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## To be the antithesis is not enough

*In 2025, it became clear that a new world is emerging, and that the European Union will not be able to stand tall in this new world by merely trying to patch diverse wounds while holding onto nostalgic images of old partnerships. Instead, the situation calls for a new type of doctrine, a compass to leave the standstill, get out of the defensive trenches and navigate the way forward. The time has come to present a realistic and forward-looking project. Not an antithesis to anything or anyone, not one that aims to object and defend, not one based on being shocked and responding, but one that can energise and encourage. It is a complicated yet necessary task.*

Readers with an interest in biographies and progressivism were delighted in 2025. Memoirs by three extraordinary leaders were published, each of whom has broken some historical records and been followed with much admiration by a broad international audience. These are evidently the former prime ministers of New Zealand, Finland and Sweden: Jacinda Ardern; Saana Marin; and Magdalena Andersson, respectively. And while their memoirs are very personal accounts of what these brilliant women leaders have aimed for and what they believe to be their driving forces now, in these complex and not infrequently depressing times, they also impart some common lessons to readers. One of them was most explicitly articulated by Jacinda Ardern in the context of her experiences as the head of government during the period overlapping with Donald Trump's first presidential mandate. She wrote that she had the impression that people often saw her as his antithesis, which may have brought her attention, but was not enough of a credential to design and implement progressive politics successfully. The political creativity in finding solutions to people's and global problems should not be seen as a response to these, but rather to what other politicians are doing. The strength to persevere and fulfil the programmatic promise must come from within the politician and political movement themselves.

This is a very insightful observation, especially for progressive Europeans. Yes, it is understandable to revolt against the vicious words of the US president, who claims that the European Union (EU) is clueless and weak. Indeed, there is reason to feel compelled to prove him wrong. There is also a sense of obligation to do so publicly. Evidently, while not

many are familiar with what the European treaties state or what is in the new Multiannual Financial Framework, it seems that almost everyone is aware of what the US National Security Strategy outlines and has an opinion about it. However, as one hears current leaders yet again express frustration, calling it all “shocking” and “the last wake-up call”, one cannot resist having the impression that this is insufficient for Europe to re-emerge as a powerful force amid tectonic geopolitical shifts.

Now, as anyone who plays competitive sports knows, once you give in and start playing someone else’s game, you will be beaten at it, regardless of how great individual players are and how many things the team has championed thus far. And that is even when the conditions of fair play are sustained. This wisdom also applies to politics, of which an infinite number of proofs can be found in history. It is truly perplexing to see that Europe has been in defence for a long time, with the most chastening moment possibly being in the summer of 2025, when the trade agreement between the EU and the US was presented. It was terrible from a PR standpoint (at President Trump’s golf resort), unacceptable from the position of those in favour of international institutions and the multilateral world order, and demeaning economically and politically. In fact, except for the vague argument that this allowed us to move on from the topic, as coined by European Commission President von der Leyen, who on the occasion promised deliverables that still remain in the sole power of member states, there is literally nothing positive that a progressive pro-European can say about this arrangement. And here one has to say, echoing the brilliant title of René Repassi’s FEPS Progressive Page: *submission is not a strategy*. Providing a proper strategy instead requires going beyond some cognitive dissonance regarding EU-US relations and accepting that what the past was is gone. There is no need to resort to phrases like “it is complex” when the transatlantic relationship has visibly deteriorated. A new world is emerging, and the EU will not be able to stand tall in it, trying to patch diverse wounds while holding onto nostalgic images of old partnerships. Instead, the situation calls for a new type of doctrine, a compass to leave the standstill, get out of the defensive trenches and navigate the way forward instead. And here progressives should sense the momentum that they can still be the ones to provide.

## We have a choice

The reader may argue that the need for a progressive doctrine of European integration has been there since Robert Schumann presented his declaration in 1950. However, while conservatives often claim that the legacy of the establishment of the Communities and subsequent steps of unification were the achievements of their representatives, the progressive contribution to the process must not be overlooked or depreciated. It was social democrats who forged a new way of thinking about the European decision-making process; one that would not be confined to narrow national perspectives but instead represents the broader political view. The vote that saw Paul Henri Spaak become the first chair of the Common Assembly was an example of it. Another was the concept of Social Europe, which

was first coined at the Confederation of Socialist and Social Democratic Parties' enlarged congress in Bonn in 1973, allegedly by Willy Brandt himself, to help unite the socialist family. At that point, there were still several sceptics of European integration, seeing it as a market-driven, and hence, liberal-imposing process. And then, yet another example of the centre-left's contribution was the Lisbon Strategy, which was the first attempt on that scale to focus the Union on its responsibility for full employment, providing quality jobs for all, and empowering and activating citizens for the new chapter of globalisation. These initiatives underpin the claim that several successful attempts have already been made to push Europe's unification onto a trajectory that aligns with social democratic programmatic priorities.

However, they also demonstrate that there are no times so dire that one cannot attempt to think big or even consider what at first glance may appear impossible. In fact, excuses about the harshness of the times are insufferable and have been disempowering enough, of which the best example is not even recent pandemics or the accumulation of challenges under the label of polycrisis, but the Financial Crisis and how progressive parties went from seeing that as an opportunity to adhering to the belief that welfare states were no longer affordable and austerity was the only path. The effect of this rationale resonated in the polls and was potentially the cause of the movement's current electoral and organisational state, more so than the ideological shifts and disagreements of the 1990s. One thing is to continue lamenting about the scale of difficulty, which only fuels the feeling that so many citizens already have about things slipping from everyone's control. The opposite is to follow the memorable words of Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez from this year's PES Mobilisation Congress in October in Amsterdam, who said instead that we always have a choice.

To depart from that liberating notion, one can ask about the nature of the choice today, and perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is to try to move from a debate on what is appalling today to what could be appealing in the future. Social democrats have effectively mastered the narrative based on ideas to defend and protect values, rights, public goods, the democratic system, the world of labour, minimum standards and more. However, if anything, this makes them part of the status quo, and through a certain intellectual and political shortcut, they appear not as part of a solution, but as part of the issue that many voters perceive as a broken system and consequently vehemently oppose. So, while they criticise the radical right-wing and illiberal forces for successfully selling an idealised dream of a possible return to the 'glorious' past, they themselves stick to what they know and believe in today, with a clear fear that this may soon be destroyed or otherwise gone. This is not a forward-looking approach and misses the positive story that the EU brings and will become in the future.

## The positive story

Of course, in the current context, one can say that this is all easier said than done. However, the problem lies precisely in the fact that nothing of note is being said that would sound like a common European story worth engaging in. The EU lasts more than anything by

repeating that it stands firmly on its values, it will actively continue to support Ukraine until peace is restored in Europe and it will boost its defence capacities. From one summit to the next, the impression is that the number of problems and frictions is growing, beyond the ones caused regularly by Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán. And that the solutions being patched appear to follow the credo “desperate times call for desperate measures” rather than being a well-deliberated strategy, alienating rather than allying member states.

What may be paradoxical in this context is that the Eurobarometer and other surveys continue to point to the fact that the level of trust among Europeans in the EU and its institutions remains at an unprecedentedly high level (having also bounced back from a slight drop noted in spring 2025). Three quarters of respondents believe that their countries benefit from EU membership, and still, six in ten are optimistic about the EU’s future. These results may be trivialised by those who try to imply that these numbers seem even more elevated as confidence in national-level politics declines, but such an approach appears cynical. The tendency that has been showing the rise of trust has been stable, ever since the pandemic, at least, whereby the awareness about the EU seems to have grown and the notion “we are in this together” seems to resonate with Europeans. But the same surveys also demonstrate that, while Europeans understand that the EU must gain new capacities to protect itself in the era of international conflicts and confrontations, and it must ensure peace and stability in the short term, they still believe that the main issue which the Union, their respective states and policymakers should ensure is that financial means are spent first on employment, social affairs and public health; then on education, training, youth and culture; and only then on defence and security. This is what voters mean when they say that the EU must be economically stronger (83%), more assertive and stable. And this would suggest two conclusions. Firstly, Europeans do not see an unavoidable trade-off between warfare and welfare; perhaps it is also time for politicians to cease denoting one. And secondly, the fashion for debating secessions from the Union has passed. Perhaps the UK has served as a cautionary tale; perhaps there have been other factors at play. But if one accepts this hypothesis, one quickly faces a rather disturbing question: is it possible that EU citizens are nowadays more decisive and clearer about the Union they want than politicians in their thinking about how to arrive there?

It is not impossible, as the tendency for political elites to claim conservatism in their societies is not new and has been used frequently. Sometimes it has served as an actual excuse, as evidenced by questions of civil liberties and freedoms, and the way they have been rejected and legislated against in several countries in Central and Eastern Europe. However, what has made it even worse at the EU level recently is the sense of an era coming to an end; one shaped by the so-called grand coalition of conservatives and Christian democrats on one hand, and social democrats on the other. One can sarcastically say “be careful what you wish for”, as there have been countless debates concluding with the same claim that this grand coalition is what has been preventing real political debate on the future of Europe – with that European *pax politica* consuming the mainstream and leaving no space to distinguish between centre-left and centre-right. Those who claim that the previous arrangement was faulty must certainly despise the emerging one even more.

The division of the so-called top jobs and portfolios within the College was the first signal, but recent votes in the European Parliament (on deforestation law and on the Omnibus package) has led one to believe that a new front is emerging that spans from EPP to the fringes of the right. The centre-left and left have been very busy exposing it, elaborating on it and explaining in exhaustive detail why it is a disaster, while perhaps missing the point that this storyline puts them not only in the political defensive trenches but also appears as a decomposing political entity. It is a risky strategy with an unclear endgame, as this narrative is unlikely to scare off those who already vote for these parties under the motto, “shame on you, look what you have done”. And even if this would make them appear somewhat antithetical to the right-radical right block, as mentioned in the introduction, it is still not enough to succeed here.

Indeed, social democrats are not a majority in the Council, the Commission (of which the College has become very politicised in the last two mandates, regardless of the literal reading of the treaties) and in the European Parliament. What is new is that they are also not in the majority, which represents a qualitative change. One way to approach this is to act as a watchdog and a whistleblower. This has not brought much thus far. The other option is to propose an alternative, truly positive vision – disturbing the mantra, distracting from the exclusive focus on the hard right, and defining the new grounds on which the clash between democratic and illiberal models could actually be won.

## A new horizon

With attention to the word limit and the fact that two claims have been made – one about progressives having a choice and the other about them needing an alternative positive story to liberate themselves from the proverbial trenches of the defensive discourse – at this culminating point of the text, I shall take responsibility and propose something tangible. Namely, how to frame such new, progressive, concrete terms.

The starting point is about setting a new horizon. Progressives have already made all possible deselection speeches, elaborating on which kind of Europe they do not want and what compromises they will never accept. This sets minimum benchmarks but is far from an ambition that could indicate progressives’ readiness to take on leadership. What is the EU that they want in the 21st century? What kind of generational project is that to be? What does this translate to when it comes to anticipating the challenges resulting from grand transformations – digital, ecological, demographic? What is the common agenda for social progress for all that can counterbalance the centrifugal forces between the regions and countries, as well as within societies? What should the rules be for the economy, and how should the budgetary means be spent to reflect a moderate version of a social contract? These may seem like questions that are not too innovative, but while they have been repeated so many times, haven’t they also been answered with lengthy documents that mostly boil down to the answer “it is complicated”? It would be unreasonable to claim that the challenges of contemporary times are not complex, but the mid-term of the EU’s

current legislative period is already next year; perhaps it is time to become somewhat bolder. At the perception level, conservatives offer a simplification in Europe that works, while the right-wing radicals' freedom within the Union of sovereign states is a valid point. Therefore, the competitive advantage of progressives is not an illegitimate question.

This is the key to unlock the potential that the already mentioned PES Congress in Amsterdam in October 2025 accumulated. It had been a long time since a gathering raised so many expectations and hopes, especially amid the electoral results in 2025. These saw social democratic parties falling behind the right-wing radical ones (as was the case in Portugal), as well as being eliminated from the parliament yet again, and the entire political system shifting to offer only the choice between right and radical right (as was the case in the Czech Republic). These gloomy results often outweigh the prospects that show there are also countries in which social democrats may return to power soon, and where, while in power and facing a challenging context, they still manage to reform internally and implement progressive policies. In that sense, coming together and participating in the launch of the brand-new 'global mobilisation' was reassuring and encouraging.

But for that drive to continue, it is time to discuss and decide. Not only what kind of Europe this generation of social democrats wants to build (and not only defend), but also what it should stand for when it comes to its role in the rest of the world. Peace, sustainable development, multilateralism – these are certain, but what does it mean in practice? What shall peace and security in Europe look like when one needs to think about it in broader terms than just the absence of armed conflicts? What shall the 'new partnerships' that all the talk is about be anchored in? When can the next enlargement take place, with whom and what will that mean for neighbouring countries? What about the concept of an open Europe, when defining migration, aid and trade policies? Each of these is a strategic question, on which the European movement continues to encounter frictions, making it even harder to imagine the promised broadening of the movement.

While the political momentum is there – and many wish to avoid becoming history, but rather make history instead – the time has come to present a real, forward-looking project. Not one that is an antithesis to anything or anyone, not one that aims to object and defend, not one based on being shocked and responding; it is complicated. But one that can energise and encourage. This is the time to make European progressivism a real doctrine – a concept with substance, promise and hope.