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## The progressive Europe we want

The history of European integration has been marked by many troubles, twists and turns. There has been no shortage of cliffhangers and ‘turning points’. But, against all the odds, the Community has always been able to persevere. So, although it is hard to argue that any crisis is a positive phenomenon, for the EU each crunch has resulted in a new opening. That makes these formative moments when ‘impossible’ becomes ‘doable’.

This tendency to sinusoidal development (from crisis to crisis) has become a sort of predisposition to European integration. Therefore, it seems legitimate to wonder how it manifested itself in the last two years. Undoubtedly, the turmoil that the EU has undergone has been multifaceted. The spread of the pandemic and its consequences, the war at its doorstep and the consequences this has already triggered, and the energy and cost-of-living crises have all been profound ‘game changers’. So much so that they overshadow all the previous preoccupations about the EU’s future, which in the preceding years and after Brexit had a somewhat ‘existential’ note to them.

Consequently, instead of asking *if* the EU should play a greater role, the question was *how* it should act to be most effective. The sense of togetherness came from the conviction that, jointly, the member states could achieve more. So, even if there were some centrifugal tendencies, especially in the second half of 2022, they have been consequently defeated. And this created a very different mood from the one around the financial crash of 2008. The sense of urgency, necessity and responsibility enabled some important compromises. They paved the way to the largest and most ambitious ever modernisation plan. The latter was labelled as “Next-GenerationEU” and was an expression of a joint aspiration for a stronger, more cohesive and modernised EU. As Pedro Sánchez, the Prime Minister of Spain, underlined when speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos:

Clearly, the last couple of years have not been easy for the European project [...]. However, the bigger the challenge, the more resolute our reaction. Throughout these trying times, we always went for further integration. To unite, and not to divide. To make our common project, Europe, stronger.<sup>1</sup>

1 Sánchez, P. (2022) “Sánchez calls for European unity at Davos 2022 - says ‘Spain will do its part’”. World Economic Forum, 24 May 2022.

And, to that end, while remaining together was relevant to increase the odds of fighting the pandemic and providing the path to recovery, it has proved equally, or even more, relevant when facing the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its consequences for the EU. Sanna Marin, the Prime Minister of Finland, captured it well during her speech in the European Parliament in September, underlining that this was not only about an ability to act in sync but also about the capacity to do so swiftly. What she said was that “Europe and the western world have acted decisively and consistently. Unity is our greatest strength”.<sup>2</sup>

## Building back better

Since the *building back better* agenda has been about *recovery and resilience*, and not a simple reconstruction, there have been several binding targets set. They served as criteria for the member states, each of which had to come up with a national plan, to be eligible to receive recovery and resilience facility (RRF) funds. They had to meet the requirements within the fields of just transition and greening of economies; digitalisation; reform of public administration, social services and public goods provision; and rule of law and democratic standards. Each plan would then be evaluated, and only upon the positive recommendation of the European Commission, with Council agreement, were the first payments released. This reflected the logic that the process goes beyond crisis management and aims to set fundamentals for a different Europe in the long term. The European leaders followed their motto: *even in exceptional times, we are determined to work for a better Europe*.<sup>3</sup>

The Next-GenerationEU was therefore a joint commitment, whereby essential elements of it were the member states’ individual efforts to contribute to a common modernisation process. While setting common standards and providing means, it would enable each of them to craft the most adequate action plan. It served as an incentive, which, for example, for Spain, would be a catalyst for the following: “we are going to pay special attention to the field of digitalisation, where Spain has a lot to learn from Finland, taking advantage of the framework and opportunities offered by the European funds, the *next* generation funds”.<sup>4</sup>

The Next-GenerationEU has been incomparably ambitious, and it has a fair chance of succeeding as a modernising agenda, since it is not a stand-alone programme. There were a number of other accompanying initiatives launched in parallel. There have been parallel efforts made in the social dimension (visible through the Social Summit, the Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) mechanisms and others), important legislation passed regarding the European Green Deal (including here the Fit for 55 package) and serious debate about the institutional aspects (within the Conference on the Future of

2 Marin, S. (2022) “Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s speech at the European Parliament on 13 September 2022”.

3 Ibid.

4 Marin, S. and P. Sánchez (2022) “Joint appearance by the President of the Government of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Finland, Sanna Marin, before the media at Moncloa Palace”. 26 January.

Europe, CoFoE). One could conclude that altogether they contributed to a decisive leap forward, which was undoubtedly induced by the Covid-19 crisis. António Costa, the Prime Minister of Portugal, observed that „this crisis had the capacity to unblock a subject that had been dragging for years”.<sup>5</sup> The question remains though about how far it really has been the awaited historical turning point. Was this a new opening to give European integration a totally fresh, long-awaited trajectory?

## At the dawn of the new beginning

Pondering if the crossroads have been passed or if, in fact, the EU is just at them is not a matter of indulging in philosophical curiosity. Assessing the state of play is, in this case, about defining expectations and possibilities. And for this, it is essential to take another look at the political map of Europe, which has changed vastly since the beginning of 2020.

The first observation is that the forces which induce centrifugal tendencies are growing in strength again. The results of recent elections in Italy and Sweden are reasons for concern. But so is the audacity of the reconfirmed Hungarian regime, which has been attempting to block decisions requiring unanimity, such as another aid package for Ukraine. It instrumentalised a veto to leverage the country's bargaining power when it comes to disputes around cohesion and RRF funds. This sadly encouraged the government in Warsaw to do the same to get tougher in its aggressive anti-German narrative. The latter may be yet another smokescreen to the truculent approach towards the EU, of which demands regarding the restoration of the rule of law remain neglected. These are just a few examples of the issues, which have been corrosive. While, as mentioned before, these kinds of behaviours have been tempered in the midst of the pandemic, now they suggest that there is no longer the prevailing mood of *we are in this together*. And that is worrying.

It is true that the countries with right-wing radicals and authoritarian forces in government may not have the power to reverse those decisions made during the pandemic and the first months of the war in Ukraine. But, at the same time, they can provide obstacles on the path ahead. They will continue to dispute rules and values, which causes conflicts and further fallouts. It will cause a situation in which some states will lag, as it starts being the case for those upon whom the conditionality mechanisms have been applied. They are not benefitting from the RRF, which undermines their respective recovery plans. This will hinder political, economic and social cohesion.

Secondly, the reinforcement of right-wing radicals and authoritarian parties means a change in the dynamics of political competition, especially since there has been an apparent crisis of the centre right.<sup>6</sup> It derives partially from fatigue with the respective Christian democratic and conservative parties, who had been the dominant governing force in the EU. But it also

5 Costa, A. and P. Sánchez (2022) "European Council acknowledges Spain and Portugal's energy specificity". *Republica Portuguesa, XXII Governo*, 30 March.

6 Wolkenstein, F. (2022) "Christian Europe redux". *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 27 July. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.13400

adds to the effects they have been exposed to amid the crisis of the traditional parties. Thus, the space for the centre right has shrunk – especially since in some countries there has also been a revival of liberal forces. Experiments to move to the right did not work, as radicalism estranged more moderate conservative voters in several countries. The only result has been that it has fuelled tension between the centre right and the radical right, which has seen several outbursts inside the European Parliament. To that end, there is an ongoing fight about the primacy on the right side of the political scene, the outcomes of which will determine the potential for reinforcement for euroscepticism and anti-Europeanism.

This tectonic shift is most relevant for the centre left, which has been gradually overcoming its own predicament. For progressives, the struggle on the opposite side of the aisle means that there is another kind of political adversary, which they have a moral duty to fight. Stefan Löfven, former Prime Minister of Sweden and recently elected Party of European Socialists (PES) president, said in his PES Congress speech:

It is a frightening development we see in the world around us. And the history of Europe teaches us with brutal clarity what happens when democracy and human dignity are curtailed. The labour movement has always been right-wing extremist main adversary. So are we now.<sup>7</sup>

## The return of the social democrats

Realising the change in the political map also means that questioning where the EU is in its search for a future trajectory becomes central to the strategy for progressives. As a political force returning and being again entrusted with governing responsibilities, they need to ponder how far they desire to go and if they can turn their new numbers into the potential to allow them to change Europe.

There were several moments in the 2000s and 2010s when it wasn't the movement's affinity that guided the respective progressive prime ministers' actions. An example of that was the quick support for Barroso to become the European Commission's president in 2009. But this time seems very different. Aside from declarations within the framework of the PES pre-Council meetings, there have been several meaningful bilateral exchanges between respective social democratic prime ministers. One such meeting was the visit of Sanna Marin to Madrid in January 2022. At the press conference, Sánchez stated:

[...] the European Council gives us many occasions to be able to talk about Finland and Spain, but there are really few opportunities like today's, to be able to sit down and talk about our bilateral agenda, to discuss both this bilateral relationship and the intense European agenda and the enormous challenges ahead of us in depth.<sup>8</sup>

7 Löfven, S. (2022) "Speech as president of the Party of European Socialists (PES)". PES Congress, Berlin, 15 October.

8 Marin, S. and P. Sánchez (2022) "Joint appearance by the President of the Government of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Finland, Sanna Marin, before the media at Moncloa Palace". 26 January.

He added that the bilateral exchanges:

[...] also reaffirm our Europeanist conviction. We are both governments led by the social democratic family, which, I believe, reinforces the new political direction that citizens in Europe and elsewhere in the world are taking in choosing different solutions to the crisis resulting from the pandemic, logically based on dignity and justice.<sup>9</sup>

Another example that depicts the relevance given to the bilateral cooperation between social democrats was the visit that Olaf Scholz, the incumbent German Chancellor, paid in January 2022 to Pedro Sánchez. It was almost immediately after the successful federal elections. Evidently, there was a lot of symbolism in that as well, to recall the traditionally close cooperation between the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE), and the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), since the times of Felipe González and Willy Brandt. These were, of course, the times of the social democratic giants, who jointly and decisively shaped the trajectory of European developments. At the press conference that followed in Madrid, Sánchez stated:

If the past has shown us anything, it is that Spain and Germany have achieved great things when we have worked hand in hand. We are more than the sum of the two countries, and so today we are putting this harmony at the service of a greater ambition for the European Union. Chancellor Scholz and I have noted that today we are entering a new phase in our cooperation at the European level.<sup>10</sup>

What is interesting is that, at the conference, a journalist asked if it was meaningful that this was a meeting of two social democrats. Sánchez replied:

I would like to recall when Chancellor Scholz was a candidate for the chancellorship we were at a meeting of the Party of European Socialists in Berlin, and I remember one of the things he said at that meeting, which has been one of his main messages throughout the election campaign in Germany. When citizens want respect and dignity in their lives, they always look to social democracy. And I believe that the revolution of respect, of dignity, is the great pending revolution on the European continent and undoubtedly in Spain.<sup>11</sup>

The sentiment expressed by Sánchez was echoed by Scholz, but also became a driver for all the progressive prime ministers. Their conclusion, indeed, was that this was the time for them to assume historical responsibility. This wouldn't be the first time: for example, in the 1979 campaign, Willy Brandt spoke about "delivering on the hopes entrusted in us in Europe". But recovering this sense of duty was this time paired with a confidence that they were able to rise to the occasion and ensure the primacy of social democracy for Europe. In the second half of the year, Stefan Löfven explained this as follows:

I believe that in times of crisis, it becomes even more obvious for more people that the answer to our great political challenges is the social democratic ideas of equality,

9 Ibid.

10 Sánchez, P. and O. Scholz (2022) "Joint media appearance of the President of the Government of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Olaf Scholz, at Moncloa Palace". 17 January.

11 Ibid.

solidarity and community. No one is strong on their own. We social democrats, we know that, we have known that for a long time.<sup>12</sup>

What was also different than before was that, this time, social democrats did not give in to determinism. They did not believe that the circumstances would simply make the political pendulum further swing in their direction. They had the ambition to shape the events, instead, and actually conduct politics at the European level. In 2022, there were several examples and statements that left no doubt about this – with the most prominent of them being, perhaps, the lecture delivered by Olaf Scholz in Prague in September. But where one can find a very bold manifestation of the commitment to make a difference was in a speech given by Sanna Marin in September to the European Parliament. The Finnish prime minister said:

European cooperation is a success story. We can see it in the desire of ever more European nations to become members of our democratic community. Yet Europe is not a monolith. The integration of the Union will not stop but will change constantly. We must become better, bolder and even more capable. The efficient functioning of the European Union is ultimately a question of political will.<sup>13</sup>

## The roots of the grand ambition

The goal to ensure the primacy of progressive ideas over European integration required coming up with a vision for the future. Inside the EU, there was a feeling that the CoFoE delivered many results, as a process that enabled participatory democracy at the EU level, and coming to a close with a clearer understanding of what the citizens expect from the Union. There were, as noted, several important initiatives and political decisions taken, which undoubtedly enabled a leap forward. But what was absent was the setting of a new horizon. And this is what progressives, among others, have embarked on trying to do.

In April, Enrico Letta, then secretary general of Partito Democratico, published an important piece in the *Corriere della Sera*. He argued that accepting the Ukrainian application for membership by the EU would be an act of historical significance. It was a recognition of Ukrainian citizens' rights to self-determination, but also a manifestation of strength from the side of the Community.<sup>14</sup> For Letta, although it opened the door to other Eastern countries *with the same ambition*, it should have not been confused with offering a fast track. The process ahead was still to be demanding and complex, and it would have to be conducted with a view on the impact that it would have on both accession countries and the EU itself. Consequently, for Letta, the momentum looked different than in 1989,

12 Löfven, S. (2022) "Speech as president of the Party of European Socialists (PES)". PES Congress, Berlin, 15 October.

13 Marin, S. (2022) "Prime Minister Sanna Marin's speech at the European Parliament on 13 September 2022".

14 Letta, E. (2022) "A European Confederation: A common political platform for peace". *The Progressive Post*, 25 April.

as the mood was different as well. Four decades ago, enthusiasm and idealism *may have taken the focus away from the practical implications*. Richer with the experience of what happened afterwards, Europe should proceed with more caution now. Letta wrote that, while the time now seemed to prompt *great promises and expectations*, the reservations of different natures shouldn't be downplayed. Therefore, his proposal was that of the *creation of a European Confederation*.

According to Letta, a European Confederation would consist of 27 EU members plus Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. This would enable closer cooperation of 36 partners, while, in parallel, the premises of the enlargement process and the need for the applicants to fulfil their obligations would stay the same. In other words, it would become a space to define shared global strategies *starting with the defence of peace and security, the promotion of a fair and sustainable development model, and the fight against climate change*. The decisions within the confederation would be taken by a leaders' summit, the meetings of which would follow those of the European Council.

Enrico Letta published his text when other stakeholders also wondered about possible scenarios for Europe. The shared concern was that the EU in its current shape could no longer fulfil its mission, regarding safeguarding peace and security. And though there have been many statements in solidarity with Ukraine, and the debate on future enlargements was back in the spotlight, there was hesitation about each aspect of it. This is also what prompted Emmanuel Macron, who in 2022 stood for re-election in a tough presidential race, to formulate some proposals himself. Macron has always been an outspoken pro-Europeanist, which was one of his competitive advantages in the campaign. He has been heavily involved in reshaping the agenda of EU liberals, who inside the European Parliament rebranded themselves as a consequence of his party joining after 2019. What undoubtedly added to Macron's challenge was the fact that, following the 2021 general elections in Germany, there was a change in the seat of a chancellor and questions were asked about the future of the Franco-German tandem.

Seizing the moment after his re-election, Macron went to the closing ceremony of the CoFoE in Strasbourg on 9 May 2022 and used that as an opportunity to propose the creation of *the European Political Union*.<sup>15</sup> He argued that this is not a substitute for enlargement, but can facilitate cooperation in the name of peace, stability and prosperity. And for that reason, he also hoped to include the UK and Switzerland within it. Adequately to the circumstances in which it was delivered, the speech was brief – but even so, one could notice that not much focus was offered to the other geopolitical aspects.

Immediately after, Macron boarded a plane and flew to Berlin to meet with Chancellor Scholz for the first official trip of his mandate. This stirred some excitement, especially since news about the SPD's electoral gain had been received with overwhelming enthusiasm earlier, and for social democrats elsewhere, Berlin became an informal reference point

15 Macron, E. (2022) "Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe". French Presidency of the European Union, 9 May.

again. Echoes of that sentiment can be heard, for example, in the acceptance speech of Stefan Löfven at the PES Congress, who said: “It’s an honour to be elected PES president 30 years after we were founded. And to be that in Berlin, in Germany, also under the hosting of a German social democratic chancellor is something special”.<sup>16</sup>

The Scholz-Macron meeting was summarised in a press conference. The chancellor expressed his appreciation for the honour of hosting Macron’s first foreign trip on the Europe Day. He remarked that “German-French partnership and friendship were more important than ever”, also as “a foundation stone, [...] a driving force and source of inspiration for the European project and the future of Europe”. Scholz promised that the two would continue to “do their bit” to strengthen “a European Union which stands for peace and freedom, for democracy and the rule of law, which can assert itself and stands shoulder to shoulder with the countries who share our values”.<sup>17</sup> But no comment was made in support of the European Political Union idea and, instead, there was a pledge made towards the Western Balkans. Both the chancellor and the president emphasised that they “stood by (their) promise of membership”.

The ideas presented in spring saw a follow-up in the autumn. There was an anticipation that the Prague Summit could be the first meeting of the European Political Union, even if there was no formal process to consolidate the new structure. The clock was running, especially since the war in Ukraine kept evolving and having a set of impacts on the EU and its economy. The energy crisis was among the reasons why it was also necessary to consider a great many aspects of the post-Brexit EU-UK relationship. But also, the geopolitical rationale required thinking about *greater Europe*. Social democrats felt that they needed to come forward with more complex answers, and so they did when Sanna Marin addressed the European Parliament, Olaf Scholz held a lecture at the Charles University in Prague and the Congress of the Party of European Socialists took place.

Of these three, it was the German chancellor’s speech that received incomparably the most attention. Firstly, there was still the expectation to hear what the new direction for Europe looks like from the German perspective. Secondly, Scholz himself was recognised for his work for the EU, which he delivered in his previous ministerial capacity. Illustrative of this were the words of Pedro Sánchez, who welcomed Scholz in Madrid, saying “I would [...] like to congratulate you, chancellor, and thank you for the pro-European commitment you have shown over the years and which, I am convinced, you will continue to show in the years to come”.<sup>18</sup> Hence, what Scholz would have to say would matter a great deal.

16 Löfven, S. (2022) “Speech as president of the Party of European Socialists (PES)”. PES Congress, Berlin, 15 October.

17 Macron, E. (2022) “Standing up for each other and for Ukraine”. Berlin, 9 May.

18 Sánchez, P. and O. Scholz (2022) “Joint media appearance of the President of the Government of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Olaf Scholz, at Moncloa Palace”. 17 January.



## For a geopolitical Europe

Thus, Olaf Scholz's lecture was prepared from every possible aspect. The choice of Prague and Charles University was symbolic: the chancellor recognised the place as being at the crossroads between west and east, where diverse traditions intertwine. This introduction, which was rich in references to the good and bad events of the past, was, however, focused on a vision for the future. Scholz announced in the introduction that he was there "to talk to you about the future, about our future, which I believe can be summarised in a single word: Europe. [...] This is about our future, which is called Europe. That Europe is being challenged today as never before".<sup>19</sup> And though the phrasing left a lot of space for interpretation, one possibility was that he would attempt a new kind of approach – building on, but going beyond, what has been known as *Ostpolitik*. This already made the speech ground-breaking.

There was, of course, a reason why Scholz used so many references to the past, which go beyond the style that is rather typical for German speakers from the centre left. They were used to underline the proud legacy of the European project and the current responsibilities to preserve its unity. He underlined that, at that moment, new kinds of demarcation lines were being drawn and that *the dividing line will run between this free Europe and a neo-imperialist autocracy in the future*. In that context, he recalled that

[this] united Europe was born as a peace project within Europe. Its objective was to ensure that war never broke out again between its member states. Today, it is up to us to continue to develop this promise of peace – by enabling the European Union to safeguard its security, its independence, and its stability also in the face of challenges from without. That is Europe's new peace mission.<sup>20</sup>

And this is what brought him to a specific vision regarding further enlargements: "Our Europe is united in peace and freedom and is open to all European nations who share our values. Above all, however, it is an active rejection of imperialism and autocracy".<sup>21</sup>

These few sentences point to an understanding that the EU must do both: become stronger and grow larger; these two are co-dependent. There must be more cooperation to ensure strategic autonomy, as there must also be an openness to work with different partners to ensure the primacy of the ideas of peace and democracy globally. But there Scholz insisted on a need to change the parameters of cooperation. It shouldn't be driven by short-term gains. Instead, it must be underpinned by shared values. For him, the latter are not abstract concepts, but the core of *new realpolitik*. This he explained as follows:

*Realpolitik* in the 21st century does not mean putting values on the back burner or sacrificing partners on the altar of lazy compromises. *Realpolitik* must mean involving

19 Scholz, O. (2022) "Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, on Monday 29th August 2022".

20 Ibid.

21 Scholz, O. (2022) "Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, on Monday 29th August 2022".

friends and partners with shared values and supporting them in order to be strong in global competition through cooperation.<sup>22</sup>

This ideological reasoning is where the chancellor also embedded the answer to President Macron's proposal. This was the first time he addressed the question of the *European Political Community* more broadly, explaining that his understanding was that it would be a step towards forming a strategic, values-driven alliance. This would be an added value to the existing structures, as it can be a space for a

regular exchange at the political level – a forum in which we heads of state and government of the EU and our European partners meet once or twice each year to discuss the key issues that affect our continent as a whole, such as security, energy, the climate and connectivity.<sup>23</sup>

This understanding made the European Political Community appear as just one of the tools in a larger toolbox. It could serve a specific purpose, but in Scholz's very definitive opinion, it could never be an alternative to enlargement. He believed that the EU had made a promise to Western Balkans, and not only should the EU keep it but, even more importantly, act upon it. He pledged, "I'm committed to the enlargement of the European Union to include the countries of the Western Balkans, as well as Ukraine, Moldova and, down the line, also Georgia". And therefore, he believed that the future Union would be one of 30-36 member states.

In his genuine commitment and confidence that this was a real prospect, he was not alone. In fact, if comparing what he expressed in Prague with what other social democrats said in that period of time, their thinking is shared and consistent. To give an example, Sanna Marin, addressing the European Parliament that same month, stated that

Our decisions in June to support enlargement of the Union showed integrity and our credibility as a partner. Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status and Georgia was given a European perspective. The Western Balkan countries' convergence with the Union is finally progressing. The road to membership is neither short nor quick. However, the European Union's doors must be open to any European state that wishes to become part of our community of values and is committed to carrying out the necessary reforms.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, Stefan Löfven addressed the PES Congress just a couple of weeks later with the following words:

Friends, our family has been a driving force behind the European enlargement. It is gratifying that Moldova and Ukraine have been given candidate status and that Georgia is aspiring. A clear commitment to the Western Balkan process must be followed by action. At the same time, it's important that every step of the enlargement process builds democratic institutions because that is how we strengthen the rule of law and

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Scholz, O. (2022) "Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, on Monday 29th August 2022".

<sup>24</sup> Marin, S. (2022) "Prime Minister Sanna Marin's speech at the European Parliament on 13 September 2022".

how we fight corruption. But bringing Europe together is about giving more people the opportunity for a better future and also about strengthening Europe's security and sovereignty.<sup>25</sup>

While the social democrats expressed their strong support for enlargement and, once again, they saw their own responsibility to deliver it in that historical moment, they also underlined that there could be no fast track. The chancellor repeated several times that the candidate countries must fulfil the accession criteria, as also, in parallel, the EU has to transform to become *fit for this major enlargement*. This meant that the EU reform process should not be delayed and should reflect lessons learned after 2004. The EU of the future would

then have over 500 million free citizens enjoying equal rights, with the biggest internal market in the world, with leading research institutes, innovations and innovative companies, with stable democracies, with social welfare and a public infrastructure that is without parallel around the world.<sup>26</sup>

And this was the kind of strong, grand Europe that social democrats desired and that they would see as worthy of the label of a new, *geopolitical Europe*.

## Delivering peace and stability

The renewed commitment to values-driven politics also manifested itself strongly in progressive proposals about how to equip Europe to deliver on its original promise: to safeguard and promote peace. Analysing all of what progressives said about the Russian invasion, the EU's role and strategy to help Ukraine goes beyond the scope of this paper. But as the tension and then the eruption of armed conflict reminded everyone about the fragility of peace, there have been some crucial reflections about Europe's capacity to act. They require to be mentioned here, as they constitute building blocks of the progressive vision for the EU, as they are also a sign that social democrats assume a stronger position regarding, for example, a defence union.

The beginning of 2022 was marked by growing tensions on the global level, and progressives were arguing that the situation required common reflection. In January, Sanna Marin explained that:

Within the European Union, we are currently completing the strategic analysis for security and defence, which will enable the European Union to be better prepared to defend its interests, promote stability in our neighbouring regions and contribute to the defence of Europe.<sup>27</sup>

25 Löfven, S. (2022) "Speech as candidate for president of the Party of European Socialists (PES)". PES Congress, Berlin, 14 October.

26 Scholz, O. (2022) "Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, on Monday 29th August 2022".

27 Marin, S. and P. Sánchez (2022) "Joint appearance by the President of the Government of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Finland, Sanna Marin, before the media at Moncloa Palace". 26 January.

This was a strong statement, which pointed to the willingness not only to coordinate more but also to act together.

As the months have passed and the situation has kept escalating, progressives have stepped up their efforts to define a new kind of doctrine for the EU, and this was echoed in the Prague speech of Olaf Scholz. For him, this was a matter of “European sovereignty”.<sup>28</sup> Being a complex concept, it encompassed the EU “growing autonomous” in all fields, and by extension assuming a “greater responsibility for our own security”. The chancellor believed that it required more unity in “defending our values and interests around the world, and hence, more synergy”.

When it comes to defence policies, Scholz argued that, first of all, there was a need to overcome the “shrinkage of European armed forces and defence budgets of the past”. This was a meaningful statement, perhaps even reviving such historical concepts as *pragmatic pacifism* (which, in the SPD traditions, existed, for example, in the writings of Eduard Bernstein). Furthermore, he believed that “the EU must be in a position to respond quickly and effectively”, which required concerted actions. He declared Germany ready to enhance efforts and provide core troops to the planned EU rapid deployment force. And consequently, he called for the establishment of the *real EU HQ* for them – “with all the requisite finances, personnel and technology”. *German responsibility* would stretch further to support Lithuania and Slovakia, to compensate with equipment for the Czech Republic, as there would also be an investment of €100 billion in modernising the *Bundeswehr*. Making their own army stronger was, in that context, a contribution to *strengthening European and transatlantic security*. Finally, Scholz’s *European sovereignty* concept was, therefore, strongly correlated with the *European armament capabilities*, which was a reason for him to call for a “separate Council of defence ministers, which [...] can become the nucleus of a Europe of joint defence and armament”.

The sense of common responsibility and that the time calls for more action in strengthening defence capacities was also shared by other progressive prime ministers. An example of that is the statement by Pedro Sánchez, who said:

Spain has had troops and units deployed in the Baltic countries for years, and I believe that this, if it demonstrates anything, is precisely that the security of the borders [...] is a security issue for the European Union as a whole and therefore it is not a question of distances in kilometres [...] but of solidarity between allied countries.<sup>29</sup>

While debates on how to make the EU capable of delivering peace and stability continued, an important question arose – namely, regarding the relationship between the EU’s efforts and strategy within NATO. For social democrats, this was pertinent, especially since progressives held the positions of both high representative and secretary general of NATO. And as Scholz said, it was NATO that “remain[ed] the guarantor of our security”.

28 Scholz, O. (2022) “Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, on Monday 29th August 2022”.

29 Marin, S. and P. Sánchez (2022) “Joint appearance by the President of the Government of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Finland, Sanna Marin, before the media at Moncloa Palace”. 26 January.

Additionally, amid the Russian-Ukrainian war, two EU member states led by social democratic prime ministers decided to join the Transatlantic alliance. And this was of historical relevance, especially because in January 2023 this still hasn't been given. Reflection of what this, in turn, meant for the adhering countries was perhaps best depicted in the Madrid statement of Sanna Marin:

Finland has the possibility to apply for full NATO membership, but this is not being discussed at the moment. It would require a majority in the Finnish parliament, and also a majority of Finnish citizens, and that is not the situation right now, although there is the possibility of applying for NATO membership in the future, and it is important that this possibility is kept open and is ours and that nobody can tell us what to do, that it is our own sovereign decision.<sup>30</sup>

## Defending and promoting fundamental values

Deliberations regarding the new vision were all underpinned not only by a sense of responsibility and necessity of the moment, as noted earlier, but even more so by a regained confidence in a mission of social democracy. This boosted the conviction that the politics of the future must be values-driven and, herewith, at least on the centre left, one could observe a somewhat unexpected return to the ideology. 'Unexpected', as the literature on the matter had been depicting for a long time, was now the end of grand narratives.

In that sense, 2022 saw the continuation of trends that had been set earlier within the respective national contexts. A great inspiration here was, of course, the SPD campaign ahead of the *Bundestag* elections, which focused on the core values and proposed "respect" as a concept to translate them into the new reality. The influence it had on the narratives of the sister parties was extensive,<sup>31,32</sup> and one of the examples was the clear statement by Pedro Sánchez:

When I talk about respect and I talk about dignity, I talk about dignity in employment. I am talking about dignity in pensions, I am talking about dignity in wages. It is also about dignity in the education of our young people. In the dignity to be able to access housing at an early age and not the ages we have now in our country, in Spain. And I would like to reclaim the word respect used by Chancellor Scholz because I believe that this is precisely what summarises the social democratic proposal for Europe.<sup>33</sup>

30 Ibid.

31 Skrzypek, A. (ed) (2022) *Transforming the Political Union: Reinforcing Europarties ahead of the European Elections* (Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies).

32 Skrzypek, A. (2022) "The narrative of respect and how it revamps the progressive values", in A. Schieder et al. (eds.) *Progressive Proposals for the Turbulent Times: How to Boost the Political, Organisational and Electoral Potential* (Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies) pp. 20-53.

33 Sánchez, P. and O. Scholz (2022) "Joint media appearance of the President of the Government of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Olaf Scholz, at Moncloa Palace". 17 January.

Evidently, Chancellor Scholz sustained his commitment to values-driven politics, and this was a prominent thread within his Prague speech. He expressed the conviction that “values are what keep the EU together”. He said:

Peace and freedom, democracy and the rule of law, human rights and human dignity – these values of the European Union are a heritage we gained together. At this of all times, facing the renewed threat to freedom, pluralism and democracy in the east of our continent, we feel that connection especially strongly.<sup>34</sup>

In that sense, the future of the EU and its policies depends on the commitments to the founding principles: “Because values are essential to the EU’s continued existence, it concerns us all when those values are violated – both outside Europe and even more so within Europe”.

The words of Scholz are, therefore, also indicative of why the Russian aggression has been perceived in ideological terms by the social democrats, and why they have become even more outspoken about the issues connected with the EU’s internal democracy and the rule of law (to which the next section will refer in detail). For progressives, this was the essence of the test that the EU was being put to and why they had to respond:

Our commitment to human rights, the rule of law and democracy are being tried. In Russia’s view, diversity, democracy and respect for human rights make us weak. [...] But it is exactly this commitment that makes us strong. Our societies are flourishing precisely because, in democracy, it is for the people to decide their future. We value diversity. We promote human rights. We want to give everyone an opportunity to succeed.<sup>35</sup>

The return of a values-driven narrative manifested itself across the board, as illustrated in two speeches delivered by Stefan Löfven at the PES Congress.<sup>36,37</sup> Asking for support for his candidacy, he said:

That sums up the main goals of the social democratic movement, namely, that the fight for human dignity requires equality, that equality is a prerequisite for the freedom of all people, and the most important condition for achieving equality is a society built on solidarity.<sup>38</sup>

And that was a bridge between the fight for equality, which progressives had assumed after the years marked by austerity politics, and the fight against the backlash that the recent years brought to specific components of it – like gender equality. Understanding that Covid-19 and right-wing politics undermined women’s emancipation was a manifestation

34 Ibid.

35 Marin, S. (2022) “Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s speech at the European Parliament on 13 September 2022”.

36 Löfven, S. (2022) “Speech as candidate for president of the Party of European Socialists (PES)”. PES Congress, Berlin, 14 October.

37 Löfven, S. (2022) “Speech as president of the Party of European Socialists (PES)”. PES Congress, Berlin, 15 October.

38 Löfven, S. (2022) “Speech as candidate for president of the Party of European Socialists (PES)”. PES Congress, Berlin, 14 October.

of the difference between what paths previous and current generations of social democrats saw to recovery.

As a principle, gender equality should, therefore, become a transversal guideline. This rationale was depicted, for example, in the statement: “We will boost coordination at the multilateral level, in the defence of our shared values [...] with the promotion of gender equality, of the women, peace and security agenda, [...]”.<sup>39</sup> As such, it should be at the centre of every action, especially inside the EU: “as social democrats are committed to embracing the social and feminist dimension of politics and to bringing a progressive approach to the European agenda through dialogue”.<sup>40</sup>

Social democrats also believe that gender equality is where the fight against right-wing radicals will be crucial. On this, Prime Minister Marin commented that “it is particularly important and topical in the face of the so-called ‘anti-gender’ movements”,<sup>41</sup> while Stefan Löfven stated that

As the right-wing conservatives gain power, women’s rights, conditions and participation deteriorate. The fight for women’s rights is a fight for human rights, but also our fight. Our fight as men for a gender-equal society. So equality must always be at the top of our political agenda. And I praise PES Women and their role in ensuring that we do have an EU Gender Equality Strategy. Now, ratification of the Istanbul Convention is a must. The right to abortion must be part of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and gender-based violence must be eradicated. And as a feminist, it is obvious to me that equality, gender equality, is both an ideological and moral issue. But it’s also a question of making use of everyone’s potential. So, all women and men must have the same opportunities and obligations in Europe.<sup>42</sup>

## Owning the fight for the rule of law

The primacy of values also consolidated progressives amid the debate on democracy inside of the EU and the struggle to uphold the rule of law in all member states. They had been outspoken before at the EU level (with such prominent personalities as, for example, Katharina Barley, the S&D Group vice-president); however, only some of the prime ministers had been addressing the issue directly, with exception of the NextGenerationEU debate. The context changed though, and as they depicted the Russian invasion and its further actions as an attempt to hinder the EU as a union founded on values, this was a matter of principle to ensure that democracy functioned internally. So, in 2022, one could say that it was visibly up to social democrats to lead the fight from within the respective countries.

39 Marin, S. and P. Sánchez (2022) “Joint appearance by the President of the Government of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Finland, Sanna Marin, before the media at Moncloa Palace”. 26 January.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Löfven, S. (2022) “Speech as president of the Party of European Socialists (PES)”. PES Congress, Berlin, 15 October.

That rationale is echoed in the Prague speech of Olaf Scholz, who said: “we, therefore, cannot stand by when the principles of the rule of law are violated and democratic oversight is dismantled”. He thanked the European Parliament and expressed support for the European Commission “in its work for the rule of law, [...] which is a fundamental value that should bind our union together”.

The chancellor believed that Europe could not refrain from using the tools it has at its disposal, arguing that, also in Hungary and Poland (countries he specifically named), citizens wanted more EU and they wanted it to stand strongly on the principle matters. Consequently, he supported the application of Article 7 and the conditionality mechanism, saying: “we should give the Commission a new way to launch infringement proceedings when there are breaches of what unites us at the very core: our fundamental values”. He regretted that several of the arguments about the rule of law went “all the way to the court” and expressed hope that a dialogue based on the “Commission’s report on the rule of law with its country-specific recommendations” could be a better way forward.

In other words, the fight for democracy was yet another sign of how much social democrats learned the lesson that nothing can ever be taken for granted, and at these historical crossroads, this is an important test. This is also audible in another speech, by Stefan Löfven, who claimed:

We see what is happening in countries such as Hungary and Poland. Democracy and the rule of law are gradually being dismantled. Gradually, women’s rights are restricted. [...] We see what is happening in Italy and unfortunately also in my home country, Sweden. Parties with roots straight down in the fascist and neo-Nazi past have now reached the ultimate political power. [...] defending democracy and human dignity will be one of our main tasks as social democrats in these coming years. We have and we will always be clear. It is thanks to our political family that the EU today is committed to defend the rule of law and democracy, and there must be clear consequences for those countries, member states that violate these European values.<sup>43</sup>

## Ensuring the capacity to act

As already emphasised earlier here, for progressives, the future of the EU is related to both deepening and developing. They had learned from the experience of almost two decades before. As much as they supported future enlargements, they also believed that a profound institutional transformation was a necessity. This is what made them more invested in questions regarding the EU’s capacity to act. However, one must point out that they were not in agreement regarding many of the aspects of institutional reform.

Some of the social democrats pinned their great hopes on the CoFoE. When it was inaugurated, there were two progressives signing the launching act – the late David Sassoli,

<sup>43</sup> Löfven, S. (2022) “Speech as president of the Party of European Socialists (PES)”. PES Congress, Berlin, 15 October.



then president of the European Parliament, and Antonio Costa, prime minister of Portugal. While the CoFoE had been criticised for a delayed start, unclear mandate and ambiguous planning, it delivered more than anyone anticipated. It augmented (even if only temporarily) standards of deliberative democracy, and it showed that the involvement of citizens at the EU level was possible. Though the closing ceremony on 9 May had been magnificent, the results of the whole exercise were largely overshadowed shortly after. But regardless of this ending being a rather brisk moment, social democrats did their utmost to keep the spirit of the CoFoE alive. They kept referring to the final outcomes rather frequently (also within the context of the national press conferences held by respective prime ministers). Also, the fact that António Costa went to Strasbourg on Europe Day, although he had no official role assigned, was a grand gesture that became an iconic one.

Within the history of EU integration, social democrats had several prominent representatives delivering institutional reforms. The Lisbon Treaty is a prominent example. But there has also been hesitation over the recognition that the sister parties weren't aligned: the so-called Nordic parties were known for their anti-federalist stands, eastern and western parties were divided about the mechanisms of enhanced cooperation, etc. But as it became clear in recent months that the EU must be able to decide and move quicker, social democrats became determined to labour internal compromises and find ways to common, pragmatic, practical proposals that could accommodate everyone.

Consequently, Chancellor Scholz argued that it was a time to shake off the prejudice against any profound reform. He emphasised that “the currency of the European Union is not supremacy or subordination, but rather the acknowledgment of diversity, a level playing field between all of its members, as well as plurality and the balancing of different interests”. Therefore, an increased capacity of the EU to act would make everyone involved in the Union respectively stronger. And then, similarly to Letta, who in his spring article spoke against bottlenecks,<sup>44</sup> Scholz pointed to the blockages that prevented the Community's action. He saw no reason why – with such logic – the rules couldn't be changed, and even added that “European Treaties aren't set in stone”.<sup>45</sup>

On this last point, social democrats were not in agreement. There was reluctance due to timing and the question of whether it wouldn't be more pertinent to start with fully using existing provisions and fixing the rules that were stretched amid Covid-19. This was the point that Sanna Marin made towards the European Parliament:

Finland also takes a constructive view on the development of the EU. We take very seriously the voice of the citizens and the new proposals they have brought up in the Conference on the Future of Europe. However, a crisis is not the right time to open up a debate on the Treaties. Our citizens did not ask for institutional changes as much as for reforms that respond both to the major challenges facing humankind and people's everyday concerns. The current framework allows us to meet these needs. For example,

44 Letta, E. (2022) “A European Confederation: a common political platform for peace”. *The Progressive Post*, 25 April.

45 Scholz, O. (2022) “Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague, on Monday 29th August 2022”.

we can increase qualified majority decisions in the field of the Common Foreign and Security Policy.<sup>46</sup>

The search for a pragmatic, progressive approach continued. And step by step, the issues on which the compromises could have been achieved were crystallising. The first among them was the desire to make the decision-making processes more efficient. This meant a need to strike a new balance between the intergovernmental approach and the necessity to remove the veto. In Prague, Scholz insisted that this was the time to drop abstract debates and apply the motto “form follows function”. He argued that one concrete idea, which especially in the current context would benefit from more “flexibility”, was defence policies. The chancellor believed that exploring the existing mechanisms, which allowed *enhanced cooperation* among the “coalitions of willing” would already be a step forward. In that sense, for Scholz, elimination of the veto wasn’t exactly an either/or dilemma. He proposed another option, which he called “constructive abstention”. He said, “if as many people as possible pursue this idea, then we will get very much closer to a geopolitical Europe capable of holding its own on the international stage”. This could prepare the way for a steady process that would, in the end, eliminate the unanimity rule. For Scholz, it was a corrosive instrument that could empower one state to prevent everyone else from progressing and would induce decisions based on the lowest common denominator. He called for “a gradual transition to majority voting in common foreign policy, but also in other areas, such as tax policy”. He admitted that the latter could have large repercussions for Germany, but this he treated as an example of how a country like his will have to give something to get much more.

Furthermore, social democrats have been offering some specific options for institutional reforms. They underlined that representative democracy must be a functional one, especially after enlargement. Chancellor Scholz was particularly invested, believing in Germany’s responsibility. He considered his state to be a country “at the heart of Europe and crucial in eastward going Union”, hence developing as a “compromise-broker” in the future. That said, he also underlined that the EU “should be about reaching decisions together and not being exclusive clubs or directorates. [...] [within the EU] members enjoying equal rights”. Therefore, he argued for a reform of the European Parliament, whereby composition should better reflect the principles of representative democracy and *every vote in the EU counts the same*. While this was rather explicit, Scholz did not refer to proposals on electoral reform, even if they had been politically sponsored by social democrats (see the European Parliament report of Ruiz Devesa<sup>47</sup>). To that end, the chancellor also redressed the old argument that a European Commission composed of representatives of 30-36 member states would not be able to function after enlargement. He did not deny the importance of each member

46 Marin, S. (2022) “Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s speech at the European Parliament on 13 September 2022”.

47 Ruiz Devesa, D. (2022) “Report on the proposal for a Council Regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, repealing Council Decision (76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom) and the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage annexed to that decision”. European Parliament, 4 April.

state being represented by “their” commissioner and being part of decision-making as a principle, but he proposed a new setup in which, for example, two commissioners would be jointly responsible as directorate-general.

## Progressive, pragmatic, politically marketable

The analyses included in this article focus on progressive proposals for the future of Europe, several of which were articulated by the respective prime ministers during the turbulent times of 2022. Importantly, they sensed the great responsibility for the EU, which led them to invest themselves in European politics beyond what could be considered essential due to the circumstances. They considered the momentum to be a historical crossroads, where progress should not be just the sum of crisis-related policies but, instead, should be politically driven. For the first time after many years, social democrats had the confidence that it was their core values and policies that should and could take primacy.

This was also reflected in the somewhat unexpected return of ideologically framed politics. The core values were what social democrats believed to be key to ensuring the integrity of the EU and its power to persevere, facing both internal and external challenges. Accordingly, the narrative and actions connected again, in a process that Olaf Scholz labelled, in his famous Prague speech, as a moment in which “ideology gave way to pragmatism”. And this was what underpinned certain strategic choices, such as assuming a tough stance in the debate on how to guarantee the rule of law internally and how to create alliances and trade agreements internationally.

Amid important statements and speeches delivered by social democrats in these past 12 months, one gains a good understanding of what progressivism stands for nowadays. This is of great relevance, as there can be no doubt what social democrats are in favour of and what they will fight against, the clarity and consequently predictability of which hadn’t been there for a long time. The power of conviction comes from the lessons learned, especially after the financial crisis, and the determination to do differently next time. Still, it is further solidified by the recent relevant experiences, such as the “respect”-focused campaign of the SPD, the fight for different democratic standards conducted by PSOE or the consistency in pursuing the green transformation by social democrats in Finland. Overall, the new approach is also inseparably pro-European.

When it comes to specific proposals for the future of the EU, social democrats are committed to what they call *enlargement and deepening*. This is the way forward that will strengthen the EU and make it answer the call of the current times. Therefore, although they are not opposed to proposals by President Macron, they insist that they cannot be seen as substitutes and cannot be allowed to cause any delays. The Community must be equipped with tools to take decisions and act, which is also why institutional reforms are crucial. Social democrats are not aligned on the question of what requires treaty changes now; however, they are very pragmatic in proposing other changes that could help advance

the integration processes in different areas and, by extension, make both the EU and all its members stronger.

This article focused on the questions connected with the long-term vision and institutional changes because these have seen the comparably largest leap forward in progressive positions. That said, evidently, there have been several other threads in the debate about the future – including assessment of the instruments that were agreed upon during the last crisis (SURE, Next-GenerationEU, Fit for 55) – and others that urgently require to be solved, like questions of (fiscal) rules, capital market union and migration. All are very relevant, especially since they are the fields where disagreements can still be detected. But what seems to emerge as a common denominator for these, and may be a reference point in the medium and long term, is a vision for a *Social Europe*; this is a concept that has been a traditional unifying agenda for social democrats in Europe since the Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Community (predecessor of PES) in 1973.

The level of ambition was perhaps best depicted in the statement by Pedro Sánchez at Davos:

[...] we certainly must show the highest degree of ambition in promoting a renewed social agenda for the European Union. Because combating inequality and fostering social cohesion is the only way to achieve our goals of progress, prosperity, and welfare in the most efficient manner.<sup>48</sup>

This view was shared by others, including the new PES president, who said in his acceptance speech: “[...] equality and growth are not in opposition to each other. On the contrary, equality and growth are each other’s prerequisites”.<sup>49</sup>

Social democrats were, therefore, determined to see the response given by the EU, and all the investments that came along during the crisis, as an opening to greater modernisation. They wanted to ensure that it is a just one, based on solidarity and focused on the future. They wanted to see ecological and digital transformation lead to better work organisation with greater protection of workers, sound reindustrialisation and a boost to technological development. They spoke about *European sovereignty* and *autonomy*, as they also argued – boldly for the first time since the 1990s – for making Europe globally competitive. In this spirit, Olaf Scholz also argues for standing tall and getting in place the *Made in Europe 2030 strategy*.

To that end, there has been a great change in the involvement, narrative and agenda. As stated, although the objectives crystallised and the political will became stronger, there were still several important issues that continued to cause internal disagreements. These were crucial, as they concerned, for example, fiscal rules; EU budgetary capacity; or, for that matter, the possibility of using nuclear energy. But even in this context, hope remained that the progress achieved would continue in the spirit of Stefan Löfven’s PES Congress speech:

48 Sánchez, P. (2022) “Sánchez calls for European unity at Davos 2022 - says ‘Spain will do its part’”. World Economic Forum, 24 May 2022.

49 Löfven, S. (2022) “Speech as president of the Party of European Socialists (PES)”. PES Congress, Berlin, 15 October.

It is together that we shape visions for the Europe of the future. It is together that we work out our joint political proposals and thus win the trust of Europe's citizens, both in the election for European Parliament in 2024, but also in every national election. And we know that one party's success is everyone's success and we need more social democratic governments in Europe.<sup>50</sup>

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50 Löfven, S. (2022) "Speech as candidate for president of the Party of European Socialists (PES)". PES Congress, Berlin, 14 October.