it is business as usual for the EU-Israel relationship. The Association Council continues to meet. Trade continues to flow. Israeli ministers implicated in genocidal rhetoric remain unchallenged**. The very structures that facilitate cooperation remain untouched even as UN peacekeepers are endangered, international law is mocked, and starvation is used as a weapon of war.

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▶ *It is not Europe's citizens who have failed to act. It is Europe's leaders.*

In the face of such complicity, where is the moral leadership we once saw? The international community had the courage to confront apartheid in South Africa and the willpower to end it through a powerful sanctions regime. Yet now, when it comes to Israel – whom Ursula von der Leyen has always called Europe's friend – the EU bites its tongue. We cannot save innocent victims if we do not call out the perpetrator. We cannot stop the bloodshed if we do not name the crimes. This is a genocide, ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of the Palestinian people at the hands of the Israeli government.

We cannot continue to turn a blind eye while pretending to hold the moral high ground. And the citizens of Europe know this. Across the continent, public opinion has shifted dramatically. A recent report in *The Guardian* revealed that support for Israel is at its lowest on record in Western Europe. That is not surprising. From Dublin to The Hague, from Berlin to Madrid, people are marching. They are drawing red lines through their cities and demanding that the EU end its complicity in war crimes.

In my city of Dublin, those protests are not an abstraction. They are personal. They are a collective cry from people who understand

and have experienced occupation, colonialism and the cost of silence. They are ahead of our institutions. **It is not Europe's citizens who have failed to act. It is Europe's leaders.** Let us not pretend that our officials lack the tools to respond. The EU is Israel's largest trading partner. Nearly 30 per cent of Israel's exports go to the European Union. Suspending the Association Agreement is a powerful and necessary lever to pull.

Article 79 allows for the suspension of this agreement if one party fails to meet its obligations. And Article 2 is clear: **Israel's indiscriminate bombing, targeted attacks on civilians and healthcare workers, execution of aid staff and forced mass displacement are violations not just of human conscience, but of the fundamental values that underpin the agreement**.

If we are serious about peace, a two-state solution, and the universality of human rights, then we must urgently wield this leverage. That means halting political dialogue, freezing trade privileges, suspending Israel's participation in EU research programmes like Horizon – and yes, suspending the EU-Israel Association Agreement in full. Suspending it would not be a radical step. It would be consistent with how

the EU has treated other countries in breach of human rights clauses. It would be the bare minimum required to preserve the integrity of our founding values and save us from complete moral bankruptcy.

It is not too much to ask for a Europe where being against genocide is a given. To ask for an end to the great shame we as Europeans feel when our institutions witness this evil yet fail to act. What we need now is not more deliberation but moral clarity. No more excuses. No more delays. No more meetings that yield nothing while children in Gaza starve. When history looks back on this moment, it will not judge us by our statements but by our actions. The time for action was yesterday. But today is all we have left.

Suspend the agreement. Sanction Israel. Stand for humanity!

Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, MEP for the constituency of Dublin, only Irish S&D member of European Parliament

The EU's failing test in Bosnia and Herzegovina

by Sead Turčalo and Harun Cero

The ongoing constitutional coup in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) – engineered by the pro-Russian separatist leader Milorad Dodik and his ruling coalition in the Republika Srpska, one of the country's two entities – continues with no end in sight. It remains uncertain when, how, or even if their secessionist ambitions will be halted, and who will ultimately take action to stop them. A failed arrest attempt on 23rd April – which saw the BiH state police face off with the police of the Republika Srpska entity in East Sarajevo and no discernible EUFOR presence – has only exacerbated fears of growing lawlessness and the fragmentation of the country's security apparatus.

Dodik, who for years has steadily pursued a strategy of creeping secession from the central government, escalated his efforts following a major legal setback. In February, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in a first instance verdict, sentenced him to one year in prison and six years of political disqualification for defying the decisions of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt, who is tasked with overseeing the implementation of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, that brought the war in the country to an end. In July 2023, Dodik signed legislation that effectively nullified the enforcement of rulings from Bosnia's Constitutional Court within the Republika Srpska (RS) and obstructed the publication of decisions issued by the High Representative. **Despite Schmidt's explicit orders to block these laws, Dodik proceeded to enact them, thereby violating the authority of the international peace envoy.** In response, the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska passed a series of controversial measures and laws effectively declaring that state-level institutions, such as BiH's Court and Prosecutor's Office, would no longer have authority within RS territory.

▶ *According to its mandate, established by the European Council, EUFOR has full authority to monitor military aspects and address non-compliance by the parties.*

Dodik's continued defiance – including ignoring the constitutional court's suspension of the laws and repeatedly refusing to appear for questioning – accelerated the legal steps in another case against him: for assault on the constitutional order. The Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina issued an arrest warrant and ordered him to be arrested for 30 days. Since it was issued, political and legal institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been locked in a stand-off over the practicalities of enforcing the arrest: who has the authority to apprehend Dodik, how such an action would be carried out given his political position, and whether it will happen at all. **This impasse highlights the deep politicisation of the rule of law in Bosnia and Herzegovina and raises broader concerns about the resilience of the country's legal order in the face of nationalist challenges.**

The Republika Srpska's new Constitution marks a long-planned move by Dodik's administration, for which the current moment is seen as the right time to advance. The draft directly undermines Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and constitutional order, laying the foundation for secession. Alarmingly, article 116 permits the Republika Srpska to form its own army

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▶ *The case has reached a stalemate, highlighting a broader institutional paralysis. The inability to move forward with the implementation of decisions by state judicial authorities underscores a growing crisis of governance.*

and enter military alliances. These provisions amount to a constitutional coup, systematically dismantling Bosnia and Herzegovina's legal and political framework and moving the Republika Srpska closer to full secession.

Since the onset of the crisis – particularly after Interpol declined to issue a red notice, an international request asking member countries to locate and provisionally arrest a person pending extradition, surrender, or similar legal action, for Milorad Dodik and the speaker of the Republika Srpska's National Assembly, Nenad Stevandić – there has been growing debate over whether, when and how EUFOR, the EU-led military mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, tasked with maintaining peace and security under the mandate of the Dayton Agreement, should support domestic security institutions in bringing Dodik in for questioning,

or potentially detaining him. **According to its mandate, established by the European Council, EUFOR has full authority to monitor military aspects and address non-compliance by the parties.** Given its legal framework and operational scope, EUFOR should remain a player in any discussions around the detention of Milorad Dodik and his allies. But will it?

On 8th April 2025, the presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina formally requested that EUFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina provide support to domestic police agencies in enforcing decisions issued by state judicial authorities in the case against Dodik and others. In response, the RS National Assembly supported the veto of Željka Cvijanović – the chairwoman of Bosnia and Herzegovina's presidency and member of Dodik's SNSD – against the presidency's request with a majority of 64 of the 69 MPs present.

Since then, **the case has reached a stalemate, highlighting a broader institutional paralysis. The inability to move forward with the implementation of decisions by state judicial authorities underscores a growing crisis of governance. This situation reveals that Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently unable to effectively assert state authority, particularly when faced with political resistance from entity-level institutions**. The ongoing impasse raises serious concerns about the rule of law and the functionality of the state apparatus. At the same time, except for countries like Austria, Germany and Lithuania imposing unilateral travel bans on Dodik, Stevandić and Republika Srpska's president, Radovan Višković, there has been no movement towards implementing EU-level sanctions against them. This shows a clear lack of unified action within the

European Union, highlighting divisions or hesitations among member states when it comes to addressing these individuals collectively.

At this stage, **the question should no longer be whether EUFOR will assist in the operation, but how it will do so and to what extent**. Unfortunately, the reality appears to be the opposite. There is still no clear official stance, aside from repeated generic assurances from EUFOR and EU officials that they are committed to maintaining a 'peaceful environment' in the country and that 'every individual should be treated in accordance with the law'. Unofficial reports circulating within international circles suggest that EUFOR is reluctant to take part in detaining Dodik, viewing the operation as too risky and contingent on prior approval from the EU member states. If these reports are true, they raise a fundamental question: why is EUFOR present in Bosnia and Herzegovina at all – and why did it temporarily increase its troop numbers by 400 following Dodik's first instance conviction and the onset of what is arguably the most serious political crisis since the end of the war?

▶ *For the EU, inaction would lay bare its eroding influence even in its immediate neighbourhood, confirming the perception that without US backing, it is incapable of decisive leadership.*

To be clear, no one is calling for EUFOR to take over the entire operation – nor would that be desirable or beneficial for the state or for the progressive forces working within it. However,

given EUFOR's mandate, it is entirely reasonable to expect the mission to support efforts to uphold law and order, and to help safeguard peace and the rule of law in Bosnia and Herzegovina. That support does not need to mean direct involvement in arrests, but it could – and should – include measures such as securing the perimeter of the area where a detention is to take place, and ensuring there is no external interference or escalation. In essence, EUFOR's role should be to reinforce the conditions under which justice can be carried out safely and effectively.

If no action is taken – if EUFOR remains passive and Bosnian institutions remain paralysed in confronting Dodik and his inner circle – it would amount to a profound failure: both for the European Union and for Bosnia and Herzegovina, setting the stage for the most dangerous scenario yet.

For the EU, inaction would lay bare its eroding influence even in its immediate neighbourhood, confirming the perception that without US backing, it is incapable of decisive leadership – even when core European values like peace, democracy and territorial integrity are at stake. Such weakness would embolden autocratic and extremist forces across Europe, encouraging others to openly challenge democratic institutions, international law and established borders without fear of consequences.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the failure of EUFOR to act would be even more catastrophic. It would expose the deep fragility of BiH's constitutional system, signalling to domestic secessionist actors that the state is powerless to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. If Dodik faces no consequences for openly defying the constitutional

order, dismantling state competencies and pursuing de facto secession, it would confirm the erosion of the Dayton Peace framework. In practice, this would move Bosnia and Herzegovina dangerously close to full territorial fragmentation, risking renewed ethnic tensions, the collapse of the state and a serious security vacuum in the heart of Europe.

Moreover, Bosnia and Herzegovina's destabilisation would not remain contained. It would likely spill over into neighbouring countries, undermining regional stability, fuelling nationalist agendas elsewhere and opening the door to greater influence from external actors like Russia – at the expense of European security and credibility. The fear, ultimately, is that inaction today will be seen as permission tomorrow.

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The politics of polycrisis

Edited by Patrick Diamond and Ania Skrzypek

THE POLITICS OF POLYCRISIS

1C YEARS

OXFORD SYMPOSIUM

Ed. Patrick Diamond and Ania Skrzypek

Drawing on insights from key contributors from the EU and the UK, the book "The politics of polycrisis" presents **new ideas for restoring social democracy**, tackling topics including the green transition, the rise of platform work, industrial policy, and artificial intelligence.

Rising challenges of insecurity and inequality that plagued advanced capitalist countries in recent years have reinstated the need for social democratic parties to strategise for success.

With authors including Commissioner for Housing and Energy Dan Jørgensen, Members of the European Parliament Andreas Schieder, Hana Jalloul and Matthias Ecke, MP Miapetra Kumpula-Natri, academics Andrew Gamble and Patrick Diamond, and many more.

This book was published by FEPS, in collaboration with Karl-Renner-Institut and Progressive Britain

SPECIAL COVERAGE

EUROPEAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY – A TRANSFORMATIVE FORCE FOR THE FUTURE

The world is changing under the pressure of the polycrisis. Traditional political forces seem to be growing feeble, and the resulting image of disempowerment translates into distrust and falling electoral numbers. Among these, Social Democrats are visibly struggling.

This dossier is not another contribution to ponder the decline or to highlight old conflicts and mistakes. Instead, it aims to showcase the remarkable number of opportunities, to offer a glimmer of intellectual encouragement and to stop further defeatism. It argues that Social Democracy has until now mainly spoken of perils and projected the image of a political family focused on preserving a sense of security amid anxieties, rather than projecting the image of a political force that is bold and ambitious enough to articulate aspiration and the determination to lead.

Our articles look at how to reimagine the concepts of state, work, internationalism, digital capitalism and democracy. They offer a path to renewal in order to help anticipate the world in the years and even in decades to come. This is a path to restore the credentials of progressives as a movement that is visionary, courageous and determinedly reformist. It is a path to rebuild the progressive movement as a powerhouse, driven by the integrity of its values and ready to take on the task of making everyone's reality better, fairer, more egalitarian and more prosperous – now and in the future.

The ideological pursuit of a modern and empowering state

by Patrick Diamond and Ania Skrzypek

In many countries, the demise of 1980s neoliberalism has led to a relentless focus on the size and efficiency of the state rather than on the inherent instability of markets. The post-war social contract has been undermined, and yet, in many countries, the debate has barely begun as to why the system of capitalism is failing to secure prosperity and progress for so many citizens.

Recent geostrategic shocks – notably the Covid-19 pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the ongoing threat of catastrophic climate change, transatlantic tensions, the race for resources prompting trade wars and the consequent unravelling of the global economic order – have each struck like an earthquake at the heart of the institutions and assumptions of western market liberalism that once had the confidence to proclaim 'the end of history'. Instead, today, it is the 'end of the West' that is announced by many.

Over the last decade, many Social Democratic parties have argued for the return of the state. They have never abandoned the concept entirely, although in the 1990s many parties were inclined to believe that the state was becoming weaker in the face of globalisation. In the 2010s, several centre-left governments accepted policies of austerity in the belief that the active state was no longer affordable. As such, the turn today is an attempt to learn lessons while insisting that only an active state can protect citizens from the new threats and insecurities – at home, in the loss of secure jobs and livelihoods wrought by the rise of new technology, climate change and globalisation;

elsewhere, in the new threats from rogue authoritarian regimes and dictators on the periphery of Europe.

▶ *Regardless of recent scepticism about the role of government, we know that Social Democracy in Europe has historically been heavily reliant on state power.*

Regardless of recent scepticism about the role of government, we know that Social Democracy in Europe has historically been heavily reliant on state power. In truth, too many centre-left parties have refused to recognise the extent of popular dissatisfaction among voters with the efficacy of the state. In recent decades, there has been a visceral backlash against the very idea of the state in many societies, which has resulted in a loss of its legitimacy. This backlash has partly been driven by the New Right's critique of 'big' government: the argument has been that

government bureaucracy was inefficient and overloaded, absorbing too large a share of scarce resources. In addition, other pressures on the social democratic conception of the state, such as the ageing society and changing demography, have threatened to render the traditional welfare state unaffordable. And **with its protective powers being neither adequate nor sufficient, the welfare state has also lost its important historical role as a vehicle for social mobility that is able to fulfil working people's aspirations**. Therefore, voters' concerns about the state cannot be blamed merely on the ideologues of the New Right. It is clear, however, that many citizens have rapidly become disillusioned with the collective provision afforded by the welfare state, both in its coverage and quality.

There have been other reasons for the growing dissatisfaction with the state. **The increasing size and complexity of modern government, as well as the perpetual narrative about 'polycrisis' and the circumstances that remain beyond government's control, have made it more difficult for citizens to understand who makes decisions and who should be held accountable.**

The professionalisation of politics had already 'outsourced' policy-making decisions into the hands of experts, but now the development of technologies and scientific innovation have increasingly placed decision-making power in the hands of consultative bodies appointed by the state, undermining liberal forms of representative and participative democracy. Large-scale bureaucracies have thus risked fuelling citizen disengagement and declining trust in the political system. Many citizens feel the state no longer trusts them, and in turn they have grown disillusioned or angry towards the state. In these circumstances, a new debate about the role of the state is more necessary than ever.

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First, there is an urgent need for new capacities and instruments to exercise collective power locally, nationally and globally. Of course, it is an illusion that the nation-state acting alone can shield citizens from rising threats and insecurities. It is important to recognise the nature of interdependence and the meaning of shared sovereignty in the light of a changing internationalist agenda – whether European integration, climate change or the response to humanitarian crises. **Governments need to work with citizens, where necessary sharing responsibility and moving away from a transactional model of delivery where the state does things 'to' and 'for' people to an approach where the state and citizens act in partnership.**

Second, we need to better determine how the state can steer markets and reshape capitalism in the public interest. What combination of tools, laws, regulations, capacities and instruments is required to ensure that market economies achieve the optimal combination of economic efficiency, social justice and societal progress? **Given the imperative to re-arm Europe and meet the economic challenge posed by the Trump presidency, there is much greater scope for active government intervention and well-designed industrial policy.**

Third, we need to work out how best to reform welfare states, given that this is the function of the modern state many citizens regularly encounter in their daily lives. The Beveridge welfare state is not meant to be put on a pedestal and defended at any price. The welfare state will need to adapt to new challenges, including becoming more responsive to citizens' needs, aspirations and preferences. The public sector has to match the convenience and flexibility that is so often afforded by the private sector. And it has to build on the impressive achievements the world of science, research and technologies has harnessed. This is yet another means to re-empower the state by making its institutions thrive in the modern era.

Fourth, **it is necessary to clarify how the state can reconnect with citizens through the decentralisation and devolution of political power**, ensuring that people are involved in the making of decisions that affect them. While decentralisation of state responsibilities is not a panacea for all social and economic ills, research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that decentralisation increases confidence in democracy while promoting more regionally balanced economic growth

and development. This also means a serious focus on the role of civil society organisations, trade unions and citizens' movements, focusing in particular on the political participation of young people.

This revived focus on the role and purpose of the state means bringing ideas about the future of European Social Democracy back into mainstream debates. Success is hardly guaranteed, for events can conspire against the best ideas. Yet without ideas, there is no hope!

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Returning to freedom: a Social Democracy for pluralist societies

by **Dominic Afscharian**

Once again, Social Democracy must change. With a longstanding tradition of social protection, progressives are well-positioned to accompany the needs of pluralist societies – if they dare to rethink their views on work and deservingness. The political left at large must urgently reclaim freedom and individual liberty through a social lens.

Stuck in a spiral of decline, Social Democracy has no time to lose. It must transform, and fast. Recently, however, Social Democrats have chosen toxic idols. Pushed to the right economically and culturally, workfare and welfare chauvinism have crept into their playbook. Today, some are looking even further to the right while others are trying to turn back time. Neither path will lead to success. To find a truly progressive way forward, Social Democrats must instead reconsider how they approach their core identity around work and welfare.

This implies adjusting rhetoric and policy on at least three issues: work, individualism and freedom. These can be considered pillars of a modern, progressive welfare state. But getting there will not be easy. **Only if Social Democrats are willing to decisively shed identitarian and exclusionary reflexes, will they be able to pull off the 'grand transformation' many are hoping for.**

| FROM WORKERS TO HUMANS

The first issue to be tackled is work. Social Democracy has always seen itself as a workers' movement. A key moral consideration underpinning workers' rights is a rejection of poverty, immiseration and inequality. **No one shall suffer, all shall prosper – including the working class.** Social Democracy, however, has evolved from a herald of universal opportunity to a gatekeeper of resources. 'Deservingness' is the name of the game, and those in work are deemed the most deserving. Social rights by virtue of being human have given way to moral supremacy by virtue of work.

It is undoubtedly crucial to value the contribution of work to society. However, **an excessive rhetorical emphasis on the working class can also divide the electorate and crowd out potential voters**. Social Democratic victories without the middle class are hardly feasible,

and its recent rediscovery through terms like 'working people' or 'arbeitende Mitte' (working middle class) hardly compensates for years of illiberal rhetoric.

▶ *Only if Social Democrats are willing to decisively shed identitarian and exclusionary reflexes, will they be able to pull off the 'grand transformation' many are hoping for.*

Perhaps more pressingly, making work itself the virtue to chase marginalises the (long-term) unemployed. This undermines Social Democrats' ability to credibly fight extreme precarity and tackle inequalities. Moreover, focusing first and foremost on the virtue of

work allows opponents to cynically frame redistribution as taking from working people and giving to the 'lazy'. Such discourses endanger social cohesion and distract from precarity and inequality. Ironically, an over-emphasis on work as a moral virtue may thus be to the detriment of low-income workers.

Hence **Social Democrats must broaden their view when it comes to 'deservingness'. By no means does this imply letting go of workers' concerns.** It rather means that Social Democrats must mobilise society-wide solidarity based on fundamental social rights for all. It is high time to counter agendas that play the poorest against the poor – and certainly to stop actively pushing them.

FROM INDIVIDUAL FAULT TO EMPOWERMENT

Fundamental social rights by virtue of being human require a healthy portion of individualism. Whether progressives like it or not, class-based identities have eroded. Chasing the remains that the radical right exploits will not reverse this trend, and ignores how internally heterogeneous groups like 'the working class' are. Social Democrats must urgently develop a constructive approach towards individualism – not to replace class mobilisation, but to fill in the gaps. Fittingly, there is a massive political void across Europe. As Liberals increasingly commit to a 'small state', individual independence is commonly framed through a lens of 'fault': **if you find yourself in precarious conditions, you yourself are to blame and it is therefore your own responsibility to 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps'**.

The political left could credibly counterbalance this tendency. Too often, however, Social Democrats have individualised the causes of precarity themselves, especially through workfare and the 'third way'. Those speaking out against this tendency usually outright reject the individualisation of societies altogether. **What is largely missing is a strong progressive voice for individualism through empowerment: to enable individuals to live their desired lives, the welfare state should provide resources that compensate for disadvantages.** Such thinking is embedded in Sweden's Social Democratic state individualism and social liberalism, providing capabilities for all. In short, do not tell people what they should want; help them achieve what they want.

FROM NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE FREEDOM

Finally, this ties into the issue of freedom, a fundamental building block of progressivism long occupied by the right. If Social Democrats want to remain relevant, they must reclaim it. **When the right speaks of freedom, it is usually 'negative freedom' from state interference. The obvious progressive counterpart is the 'positive freedom' to actually achieve one's goals.** This directly follows from the considerations above: in a progressive sense, true freedom is only achieved if an individual has the capabilities to overcome limitations.

▶ *Demolishing the welfare state in the name of negative liberty will diminish, not enhance freedom.*

25 -

Social policy is crucial for this goal. It provides resources necessary for positive freedom, compensates for disadvantages, and makes solidarity beyond sub-groups of an individualised society possible. **Demolishing the welfare state in the name of negative liberty will diminish, not enhance freedom.** For too long, the right has been able to pursue such agendas in the absence of progressive counterweights. Reclaiming the discursive high ground on the issue of freedom is thus an urgent task for progressives.

LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

To some, this may all sound very liberal. However, liberalism must not be a monopoly of Margaret Thatcher's heirs. Not so dissimilar from 20th century Socialism, the ideals of liberalism inspire the masses, yet the reality of neoliberal policy is unable to deliver on them. Consider the US: its pledge of allegiance promises 'liberty and justice for all' – yet conditions in the 'land of the free' drift away from this ideal.

The vacuum left by the global decline of liberal democracy could be filled with an ambitious vision of a just society, delivered through strong welfare systems for all. Yet Social Democracy seems to have accepted the status quo, believing it cannot build a world where everyone is free and everyone lives a decent life. Instead, narratives of competition over limited resources between the poor have crept into Social Democratic discourse, leading to division between in- and outgroups, deserving and non-deserving people, 'us' and 'them'. This renders the centre-left incapable of filling the current political void.

If progressives develop more inclusive discourses and policies that empower all to live self-determined lives, they may just turn the political tides. The welfare state is key for this, but it must be reconceptualised. This means imagining work beyond the working class, welfare beyond work, and belonging beyond borders. In this way, progressives may finally achieve a world where no one shall suffer, and all shall prosper.

▶ *The vacuum left by the global decline of liberal democracy could be filled with an ambitious vision of a just society, delivered through strong welfare systems for all.*

Dominic Afscharian, project manager at the Berlin-based think tank Zentrum für neue Sozialpolitik

Social Democracy, digital revolution and digital capitalism in the future

by **Ivana Bartoletti**

As technology transforms our world, we face a critical challenge: to drive these advancements in an inclusive manner. By emphasising openness, trust and our values, we can create a robust technological ecosystem that not only benefits society but also protects individual rights and strengthens our collective future.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is revolutionising our daily lives and reshaping the work environment in exciting and daunting ways. While we celebrate the immense potential of these technological advancements, the real challenge lies in leveraging them to fulfil our collective aspirations as a society.

In recent years, the influence of technology has permeated every facet of our existence. **From automated systems managing resources to algorithms that curate our online interactions, the digital landscape has dramatically altered how we connect with each other and navigate our daily lives.** The impact on the younger generations has been immense.

Yet it is essential to recognise that this influence often comes from technology to us, rather than vice versa. This reality illustrates a troubling passivity in our political landscape: **all too often, we have positioned ourselves as mere bystanders, attempting to adapt existing norms and regulations without a coherent understanding of their implications**.

To build a resilient society, we need robust regulations that foster stability and ensure equitable access to resources. However, a narrative has taken hold, suggesting that regulatory frameworks in Europe stifle innovation and disadvantage us compared with the United States and China. This argument, while popular, is flawed and ignores the nuances of the situation.

▶ *The digital landscape has dramatically altered how we connect with each other and navigate our daily lives.*

Evaluating progress and attributing Europe's slower technological trajectory solely to regulation misses the broader context. **Criticising the European Union for placing too much emphasis on ethical considerations oversimplifies the complexities involved.**

The former president of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, has correctly warned against both ineffective and overly stringent regulations, stressing the need for a balanced approach. The recent initiatives from the European Commission to streamline regulations are promising. Yet we must remain aware that many technological tools and platforms today have thrived in a largely unregulated environment – an environment that has, as Draghi cautioned, sometimes been detrimental to genuine innovation.

Consider the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), often criticised for complicating business practices. While it certainly poses challenges, it also represents a commitment to respecting individual dignity and privacy. The GDPR acknowledges that breaches of privacy can have serious consequences – an understanding that is becoming increasingly important as technology intermingles with our daily lives.

Building a strong European technology ecosystem is more urgent than ever, especially as

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▶ *All too often, we have positioned ourselves as mere bystanders, attempting to adapt existing norms and regulations without a coherent understanding of their implications.*

the pandemic has underscored our reliance on foreign technology. What principles should guide this progressive approach to technological development?

First and foremost, openness. **Believing in sovereignty does not imply isolationism; it ensures that Europe asserts its position within the global supply chain** while fostering international partnerships.

Secondly, we should leverage values as a catalyst for growth. For instance, ensuring that data storage and processing occur on European soil and in line with local regulations presents an extraordinary opportunity for businesses within the fast-evolving digital landscape. Building an ecosystem of trust is essential. Citizens must feel empowered to use technology without fear. We must move beyond bureaucratic compliance and foster a culture of experimentation and innovation, where privacy and human rights are integral to technology development. When brilliant minds gather to ensure technology enhances rather than diminishes our humanity, we unlock incredible potential.

Thirdly, we must focus on technologies that promote participation, civic duty and co-design. Instead of viewing AI as a tool for replacing labour, we should regard it as an opportunity to enhance public services and boost business productivity. It is time to invest in leadership that transforms how we approach AI – empowering workers to lead this change rather than diminishing their roles.

Lastly, **redefining data privacy as equity is essential. Data is integral to our existence, yet it should be seen as a collective good of extraordinary value**. When citizens share their data, they should receive tangible benefits in return. Public involvement in determining what data is collected and how it is used can create a more equitable digital landscape. Redistributing the rewards of the digital revolution is vital to ensuring it benefits everyone.

In conclusion, **embedding innovation within European values is not merely a choice, it is a vital endeavour to safeguard the very essence of Europe. Embracing this challenge is essential to our commitment**

to innovation and the future we want to create. By navigating these complexities thoughtfully, we can harness technology to benefit our societies entirely.

▶ *Criticising the European Union for placing too much emphasis on ethical considerations oversimplifies the complexities involved.*

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Social Democracy, a new take on internationalism and pragmatic pacifism

by Nicoletta Pirozzi

From Kyiv to Gaza to Washington, the world we now live in seems to be challenging an integral part of what progressives traditionally stand for. The rise of populism and extremism is today widespread, and is fuelled by both the increasing perception of insecurity in society and the malign influence of foreign actors and internal proxies spreading disinformation and propaganda in liberal democracies. The resurgence of imperialism and the use of force have become the new normal since Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the declared disengagement of the US from European security.

Liberal cosmopolitan values are increasingly contested – not only by a plethora of actors outside the Western world, presenting them as instruments preserving economic imbalances and Western domination, but also from within the group of countries that have hitherto been seen as defenders of this system. Indeed, we have clearly experienced this in the first 100 days of the second Trump administration and the new American tech-oligarchy.

As a result, **the multilateral system has weakened, common institutions have proven to be increasingly dysfunctional, and shared norms are constantly violated**. This has also created a destabilising vacuum in leadership, which has plainly increased the appetite of non-democratic players to fill the void and engage in regional or global parallel order-shaping.

In this context, the progressive international agenda grounded in Social Democracy, internationalism and pacifism risks being perceived as marginal, or even harmful to stability. **It is fair to ask whether progressivism is still able to interpret current challenges and to imagine a credible way forward. Ultimately, it is legitimate to question whether progressivism is still fit for today's times.**

▶ *The multilateral system has been weakened, common institutions have proven to be increasingly dysfunctional, and shared norms are constantly violated.*

The worst mistake progressives can make is to live in denial and continue to filter international reality only through the prism of their own idealism. I am not suggesting abandoning the ideal of peaceful coexistence, but in order to realise it, it is key to identify the conditions for peace in the present circumstances and imagine adequate measures to achieve these conditions.

Excluding the possibility of war and indulging in antimilitaristic narratives will not help progressive forces fight for peace and build it. **In a world characterised by imbalances of power, predatory military adventures such as Russia's war in Ukraine can only be stopped, and prevented for the future, by building adequate defence and deterrence capabilities.** The principles of non-aggression and territorial integrity are enshrined in international law,

AI-generated image (Google Gemini)

and it is the responsibility of the international community to defend them, especially when the responsible institutions, such as the UN Security Council, are not able to act. Increasing defence spending and investment in joint military capacities in Europe and with other like-minded countries does not mean adhering to a logic of permanent war. It is the precondition for preserving freedom and democracy, the ideals on which the European Union project is built and to which many of its partners aspire. Of course, **to make military capabilities an effective instrument for restoring and preserving peace, a thorough reflection on strategic goals, proper institution-building and efficient decision-making is essential**.

The second worst mistake the progressive camp can make would be giving in to the wind of isolationism, protectionism and competition. People are still looking for a credible alternative that progressives can embody and implement. We can see this in the streets of Tbilisi, in the resistance of women in Iran and Afghanistan, and in the students' protests in Serbia and the US. **Extremist forces propose a narrative steeped in ideological references, and their political platform appeals to tradition, control and closure.** The model to which they aspire is that of a fortress, which manages to keep out perceived threats through the protection of a unique and partial identity, a Europe of homelands that identifies national sovereignty as the only way to achieve the well-being of citizens.

Progressives can revive the trust in internationalism and the quest for multilateral cooperation by appealing to positive examples. **We are constantly confronted with transnational challenges, and the idea of retaining control at the national level is futile and dangerous. The only chance of having an impact is through joint action at the supranational and international level, and for this we need common institutions, rules and instruments.** The
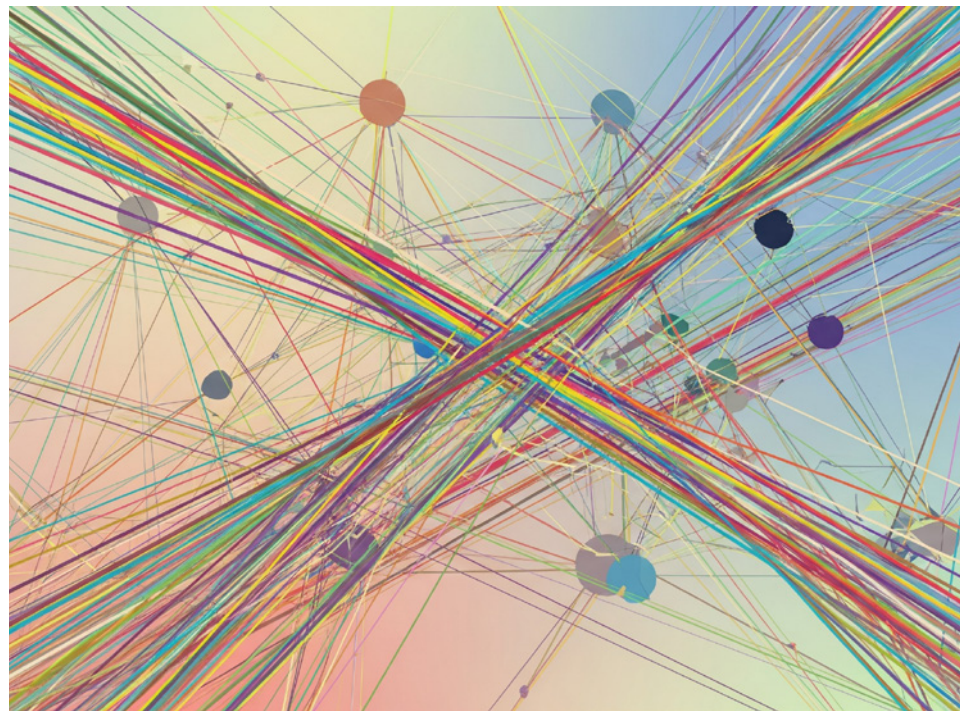
Covid-19 pandemic has shown us that it was only the joint purchase of vaccines, and solidarity instruments, such as NextGenerationEU, that were able to help nation-states cope with the health emergency and its socio-economic consequences.

▶ *We are constantly confronted with transnational challenges, and the idea to retain control at the national level is futile and dangerous.*

In a mirror-like manner, the world is extremely interconnected and interdependent, and this reality cannot be radically changed, despite attempts to control trade through the imposition of tariffs, or migration by building walls. On the contrary, we can leverage these interconnections to promote a more sustainable and inclusive society, for example by concluding new-generation trade agreements that promote green transition and social standards, or by adopting migration schemes that benefit our ageing democracies and the countries of origin.

But this should not be presented as opposing nationality and identity. **An inclusive identity narrative that values national identity as part of the European and international family can help present European integration and internationalism as a source of cultural renewal rather than a loss**, thus depriving nationalist and nativist forces of a powerful propaganda element.

Progressives can and should remain faithful to their playbook. They should advocate pacifism and internationalism, but they must be pragmatic and embrace reality. This means enlarging their political agenda to talk about and act for what people care about, including security and national identity, in a way that is compatible with and beneficial for the advancement of Social Democratic objectives.

Nicoletta Pirozzi, Head of Programme on European Union and Institutional Relations Manager at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Investing in leadership is key

by Maria Maltschnig

Overall, 2024 – the 'year of elections' – left us with immense dissatisfaction. With very few exceptions, progressives failed to meet voters' demands and expectations, while the extreme right found effective ways to communicate and organise. The way forward for a Social Democratic reorientation is not obvious. High inflation, poor economic growth, severe global security threats and increasing concerns about migration all challenge traditional progressive strategies. While our overall claim of social justice is still our most important framework, we can no longer avoid addressing fundamental security concerns.

Political strategists and academics are trying to find a way forward. But the domestic situation of Social Democratic parties across Europe is so diverse that it is impossible to find a one-size-fits-all strategy. Parties that have a leading role in the centre-left or that even aspire to lead governments – which is the case for SAP in Sweden, the PD Italy and the PvdA in the Netherlands, amongst others – have different goals and target groups from parties that find themselves in a single-digit position or that are struggling to reach the threshold to even enter parliament. The traditional Social Democratic catch-all approach is still valid for those parties that continue to play a leading role. **It is not possible to reach a majority without convincing various social groups of your political vision: rural and urban, men and women, young, middle-aged and old people, very progressive and moderate voters.** More marginalised parties, however, might need to develop more targeted policies to become relevant at least in some parts of society.

What all these parties have in common is that they need to decide how potential voters can be addressed effectively, and how local structures can be maintained or (re)built. **The key here might not lie in developing even more theoretical policy solutions and publishing even more elaborate manifestos, but rather in investing more in strengthening the party organisation and finding better ways to communicate with the voters.**

▶ *It is not possible to reach a majority without convincing various social groups of your political vision: rural and urban, men and women, young, middle-aged and old people, very progressive and moderate voters.*

GOVERNING WHENEVER AND WHEREVER WE CAN

One big opportunity to attract more attention and prove our capabilities is governing. Wherever Social Democrats are in power – be it in national or regional governments or in cities and towns – we can reach a much wider public and show that we can deliver for the people. It is not uncommon that in countries governed by right-conservative national governments, Social Democrats are in charge at the local level and are very impactful in this position. Even in small(er) structures, we need to approach the big challenges of our societies with ambition and full understanding of the social and environmental issues of our time.

Public representatives at all levels must recognise their unique responsibility and the chance to convince people that how we lead and shape our communities is the way forward.

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▶ *We need political leaders at all levels who can stand up for the people, and who can make a visible effort to make a change.*

National parties, foundations and international progressive networks can help empower and strengthen local representatives by providing opportunities to connect and learn from each other. The Socialist International recently launched a progressive mayors' network for exactly this reason.

STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP AT ALL LEVELS

Politics has become much more complex than it used to be. Many common challenges require a high level of strategic ability to be solved. **We need political leaders at all levels who can stand up for the people, and who can make a visible effort to make a change.** In addition, they must be highly skilled in moderation, leadership and communication, as well as being resilient and motivated. Political education and advanced training strategies in parties might never have been as important as they are right now and need to be designed thoughtfully. Parties, foundations and party academies should focus on providing skills and support for Social Democratic leaders at all levels. Important elements of training programmes include:

• leading and motivating teams of volunteers;
• developing and managing campaigns at the local level;
• using new technology (AI) in grassroots activism to improve efficiency and reduce tiring and time-consuming tasks;
• developing widespread knowledge about the functioning of modern communication tools;
• recognising and supporting talented newcomers of any age.

It is important to understand that the current political circumstances are far too difficult to be managed in any efficient and successful way by just developing narratives and message boxes in party headquarters and think tanks. **Our parties need to be learning organisations, able to adapt to changing expectations.** Investing in leadership will not pay off immediately, but it is probably the most impactful option we have right now.

Maria Maltschnig,
Director of the
Karl-Renner-Institut (Austria)
and Vice-President of FEPS

FOCUS

THE FAR RIGHT AND ITS CONQUEST OF EDUCATION

While education is commonly seen as a driver for equal opportunities, the way education systems are designed significantly shapes whether they genuinely promote diverse values and address inequalities, or, conversely, perpetuate them.

Far-right forces in Europe and beyond are trying to redesign education systems and programmes in order to promote their own illiberal and authoritarian principles.

Whether it is Viktor Orbán's government with the collaboration of the church in Hungary; President Aleksandar Vučić's attempts to crush the protests of the student movement by blackmailing supportive teaching staff in Serbia; or the freezing of funds, the restrictions on the enrollment of international students and the attacks against university autonomy – as it is happening in the United States: far-right forces are consistently and deliberately taking over education systems.

Far-right approaches to education

by Anja Giudici

Education is not inherently liberal or equal – it is political. Far-right parties across Europe are seeking to reshape education to reflect their illiberal, nationalist and authoritarian values, capitalising on discontent with the current provision. Offering alternatives is important both politically and to defend the democratic and equalising function that education serves.

Education is often described as an inherently liberalising and equalising force. But it is not. A host of research shows that, depending on how they are designed, education systems can either promote democratic, tolerant and progressive cultures, or illiberalism and authoritarianism. Economically, education systems can enhance equality or reinforce and legitimise hierarchies and discrimination. They can provide staff with secure and fulfilling employment in classrooms, canteens and school buses – or, as is increasingly the case after decades of austerity, exacerbate their precariousness and insecurity.

The design of education has vital, politically relevant, cultural and economic implications. Research shows that parties have thus developed distinctive approaches to it. Until recently, this research largely overlooked the far right, assuming the far right's focus lay solely with migration. However, **the surge in popularity of far-right parties across Europe and their entry into parliaments and governments means they now have the power to legislate on all issues, including education**. This development has rekindled interest in the question of how the far-right approaches education.

▶ *The surge in popularity of far-right parties across Europe and their entry into parliaments and governments means they now have the power to legislate on all issues, including education.*

Recent research shows that far-right parties have primarily approached education as a cultural policy issue. These parties have most benefited from and contributed to immigration being linked to public policy issues such as security and the labour market. Since the 1980s, far-right parties have used schools as yet another example of how immigration and multiculturalism cause discord and bring down standards to the detriment of the 'native' population. This framing exploits the real difficulties schools face in providing opportunities for minority pupils, and it places the blame on minorities themselves – immigrants in Western Europe and national minorities in Eastern Europe.

Cultural values bind together the economically diverse electorate of far-right parties. The need to appeal to different economic constituencies may explain why the far right has used its platforms to drag education deeper into the culture wars, broadening the focus from immigration to religion and gender. But the focus on the cultural implications of education is not just an electoral strategy. **When elected to government, far-right parties have worked to reshape education in order to disseminate conservative values.** The Italian government, led by far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, recently reallocated funds earmarked for sex and relationship education to teacher training on infertility prevention. *Fratelli d'Italia*, Meloni's party, now wants to require parental consent for any activity relating to 'sexuality, affectivity, or ethics', and to limit 'the dissemination of distorted cultural models'. In Hungary, the Fidesz-government has rewritten the official curriculum to emphasise nationalist pride and religious values. It has also banned gender studies degrees from higher education.

But education is not just about culture. **By determining who has access to more – or less – prestigious types of education and**

qualifications, education systems also distribute benefits and opportunities to different groups in society. Comparative analysis shows that far-right parties are less united on their approach to the economic aspects of education than they are on cultural aspects.

Consider attitudes towards the educational role of parents, private providers, and the state. Some parties, such as Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, advocate a strong state sector that limits parental choice. They argue that only strict testing and hierarchical differentiation between academic and vocational routes, and between mainstream and special educational needs provision, can ensure that opportunities are allocated based on merit. Other far-right parties, such as Reform UK or Spain's Vox, embrace private schooling and parental choice. Still others teeter between positions. In the 1980s, the Front National was the only French party to advocate providing parents with vouchers that they could spend on either private or state schooling, aiming to disrupt the latter. Nowadays, the party calls for a strong, hierarchically structured, public education system with greater state control over programmes and textbooks.

These positions seem contradictory. However, if designed accordingly, both hierarchical differentiation and parental choice can reinforce cultural and status inequalities, which the far right deems "natural and positive", as Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde has written. In the United States, far-right movements historically fought to reinforce hierarchies and segregation within public education. However, after losing power from the mid-1960s onwards, they started promoting and implementing parental choice, vouchers and homeschooling as alternative means of maintaining racially segregated and religious education. Now that the far-right movement has reached government in various countries, it is again using state power to reform public schooling – and private universities.

Another key feature of the approach of far-right parties to education is that they engage with it in ways that extend beyond the institutional

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channels of electoral campaigns, parliaments and governments. Historical studies show that, **even when education did not feature prominently in their manifestos, far-right parties devoted considerable effort to organising students, teachers and parents, and to providing education themselves**. This continues to be the case today.

These efforts have a dual purpose. First, they set out to change education from the bottom up. Among some of their recent campaigns, far-right groups have threatened individual teachers in Germany, mobilised parents to protest against sex education in Germany, France and the UK, and established an institute for higher education in France. Parents, students and teachers often care deeply about education, and organising in and around schools enables the far right to exploit their dissatisfaction with local educational provisions. At least in some cases, this strategy seems to be working. While some parties remain hostile towards teachers – Reform UK's Nigel Farage recently declared he would "go to war with teaching unions" – other parties, such as the Rassemblement National in France, have instead reached out to teachers. In the 2024 French elections, a record number of teachers voted for the far right, prompting analysts to suggest, in the words of French political scientist Luc Rouban, that "the state that served as a resource for left-wing parties since the 1980s has largely disappeared, including in education".

Education can promote both equality and inequality, democratic and authoritarian values. Since the knowledge revolution, educational qualifications have become a make-or-break factor in the labour market, turning education into a key issue for voters and an increasingly important determinant of partisanship. Allowing those who openly oppose liberal and democratic values to shape this policy area and exploit discontent is dangerous. The good news is that research shows substantial agreement among the parties that subscribe to liberal-democratic values with regard to a range of policies – from expanding early-childhood education to advancing civic participation in curricula and equalising opportunities. Offering an alternative to far-right visions of education is crucial both politically and if we are to preserve and enhance the democratic, liberalising and equalising function of education.

*Anja Giudici,
Lecturer in Education,
Cardiff University, UK*

A suffocating embrace?

Religion and nationalism in Hungary

by Eszter Neumann

The Hungarian authoritarian conservative government is progressively outsourcing education and welfare to religious organisations. No matter what strategies these religious elites have chosen to navigate this political challenge, they have actively contributed to consolidating the autocratic power and cementing a hierarchical and segregated society.

Since the late 1990s, christianity has become a key resource for European radical-right politics. Radical autocrats have appropriated religious narratives to construct divisive and exclusivist interpretations of the nation. They present themselves as the protector of the 'pure people' from the corrupt elite and dangerous others such as religious and ethnic minorities.

▶ *Since the significant increase in asylum applications in Europe in 2015, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been portraying himself as the saviour of Europe, led by a sacred mission of protecting the true 'christian identity of Europe'.*

Hungary's government is a prime example of how conservative religious narratives are used to legitimise authoritarian populist governance. Since the significant increase in asylum applications in Europe in 2015, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been portraying himself as the saviour of Europe, led by a sacred mission of protecting the true 'christian identity of Europe'

from the external threats of immigration and the internal threats posed by 'liberal elites' and 'Brussels'. Breaking off from the political consensus on the separation of church and state, Orbán proclaims that his government is building an 'old-style christian democracy' where christian churches are the state's strategic allies.

| THE ALLIANCE OF STATE AND CHURCH

The boundaries between state and church have been blurred in different ways in European states with right-wing populist governments in power. The Polish catholic church had taken a leading role in setting the political agenda and dominating the political discourse with symbolic themes such as abortion and catholic nationalism under the PiS government. The Turkish government has co-opted quasi-civil organisations to orchestrate religious rhetoric and traditional values. Hungary represents another case. In exchange for ideological resources and political legitimacy with the government's christian conservative ideology, politically loyal churches have been invited to take over education and welfare services, with generous funding conditions and governing autonomy.

Outsourcing first started with schools. Since 2010, the share of faith-based educational institutions has grown significantly – for example, 27 per cent of secondary schools are today run by faith-based organisations, while this share was only ten per cent in 2010. Religious organisations have become key providers of various non-formal education programmes (after-school learning spaces and talent education programmes providing support for Roma and disadvantaged students), teacher training, early childhood education and care as well as the kindergarten sector. **Recently, the entire foster care system has been outsourced to the church. At the same time, rival service-providing NGOs have been cornered out of these sectors.**

| A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL EXCHANGE OR A SUFFOCATING EMBRACE?

In line with European trends, Hungary is a steadily secularising society. Indeed, the embrace between state and church did not stem from popular demand. The government's strategy of politicising religion in fact

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> ▶ *Church leaders have publicly shown loyalty, supported divisive propaganda and anti-LGBTIQ+ politics, and suppressed dissent in schools.*

met with the ambition of the big traditional christian churches to grow their resources and secular power through expanding their institutional network. Nevertheless, **critical religious intellectuals and the representatives of smaller religious communities describe religious populist politics as a suffocating embrace**. Even so, some religious organisations aim to make use of the political opportunity by helping groups that are scapegoated or written off by autocratic politics (the poor, Roma and immigrants) – but only a few actually raise their voices publicly against political Christianity.

EVANGELISATION AND SOCIAL MISSION

What benefits and opportunities do religious elites see in engaging with authoritarian conservative governance and in supporting political Christianity? The catholic and the Lutheran churches, the two biggest denominations in Hungary, view schools primarily as a territory for evangelisation. Schools are thus seen as a medium for ingraining religion into families, in the hopes of expanding the respective catholic and Lutheran faith communities.

Church leaders have publicly shown loyalty to the government, supported divisive propaganda and anti-LGBTIQ+ politics, and suppressed dissent in schools. Meanwhile, other faith-based organisations consider education as a forum for enacting the church's social mission. They take over schools in disadvantaged regions and marginalised Roma communities with a view to providing better quality education and channels of mobility. The Order of Malta, in particular, has become a key state-supported actor of managing poverty in marginalised Roma communities, thus pacifying social conflicts amplified by the government's propaganda and workfare policies. At the same time, the Hungarian state has completely withdrawn from providing welfare and education services in the rural margins, and has outsourced the task to christian charities.

DIVIDED COMMUNITIES

No matter what strategies religious leaders and policy elites choose to navigate the far-right political challenge, they contribute to consolidating autocratic power, solidifying social divisions and cementing a closed, hierarchical and ethnically segregated society.

The large-scale outsourcing of the education system has produced a school system with multiple providers where the state neither aims at nor is capable of enforcing social justice principles. The largest churches have taken over the most prestigious elite educational institutions, and faith-based organisations run schools in the most deprived communities. Consequently, the outsourcing process has amplified segregation between schools, and segregation of Roma in particular. In urban contexts, parents' school choice closely follows political cleavages. **Choosing faith-based education means approving the conservative populist regime. The churches' expansion has therefore not only solidified the divisions within local communities but also rendered the education system a battlefield for future voters.** The politicisation of religion has divided religious communities internally. While the leaders of the largest denominations have embraced the government's divisive and exclusivist nationalism, communities of faith have become divided by the politicisation of religion and by the government's political agendas, which are underpinned by religious-moral arguments. Dissenters are thus turning away from organised religion.

Eszter Neumann, Sociologist of education at the Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest

Academia stands up: Serbia's higher education under siege

by Jovana Karaulić

A moment of solidarity between students and teaching staff in Serbia opened a democratic space – which was quickly met with revenge from the ruling authorities. What followed was a full-scale assault on higher education, an attack that demands a stronger European response.

When student-led protests broke out in Serbia at the end of 2024, the academic community did something unprecedented: it stood by them. **Teaching staff from all public and private faculties openly supported the students' demands** for justice and institutional responsibility after the collapse of a roof at the newly reconstructed railway station in Novi Sad that killed 16 people, and after an organised attack on a student following state failures and violence. **Teaching staff indeed recognised a broader democratic impulse in the students' protests**, and universities thus became platforms for civil resistance. It was this unity between students and teaching staff that made universities a target.

Over the months that followed, the Serbian government launched a coordinated campaign of putting financial, legal and institutional pressure on higher education institutions. What began as administrative harassment soon escalated into what many now describe as an attempt to dismantle the autonomy – and dignity – of the academic profession.

UNDERMINING SCIENCE AND AUTONOMY BY DECREE

In March 2025, the caretaker government in Serbia adopted regulation 5/35, which drastically altered the official work-hour allocation for university teaching staff – from an equal distribution of 20 hours each for teaching and research, to 35 hours of teaching and just 5 hours of research. The result has been two-fold: teaching staff no longer receive pay for research hours (in practice, many earn as little as €70 per month) and scientific activity has been institutionally deprioritised.

▶ *The Serbian government adopted the regulation without consulting the academic community and without following legal procedures.*

This move, which was widely criticised by the academic community, has not only financially destabilised public universities but also jeopardised Serbia's participation in European research frameworks. Accreditation systems have been disrupted, participation in Horizon Europe and other projects has become nearly impossible, and international cooperation has stalled. **Moreover, the Serbian government adopted the regulation without consulting the academic community and without following legal procedures – an approach that not only makes the regulation illegal, but also undermines legal certainty and academic governance.**

CRIMINALISING ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

The government's campaign has not stopped at structural interference. In May 2025, criminal charges were filed against Vladan Đokić, the rector of the University of Belgrade, and the entire rector's board. The charges were reportedly

based on allegations from a government-aligned student group. The accusation – abuse of office – is widely seen as politically motivated and aimed at delegitimising university leadership.

The charges come after months of verbal attacks by government officials and a relentless media narrative portraying teaching staff as the hidden hand behind the protests. Aleksandar Vučić, **Serbia's president, went as far as to publicly mock educators, stating that teaching staff who support blockades will "get potatoes", instead of salaries**. These events have deepened an already worrying atmosphere in which academics face a choice between silence or punishment – between protecting institutional values and the existence and future of universities or protecting their livelihoods.

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DIVIDE AND ISOLATE

A key feature of the government's approach has been the division of the academic sector. While the vast majority of faculties remain in lockdown or on legal strike, a few have been forced to adopt alternative teaching models, including online teaching. The government's aim is clear: to weaken collective action, fragment solidarity and create a semblance of normality, while ignoring that this largest student movement in Serbian history refuses to participate in such contrived teaching. In this way, the possibility of a new and very dangerous division between teaching staff and students is created. Alongside this, a new draft law on higher education has been announced, raising concerns that this crisis is not temporary, but a step towards the structural erosion of academic autonomy.

REPRESSION AGAINST ACADEMIC SOLIDARITY

It is important to stress that the academic community did not initiate this political conflict. It responded to it – by defending constitutional values and the rights of its students.

In January, university rector Đokić addressed the Parliamentary Committee for Education, explicitly stating that the university supports students' democratic demands. This message was echoed by the majority of faculties, marking an institutional moment of democratic clarity in an increasingly authoritarian environment. Their position, however, has come at great cost.

Teaching staff and students have been painted as enemies of the state. Salaries have been suspended for over two months. Accreditation is under threat. And those who stand firm, face personal and professional consequences. The goal appears to be not only punishment, but deterrence – to make future acts of civic solidarity less likely.

A CALL FOR EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY

This situation has not gone unnoticed. In May 2025, at the meeting of the Friends of the Western Balkans in Ljubljana, European progressives adopted a declaration explicitly condemning political repression in Serbia and supporting the civil and academic movement.

The declaration highlights that free, fair and timely elections are the only sustainable democratic solution to the current crisis. It includes a strong stance against the ongoing repression of university autonomy, and it calls on EU institutions to end the policy of appeasement towards the Serbian government.

However, **political declarations must be followed by civic and institutional support**. Numerous European academic organisations collaborate with Serbia through research and policy exchange. We call on these partners – and on the broader European academic and political community – to speak up, offer platforms for visibility and stand with those in Serbia who are defending the public mission of universities. When academic freedom is lost in one country, it is a warning to all others.

Jovana Karaulić,
Vice-Dean & Assistant Professor,
Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade and President of the Cultural Policy Committee,
Democratic Party of Serbia

Trump vs Harvard: strike one to educate one hundred

by Mattia Diletti

The conflict between Harvard University and the Trump administration has become the latest battle in three decades of American cultural wars. Since the beginning of his second term, Donald Trump has opened several fronts in the culture wars, and this conflict with Harvard is perhaps the most striking, in part because of the involvement of important institutions. In the field of education, the culture wars are playing out in two distinct ways – against universities on the one hand, and the dismantling of the Department of Education on the other.

The Trump administration is currently at its maximum strength and is implementing a *blitzkrieg* strategy to strike its ideological and political enemies through an unprecedented use of executive orders, direct pressure such as the threat of cutting federal funds, and relentless attacks through mainstream and social media.

It was James Hunter who established the contemporary sociological definition of 'cultural wars' with his seminal 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to define America*. Hunter's core argument is that American public life is animated by an enduring antagonism between two rival moral cosmologies, which he terms 'orthodox' and 'progressive'. In each of the fields he identified, a specific conflict was taking place over the very meaning of being American. However, it was the paleoconservative Pat Buchanan who weaponised the concept as a political tool in 1992, when he said, in his famous speech at the Republican convention in Houston, that "a war is taking place for the soul of America".

Buchanan denounced the Democratic Party as "one that supported abortion, radical feminism and the homosexual rights movement". Since then, the culture wars have become a strategic tool for the American right to polarise US politics and foster ideological cohesion within its ranks.

▶ *The culture wars have become a strategic tool for the American right to polarise US politics and foster ideological cohesion within its ranks.*

The pillars of the right's identity politics include white nationalism, christian nationalism, the traditional family and lower taxes. The fighters of the American culture wars today have identified a natural enemy in immigration, the cosmopolitan elite and globalisation. The Ivy League universities, and the intellectual class more generally, have become a symbolic antagonist, allowing disparate grievances to be channelled into a single concentrated attack.

Universities are spaces of experimentation with DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) policies, and the construction of pluralistic cultures and identities. They also act as a springboard for the entry of ideas and protagonists linked to those ideas into society – which sometimes also come from countries other than the United States. **The most important American universities, like Harvard, are indeed places where cultural pluralism and new ideas are experimented with, but they are also institutions for the reproduction of social injustice.** Thanks to this contradiction, right-wing populism *à la* Steve Bannon has found fertile ground to oppose the established cultural elites, such as those of the Ivy League. Students belonging to the richest one per cent in the United States are more than twice as likely to attend an elite college as students from middle-income families, even with
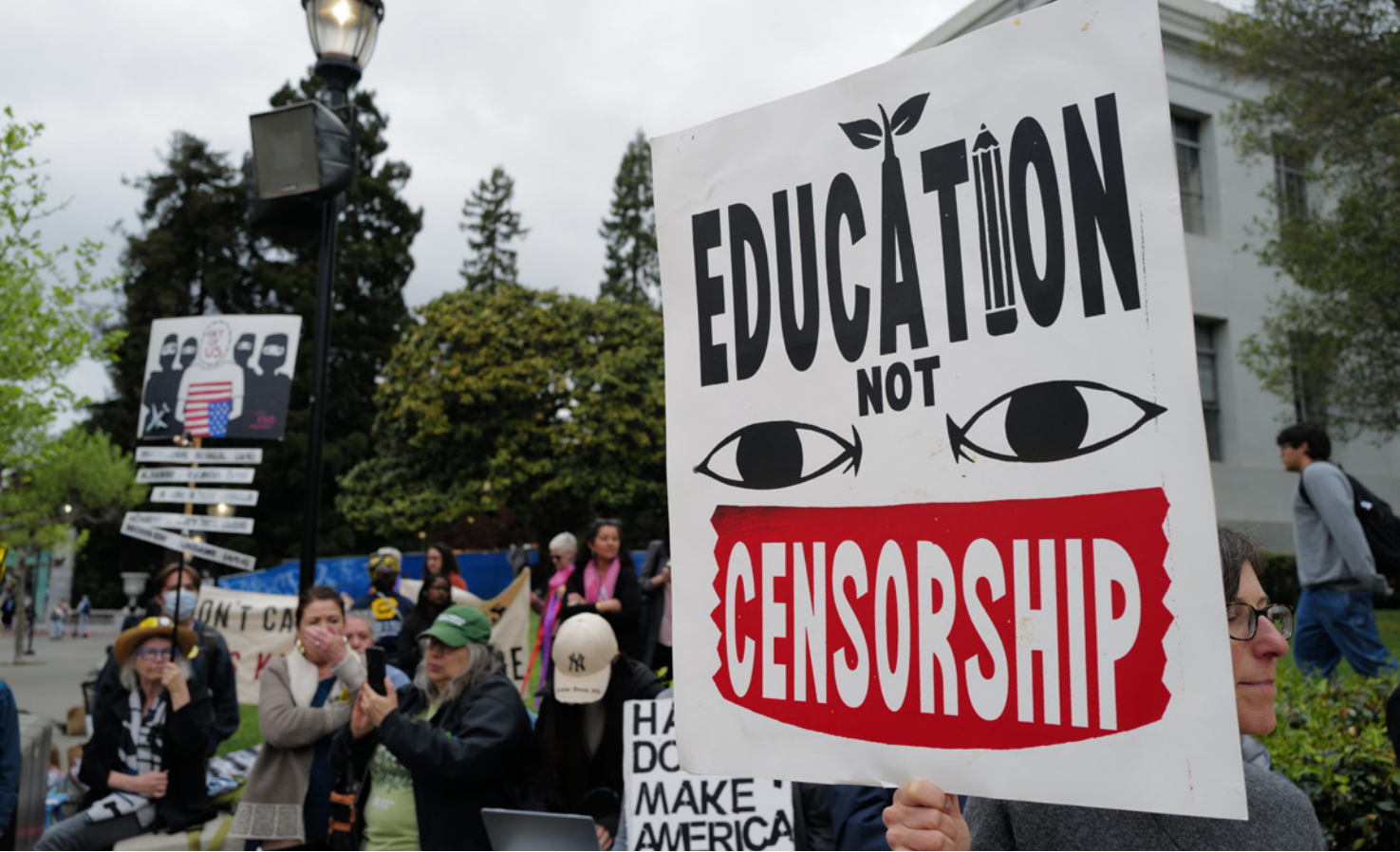
identical admission test scores. In these years of great resentment, challenging the Ivy League universities has become equivalent to attacking unpopular elites.

▶ *Some intellectuals from the national-conservative right have suggested a strategy of control, censorship and subordination of universities.*

Some intellectuals from the national-conservative right have suggested a strategy of control, censorship and subordination of universities. Certain Republican states, like Florida and Texas, have experimented with strategies to control university curricula and hiring policies. The final, extremely ambitious, goal is to downsize the power of the old American

idea factories and to promote the rise of a national-conservative intellectual establishment. A close look at the galaxy of intellectuals, policymakers and experts supporting the Trump administration reveals a significant number of Ivy League dissenting voices (such as Stephen Miller and Russell Vought – scholars from minor universities and members of right-wing think tanks) who contested the Ivy League's 'liberal culture' when they were students. This is not simply a war of ideas, but also a strategy for the replacement of cultural elites.

The strategy against Harvard could be summarised as 'strike one to educate one hundred'. One of the masterminds of this strategy, first in Florida and then across the US, has been the conservative activist Christopher Rufo, who has called for federal financing to the universities to be adjusted "in a way that puts them in an existential terror", and makes them bend to the current administration's will. There is little else to add to understand what President Donald Trump is doing. In the same way, the alleged antisemitism of students

demonstrating in favour of Palestine is being used with the same methods as back in the time of McCarthyism: arbitrary accusations and police tactics, which are often illegal.

For the victims of the 'Trump system', the first line of defence is judicial. It is hard, however, to believe that the American conflicts, of which this is just one example, will remain confined to the courtrooms.

▶ *The strategy against Harvard could be summarised as 'strike one to educate one hundred'.*

Mattia Diletti,
Lecturer of Political Science and Public Policy at Sapienza University of Rome

POLICY BRIEF

SERBIA'S CIVIC AWAKENING: THE 2024-2025 STUDENT PROTESTS IN FOCUS

Friends of the Western Balkans series

By Strahinja Subotić

The 2024-2025 Serbian student protests – triggered by the fatal collapse of the Novi Sad train station canopy – have become the most **formidable civic challenge to Serbia's authoritarian trajectory**.

This policy brief traces their evolution, from spontaneous gatherings and student blockades demanding accountability to the shift toward political engagement.

As the crisis is nowhere near its end, this paper concludes with policy recommendations for a more proactive EU response, arguing that the protests may signal a turning point in Serbia's democratic development and reshape its European future.

DOSSIER

STRONGER TOGETHER!
LGBTIQ+ RIGHTS VS ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS

Equality and non-discrimination are enshrined in the European treaties and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. In recent decades, this has resulted in an unprecedented level of acknowledgement of LGBTIQ+ rights, at least in principle.

However, 'anti-gender' movements are on the rise too. Conservative and illiberal forces are hijacking the very concept of gender, and are using it as a tool to coalesce consensus against LGBTIQ+ rights and transgender rights in particular. These conservative and illiberal forces are building coalitions that are bound together by a common 'enemy'. They mislead public opinion by claiming to be protecting the rights and interests of women and, sometimes, even lesbian women. They demonise what they call 'gender ideology' and even offer an alternative ideology based on traditions, family, nation and religious values.

In short, gender is at the centre of the political struggle in Europe and elsewhere, and it is becoming a key ideological battleground. For progressives, it is essential to be clear that LGBTIQ+ rights are human rights, and as such not negotiable. Progressives cannot remain silent while harassment and the violation of people's dignity are being perpetrated.

The anti-gender movement, and why it is winning (now)

by Andrea Pető

Anti-liberal forces are hijacking and appropriating the concept of gender. When they mention 'gender', it is not about gender but about seizing on language and concepts from the human rights discourse in order to create an anti-liberal alternative.

Hungary is a laboratory that tests policies, narratives, discourses and technologies (such as face recognition software) to see what works and what can be applied by other illiberal forces in other parts of the world. Policies and narratives against gender equality are the most well-thought-out products of the present anti-liberal turn. **The anti-gender rhetoric is a foreign policy tool that positions the Hungarian government at the forefront of international illiberal forces.** These illiberal forces pretend to represent 'unashamed citizens' who do whatever they want, ignoring all previous norms, values, laws or conventions. Proudly ignoring the last liberal consensus, these 'unashamed citizens' – who vote for protest parties and/or far-right parties – are not only undermining the present liberal order but also setting up a new, anti-liberal alternative. In reality, the anti-gender rhetoric fits into the general crusade that the anti-liberal governments are waging against science, academia and critical knowledge production, actively promoting anti-gender movements and actors.

▶ *The anti-gender rhetoric is a foreign policy tool that positions the Hungarian government at the forefront of international illiberal forces.*

WHY GENDER?

Europe is living in a new cold war, which is no longer all that cold. This war is being waged along the narrative lines of the gender discourse. As sociologists Laurie Essig and Alexander Kondrakov point out, the concept of cold war refers to the process of stigmatisation and exclusion of one part of the population by another along political and symbolic lines. This new cold war is not connected to the specific historical period of the Cold War, but rather serves to reflect how images of enemies are being assembled and gendered. The new cold war is not an abstract division line between imagined geographical locations, like East and West or North and South, but rather it is an active political process of alliance-making and of redefining what is normal. Today's new cold war is not being waged between two blocs of states, but inside specific national boundaries in order to undermine national unity. Gender is used as the glue to create these new blocs domestically and transnationally, binding together forces that otherwise do not have much in common in order to undermine national cohesion, solidarity and trust.

WHY IS GENDER A SYMBOLIC GLUE?

The metaphor of gender as 'a glue' highlights how the concept binds together different religious and political forces, from fundamentalist groups to (in some countries) football hooligans. Gender works as a glue in different ways. First, a dynamic is constructed so that the notion of gender is perceived as a threatening concept.

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The political right has united separate contested issues and attributed them to the umbrella term 'the progressive agenda'. The concept of 'gender ideology' then comes in, which is constructed by those who consider gender as a threat. Opposition to this 'ideology' has become a means of rejecting certain facets of the current social and economic order – from prioritising identity politics over material issues to weakening people's social, cultural and political security. Second, the demonisation of 'gender ideology' has become a key rhetorical tool in the construction of a new concept of 'common sense' for a broad audience, moving away from the consensus of what is normal and legitimate. It also glues together and mobilises the opponents of liberal democracy. For the anti-gender movements, 'gender' is not what members of

gender academia (activists, policymakers and academics) use in their work. Nevertheless, gender is and will be at the forefront of the upcoming political struggle because it taps into people's feelings of uncertainty about the world around them and directs them towards equality issues.

It is important to note that the anti-gender movement is a social mobilisation based on opposition to 'gender ideology' and 'political correctness'. It does not just demonise the worldview of its enemies and reject the human rights paradigm, but it also offers an alternative centred on the family, the nation, religious values and freedom of speech. This alternative is widely attractive because it is based on a political identification, and it promises a safe and secure community as

a remedy for individualism and social atomisation. **Opposition to 'gender' is also an opportunity for the right to create a broad alliance and unite various actors that did not cooperate in the past. The very concept of gender has therefore become a necessary element for binding together this coalition of opponents to 'gender ideology'.** One of this coalition's first targets for attack is the academic study of gender as a scientific form of interdisciplinary enquiry.

▶ *Illiberal forces are emptying and instrumentalising the existing institutions, values and resources of liberal forces.*

WHAT IS THE ANTI-LIBERAL PLAYBOOK?

The anti-liberals' most important weapon is this internal cold war, which weakens the state and its institutions. Illiberal forces are connected through an illiberal international network of those fighting liberal and progressive values. This network has existed for decades but it has become increasingly successful in recent years, partly because of the sleepwalking of liberal actors who do not recognise the fundamental structural changes taking place, and who do not recognise the encroachment of these illiberal forces.

WHY ARE ANTI-LIBERALS SO SUCCESSFUL IN USING GENDER AS A GLUE ?

Illiberal forces have succeeded because they have not met with any real resistance and because they have adopted a perfect strategy of attacking certain institutions, eliminating what spaces of resistance were left. At the same time, illiberals are creating their own spaces and their own institutions. Weronika Grzebalska and I have introduced the idea of 'polypore states' whereby states are like parasitic organisms that feed on their host's vital resources – and whereby illiberal states are therefore like mushrooms that take all their energy from the tree of the existing liberal forces on which they grow. These polypore states produce nothing new, but they sustain their existence with resources taken from others. **Illiberal forces are thus emptying and instrumentalising the existing institutions, values and resources of liberal forces.** They are doing this for two reasons: to eliminate liberal forces, and to create and strengthen the illiberal political alternative

IT IS NOT (ONLY) HOMOPHOBIA

The anti-gender, anti-equality movement is not (only) homophobia. It is a proxy or substitute for homophobia. This is difficult to explain, especially to the LGBTIQ+ community, because this fight puts their very lives in danger. On the one hand, the anti-gender movement is not about the LGBTIQ+ community, and on the other hand it is very much about them.

▶ *Traditional forms of resistance, such as petitions, signatures and public protests, no longer work.*

WHAT CAN PROGRESSIVES DO?

A lesson that needs to be learned is the importance of networks, international contacts and press relations, and an understanding of the surprising weakness of European infrastructure. **Traditional forms of resistance, such as petitions, signatures and public protests, no longer work.** The anti-gender movement copies strategies and policies that have worked nationally – for example in Hungary. In the same way, progressives should copy from the successful strategies of others. The main focus should be on resources and ideas. Illiberal forces already recognise the importance of higher education because higher education controls knowledge production, the distribution of knowledge and the construction of new elites. For progressives, an alliance between different actors to invent the 'glue' for a coalition of progressive forces must therefore be a noble and pressing task for the future.

Andrea Pető, Professor in the Department of Gender Studies at the Central European University, Vienna, and research affiliate of the CEU Democracy Institute, Budapest

United (in diversity) we stand – divided we fall

by Flora Bolter

Across Europe, 'anti-gender' movements are on the rise, increasingly targeting the rights of trans, non-binary and intersex persons, with serious real-life consequences. These movements sometimes frame themselves as defending the interests of women, children or even lesbian, gay and bisexual persons. The progressive movement should not fall for this misrepresentation.

As of mid-2025, 22 of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe have recognised marriage equality for same-sex and different-sex couples, and 12 have based the legal recognition of gender on self-determination, in line with the best practice recommendations made by international human rights organisations. The rights of lesbians, gays, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) persons are therefore acknowledged to an unprecedented level in our region. At the same time, **the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency shows a rise in reported experiences of harassment and violence against LGBTI persons in the years leading up to 2024. Indeed, Putin-style 'propaganda bans' including Viktor Orbán's attack on Budapest Pride or exclusionary constitutional definitions of gender, marriage and family are now ubiquitous endeavours of illiberal populist movements all over Europe** (and elsewhere, particularly in Donald Trump's United States). LGBTI rights are therefore at a political crossroads, and this is particularly true in Europe, which has historically championed these rights.

Yet some progressive groups remain silent regarding the dissemination of these harmful narratives on LGBTI persons, which are openly and demonstrably engineered by US ultra-conservative groups and part and parcel of these groups' global anti-choice campaigning. Worse, some seem to pay credit to the specious claim that LGBTI rights somehow contradict or diminish women's rights or the rights of children. And even within the LGBTI community, a so-called 'LGB movement' has emerged to focus on sexual orientation issues only (but in practice almost exclusively advocating against trans rights).

▶ *The EU's Fundamental Rights Agency shows a rise in reported experiences of harassment and violence against LGBTI persons in the years leading up to 2024.*

It is no surprise that most of the harmful narratives around LGBTI rights today focus on gender identity and trans persons: they tap into misrepresentations and uneasiness in the general population regarding a very small group of people that has been gaining visibility and acceptance in recent years.

Because younger generations are more at ease with expressing non-normative gender identities, trans and non-binary persons are more visible today than previously. Although this is simply due to the erosion of social taboos, claims that there is a 'trans epidemic' – and conspiracy theories on 'grooming' and 'propaganda' to explain it – are on the rise, repeating word for word the aspersions cast on the gay and lesbian movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Add a touch of vitriol about 'gender ideology extremism', a dash of sensationalistic junk science, cherry-picked 'reviews' and pseudo-diagnoses that respected scientific authorities have warned against and – hey presto! – you have the recipe for a moral panic.

An onslaught of manufactured controversies, frequently echoed uncritically in sensationalistic media titles, focuses the public debate on hyperbolic fears and a metaphysical debate about gender, when we should be focusing instead on what matters in terms of human rights: the lived experiences and policy needs of trans, non-binary and intersex persons, who undeniably face discrimination and violence and have the same unalienable rights as everybody else.

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▶ *The rights of one group of people are not acquired or defended by diminishing those of others: human rights are not a zero-sum game where we should fight against ourselves for scraps of legal protection and tatters of dignity.*

The fears that are being bandied about are largely imaginary. No country with a self-determination model of legal gender recognition has reported any abuse of these provisions. While individual transgender persons, like any other, can of course offend, the idea that a significant number of people would willingly face this level of stigmatisation just to access titles, roles or single-sex spaces purely for fraudulent reasons, is absurd. Trans and gender diverse identities are not conditions of mental ill-health, as the World Health Organization has explicitly pointed out. And from a feminist perspective, saying that 'woman' needs to be defined in law through biology – and biology only – means adhering to the notion that biology is destiny and that there should be an unsurpassable summa divisio of humankind into two sexes, with different-but-equal legal rights and obligations on either side – a far cry from what the feminist movement actually stands for. Wrangling the scope of legal protections against sexist violence is possible without adhering to a vision that can so easily be used to curtail our rights. Procreative choices are vitally important for all, and they are a key element for equality between women and men: this is also precisely why we should not reduce a woman's existence and identity to reproductive aspects, even with the best of intentions.

And while we are wasting energy on pointless debates about the essence of femininity, or on haggling over the extent to which unwanted sterilisation should be required to obtain legal gender recognition (hint: it should not), the persons who are the focus of this debate are being denied dignity and rights every day, at an alarming and increasing rate. Harassment against trans, non-binary, intersex and gender-diverse children and youth is being enabled and institutionalised through legal initiatives against 'gender ideology' that also target comprehensive sex education.

▶ *The fears that are being bandied about are largely imaginary. No country with a self-determination model of legal gender recognition has reported any abuse of these provisions.*

In Europe, as in the United States, the ultra-conservative right's playbook is the same: attacking trans rights to erode the rights of all LGBTI persons and to undermine sexual and reproductive rights at the same time. To do this, it tries to sow division among the LGBTI movement, and to pit feminists against trans persons.

But the rights of one group of people are not acquired or defended by diminishing those of others: human rights are not a zero-sum game where we should fight against ourselves for scraps of legal protection and tatters of dignity. Anti-choice, ultra-conservative demagogues, Putinist bots and masculinist 'influencers' have constructed narratives to divide and oppose all marginalised and discriminated groups of society, to weaponise complex, progressive societies against themselves. Feminists, LGBTI activists and progressive movements belong together in the shared commitment to build a society based on equality and human rights. Faced with the looming perspective of widespread takeover of European democracies by illiberal, far-right movements, we need to focus on our common ideal – and not on harmful distractions that aim to divide us.

*Flora Bolter,
Co-chair of the LGBTI+
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Leading locally for LGBTIQ+ freedom

by **Tom Jungen**

At a time when LGBTIQ+ rights are under attack across Europe, staying silent is complicity. As a Socialist mayor, I believe that the defence of freedom and equality starts in our towns and cities – but it must drive bold action at EU level, especially with the revision of the LGBTIQ+ strategy on the horizon.

A s Mayor of Roeser, a small but proud municipality in Luxembourg, I know that progressive values are not measured by the size of a city but by the courage of its leaders. In recent years, we have seen a dangerous backlash against LGBTIQ+ rights across Europe. Zones of hatred have been declared where freedom should reign. For me, as a Socialist and as a European, staying silent has never been an option. That is why, in 2021, our municipal council unanimously declared Roeser an LGBTIQ Freedom Zone. This was more than a symbolic gesture. It was a clear message: in Roeser, everyone is free to be who they are, to love whom they love, without fear or shame.

▶ *Progressive politics starts at the local level. We are the first to see when discrimination creeps in – whether in schools, workplaces, sports clubs or public spaces.*

Progressive politics starts at the local level. We are the first to see when discrimination creeps in – whether in schools, workplaces, sports clubs or public spaces. That is why we signed a Pact of Coexistence, committing to fight prejudice in all its forms, be it against migrants, religious minorities or LGBTIQ+ people. For us, equality is not selective – it is universal.

As Secretary General of Luxembourg's Socialist Party (LSAP), I took this fight beyond Roeser. I urged fellow mayors and councillors to follow suit. Today, nearly half of Luxembourg's municipalities have declared themselves LGBTIQ Freedom Zones. Our local movement inspired action at the national level, leading to a resolution in parliament affirming that Luxembourg stands for freedom and equality. But while I am proud of what we have achieved, I am not naïve.

Across Europe, reactionary forces are gaining ground. In too many member states, LGBTIQ+ people face growing hostility, legal setbacks and daily threats to their dignity and safety. That is why initiatives like the #LGBTIQFreedomZone campaign are so politically important – because rights not defended are rights lost.

▶ *Across Europe, reactionary forces are gaining ground. In too many member states, LGBTIQ+ people face growing hostility, legal setbacks and daily threats to their dignity and safety.*

As we approach the revision of the EU's LGBTIQ+ strategy post-2025, we must be clear: this is not the time for half-measures or cautious language. The European Commission, under the leadership of former Equality Commissioner Helena Dalli, took a historic step with the first strategy. Now **we need an even bolder and stronger commitment. One that does not just react to attacks but actively pushes forward – tying respect for LGBTIQ+ rights to the core of EU values, funding and external relations**. The EU must stand with local and

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regional authorities who are on the frontline of this fight. We need resources, visibility and political backing to make sure that declarations of freedom are matched by concrete actions – be it in education, healthcare, housing or public safety.

As a Socialist, I believe that human rights are non-negotiable. LGBTIQ+ rights are not 'special rights', they are basic rights every person deserves. Europe must remember this, especially when dealing with member states or candidate countries where these rights are under attack. In Roeser, we will continue to do our part. But local voices need a strong European echo. **The upcoming LGBTIQ+ strategy revision is a test of whether the EU is ready to stand firm against the tide of intolerance, or whether it will look the other way.** I know where I stand. I call on all progressive leaders – local, national and European – to stand with us. Because freedom, dignity and equality are not just words for resolutions. They are the foundation of the Europe we believe in.

▶ *We need an even bolder and stronger commitment. One that does not just react to attacks but actively pushes forward – tying respect for LGBTIQ+ rights to the core of EU values, funding and external relations.*

*Tom Jungen,
Mayor of Roeser,
Luxembourg*

DOSSIER

BRICS: NAVIGATING GLOBAL AMBITIONS AND GEOPOLITICAL TIDES

The BRICS is in a pivotal moment in its short history. With Brazil currently holding the presidency, it must navigate an increasingly complex global landscape. Amid a significant shift in global power and a new US foreign policy stance that forces other international players to redefine their roles, the BRICS could be instrumental in advancing the interests of the Global South. Therefore, the bloc is trying to develop new instruments and financial systems to lessen its dependence on established Western frameworks.

Despite this ambition, the BRICS' global influence is often constrained by its own internal limitations. The group's inherent heterogeneity, coupled with deeply divergent member interests – notably on the question of how it positions itself towards the West and on the question of United Nations reform –, a lack of mutual trust and a shifting governance structure, present significant obstacles to achieving its initial transformative vision.

This dynamic tension between its global aspirations and internal challenges is what defines the BRICS today.

BRICS 2025:
Brazil's balancing act

by Ana Garcia

Under Brazil's current presidency, the BRICS+ convenes for its 16th leaders' summit since its inaugural meeting in 2009. At that time, the world was facing the global financial crisis, which had begun in the United States in 2008. Indeed, it was the perception that international financial institutions did not reflect the distribution of power in the global economy that brought the BRICS countries together. Their shared objective was to reform these institutions, with particular emphasis on the International Monetary Fund, which had shown limitations in preventing the 2008 financial crisis.

In its initial phase, the BRICS adopted a reformist agenda, seeking greater representation and influence within existing institutions, without necessarily confronting them. However, this reformist drive has gradually lost momentum as geopolitical tensions have intensified. In this context, factors such as growing tensions between the United States and China, Russia's annexation of Crimea followed by the invasion of Ukraine, debates over monetary alternatives to the US dollar and the expansion of the bloc to include regionally significant countries have all contributed to the transformation of the BRICS into a geopolitical coalition.

The Johannesburg summit in 2023 was a turning point as it marked the BRICS' expansion. This move was shaped by global tensions and back-to-back BRICS presidencies in the G20 – India in 2023, Brazil in 2024 and South Africa in 2025. **Public debates focused on the BRICS as a potential driver of de-dollarisation, and on a shifting global power balance. Yet concrete financial outcomes remained limited.**

Brazil, in particular, was concerned that expansion would dilute the group's cohesion and its own influence.

▶ *BRICS governance is shifting. While decisions once required full consensus, the new approach allows for voluntary, non-binding adoption. This flexibility reflects the growing diversity within the bloc.*

Russia's presidency of the BRICS in 2024 pushed the agenda further. Five new countries became full BRICS members – Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (with Indonesia following in 2025) – and others were designated as strategic partners. Russia also announced ambitious initiatives: the BRICS Interbank Cooperation Mechanism,

the Cross-Border Payment Initiative, BRICS Clear (a settlement and depository platform) and a BRICS (Re)Insurance Company. All these aim to increase the financial autonomy of the BRICS and to reduce reliance on Western systems. Yet they remain at the proposal stage, with voluntary participation and lengthy testing ahead.

Notably, **BRICS governance is shifting. While decisions once required full consensus, the new approach allows for voluntary, non-binding adoption. This flexibility reflects the growing diversity within the bloc.** It is thus an ambitious BRICS agenda that Brazil has inherited from Russia for 2025. Adding complexity, Brazil's presidency of the BRICS overlaps with two other major roles for that country: the G20 presidency in 2024 and hosting COP30 in late 2025.

Meanwhile, the international landscape has shifted dramatically. The ongoing genocide in Gaza and Israel's war against Iran underscore the deepening crisis in global leadership

– or hegemony – exposed by the absence of universally accepted and enforced international rules and norms. The return of Donald Trump to the White House has further reinforced this trend. **The new US administration has ramped up tariffs, particularly on Chinese goods, threatened traditional allies such as Mexico and Canada, and unsettled global markets with new rounds of retaliatory trade measures.** Tensions with Europe have intensified, particularly after Trump unilaterally tried to broker a ceasefire in Ukraine and made continued US aid to Kyiv conditional. Washington's retreat from multilateral institutions, coupled with its growing embrace of trade protectionism, now defines the challenging global environment that Brazil must navigate.

In response, Brazil has adopted a cautious BRICS strategy – minimising both external and internal tensions. Internationally, Brasília avoids open confrontation with the US, focusing on trade facilitation rather than on monetary alternatives to the dollar. Domestically, the government steers clear of divisive debates that could trigger a political backlash. This recalibration can be seen in Brazil's economic priorities for the BRICS. **While previous presidencies have pushed for de-dollarisation and the increased use of local currencies, Brazil has centred its agenda on practical trade facilitation. Given that BRICS trade remains heavily China-focused and centred on commodities and energy, easing transaction mechanisms makes sense – and provokes less political resistance at home and abroad.** Brazil is also repositioning the BRICS away from an 'anti-Western' image. As Celso Amorim, President Lula da Silva's chief adviser for foreign policy, has stressed, the goal is a more balanced and fair international system, rooted in development, multilateralism and peace.

▶ *Institutional reform remains a top priority. With the BRICS doubling its membership in just two years – from five to eleven countries – governance mechanisms need urgent revision.*

In practice, Brazil has scaled back its BRICS ambitions in comparison to previous years, adopting a more pragmatic agenda. As ambassador Tatiana Rosito, head of the BRICS finance track, has noted, the BRICS should serve as a 'stabilising' rather than a 'transformative' force. Reflecting this approach and faced with a tight negotiation calendar, Brazil is concentrating on outcomes that are feasible and deliverable in the short term. One concrete achievement was Indonesia's accession as a full BRICS member in early 2025. Indonesia brings economic weight and a unique position bridging East and West – an important strategic gain for the bloc.

Yet in the monetary-financial sphere, major breakthroughs remain unlikely. Proposals for new payment platforms and alternatives to the dollar have largely been sidelined. One potential area for progress is the Contingent Reserve Arrangement, which was created in 2014 but which has never been put into operation. The Central Bank of Brazil is now reviewing its statutes and testing functionality, but it is unclear if a new implementation plan will emerge this year.

Institutional reform remains a top priority. With the BRICS doubling its membership in just two years – from five to eleven countries – governance mechanisms need urgent revision. Establishing clear criteria for future enlargement is also essential. Brazil faces a delicate balancing act: preserving the BRICS' reformist spirit, maintaining group cohesion and avoiding political pitfalls at home and abroad. Despite these challenges, the BRICS continues to play a critical role in the broader effort to build a more balanced and just world.

Ana Garcia, Professor of International Relations at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and Associate Researcher at the BRICS Policy Center

Engaging the BRICS: a view from the Global South

by Sanusha Naidu

The relationship between the Global South and the BRICS is often viewed as complementary, rooted in South-South cooperation and defined by solidarity and non-alignment. But is this really a realistic reflection of the relations between the BRICS and the Global South? To answer this question, the strengths and challenges of the BRICS-Global South connection need to be examined.

In the current global context, the BRICS founding members – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – are pivotal in shaping the future of the Global South. This aligns with the spirit of the 1955 Bandung Conference – the first large-scale Asian-African conference – which emphasised economic development and political non-alignment. This was seen as crucial for growth and stability, where the developing world would not be caught in supporting one power over another. Furthermore, the BRICS today aims to foster a more inclusive multipolar international system that represents Global South voices better.

At first glance, the BRICS embodies benign ideals of mutual interests and win-win partnerships for the Global South. However, whether this truly reflects the dynamic between the BRICS and the Global South needs to be scrutinised. The BRICS represents a critical element for the Global South's identity in responding to systemic challenges within the international order. The ties that connect the BRICS to the Global South can be characterised in the following way:

1. **Shared development challenges**
   The BRICS serves as a platform for nations with similar historical experiences and development challenges, enabling them to unite and advocate for collective interests.

2. **Reforming global governance**
   The BRICS seeks to reform institutions like the United Nations Security Council, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to ensure fairer representation, and to promote a more equitable global order for developing nations.

3. **Economic cooperation**
   The BRICS has established institutions such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) thus providing alternative financial mechanisms to reduce reliance on traditional Western-dominated institutions.

4. **South-South cooperation**
   The alliance fosters collaboration among Global South countries and promotes solidarity across various sectors, including finance, trade and technology.

However, these ties can also become sources of internal fragmentation and friction due to competing interests and regional or global rivalries for power. **The Global South is not a homogeneous bloc, and by extension the BRICS reflects this diversity. Promoting the BRICS as the pivot of the Global South therefore raises levels of contestation both within the bloc and externally.** The complexities underpinning the push and pull between the BRICS and the Global South are embedded in the institutional architecture of their engagement. Several structural conditions make this evident.

▶ *While the expansion of the BRICS may enhance its outreach, it serves as a reminder to India of China's use of economic power to extend that country's political influence in the Global South.*

CONTESTATION FOR LEADERSHIP

Both China and India position themselves as de facto leaders of the Global South. Their rivalry stems from historical tensions and their efforts to leverage soft power in various regional contexts. A prime example is the tension over the Indian Ocean, where India perceives China's encroachment into its sphere of influence as a threat to its interests. This rivalry complicates their interactions within the BRICS, as both nations strive to mitigate each other's influence. **While the expansion of the BRICS may enhance its outreach, it serves as a reminder to India of China's use of economic power to extend that country's political influence in the Global South**. Consequently, India faces the dilemma of balancing its interests between the Global North and the Global South. What remains to be seen is whether this contestation for power within the BRICS and the broader Global South will result in the emergence of competing power blocs led by China and India respectively. More importantly, this rivalry might create opportunities for other actors in the Global South to leverage their positions through strategic trade-offs and compromises, effectively playing China and India off against each other.

THE TRUST DEFICIT

The trust deficit between the BRICS and several nations of the Global South is a significant concern, stemming from various factors such as differing national priorities, historical grievances and the perception that the BRICS prioritises its own interests over those of the broader Global South. Internal divisions within the Global South, combined with scepticism regarding the BRICS' commitment to equitable development, further exacerbate this lack of trust.

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Moreover, this issue of trust also exists within the BRICS itself, potentially fuelling tensions that could lead to further conflicts in the Global South. For instance, the South China Sea dispute illustrates these tensions, where China faces frictions with the Philippines and Vietnam, while other BRICS members like India and Russia uphold their own strategic interests with the actors concerned. This not only complicates cooperation within the BRICS, but it also informs the BRICS' muted stance on issues of peace and security. The conflict between Israel and Iran serves as another example. **China has condemned Israel's violation of Iran's sovereignty, while India has remained silent on Israel's attack on Iran, despite Tehran becoming a formal member of the BRICS in January 2024.**

THE CONSENSUS DILEMMA

The efficacy of the BRICS can thus be hampered by a 'consensus dilemma', where divergent interests complicate decision-making outcomes. Although the BRICS operates under the principle of 'the right to agree to disagree', achieving consensus on overarching goals related to global governance reform is often obstructed by competing interests and disagreements over processes. **The issue of reforming the UN Security Council (UNSC) exemplifies this dilemma, particularly with the recent BRICS accession of Egypt and Ethiopia, who reportedly objected to a BRICS declaration favouring the aspirations of India, South Africa and Brazil for permanent seats on the UNSC.**

This opposition underscores potential divisions within the expanded BRICS, especially among African nations regarding representation and influence.

▶ *The Global South and the BRICS represent a new era of cooperation, marked by both strengths and challenges. By leveraging economic potential, increasing political influence, and focusing on social development, these nations can foster a fairer global order.*

The disagreement highlights divergent views on UNSC representation from the African perspective, driven by the Ezulwini Consensus – the African Union's common position on the reform of the United Nations – which calls for two African countries to become permanent members of the UNSC with veto power. While South Africa, along with India and Brazil, might have settled for a softer reform without veto power, Pretoria now faces the challenge of balancing its BRICS interests with its engagements in Africa. Both Ethiopia and Egypt have noted that South Africa's candidacy for a permanent seat on the UNSC remains undecided, and the process of determining who should represent the continent's interests on the global stage is still unresolved. This situation complicates efforts to achieve consensus among the diverse membership of the BRICS and it highlights the difficulties that could

hinder the BRICS' ability to act cohesively and effectively on the global stage, particularly regarding the positioning of the Global South to speak with one voice.

The Global South and the BRICS represent a new era of cooperation, marked by both strengths and challenges. By leveraging economic potential, increasing political influence, and focusing on social development, these nations can foster a fairer global order. However, it is essential for them to address differing interests, economic disparities, and geopolitical tensions. As the world changes, collaboration between the Global South and the BRICS could shape international relations, promoting a more inclusive and sustainable global community. The BRICS alone will not, however, be the panacea for the Global South's agency, interests and positioning in global affairs.

Sanusha Naidu, Associate Researcher at the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance at the University of Cape Town, and Senior Research Fellow with the Institute for Global Dialogue linked to UNISA

The stage is being redesigned

The EU and the BRICS in the current geopolitical context

by Udo Bullmann and Uwe Optenhögel

Donald Trump's Oval Office seems to have become the backdrop for a new reality TV show as he stages his idiosyncratic international diplomacy. His recent emblematic encounters with Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Cyril Ramaphosa furthermore signal to the world that a paradigm shift is underway – following on from the pandemic, the Russian war against Ukraine and the Israel-Gaza conflict.

Under Trump's 'America First' doctrine, the US has withdrawn from many international organisations and agreements (the Paris Agreement on climate change, WHO, WTO, UNHCR, UNRWA, SDGs and others). With the closure of USAID, the Trump administration has brought America's official development policy to an end. This shift to unilateralism emphasises national sovereignty and interest over multilateral cooperation. The creator and hitherto most powerful and determined defender of the existing multilateral order is switching sides and joining the proponents of an imperialist perception of world politics, based on competing empires accompanied by their vassal states in their respective spheres of influence. This puts the other players on the stage under pressure to redefine their roles, and it also opens up space for new alignments.

Since the BRICS entered the international stage during the financial crisis in 2009 (originally the emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China, then quickly joined by South Africa in 2010), the bloc has perceived itself as a challenger to the unfair model of neoliberal globalisation and to the existing multilateral order. Consequently, **the BRICS agenda was developmentalist, and this resulted in the bloc's voice being heard not only in the Global South but worldwide**. However, with the recovery of the global economy, and against the backdrop of Western refusal of reforms, the BRICS developmental ambitions were largely frustrated. For a decade, the group then led an existence in the shadow of international attention.

The BRICS only reappeared on the international stage in the context of the pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine. This time, the bloc's in-built contradictions with the West have become more visible. **As a result of both the Western refusal to classify Covid-19 vaccines as 'global common goods', and of the comprehensive sanctions system imposed on Russia, the anti-Western sentiment in the Global South has grown.** The sanctions policies of the US and Europe have caused problems for global trade, and the

debt pressure for many countries in the Global South has returned to the agenda. The BRICS has thus turned from being a bloc with ambitious development objectives into a geopolitical challenger to the West. This change in priorities was documented in the enlargement of the bloc in 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This accession of important energy exporters has boosted the bloc's significance as an energy and financial partnership. And countries like Iran, Russia and China are highly motivated to develop an alternative currency system due to their concerns about sanctions and being excluded from the dollar-based economy.

At the same time, these developments nevertheless shed light on the internal fissures that the BRICS has experienced since its foundation. **India and Brazil opposed the enlargement of the BRICS and, together with South Africa, are less inclined to position the bloc against the West. Instead, they want to use the BRICS to democratise and reform the existing order.** The democracies

in the BRICS are more interested in genuine multipolarity, in which countries should be autonomous enough to steer between eventual US-led and Chinese-led blocs. This divergence between anti-Western states and non-aligned or multi-aligned states still continues, and the fissures remain a characteristic of the bloc. With the formal admission of Indonesia in January 2025, one of the biggest democracies in the world, this divergence has only been underlined. The dichotomy of these forces will most probably shape not only the future of the BRICS, but also that of the global order.

THE EU AND THE BRICS: OVERLAPPING INTERESTS?

As a multi-layered governance system with many deliberative elements, the European Union is struggling to keep pace with the dynamic development of the international system.

The US president's denunciation of what for decades has been called the 'West' seems to be the final argument for Europeans to strive seriously for autonomy. This implies creating new alignments or strengthening alternative ones. Due to the low degree of institutionalisation on the BRICS side, contact tends to take place directly between the blocs' member countries. This contact has been characterised by dialogue (often regarding the prevention of conflicts), economic and trade questions, and multilateral cooperation regarding global challenges (climate change and development, among others). With the ever-increasing uncertainty in international relations, more concrete areas of interaction are coming into view.

▶ *Fewer and fewer international players want to conduct their transactions in US dollars.*

De-dollarisation

Fewer and fewer international players want to conduct their transactions in US dollars. This trend is particularly noticeable in the energy sector, where many players, among them BRICS members, are opting for alternatives. Under the Trump administration, the dollar has experienced heightened volatility due to unpredictable tariff threats. By diversifying their foreign exchange reserves, developing countries aim to reduce vulnerability to external shocks. Their goal is not only financial independence – such as avoiding conversion disadvantages – but also political autonomy. In this context, Trump's threat of universal tariffs does not deter the BRICS countries from going their own way. Indeed, his tariff threat has rather driven them closer to China and Russia and their 'alternative economic ambitions'.

This could lead to fundamental changes in the global financial system, though not necessarily negative ones. Europe could even benefit – if it acts strategically.

The euro is the second most important currency on international markets, accounting for around 20 per cent of global reserves. To boost this performance, **the EU must offer investors – especially those from the Global South – a genuine alternative to the dollar. A European bond market would further increase the euro-zone's global relevance. This would support a strong European economy and reinforce the euro as an international reserve currency**, reducing Europe's dependence on US political and economic uncertainties. Strengthening the euro's role in the green transition, deepening financial market integration and advancing the digital euro project could also boost Europe's international standing and leverage.

EU capital market integration and its spillover effects

The option to align the economies of the Global South more deeply with the EU capital market would bring significant advantages for developing countries, including access to stable and transparent capital, improved corporate governance, technological progress and greater economic resilience. The EU's capital markets union seeks to create a unified market that facilitates investment and economic stability. Through this, Europe's partner countries could also attract essential funding for infrastructure and industrial development, reducing capital costs and increasing foreign direct investment. Financial integration further enables more efficient capital allocation and risk sharing, strengthening national financial sectors and diversifying economies.

Exposure to EU regulatory standards could promote better corporate governance, transparency and investor confidence in companies located in countries in the Global South. Additionally, collaboration with advanced EU markets accelerates technology transfer and innovation, enhancing the global competitiveness of their economies. Furthermore, the dynamic and diverse markets of those states offer valuable opportunities for portfolio diversification and higher returns, attracting global investors and supporting local financial market development.

SDGs: a common concern?

Like the EU, the BRICS countries have committed themselves to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. According to various reports, European countries rank highest in the implementation of these goals. When it comes to international spillovers, high-income countries, including EU countries, tend nevertheless to generate negative effects. This is mainly related to unsustainable production and consumption, which fuels deforestation and other negative environmental and social impacts worldwide.

But **even in areas where the EU is trying to renew its legislative arsenal to live up to the 2030 sustainability agendas, it is accused of hindering sustainable reforms in southern economies**. The EU Green Deal legislation, for instance, raises questions. The EU should be aware of this problem, incentivise legislative dialogues and review its policies that impact the Global South in order to improve mutual relations. African shareholders fear protectionist motivations on the European side and wish that their views would beincluded earlier in the finalisation of European legislation.

| EUROPE'S CHALLENGE

If the EU wishes to remain a global player, it should prepare itself because multipolarity is here to stay, and the strategic landscape is likely to become even more complicated. Getting ahead in such an environment will require the EU to move beyond the West-centric transatlantic perspective. It needs clarity regarding its own interests and, at the same time, the political will for a true and fair engagement with developing countries. This means sharing Europe's knowledge and experience with partners – but not lecturing them. The EU should actually be in a better position to do this than many other actors. As an alliance of very different member states with often-conflicting interests, it is accustomed to complex challenges and the art of compromise in negotiations.

In today's reality, where the rich countries of the north are de-risking and de-coupling from one-sided dependencies on individual countries, developing countries in the south have leverage for the first time in years. They are suddenly being courted – either for their raw materials, or because they are needed to manage migration, or simply because the increasing polarisation between China and the US is opening up additional negotiating space not only for the big BRICS countries but in some cases also for the 'nobodies' of the international community.

The BRICS is giving many of these changes an institutional face. For this to be successful, it is often sufficient to promote symbolic politics. Looking at the legacy of the 'loose association', it is evident that substantial developmental and economic achievements are limited. In contrast, the geopolitical impact in a world of competing narratives is considerable. However, **history teaches that a world with multiple centres of power tends to increase the risk of conflict and war. A multipolar world can only ensure stability if the major powers collaborate**. Where multipolarity is not integrated into multilateralism, the outcome might be fragmentation and war.

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POLICY BRIEF

EUROPE'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT
A CALL FOR AMBITION AND REFORM

By Stefano Manservisi and Mario Pezzini

EUROPE'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

A CALL FOR AMBITION AND REFORM

ABSTRACT

In a world marked by geopolitical tensions, climate crises and weakening global cooperation, this policy brief argues that the EU must redefine its relationships with developing countries – moving from its current partnership approach to a strategic alliance, the terms of which are grounded in mutual interest and defined in common.

The policy brief identifies four urgent imperatives: (1) renewing multilateralism through more inclusive governance; (2) rethinking development priorities and metrics beyond GDP; (3) reforming cooperation instruments to foster joint action, peer learning and national ownership; and (4) overhauling the global financial architecture to generate sustainable fiscal space for developing countries, protecting them from recurring debt crises. These reforms are not merely technical – they are political. They require the EU to act as a convener of alliances and an architect of common goods, particularly in cooperation with the Global South.

At the heart of this redefinition lies the Global Gateway, which should evolve from a flagship investment strategy into a truly global platform for co-created transformation. To succeed, it must redesign its governance, connect the priorities of the EU and its partners, and invest in capacities and ecosystems beyond infrastructure. This requires rapid and visible reforms, from radically simplified delivery procedures to the creation of inclusive dialogue mechanisms and robust certification frameworks.

The EU's credibility will depend on the level of resources it commits to external action and on its determination to change – beginning with how it listens, decides and collaborates. The upcoming UN Conference on Financing for Development in Seville represents a crucial opportunity for the EU to demonstrate its willingness to shape, together with the countries of the Global South, a new compact aimed at achieving the sustainable development goals. This will be essential to the EU's global relevance and resilience.

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The EU must redefine its relationships with developing countries, grounding them in mutual interest and shared objectives.

On the back of the EPP's alignment with the far right to vote down the European Parliament's report on financing for development ahead of the UN's International Conference in Sevilla (FfD4), the EU must step up and lead by example in defending human rights, equality, and democracy.

This vote undermines the Agenda 2030 and weakens the EU's global reputation when multilateral cooperation is crucial. The EU's credibility will depend on the level of resources it commits to external action - and its willingness to truly listen, share decision-making power, and collaborate differently.

This policy brief was published by FEPS, in collaboration with FES New York Office, Karl-Renner-Institut, Fondation Jean-Jaurès, Fundación Avanza, Fundación Pablo Iglesias and Olof Palmes Internationella Center

INTERVIEW

Gaza: peace is easier than war

Interview with Omar Shaban, founder of the Gaza-based think tank PalThink for Strategic Studies by Beatriz Abellán

As the war on Gaza continues and the conflict in the Middle East widens, Palestinians face mass displacement, starvation and the systematic destruction of civilian life on all levels – from homes and schools to hospitals and water systems. Meanwhile, much of the international community remains inactive. In this interview, Beatriz Abellán talks to Omar Shaban, economist, political analyst and founder of the Gaza-based think tank PalThink for Strategic Studies. He gives a powerful and personal testimony on life under siege, and describes the broader political dynamics shaping the conflict.

Beatriz Abellan: After 19 months of continuous bombardment, how would you describe the current humanitarian situation in Gaza?

Omas Shaban: The situation in Gaza is catastrophic. Many international organisations and Western governments have described it as the bloodiest and most devastating war in recent history, possibly of the 21st century. Around 80 per cent of the population has been displaced. 2.2 million people are now crowded into less than half of Gaza's territory. And Gaza is very small – only 362 square kilometres, with one of the highest population densities in the world. It's smaller than Andorra but has 25 times the population. Since 2007, Gaza has been under a full blockade and has faced more than ten military escalations, five of which were major wars. The current conflict is the most deadly. Credible international organisations like the

ICRC and the ICC have described what is happening as close to genocide.

Palestinians believe in peace. We signed the Oslo Agreement and support a two-state solution. Despite everything many still hold this belief. But Gaza was declared a hostile entity by Israel in 2007 and has been besieged ever since. About 62 per cent of the population is young. **Around 700,000 people were born under the siege, and another 700,000 were born in the 1990s and have spent their whole adult life under these conditions. Most have never left Gaza or seen Europe, but still believe in peace.**

I personally lost my brother and our family home. I left Gaza in mid-October 2023 and am now in Cairo. But my three sisters, five brothers, and many relatives and friends remain in Gaza.

▶ *Around 700,000 people were born under the siege, and another 700,000 were born in the 1990s and have spent their whole adult life under these conditions. Most have never left Gaza or seen Europe, but still believe in peace.*

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BA: *The war is taking a particularly heavy toll on children. What does this mean for their future in Gaza?*

OS: Gaza's children face a grim future. There are 20,000 orphans, and the WHO estimates 86,000 children have lost limbs. What do we expect of children who have lost their parents, who haven't been able to attend school for two years? Half a million pupils and students have had their education interrupted. Education is our only asset – we don't have oil or gas, just education. And Palestinians are among the most educated people globally. We believe in education.

BA: *How is the situation for your family, and what do you conclude from it for the general situation?*

OS: All of my siblings and their families are now homeless. My eldest brother is 67 years old. He had nothing to do with 7 October or with Hamas, and yet he has no home. My three sisters live in tents. One day you have a house, the next you're living without water or electricity, surrounded by sewage and disease.

We're also researching the war's impact on women. There are no feminine hygiene products, no medicine for children. What does depriving children of milk have to do with fighting Hamas?

This war must stop. Even **most Israelis know this is Netanyahu's war, a way to hold on to power. He claims to be fighting Hamas, but many believe he's using that as an excuse to displace Palestinians – to push us towards Somalia, Indonesia, or Europe**. But we are Palestinians. We love our country. We want to stay. This war won't bring peace to Israel or the Middle East. Just look at the region since it began – there's conflict in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Ukraine. Everything is getting worse. But I still believe peace is possible. And peace is much easier than war.

BA: *What is your view on the role that the media have played in the conflict?*

OS: The Western media often frames the conflict as beginning on 7 October, but for us, the story started long before that. I've lived in Gaza my whole life. While I've managed to travel, two thirds of our population is under 30 and has never been able to leave. Israel controls movement and requires permits, which are rarely granted. The siege began in 2007, under the pretext of the conflict between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. But innocent people, especially children, are being punished. They didn't vote or participate in any of this. There have been no elections, no jobs, no food security and no travel. Many students have lost scholarships abroad. Around 3,000 cancer patients were denied treatment outside Gaza, while our hospitals lack the necessary resources. Women, in particular, have died from preventable conditions.

This all predates 7 October. **There has been occupation, siege, and the ongoing refusal to recognise a Palestinian state, and, despite agreements from the 1990s, Israel continues expanding settlements and demolishing homes in the West Bank.** In the north of the West Bank, 60,000 Palestinians have been displaced. The current Israeli leadership – Smotrich, Ben-Gvir and Netanyahu – has repeatedly expressed support for transferring Palestinians to Jordan. So this is not just about Gaza; the same policies affect the West Bank.

BA: *How do Palestinians view the international community's response to this crisis?*

OS: We've lost faith in the international community. Our whole situation is covered on TV

– Europeans and Americans can't claim they don't know what's happening. What more do you expect the Palestinians to do? Inaction fuels radicalisation. When Europe fails to act, extremism grows, and so does Islamophobia and the far right. **What's happening is a violation of international law – killing children, denying water, food and medicine. It's illegal, but also dangerous in the long term.** Some Western governments still provide Israel with weapons and unconditional support. We hear strong statements against this, but that's not enough. We need real action. Israel must be held accountable. The Netanyahu government isn't acting in Israel's best interest or promoting regional stability. It's working against the two-state solution. This dangerous agenda must be stopped.

▶ *We don't want Europe to fight Israel – we want Europe to live up to its values.*

BA: *What concrete actions should the EU and European governments take now?*

OS: We don't want Europe to fight Israel – we want Europe to live up to its values. Some governments have toughened their tone, but that's not enough. They need to issue clear ultimatums: this must stop. There are still Israeli hostages in Gaza, but you cannot starve 2 million people for 20 hostages. Most Palestinians are innocent, yet Israel claims there are 'no innocents' in Gaza. We're not asking Europe to be pro-Palestinian. We're asking you to be pro-truth, pro-justice and to uphold international law.

BA: *Is the two-state solution still viable?*

OS: There are 700,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank. They confiscate land, prevent farmers from accessing their fields, and children from going to school. Some villages are encircled by walls, with children allowed outside only at specific times. It's collective punishment. Despite everything, the two-state solution remains the only viable path. If not, we'll be forced towards a one-state model. There are challenges, but nothing unsolvable. We can look to the EU as an example: 27 countries with different political systems working together. Israel and Palestine could become two states within a shared framework. Water, sewage, trade and aviation – all are already interconnected. About 90 per cent of imports to Gaza and the West Bank come from Israel, and 80 per cent of Palestinian exports go there. Around 200,000 Palestinians from the West Bank work in Israel, and previously 100,000 from Gaza did too. There have been successful partnerships. Even under occupation, cooperation was possible. Over the last two decades, both sides have been taken hostage by hate. Still, a different form of two-state solution is possible.

BA: *How has the war affected Palestinian politics and public opinion?*

OS: According to polls, this war has changed the political reality. The majority of Palestinians are fed up with the traditional political system. The last election was held in 2005. Unfortunately, in 2021, Israel did not enable legislative elections to happen because it refused to permit the inclusion of East Jerusalem. East Jerusalem, according to the Oslo agreement, is part of the Palestinian territories and it should be the capital of Palestine. West Jerusalem is for Israel. East Jerusalem is for the Palestinians. There are 400,000 Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, they're Jerusalemite and they have the right to vote for the Palestinian Parliament. We need to go for elections. Palestinians are looking for a new type of leadership.

According to the last poll, Hamas would receive 5 per cent of support, and Fatah 15 per cent. More than 40 per cent of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza want to elect a new type of leadership.

The EU and its member states provide Palestinians with €400 million a year. Our government held a high-level dialogue with the EU in Luxembourg in April, during which €1.6 billion was proposed for the Palestinians over the coming two to three years.

The EU has been generous to us. Many studies show that if Israel and Palestine make peace, the Israeli economy will triple because the cost of war will be transferred to an economy of peace. And the Palestinian economy will grow five times because, besides investing our efforts in the reconstruction of what Israel has destroyed, we will be building for the future. We need to give peace a chance!

Omar Shaban, Economist, political analyst and founder of the Gaza-based think tank PalThink for Strategic Studies

Beatriz Abellán, FEPS Policy Analyst on International Relations

PROGRESSIVE
READS & VIEWS

In the beginning was the word

by Ania Skrzypek

Fabio Wolkenstein and Christopher Wratil

Political Representation as Communicative Practice

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Cambridge University Press, 2025

Almost 15 years ago, one of the iconic political scientists of this century, Pippa Norris, published a book with the gloomy title *Democratic Deficit* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). It begins with the statement that an infinite number of pages have already been written about the crisis of representative democracy. Nevertheless, she argues, there are still things to add — and she challenges her readership to think about the gap between the performance of democracy and the aspirations of citizens. Norris points to the fact that there is a growing dissatisfaction among people with the failure of public institutions to deliver, leading to an erosion of trust. The process is further fuelled by what she calls 'negative news'. Remembering her groundbreaking work today, while watching the tectonic shifts that are taking place across the political landscape in Europe, prompts a question: is the issue of delivering on political promises still relevant, or has the main question become one of perception? This is one of several key considerations pondered in a book by the same publisher, but written by two political scientists of a new generation:

Fabio Wolkenstein and Christopher Wratil (both scholars at the University of Vienna).

▶ *Wolkenstein and Wratil's book departs from the often-repeated question 'how can the historical political parties reconnect with disenchanted citizens?' Instead, it asks a new question: 'how can the historical political parties become the political agents seen as speaking on behalf of diverse citizens?'*

In *Political Representation as Communicative Practice*, they reflect an ambition to broaden Norris's approach, or even to be pioneers in a new field of research — a task they accomplish in just 92 pages. Wolkenstein and Wratil

go beyond the traditional schemes used to describe the crisis of political representation through the lenses of opinion polls and electoral figures. They challenge these schemes by claiming that **on the one hand, there is no linear development when it comes to levels of trust in institutions and stakeholders across the EU, and that on the other hand, the discourse focused only on electoral aspects misses an entire dimension of political life**. Instead, the authors argue that the degree to which democracies are representative should be determined from the perspective of democracy as a communication process.

This is a critical reflection in a context where so much is influenced by media and social media bubbles, and where so much content is controlled by global media oligarchs or pushed through by so-called 'influencers'. Wolkenstein and Wratil's way of considering the degree to which a democracy is representative is an invitation to think differently about politics and, hence, the role of communication processes. Potentially, it liberates political analysts from focusing exclusively on the decline

of traditional electorates and stakeholders – and it shows that categories of 'traditional voters or parties' and their performance are not sufficient for grasping the nature of political changes, the shifts in opinions and attitudes and the transfer of voters.

Wolkenstein and Wratil's book departs from the often-repeated question 'how can the historical political parties reconnect with disenchanted citizens?' Instead, it asks a new question: 'how can the historical political parties become the political agents seen as speaking on behalf of diverse citizens?' Wolkenstein and Wratil argue that it is impossible to continue thinking that only elected politicians can speak on others' behalf, and they mention social mobilisation, as well as public figures such as Bono from U2 who claimed to "speak for those who have no voice" (p.29). The authors suggest that in the current era, the constituencies that vote for certain parties or politicians (and not for the others) are no longer to be framed as a parenthesis of the traditional 'core electorates' or as their spin-off. Instead, these constituencies must be understood as creations resulting from communicative acts. It is about how an issue is articulated that forms a collective, which eventually supports one political force or another. This makes the electorate much more volatile and leads to a situation the authors call "political surrogacy". Citizens can feel represented by politicians they had not voted for – a situation frequent in multipartisan systems, where voters swinging between the parties is common. Interestingly, the authors state that the readiness to relate to political surrogates is greater among more educated cohorts. These innovative ideas shed new light on how populism can be

attractive to those whom the authors describe as *more sophisticated* consumers of communication acts – a group only a relatively small body of literature has focused on so far (p.51).

▶ *The authors prove that electoral support is no longer dependent on voters finding the best match between their beliefs and the candidates/parties, but that it is more a result of a communication act which is a two-way street. It is not only about the communication package or content, but even more about how content and communication are perceived.*

Evidently, the authors do not suggest that every communication act (verbal or non-verbal) can trigger an electoral shift. They neither claim that citizens have no filter when digesting information about the different aspects of the representation of a communication act. On the contrary, in their interactive-constructivist perspective (inspired also by the work of others such as Jürgen Habermas), they believe there is a two-way street. Voters are driven by values, partisanship, group-based identities, cognitive abilities and political sophistication (p.40). At the same time, the communication act has at least six dimensions (substantive, descriptive,

the above-mentioned surrogacy, justification, personalisation and responsiveness). All of these are duly explained and exemplified, using case studies that focus, for example, on how Joe Biden aspired to be the president of *all* Americans (and not only those who elected him); how Jacinda Ardern acted in a way that made others connect with her after the Christchurch attack; how the FPÖ shifted from representing just one group to sounding as if their policies would benefit all. Based on these case studies, the authors prove that electoral support is no longer dependent on voters finding the best match between their beliefs and the candidates/parties, but that it is more a result of a communication act which, the authors insist, is a two-way street. It is not only about the communication package or content, but even more about how content and communication are perceived.

The examples in the book are fairly recent, making the its findings appear easily applicable. However, there are several caveats. The authors show that women are more successful than men in coining more pluralist, and therefore more inclusive, messages. Female politicians appear to be quite communitarian, inclusive and consistent in representing their respective parties' lines. **The problem is that today, the personalisation aspect of politics and the readiness to rebel are perceived as more genuine and hence earn more trust among voters. And these non-conformist approaches are more attributed to men** (as shown by the example of the Brexit debates in the UK's House of Commons). This provides an insight into the cultural war which affects many spheres, including politics, and into the fact that women may have to face even harder fights in the future.

> ▶ *Today, the personalisation aspect of politics and the readiness to rebel are perceived as more genuine and hence earn more trust among voters. And these non-conformist approaches are more attributed to men.*

Voters seem to reject politicians who try to justify themselves and who explain their actions by enlisting the promises they have fulfilled, and, hence, ask to be re-elected on this basis. This observation is unsettling, but for traditional parties, it should be a hint that neither the social contract nor a mandate is given as an omnibus package by default. Every election is, therefore, more of a new chapter than a sequel.

Political Representation as Communicative Practice should be read by all those keen on understanding what drives contemporary politics. There is a great wealth of material gathered in the book, as well as an original proposal on understanding the function of political communication in the context of representation, support and mandate. Where Wolkenstein and Wratil's book has perhaps not fulfilled expectations is in its take on how politicians can avoid being deceived by the perceptual illusion generated by opinion polls. And concerning this, the book focuses on connections through communicative acts rather than how communication could help educate the public, raise aspirations and change opinions. But then again, the authors' choice to narrow the focus is legitimate. Assuming others will perceive it as innovative, it is quite likely that the debate will be continued and that reference will be made to their arguments in the future.

Ania Skrzypek,
FEPS Director for
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Fists and roses: a post-identitarian approach to Democratic Socialism

by Miguel Xavier

Renaud Large, editor

The Third Left: An Investigation into the Post-Identitarian Shift of the European Left

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Fondation Jean-Jaurès, June 2025

Facing the dire state of the centre-left, the collection of essays *The Third Left*, edited by Renaud Large, seeks to analyse not only the causes of the centre-left's decline, but also the steps taken by various democratic socialist, social democratic and labour parties across Europe and beyond, to address this phenomenon. It aims to offer an alternative path that enables Socialists to continue improving people's lives in accordance with the principles of freedom, equality, solidarity, prosperity, security and social justice.

Had you asked an average member of a European Socialist party in the mid-1970s whether they believed Democratic Socialists and the moderate left would ever again face a situation akin to that of the late 1920s, they would likely have laughed and dismissed the idea as impossible. Unfortunately, they would have been wrong. Today, in a Europe increasingly reminiscent of that earlier period, Democratic Socialists across the continent

are facing a deep crisis. Whether reflected in election results or in the loss of narrative control, the decline is unmistakable. **In today's European Union – after decades of dominance of Social and Christian democrats – more and more countries are being drawn towards the far right. Although some centre-right parties have also been affected by this backsliding, the primary victims of the populist surge have been the Socialists and the centre-left more broadly.** In the face of this decline, we must ask ourselves what went wrong – and, more importantly, what solutions are available.

According to Renaud Large and the other contributing authors, the origins of this crisis can be traced back to the late 1980s. The rise of neoliberalism and globalisation during that decade posed a formidable challenge to Democratic Socialism. Its foundational principles – Keynesianism, state intervention and the welfare state – were undermined by globalised

▶ *In today's European Union – after decades of dominance of Social and Christian democrats – more and more countries are being drawn towards the far right. Although some centre-right parties have also been affected by this backsliding, the primary victims of the populist surge have been the Socialists and the centre-left more broadly.*

markets, the independence of central banks and the unregulated movement of capital and labour. **In adapting to these new realities, Socialist parties across Europe incorporated elements of neoliberalism into their platforms and rhetoric.** While this shift was tempered by continued public investment and a robust welfare state, it also ushered in significant problems, including high unemployment and rampant speculation. These issues culminated in the 2007 subprime crisis and the Great Recession that followed.

▶ *In adapting to these new realities, Socialist parties across Europe incorporated elements of neoliberalism into their platforms and rhetoric.*

Since that recession — and the subsequent failure of the Third Way — centre-left parties have steadily lost ground to both the centre-right and the far right. The hardship caused by sovereign debt crises, coupled with the inability of Third Way politics to alleviate suffering, bred resentment among traditional Socialist voters. **Many felt that the parties they had supported — often for decades — no longer represented their interests. This sense of betrayal was compounded by what many perceived as a disproportionate focus on minority rights and environmental issues, the refusal to address concerns around security and immigration, and a condescending attitude towards working-class communities.**

As a result, many working- and middle-class voters began to feel that the parties which once improved their lives now viewed them as xenophobic, racist, or backwards.

In the face of the failure of what the authors call the 'societal left' — a minority-focused and hyper-individualistic strain of leftism that neither addresses material needs nor engages with issues such as security, immigration, patriotism and ecology constructively or pragmatically — they propose a promising alternative: the rise of a post-identitarian left. This emerging form of Socialism, quietly gaining traction, marks a significant shift in the priorities of the centre-left. **It begins by rejecting the neoliberal consensus embraced by the Third Way, instead championing a universalist welfare state, workers' rights and state intervention through regulation and social dialogue.** Unlike the societal left, this movement grounds its priorities in material concerns rather than cultural or social issues. Crucially, it does not shy away from taking clear positions on regulated immigration, public safety and a fair green transition that places people and the state at the centre of its discourse. It should be said, however, that when it comes to the issues of public safety and the green transition, the distinction between the two is mainly centred around the discourse and not on the measures. In these matters, what distinguishes this form of Socialism from other forms is that it recognises that security and a green transition that does not harm rural communities have become topics of concern for the general population and that there is a need to present social democratic answers for these problems in its discourse and narrative.

Moreover, in stark contrast with the societal left, this new movement embraces patriotism — not from a nationalist standpoint, but through a communitarian lens. It emphasises social and territorial cohesion, as well as the importance of institutions like trade unions and local associations. By doing so, the advocates of this democratic socialist model seek to reconcile the two traditional pillars of the movement. On one hand, as Renaud Large describes, they affirm institutional continuity, democratic sovereignty, security and republican order. On the other hand, they uphold social justice, redistribution and the unconditional defence of working-class interests. This reconciliation represents a return to the traditional purpose of Socialism, adapted for a post-globalised world.

▶ *Socialist governments should promote inclusive policies, but such matters should not dominate the discourse or the political agenda.*

Critics on the identitarian left often argue that this post-identitarian current represents a capitulation to conservatism and xenophobia. Nothing could be further from the truth. While the post-identitarian left prioritises material issues over identity-based concerns, this does not make it conservative or regressive. Rather, it reflects a belief that lasting progress on cultural and social issues can only be achieved once the material needs of the broader population are met. **Socialist governments should promote inclusive policies, but such matters should not dominate the discourse or the political agenda.**

This post-identitarian form of Socialism, though initially fragmented and informal, has recently gained new momentum. In countries where Socialist parties are currently in power – or leading in the polls – these principles are consistently reflected. With the partial exception of Spain, every recent Socialist success has been driven by a return to the foundational principles of Democratic Socialism, adapted for today's challenges.

Reading this collection of essays has been a refreshing experience. Since the late 1980s, democratic socialist thought has either veered towards neoliberalism or shifted focus away from what made the centre-left a force for improving ordinary people's lives. These essays offer a revitalised vision of Socialism – one that returns to its roots without appearing outdated. In an age where individualism has permeated every facet of society, including parts of the Left, encountering a communitarian form of Socialism that is both principled and electorally successful is truly uplifting. While perhaps not suited for casual bedtime reading, these essays are an essential starting point for every Socialist who dares, in times like these, to envision a future for Democratic Socialism.

Miguel Xavier,
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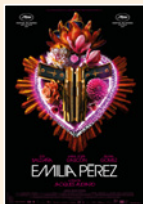
Emilia Pérez

....

Jacques Audiard, 2024

Hedwig and the Angry Inch

....

John Cameron Mitchell, 2001

Jacques Audiard's *Emilia Pérez* is an audacious genre-bending spectacle. It is a crime epic, trans drama and musical all rolled into one. The film follows Mexican cartel boss Manitas (Karla Sofía Gascón) through the transition into Emilia Pérez with help from lawyer Rita (Zoe Saldaña). It won the Jury Prize and shared Best Actress award at Cannes in 2024.

While Gascón, who herself is trans, displays her character with care and flair, the film overall reuses old, harmful and derogatory clichés about trans women, particularly the idea that they are dishonest and use transitioning to escape or erase a troubled past. This narrative is reinforced by the film's heavy emphasis on medical procedures as the central focus of transitioning. This runs contrary to the work transgender activists have been doing, namely 'demedicalising' transgender identity and emphasising that gender-affirming surgery is not a necessary precondition for transgender individuals to live authentic and fulfilling lives. As such, and despite a trans actress in the lead, it is difficult to see this movie as a positive step in transgender representation in mainstream cinema.

Looking from a more cultural perspective, *Emilia Pérez* tends to approach Mexican culture and cartel violence superficially, using real tragedies as a décor for the storyline without displaying evidence of meaningful research or cultural sensitivity. Many Mexican critics feel the portrayal reflects outsider stereotypes rather than genuine understanding – an opinion I share – and Audiard has since admitted he did barely any research when making his film.

From a purely entertainment perspective and despite all its flaws, *Emilia Pérez* hits the mark. Featuring excellent performances from Gascón and Saldaña, as well as singer-actress Selena Gomez, it is a 130-minute feast for both the eyes and the ears. It had me switching between soaking up stunning visuals and tapping along with the musical performances.

The mind and the soul, however, were left longing for more. Once the dust had settled on my first impression and I began to reflect on what I had seen, I became increasingly frustrated and angry with the fundamental choices that Audiard had decided to make, quickly wiping away the enjoyment I had experienced while watching the movie. While I think that its outrageous premise set the movie up to fail, *Emilia Pérez* could – and should – have done better. It owed at least that much to the communities it tried to portray.

Given my somewhat unusual name, Hedwig, I confess to a particular fascination with films whose characters share it. It is a short, exclusive list. Beyond Harry Potter's owl, there is also another prominent Hedwig: the chilling wife of the Auschwitz commandant in *The Zone of Interest*. However, I know a third movie that features a quite different Hedwig. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is the film adaptation of the off-Broadway punk rock musical. Written and directed by John Cameron Mitchell, and starring him too, it is a cult film for the LGBTIQ+ community. Less well-known than *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, it is no less disruptive, enthralling, eccentric and ironic.

Hedwig revolves around the life of Hansel, a young gay man who, out of love and a desire to escape the East Berlin of the Cold War (ironically, just one year before the wall fell), is persuaded by his lover and his mother to change sex, becoming – after botched surgery – Hedwig. Alone in the US, Hedwig embarks on the search for love, facing crushing abandonment while striving for rock stardom and a deeper understanding of their true self. *Hedwig* is a compelling story about the search for one's identity, a quest to define oneself beyond the confines of social norms and expectations. Like Berlin, Hedwig is divided into two: "between East and West, slavery and freedom, man and woman". However, just as the Berlin Wall eventually fell, so does Hedwig's self-constructed image.

One of the film's most heart-wrenching and unforgettable songs, "The Origin of Love", features Aristophanes' myth from Plato's Symposium. This describes how there were originally three sexes (male, female and androgynous), and humans were beings with two sets of everything (heads, genitals and limbs) who were split in two by Zeus to punish their arrogance. Love is therefore nothing but the desire to reunite with one's other half, our soulmate.

Hedwig's profound inner conflict stops when they understand their wholeness. Through every transformation – from man to woman, lover to wife, sex worker to queer icon, and finally to a rockstar – Hedwig eventually accepts who they are, embracing all their contradictions and triumphant entirety.

Both the musical and the film are revolutionary. They do not just explore gender but move beyond rigid definitions to break boundaries and become champions of a simple but beautiful message: being one's true self without explanation or apology. This powerful universal narrative is delivered with an irresistible soundtrack that shifts from raw, angry punk rock songs to tender, moving ballads. For me, the profound message and the incredible songs resonated deeply. They have remained with me since I first watched the film over 20 years ago.

POLICY STUDY

HOUSING AS INVESTMENT IN GREECE AND SOUTHERN EUROPE
PRIVATE PROFIT VS SOCIAL VALUE

By Dimitra Siatitsa, Laura Colini and Simone Tulumello
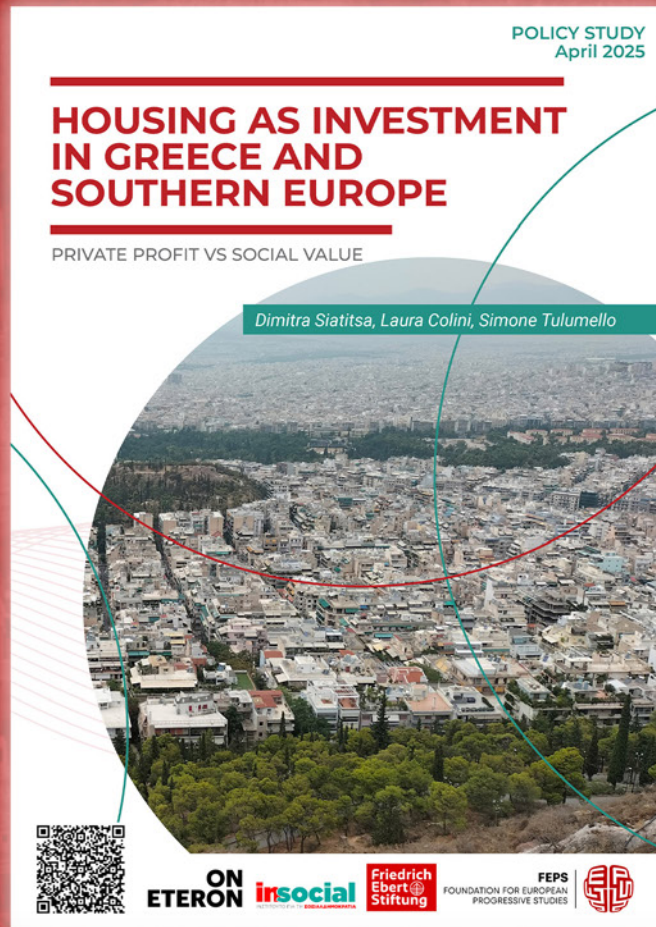
This policy study argues that mainstream policy mechanisms (including reliance on the free market), which are seen as solutions to housing, are inherently part of the problem.

After the global financial crisis, **real estate and construction sectors in Southern European countries became particularly dependent on foreign demand and tourism**. However, these trends have been contributing to the actual and ongoing housing crisis rather than providing viable solutions.

With comparative insights from Greece, Italy and Portugal, the study calls for a systemic reframing of housing as a social right and public good, emphasising the decommodification of housing, regulated rents, and mechanisms to redirect private and public investment toward equitable housing systems
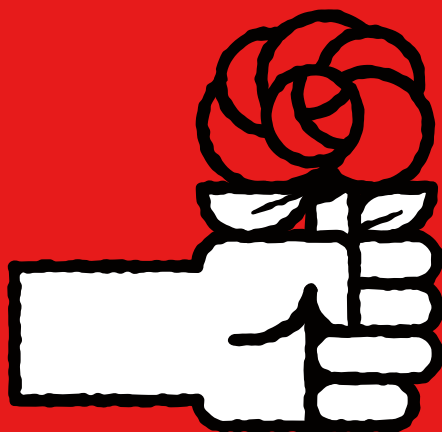
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