

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

FIT FOR THE FUTURE

**A BRIEF SET OF VIEWS
ON HOW TO TAKE SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND EUROPE FORWARD
TO A FUTURE WHICH LOOKS BOTH EXCITING AND TERRIFYING**



SERGEI STANISHEV



EUROPEAN
ELECTIONS
CAMPAIGN

FAIR
FREE
SUSTAINABLE

The Progressive
Europe We Want

PES
SOCIALISTS &
DEMOCRATS

LISTEN

IN YOUR CAR, ARMCHAIR OR ON THE WAY



As a book fan, I am glad to see that both publishing and sales of print books are ever on the rise worldwide, despite hardships faced by local retailers and bookstores, especially during the pandemic, and the strong competition of the e-books and audiobooks.

Of course, other options would be better suited to different situations according to people's routines. That's why this text is also available on the PES website in PDF format. I have also decided to publish it in audiobook format, so you can listen to it on your way to work, for example. It's a great way to make the most out of your daily commute.

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Party of European Socialists. The sole liability rests with the author of this book and the Party of European Socialists is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

This book was printed on a recycled paper with environmentally safe water-based inks.

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S U M M A R Y

What's wrong with this world?

- Inequalities, tax evasion, tax heavens
- Obsession with growth, where profit is still king
- Radicalisation & confrontation
- New tech undermining social standards
- Addiction to consumerism

What are we doing about it?

- Strengthening social rights & standards
- Delivering on our Green ambitions and promises in a just & fair way
- Protecting our democracies and fundamental rights
- Regulating and taxing new technologies
- Ensuring it all works for the many, not the few

What are the 5 things which will define our future?

- Inequalities
- Climate change
- Peace (or the absence thereof)
- Technology
- Good governance, critical thinking

What are the 5 key challenges to EU policy-making?

- Doing more with less resources
- Introducing transformative policies with social lining
- Keeping social & regional cohesion, respect & solidarity
- Maintaining strong, independent institutions
- Keeping our minds and newsfeeds clean

What role for Social Democracy in the next 30 years?

- Reconcile labour and capital in more fair way
- Engage with grassroots movements
- Expand to all new kinds of labour/jobs
- Go green, ensure just transition
- Keep it authentic



TIMELINE

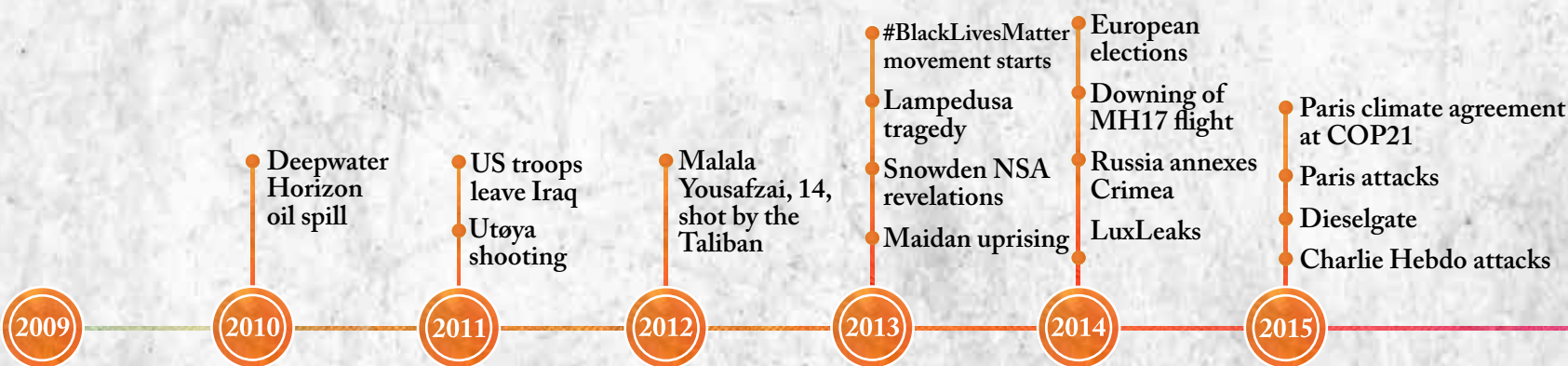
AND

Against a backdrop of multiple crises, challenges and defining moments, the PES family stayed united, remained true to its moral compass and managed to secure a strong progressive mark on key policies, decisions and solutions at European, national and regional level.

Through sweeping electoral victories or bitter disappointments, today PES member parties lead seven EU governments, representing over 36% of EU population, and are part of the governing coalitions in other six Member States.

Here are some of the key achievements we have authored, spearheaded or significantly contributed to, mapped against the challenges of the turbulent times we live in:

						Progressive leaders' Paris declaration for COP21
			PES leads EU rejection of ACTA			
			PES Fundamental programme adopted			European-wide Deposit Insurance Scheme proposed
		PES Congress: first political family to present a Common Candidate	PES, S&D launch European Youth Guarantee campaign	European Youth Guarantee proposed	Single resolution mechanism introduced	European fund for strategic investments (EFSI) introduced
Europe 2020 strategy announced						



ECONOMIC CRISIS

SECURITY CRISIS

REFUGEE CRISIS

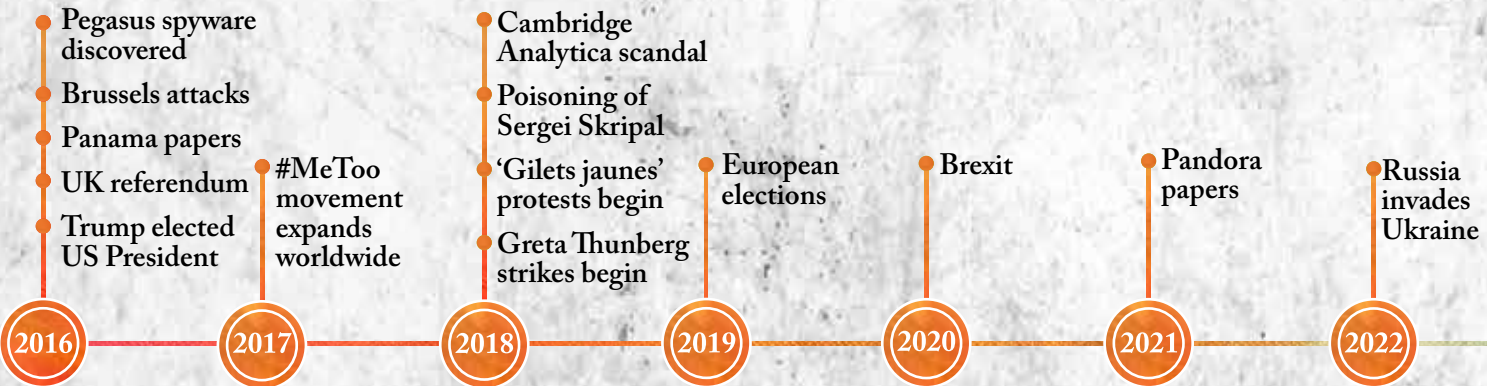
GREEK SOVEREIGN DEBT CRISIS

CLIMATE CRISIS

PES ACHIEVEMENTS

MILESTONES

GDPR introduced	Article 7 TFEU triggered against Poland, Hungary in defence of EU rule of law, fundamental rights	Revision of the Posted Workers' Directive	Strong social dimension in Commission work programme ensured	European recovery plan	European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan endorsed at the Porto Social Summit	Directive against abusive litigation (SLAPP) targeting journalists and rights defenders proposed
PES puts forward the European Youth Plan	EU Social Summit Sweden proclaims the European Pillar of Social Rights	PES Western Balkans Summit in Sofia	European Labour Authority created	SURE instrument created	European Climate Law adopted	Directive on renewable energy
End of roaming charges across the EU	End of roaming charges across the EU			Permanent Youth Guarantee proposed	'Fit for 55' package proposed	Directive on energy efficiency
				New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed	EU Directive on Whistleblowing	Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence proposed
				EU strategy for LGBTIQ equality presented	Conference on the Future of Europe starts	Directive on adequate minimum wages in the EU agreed
				NextGeneration EU, the European recovery plan agreed	Just Transition Fund approved	EU's Temporary Protection Mechanism activated for the first time
					G7 agrees to implement a global minimum corporate tax rate	



RULE OF LAW CRISIS

ENERGY CRISIS

COVID-19 CRISIS

UKRAINE WAR CRISIS

CLIMATE CRISIS



PREFACE

In 2022, PES celebrates 30 years since its establishment as a European political party. When celebrating an anniversary, one naturally looks back and reflects on the path followed, and forward – to the way which is yet to come. So in the run-up to the PES Congress in October 2022, I went through our previous policy documents, resolutions and manifestos, back to the PES Fundamental Programme of 2013 and the 3-year process of its creation beforehand.

What I found confirmed my conviction that we have done a great deal of things, and they were the right things. That the path we have chosen is a consistent one, and we have stood true to our moral compass, to our values and principles. And this is not an abstract claim – it is demonstrated by every single position, initiative or legislation adopted, supported or amended by us. I have also found that we have a good understanding of the issues which will define our future and we are well equipped to lead Europeans towards it. This is no small achievement, in view of all the turbulences the EU and the world have faced for the past 10 years or so.

Yet, claims to the contrary are abundant. Some say that social democracy is dead or on the decline, and that the policies we pursue are ‘suicidal’ for the EU. In fact, too many false prophets have told you that the future altogether is grim and that Change is dangerous. That we better stick to and preserve what we have, as we know it. That the EU as a whole is on the decline, and that politics and institutions are failing. And that, consequently, you need to vote for some brand new political start-up, or some very cool disruptors, who will take you back to a glorious past, when the sun was shining over bright blue skies. Dubious news outlets, political rivals, analysts, opinion leaders take aim at us so massively, that not only some of our supporters have begun to doubt us, but we’ve grown to sometimes doubt ourselves.

Well, I have decided to put up this text in order to tell you otherwise: that social democracy is doing well and is actually quite popular today. That we are delivering on our promises, that the Left was right when the Right was wrong, and that the future that awaits us is exciting, albeit a bit terrifying. But it is our choice, and also our responsibility, to shape it in a way that we make the most out of it, that it works for the many, not the few. And that Change is difficult, but also exciting, possible and in some cases – very urgent. That we, as socialists, are perfectly capable of leading that Change and should have the confidence and courage to do so – despite the difficult days which undoubtedly lie ahead of us. And we must do everything we can to inspire others to actively take part in shaping our future.

So what follows is a brief set of views on some issues I believe are key to our future – as socialists, and as Europeans. I will try to explore what I think is wrong with European politics and policy-making, what we are doing about it, what the major issues we face are, what I think we should be doing in the long term and, ultimately – what will be the role of social democracy in the years to come. It is in no way an omnibus, but rather a personal account of history in the making. A leftist hitchhiker’s guide to how it all fits together in one story. My views on Our PES story.

And if, by some chance, you – the one reading this – are not a socialist, I hope that by the end of this text you will at least have taken some interest and appreciation of what we do. If you are asking me how can I be a socialist, with this I am asking you – how can you not be? ■

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

FIT FOR THE FUTURE

What we offer is consistent, relevant and credible

Before exploring modern social democracy and its future, let's first provide some context and perspective. Today you can find an abundance of claims that the differences between mainstream Left and Right, especially in economic policy, have come down to adjusting the levels between competing demands, between the individual freedom to get rich, and the collective duty to share. I find these differences to be fundamental, and not incremental.

The basic concept of capitalism and modern liberals (and pretty much every entity from the political center to the right) is that the money one makes belong to them only and entirely, as it's solely a result of their own effort and achievements. Hence, they see any redistribution (say, in the form of taxes), as unfair by default. This is exactly the opposite of what we believe. The duty

to share, or the notion of a fairer redistribution (and, hence, a more just society), is based on our fundamental

understanding that not one of us can survive or prosper on his own. A single person cannot be self-sufficient, as we live in societies, where everybody contributes a different part and plays a different, but essential role. While incentive and hard work and success need to be recognized and are essential to progress, none of it would have been possible if not for the successes of others around you and before you. **Solidarity is what makes us a society.** It is our collective achievements, the sum of all there is and has been so far, that have made any individual's success today possible. It is precisely from here where the duty to share stems. What also stems from here is our primary conviction as socialists – that not one of us can be truly well-off, successful, and happy – if there are others who are not, if there are others who suffer, who are exploited, who do not enjoy the same rights, the same chances, the same opportunities. To us, equality is,

then, not to strive for all to be the same, but to have the equal chance to realize their potential in a way meaningful for society and themselves. Just ask yourself the question how much we have missed and where would we be today if all those who are less fortunate, in terms of chances and opportunities, would have had them, and would have been able to realize their full potential. This is, by the way, the essence of investing in social capital – not only in our own countries, but also in developing countries, where the shortage of highly qualified specialists or scientists, for example, should not be taken for granted, but rather seen as a consequence of the lack of social investments and, hence, a missed opportunity for those people to return on this investment by contributing to society and humanity.

“ Equality is not to strive for all to be the same, but to have the equal chance to realize their potential in a way meaningful for society and themselves

Then again, right-wingers claim that redistribution robs successful, hard-working people of their fairly earned wealth in order to give it to someone

who did not put any effort in earning it. And liberals and free-market fundamentalists see any state regulation of the economy as an assault on liberty. It is true that the free market self-regulates, but it regulates in favor of a specific corporate interest, which is profit, and not the public interest, i.e. the values and rules of society. What they fail to see or will not dare admit is that they are also victims of their own monsters – big businesses unchecked. As it is self-evident that no one can truly isolate on an island of opportunities just because he can afford to, and be immune to all the problems of the world, from security to climate change. So, the lack of social investments is also a missed opportunity which would have ultimately benefitted the uber-rich, the uber-liberal or the market fundamentalists, too.

This is why we assert policies which aim at ensuring the wellbeing and uplifting of everybody, including those who



are less fortunate, less capable or somehow deprived or disadvantaged. Because we believe their existence, their contribution, their lives matter – to all the rest. It is appalling that it took a global pandemic and crisis for the EU (and elsewhere in the world) to realize that healthcare staff are underappreciated, undervalued, underpaid, while being of critical importance for society. The same goes to every other worker who was deemed ‘essential’ and had to continue working (remember, not by choice, but because states and societies deemed it so, which implies some form of coercion), while all the rest were confined to their homes in order to contain the spread of COVID-19. So this is what we mean when we say we want an economy, a society which works for the many, not the few.

Albeit these fundamental differences, a number of political scientists have all but announced the death of ideology (similar to Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’), where the classic debate between socialism and capitalism was largely resolved, polarization came down to minor policy differences, and voters struggled to differentiate between Left and Right. Hayek was

one of the few who called against the perceived convergence between the major political poles, down to what he described as statist policies. This rumor is, of course, largely exaggerated.

Any democratic political system is by default meant to represent and resolve differences within a society, so polarization and conflict are inherent to it. And this conflict has not been limited to minor adjustments. To be fair, there were a number of right-wing or liberal parties in the EU which provided left measures, mostly as a result of an ever-increasing demand or as a crisis-response, putting out fires of burning social issues with money where they can. But those were the bare minimum, more charity than comprehensive social investments. Because **right-wingers and liberals do not see social investments as investments at all**, as they are universal by nature and benefit the many, not the (pre)selected few (think education or healthcare). They have always preferred investments, which have a clear ultimate beneficiary, which is most often some big corporation. This is evident just by identifying the top-job policymakers who switch sides for a career in a business usually related to their previous public service portfolio. This illustrates that conservatives and

liberals rarely care for the public interest, even while in public office. But to us, any law and any public policy should not be made to favor a particular interest.

Against this backdrop, Chantal Mouffe, a Belgian political theorist, argues in her 'Democratic Paradox', that it's not enough for a political actor in opposition to demand reasonable concessions from the ones in power. Agreed; we have seen time and again that while somewhat good for promoting some of one's policies, this approach usually leads to diminishing space and differences between rival actors, from which usually the weaker suffers more at the next elections. It also creates vacuum elsewhere, allowing for new actors to emerge with a more radical, and hence more appealing, messages. In a number of Member States, our parties are being suffocated by the shrinking space between radical left and right-wing populism and nationalism. What Mouffe suggests is the need for an actor to offer a 'radical', comprehensive alternative to challenge the hegemonic worldview and political ideology of the moment.

Looking back to at least 10 years of battles, achievements and policy documents of our family, I believe we have been promoting just that – a comprehensive, consistent, credible alternative to the dominant ideology, deeply rooted in our progressive values, which clearly sets us apart from conservatives, liberals, populists and nationalists.

At present, I believe we are inching a moment, when it is the progressive agenda which is dominant, and not the conservative one. Caution here – **more Left does not necessarily mean only more progressive governments**, as this is a very dynamic variable. Gone are the times of absolute majorities ruling for decades. Societies, and by extension – politics, are far more complex and fragmented today. Both the experience of previous crises and the emergence of the new ones have increased the demand for social policies. The pure joy of technological advancements has made way to increased public awareness of workers' rights and working conditions across old and new economic sectors. Large-scale movements and unions, centered around social issues, such as women's rights, LGBTI rights or workers' rights, are proliferating – engaging and inspiring people across the EU and the globe. So while we may not yet declare hegemony, I think the political landscape has profoundly changed in recent years, not least because of our relentless efforts to turn the tides.

The Left was Right and the Right was wrong

A few prominent examples are worth mentioning here. It was us who advocated for the end of fixation with economic growth in the aftermath of the financial crisis, for putting reins on the untamed financial markets and our excessive dependency on their whims. For the introduction of a financial transaction tax to restrain speculation and introduce a fairer share of contribution of markets to social goals. For a fairer global taxation, with taxes paid where profit is made, without tax avoidance and tax evasion through letterbox companies in tax heaven islands. Because we know for a fact that economic growth does not make even the better part of societies wealthy, but only few, with inequalities both within societies and globally widening by the day, to the point where the wealthiest 1% earn more than the entire bottom half of the world population.

It was us who insisted on breaking away from austerity, especially in the context of the debt crisis, when Greece was

at the brink of default and of being kicked out of the Eurozone, while people were protesting violently in the streets day after day.

It was us also who time and again warned that this fixation on

economic growth strains the planet and its resources to its limits. The path followed was and still largely is unsustainable, ruining our social models and widening inequalities, which in turn leaves more and more people and systems vulnerable to new crises. That's why we demanded the revision of the EU's stability and growth pact, to allow for more social investments.

We also saw the danger of conflict between our environmental and social goals, and insisted on a Just Transition, leaving no one behind – adapting to climate change while also making sure our social systems do not collapse in the process.

All the while, we were also upholding rights and freedoms in the age of rapid digitalization and technological advancements, including new types and forms of work, which introduced fundamental changes to the labor market. We were the first political family to oppose ACTA, we advocated for the introduction of a GAFA tax (named after the big four Google,

“ Conservatives and liberals do not see social investments as investments at all, as they are universal by nature and benefit the many, not the (pre)selected few

Apple, Facebook and Amazon), we ensured a progressive, people-centered General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), we succeeded in introducing new regulations for platform workers and posted workers.

We insisted that investments in healthcare and education, alongside eradicating poverty in the EU, are key to the future resilience. That's why we proposed the European Youth Plan, where the Youth Guarantee, the Child Guarantee and the Cultural check are now a reality.

We were also adamant in our demands for upholding Rule of Law, as we saw it eroding throughout our Member States, where democratic institutions were privatized, opposition suffocated, and economies distributed among faithful oligarchs, who owed much of their fortunes to public and EU funds.

We also vigorously defended human rights wherever they came under threat from rising conservatism, nationalism and borderline fascism. That includes women's rights, LGBTI communities, refugees. It was our representatives in the European institutions who worked tirelessly for the introduction of key legislation aimed at improving the environment of growing hate, discrimination and xenophobia.

During this period, we had two major campaigns – for the European elections in 2014 and 2019. Back in 2011, we were the first political family to propose people to have a say on who takes the EU's most influential job – that of a Commission President. Common Candidates, put forward by European political parties, who would be the face of their campaigns and platforms, so that people know that they would get what and who they voted for, instead of a last-minute opaque back-room deal. With a Common Candidate spearheading our efforts to promote these achievements and our values and policies, we 'knocked the vote', door to door, town by town, step by step. Both of these campaigns took political communication of European political parties to a new level, uplifting the legitimacy and credibility of a Union, which had long suffered from repeated bashing for its detachment from ordinary people and reality. And although we did not succeed in securing the post of Commission President on both occasions, an increased number of people saw in social democracy what had so far been masked behind a smoke screen of right-wing clichés: relevance, credibility, hope, optimism and opportunity.

“ Every major EU legislation now includes a social cushion

The .RED concept of policy-making

But all these were incremental achievements, and it took a full-blown crisis – when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, for most to realize that had we invested more in the social dimensions of our economies, health systems, for example, would not have collapsed so quickly during the pandemic, and their resilience would have saved countless lives and public health. What little social policies were done before that, the EPP took the credit for, while Juncker's promised social AAA standard for the EU was nowhere to be seen. And we now have an energy crisis and a war in Ukraine to add to the mix of misfortunes which strain the limits of our ability to maintain the European social and economic achievements of the past.

But the tides have changed for good, and this time the approach is different. The talks at the European Summits are different, and the public discourse is different. Things which were a taboo only until recently, are now the buzzwords of the day. Incredibly as it may seem to some, now every major EU legislation, measure and initiative has a social cushion, with the social

dimension or impact addressed with a dedicated tool, in what I see as an entirely different way of doing things, a dot-red concept of EU policy-making, if you would echo the .net boom.

The latest reform of the European Social Fund (now ESF+), The European Youth Guarantee, The European Child Guarantee, NextGenerationEU, The Temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE), REPowerEU, The Just Transition Fund, The InvestEU fund (successor of EFSI), the Social Climate Fund – the common denominator (apart from the fancy abbreviations and nicknames) is the social dimension, the one which recognizes the impact of Change on people, and makes an effort to manage it in a fair way.

Why is this important? Because **nearly all new policies, measures and initiatives in the future will inevitably be policies of change and transformation.** Being cautious upfront about their social impact, especially on the most vulnerable, will contribute to their success and sustainability. It will also save socialists a lot of time and energy, not having to fight the same battles and argue with conservatives over and over again.

The current situation we face, of course, puts additional strain on all the existing plans and demands new ones. A number of measures have been employed by Member States and the EU

to mitigate the effects of skyrocketing energy and consumer goods prices, with inflation rates reaching heights unseen since WWII. Governments still struggle to support both business and households in meeting their needs and bills, as the situations gets worse towards winter. We will inevitably be forced to reconsider energy consumption, notably gas, and do what we can to soften the blow.

“ Policies in the future will inevitably be policies of change and transformation

However, a large part of the measures we introduce today in crisis mode are temporary. This again demonstrates that we know what the solution or the necessary thing to do is, but we do not employ it until it's too urgent or too expensive, and even then its temporary nature suggests it's not implemented as a long term social policy, but only as a crisis response. Already in 2020, as the pandemic was making its way towards the EU, and before the economic and energy crises that ensued, 21.9% of Europeans were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Add the working poor, the energy poverty, and others who are less fortunate in opportunities to afford quality education, quality healthcare, quality food, etc., and you will easily see that this approach will not lift them out of poverty, but rather keep the status quo for a short while, and leave them vulnerable when the next crisis hits. This in turn implies that to some (conservatives) there is an acceptable level of poverty and inequality, which is anything but acceptable to us. **Just as we have a drive for net-zero CO2 emissions, similarly we should have the same resolve to strive for zero poverty.**

The pandemic shed light on staggering inequalities and grossly exacerbated them. It was a devastating blow for the social fabric of our societies, and especially for their most vulnerable parts. It pushed injustice and inequalities beyond the line of tolerance, which the many had to put up with for years, if not decades. Even for the few, it became evident that something has got to change. It's a pity, really, that it took a pandemic and a war for this to happen. It is, however, also a wake-up call, a call to change for the better. And it is our mission to ensure that this change is not just another wish-wash from the right-wing to keep people at bay. It is our responsibility to make the transformation happen and make it happen for good.

- The latest reform of the **European Social Fund**, dating back to 1957, was introduced in 2021 with the ESF+, with a total budget of EUR 99 billion, with the purpose of implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights – investing in people, creating and protecting job opportunities, promoting social inclusion, fighting poverty and developing the skills needed for the digital and green transitions.
- The **European Youth Guarantee** – an investment scheme tackling youth unemployment by ensuring young people under 30 receive a good quality concrete offer for a job, apprenticeship, traineeship or continued programme within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed. It is primarily financed by the ESF+ and national investments.
- The **European Child Guarantee**, funded through the ESF+, aims to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing access of children in need to a set of key services – early childhood education and care, healthcare, nutrition and housing.
- **Next Generation EU** – an unprecedented stimulus package of EUR 806.9 billion, aiming to mitigate the effects of the economic and social crisis as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme consists of the Recovery and Resilience Facility enabling EUR 723.8 billion in loans and grants to support reforms and investments in Member States, alongside financing programmes such as ReactEU, Horizon Europe, InvestEU and the Just Transition Fund.
- The **Temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE)** is a tool enabling financial assistance of up to EUR 100 bln in the form of loans to address increases in public expenditure and protect employees and self-employed against the risk of job loss.
- **REPowerEU** – introduced as a response to global energy market disruption, with the aim of accelerating clean energy transition, increase Europe's energy independence from unreliable suppliers and volatile fossil fuels. Measures include common purchases of gas, new energy partnerships, national REPowerEU plans under the Recovery and Resilience Fund plans to support investment and reforms worth EUR 300 billion, boosting industrial decarbonisation with EUR 3 billion under the Innovation Fund.
- The **Just Transition Fund** – a financial instrument within the Cohesion Policy, aiming to support regions facing socio-economic challenges related to the transition towards climate neutrality, with a total budget of EUR 17.5 billion.
- The **European Social Climate Fund**, with a budget of EUR 72 billion, aims to finance direct income support for vulnerable households as part of the revision of the EU emission trading system under the 'Fit for 55' package. The Fund should also provide funding to Member States to support investments in the energy efficiency of buildings, decarbonisation of heating and cooling, and improved access to zero and low-emission transport.
- The **Invest EU** fund (successor of EFSI) combines various EU financial instruments and is expected to mobilise at least EUR 372 billion to finance sustainable infrastructure projects, research and innovation, SMEs, as well as social projects in skills, education, social housing, healthcare, integration of migrants, etc.



“ To some (conservatives), there is an acceptable level of poverty and inequality, which is anything but acceptable to us

Losing faith either in the EU or in democracies now is not an option. The multitude of problems have forced large parts of our population to endure hardships and lose comforts. Unemployment, business closures, high bills, falling standard of living, people living below the poverty line, people not being able to afford to keep their home warm in winter or pay for the education of their children or afford healthcare bills all contribute to the seemingly declining prospects for a better future for them and their children. More and more often I hear people saying that Europe is on the decline, that our glorious days of living in comfort are over, and tomorrow is going to be worse than today. Complicated national politics lead more and more people to lose faith in the ability of our democratic systems to produce effective solutions addressing their problems, lose faith in the European institutions and the EU, and ultimately begin to question the merits of democracy altogether. Nationalistic and populist forces again seem more appealing, which one might think is only natural in times of crises. To ignore these trends or discard them as far-fetched would be a mistake.

The times we live in demand that we strengthen our progressive identity, keep our resolve, build on our achievements and project hope and confidence. However, we should also live with the sense of a looming mortal danger upon our political movement. We did survive the austerity era and the Covid-19 pandemic, which pushed progressive policies to the corner, and imposed a heavy toll on some of our parties. As we are entering a new historical period, **the lack of enough social policies would result in our political movement paying the price, and not the right wing.**

We cannot predict the future, and yet I do remain hopeful. In my view, Europe remains and will remain the best place to live on Earth, and the EU is well equipped to go through these turbulent times, as it is by itself a tool for ensuring peace, stability, prosperity and quality life for all its citizens. And I am certain that Social democracy has an integral and leading part to play in what is to come, and eager to face it. ■



LUÍZA ♥
10.06.07

POLETA
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FUKARET
SLOBODA

25.02.08
Adnan
Amela

TORENT
RENE

MARI
VINO
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Enes
DAMIRO

BARENKA
JSE
FUKARET

KOLAR

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ON WAR & WINTER

The fittest survive. The free thrive

‘And somewhere from the dim ages of history the truth dawned upon Europe that the morrow would obliterate the plans of today.’

Jaroslav Hašek, *The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the World War*

It feels awkward, doesn't it? Deliberating on and devising our future, while there is a war raging right next to us, with a spillover of hardships falling upon us, Europeans, set to multiply, as the winter approaches. The energy prices have skyrocketed, sending people, politicians and markets into a panic mode – we all see that. The prospects of gas shortage and cold homes, schools, hospitals and businesses terrifies us all. We scramble to ensure backups, reinforce connectivity and solidarity mechanisms, and push for savings to mitigate the expected effects. All the while the war rages on, plummeting ever deeper into the abyss of cruelty and suffering, dragging humanity, compassion, empathy and solidarity down with it.

What is one to do or even say in moments like

this? We have called for the Russians to halt and withdraw, we have deployed an unprecedented array of sanctions to persuade them to do so, we have supported Ukraine to the tune of tens of billions, we have welcomed those displaced by the hostilities, and we continue to debate the matter every day, everywhere.

And yet, here we are, on the brink of insanity ourselves, with public opinion swinging between our moral obligations to help and support those who are victims of aggression, and the need to ensure our own well-being. Is this selfish? Maybe. What I know is that it's natural. **We wouldn't be of much help to anyone, if our own economies crumble, would we?** Indeed, there is polarization in society, with two opposing vocal minorities, which guarantees that whatever politicians say or do will be met with stark criticism from either one of the 'sides'. Therefore, we are again forced to walk a thin rope, the perpetual task of balancing between Leading and Following.

Yet, I don't think most people question the need to help, but rather genuinely want this war to end – for Ukraine's sake, for the sake of all those losing their lives or suffering, and for our

own. Inconvenient as it may seem, it is an **epic fail of politics to prevent this war in the first place, and another one – to halt it as soon as possible.** Of course, this irritates people, who expected better. But those people were the ones welcoming refugees at the border crossings and train stations in Poland and Romania, who opened their homes throughout Europe, who gathered and shipped aid to those in need, who donated and volunteered and continue to do so. Yet, it would be best if there is no more suffering, destruction and death.

“ People don't question the need to help, but rather genuinely want this war to end

But wars have their own logic, which even those who start them cannot fully foresee and control. And I'm afraid we are heading for a protracted conflict, similar to all the rest in the Middle

East and elsewhere in the world, where warfare is just perceived as the normal, and we are not even sure who's fighting who and why any more. There, people have certainly forgotten what it was like to live without war. Children grow with a Kalashnikov in their hands, instead of a book. We saw this type of failure in Afghanistan two times in recent history, and we are still waiting for the Arab spring to fully blossom, not to mention Yemen and others.

I am sure there are liberals and conservatives, capitalists and industry persons, who would argue war is good business, provides for GDP and employment, and the necessary means to stand up to terrorism, for example, or for peacekeeping missions. Shooting for Peace, however, has never been the credo of socialists. We've seen time and again that 'delivering democracy to the desert' does not quite happen overnight. To us, waging wars is the epitome of the stupidity of mankind, a feature we have not been able to shake off our characters for thousands of years, ever since Cain and Abel.

It was during the Cold War that we had reached a point where we had the ability and the means to destroy ourselves for good – with nuclear weapons. And we have never been closer to actually doing so in the last 60 years, than we are today. We now also have a second way to do the same – with inaction on climate change. Global warfare, apart from the toll of human lives lost and the destruction it brings about, seems as a gigantic waste of resources and potential that could have been put to better use. In fact, any other use would have been better.

'It was miraculous. It was almost no trick at all, he saw, to turn vice into virtue and slander into truth, impotence into abstinence, arrogance into humility, plunder into philanthropy, thievery into honor, blasphemy into wisdom, brutality into patriotism, and sadism into justice. Anybody could do it; it required no brains at all. It merely required no character.'

Joseph Heller, Catch-22

Europeans' immediate concern now is making it through what promises to be a tough winter, and the tough winters ahead, as surely we will not be able to return to the pre-war and pre-pandemic level of prosperity and price stability. The years to come will be years of adaptation, when the economies will try to catch up with inflation and prices, and debt. But more often than not, I see people just mocking efforts to reduce gas and electricity consumption. Lowering heating in private homes and public spaces, turning off shop lights, taking shorter showers and so on – are portrayed as absurd. Well, it's true that such consumer-level savings will account for little, and a larger (and more painful) effort will be needed to compensate for current shortages.

However, I feel it's important to take a moment to explore this point in more depth. All those saving measures should have happened long ago, and seem perfectly reasonable from sustainability point of view. Why would you waste any resource, be it gas for heating or fresh water, or electricity, or materials, just because you can, or can afford it? Because we are simply used to it. Used to the notion of abundance and inexhaustible resources, goods, services, which are somewhat guaranteed. Capitalists would, of course, blame the Welfare State for establishing a feeling of certainty, a state of confidence that there is such an abundance of everything, and there always will be, guaranteed by the state. This couldn't be further from the

truth. This notion was implanted by capitalism's own insatiable thirst for growth and consumption as driver of progress and profit. What we are used to is overconsumption, and this is why we have been struggling to promote sustainability for the past years, and the urgent need to do it. **What seems as loss of comforts to many now, is just breaking away from bad habits.** This is how these current measures are different from austerity, which critically undermined key public services and social standards for all.

And make no mistake – overconsumption does not mean you are rich, or even middle class – it's a vice which spans across the social pyramid, rendering people dependent on overconsumption and overuse. Let us remind ourselves – there was resistance when we started promoting the right to repair, instead of throwing away a defunct or broken device, thereby reducing waste and resources. There was resistance when we started promoting a circular economy, where we recycle and reuse. There was resistance when we started promoting a more responsible use of freshwater, and raising awareness of the tremendous amounts of water, land and crops for the breeding of livestock (and meat) in some parts of the world. But again – there is no reason to continue with a bad habit just because you are used to it or can afford it. We have changed lots of things along the way, and even more remain.

“ We are addicted to consumerism. Savings measures are not austerity, and should have already happened ”

What we should care about, then, is not the loss of 'comforts' by some, but sustainability, as well as the most vulnerable, to whom savings measures are not merely a loss of comforts, but could have a significant impact on their livelihoods – those who are worse off, in poverty, etc. We should make sure also not to jeopardize the running of key social systems, which ensure the universal basic living standards for all – including the rich, such as healthcare and education, and public utilities.

Then, there are those who also criticize efforts to cut the EU's energy dependency and expand its diversification, and I would dare say this is a more valid point. Looking for alternative gas suppliers now is imperative, but we will still be dependent on fossil fuels, such as oil and gas, and, hence, on their suppliers. Furthermore, let's be honest – **few other resource suppliers are true champions of democracy and human rights, or social rights.** Buying their stock, with no strings attached, serves as a blank check or indulgency to them to continue business as usual. This applies to any other resource, including the metals and minerals needed for batteries, for example. Even if this is not used against us for blackmail and extortion, we would

still be funding exploitation and authoritarianism around the world. The urgent need to shift away from fossil fuels and to decouple economic growth from unsustainable resource use, then still stands as the only viable way of breaking away from any dependencies in the long term.

But what about the war? Well, first and foremost, we need a massive, unified push for ceasefire and peace. Yes, we have done that – to no avail, but we should do it again and again, until we succeed, convincing other world players to also step in line. We have imposed sanctions – and that was the right thing to do, as standing up to aggression stems from our values – but again, to no avail. We have continuously demanded the full and unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops, but hostilities and atrocities have continued. But our moral (and practical) duty to keep trying stands.

In the hard winter(s) which undoubtedly lies ahead of us, Solidarity will be put to the test – both between countries and within. Because

this time it will be a zero-sum game, felt very tangibly by every citizen, more than ever: we will have to part with something, for real, in order to help others. And if we fail to devise enough cushions and measures to mitigate the negative effects of the crises on people and businesses in our home countries, more and more people are bound to rebel and strike, demanding better. They will do so not because they do not support Ukraine, but because they expected more and better of us, politicians, as the current downward spiral is simply not sustainable for long.

What gives me hope, though, is that things on the other side are also not sustainable. Authoritarianism is not sustainable, and we know this for a historical fact. There is simply no way to tighten the grip on people's freedoms, businesses and institutions, and maintain a performing economy, and project soft power and prestige abroad, all at the same time. And in Russia, the scales have been tipped long ago – as the soft power dried thin, there was nothing else left but hard power, in order to feed the status quo (of course, there are a thousand other factors and preconditions leading to this war which could be analyzed, but that's not the point here). This is also not sustainable, as all resources are sucked in by the war effort and the economy is all but crippled by sanctions. Critics argue that one way or the other, we continue to fill the Russian coffers, buying and paying for oil and gas. Again, this is not going to last forever, and will end – maybe not tomorrow, but sooner, rather than later. What Russia is now, is hardly a role model. The same applies to China, for example, or any other authoritarian-leaning regime

around the world, including Europe. **No one really looks up to Orbán or Vučić for counsel on democracy, rule of law or the economy**, although public space was flooded with praise of them all up until recently, speaking of the economic success of China or political power projected by Russia. Home-grown populists and nationalists in the EU, who were inspired by such 'prominent' examples, are not in power, and do not set the agenda. Democracy, freedom of expression, checks and balances between institutions, active civil society, free and fair elections and all the other elements of our achievements – these are universal and sustainable, and they will prevail in the course of history.

What we need then is a different Russia, although it might be hard to imagine it today: one which is more democratic and

more free, one with which we trade and collaborate sincerely in the pursuit of solving the global-scale issues. When this senseless war is over, there will be a Herculean task to rebuild Ukraine.

“ Authoritarianism is not sustainable, but democracy is. It's our moral duty to renew efforts for peace

The Russians' task will be to rebuild Russia – in the right direction. To build a better living place for themselves, to avoid other disasters like this war, and to restore its much needed place in world affairs, from trade to security. One thing which leaves no doubt what the current direction is, was Gorbachev's passing in the beginning of September, when he was refused state funeral. While a minor detail to some, it's actually quite revealing. While hailed as a hero in most western countries, at home his name was associated with the crumbling of a Great Power, and the loss of territories, image, strength, and all the turmoil that ensued. Cherishing what the USSR once was is clearly the wrong way to being Great today. Burning gas, to a great environmental cost, which could have otherwise been in the pipes, is also not the way forward.

And if it is difficult to see any light at the end of this tunnel of confrontation, we would do well to remember two things. First – the great space race between the US and the USSR during the Cold War eventually led to cooperation: the common challenge of exploring space later resulted in common missions, and the building of the International Space Station. And second: that it was in 1969, again in the midst of the Cold War and just 7 years after the Cuban crisis, when **Willy Brandt pushed for a new Ostpolitik**, breaking with the policies of the Christian Democrats, who had ruled for 20 years, and their Hallstein Doctrine of no contact. The rest, as they say, is history. Can we pursue a similar course today? I am not sure, but I surely know that it is well worth trying. ■



ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Being 'green' is not optional.
Being red is a must

'A day, a livelong day, is not one thing but many. It changes not only in growing light toward zenith and decline again, but in texture and mood, in tone and meaning, warped by a thousand factors of season, of heat or cold, of still or multi-winds, torqued by odors, tastes, and the fabrics of ice or grass, of bud or leaf or black-drawn naked limbs. And as a day changes so do its subjects, bugs and birds, cates, dogs, butterflies and people.'

John Steinbeck, 'The Winter of Our Discontent'

Entangled in crises as we are, with even more hardships on the horizon, one is easily tempted to think that the light at the end of the tunnel has gone out for the EU (also to save energy). Indeed, it is difficult to promote sustainable policies and investments as more and more people are struggling to heat their homes, top their car tank or businesses to stay afloat. However, it is my conviction that if we focus on just getting by, on solving one issue at a time, we are bound to lose hard-won achievements and comforts one after the other.

New challenges emerge so fast now that both policymakers and citizens are gasping for breath, exhausted by a never-ending crisis mode. However, most of the problems we face today, and certainly the tools we need to deal with them, are connected. More renewable energy will reduce our carbon footprint, making for a better environment and driving costs of goods down as technologies develop. It will also reduce our dependencies and make us more resilient towards external shocks and pressure (yes, read Russia, but also any other provider in the future). It also drives other sectors and technologies forward, such as the shift towards electric or hydrogen vehicles – private, but also public and freight transport. Preserving forests, more responsible use of fresh water and utilization of rainwater, less use of pesticides, reducing and recycling waste – the list is endless. We must therefore not lose sight of the bigger picture, and make the smart choices we need today, if we want to find ourselves better equipped tomorrow. And that bigger picture is climate change.

A great many people somehow have the notion that we came up with these climate change policies just yesterday. Major decisions having major impact on their daily lives, are ‘suddenly’ found on top of the agenda. Truly, for too long, we have either lacked understanding or chose to look the other way regarding climate change. Driven by the strive for economic growth and the benefits and improvements it brings, backed by a perceived abundance of resources, the world was blind to the issue of sustainability of such a growth model and its environmental and health impacts. However, scientists have been ringing the alarm bell for decades. As a matter of fact, the first ever UN environmental summit was held as early as 1972 in Stockholm, when the suggestion that the planet’s finite natural resources cannot support an ever-increasing demand and consumption, risking social and ecological downturn, was met with criticism and scepticism which persisted for years to come.

We’ve come a long way now in understanding how nature works, what the interconnections between systems are and how they impact our daily lives. There is still a lot we don’t know, but what we do know has terrified scientists and policymakers: that human life is tied to an extremely narrow set of conditions,

which in turn are part of an infinitely complex system where every bit has its place.

It’s difficult to be taken seriously when you try to convey a sense of urgency over a period of 40 years, especially when the world has not ‘ended’ in the meantime, and we are still supposedly doing just fine as we are – as opponents would point out. However, there are two very important points to be made here: One, the effects of climate change have been more visible, more frequent and more impactful by the day. Coming to realize the trend of climate change, we have also discovered the sheer scale of the damage – some of it already close to irreversible – done to system elements which are crucial for our survival. From heatwaves, warming seas, loss of ice on the Poles, changing ocean currents, droughts, storms and raising sea levels, to massive loss of biodiversity, the effects of climate change are felt virtually everywhere across the globe, threatening the livelihoods of billions of people. The second point – we have actually done a lot in order to mitigate those effects in the past years. From increasing the number of protected natural sites, including in seas and oceans, to reforestation, stricter limits for industrial pollution of air, soil and waters, limiting the use plastics – there are a host of ‘green’ EU and national policies over the past years which have improved the environment we live in.

The ozone layer: when there is a will, there is a way

The ozone layer ‘hole’ is just one tangible success story. First discovered in the 1970s, by 1990s it was already a pressing global crisis. Although it took some years for the magnitude of the danger to unfold, the prospect of the destruction of the ozone layer adversely impacting human health and ecosystems prompted public awareness, which eventually led to heavy investment in scientific research, a global pooling of resources and international political coordination, pressing governments around the world to collaborate in an unprecedented way. In 1987, the Montreal protocol was adopted, binding the phasing out of CFCs. By 2000, their production and consumption had been halted. And this turned things around, significantly reducing the human-caused phenomena, with the ozone layer expected to return to pre-1980 levels around 2050.

The Montreal Protocol has been signed by virtually every country on Earth and remains the only treaty to be universally ratified – a triumph of international environmental cooperation. Of course, climate change is an issue much more complex, but

the lessons here are at least two. One, to demonstrate just how fast we can change our environment for the worse, and how slow it is for it to recover, compared to our lifespan. And two, that when there is a will, there is a way.

It's not about saving a cute panda, but about saving ourselves

Science now has a comprehensive overview of the resilience and limits of key ecosystems across the globe, or what a team led by Will Steffen and John Rockstrom calls 'planetary boundaries', for example. They have identified nine thresholds within which we need to operate to secure sustainable existence.

They include climate change, ocean acidification, ozone layer depletion, air pollution, biodiversity loss, etc. Breaching any of the thresholds of the nine

boundaries would risk destabilising the ecosystem balance, which humanity needs in order to prosper and develop. What is important here, however, especially for us socialists, is that **we cannot separate the environmental crisis from social issues, as those are inherently connected.** A crisis in either direction has the potential to exacerbate the other. Curbing the desire for endless growth, profit, and consumption is crucial for making sure we are not stepping over any of the boundaries. So far, we have been living in an exploitative world economy – not only for people, but also for our natural resources, ecosystems and environment. This is the direction of economist Kate Raworth's idea of 'doughnut economics', adding an inner 'social' ring to the planetary boundaries model, including healthcare, access to energy, education, housing, gender equality, and social equity – all inspired by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Both circles complement each other, as we must find the balance between the outer ecological ceilings and the social foundations necessary for a fair and just world for the many. This is, by the way, a strategy officially adopted by the city of Amsterdam in 2020, as a means of recovery from the crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important therefore to understand that **climate change is not only a crisis of its own, but a crisis multiplier.** There would not only be dire consequences for the environment, but the political, economic and social systems as we know them will also be severely destabilised. This illustrates just how much unsustainable the nature of today's model of

development is. The carbon-neutral transformation will not be the only transition our societies will go through in the next decades. Social, economic, governance, and environmental transitions are the also under way. Looking back at the past decade, crises have become a permanent feature of our lives, as we reap the consequences of the 'growth-first, think later' right-wing doctrine. We had a financial crisis, followed by a social-economic collapse, a migration crisis, a health crisis as a consequence of the pandemic, and now a war with globe-scale impact on food and energy, to name a few. All this amidst a looming climate emergency, with devastating disasters happening more often than ever. To stop this chain, we must 'build back better': not just returning to the state of affairs before a certain crisis, or dealing with one problem at a time, but making sure that the mistakes that led to it are corrected and we emerge with an entirely new economic and social model. One which is not only more sustainable in terms of natural

resources and the environment, but also fairer and more just in terms of people.

So make no mistake: all our climate policies and ambitions

are not (just) about saving some cute panda or a whale off the shores of the Arctic. It's about saving us and our way of life, about being better version of ourselves, about feeling empowered by the possibility to be better in everything we do.

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Fighting climate change
is the ultimate level of solidarity

Why red is green (& vice-versa)

I am amazed at how often conservative and especially nationalist forces try to portray that environmentalism or green policies are something new and that we, socialists, only recently converted in the new 'religion' in an effort to compensate for electoral decline, joining in with 'climate fanatics'. This is classic manipulation, not to mention the detrimental effect of branding climate change policies as something bad for short-term political gains. This is not a new *raison d'être* for us. It is exactly the same as it always has been – caring about one another, caring about people. Because fighting climate change is ultimately about fighting for the survival of human life as we know it, anywhere on Earth. So you could see it as the ultimate level of solidarity possible. We have just been among the ones who do actually pay attention to science and its warnings, and have been willing to act, because we see both the threats and the merits of such policies and we have been at the forefront of forging, promoting and implementing climate change policies in the European institutions, in government and in local authorities. This line, which reflects our convictions, can easily

be seen throughout our policy documents dating years back, and our extensive track record in policymaking.

Back in 1992, following extensive campaigning by the socialists, Europe banned CFCs (chemicals typically used in refrigerants and aerosol propellants, which are harmful to the ozone layer). In 1994, the PES manifesto called for a joint European environmental policy focused on industrial transformation, renewables, environmental protection and green transport. In 2009, we proposed and pressured for mobile phone industry to harmonize chargers in the EU, which resulted in sparing an estimated 51 000 tons of waste. In 2022, the EU moved even further, introducing the single USB-C chargers for laptops, phones and tablets. In 2015, we were pushing for a far-reaching and binding agreement at the COP21 meeting in Paris. In 2019, we spearheaded the Green Deal – the EU’s biggest ever sustainability plan. In 2021, we were instrumental in passing the European Climate Law, which set the target of EU’s carbon neutrality by 2050 in law. In 2022, we secured an ambitious and progressive ‘Fit for 55’ package. All these are just to name a few.

To further help those trying to navigate the complex political landscape and find out who stands for what and who is genuine and who’s not, it should also be noted that the Greens’ ‘green’ policies are not so deeply rooted in ideology or values. It was a significant number of people who placed climate change on top of their agenda that organized in different movements which swiftly grew to political parties with respectable representation throughout the EU now. What is also interesting to note is that Greens are naturally left-leaning, and this can be seen in voting patterns in the European Parliament, for example, where – while not in coalition, we often vote together on key legislative issues. And these include not only climate policies, but many other areas, including social policies. The Greens are also usually a natural partner in left-led coalitions in a number of EU Member states. Why did those people did not identify with us in the first place is another matter, but this is a practical demonstration that the Left is naturally and genuinely green.

Regrettably, a lot of the public and media space is still dominated by a discourse too simplistic to correspond to the present day realities. What is called traditional, core behavior of the mainstream parties, in fact refers to their core policies or stances, but using an image of them dating back to the Industrial revolution or the aftermath of the WWII at the latest. You know – the Left cares for salaries and pensions, the

Right about the business, and that’s pretty much everything there is to politics. But while the antagonism between Left and Right, between Labor and Capital is still very much alive and relevant, this is an outdated perception, as the world has been changing exponentially ever since. New issues, new problems have arisen, and we have been using our core values, our moral compass, to apply it to these new issues and act accordingly. So being green is our business, too – this is us caring about the planet and the environment we live in, the livelihoods of people around the world and the innumerable ways in which climate change affects us all right now.

Remember, then, that any time someone tries to frame a debate along those lines, it’s not us being nostalgic, but others trying to push us back into a corner, to the past, away from the concerns of modern people. It’s a reminder also of the limits of the ‘class’ differentiation based on income only for practical policy making and political strategy. In the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and their involvement in the US elections and the Brexit referendum, we learned of the scale of micro-targeting practices, based on thousands of variables related to people’s behavior, activities and opinions. Does anyone still think we can just label people as ‘working class’ and ‘middle

class’, or ‘blue collars’ and ‘white collars’? We are The Progressives, after all.

“

Old labels about the Left and the Right are not applicable. Our moral compass is, though

So yes, red is naturally green, as far as the political spectrum is concerned. In fact, the way I see it, **being green is not an option any more, but a necessity** – everybody should be. But then important differences come into play when taking concrete policy decisions.

The Green Deal – a positive, cosmopolitan vision of a better future

To say that we are doomsday prophets, however, would not be correct. Far from it. We’ve never taken alarmism to be enough, but have committed to doing something about it instead. What we stand and fight for as regards climate change refers to a far-reaching and uber-broad change in the way we live – not only in order to survive, but also to progress. And the global nature of this issue is actually another reason for us to place it higher on our agenda. It would not be far-fetched to say that for the first time in history every state, every society, every person is faced



with a common problem, affecting them similarly gravely, albeit in slightly different ways due to geography, socio-economic or other factors. And socialism has always been internationalist by default, looking for common solutions to common problems, instead of offering to crawl back into a protective, isolated tortoise shell, hoping for the storm to pass (as would be the nationalists).

This is precisely why our green policies and positions are not about going along as we always have, preserving the status-quo or rolling back to some allegedly glorious past when everything was alright. What we offer instead is a truly global, cosmopolitan if you will, concept about the future. One which is urging people to DO, create, build and innovate, rather than not-do. One which seeks to inspire people to take collective action, in the spirit of solidarity against the common problems we face, rather than cut back ties to everyone else and fortify at home.

This is why we have the Green Deal. Looking beyond the concrete policies, targets and finance vehicles and funds on our way towards carbon neutrality by 2050 and 55% emissions reduction by 2030 – it is an incentive and a blueprint to achieve something far larger than our daily accomplishments. It is our vision of a future where we live better, where more people live better, where we produce and consume better, in a more sustainable way, translated into milestones and policy actions.

In the midst of the Cold War, the space race became an important arena of competition. While the USSR was the first to send Gagarin into orbit, the U.S. had the aspiration to land a man on the Moon. In the US in particular, space exploration was elevated to a dream and hope of a nation, which

encompassed its drive to progress, its spirit of competition and willingness to prove better, and at the same time achieve something of tremendous value for humanity. There were always other issues on the domestic and international agenda (including the Vietnam war), but this one aspiration passed ethnic, religious and any other social divisions to bind people together in looking up to the skies with hope of an exciting future.

We must do something similar in Europe today. We are already the best place to live on Earth. And while enormous parts of the world population continue to be entangled in poverty, misery, wars, exploitation, rights deprivation and lack of basic living conditions – and we are doing a lot to alleviate this and inspire progress – we are also striving to further improve the way we do things, prevent a backslide and pioneer a new, more sustainable age for the world. It is imperative that we – and others around us, see this drive in a positive, rather than negative way.

But how? Most people naturally fear any change. The fact is that it usually takes a major challenge, a global scale event, to shake things up enough to force us out of the comfort zone, and introduce real, profound change and leap forward. The climate emergency, coupled with the horrific war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, provides a perfect storm, while also the perfect opportunity for deep changes in economy and society. So I believe this vortex of crises forces us to speed up and scale up our actions, rather than abandon them. Solutions which were unthinkable a few years ago are now an urgent necessity. Yes, it takes courage and forward looking (i.e. more than four years ahead) to take the necessary steps – and not just incremental steps, but a big leap forward. But this is crucial if we want to stay ahead of competition worldwide (we often tend



to forget there is actually a competition with other models of development we don't quite like), if we want to be fit for the future.

The effort to do so has already started in the European institutions, and so have the resistance and backlash against it. **We need to counter the narrative that puts the blame for all the world's hardships, such as the energy crisis, the inflation or the falling Euro, on the EU Green Deal and all climate-related policies** in general. The state of world affairs is much more complex, with factors ranging from the surge of energy demand following the pandemic, to disrupted supply chains, coal shortages in China, and, of course, the war in Ukraine. The Green Deal is the EU's answer, not the root problem – even if you only consider the timing of events. As usual, however, populists single out the obvious culprit to take the blame, offering an easily digestible explanation with no deeper cause-and-effect base. One which is much more appealing than in-depth justifications, which are far less attractive and eye-catching, and are therefore often pushed to the background of media space.

At the same time, the EU has been focused too much on communicating strategies which address specific current problems, be it energy, inflation, migration, etc. While we do need to respond directly to obvious problems, I believe where we are lagging behind, communication-wise, is the lack of a positive strategy to achieve and create something entirely new in the near future. A strategy which inspires and motivates, gives us something to look forward to and naturally brings along the necessary changes and innovation needed to get there,

which ultimately influences a whole array of sectors which would otherwise be stuck in the status quo. The EU Green Deal is indeed such a strategy – if we manage to present it that way. It is a deal on what kind of future we want for our continent, and not only a tool for addressing a set of particular challenges. If we do not succeed in communicating positively, or ignore the counter-narratives of populists, **the Green Deal risks falling victim of the very crises and problems it seeks to remedy.** So We should frame our strategy not towards solving specific, separate issues, but towards achieving something new and exciting. One to which everyone can and should contribute.

“ Amidst a perfect storm of crises lies the best opportunity for Change ”

But clearly, not everyone is feeling engaged at this stage. We must, therefore, find the right balance between leading and shaping public opinion on the one hand, and understanding the socially

acceptable limits on the other. If we push change too hard, the wheel might roll back, leading to even more populists and right-wing extremists in power. We cannot implement our vision and the crucial policies we are fighting for if we don't have the people on our side. The only way to secure the means necessary to make the transformation happen is to earn people's trust and convince them that we are in this together with them, and not against them.

Avoiding missteps along this way is also crucial. When introducing the latest 'Mobility package', which served the dire need to improve drivers' working conditions and ensure a level playing field for transport within the Single Market, we

knew that the idea of returning (empty) trucks every 8 weeks to their country of registration, and drivers every three or four weeks, is not exactly helpful for the environment and our goals of emission reductions. It does not address any social issue, but attempts to artificially redress the lack of cohesion between EU Member States. This needs to be urgently reassessed, if we are to preserve our credibility on green policies. **We should not create legislation which opposes social to environmental issues, and forces people to choose between the two.**

On this quest, like any other, there is an opponent in the other corner – or, rather, a multitude of opponents. The fight with populists and climate change sceptics is crucial. Again, we need the people on our side, as the magnitude of changes and challenges ahead is so big that it requires wider-than-ever participation and strong social movements. Defeatism, carbon inertia, resistance to change of habits, commodities and comforts could become self-fulfilling. But regardless of the false narratives and alternative realities populists are selling, if we do not succeed, at some point, the evidence of collapsing systems will be undeniable. It is then when governments must answer to public and social pressure, or be replaced by it. But unless we win this conceptual battle now (whether or not to pursue and speed up our climate policies and ambitions), by the time sceptics are silenced by the unfolding ecological disasters, we will surely be way beyond the point of no return and our children will wake up in a world much, much more hostile than the one we inherited. So a wait-and-see approach is clearly off the table.

In fact, some believe we are already past the tipping point. While most climate experts claim there is still some time to take meaningful action in reducing our carbon emissions to net zero and halting global warming, Bill McGuire, a leading UK scientist, argues this is just complacency. Most scientists, according to him, are much more terrified by the situation that they are willing to admit in public, perhaps in fear of backlash by sceptics. In his latest book, *Hothouse Earth*, McGuire, a professor of geophysical and climate hazards at the University College London, describes a scourging climate getting worse every year, with an ever heavier human and economic toll, warning that we are going to pay the price for our own inaction and complacency in the form of storms, floods, droughts and heatwaves in the future.

“ Green policies are best to attract more young people to social democracy ”

And it's easy to see why. The heatwave in Europe in 2003 claimed 70 000 lives, and the drought we are experiencing this year could well be the worst in 500 years, with the death toll across the EU already in the thousands. The Guardian recently analysed a database of attribution studies of more than 500 extreme weather events, compiled by the Carbon Brief, to find unequivocally that most of them have been made 'more severe or likely by human-caused global heating'. Still, there are those who don't believe any of this at all.

Who are we fighting, and who are we luring in?

The sense of urgency then also extends from climate action to dispelling skepticism, denial and outright opposition. When refuting false narratives and the twisted reality on climate change, skilfully pictured by populists and conservatives, we need to look beyond ideology. Sometimes the arguments we face are so ludicrous, it is beyond belief that anyone buys it. I keep being entertained by the picture of the republican senator who brought a snowball into the US Senate as proof that global warming is a scam and a conspiracy (it's also why it's better to refer to it as 'climate change'), or former US President Trump, who mocked global warming because of cold weather back in 2017 (oh, and he also pulled the U.S. out of the Paris climate agreement, among many other things). This is the point at which many of us are asking the simple question – surely, billionaires, conservatives or populists (or a blend of all three) also want to enjoy the benefits of a habitable planet? After all,

coral reefs, snowy mountains and remote islands should be key ingredients for much of their side activities. If you have a billionaire friend, please call him now to inquire, as I don't.

But, seriously, I don't think that conservatives are blind to the environmental impacts of limiting climate ambitions in the 'Fit for 55' package, or lack understanding of the consequences of watering down EU's biodiversity strategy, for example. They often do so on behalf of interests to whom they feel obliged. Just a quick check on how those in top jobs during the financial crisis of 2007 found even better employment opportunities in the years after speaks volumes. And that also includes most of former right-wing EU Commissioners, who, right after walking through the 'revolving doors' of the Berlaymont building,

found themselves on the boards of as many as 15 multinational companies. One might say that this is just how the world works, and how capitalism works. Maybe so. But more importantly, it is crucial for us, socialists, to understand where the opposition to progress and transformation comes from, in order to tackle it effectively. Arguments don't always win against interests, and this is why times of such generational crises, when injustice and inequalities cannot be hidden behind false narratives, are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Change and Progress.

And the current one is indeed a generational crisis, in the sense that there is a clear clash between generations on climate change. From #ExtinctionRebellion to the youth strikes inspired by Greta Thunberg, who accused politicians and adults in general of not doing enough to avert a climate disaster, young people have been demanding decisive action, asking those in power to do better here and now. 'Adults', on the other hand, have been more reluctant and suspicious towards major and sudden changes, as they are naturally concerned about... well, pretty much about everything. This is how we adults are.

At the same time, those same young people have grown in comforts, which they now take for granted, such as affordable travel, affordable transport in general, and easy online shopping, which most often involves goods shipped from the other end of the world. However, we see them also as most eager to adopt new attitudes and behaviours, which become the trend and fashion, especially if promoted by popular people. Take for example 'simple' things, like separate waste disposal, bio food consumption, less use of plastics and textiles, or increased demand for goods produced sustainably in general, with lower CO₂ footprint. So we see changes also in demand for more sustainable policies, and this is key to advancing any major change. Hence, it is precisely in the domain of climate change policies that we have the greatest potential to open up to new voters, especially young people, and attract them to social democracy, and also be inspired by them. Importantly, though, **we also need to carefully manage expectations** – both of younger and elder generations, and reconcile the drive for change with the need to act responsibly and mitigate the negative impacts of major changes, such as increasing inequalities, loss of jobs and important public services underfunding due to shifting priorities, to name a few.

Remember, not everyone can afford to be 'green'

However, inequalities and the climate crisis are inherently connected. Climate change reinforces inequalities, and inequalities reinforce climate change. This destructive vicious circle could only be tackled with coordinated policies aimed at addressing all aspects of these crises simultaneously. Because all the crises we face, and all the policies we implement, affect different people differently. A spike in energy prices might seem as minor inconvenience to some, a number change on an account sheet, and nothing more. To others, it may change their whole life, forcing them to choose between heating their home and buying school books for their children. Despite our best efforts, too many people in the EU still live in poverty, and a great many can be classified as living in 'energy poverty'. So **developing effective backstops against poverty is crucial in order to break the vicious circle of inequality**. Despite the magnitude of the European poverty crisis, EU policy action to date has failed to address it with sufficient determination. This is

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Inequalities and Climate change are inherently connected

why we have been consistently calling for an EU anti-poverty Strategy, and have introduced the Child Guarantee to address child poverty and social exclusion specifically,

among other initiatives, such as calling for a minimum income. As we struggle to find our way through the many crises, though, it is less and less certain that we are going to fulfil the pledge made in the EU 2020 strategy to bring 20 million people out of poverty by the end of this decade.

This is why we are the only political movement to advocate and actively promote the concept of Just Transition. It is rooted in the basic understanding that the transition towards a climate-neutral economy should only happen in a fair way, leaving no one behind – because of that vicious circle just described. We have secured a European Just Transition Fund and a Social Climate Fund, among other instruments and initiatives. The national recovery and resilience plans include measures aimed at improving lives of households and strengthening their resilience, such as energy efficiency support, and incentives for renewable energy installations. But I don't think we have yet managed to convince the others of the magnitude of the social crisis and the political and socio-economic risks associated with underestimating it. It is our conviction that **an ambitious climate policy should be coupled with an equally ambitious social policy**. It is important to underline here that

the green transition is by default social and must be perceived and promoted as such – as it is aimed at solving social issues, remedying the negative effects of climate change on people.

It is in no way true that we abandon Labor in favor of green policies – to us there is no conflict, as the two are inextricably intertwined. We take pride in this being our red mark on the green policies, but are the existing measures enough to ensure a just transition for the many? Certainly not. Yet. But this is the right direction. So when you hear us talking about inequalities, don't think it's an empty word – not for us.

Another important aspect here is the **information inequality**. I know of many young people, including my children, who have been fascinated by Sir David Attenborough's documentaries, produced by the BBC (Planet Earth, One Planet, and many others). A world-famous English broadcaster, biologist, natural historian and author, he's been making nature features all his life, but only recently he admitted: 'At the time, it appeared inconceivable that human beings, a single species, might one day have the power to threaten something as vast as this wilderness'. And now his latest works depict not only the many marvels of our planet, but also the critical state they are in, how are they all connected and how it impacts our own livelihoods. Although somehow obvious, he gives painfully revealing first-hand accounts of the effects of climate change and human activity on ecosystems, arguing that 'anything we cannot do forever is by definition unsustainable. If we do things that are unsustainable, the damage accumulates to a point when ultimately, the whole system collapses'.

Now consider this: a vast number of people have not seen Attenborough's movies on Netflix or Blu-Ray – because they cannot afford to buy them or stream them on Netflix. Trivially obvious? Not nearly enough. Same people also do not read major international outlets, which produce quality features both on paper and online, such as the Guardian or The Economist, or Reuters or any other – either because they cannot afford to buy a copy or because they do not speak English. They don't drive electric cars, they don't have solar panels on their roofs, sometimes they don't even sort their garbage – because their municipality doesn't. Or don't have access to internet altogether. With different crises hitting more often than not, the number of these people increases, while this kind of services is one of the first to be cut off the family budget for others in hard times.

So my point is this: consider that not everybody is exposed to the same amount and quality of information as, say, the Brussels bubble, or people directly involved in relevant policy-making or working in public administration, international institution or another entity with strong exposure to global affairs. Hence, they are not as aware as others of the complexity of the issue, the problems, the solutions, the connections. Surely not as enthusiastic. **Quality information is a luxury good.**

Therefore, they are naturally concerned about their everyday problems and the direct effects they see in their communities. They see the costs associated with any transformation, and where we see great opportunities, they see bad prospects. Yes, they also see the heatwaves, the fires, the landslides and the floods, but not the bigger picture, the scale, the magnitude, the urgency.

Also naturally, this is a fertile ground for populism. It's easier to sell 'turtling' there, rather than innovation and green transition. It's easier to provoke anger and backlash, instead of hope and inspiration. So patronising these people would be a grave

mistake. If we are to promote our ideas to an ever broader audience, if we are to inspire more people, **we should lead, not impose. Engage, and not stigmatise.** We also need to be mindful that being 'green' today is expensive, with green

being the new bourgeois. Some technologies have developed to an affordable consumer level, but others have not. Sales of electric cars are booming in some Member states, and so is the rollout of infrastructure, but not everywhere, and not for anyone – again, due to those same inequalities, coupled with the staggering differences between Member States. And if people are not buying electric vehicles at a rate impressive enough for us, it is not because they don't like it; it's because they simply cannot afford it. The same goes for bio food products, which most often are at least double the price, photovoltaic installations, and just about any other good or service with an 'eco' label – as sustainable production is still associated with higher cost of production and compliance.

So I don't think we should put the 'blame' on consumer behavior when talking about the shift to electric cars, or any other transition. Early adopters will always be those with higher means, rather than those with lower income. As policymakers, we should be there to create the right incentives to switching from one technology to the other, as we have been doing with

“ It's time to break the wheel where higher-income users enjoy the benefits of development, while the negative impacts are borne by the less fortunate

the shift from fossil fuels to renewables. With cars specifically, by the way, it was the industry which was the primary driver of change, with manufacturers investing in research and development and changing production lines well before we began setting targets and introducing low-emissions zones in cities. But they would only do so if they see opportunities for new markets and profits. We cannot possibly just wait for the gradual replacement of old vehicles with cleaner ones. We are rethinking mobility in general, with improved public transport, investing in railways and replacing short-haul flights with high-speed trains, all while conceptualizing smarter cities altogether, which provide for a more sustainable way of living fit for the future. That includes more solar panels on buildings, more energy efficiency, more access to green areas, better connectivity, and so forth. An important detail here is the new European Bauhaus Initiative, which seeks to connect the European Green Deal to our homes, coming up with new designs for living spaces which better correspond to the new realities.

While still on cars, an important aspect needs to be underlined here: **if we are to replace competition for one resource with another, exploitation of some people with others, one pollution with another, then this would not be a transition to a more sustainable future, but we would still be trapped in the old injustices.** While electric cars are the new trend, remember that those materials needed for the batteries are still a natural resource often mined and recycled in dubious conditions. We need to be mindful of the whole production cycle and impose social and ecological standards throughout the supply chains, if we are to rectify mistakes of the past. Due to global inequalities, the new exciting gadgets and goods produced, and the resources needed for them, will primarily be used in higher-income countries, which will enjoy their benefits, but the related negative impacts – such as precarious working conditions in production and pollution, will be absorbed by the less fortunate (this also applies within societies in our countries). The lithium and cobalt primarily needed for batteries, as well as other resources, will come from the global South, which is least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions and yet most affected, also because it happens to be home to most vulnerable people. This is yet another vicious circle which needs to be broken, if we are to claim that we are on the course to sustainability.

Doing more with less

Decoupling economic growth from natural resource use altogether, or what some call ‘doing more with less’, is therefore key to true sustainability, because ‘in a finite world, nothing

can increase forever’, as Attenborough rightly points out. Redefining growth from a sustainability perspective entails not only doing away with the insatiable hunger for goods that drives contemporary consumer culture, but a complete change of mindset, where prosperity is defined not (only) on the basis of an increasing throughput and consumption of material goods and services, but also on other factors, such as sustainability and social indicators. This concept has been explored in length academically in past years, notably in the UN Environmental Programme’s 2011 report on the same topic, but little have we achieved worldwide towards changing the understanding of growth and development. As the EU, we have adopted a number of policies aimed at smarter use and reuse of resources in an effort to provide for a circular economy, but we still need a massive investment in technological, financial and social innovation, in order to achieve economic growth and social progress while using less resources. In times when the depletion of some key resources, disruption of supply chains or political instability drive prices up, and new rivalries emerge for new resources in Africa or the Arctic, this becomes even more important and urgent.

And while we often refer to innovation as an answer to any major challenge we face, the EU is still far from what is needed. There are a number of factors hindering Europe from being able to rival The Silicon Valley for its corporate mastodons or Taiwan for its chips industry. It may also be quite a while before we are able to harness the potential of nuclear fusion at the ITER site in France, or for the investments in carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies to produce economically viable and implementable solutions. But what we can and should do right away is a **total revamp of and massive investment in our education systems.** Apart from serving as a universal equalizer of chances, education should also be in the focal point of socialists as a precondition to answering the needs of the new economy, its technological advancements and the labour market changes associated with it. New jobs will require new disciplines and skills taught at schools. Extracurricular activities should be available for children to stimulate their interests, present future opportunities and boost their development, especially their STEM skills. Therefore, parents should be able to afford them. Teachers and university professors should be able to benefit from proper means and infrastructure to teach courses such as math, physics, chemistry, biology, engineering, digital and IT, and all their branches. Simultaneously, we need a boost in financial culture and awareness, and entrepreneurship, from early on. Self-managed educational portfolios underpinned by life-long learning are key for people to adapt and excel in a rapidly-changing economy.

As our green ambitions require the phase-out of coal energy production and mining, for example, **we should be able to offer a miner the prospect of his child becoming a marine biologist, an astrophysicist, or climate scholar, instead of being forced to continue the family trade – simply because there are no other options in the area** and parents cannot afford quality education. We need innovation and pioneering in virtually every sector, in every facet of our economies, and this can only start with education fit for the future. This also requires fighting the notion that technology, or robots, will, by and large, rob people of their jobs and livelihoods. This is not even half-true, as we will need people able to build and program robots, design, produce and operate complex machinery, scientists and engineers to advance nuclear fusion and space exploration, environment experts to preserve nature, specialists to offer innovative solutions in agriculture to a hungry planet, and so forth. The new economy will open a new world of possibilities, and we should be fit for them – globally, but also as the EU, set against other international actors.

It often feels as if we are running too far ahead of others, or even in the opposite direction, which has major implications for the prospect of results to be achieved, for our competitiveness, world trade, and so on. Some – like China, do it by choice, and others do it out of necessity, as a heritage of poverty decades-heavy forces them to jump development stages. There are villages now with photovoltaic panels everywhere, but no access to clean water. Recently, the DR Congo announced further oil drilling, stating that their ‘priority is not to save the planet’, but to help economic growth and reduce poverty. Can we really blame them? The whole of the African continent accounts for just 7% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions, and yet these countries are at the frontier of climate change. As such, we would expect them to be most eager about advancing the fight against it. But inherent inequalities also play a role here, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent energy markets turmoil and price hikes, are also factors to consider. So there are even states which cannot afford to be green, which all the more reinforces the need for the EU to step in with leadership and help. And then there are those, who do account for a major part of the world’s emissions, but their ambition for growth clouds their judgement.

However, I think that **you just can’t swim against the tide for long: global megatrends will always cause inadequate national policies to fail**. We should therefore stick to our course and the EU should continue to be the world’s engine room of this drive for Change, leading by example and availing ourselves of the opportunity to take a lead in new economic sectors. This is also our chance to speed up the reindustrialization of our continent, attract new talent and redefine global supply chains by producing more at home, with higher added value and less resources. **‘Made in Europe’ should not be a luxury any more.** ■



WE'RE ALL
THE SAME
BOAT



ON RADICALISATION OF PEOPLE AND POLITICS

Answering people's discontent with populism
is easy. So we must never do it



In the sea of opportunities, we have been facing something more than challenging weather. A dead current of growing radicalization of people and, consequently, politics. Too many people feel the 'system' is failing them, changes are not working in their favor and they are not enjoying the benefits of human progress, all the while the rich are getting richer, untouched and unmoved by the troubles and hardships of the world. The first manifestation of this frustration is the disenchantment with traditional, 'mainstream' political parties, all labelled as 'status-quo'. As a punishment, the voting behavior now favors radical alternatives, which seem more appealing than any moderate messages. The voices of reason, arguments and respect are silenced by a crescendo of denials, objections, confrontation and lies – because **if you are not radical enough, you won't be noticed at all.**

And populists and nationalists are always there to fill this vacuum and offer a 'solution'. But they are looking for solutions in the wrong place, to say the least. One thing they all seem to have in common is trying to sell a vision of the past, not the future. A nostalgic notion of some point in time when 'things were great' (which is usually false or twisted), some glorious past, usually when the people/state was 'Great', according to established or devised popular narrative. It's a cunning exploit of intuitive shortcuts in the perceptions of individuals, where confronted with a troubled present, any moment in the past, especially if portrayed positively, seems like a preferred alternative.

Apart from the obvious example ‘Make America great again’, such nostalgic longing of a glorious past is easily sold also in Europe, particularly on the Balkans, where it fuels old divisions and inflames new ones. It is self-evident that these visions are bound to clash and would inevitably lead to new conflicts between peoples, as they usually refer to different points in time and overlap with one another geographically, given the history of our continent. Within and between Member States, old wounds bleed anew, mostly based on ethnic, religious or linguistic divisions. This is a threat we should not underestimate, also when dealing with countries aspiring to join our Union. In any case, looking for solutions to present and future problems in the past, or by offering to roll back to a previous state of affairs, in the way envisaged by nationalists and populists, is fundamentally wrong and futile. It can, however, cause a lot of troubles here and now – which prevent us from moving forward, innovating, reconciling, etc.

As people’s frustration and populist narratives fuel one another, polarization and confrontation grow to the point of complete denial of the other side’s claims. On any major topic which comes on the public agenda, we are now forced first to debate whether there is a problem at all – even if it’s right in front of our eyes. We saw this with the Covid-19 and vaccines, we see it with climate change, domestic violence, you name it. There are, of course, a number of other factors, which contribute to this deteriorating culture of communication and erosion of the fabric of societies: media landscape, social networks, foreign interference, etc., but these are rather the techniques. The essence is that left unaddressed, this trend risks escalating to people objecting to any new policy, rebelling against any progress, against their own future. Confrontation between people will eventually lead to sharp political confrontation between political parties, and then ultimately between people and authorities. And this is when things can really start to fall apart for our societies and democracies. We have already witnessed how far this can go – with the Republican supporters’ storm on the Capital following Trump’s call, and with violent rallies against Covid-19 measures in a number of EU Member States. Clashes between local population and migrants emerge every time there is a renewed influx of asylum seekers, and hate crime becomes more and more spread.

This trend has been going on for a while now. Its peak was reached with the term of office of Trump and Brexit. But to think that this age is over today would be underestimating the deep water currents which led to these events in the first place. Radical right wing – borderline fascist – parties, populist and nationalistic fractions still hold significant ground both in parliaments and in the hearts and minds of citizens.

I think the need for policies which work for the many, not the few, and for positive, engaging projects is still there, but the hopes are misplaced. Populists consistently fail to deliver when in power, and most often fail to present any kind of constructive agenda at all. The tragedy is that it takes more or less a full mandate for people to get disappointed and see their true colours, before sending them to the back benches. The examples are ample – from Salvini and Trump, to the participation of extreme right parties as junior partners in EPP-run coalitions in Austria and Bulgaria in the recent past.

This is, in fact, **an original sin of the conservatives, who embraced the extreme right and populism**. Instead of taming them, it was the EPP, which got radicalised or spread too thin on the political spectrum, incorporating awkward allies such as Orbán and Vučić not on the basis of some common values and principles, but just for the sake of power and number of Prime Ministers sitting at the European Council table. This boost of legitimacy to nationalists, coupled with the traditional leaning towards big business and big capital of the conservatives, provides for their disruptive agendas, which find fertile ground in a society already discontent with its political establishment.

While there is a lesson to be learnt here, I don’t think that we can afford to descend to the level and type of narratives of the populists. While the need for a more engaging and understandable outreach to citizens is clear, profanation of parties’ public relations is clearly not the answer. **To race with them in the same track would be a race to the bottom**. We should instead look for more ways to reconnect with citizens, talk to them about the issues that matter – both to us and to them, and engage especially with issue-based grassroots movements. ■

“ People’s growing frustration is channelled into nationalism and populism under the watchful eye of the conservatives



ON GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS

**This is where it all started for us.
And this is where it should continue to**

A primary feature of any democratic political system has always been to vent out conflicts in society and find reasonable solutions favorable or acceptable to most, that the others can live with. We have done a great deal in recent years to improve communication, engage citizens in policy making, empower individuals and interest groups to take action on issues that matter to them, ensure the input of key stakeholders through public consultations, etc. The European Economic and Social Committee ensures trade unions and employers organizations have a say on European legislation. Citizens can petition the European Parliament more easily than ever, not to mention the link between the directly elected Members of the EP with their constituents, where citizens can swiftly bring matters to the EP or the Commission via their MEPs. Most recently, we conducted the Conference on the Future of Europe, which despite the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, was a substantial exercise in direct engagement of citizens. Both national governments and European institutions are communicating via all possible channels on their decisions and policies. So an unprecedented amount of information is out there, coupled with a wide range of opportunities for individuals to have their say.

However, we see continued alienation from politics, falling turnouts in elections, an alleged general crisis of representation

with large-scale swing votes and comet-like political projects, discontent with specific policies and large parts of the population just rebelling against policies and decisions. We saw this with the wide-spread resistance to the COVID-19 vaccines and restrictive measures, we see this with some aspects of the EU Green Deal, we face disregard of the rule of law, shameful conflicts regarding migration, LGBTI rights, women's rights, and so forth.

We should not underestimate these lines of division. In an environment where people have low regard for institutions, distrust politicians and rebel against decisions they deem unfair or unfavorable, the fabric of society can swiftly erode, paving the way for conflicts between groups, and mass opposition to the state, which would inevitably be forced to uphold order. We have seen how far this can go in other parts of the world, and even in Europe instances of violent clashes between demonstrators and police are more frequent. The multitude of crises we face today only exacerbates these trends.

A parallel trend has also been present, though. Where people feel unrepresented, or parties and institutions are failing, or not doing enough, civil society organizes in interest and pressure groups, which at times grow to mass-scale civil movements. Despite being a manifestation of a failure elsewhere, this is

actually healthy for democracy, a self-correction mechanism if you will. It reflects the need for people to participate in politics in general, engage with their communities, and speak up on any issue they deem important, any injustice or any error on part of those in power.

The need for social democracy to engage with such grassroots movements is evident. **We – unlike the conservatives, trace our roots as a political movement to the first trade unions.** Back in 1978, the Socialist parties of the European Community came up with a common political statement. There, among other issues which one might find relevant also today, they highlighted the need for democratization of the economy and close collaboration with trade unions in policy-making. To this day, trade unions continue to be our most natural partner. Moreover, **many mass movements today are centered around issues dear to our hearts** – from the #MeToo movement, to protests against undermining democracy and rule of law, rallies for social rights and working conditions, for justice and equality, workers' strikes, people marching for climate change action, and so forth. The alarmingly low turnout at elections also calls for efforts to restore trust that voting brings about any real change, and engaging with such movements and acting to resolve the matters at hand could serve to demonstrate our abilities and merits. Unfortunately, when election day comes, too many people do not see a credible alternative from what is on offer on the political market, i.e. do not sufficiently identify with any actor, or simply do not trust them to do a good job at governing in their interest. Therefore, we need a dedicated effort to be present, listen to and to talk to the people in such movements, as their existence is in itself a precondition for meaningful action and change. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the US, which ended segregation in public spaces and prohibited employment discrimination, for example, came into being only after years of struggle of the civil rights movement, and this act is seen as its crowning achievement.

Prof. David Engels, an author in whose works the essence of conservatism shines, argues against the possibility for change and reforms coming from above, and by and large spells the twilight of Western civilizations, inevitably doomed to decay. While I profoundly disagree with his views and prospects for our premature demise, I do agree with the need for grassroots movements that can serve as viable alternatives where institutions fail. My perspective here would be different, though – that democratic processes may not by default always produce the best of results to satisfy enough people. We could not possibly take democracy, institutions and processes, for granted, as they require human interaction, which is bound to fail every now and then. Democracy can also come under threat by those who seek to abuse power and capture institutions, as we have witnessed even with EU Member States. Democracy then

needs safeguarding on a daily basis. And this is precisely where correction mechanisms, such as organized civil society, come into play, provided that it acts in the public interest, and is not a hoax devised by some business lobby group (i.e., a very private interest), of course.

Unfortunately, not all politicians have been eager to sincerely engage with citizens – this is how problems are created in the first place. Maybe it's just arrogance, or the perks of power which twist one's character once he starts climbing the ranks. Too often politicians have treated people with a lack of respect, to the point of bullying, 'looking down on them', as if they don't have the time or care to explain as they go along. Imagine a liberal free-market fundamentalist driving a Tesla, who disregards anybody who cannot afford one as simply not worthy talking to and arguing with. Ignoring and patronizing are clearly not the best course. But there is **a larger issue at stake here – how we deal not only with our 'core' voter base, but how we approach those who do not vote for us**, or who disagree or are diametrically opposed to us. Think 'anti-vaxxers' (this commonly used, but abusive term demonstrates just that kind of attitude), climate change deniers, austerity fans, those who oppose the right of asylum, those who oppose the Green Deal, those who oppose measures to combat violence against women, those who oppose the EU altogether, you name it. Many lines of division have been carved through our Union, and yet these confrontations seem to get ever deeper, instead of bridging. No one is convincing the other of anything, we just dig in deeper in our trenches, which ultimately hinders any progress, undermines policies, provides for too many diverging interests within parliaments and governments, etc. It is imperative that we put more effort into listening and talking to one another, if we want to have cohesive societies, capable of collective action and progress.

What **we should avoid, though, is putting people in patterns, pre-defined one-dimensional boxes.** Different things matter to people at different times, as they each have a multitude of interests, and we should be able to engage with them on each occasion – be it global-scale movements, loosely organized independent circles, NGOs, ideological platforms or just like-minded friends, focused around an issue they care about. Some of them will eventually decide to take political action and enter the political system, but most will not. We must win them on issues and policies, proving our worth as political players and expanding our support in the process. Keeping in mind that even if we do win them on our side (or they win us on their side) now, tomorrow our views might diverge on something else. That would be alright – we will just need to keep talking and working together whenever we can. Such an approach, if applied consistently and sincerely, could serve also to inject a much-needed motivation and trust in our political systems. ■



HUMANS

Credit should go where credit is due. So this is us – some of the prominent faces of the PES family, whose collective efforts and enduring faith in our progressive values in the pursuit of peace, prosperity, sustainability and social justice for all Europeans have brought about the success stories of European social democracy thus far.

The S&D Group in the European Parliament, the PES Group in the Committee of the Regions, our Member parties, Prime Ministers, Commissioners, leaders of left organizations such as FEPS, YES, PES Women, the Progressive Alliance, Rainbow Rose and many others, who have ensured both continuity and progress in our work towards more free, fair and just societies throughout the years.





OF PES

**Differences – we all have some.
But some values unite us all.**

Ever since the creation of the PES Fundamental Programme in 2013, what binds us together has been far more than our differences. The PES will always be instrumental in providing purpose and sense of direction to all our entities and representatives, being a connecting platform where we deliberate and forge

our common positions and policies, in respect of particular situations, opinions and interests. Only by working together at all levels and relying on each other can we achieve real progress, so that our policies are valued and sought after by more and more people.





ON FEMINISM

The massive assault on women's rights should not be ignored

'We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantly: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it.'

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Talking about grassroots movements, one word stands out and comes as top-of-mind: feminism. From the 1848 Women's rights convention in the US, to #NiUnaMenos and #MeToo, feminism has a long history. Indeed, a lot has already been said and done, a lot has been achieved in the struggle for personal, social, economic and political equality of women. The PES, together with PES-Women, has done a lot, most notably with the 'My body, my rights' campaign the Women on boards directive and the proposed directive on combating gender-based violence, to name a few. Still, in the XXI century, we are far from where we want to be – in Europe, not to mention worldwide. Serious problems have exacerbated, new ones have emerged and old ones have resurfaced. The topic of women's rights and role is actually still subject to fierce debates, which in itself is appalling and regrettable.

Still, a lot of people are ignorant or dismissive of this, find it even annoying, as they either do not recognize the scale and complexity of the problem, or perceive it as just one of many other issues. They do not see the need for so much fuss about it, i.e. for them this issue is not on a par with other items which they place higher on their agenda – such as prices, jobs, energy or the local news.

Nevertheless, we socialists are never content with the state of the world as it is. That's why we are at the forefront of this struggle. Because women's rights and empowerment is an integral part of our socialist DNA – due to our fundamental belief that everyone should care for one another, and no one can be truly well off as long as others suffer, or are otherwise deprived or underprivileged. And here it's important to stress that as such **this should be our common fight, not just of women.**

We should double our efforts to not only explain what is obvious to us as socialists, but also to demonstrate the links between those issues, between problems and policies, between (in)actions and consequences: how it all fits together. Apart from the theoretical, ideological or human rights-based perspectives, women's role in society has some very tangible projections.

Larger share of women are unemployed, and larger share of women are employed part-time. And while part-time working is a useful instrument to boost job market participation, by and large this undercuts GDP in general, and contributes to the gender and pension pay gap.

Of course, most women stay at home mainly due to the need to take care of children. Consequently, social policies have been adapted to support them, through paid maternity leave, allowances and tax breaks. However, in most Member states, these policies are

tailored towards keeping women at home, instead of facilitating their swift return to the job market, while at the same time being able to afford quality childcare. Moreover, this leads to dire shortages of staff in key sectors, such as healthcare and teaching. Prolonged absence from the job market means men and women of the same age find themselves at different stages in their career. Hence, up the chain, we see insufficient representation of women in senior management posts in business, in politics and decision making.

More broadly, this contributes to prejudice and stereotypes of 'traditional' or 'suitable' jobs for women. Consequently, we see insufficient number of women in science, information and technology sectors, for example. This also has to do with access to education, but even as quotas have been introduced here and there, success has been uneven, and far from the desired state throughout the EU.

Inspiring action in contrast to ignorance is paramount

Another major consequence is on the ability to make it on your own, on independence and self-esteem. As a result of lagging behind in career and income, many women are forced to stay in an abusive relationship, as they are not only emotionally, but financially dependent, making for a vicious circle. They often fall victim to domestic violence. Too many times I have heard 'I have nowhere else to go; no way to pay for my own home and raise my children on my own'. In turn, this has an implication on the life of children who grow in such a damaging environment. The PES has relentlessly called for a Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, until it was finally put forward by the Commission in March this year.

The case in point: all these issues are linked by causality, and their negative impact can be seen in the daily lives of many people. Choosing to ignore such evidence is unacceptable. Because **ignorance or indecisive action is empowering those who wish to see women's role reduced to one of a bygone age**, rewinding the clock centuries back.

In a limited attention timespan, it is indeed difficult to explain this complexity, let alone attract support or inspire action. However, it is imperative that we do, because from what I see in recent years, I fear that it is the women's role in society in general which is being questioned, as a sum of all the issues we've been dealing with: from domestic violence to sexual and reproductive health, from maternity leave to political participation.

And indeed, there is a massive backlash – from conservatives and nationalists, on this issue, which we should not ignore or underestimate. I have seen this coming from so many different parts of the political spectrum that I struggle to tell if it's a trademark of conservatives, nationalists, the far-right, or somebody else. What I can tell is that's increasingly becoming part of the playbook of anyone who adopts a populist narrative. It is usually under the banner of 'traditions', Christian values, 'traditional family', etc. It is part of that **vision of a glorious past that is being sold as a solution to all our current problems**, and is usually found next to 'sovereignty', 'identity', making something great again, dismantling the EU, and so forth – almost the same 'package' everywhere.

What is worrying is that this is taking roots in more and more places – Member states, media, online discussions, political parties, individuals. This is undermining national and European policies, prolongs the suffering of real people and threatens to roll back years of progress.

'Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary.'

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

As social democrats, we cannot possibly allow such a backslide. We cannot leave people ignorant about it, or let women's rights become collateral damage to other fights, such as anti-EU sentiments, nationalism, or the multiple crises we face today. In the quote above, Aunt Lydia's words suggest that the strength of a totalitarian state (Gilead) is not in making people believe that it's right, but rather by making people forget what a different world could look like. Similarly, **we cannot allow any backslide of human and European achievements to become 'ordinary'** – so ordinary that people would forget that another, better world is possible. Where such a backslide is growing, we should resist and uphold our values. Where it is proliferating and taking over, we should rebel. In any case, inspiring action in contrast to ignorance is paramount. Because someone is already heating that bathtub.



And not just this one. In a conservative's playbook, this is also closely interlinked with the issue of LGBTI rights, or rather the opposition to any such rights. A number of appalling propaganda techniques have been employed in recent years to instigate hate, homophobia, dismissal of their needs and demands, and so forth. Again, as this is a fight for political rights, participation and recognition in society, it should not be a Rainbow rose issue only, for example, but our common issue, our common cause and fight. Building on our values and principles discussed at the beginning of this text, it should be clear that this concerns every member of society, that everyone should care. Just as there should not only be women fighting for women's rights, **there should be more non-gay people marching on a Pride**. That would be a milestone to success – not having the need for a Pride or a march about women's rights at all – someday.

Part of this 'package' of targets are also **refugees and migrants, as convenient scapegoats** and external 'enemies' of the state, the EU, the identity, the jobs, you name it – fueling xenophobia and confrontation throughout the EU, as if we've learned nothing from history. True, the influx of displaced people from Ukraine recently proved a different story than the previous crises, but this exception only serves to reinforce the rule. And it is only a matter of time before they too become 'targets' of contempt or hatred. With another wave of migration looming in case we fail to avoid a worldwide food crisis and famine in Africa, we must finally make asylum and integration work in the EU, avoiding fragmentation and other Lampedusa tragedies. The PES family has long called and worked for reforming the now-obsolete Dublin system towards a truly fair asylum system, but despite notable progress this year, we are still nowhere near a sustainable solution. ■

ON MEDIA

In the age of fake news, access to quality content is crucial for making better choices

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.

2. The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected.

Article 11 'Freedom of expression and information',
Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union

In the struggle to uphold our achievements and prevent such backslides from becoming 'ordinary', a significant role is attributed to the media. But media is a domain which faces a number of serious challenges itself: the proliferation of fake news, difficulties in attracting audience and revenue in the age of digitalization while preserving basic ethics, staying faithful to the purpose of serving the public interest and speaking truth to power, maintaining quality while under attack, quite literally, from those discontent with their actions. These, in turn, pose serious challenges for democracies, societies, politics and policies.

Much has changed in the way we consume and process media content. Information is everywhere we go, on any device with or around us, all the time. We increasingly feel **plugged into a never-ending newsfeed, overwhelmed, unable to keep up with everything or failing to make sense of most of it.** On the other side of the screen, content creators are likely also struggling to keep pace, in an industry where you are either a frontrunner or a loser. There is fierce competition for the limited amount of time the average person can spend on news reading. And fierce rivalry for ads revenues, which are increasingly being shifted towards social media.

Unfortunately, **fast news is much like fast food.** You know it's bad, but you just can't resist it. And while in the case of food we have quite a number of options to eat healthily, including



cooking ourselves, in the case of media, options have been dwindling fast. Too many people have had too much of the bad stuff, and the good one is either hard to find or hard to afford. This has already had and will have dire consequences for our societies.

In the age of fast news, it's harder and harder to find quality content, harder to spot a lie or misleading information or unverified claims. At the same time, as news today can have an instant and enormous outreach, the role and influence of reporting has increased tremendously. Large segments of the public make their opinions and form their behaviors, including electoral and political, on the basis of what and how is (not) portrayed in media, which ultimately means their own future. The pursuit of truthful reporting, the pursuit of Truth, therefore, has never been more important.

But the issues we face (in politics) today have become more and more complicated, and so have the ways to mask, manipulate or twist the truth. Shaping a story to some preconceived version that serves a disguised motive to hide truth or facts so that it is somehow beneficial to a particular interest, is usually justified as being for the greater good, a noble lie if you will. I am not

striving for an academic definition here, but this is about much more than fake news. In fact, we face this so often that **at this point I think none of us believes the first version of anything.**

As a consequence, most people would retreat to trusting, and reading, only one or a handful of sources they deem credible. Subconsciously however, they tend to pick the ones whose content is most likely to coincide with their own views. This, in turn, serves only to strengthen existing convictions, cornering the person within a bubble of like-minded others. It is then next to impossible for other, new perspectives and views to penetrate, and any attempt for discussion serves only to increase polarization, confrontation and radicalization. This is most evident through the discussions on online forums, social media and the comments sections of news outlets, but also 'offline', where meaningful exchanges and socializing are hindered.

While in the past this might have seemed as just an annoying feature of the media and the political landscape, the issue has grown to something resembling mass insanity, threatening our democracy and ability to govern effectively at all. Some politicians (and media) have been trying to hedge this, armed with the notion of 'the other point of view', or presenting all 'sides' of the story. However, I believe **truth can never be found half-way between a fact and a lie, or between two lies.**

But don't just think of Trump or Brexit here. The dissolution of truth within a sea of false interpretations, mocking, scaremongering or outright lies dates back to way before Trump appeared on the political world stage, with the rise of tabloids but also established media in pursuit of sensation and hence, sales and audience. And while it is in the interest of the general public to put the spotlight on politicians and their actions and behavior, a considerable part of media reporting, coupled with the boom of online opportunities for discussions, contributed to the alienation of people from politics and politicians. What's more, quite often it altogether took away the notion that 'things are going to be better' or that any proposed change was for the good – it could not possibly be, as any politician was to be distrusted as a result of being portrayed as somehow incapable or un-credible. In such a vortex, solid, fact-based opinions and interpretations became less and less attractive to read, and less and less available. This is important, as media reporting on politics and policies has a huge influence on the choices of people, not only in terms of voting behavior. This is a problem both for politicians – how to gain trust and hence support for positions and policies, and for the public – where to place their trust? It is also a problem for media – with politicians like Trump basically declaring war on truth, and bashing mainstream media in an effort to undermine their credibility.



Unfortunately, this is a new reality that is here to stay. How do we then reconcile freedom of speech with the clear need to fight fake news? How do we ensure freedom of information while also safeguarding national security, for example? How do we fight fake news, propaganda, foreign interference or biased reporting, in the age of social networks and opinion makers and influencers, without becoming an Orwell-style ministry of truth and censors? How do we protect whistleblowers without promoting a totalitarian culture of mistrust and spying? Well, if you expected a one-line silver bullet here – there is none. There are two important aspects though, which I think we should pay attention to.

First, investigative journalism. **Media should be free to shed light on any injustice**, on any public authority or private entity wrongdoing, expose any incompetence, any abuse of law or misuse of public funds. This is essential not only for holding those in power to account on behalf of the public and in the public interest, but also in order to ensure justice and fairness, and assist in the process of collective learning – so that the exposed wrongdoing is not repeated and appropriate measures are taken thereto.

A watchdog on its own, investigative journalism helps make the world more just and fair. Fifty years ago, the Pentagon Papers shocked America in what is now known as probably the most prominent example of the battle for freedom of information. On from the Watergate scandal to Assange and Snowden, whistleblower revelations, journalists' inquiries and leaked documents have been dividing public opinion and setting governments against media and investigative journalism, nevertheless deeply transforming societies, public perceptions, reputations and legislation along the way.

But to oppose media to governments only here would be limiting. In recent years only, the Panama papers, the Luxleaks and the Pandora papers gained worldwide attention by exposing private 'papers'. In every country, local journalists, NGOs and expert collaboration networks have been instrumental in exposing all sorts of wrongdoings.

As social democrats, we should naturally see those seeking the truth as allies in our quest for resilient democracy, fair societies and good governance. In some countries, where authoritarian-leaning governments have managed to secure a tight grip on media, independent investigative journalists and networks are some of the last bastions of truth and impartiality, struggling to have an impact. But this is no easy task, staying afloat against

retaliation from powerful enemies. Media professionals and rights activists throughout the world are targeted for their work and actions, with some even paying the ultimate price, like Jamal Khashoggi, for example. In another instance of controversy, the Pegasus spyware scandal revealed the use of software that was supposed to facilitate national security and counter terrorism being employed against rights activists and regime opponents around the world, including against a fellow MEP and party leader from our family.

Information equality is pivotal in fighting fake news and populism

It is paramount for media and investigative journalism in particular, therefore, to remain free from commercial or political influence, and be shielded against retaliation. This is vital for democracy and fairness. This is why socialists and democrats were actively calling for and supported both the EU Directive against abusive litigation (SLAPP) targeting journalists and rights defenders, and the Whistleblowers Protection Directive.

These are instrumental in ensuring society's access to truthful, fact-based, impartial information reporting. And beyond the search for truth, there is the need for quality: analysis, context, interpretation, extrapolation, connections, predictions. However, providing those is no easy task. It seems like ages ago when we were used to buying newspapers, i.e. paying for content, but with the advancement of the digital age, we grew to have free access to an immense amount of information for free. As a result, media struggled to provide quality content and were forced to restructure their revenue sources, running more & more ads, turning to media barons for sponsorship or leaning heavily towards those in power, who could ensure some kind of support. Even today, when new business models are sufficiently advanced, not many people pay for digital content and access to quality journalism, or donate to support free-to-use projects, such as Wikipedia, for example. The same goes for any content, by the way: from video-streaming platforms such as Netflix, to music ones such as Spotify. Despite a booming number of users of subscription-based content, still, large parts of our population simply cannot afford it. This makes quality information a luxury.

So it would be wrong to point the finger at all those who believe fake news, whose opinion on Brexit, the vaccines or the Green Deal has somehow been twisted or victim of populist narratives. As socialists, **we should instead uphold and promote information equality.** As a matter of principle, we always strive for more people to be able to afford quality services and products, and that includes media content. However, people should also be able to benefit from free, equal access to quality, truthful news and journalism, regardless of their ability to pay

for it. This is pivotal for them to be able to keep track of current affairs that matter, get a grasp and deeper understanding of the complexity and scale of the issues we face today and how it affects them, and therefore make better-informed choices and be inspired to take actions. Just as the right to basic economic services, or the right to accessible and affordable healthcare and education which we promote, **the right to accessible and quality information is a must.** The situation where quality is paid and expensive for too many, while what is free is usually low quality, only further enhances inequality. To break away with this, we should steer people away from unreliable sources. Yep, don't click on those click-baits, you are only increasing the revenue of dubious outlets.

Outsourcing freedom of expression or the defense of democracy to big tech CEOs is wrong

This endeavor is not, of course, without issues. The advancement of digitalization has seen increased use of algorithms, and platforms such as Facebook or Netflix have made curated or suggested content central to their users' experience. Apart from the issues with privacy and the cross-platform use of data across the web (being sold to third parties so that they can better target and tailor their sales), a deeper question emerges: how can we be sure that the choices we make are our own, and what does that mean, actually?

In his book '21 lessons for the 21st century', author Yuval Noah Harari explores this concept, warning that algorithms are robbing people of their own choices and the ability to judge for themselves,

with wide-ranging implications on democracy, equality, future of work, etc. This also has a direct impact on truth, as just discussed. Harari puts it bluntly: truth today is defined by the top results of a Google search.

Zooming out here, this is about how big data and big tech companies are and will be defining all aspects of our lives in the future – as they will, in fact, own that future. Hence, the challenge for us here is to regulate in time and in a manner which preserves the public interest as defined through our democratic processes – before we outsource democracy itself to AI and algorithms. Because to leave this matter to the conscience of those big tech CEOs would be imprudent. I was frustrated when in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal we suddenly found ourselves begging Facebook and other social networks to put up measures to safeguard our democracies. Privatizing this is not the way to go, as we cannot rely on this handful of people to define the fundamental philosophical, ethical, social, political and economic implications of their work, as it is by definition in the private (read, profit) interest, not the public one. As social democrats, we should therefore continue to be at the forefront of content regulation in the digital age, as we were with the introduction of the GDPR regulation (the largest data and privacy protection effort so far), defining the rules to be followed by any platform and enforcing compliance, and not vice-versa. ■





ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social networks are cool, but will not defend democracy or privacy for us

'Senator, we run ads.'

Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg at a joint hearing before the US Senate Judiciary and Commerce, Science and Transportation committees
10 April 2018, Washington, DC

No one would deny the tremendous opportunities and benefits the advancement of digitalization has brought to economies and societies. From online shopping and payments, to trade and social exchanges, innovation is visible everywhere, sectors are transformed and evolving as we speak. However, it was rather late that we realized the sheer scale of possible problems that came with the expansion of social media: data and privacy security, disinformation, propaganda, brainwashing, hindering meaningful social interactions by filtering content to match the users' existing convictions and views, etc. Facebook is, of course, the most notable case in point, in view of the amount of user data its use generates, the amount of advertising and the type of content which can be created or shared on this platform.

To begin with, it's not free. At a Senate hearing back in 2018, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was asked how the platform sustained itself on a business model where its service is offered to customers for free, to which he famously replied: 'Senator, we run ads'. Obviously, there is much more to this. What the US senator failed to follow up with is just how those ads are sold and what makes Facebook so attractive a platform. It is users' data – behavior, likes, interactions, comments, anything they share and do within and outside Facebook, that makes for an invaluable trove of data – big data. We now have some idea as to how this data is being collected, stored and sold, serving in turn companies to tailor and target their ads. An idea we got from the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where millions of users' data was used for political advertising and micro-profiling of people – or 'psychological targeting', as scholars put it. The caliber of Cambridge Analytica's clients – the Trump presidential campaign and the UK's Vote Leave campaign – showed the world just how powerful and wide-ranging an impact can data (mis)use have on politics and democracy.

Of course, most people don't care. Accepting 'cookies' which are deemed 'essential' for the functioning of a website is just one more annoying click, for example. And if their data is anonymized and used by third parties to ultimately allow the algorithms of the platform to curate the content around things they are generally interested in or familiar with, all the better – as opposed to random stuff. Imagine using a brand new device, without being logged in with your account anywhere – it would feel awkward, seeing all sorts of things.

The catch here – **you are not the customer of this service, but rather the product, the commodity which is traded with** – as far as your data is concerned. The real customers, where profit is

generated from, are the likes of Cambridge Analytica and their clients. And you don't have a say in how your data is being used, or how much of it is sold to whom, and for how much. Or what they do with it.

You still don't care. And why would you? The service is still free for you. But here's the thing: it's like you are buying a product at a price you don't know, which changes constantly and can potentially be devastating for you and everybody around you. How so? Precisely because of the potential for use and misuse data has today. An ad of a car or clothes brand you like may seem OK for you. But being deliberately misled and guided into a decision which favors the agenda of a hidden interest – not yours, using the very means you yourself provided – is another thing completely. Multiply by the millions – you now have a threat to a state, to democracy itself and decision making, to public opinion, to policy options, to crucial decisions which will affect the lives of many and the generations to come. It was only when we realized the massive potential for misuse that the general public became really aware of personal data and privacy. That is when most people started to care.

Lawmakers and platforms have adopted a number of measures since then to address this issue, most recently with the EU Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act, which aim at safeguarding fundamental rights of users and establishing a level playing field for businesses (their application and significance goes way beyond Facebook to an effort to curb the power of big tech, which are often monopolies, over users and regulators).

There was another thing we realized along the way. Most people learned about the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal... on Facebook. Social networks have become the primary source of information for many now. A survey in the US found 40% of respondents listed Facebook as their primary source of information. This includes both its newsfeed acting as news aggregator of third-parties' content, and genuine content created by users. So in the past few years we have been struggling with this question: **if it acts like media, if it looks like media, is it a media?**

The answer is crucial to the extent of responsibility such platforms must take towards their users and the content they provide, generate or aggregate. The rules and standards they must adhere to. Copyright issues for third parties' content listed on their platform. Terrorism or illegal content. Propaganda and fake news. False information influencing public debate on key

“ Algorithms create bubbles, which only reinforce divisions and discord

policies. The list of potential problems is immense.

Unfortunately, as politicians and lawmakers, we often do not fully understand all the intricacies and mechanisms behind such networks, we are not quite on the same page as to what problem we are trying to solve, and hence we are slow to regulate. But one thing is certain – **a monopoly is unlikely**

to self-regulate, and we should step in to safeguard rights and introduce stricter rules of the game. Because **we cannot outsource the safeguarding of democracy and freedom of speech to the goodwill of a private company**, no matter small or big. The choice, however, should not be between establishing a state Ministry of truth or a private one. A censorship is still a censorship.

*'If it looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck,
we have at least to consider the possibility
that we have a small aquatic bird of the family Anatidae on our hands.'*

Douglas Adams, 'Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency'

This has to do with another important aspect of social networks – the ability of users to post online their opinion and engage in discussions, i.e. genuine content. Indeed, Facebook, Twitter and some others have provided vast opportunities for self-expression. But apart from the spread of illicit or malicious content, another problem has emerged. The algorithms favoring 'relevancy', prioritizing content you are likely to agree with or interact with (positively, as there is no 'dislike' button). This has created bubbles of like-minded individuals, whose online experiences only strengthen their existing convictions, beliefs and arguments, while increasing negative sentiments towards other opinions. This has fractured social interaction and social cohesion to such an extent that we see lines of division in our societies running deeper than ever. The list of issues of deep discord is ever increasing: Trump, Brexit, COVID-19 measures, vaccines, migration, green policies, women's rights, LGBTI rights... The consequences are appalling: people unable to talk to each other, fractured parliaments with political parties which cannot talk to one another, sabotage and opposition to any policy... our countries, societies and democratic processes are stalling as a result. To illustrate the magnitude of this problem, just remember Trump's call to his supporters to storm the Capitol, claiming that elections were forged and he did not recognize the result. This is frightening.

To top this up, it has become increasingly difficult to fight the phenomena of 'troll' or fake accounts, or genuine accounts whose opinions could be biased due to foreign or otherwise private interference. We have collaborated with platforms in recent years and some measures have been taken – by the platforms.

What we need, however, are universal rules, created by the legislative authorities, to which all platforms should adhere. Rules where we provide the definitions of what is admissible and what not, what the procedures for taking content down or deleting accounts are, etc. To expect that a private company, let alone one of such scale, let alone one that is in fact a monopoly – would self-regulate, or to rely on the rules devised in corporate headquarters is not what citizens expect from

us. This could never work in the public interest and would lack any legitimacy to do so. **Safeguarding the public interest and ensuring a level playing field between**

Creating the rules is the job of lawmakers, not private companies

platforms is the job of lawmakers, not private companies. Remember, Elon Musk committed to reinstating Donald Trump's twitter profile if he was to close the deal and buy Twitter. And Twitter deleted Trump's account following the events at the Capitol only after a significant public pressure. Enough said about private companies and their CEOs playing tzars.

We should be careful treading on this path, though. We should remember that not every controversial or non-mainstream opinion out there is published by a paid 'troll' or authored in some top secret propaganda headquarters. There are real people who do believe the Earth is flat, vaccines kill, Bill Gates will secretly install a chip in their heads through the PCR tests or seeks to control them by spreading chemtrails from airplanes. Or rather, they have been led to believe so. We should address the disease, and not the symptom. There should be a larger effort to counter these trends. It must include strengthening the quality of journalism, promoting fact-checking, raising awareness on credibility of sources, encouraging people to dispel manipulation, etc. ■



ON TECH, RIGHTS & JOBS

New technology and business models need rules sooner than later

'If there's anything more important than my ego around, I want it caught and shot now.'
Douglas Adams, 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy'



Innovation, technological breakthroughs are by definition disruptive – they force their way into existing markets and businesses, smashing competition and wiping away anybody who cannot keep up, adapt or adopt. This we usually call progress, and undoubtedly it has brought innumerable benefits to humanity.

The speed of this technological advancement has been increasing exponentially over the last years. What's bad about this rapid progress is that regulation is usually slow to catch up. We, as politicians, are slow to catch up. It is not before the 'side effects' of such advancements become apparent, or large scale or intolerable for sufficiently large or significant parts of society

that we are forced to take action. This is how it all started for socialist movements. There was already a vast number of uber-wealthy industrialists, before people started organising in trade unions and eventually won banning of child labour, the 40-hour work week and any kind of social rights. And still it was a very long and bumpy road.

We are experiencing something similar today with the digital transformation. It is cool, it provides for new jobs, new technologies with wide-ranging applications, which improve human life in a number of aspects. It is being encouraged by governments and banks, investors and markets are crazy about it. However, we cannot deny that this favourable environment

has also stimulated a certain culture of arrogance within the tech sector, coupled with some Wild-West lawless exploration of unchartered territories, where the stronger survives. As largest companies are located in the US – not exactly a welfare state, an unchecked capitalism and market fundamentalism is added to the mix.

An odd addition is **multi-billion companies' CEOs' obsession with some kind of messianism**. A temptation to solve problems in society at the snap of a finger and a large amount of cash, which is some twisted form of corporate social responsibility. This fits in nicely with the narrative that a private company with enough capabilities can solve big problems which slow, quarrelling democratic institutions have been unable to solve. And that brings tons of positive image to the company. In some cases, it amounts to sort of a personality cult of these CEOs.

One of the world's largest lithium-ion battery-based energy storage systems was built in 2021 in Australia. It all started with an exchange on Twitter, when Elon Musk bet that he could get a 100-megawatt system up and running in 100 days. The offer was in response to a power crisis in South Australia, where at the time the grid was struggling to handle surging renewable power generation and was suffering repeated major outages. Honestly, you can't help but admire the guy.

Indeed, Musk and the likes of Sundar Pichai, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg and Tim Cook have risen to the rank of celebrities worldwide. Their influence now stretches way beyond their sectors to politics and policies, employing thousands of people and driving industries and markets.

But while such success stories are abundant, they have also imposed a perception of tech companies and startups as a new kind of business to which old rules do not apply. As if somehow their proclaimed humanity-scale goals and achievements topped the inherent business strive for profit. As if it exonerates or relieves them of their duties to society and obligation to follow established rules, especially those related to working conditions and social rights. As if paying taxes was an annoying obstacle to their – and humanity's – progress. As if their being so important to stock markets, watchdogs going against them would be detrimental to whole economies. They have become **too big to fail, too big to regulate**, too big for workers to demand anything of them. But certainly not shy to lobby heavily.

What is important to mention here is that to a large extent these **companies became so big precisely because they did not adhere to the rules we in Europe take for granted – social rights and standards**. This is one of the main reasons the US has come so far ahead of the EU in the tech sector. And while we have long recognised the need to catch up in key industries and have embarked on revising some of our rules on competition and state-aid, we should strive to regulate the business of large multinationals, at least on EU territory, and not backtrack on our social achievements – and encourage other countries to follow. **Technological progress must not be at the expense of social progress**, as this would be unsustainable and would only increase inequalities in the future.

Socialists and democrats spearheaded the introduction of the Platform Workers Directive to improve working conditions for those employed through digital labour platforms. We were thinking mostly of Amazon's modern-slavery-like treatment of its employees or the Uber drivers, but the general problem is much bigger. Reminder here: the conservatives then sided with industry to undermine social rights and protections, as usual.

We now know this was partially due to heavy lobbying (the other part is their genuine conviction that there is no need for social standards). The Guardian's recent revelations shed light on

the aggressive lobbying practices employed by Uber in order to secure market access, favourable treatment by authorities and avoid rules and regulation.

Technological advancements, left outside of existing rules, can abuse people, social and human rights, public coffers, democracy itself.

Uber's business model has been subject to controversy in every country they began operations, but mostly portrayed as a battle between the new and the old. Clients liked using the service, unaware of or neglecting the issues faced by the people providing the service. Seeing arguments, rallies and clashes between traditional transport services like the taxis and Uber drivers only served to reinforce this impression. However, it was Uber drivers marching for better working conditions, stronger social rights and better remuneration when they went on a 24-hour strike in London in 2021. Meanwhile, as the pandemic's grip loosened in the US, Tesla founder Elon Musk threatened to fire all workers who did not come back to their offices and wanted some more flexibility as regards working location arrangements. Yes, he can – because they are in the US. We saw a similar stance on the part of Ryanair CEO Michael O'Leary, who refuses to give back what was taken from workers because of the pandemic in terms of social standards and salaries, even though business has largely recovered.



More broadly then, the issues surrounding Uber, Amazon, Tesla or Ryanair prompt for serious and urgent reflection on how to reconcile the wealth-generating drive of the market (new tech, start-ups, new business models, etc.) with the social rights and protection which authorities need to impose on any business – as we’ve long come to the conclusion – at least in Europe, that these are essential, for the greater good of society. The same goes to paying fair taxes where profit is made – another key socialist demand which we have been working on for several years, and only recently bore fruit with the introduction of the CCCTB (see Glossary), for example. This also has to do with the larger problem of tax evasion and tax avoidance, the registering in offshore zones or tax heavens, and so forth. To us, the need for a cage on these business models is apparent and urgent. **Left unchecked for too long, we see them growing too big to handle, and we see them ‘handling’ us, politicians,** as demonstrated in the Uber files.

Which is another worrying trend altogether – that US-style lobby practices have taken root also in Brussels, with big tech already spending millions every year (yes, some of them actually declare it in the Transparency register). And what we’ve seen is not only well-suited interest representatives, but also allegedly-citizens’ interest groups of all sorts, whose positions can be traced back to specific companies and interests.

So all this is ultimately about democracy and we are again called to step in – at least in order to uphold our vision of fair and just economies and societies. On numerous occasions we have already seen that **technological advancements, left outside of existing rules, can abuse people, social rights, human rights, public coffers, democracy itself.** Just as with big data and its use, the cost of innovation in general is often invisible to people, but is nevertheless there. It is crucial then for us to fulfil our role of safeguarding the public interest, and not serve – voluntarily or unintentionally – to advance the corporate strive for profit at all costs.

This is not to say, of course, that technological progress should be halted. Reusable rockets are important. Ultra-high speed trains in vacuum tubes is awesome. 100% satellite coverage of Earth will bring a number of benefits. Mass production of electric cars and batteries is key to the energy and economic transition. The challenges the world faces today require rapid innovation and optimization, and a fairer distribution of the achievements and solutions – both geographically around the world and within societies. And this is especially true with regard to the shifting needs of the labor market, where new types of jobs with higher added value are created.

Indeed, changes are happening at an unprecedented speed, but it is imperative that we ensure a just transition to a new sustainable economy. This means feasible solutions for those who will be negatively affected by the changes, creating safety nets but also new opportunities, especially for the next generations. In this sense, calls to ‘preserve’ what we know, as we know it – current jobs, is usually not a smart investment, but just protracting the unsustainable status-quo, at a great cost. As socialists, we care for the jobs and incomes of people, but more importantly, we care for quality jobs, incomes which allow for decent life, better health and better work-life balance. Thinking of the mining sector, for example, which is heavily affected by the shift to renewables and the phasing out of fossil fuel energy production: these are not jobs we would like to preserve for the years to come. **We don’t want the children of today’s miners to have to become miners in their stead, forever bound to the only possible craft in their area like some form of modern serfdom,** but instead have the opportunity to choose from a range of new professions. Same goes for any other labor-intensive, or low-skilled jobs.

Recently, the Brussels municipality of Sint-Jans-Molenbeek introduced an additional tax on every self-check-out stand in stores in an attempt to stimulate preservation of jobs – traditional cashiers – and social interaction. The aim here is legitimate from a social democratic point of view, but are these really the type of jobs we would like to keep? This is usually not a job you can retire at, not one where everybody can advance in career, not one which pays well so that you live well. And once you lose it – which happens sooner than later, there are not many opportunities to do anything else, based on your experience, skills and qualifications. The same applies to too many other professions which we are so used to.

To simply shut down everything ‘old’ would, of course, have grave consequences, with a far-reaching chain reaction, leading to Detroit-type of aftermath. In his book ‘21 Lessons for the 21st Century’, author Yuval Noah Harari speaks of the danger of creating a whole new class of ‘useless’ people, as ‘old’ jobs become irrelevant, become automated or are replaced by AI. We do recognize this danger, of course, but to us, **a job which can be easily automated is usually not a type of job we would like to preserve and take with us to the next century.** It is usually a job which is not well paid, and, hence, those exercising it are the first to suffer – disproportionately, when a crisis hits.

And we are being hit by crisis after crisis now, forcing us to compensate large parts of the population, which in turn diminishes our ability to collectively invest in the transition needed to upgrade the economic and labor models. This is a vicious circle, which we do not have the time for. Eventually, there will be a crisis, which will be the last straw that breaks the camel’s back – systems, especially social systems, will begin to collapse and we will struggle to provide even the basic economic services and utilities, such as heat, water, food, pensions and so forth: the very systems we now try to keep and improve.

This is why we have been trying for years to break with the old industrial model, and introduce a new one, where people can both fulfil their potential in a high-skilled, high-value-added job, and enjoy a better social standard, better remuneration, better working conditions, better work-life balance. This is not only in the interest of workers, but also in the interest of the economy that we are so desperately trying to modernize, as climate change imposes a great urgency in virtually every sector and aspect of our lives.

So when we see today the conditions imposed on workers at Uber, McDonalds, Amazon, Ryanair or the Tesla factories, we see not the CEOs hailed as heroes, but the workers upon whose hard labor such companies have built their success. Clearly, this is not the way we should go, and this needs to be rectified like yesterday, not in the distant future. And only then we will be able to be credible and convincing towards the public when advancing with new technologies and new transformative policies, such as the Green Deal. It would also allow us to expand our political representation from blue-collars in traditional sectors, to all sorts of working people, also in the high-tech sectors, who now paradoxically identify as centre-right, rather than left.

So before building a self-sustaining city or colony on Mars, there are a number of socio-economic issues we need to resolve here on Earth – so that we don’t replicate them up there one day, which would be a real pity. ■

FOREVER YOUNG

A sincere, authentic and realistic narrative is key to expanding our voter base



Expanding to all sorts of working people, including the jobs of the future, is key to the thriving of social democracy in the XXI century. As our ‘traditional’ voting base is aging and the job market – evolving, we risk becoming obsolete or irrelevant. If we are to stay ‘forever young’ as a political movement, we need to be constantly identifying new profiles of people who would potentially identify with us, what their interests are and where we match. Indeed, the policies we promote match the interests of young people, people in new types of jobs, middle class workers, etc. – but still they do not necessarily realize it and hence do not vote Left.

While this can be attributed to a number of reasons, ranging from old conservative clichés to member-state specifics, from attention competition to populism, there is certainly room for improvement as regards our communication. In terms of political communication, I think it’s been a while now that people have turned away from the traditional, professional, coded and crafted messages, which were devised to convince, say the right thing. Maybe at some point it became so theatrical and artificial, drifting too far from reality, that eventually it became repulsive and superfluous. Too often we strive to (not) say so many things at once, that eventually only we understand

the message. A kind of talk that we use amongst ourselves, but others just change the channel when hearing it. Nowhere is this more evident today than Brussels. The heart of European policy-making has gained a solid foothold in national media and public space in recent years, but the backlash against bureaucratic language is simply overwhelming.

I think people have been looking for more authenticity instead – we just didn't see it that way. A demand for a more simple, yet sincere and realistic narrative. Promises which could actually be kept. Visions which could inspire and mobilise. Policies and decisions translated to demonstrate the effect on people's daily lives. Messages which engage, rather than frighten.

This is, by the way, one lens to look at the success of populism and populist leaders in recent years, ranging from Trump and Orbán, to Le Pen and Farage. Surely, their agenda was and is destructive, selfish and deceitful, as proven on so many occasions, and we profoundly disagree with it. However, there is something to be learnt here: that **we need to keep it real, close to people's lives and problems, admit defeats or failure, look vulnerable even – but remain authentic, while determined and convinced.** I

believe confidence and credibility can be demonstrated without appearing lofty or arrogant.

To stay 'forever young', we need to open up to new people and identify how our progressive policies match their interests

We do have a lot to communicate – as socialists, as socialist-led governments, as the EU. There are innumerable improvements in every aspect of citizens' lives which would not have been there without the EU (and its clumsy, unappealing 'sausage-making'). And when there are missteps, we should be quick and reasonable to correct them. Adapting along the way, changing course, is inevitable. But it takes courage to admit being wrong or finding a better way, and act upon it. Being slow or defiant, however, is sure to be a costly course – not only in terms of money, but also in public support.

Bringing politics and policies closer to people has always been a challenge for politicians, but the need to do so is ever more urgent. This goes beyond traditional public relations, which are usually confined to those already engaged or interested in political activism. Those who make **a genuine, dedicated and structured effort towards community engagement** – a much broader and more complex effort, are too few. Bridging the gap between policy-making and local communities is a policy, and an art, in its own right. Giving people a platform, a constant tool to be seen, heard, consulted, resourced, engaged in decision making, is crucially important for active citizenship

and civil society – and for our political family – to thrive. Those who feel underrepresented, unheard, unaccounted for should not find comfort in radicalism or populist projects, but be able to see an alternative – politicians who care. And this is a domain where our political family is best positioned in terms of traditions and approach, based on values.

Community engagement is also closely linked to social integration – an important aspect of our efforts towards more cohesive societies. It is about how we all live together, the ability to positively interact and connect with others in society, irrespective of background and differences. And it is of course shaped by the level of equality between people, the nature of our relationships, and the levels of community participation. Our political activities already include an array of policies and efforts targeting precisely these elements. What we need, as political parties and actors, however, is a more structured approach, geared specifically towards fostering better, positive relationships and communication between people, promoting shared experiences, supporting people to be active citizens, and tackling social barriers and inequalities. This should be underpinned by dedicated data and evidence to measure and

evaluate the real state of social integration in our Member States. The results – which will vary between communities even within a single

Member State – might surprise some of us, and prompt urgent action, which has so far been overlooked.

All of this is of course easier said than done, but nevertheless a legitimate goal. We cannot leave it to those who claim to make politics 'great again' of some sort, as they usually lack any basic sincerity and integrity. But the need to bring national and European politics closer to citizens is urgent. If we are to succeed with any far-reaching policy or deal with any crisis, we need cohesion within societies, cohesion between people and institutions; we need our people be aware of the challenges we face, but also engaged and inspired to play their part and to take collective action. We need people to have a strong conviction that things are going to be better, that the future ahead of us might be a bit scary, but still exciting and full of opportunities. We need hope. Throughout history, hope has been the most powerful driver of change. And hope can only be rooted in a basic level of security of the present, coupled with a credible outlook of accessible opportunities for the future. We will not be around forever, but **our values must live on, and inspire future generations** to achieve more and more on the way towards free, sustainable and just societies. ■

PHOTO



▲
The traditional PES Leaders meetings have become a high-level floor for cooperation and important exchanges ahead of key decisions at the European Council Summits. The format becomes ever more relevant, as Europeans are looking up to social democrats for solutions and our presence is growing. But make no mistake - behind every cordial family photo, there are busy schedules, rushing staff, hard talks and impossible deadlines.

▼
Frans Timmermans' endorsement as the PES Common Candidate for the 2018 European elections was a pivotal moment for the social democratic family. His first speech at PES Council inspired many, and led to one of the strongest campaigns we have had for years. Frans rallied and inspired citizens not only in the Netherlands, where he spearheaded PvdA's victory, but across Europe, and this energy encouraged our family to grow ever stronger in the years that followed.



ESSAY



Success in politics, especially in 'Brussels-speak', is often defined by ambitious reports, adopted resolutions or breakthrough decisions at EU Summits. One of the biggest successes for our family, however, was our active participation in facilitating the dialogue between Prime Ministers Zaev and Tsipras. The culmination was the PES Leaders' Western Balkans Summit in 2018 in Sofia, Bulgaria, which contributed to the signing of the historic Prespa agreement between North Macedonia and Greece, resolving the decades long name dispute. This was a remarkable achievement of two progressive governments, which was a victory for democracy and stability in the region, but also for the progressive political family in Europe.



I am particularly proud that since the 2015 PES Congress in Budapest, Rainbow Rose has been an associated PES organisation. In fact, it's the only organisation promoting LGBTIQ rights to enjoy cooperation on such a level with a European political party. PES and Rainbow Rose will continue flying the banner of equality and diversity around Europe, against a background of growing conservative backlash .



Stockholm, November 2019. The Progressive Alliance's 'Political Courage' award goes to the former HDP-Turkey co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş, imprisoned for political reasons on 'terror'-related charges, received by his wife Başak Demirtaş.

On stage together with colleagues Conny Reuter, Secretary General of SOLIDAR, and Peter Hultqvist, Sweden's Minister of Defense. Fighting for justice, wherever it's been defied, and defending democracy and rule of law, whenever they are under threat, are the primary mission of progressive forces in Europe.



Europe is too small not to look beyond our borders. Especially when the stake is a populist presidency, marked by violation of human rights, climate standards and democratic values. The PES delegation to Brazil in August 2022 supported Lula's progressive presidential bid and stood behind a brighter, more prosperous and democratic future for the country, and the whole region.



Of all the battles the PES has led, gender equality and women's empowerment must have been among the toughest, met with staunch resistance by conservatives and nationalists across Europe. I'd like to believe we have come a long way since the Action day organised by PES Women and the EP FEMM Committee in November 2017, but there is certainly still a long battle ahead.





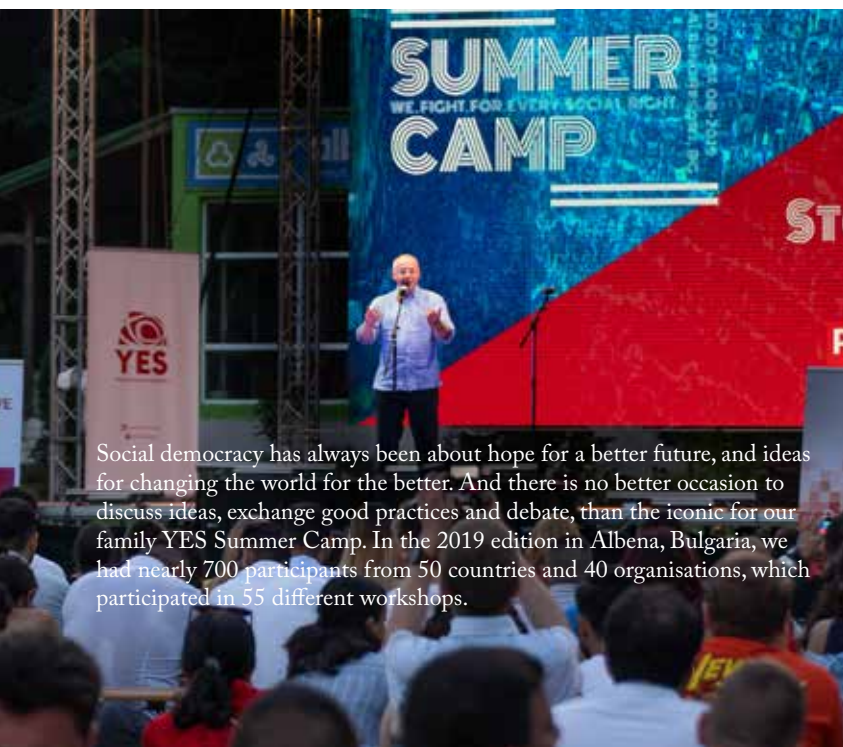
In the wake of the tragic attack on 'Charlie Hebdo', leaders, activists, and citizens stood together in the Paris Unity march. But it was more than commemoration and paying tribute to those who lost their lives; rather a show of determination to protect freedom of speech and the vision of peaceful coexistence between communities and our democracies.

'No more walls in Europe': a demonstration in Brussels organised in March 2016 by the S&D Group ahead of the European Council, calling for a long-lasting common European solution to the refugee and migration crisis, instead of building walls and drawing further lines of division within the Union.

Years later, the struggle for solidarity continues. Despite the good work put in by progressive parties, MEPs and Commissioners, key elements of a fair share of responsibilities mechanism are still flatly refused by conservative governments. The very same governments, which welcomed European support in 2022, when they themselves had the misfortune to face a refugee crisis.



▼ 'All stars' on stage in Brussels, on the occasion of the 2021 PES Council. Central spotlight on the newly-elected German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The SPD victory had marked not only a success for our family, but also a new era both for Germany and Europe.



Social democracy has always been about hope for a better future, and ideas for changing the world for the better. And there is no better occasion to discuss ideas, exchange good practices and debate, than the iconic for our family YES Summer Camp. In the 2019 edition in Albena, Bulgaria, we had nearly 700 participants from 50 countries and 40 organisations, which participated in 55 different workshops.





◀ In Paris, in October 2015, with Prime Ministers and party Leaders from the PES family, we urged for the adoption of a strong and binding agreement at the upcoming COP21 Summit, putting forward 21 progressive proposals and recommendations.

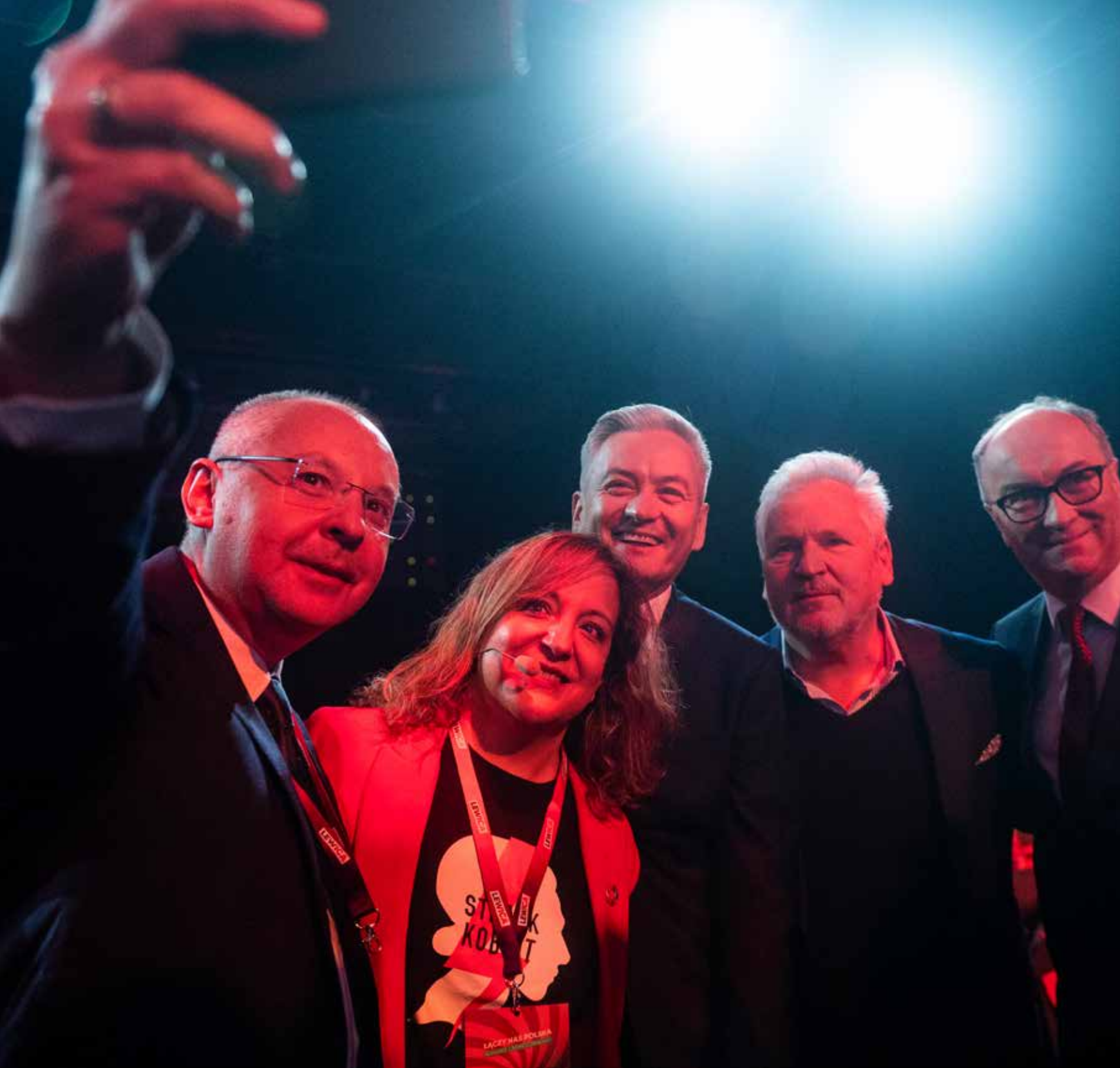
The efforts and appeals were not in vain, as when the Paris Agreement came into fruition two months later, it became the first-ever universal, legally binding climate change agreement.

111 events in 83 cities and 30 countries, led by 49 campaign ambassadors under the slogan 'Act for Youth' – including MEPs, national MPs, members of PES and YES. That is how we mobilised and pushed for the European Youth Plan back in November 2016, when social investment was still a taboo and economic pragmatism was king. Looking back and seeing how far we have come with the Youth Guarantee, the Child Guarantee and the Cultural Check, we can be proud of one of our most successful campaigns. ▼



The European Pillar of Social Rights – the Holy Grail of social policies for social-democrats – has been one of the longest fought battles for our political family. From the proclamation of the 20 key socialists principles in Gothenburg in 2017, which put social issues back on the EU agenda after a decade of austerity, to the Commission's Action plan, translating it into concrete policies, and the EU Social Summit in Porto in 2021, we have been instrumental in transforming EU's approach to dealing with crises and policy-making.





▲ It was a privilege being part of 'Nowa Lewica' unifying Congress in 2021, where comrades put differences aside and embarked on a road together to challenge those threatening rule of law and democracy in Poland. Because there would not be a united Poland without a unified Left.

▼ 2016 was a year of many crises and few ideas on how to approach them, apart from the conventional right-wing bitter pill of more and more austerity, more borders, and less Europe. The PES family convened on a regular basis, such as the High-Level Progressive Summit in Paris, to look for a different, fairer way out, and turn the tide towards rediscovering the social democratic roots of the EU.



◀ 26 June, 2021, Berlin. Back when the polls were still favouring the Right. It takes courage to stand up in the face of a conservative government, entrenched in power for 16 years. It takes a credible progressive alternative to win the hearts and minds of voters, defy all odds, and put Europe's biggest economy back on track with social-democratic values.



At the 2013 PES Council in Sofia, PES became the first political party to lay out the groundwork for nominating a Common Candidate for President of the European Commission. A process meant to determine the next holder of the most influential EU post by the result of the democratic vote, and not through a backroom deal. While there is still concealed opposition within conservatives, and we are yet to succeed in fulfilling this bizarre idea of ours that people should have a say in who takes the top job in European politics, I am proud that mindsets have changed, the idea of accountability has dramatically evolved, and we are ever closer to practice the democratic values that we preach. ▲



◀ Bureaucratic, artificial and deprived of any emotion? Not our meetings. Sincere exchanges, outstanding organisation and friendly atmosphere come across even through the screen and the press release. Always courtesy of our hosts and the hard-working PES staff.

As the struggle against ISIS was coming to an end, in December 2016 the PES initiated a conference in Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan, to explore possibilities for rebuilding communities, addressing security challenges, and avoiding a power vacuum. Shortly after, we visited refugee camps near Arbat only to see that, once again, it is ordinary people that bear the biggest burden of protracted conflicts. ►



Lebanon, October 2015. In the midst of the migration crisis in the Middle East and Europe, together with our partners from the Global Progressive Forum, the S&D Group and the Arab Social Democratic Forum, we initiated a conference to debate the causes of the refugee crisis and the means to supporting the region. A PES delegation later visited a local refugee settlement, which was a harsh reality check for the challenges faced by the countries neighbouring Syria. ►

Today, around 1.5 million refugees remain displaced in Lebanon, including close to half a million Palestinian refugees who fled the 1948 war – accounting for nearly a quarter of Lebanon’s total population, the highest proportion of refugees anywhere in the world.



Addressing the root causes of migration and supporting countries economies’ and local communities is the long-term solution of the refugee crisis, walls in Europe and push-back operations will simply not do.

What we witnessed at the Polish border with Ukraine in April 2022 was great suffering, fear and despair, but also dignity, determination and resolve. People, mostly women and children, are still fleeing for their lives. We also saw great compassion, with people from neighbouring countries and across the EU going to extraordinary lengths to help. The PES maintains contact with representatives from countries close to the warzone. They count on EU support to deal with the crisis. ►



▲ In January 2020, we said *au revoir* and not just goodbye to our British friends in the European Parliament. A sad moment, not just for the UK and Europe, but also for our Group, as excellent colleagues, with whom we had the privilege to lead and fight many memorable battles for justice and progressive values, had to leave our ranks.





At the 2018 PES Congress in Lisbon, together with PES Spitzenkandidat Frans Timmermans for the 2019 European elections, we joined Fernando Medina, Mayor of Lisbon, for a short bike tour. The best guide, and the best way to explore the city. In fact, any European city.

I am often being asked for the most memorable occasions throughout my time as PES President. The March 2017 celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome are certainly a highlight. For much of the past decade, Europe has been in crisis management mode, and not without reason. However, every now and then it's good to take a moment to reflect on and appreciate everything the EU has achieved so far. The opportunity to speak to (more importantly – with) thousands of people celebrating Europe, was a moment I will always cherish. ▼



In February 2017, a PES Delegation supported HDP co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ during their first court hearing in the government-orchestrated political trial against them. The only crime they ever committed has been their political activity, representing their voters.



In May 2019, I was honoured to campaign alongside fellow MEP Claude Moraes, Keir Starmer and other friends from the Labour Party, in what turned out to be the last EU elections to be held in the UK. ▲

Labour's call for avoiding a hard Brexit was not heard, and despite the many common internal and external challenges, the relationship between both sides of the Channel is strained. I hope the winds will change when a more outwards-looking progressive Labour government comes into power.

One of the best things about doing politics is being close to people. It's exciting, enriching, fulfilling and sometimes sobering to devote time to talking and listening to those you represent and serve. Events, campaigns and meetings, taking place across different countries and different cities, speaking different languages.

But what is most heart-warming are the things I find common and shared everywhere I go: the red banners, the hospitality, the same passion for social justice, the same solidarity. It truly feels like visiting family, even if you meet people for the first time. Because this is how we, socialists, are.





GLOSSARY

Some of the things we care and talk about, which people (should) associate with or credit to social democracy.

A

Active citizenship

is about being involved, participating and contributing - anywhere and anytime you can, at any level - from local community to world affairs.

Affordable housing

can be achieved through smarter urban and regional development, and not by building ever-bigger skyscrapers.

Asylum

Too many people need it. Too few provide it.

C

Child guarantee

is a PES initiative aimed at ensuring quality care, nutrition, healthcare and education to keep children away from the vicious circle of poverty and social exclusion.

Civil society

is where we stop being selfish and start to act, engaging & connecting to form groups, unions or organizations centered around the common issues we care about.

Clean energy

is basically something which needs not to be burned. Nowadays also a synonym of 'independent energy'.

Climate change

is real, urgent, and planet-wide. It won't end the world, but will likely make human life next to impossible. That simple.

Common candidate

The unpopular idea among those accusing the EU of tyranny, that people should have a say on who takes the top job in European politics.

D

Data protection

Your data should be your property. So forget about it if you are on Facebook.

Democracy

Too many preach about it, too few actually practice it. Involves listening to others and compromising, and certain checks and balances, therefore found too annoying by some.

Demographic policies

should deal with things like fertility research, gender equality, the pay gap,

affordable child care and regional development, rather than stimulate women to stay at home and treat them like breeding stock.

E

EFSI

The European fund for strategic investments, shamelessly dubbed 'The Juncker Plan', has so far mobilised EUR 250+ bln of project funding throughout the EU.

Empathy

is the ability to understand and relate to other people's perspective, step in their shoes. It's a key feature which makes us a superior species. The lack of it downgrades our humanity.

Energy poverty

Is something a shamefully staggering number of people in Europe experience.

Environmental sustainability

is doing more with less resources, in a manner which does not leave a wasteland and devastation behind you.

Equality

is not about all being the same, but rather having the

same opportunity to develop and contribute in a way meaningful to society and oneself

EU recovery plan (NextGenerationEU)

More than just a common debt. Europe's best chance to channel resources into profound renovation, instead of more luxury yachts.

F

Financial Transaction Tax (FTT) should be the reins of untamed financial markets, which are in the habit of throwing economies and societies off the saddle more often than not.

G

Gender equality

is too complex a task to be left only to men to deal with.

Gender pay gap

Women having to work two months extra each year to earn what men do. The definition of unfairness.

Green Deal

A chance for survival. For ecosystems, the planet, and us.

H

Healthcare

Investment advice: this is the secret recipe for avoiding another health crisis.

Human rights

are universal, and should be defended universally, in solidarity: one for all, and all for one.

Humanitarian aid

Investment where it is needed the most.

I

Inclusive societies

is the notion that everyone has their place & role in a community. Exclusion or deprivation of rights & opportunities goes against the nature of our civilization and hinders its progress.

Information equality

Access to free, quality media content is crucial for making better choices.

J

Just transition

is making sure nobody is left behind when transforming economies & societies. Read: avoid a Detroit scenario

M

(adequate) Minimum wages should ensure a decent life and reflect the true social value of work.

P

Pillar of Social Rights

The Holy Grail of social democracy. The same as profit, capital and growth to conservatives.

Poverty eradication

There is no acceptable level of poverty and inequality to us. Just as we aim at net-zero emissions, we should strive for zero poverty in the EU.

Privacy

Is when your data is not being used to spy on you, manipulate you, or lure you into buying yet another useless thing. Still not guaranteed anywhere, so largely theoretical.

Q

Quality education

Should not be limited to a privileged few, as it is a universal equalizer of chances.

R

Reindustrialisation

Let's try this one again, since last time it didn't work so well for social rights.

Rule of law

You should know what this is. Unless your name is Orbán or Kaczyński.

S

Safety nets

are indispensable, but due to their short-term effect cannot substitute social policies and social investments, especially during times of transition.

SDGs

Social Democratic Goals. Also referred to as Sustainable Development Goals. Or was it the other way round?

Social investments

The only type of investment to be universally beneficial for all, and not for the (pre) selected few.

Social justice

is about equal access to the benefits of society, including rights, freedoms and opportunities.

Social protection

is the notion that basic living standards should be ensured to all. The opposite of social Darwinism.

Solidarity

is the opposite of egoism. It's about caring about what goes around you, and those around you. For no one can be truly well-off, while others are not.

Sustainable development

is basically not living at the expense of your children. It should be the other way round.

T

Tax justice

The bizarre idea that everybody should pay taxes. Billionaires, Google, Amazon, Facebook & Apple included.

U

Unpaid internships

is modern exploitation & should be banned. Such 'opportunities' in New York, Geneva or Brussels are only accessible to the rich, and therefore increase inequalities.

W

Welfare state

Compensating for capitalism.

Women's rights

Are human rights. Also, women's bodies are their own business.

Working poor

are those who are employed, but struggle to pay their bills and afford quality services.

Work-life balance

Working from home during the pandemic reminded people of priorities different from work, more than any policy.

Y

Youth Guarantee

will guarantee you a chance to start in life. Make the most out of it, or capitalism will discard you as redundant.

READING LIST

of books I have found relevant, significant or otherwise inspirational

Books have always been an important part of my life. You know, the hard copy, the one you can touch, feel and smell. To me, there is indeed something special about it and I do my best to find the time for it, having had more than a fair share of reading on screens. Throughout my political career, including one of its most challenging stages – my time as Prime Minister, books have remained an invaluable companion to an otherwise fast-paced routine.

Being a father of two now, I have extended this habit to reading bedtime stories and books to my children – something I believe every parent should do and should be able to do. Not only is it an important part of a child's upbringing, but it also reinforces the bond between parents and children. It allows you to spend some quality time with your kids, slowing down, taking it easy, away from the profane and exhausting but necessary daily care duties. I read a variety of literature to them – in Bulgarian, English and Russian, and sometimes they would read to me in French, so it's a mutually enriching experience.

By the way, 'Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls' by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo is an excellent book, if you want to give your child early on a notion of how successful and impactful role women can have in society.

As a politician by trade, I also strive to keep an eye on the different schools of thought and takes, both academic and non-fiction, on current political affairs and future challenges. There is a wide range of authors these days who explore in-depth the issues we deal with on a daily basis as politicians – not necessarily from a social-democratic point of view. So I thought I'd put together a list with some of those books I have found relevant, significant or otherwise inspirational. One might agree or disagree with the points those authors make, but I think these are nevertheless useful reference points, providing food for thought and reflection.

I hope you enjoy it.

■ **'21 lessons for the 21st century'**, by Yuval Noah Harari
Exploring some complex contemporary issues, and especially the influence of technology on virtually any aspect of our lives, including politics and policies, Harari, like any good author, provides more questions than answers. Nevertheless, it's an essential reading for anyone wishing to reflect on today's challenges in order to prepare for the future.

■ **'A brief history of equality'**, by Tomas Piketty
At nearly 300 pages, it's not really brief, but considering the historical overview of the struggle for equality Piketty provides, it does make for a truly essential read for any socialist, or any other who needs proof that historically, mankind has been moving in the direction of more equality, not less. It's here that the author draws his optimism about us being able to advance equality even further today, despite the challenges we face.

■ **'How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division'**, by Elif Shafak
At 90 pages, this one can be considered brief for a Doctor of Political Science, which Shafak, a Turkish author, is. In a compelling story, she explores the swift disillusionment with social media after a brief moment of hope and excitement, and its impacts on human conversations. Sadly, one cannot but relate to the portrayed notion of aggressive polarization and total inability or refusal to hear another one's story. Beyond stating the obvious, it prompts deeper reflection when confronted with the statement that a growing number of people feel left out, unheard, and are hence not interested in hearing anyone else either. There are some important lessons for us, politicians, to draw here.

■ **'Go Set a Watchman'**, by Harper Lee
The only other novel written by Lee, apart from her Pulitzer Prize-winning 'To Kill a Mockingbird', is a classic in its own right. Set against a backdrop of a changing American South and the Civil Rights movement, the story features a young woman and a troubled world, both going through difficult, but necessary, or inevitable, transitions and transformations, breaking away from the illusions of the past. It is remarkably good at both picturing a bygone era, and being surprisingly relevant to our own times. Both then and now, to sail through the waves of history, we need a moral compass, or a watchman.

■ **'The Rise and Fall of Communism'**, by Archie Brown
Seriously, who would like to read about communism today? Well, first – any social democrat who is consistently bashed for being a 'communist', by people who know little about it, or whose memories portray a grim picture of totalitarianism, but without the deeper understanding necessary to recognize the same thing today under a new label or disguise. This is important, as there are many right-wingers running on anti-communist ticket, who are strikingly reminiscent of those who they claim to be the opposite of. The book meticulously examines communist systems country by country, offering insights crucial for people to know how different we are today. After all, we are supposed to learn history in order not to repeat it, and draw lessons from it.

'The Master and Margarita', by Mikhail Bulgakov

One of the great novels of the XX century. An essential classic of modern Russian literature, the novel depicts Soviet life in the 1930s. Employing a peculiar set of historical and fictional characters, Bulgakov explores in philosophical depth the notions of good and evil, of art and tyranny. He portrays evil as being inseparable from (and essential to) our world (and human beings), as light is from darkness. The novel touches in a unique blend of tragedy and irony dignity, love and many other features and emotions. By and large, the novel is, by virtue of its own existence, a proof of the necessity of art in times of repression.

One of my favorite quotes from the novel is the words of Jesus before his crucifixion: 'One of the greatest vices of human beings is cowardiss'. A memorable phrase for everyone in politics. It is always much easier to swim with the tide than against it. But it is exactly the ability to stand for your views against all odds that really makes the difference.

Our dramatic time, however, opens the Pandora box of hatred and mediocrity. Recently, the National Union of Writers of Ukraine insisted on the closing of the Bulgakov home-museum in Kyiv (the author was born in Kyiv in 1891 and lived there until 1919). This was preceded by the dismantling of a bust of Maxim Gorky in Ukrainian Alexandria, and the dismantling of monuments to Alexander Pushkin in Uzhhorod and Ternopil.

This ostracism, similar to the cancel-culture in other parts of the world, is of course fueled by the ongoing war. Ukrainians can hardly be blamed for not wanting to see any Russian face around their streets. But it also demonstrates how deep the madness of war can descend.





SERGEI STANISHEV

PES PRESIDENT 2011 – 2022

Sergei Stanishev was the President of the Party of European socialists between 2012 and 2022. A current Member of the European Parliament, he served as Prime Minister of Bulgaria between 2005 and 2009, and Leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party between 2001 and 2014. He was Member of Parliament in Bulgaria from 2001 to 2014.

Stanishev obtained a PhD in History in 1994 from the Moscow State University (back in the times when it was still cool). He was also a Visiting Fellow in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1999-2000.

During his term as Prime Minister, Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007

Led by Stanishev, the BSP won the general elections in 2005 and the presidential elections in 2006, and led two coalition governments in 2005-2009 and 2013-2014

Proposed the PES European Youth Plan (comprising the European Youth guarantee, the Child guarantee and the Cultural check)

Authored a book titled 'Because we are socialists'

