

Compassionate and visionary leadership

Key lessons of Social Democratic governance in times of Covid-19

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The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered an unforeseen reaction from European citizens. People – the same people that until a year ago were very vocal in expressing their mistrust in politics and institutions – instinctively turned to their national government to receive care and cure in a moment of deep crisis. Furthermore, they found a feeling of mutual solidarity, particularly in the first stages of the lockdown, and naturally longed for a more robust welfare state. These are not changes that one can consider permanent or long-term. Yet they have had significant implications for politics and for political parties, and for the Social Democratic ones in particular, which are strongly committed to values such as solidarity, and have traditionally been champions of the European welfare states. The new public mood has allowed for welfare policies to be recognised as essential, that during the 2008 financial crisis were considered simply too costly. What is more, the crisis has offered the opportunity for the Social Democratic parties in government to set the direction rather than merely manage the crisis. Empathy and communication focused on safeguarding jobs have become fundamental tools for establishing a connection with the European people.

At the end of 2020 social media were flooded by memes that would immortalise the passing year as a complete disaster. The depiction varied with some suggesting ‘all down the drain’ and others implicitly offering the hope that from the absolute low in which the world had found itself, there was no other way but upwards. Simplistic as they were, they did not of course reflect the pain connected with the losses every society had experienced, and they did not take account of the fear and the longing for any kind of viable idea when this is all over. But while this terribly aching side of Covid-19 was quite understandably not depicted in the widely shared popular art pieces ahead of the New Year, neither were too many references to the world of politics, with the exception of the fact that Donald Trump had lost his bid and would not be continuing as the American president.

One might wonder why there was so little politics there, and the right answer does not seem to be the often-repeated one about growing estrangement between society and institutionalised politics. In fact, the opposite seemed to be happening because when the pandemic hit, citizens turned to those they may have distrusted before but who were at least familiar and could offer some kind of anchoring point in these turbulent times. In their hour of need, people instinctively looked to their respective national governments – from whom they expected care and cure. And as that happened, the previously unthinkable suddenly became reality: the concept of welfare state re-emerged as an embodiment of people's greatest desires. Moreover, its resurrection overnight erased the past and painful narratives: those of the 1990s (dismissing the state as too weak to face the challenges of globalisation); those of the early 2000s (when in the midst of the financial crisis, the argument was coined that the welfare state was simply unaffordable); and those of the last decade (when the topic of the state was mainly hijacked by nationalists).

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But while the citizens turned towards their states, it was not just an anchoring point that they were looking for. In fact, the more the respective countries proceeded with implementing varying degrees of lockdown, the more the sense of solidarity, community and mutual responsibility became apparent. The iconic daily gesture of clapping hands for medical personnel – and all others on the frontline of the battle with the pandemic – was a symbol of a profound change in attitude: the more isolated people were, the less they were individualised; the more in lockdown, the more appreciative they were of intrapersonal relations; and finally, the more alone people were, the more they felt 'we are in this together'.

These transformations are of profound sociological, and consequently political, importance. Especially for Social Democrats, who frankly have been having a rough decade (if not longer), leading some to question their very sense of existence. The less friendly observers called the Social Democrats' historical mission, especially in 2008, financially irresponsible; the more friendly claimed Social Democrats were victims of their own success: having accomplished so much, they had to accept not being a 'political force on the rise' any longer. So, for these more friendly observers a return to concepts such as solidarity, community and welfare state could have been seen as a hope, as if their time had finally come. But learning from the past (even from the 2008 crisis), one should not indulge in the illusion that there will be an automatic correlation between the ongoing changes and the growth of popular support for the centre left. No, if recent history has taught Social Democrats anything, it is that the pendulum does not swing in their favour by default.

Quite the contrary. Social Democrats faced an incredibly tough test in 2020 – especially when in power. Ambushed by the pandemic, they needed to set the course, keep it steady and make tough choices. These generally boiled down to the decision between a path exclusively focused on 'managing' the apparent crisis, or the trickier road that would make them respond to the crisis but without giving up their agenda and aspiration to finally govern. All six

Social Democratic prime ministers in the EU opted for the latter, which puts another historical mark on the past year. After years of having been accused of being old-type, establishment and glued-to-any-kind-of-power parties, Social Democrats turned this characteristic to their advantage. They found the courage to show that their institutional embedding, their predictability and experience, allow them to master the art of governing, no matter the context. This article aims to highlight and discuss this epic achievement, which has remained under the popular radar.

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The strong leaders of today

The arrival of Covid-19 in Europe was sudden, but gradual at the same time. It had been feared while it had been conquering other continents, but back then leaders considered that the European welfare states would prove resilient and that they would manage to prevent a large-scale expansion of the disease. When the virus hit Europe in the early months of 2020, however, it was like a storm that saw entire countries surrender and declare a state of emergency within a matter of days.

Politically speaking, Social Democrats were not in the best of places at this point. Yes, they had had an unexpectedly good result in the European elections (looking at the composition of the European Parliament) and were well positioned in the context of the EU institutions (see FEPS Progressive Yearbook 2020), but they were struggling when it came to the national level. In the north, in Finland, there was a new government, talked about extensively by media. The friendlier comments saw the historic breakthrough of a coalition of four governing parties, all headed by women. The less friendly ones doubted if Sanna Marin was up to the job of prime minister, and made unflattering comparisons to the Spice Girls and the like. In neighbouring Sweden, although remaining the first party in numbers, Social Democrats no longer enjoyed the same position of primacy as before. Every decision was subject to tough negotiations and was announced with a footnote listing the parties that would endorse it. In Denmark, half a year after the parliamentary vote, Mette Frederiksen kept facing questions about her party's identity and if her strategy would pay off in the long term.

The situation was no easier in the south. Portugal is ruled by a stable government coalition of centre-left parties and was initially quite exceptionally spared by Covid-19. But in neighbouring Spain, Pedro Sánchez quickly found himself facing one of the gravest situations in Europe. It emerged just when he finally could have assumed he would get to govern, after turbulent years marked by a leadership contest in his PSOE; repeated national, regional and European elections; and very difficult coalition negotiations which, after a previous breakdown, finally brought the PSOE and Podemos into a common cabinet. In parallel, in Malta, it was the time when the prime minister, Joseph Muscat, had to resign due to a scandal caused by the murder of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, and when Muscat was then replaced by Robert Abela.

These were the beginnings of 2020, which would suggest that when the pandemic hit, it could have been, colloquially speaking, anyone's game. Looking at the popularity of the centre-left parties 12 months ago and today, it seems that, if anything, Social Democrats in power have solidified their positioning. POLITICO's poll of polls shows that the Finnish SDP started the year with 15 per cent of support and as the third party, and ended it with 21 per cent and as the leader in polls, reflecting a level of popularity that has been stable since the end of April. Social Democrats in Sweden uphold their frontrunner status, with 24 per cent in January 2020 and 27 per cent in December, while the polls showed them at 31 per cent in May and distancing both the Sweden Democrats and the Moderates in the second half of the year. The Danish Social Democrats grew from 26 per cent to 32 per cent, expanding the gap between them and the liberals (who lost 5 per cent) and seeing their leader doubling her popularity already in April (reaching 72 per cent job approval). The PSOE, in Spain, kept 27 per cent (with 30 per cent being their top score in July), while Podemos dropped from 15 to 11 per cent, which indicates that the decisive factor is not simply to 'be in government'. The Maltese Labour Party started the year with 61 per cent, reaching 66 per cent in the summer, but it fell back to 58 per cent in early 2021. In Malta, the situation is perhaps somewhat different from the earlier quoted results, since the gap with the opposition Nationalist Party is narrowing. Finally, the Portuguese PS began with 36 per cent and rose to 38 per cent (while the coalition partners noted small drops).

These numbers tell a story that has not yet been explained. Many important political analysts focused in the first half of 2020 on the rising popularity of leaders, and in the second half on the contrasting plunge of so-called 'populist' leaders. The analysts also alluded to the already quoted so-called *rally round the flag* effect, which boosted governments' trust-ratings in the polls. Until now, however, not much attention has been paid to the dimension of political parties, although the conclusions for Social Democrats in power in this area are particularly encouraging. The respective personalities of their leaders mattered a great deal, but what seems to have weighed equally much was the nature of their politics and the content of the policies they delivered.

With the people and for the people

The earlier mentioned idea that Covid-19 put an end to the argument about the gap between politics and society, as the citizens turned to their representatives and institutions in the search for care and cure, is of course only one side of the coin. The other is that Social Democrats in power articulated a message of confidence in the people of the country right from the start. This was a qualitative change, as previously they had tended to speak about 'them, the ordinary citizens', while now they started addressing citizens directly. This contributed to an image of parties who listen and respect, who are ready to lead while being humble and humane at the same time.

The most telling example of this image comes from Finland. In her first parliamentary speech after the Covid-19 outbreak, Sanna Marin insisted that only "by helping and supporting each other, can we get through difficult times".¹ Marin kept explaining that the state

1 Prime Minister Sanna Marin, 'By helping and supporting each other, we can get through difficult times', Government Communications Department, 17 April, Press release 262/2020. (<https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/10616/paaministeri-marin-auttamalla-ja-tukemalla-toisiamme-jaksamme-vaikkeiden-aikojen-ylitse>).

of emergency affected everyone, putting limits on everybody and making people give up many things. She called on Finns to take a moment to reflect how much great work was being done by so many, whilst she gave reassurances that the government would do everything in its powers to provide support. In another address in April, Marin expressed her deep appreciation for citizens' compliance with the measures which made it possible to stop the spread of the virus. While she thanked each and every one, she especially thanked "healthcare workers, teachers, cleaners, police officers, public transport drivers, retail and catering workers and many other groups of professionals for keeping society functional". This connected her speech to the sentiments present across society. But beyond this connection, which could perhaps be credited to skilful rhetoric, she said something else, something truly extraordinary for a prime minister: she recognised that the government had also made mistakes, and gave as an example the fact that the situation had continued too long of passengers arriving from abroad at Helsinki's Airport without being subject to medical controls for Covid-19. She insisted that all experiences are to be seen as lessons, reaffirming the readiness to learn from them and to reinforce the country's capacity to deal with the crisis.

On information and communication throughout the crisis, Marin insisted on a twofold approach. First, an understanding that all measures that are taken should initially be debated in parliament, giving the opposition the possibility to react but also to take ownership of the strategies to counteract the pandemic. In her parliamentary speech in April, she acknowledged that all the parties took the pandemic very seriously and cooperated extremely well, with a sense of duty in these extraordinary times. In parallel, the government expanded the communication channels towards the citizens. Second, she invested heavily in an information and communication campaign.

This campaign used a number of tools, all driven by an understanding that the government needs to be accountable but that its actions will only translate into a universal effort if there is a solid communication about them, allowing people to take their share of responsibility alongside common guidelines. To begin with, the National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) was tasked with sending an information package on the coronavirus in both official languages of Finland to every household. THL was then further mandated to translate the work of experts into guidance and support for citizens. As part of this, a smartphone application was developed in parallel with the online service *oma/o.fi*, offering everyone the possibility to answer a questionnaire to assess at any time if they were showing Covid-19 symptoms. For the government, this embodied the principle that everyone has the right to healthcare and to information. Beyond that, as early as March, the prime minister also initiated cooperation with the Finnish Media Pool (part of the National Emergency Supply Agency)

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and PING Helsinki (an internet influencers company). The aim was to “support social media influencers in sharing information on the coronavirus with their followers”. This added to the official communication and traditional media channels, which do not currently always reach all parts of society.

These first steps were broadly welcomed by the population, encouraging the government to go even further. At 11:00am on 23 April, a “coronavirus info session for children” took place, featuring the prime minister herself, alongside the minister for education Li Andersson, and the minister of science and culture Hanna Kosonen – a first in Finnish history. The event was organised in partnership with communication agencies, which facilitated the participation of 7-12 year old children via a videoconferencing system. The conference was not only a self-standing event, transmitted also via YouTube, but next to the live-feed it provided recorded material to be used in distance teaching and young people’s media channels.

Months later, the government announced a series of 27 “Lockdown Dialogues”, which would yet again focus on connecting citizens and institutions in a conversation about life in Finland and how it had been under the Covid-19 emergency measures. Citizens had a chance to share their experiences, which were later compiled in a report. The selected participants represented diverse social groups (parents of young children, teachers, young people, pensioners, activists, prisoners on probation, immigrants, managers, freelancers, cultural sector professionals, entrepreneurs, researchers, but also officials from central government and municipalities). Unsurprisingly, the common thread of the conversations turned out to be anxieties around Covid-19 and its aftermath. While the results were universally available on a special website, summarising the dialogues, a government press release stated that for many people the crisis seemed to have brought to the surface a new kind of awareness of their own privileged position and a desire to help those who are less fortunate.

This reinforced the idea of a new ‘Finland Forward’ communication campaign, which would operate first as an online platform showcasing all the big and small acts of solidarity. Marin insisted it could be about anything, including “someone going to the shop on behalf of an elderly person, someone else helping a pupil with their distance learning assignments...”. It would be there to inspire, but above all to pay tribute to the fact (quoted also in the figures of Finland’s statistic survey) that “in Finland most people say they have helped others during the pandemic”.

All these efforts have proven very successful. Surveys conducted both during the first and second waves of the pandemic showed that close to all (95 per cent plus) citizens felt well informed, able to follow government instructions, and even “happy or fairly happy” to do so. They considered authorities’ communications on the situation as “reliable and balanced”. But beyond that, it brought Sanna Marin and the SDP (which she has led since August 2020) recognition from voters as being “knowledgeable, reliable, and trustworthy”. The growth in popularity was unprecedented. And great numbers of citizens would consider Marin as a solid candidate for the country’s presidency. Many others also came to consider backing the party in local and parliamentary elections.

Back to ‘jobs, jobs, jobs’ – to have a hope for the future

One could say that the communication of course mattered a great deal, as it was the only connection among people otherwise left in isolation for so many weeks and months. And as explained in the previous paragraphs, it was not only the tools, but above all the humble tone and the interactivity, that made a qualitative difference, compared to the political messaging that for so long had been captured by an aggressive tone. It was possibly a turning point, allowing a move away from a period of electoral victories by ‘those, who finally told them’ (as populists were often described) towards those ‘who actually listened and responded’. But the next point is that it is not only how you communicate, but also what you have to say and what you intend to do, that is important.

In the early days of the pandemic, it quickly became clear that this would be not only a health crisis, but a multilayered one. Social Democrats in power managed to anticipate this right from the start. Among many other examples, some very telling evidence of this is the speech given by the Swedish prime minister Stefan Löfven at the end of March.² “The Covid-19 virus is testing our country, our society and all of us as fellow human beings. Every person now needs to mentally prepare for what is coming (...) Lives, health and jobs are at risk. More people will get the disease, more people will have to say a final farewell to a loved one (...) The only way to manage this crisis is to face it as a society, with everyone taking responsibility for themselves, for each other, and for our country (...) I, as Prime Minister, and the Government I lead, will take every decision that is necessary to protect the lives, health and jobs of as many people as we possibly can”.

The first thing that the Swedish government therefore opted to do was to make a temporary change to the labour law regulations, which would serve as an incentive for people to consider staying home from the moment they sensed they could be positive for Covid-19. The change in regulations translated into making sickness benefits available for employees from day one of illness and a temporary suspension of the medical certificate requirement (until the eighth calendar day of the sick pay period).

Secondly, as early as mid-March the government announced a new “crisis package for Swedish business and jobs”,³ which was based on an agreement between four parties. The package included payouts of 300 billion SEK and focused on contributing to the employers’ wage costs with the hope that this would enable more jobs to be preserved in the period of economic slowdown. According to the proposal, the central government would assume responsibility for the cost of all sick pay in April and May, and also there would be compensation for the self-employed in the form of standardised sick pay for up to two weeks. To reinforce liquidity, companies would be allowed to defer payment of the employers’ social security contributions, preliminary tax on salaries, and VAT.

2 Speech from Prime Minister’s Office, Prime Minister’s address to the nation, 22 March 2020, published 23 March 2020 (www.government.se/speeches/2020/03/prime-ministers-address-to-the-nation-22-march-2020/).

3 Crisis package for Swedish businesses and jobs, published 16 March 2020 (<https://www.government.se/press-releases/2020/03/crisis-package-for-swedish-businesses-and-jobs/>).

In the following weeks, the proposals were further updated. The phenomenon of short-term layoffs was tackled by providing a supplementary system of support for short-time work schemes. This would see a temporary reduction of working hours, the costs of which would be shared between the government, employers, and employees. Next, it was paired with a “crisis package for jobs and transition”, which would be a set mix of five policies: 1) temporary reinforcement of unemployment insurance; 2) more active labour policies (including grants to municipalities to fund more summer jobs for young people, as well as green jobs); 3) more places for students and more distance learning for higher education; 4) more opportunities for vocational education and training throughout the country; 5) removal of the income ceiling for student aid (so that help and medical care students could help the sector without their student aid being reduced).

While these policies were put in place to cushion the first shock, the government continued its efforts to find ways out of what transformed into a more permanent situation than previously expected. In that spirit, the Swedish government looked at ways it could not only help businesses but make them more resilient and sustainable. It then raised the capital contributions to Almi Företagspartner AB (a national company co-owned by regional and city councils) and the Swedish Export Credit Agency to ensure that credits for SMEs across the country were increased. Further guarantees were issued on up to 70 per cent of the new loans to be provided under the supervision of the Swedish National Debt Office by banks to companies – all with clear guidelines that read (amongst other things): “it is expected that the guaranteed loans will not be used for bonuses or variable remuneration to senior officers”. The government then also started looking for strategies that would help businesses (such as hotels, restaurants, and durable consumer goods) while no economic activity was possible in their sectors. The strategic solutions included renegotiations of rents and support to pay 50 per cent of the rental costs. All these loans and tax reliefs would have a temporary character, and their implementation as well as impact would be closely monitored.

As the crisis persisted and the expectation of further negative impact by a global economic recession became stronger, the Swedish government continued to provide further assistance. This went beyond financial help. One of the additional objectives was to help people in sustaining themselves and to help businesses in ‘weathering the crisis’ while readapting and reorientating their activities. This covered a broad range of activities. When it came to assisting people, the government opted to accelerate efforts to provide safety and to increase various life opportunities. This meant changes to the unemployment insurance scheme (to make it more accessible) and more assistance for individuals in transition (including expanding the number of places at universities and other higher and vocational education institutions).

The Swedish government also offered its support to those businesses ready to adjust to operating in the new circumstances, and it provided financial support for various adaptations – for example, restaurants which could refocus on selling more takeaway food; taxi companies, which could switch into deliveries; or manufacturers, which could start producing healthcare materials. The criteria for eligibility included companies having a minimum turnover in the previous year and a loss of turnover of at least 30 per cent (calculated in March and April). In those sectors where such adjustments would prove impossible, the government looked at temporarily easing regulations.

With all these measures already in place before the summer, the Swedish minister for finance Magdalena Andersson was able to report that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was decisively cushioned and that both the recession and the unemployment levels were likely to be less than expected, even if growing public debt and the deficit it would cause would require a longer time to recover. Most importantly, however, many Swedes could hold onto their jobs, and businesses (including SMEs that had been well off before the crisis) could either carry on or be assisted in refocusing. Those in need were offered adequate protection and opportunities (including training) to be able to get back on their feet. The government was equally confident that the help it provided would also matter in the times to come – as the government help packages were not only focused on the ‘here and now’, but also tried to use the crunch momentum to inject funds for future-oriented strategies. An example of this was the additional funds that would back the Swedish Climate Act, which would assist green industries in employing more people. The incentive to speed up the work on that Act may have been the absence of the foreign seasonal workers in the time of harvest, but the outcome was effectively a further greening of the Swedish economy.

These Swedish government policies illustrate the overall direction of European Social Democrats in power in 2020. First of all, they correctly anticipated that the pandemic would result in a multilayered crisis and they reacted with the painful lessons of 2008 in mind. They were ready to do more than just try to manage, they were governing, and they did it guided by the very core Social Democratic principles in mind: safeguarding jobs, protecting and helping the vulnerable. As the Swedish government supported its fish farmers, the Spanish government of Pedro Sánchez was quick to provide help to its land farmers, also by calling upon the European Union to revise – at least temporarily – the rules of the Common Agriculture Policy. He was supported in this endeavour by his Maltese counterpart, Robert Abela.

Secondly, the various loans were to be granted with strict conditions. The rules in Sweden included no bonuses for senior managers. But there were more, and they transcended borders. In Finland only those companies that had not suffered losses in the previous years were to be eligible for the credits, to make sure that the painful collective effort helped those who could keep people employed and make themselves resilient for the future. In Denmark, Mette Frederiksen coined the rule that only those businesses that had duly been paying taxes in Denmark could expect to be helped by the state, making a clear case for justice and an immensely relevant step in the fight against tax havens.

Thirdly, the support and investments have been provided with a long-term perspective in mind. Pedro Sánchez’s government, with Salvador Illa as the minister for health, opted to give substantial support to the healthcare services. This support was designed not only to overcome the results of the cuts from a decade ago, but also to ensure the workforce and supplies that could make Spanish healthcare provision one of the most modern in Europe. In Malta, Robert Abela and his government had to find ways to sustain the economy, which so heavily relies on fisheries, tourism and culture. Digitalisation helped in providing a partial answer – making the necessary and initially only temporary transformation gain prospects also for the future, as virtual tours and performances started increasing in popularity. Experiencing a similar migration of many activities into a virtual space, the Finnish government set up a spe-

cial commission to analyse the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis and the digital leap (especially connected with teleworking), aiming to design ways in which the country could regulate and benefit from digitalisation in the future.

Finally, political colours actually do matter

In substance, Social Democrats in power have re-established themselves as humane and responsible political parties. They have shown that it is possible to govern by 'putting people first', while safeguarding jobs and creating new (also green) jobs at the same time. But possibly the most interesting development of the last year was that finally, when the governing Social

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Democrats were literally faced with a mortal enemy – Covid-19 – they stopped hesitating about their true colours. They dropped the 'there is no alternative' narrative (which they had gradually assumed and which had been haunting them since at least the 1990s) and they shook off the almost obsessive search for conciliatory policies. Instead, they acted upon the values and principles on which the movement was built. They allowed themselves to be authentic, which not only empowered them, but also made people look up to them again.

We have explained how the return to the commitment to jobs offered Social Democrats the confidence to take adequate economic decisions, proving that it is still possible to put the economy at the service of the people. But there have been more actions that they have taken in these incredibly challenging times which have proven Social Democrats' re-established commitment to values such as solidarity, equality, and freedom, as well as to principles such as democracy and gender equality.

A good illustration of these principles can be seen in Pedro Sánchez's speech of 4 April,⁴ when Spain was well into the fight against the first wave of the pandemic and was, as Sánchez said, moving closer to a hope of finally flattening the curve. The Spanish prime minister compared Covid-19 to a kind of civil war. His conclusion was that while the country would have to activate all its resources, it first and foremost had to "protect those people and families that are most vulnerable, so that Covid-19 does not also leave with these civilian victims (...) a veritable legion of social victims". But while recognising the challenges ahead, he remained hopeful, stating that "we can appreciate that the new world, that we are already entering, will not be the same as yesterday's world, and much less like the one before that, when people lived ignoring others and society lacked any form of collective protection. There is no selfish or

4 Press briefing by President of the Government on new measures to combat COVID-19, 4 April 2020 (<https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/presidente/intervenciones/Paginas/2020/20200404press-briefing.aspx>).

individual solution (...), our strength comes from being able to count on one another". He also mentioned the need to protect the elderly, the young and women.

The words of Pedro Sánchez have been playing out in the government's actions, starting with gender equality, which Sánchez's cabinet has made a top priority right from the start. When the pandemic hit, special attention was given to its gender-related consequences. Reports, including the periodical ones by the Carlos III Health Institute, noted that women found themselves in increasingly vulnerable positions again. They constituted the majority of care workers (76 per cent of healthcare professionals in Spain) who were at the frontline of the fight with the pandemic (and hence more exposed to being infected). Women were the first to be overburdened in domestic circumstances (teleworking became the norm for many and schools closed, adding full-time childcare to daily professional duties). The figures showing the number of women affected by domestic violence also increased. The government was determined to act, putting additional resources into support for women on the labour market (including an extraordinary subsidy for the lack of activity of people, under the Special System for Domestic Workers) on the one hand, and into preventive and care programmes, as well as projects assisting victims, on the other.

The Spanish government's line was exemplary, but similar or even broader-reaching actions were also taken by the Social Democrats in power in other countries. In Finland, the government accomplished a "New Government Action Plan for Gender Equality", which was adopted at the dawn of the first phase of the pandemic. It spelled out many issues including improving gender equality in work life and families, combating gender-based discrimination and violence against women, increasing pay transparency, improving the status of sexual minorities, and promoting gender equality in the EU and internationally. In Sweden too, the government recognised that "those already disadvantaged were affected the most", including children and young people, as well as women (especially young women), older people, LGBTI and people with disabilities. Against this backdrop, the Swedish government asked the Swedish Gender Equality Agency to reach out to victims of violence. And the National Board of Health and Welfare was assigned to allocate 100 million SEK to non-profit organisations in order to assist them in their fight against the increased vulnerability resulting from the Covid-19 outbreak. In this area, the Swedish government's activity was unprecedented. The country was also one of the signatories of the "Joint Press Statement Protecting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Promoting Gender-responsiveness in the Covid-19 crisis"⁵ (signed by 59 countries).

Gender equality is one – but far from the only – example of how Social Democrats in power acted upon their core values in 2020. Another example is international solidarity, where 2020 saw all Social Democratic governments in the EU not only sustaining, but also reinforcing, existing global cooperation.

5 Joint press statement Protecting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Promoting Gender-responsiveness in the COVID-19 crisis, published 06 May 2020, Joint press statement by 59 countries (<https://www.government.se/statements/2020/05/joint-press-statement-protecting-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-and-promoting-gender-responsiveness-in-the-covid-19-crisis>).

The Swedish government spoke up forcefully against the anti-democratic behaviour manifested by several countries' governments, where the ruling forces used the pandemic as a pretext for changes that not only do not protect people, but also limit basic freedoms and impede the rule of law as well as human rights. To build a coalition, the Swedish government launched the "Government's Drive for Democracy" initiative, featuring a series of digital conversations with foreign ministers and representatives of key intergovernmental organisations. Furthermore, Sweden remained engaged in international aid. The government argued that international work would not only be about managing the crisis,

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but also about pursuing the mission to build a "sustainable, equitable and gender-equal world". It therefore allocated further funds to the UN, the International Red Cross Movement and in support of multilateral organisations and development banks.

Spain too argued that global cooperation remains crucial. Already in April, the Humanitarian Action Office and NGO Department of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation activated emergency agreements of the NGO consortium of Medicos del Mundo and Faramundi, alongside Accion contra el Hambre, to offer additional funds in several countries in desperate need of humanitarian action (including in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America). Furthermore, Spain was among the key instigators of the Conference of

Donors in solidarity with Venezuelan refugees and migrants; and it kept repeating that all countries should rally behind the UN Secretary General's Agenda to forge multilateralism.

The commitment of these countries' respective governments to act in accordance with their values not only showcases that Social Democrats in power stayed true to their movement's principles, but also manifests a qualitative change. During the previous crisis of 2008, austerity was a mantra. Cuts affected many welfare programmes, gender equality initiatives and international cooperation. This time, however, Social Democrats chose to break away from the confining narrative of 'it cannot be afforded', looking at principles-driven initiatives not as spending, but as investments in a prosperous future. This, despite all the limitations of the Covid-19 era, might be a liberation in the long term.

Key lessons for Social Democratic leadership

Looking back at the past months, it seems that progressives in power contributed to an incredibly important transformation. Truly governing with clear values and a clear mission, instead of merely trying to manage the situation, was what boosted the respective prime ministers' approval ratings, even doubling them in some cases, and was what solidified the parties' positions. They moved away from being seen as traditional, old, organisations, confined by institutional anchoring and addiction to power, to being seen as the governing, responsible

and capable parties that have the necessary strength to lead through the most turbulent times.

They may have benefited, as others have, from the impulse that drove people towards their governments and states when the pandemic hit. But this drive counted only for the beginning, while the extraordinary achievement of Social Democrats was to keep up and fortify the newly established connection between politics and citizens. They sustained and invested in communication channels, broke free from the dominance of the radical forces that were winning votes with the slogan 'we will tell them'. They moved to being the key interlocutors – the ones that listen, understand, care and respond. The ones that prove to be humble and, when needed, admit their mistakes.

What made their governing qualitatively different this time was also the readiness to shift the paradigms and indeed to put people first; to commit to Social Democratic values and to act upon them; to think and proceed with the long term in mind. This allowed them hope, confidence and emancipation from the TINA-dogma (there is no alternative), from austerity and from the overwhelming search for conciliatory solutions. This rediscovered authenticity, combined with the ability to be humane and humble, is at the core of what the polls consistently showed last year. And it is also the reason why it is no longer an impossible dream to think about Social Democrats elsewhere returning to the helm.

But – to end on a note of caution – nothing happens by default. The fact is that societies have recovered their sentiments of solidarity, that societies long for more robust welfare states or that there is an understanding that European cooperation needs to translate into improvements for all. But all these convictions, no matter how broadly shared, do not automatically turn citizens into centre-left movements' members or supporters. There is a long way to go, which will require a great deal of effort to build and rise up on the newly built fundamentals. No matter how difficult it may get, it is reassuring that the ideological compass, and the willingness to persevere and to seek a better, more egalitarian world, are back in place!

Progressives in power contributed to an incredibly important transformation. Truly governing with clear values and a clear mission, instead of merely trying to manage the situation, was what boosted the respective prime ministers' approval ratings and solidified the parties' positions