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Dynamics of progressive policies

Right back at the beginning of the pandemic, I suspected that this global crisis would be politically momentous for Social Democracy – and the last two years have fully confirmed this. The global health crisis has drawn attention to the fact that investment in social and health policies cannot be seen in the light of market rules only. The neoliberal economisation of health from only the perspective of profits and losses has weakened the healthy systems even in the richest countries of the globe. How do we explain the fact that now in the fourth wave, our health systems are yet again driven to their limits? Decisions on who should live and who should die are a horror for doctors and medical staff who are committed to saving lives, but not to selecting who should survive. How much should be invested in the sector remains a systemic question – but the health sector needs to be run as a social economy service rather than a health business.

In Europe, it was the Progressives in the European Parliament and the European Council who succeeded in pushing for the European recovery programme and a new vision of financing – and even if this is not yet a breakthrough and is still questioned by some, it is a very significant milestone of which our political family should be proud. But it is not only in Europe that progressive governments have managed to steer the crisis better than conservative or authoritarian regimes. Looking further West, we have been surprised to see how in the once most neoliberal economy in the world the Biden/Harris administration is determined to set new – ultimately Social Democratic – priorities.

However, the North-South divide is still to be overcome – particularly when it comes to access to vaccines. At the start of 2021, the Progressive Alliance launched a campaign for vaccine solidarity. This is now supported by 55 member parties worldwide, many NGOs, think tanks like FEPS, and the European and International Trade Union Confederation.

And we did not stand alone with our call. UN Secretary General António Guterres and UN Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet shared our arguments and made similar calls. The key point of dispute remains the liberation of the licences to produce the vaccines (patent waivers), which is not very popular in the Northern Hemisphere, where the laboratories are based that developed the groundbreaking mRNA vaccines in record time. However, some appear to have forgotten that without the public investment in the research

for these vaccines they would not have seen the light of day. Nevertheless, it seems that the fear of losing profits is stronger than the – often repeated – global political and medical understanding that ‘no one is safe until everybody is safe’. This simple truth needs to have consequences, at least in the temporary liberation of licences. Have the lessons from HIV/AIDS not been learnt?

At a time when the rich North is launching its Covid-19 booster campaigns, the vaccination rate in the poorest countries of the world is around 5 per cent of the population. One does not need to be an epidemiologist to understand that if the virus is not contained in the Global South, and if variants are left to spread – like the most recent Omicron variant, discovered in South Africa – the existing vaccines will need to be adapted, which will have another cost. Will we be forced to confront the reality yet again that solidarity ends when it comes to making safe profits? Thinking global is fine, acting local is not sufficient.

In terms of the global trends for 2022, the pandemic has accelerated the threats to democracy, as many regimes have used the fight against the virus to shrink democratic and civic rights even further. We are now witnessing a multitude of threats that endanger resilient democracies. Inequalities pave the way to right-wing and even fascist populists. The paradox is that those who do not care about more social justice far too often gain the votes of those who struggle for survival in their daily lives. Yet there is not a single right-wing, authoritarian, or fascist regime that has managed to draw 30 million people out of poverty like Brazil’s former president Lula did. Indeed, under the country’s current far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, 45 million Brazilians have been pushed back into poverty.

Is it democracy-fatigue or should we finally acknowledge that too narrow a focus on only economic questions does not help those who suffer? At the time of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow jacket) protests in France, the tension was between those who were afraid of the end of the month and those who were afraid of the end of the world. It is therefore of the utmost relevance that our political family fully engages to ensure that the upcoming green and digital transitions are fair and do not leave anyone behind. This is easier said than done when we look, for example, at the length of time taken and at the social cost demanded for the transition of the Ruhr, once Germany’s most economically relevant region of steel and coal.

There are certainly economic solutions – and new businesses, industrial and technological revolutions will help. We will definitely need to strengthen social dialogue, but we should also focus more on new economic actors because decent work, and new and sustainable jobs are needed more than ever in these times of transition. And the transition cannot be for the Global North alone!

What is more, we need to prove that economic prosperity without democracy is not the alternative. There is competition with Russia and China. While we continue to question trade agreements between the EU and other countries and regions in the world, the Chinese are investing heavily in Africa and Latin America. They even support activities of parties linked to our political family. But there are no mass protests against these forms of dependency.

In the end, my plea for a progressive New Year is for a return to the fundamental call of Social Democracy: dare more internationalism! We offer the Progressive Alliance as the cooperation platform of progressive parties worldwide – because we need to exchange experiences, concepts and visions. We need to develop sustainable perspectives and solutions. And in the Progressive Alliance we can build on good progressive governmental experience from the Dominican Republic to New Zealand. Who else can?