

# Experiences from Denmark

Britta Thomsen

*Since June 2019, Denmark has had a minority Social Democratic government, after almost 20 years of liberal/conservative governments that were supported by the nationalistic Danish People's Party. The only interruption during those 20 years was a Social Democratic coalition government from 2011 to 2015. This article gives a short presentation of the historic background of the Nordic welfare state since 1960 and the politics that are the precursors of the new ideas of the Danish Social Democratic Party, the current government, and the party leader Mette Frederiksen. The Covid-19 crisis has affected the political environment in Denmark like in other countries and this article explains some of the initiatives that were taken. It is clear that the Danish welfare state played a key role in managing the Covid-19 crisis in Denmark. This article also explains how Danish EU politics have developed and why the Danish trade unions and most political parties are fighting so strongly against the EU directive to establish a minimum wage. Finally, some lessons from the Danish example will be drawn.*

## Historical background

The Nordic Social Democratic parties' visions for the welfare state became a reality during the golden age of the post-war western economies in the 1960s. In 1960, the Danish Social Democratic Party won a landslide victory with 42 per cent of the votes under the slogan 'Make good times better'. It was its best result ever in the post-war era. Contrary to Sweden, Denmark has always had several strong parties and the Social Democratic Party never had an absolute majority. However, the Danish Social Democratic Party did dominate the post-war era, both in terms of electoral performance (the party was always the biggest) and of ideology.

A fundamental part of the identity of the Social Democrats lies in the tradition of equality. If people are not born with the same preconditions to manage their lives – due to the influence of the social environment – this should not impair their opportunities to have a good life. This is the idea behind the Nordic welfare state. Contrary to this, the conservative and liberal philosophy is that the welfare state is only meant for people that cannot take care of themselves, and not universal for everyone. The Social Democratic model is built on a principle of solidarity where everyone pays for everyone. It demands high taxes from the individual, but in the tax system there is a considerable effect of redistribution. A system that allocates the

welfare benefits depending on a person's needs, and not to everybody, may seem fair, but there is less of a redistribution effect. In Denmark, the health system is free for everyone, the state guarantees affordable childcare to all children after 12 months, and there is free access to education including all universities, and every student gets a scholarship, independent of their parents' income. In 1957, a law on a universal pension for everyone, that is not based on their contributions but on the fact of being a citizen, was adopted and it still exists as a kind of basic income for all.

Another feature of the Nordic welfare state is the close relationship between a strong unique trade union and the Social Democratic parties. Scandinavian trade unions have traditionally had a high number of organised workers and a well-functioning labour market with small income differences, and the highest minimum wage in Europe, at around 17 euro per hour.

## **The welfare model and the labour market**

In Denmark salaries and working conditions are typically established by collective agreements concluded between trade unions and employer's associations in the private labour market.

The Danish labour market model came into being in 1899 through the September Agreement, also called the Constitution of the labour market. In this agreement, the trade unions and employers' associations established the rules for the basic labour law concept. The employers recognised the trade unions' right to organise and to go on strike and the employers obtained the right to lead and distribute the work, which means to hire and fire workers. It also stated that trade unions were the only ones that could make deals and collective agreements.

Integrated into this agreement was that all the labour market regulations should only take place through collective agreements between the partners. Both partners can use collective action such as strikes and lockouts, but only during the renewal of the collective agreement which normally takes place every two years. While an agreement is in force, a so-called duty of peace exists, which means no actions can be taken by either partner.

The Danish Unemployment Fund has, unlike in other European countries, been administered by the trade unions since 1907. It is funded by membership fees and by the state and is subject to state regulation. Membership is voluntary and is paid by the individual and not via the employer as the fund is administered by the Unions.

## **Denmark's relation with the EU**

When the United Kingdom decided to enter the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1972, due to the economic weight of Danish agricultural exports to the UK, the Danish Social Democratic Prime Minister Jens Otto Kragh proposed a referendum on whether Denmark should follow suit. The party was divided with a group of young, rather left-wing members of parliament under the leadership of the later European Commissioner Ritt Bjerregaard, who organised a campaign against accession.

However, 63.4 per cent of Danish voters voted in favour of joining the EEC and on 1 January 1973 Denmark entered the European Community together with the UK and Ireland. Danish politicians, however, had explained the EEC to their voters only as a market for goods and services, one that never would develop further into a political union.

All left-wing parties were against membership and two new movements: the People's movement against the EU and later the June movement were created. For many years, both movements were represented in the European Parliament (EP) and many traditional Social Democratic voters supported them. For the first time in the EP election in 2019 neither of these movements were elected.

The referendum on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 resulted in a majority of 50.7 per cent voting against it, because people did not want the EU to deal with more political issues, only the single market.

A new referendum resulted in the Edinburgh Agreement that contains the Danish reservations to the four policies of the referendum. Then referendum after referendum was lost. In 2018, the Danish People's Party and the United Left Party took inspiration from Brexit and proposed a referendum to leave the EU. A recent survey however showed that most Danes are happy to stay in the EU if they can keep their reservations (justice, defence and the euro) included in the Edinburgh Agreement.

Some of Europe's oldest modern democracies, both the Nordic countries as well as the UK, are characterised by a majority democracy where the mantra is "sovereignty in parliament": no one is above or equal to the parliament, therefore, these countries do not feel confident with the EU constitutional courts in Strasbourg and Luxemburg that actively monitor legislators and civil servants. This is one of the reasons why these courts have been criticised so much, especially in Denmark and the UK.

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## **1993-2001: the Nyrup Rasmussen years**

From 1993-2001, the Danish Social Democrats succeeded in winning three elections in a row, under the leadership of Poul Nyrup Rasmussen who formed a government in coalition with the Social Liberals.

When Nyrup Rasmussen took office in 1993, the preceding right-wing government had left the country in an economic crisis and with an unemployment rate of 12 per cent, which is high for Denmark. Nyrup Rasmussen's government chose to kickstart the economy by lifting the taxes on income and increasing public investments. This effort was combined with the famous active employment policy which meant that people receiving social benefits should in principle become active in the labour market or be integrated in the education

system. Soon unemployment fell and many new initiatives were taken, especially in the environmental area and by the adoption of a green energy agenda. When Nyrup Rasmussen lost the election in 2001, Denmark was leading in Europe in both renewable energy and in energy efficiency.

In 1995 a new party, the Danish People's Party, was founded, with an anti-immigration, anti-EU and anti-elitist profile and with the former municipal home-helper Pia Kjaersgaard as its leader. Contrary to some other European populist parties, like AfD in Germany and SD in Sweden, the Danish People's Party presented itself with a social profile specifically in relation to elderly people by demanding higher pensions and housing benefits for pensioners.

During the last years of the Rasmussen government, the Danish People's Party and the other right-wing parties succeeded in pushing immigration to the top of the political agenda. A very liberal refugee legislation from 1983 and family unification programmes had increased the number of refugees and their families living in Denmark. A large part of them never found their way to the labour market and lived on public benefits that were considered a costly public expenditure. The refugees lived amongst the poorest and most vulnerable Danes in social housing areas and many of these Danes felt alienated living with a majority of neighbours from Somalia and Palestine.

A survey on voter behaviour published in 2000 showed that voters turned away from the Social Democratic Party to the Danish People's Party not because they had changed their values, but because they thought that this party would take better care of their interests. Even though globalisation had an overall positive impact on the Danish economy, many workers felt insecure due to structural changes, weakened trade unions, and immigration.

## 2001-2011: right-wing governments

The election in 2001 was held just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and all right-wing parties together orchestrated a campaign against foreigners. For the first time, the liberal Venstre Party, under the leadership of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, received more votes (31 per cent) than the Social Democrats (29 per cent). But what was most surprising was that they also became the largest workers' party in Denmark. Fogh Rasmussen formed a minority government with the Conservative Party that was supported by the Danish People's Party. Unlike in Sweden and Germany, the Danish traditional right-wing parties saw no problem in establishing their government with the national populist party.

Inspired by Tony Blair, Fogh Rasmussen made a contract with the voters on very few and concrete promises such as tightening immigration policy, stopping taxes increase, and being tougher on crime. He also started elite bashing by dissolving more than 100 expert councils financed by the state, alleging that people did not need opinion makers.

New legislation on immigration was approved. People could no longer automatically unite with spouses from third countries and family reunification between young couples could not take place before they were 24 years old, to exclude arranged marriages. Refugee policies were tightened too, so it became more difficult to get asylum. Rejected asylum seekers would

be placed in centres until they agreed to be sent home. Social benefits for asylum seekers were also lowered.

At the beginning of his term, Anders Fogh Rasmussen was a very ideological liberal and wanted to introduce a minimal state as a counterweight to the welfare state, but he soon gave up on this idea to secure support from the Danish People's Party. He succeeded in cutting welfare programmes, introduced new public management, and initiated a digitalisation process in the public administration.

In 2005, Helle Thorning-Schmidt promised she could beat Anders Fogh Rasmussen, whose party continued to win the elections with a heavy focus on an immigration agenda until 2011.

Fogh Rasmussen's government made an agreement with the Social Liberal Party's leader Margrethe Vestager to reduce the unemployment benefit from four to two years. The Social Liberals had always been focused on labour reforms that would increase the number of workers in the market. This legislation was an attack on the core value of the trade unions and the Social Democrats.

## **Helle Thorning-Schmidt: 2011-2015**

After 10 years in opposition, the general election in 2011 finally provided the opportunity to form a new government. Helle Thorning-Schmidt formed a government with Margrethe Vestager's Social Liberals and the People's Socialist Party, which for the first time participated in a government. From the beginning, the three parties had problems finding common ground and ended up with a programme strongly influenced by the social liberals. Vestager insisted on continuing the former government's economic policy with a focus on the supply side. She did not want to restore the unemployment benefits and the new government also made further cuts to the pre-pension schemes. In the middle of the financial crises with growing unemployment, it was difficult for many Social-Democratic voters to understand these decisions.

## **Transformation within the Social Democratic Party**

In the 2015 elections, the Social Democrats progressed a little to 26.3 per cent, but the coalition partners lost votes, making a continuation of the centre-left government impossible. Therefore, Thorning-Schmidt gave up her position as chairperson. So, the liberal Venstre Party formed the government.

The even bigger surprise was that the Danish People's Party had become the second largest party with 21 per cent. The result was not only related to immigration policy but also that they took people's worries in the provincial areas seriously. Many public services had been centralised and moved to the bigger cities and the consequences thereof had been overlooked by the other political parties.

Soon after the general election, a party congress elected Mette Frederiksen as new leader of the Social Democrats. She is a fourth-generation member of the party, hailing from a skilled

working-class family with deep roots in the trade union movement and in local politics in the northern part of Denmark.

Frederiksen, who was elected to parliament for the first time 20 years earlier when she was 23 years old, had been minister of employment and later of justice in Thorning-Schmid's government. She was convinced that a new political direction was needed if the Social Democrats wanted to come back in power. Her new headline was 'back to basics', which meant classical Social Democratic values that responded to people's concerns. A new programme under the overall theme of fighting inequality was approved at the congress in 2016, where the party also distanced itself from the Thorning era.

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For a few decades, the public sector had been inspired by market-based management philosophies. Focusing on efficiency and possible improvements can be good, but it had gone too far. The public sector in Denmark cannot be reduced to numbers on a spreadsheet. It consists of people with commitment, diligence, and professionalism. The public sector is an important part of our community. Therefore, it must be managed and organised according to the values of our community.

The programme also explained how globalisation could benefit everyone and highlighted the fight against climate change and that the green transition must be a social project to avoid losing the support of workers and the middle class. A green society should also be a more equal and just one, with new potentials for the creation of better jobs and living conditions.

On immigration, the new programme said: "We have parallel societies in Denmark where immigrants and their descendants live isolated from the Danish community and in accordance with other values than the Danish ones. In Denmark, everyone should live in accordance with rules of democracy and respect our values of freedom. Religious and paternalistic standards should never be above law and order. No one should ever be subject to social control in Denmark". The high number of foreigners without education and the lack of integration are also considered as an economic problem. The more people without employment that do not contribute to society, the more difficult it is to maintain welfare in the country. Therefore, for the Social Democratic Party, improving integration significantly is a main priority.

With this clear statement on integration, the party was ready to have a dialogue with the government and other right-wing parties on what was named the "Ghetto Package". It was a policy that moves people out of their homes to another neighbourhood to avoid a high concentration of unemployed, uneducated, and too many foreigners in certain areas that create parallel societies.

At the PES Leaders' Dinner in Lisbon in December 2018, Mette Frederiksen summarised in her speech the position of the Danish party. She said it was important to acknowledge that

many Social Democratic parties in Europe had lost the confidence of the citizens. For many people, globalisation meant the loss of employee rights, growing inequalities, and uncontrolled immigration. When there are not the necessary Social Democratic answers, it is natural that voters disappear. She then argued that Social Democrats should go back to the classical redistribution policy, invest more in welfare, and education and control the immigration policy, so the country does not receive more immigrants than it can integrate. The goal of the Danish Social Democratic Party is to avoid a class of working poor, as it first appeared in the US and later in some European countries too, and a new underclass of poor immigrants.

Mette Frederiksen also stated that many challenges – like tax havens, common enterprise taxation and stopping the race towards the bottom – could only be solved at EU level. The EU should get in control of the free movement of workers because it puts pressure on the labour markets. It should also have a policy towards the tech giants and fight climate change together.

In the 2019 election, the Social Democrats under Frederiksen's leadership succeeded in regaining voters from the far-right Danish People's Party, even though the result was lower than expected (25.9 per cent). At the same time, the party lost voters to the three other centre-left parties – United Left, the Socialist People's Party, and the Social Liberals – in the so-called Red Bloc. Especially in Copenhagen and other big cities, younger voters had moved to the other Red Bloc parties. But together, the Red Bloc ended up with 94 out of the total of 179 seats in parliament. The Danish People's Party lost half of its seats. The conclusion of the election was that the Danes voted for more welfare spending and increased action on climate change.

The Social Democrats became the largest party and Mette Frederiksen preferred to form a minority government based on the so-called paper of understanding between the parties of the Red Bloc. A minority government has the advantage of allowing the making of agreements with other parties. Mette Frederiksen made it clear that the government would be based on strong ideological values, open to many of the demands of the parties in the Red Bloc, but it would not make concessions on immigration policy.

The paper of understanding focuses heavily on climate change as one of the most important issues. The agreement will make Denmark one of the world's leading countries in the green transition, with a 70 per cent reduction of the CO<sub>2</sub> levels of the 1990s, by 2030.

This will be done by national strategies in all energy-spending areas, from buildings to transportation, and other industries. Since the paper of understanding was adopted, concrete initiatives have been taken; among others, a new green tax reform that should lead to a uniform taxation of CO<sub>2</sub> and a huge investment in the development of green technologies. Now, only one year and a half after the election, an action plan has been adopted. It contains a target of 46-50 per cent CO<sub>2</sub> reduction by 2025. In accordance with the so-called Danish model (which entails the involvement of all social partners in negotiations, editor's note), Climate Partnerships have been established in different sectors of the economy with the respective stakeholders from enterprises, trade unions and others. Each sector has to present strategy and solution catalogues for their specific area. Also, a green road transport and a target of 1 million electric cars in 2030 are part of the plan.

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During the election campaign, Mette Frederiksen had said that she wanted to become the prime minister of the children, and the paper of understanding put a high priority on fighting child poverty and improving childcare. High quality kindergartens are considered a precondition to being the best country to live in for children. Already in the financial law for 2021, a plan for minimum standards for staff numbers per child was adopted. The target is a maximum of three children per adult in nurseries and six children per adult in kindergartens. Money was also allocated to improve the professional training of educators as well as the ordinary school system. Children who are at risk can be removed from their parents more easily and placed in foster families.

An important priority for Mette Frederiksen was the introduction of a new pension scheme reserved for workers with low levels of education and many years in the labour market. This was predicted to be difficult to realise politically, but the minister of employment, Peter Hummelgaard, succeeded passing the legislation with support of the Danish People's Party, while the Social Liberals did not want to participate because it would move 10,000 people out of the labour market.

Recently, a plan for the decentralisation of public service has been adopted. Right-wing governments had closed police stations, hospitals, and education centres in provincial and remote areas that now are going to be reopened. A new legislation on housing policy for the cities has been adopted to counter gentrification and speculation in rental housing.

The Social Democratic government also introduced new ways of working in the ministries. Instead of seeing the ministries as silos, policies are now transversal. Hence, green policy is not only related to the environment and climate but also to industrial and research policies. And development policy in Africa is now linked to the creation of refugee camps in Africa, from where people can directly seek asylum in Denmark without the need to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

In the first year of her government Mette Frederiksen has already had to deal with the MMF and the Recovery Fund. In the Danish parliament it was difficult to find support for raising the EU budget and she proposed to modernise it with more focus on a green economy and research instead of allocating money for agriculture and structural funds. Concerning the Recovery Fund, the Danish government thought it was better to give loans and only as a one-time occurrence. This position was not difficult to understand as she had difficulties in getting support from both the alliance partners and other parties in the Danish Parliament when she went to Brussels to negotiate.

The situation did not get any easier when the Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio (Five Star Movement) announced during the negotiation on the Recovery Fund that he would spend the money to lower taxes and pension age to 62, during a very heated discussion on raising the pension age to 70. Danish trade union leaders were furious and accused the Danish govern-



ment of contributing to reduce the pension age in a country with high life expectancy while demanding Danes work until they are 70 years old.

## **The Danish Covid-19 strategy**

A lockdown was decided on 11 March 2020, by Frederiksen with support from all other parties of the Danish parliament. She reacted quickly after a recommendation from the Italian Health Minister. A closure of the borders was decided against the recommendation of the national health authorities. In this way, she opted for a political way to handle the crisis. She also told the citizens that during the process of handling Covid-19, people should be prepared that the government would make mistakes as there were no previous experiences with dealing with a pandemic of this nature.

A strong welfare state and its institutions, with free access to hospitals and medical services, were at the core of the Danish Covid-19 strategy. For example, soon after the beginning of the lockdown, infected people living in small apartments together with others received access to isolation in youth hostels or hotels.

Regarding the compensation to small and big companies, the government has set up a tripartite forum with the labour markets' partners to discuss the different support schemes or the so-called help packages that fit different kinds of situations depending on the type of company and needs. To keep companies afloat, fixed expenses and labour costs have been compensated along with the possibility to receive a loan and defer VAT. Also, freelancers and self-employed people have access to compensation.

Regarding unemployment benefits, the normal rules were cancelled and the right to receive benefits will be extended by several months. At the same time, the amount was raised and people who were working from home have the right to receive education while at home.

In Denmark, a comprehensive test strategy has been implemented, only surpassed in Europe by Slovenia in Europe. All tests are free for everyone.

The Danish hospitals were never overcrowded as in other countries, and the virus was kept under control until December. The culture plays a key role in relation to the spread of Covid-19. Danes do not live together across generations, and young people do not usually live with their parents. When politicians do agree on following the rules in one direction, citizens tend to follow suit.

During the summer, the Social Democrats gained new heights in the polls, with approval rates of up to 35.5 per cent. Quite like in the 'good old days'. But there have also been bumps in the road, not least in relation to the problem of the Danish minks. The health authorities

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warned that due to mutations of Covid-19 in minks, Denmark, as the world's biggest mink breeder, could become a new Wuhan. The government asked the mink owners to kill 17 million of them against compensation. The case became complicated and developed into a big problem for the government and the agriculture minister had to resign, because the order to kill the minks had no legal basis. It seemed like the opposition finally had a case against the government. However, the prime minister still enjoys high trust, and the recent polls show no decline in the approval rates. A compensation for the mink breeders have been approved by the parliament.

The government has presented a vaccination plan that will offer free vaccination to all citizens. and all residents will be vaccinated before this summer.

The handling of the Covid-19 crisis is completely different from the right-wing government's approach to the financial crisis some years ago. The help packages for enterprises are designed to avoid layoffs and closures. Money is also invested in requalification of the workforce and green transformation of the social housing sector. This is also a way of combining the green transition with new and better jobs.

## **Future challenges for the Danish government**

The Covid-19 pandemic has delayed many of the initiatives intended by the government – not least the transformation of the public sector. However, many new laws have been decided upon or implemented. The results of the mink case are still unclear and the farmers have not been compensated yet.

On the EU level, the Danish government has some challenges ahead: not least in relation to the Social Summit during the Portuguese presidency. The trade unions as well as all political parties, except the Social Liberals, are against the new EU proposal for a directive of a European minimum wage.

Because of the opposition from the Nordic countries to the directive on minimum wage, the European Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, Nicolas Schmit, paid his first visit to Denmark and Sweden to guarantee that the proposed directive will neither destroy the Danish or Swedish labour models nor weaken their trade unions. But the Danish government and the social partners still believe that it will have catastrophic consequences for the whole Danish society. One thing is certain, if agreed, the more radical elements of the Danish left and the trade union movements, who are traditionally sceptic towards the EU, will protest and demand that Denmark leaves the EU.

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A more federal approach with qualified majority vote instead of unanimity in defence and security, foreign policy and the EU budget will probably not gain support from the Danish parliament and the government wants to avoid more referenda, as most of them have been lost in past decades.

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## Conclusion and summary

Like in the good old days, the Danish Social Democrats have become the largest party in the last elections, in June 2019. Even with only 25.9 per cent of the votes, it was able to form a minority government with the support of two left-wing parties and the Social Liberals, called the 'Red bloc'.

Since she was elected leader of the party Mette Frederiksen has given priority to:

- welfare reforms coupled with a critique of centralisation of the public sector such as hospitals and police stations that were closed in local areas;
- a stricter stance on immigration and asylum, coupled with a strengthened focus on integration;
- an early retirement scheme for low skilled workers with many years on the labour market;
- an ambitious climate policy;
- a more leftist economic policy, particularly in relation to inequality, tax avoidance and the financial sector.

The Red Bloc alliance agreed on a paper of understanding with a very progressive agenda on green policy and welfare. During the election campaign, Frederiksen had promised to continue tightening politics on asylum and migration. She only gave a few concessions to the other parties by receiving more UN refugees and letting rejected asylum seekers with children stay outside the detention centres. By adopting a stricter stance on immigration, the Social Democratic Party was able to neutralise the policy issue that had given the right-wing four election victories.

At the end of the 1990s we witnessed the Social Democratic electorate turn toward the right after the decline of old industries and an increased globalisation that did not benefit ordinary workers. Later, during the financial crises in 2008, the centre-left did not respond with Social Democratic solutions to the financial crisis.

When Mette Frederiksen was elected leader of the Social Democratic Party she wanted to go back to classical Social Democratic values of redistributions and welfare policies combined with the fight against climate change and controlled migration. She listened to people's worries and succeeded in getting many of the old the traditional voters back, while many of the young citizens with higher education in the cities supported green policies and voted for the other parties of the Red Bloc.

The Covid-19 crises has strengthened the Danish Social Democratic Party and the prime minister. Citizens have regained trust in the benefits of a strong welfare model and the support for the government has increased considerably.

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policy. But in a globalised world, with open borders and access for everyone to all services, it is difficult to continue upholding such a welfare state.

In Denmark education is not only free, students get grants during their period of study and they get access to loans with low interest rates. This has made Denmark a magnet for students from other European countries, even more so as an important part of the university courses are taught in English. After going home, a vast majority of the foreign students do not repay the loans and leave a large bill with the Danish taxpayers. This is a problem constantly raised by the populist and EU sceptic parties, and Mette Frederiksen will have to find a solution.

The challenges for Mette Frederiksen in the longer run will be that she will have to deal with the demands from the other parties of the Red Bloc. The closer we get to the next election, the more they need to brand themselves on their specific policies. The left will demand more welfare spending and a faster

process in the climate fight at any cost. The Social Liberals will demand reforms that generate labour supply and open the country for more import of labour from third countries. Currently however, the economy and the political situation are so influenced by the Covid-19 situation that all parties see an interest in a close collaboration.

The Red Bloc, led by four female party leaders, never stood stronger in the polls and could be a role model for other Social Democratic parties and coalitions in other European countries. In this moment, the Red Bloc stands at 60 per cent support – more than ever before.