



**PROGRESSIVE
YEARBOOK 2020**



Looking back to look ahead!

The 2019 European Parliament elections have triggered a thorough reflection not only on the state of the Union and the project of European integration, but also on the state of social democracy in Europe. This reflection has been, and continues to be, a difficult process. Sometimes even uncomfortable. Yet necessary, if we want to be active players and shape the future that is unfolding. What we now see is the possible way forward.

This Progressive Yearbook is a new FEPS publication. Taking stock of last year's events and developments, it will help highlight the most important achievements, as well as the lessons, of 2019. But our Progressive Yearbook is also, and above all, about the future. It is an opportunity to stop for a moment and look forward, set priorities, and put on paper some of the expectations and plans against which future developments will have to be tested.

Through a variety of online and printed publications in 2019, including our flagship Progressive Post, FEPS has provided quality analysis and reflection for its readers. New instruments, such as the podcasts (FEPS Talks), have been successfully introduced. In 2020 we plan to keep offering our understanding of European politics, while continuing to innovate using old and new channels. The Progressive Yearbook is part of our innovating effort.

As the leading progressive think tank in Europe, FEPS wants to demonstrate that by publishing a regular yearbook it has the capacity to bring together political leaders, activists and academic experts from our political family, as well as collect critical data and deliver sharp analysis along with concrete proposals.

The FEPS Progressive Yearbook is something from which our readers can learn, while hopefully also enjoying their read.

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LOOKING BACK

Eppur si muove...

How the European Elections 2019 became a turning point against all the odds

Ania Skrzypek

The European elections are a very strange event in the political calendar. Unlike the national elections, they cannot be called any time, whenever there is a grave crisis and the political stakeholders find themselves either in a deadlock or in a search for a renewed legitimacy. But while they take place at a fixed point every five years and hence, in theory, they could be more predictable, they prove to be the hardest to prepare for, the trickiest to run a campaign for, and the most volatile when it comes to overall results.

One could wonder why this is actually the case. There is a handful of explanations. First of all, while political scientists have unfortunately classified them as the vote of second order, for years there was the impression that they are a very different kind of game. For the parties in government they frequently proved to be particularly difficult, being seen as a sort of a mid-term. For the parties in opposition they were a window of opportunity to launch an attack on those in power. For the new groupings and protest movements European elections represented a chance to emerge. And finally, for the citizens, they seemed to offer a possibility to express their general or particular dissatisfaction, usually over an unrelated issue. That is, should they actually turn up at the polling station, which, for every election, can be taken for granted less and less.

Secondly, there has been a tendency to analyse the European elections in a fashion that would suggest that they were a periodical referendum on the European Union itself. The lower the turnout and the greater the participation of the anti-European groupings, the more likely the commentators would conclude that the vote exhibited a growing crisis (of confidence), a disenchantment of the European voters questioning the very sense of Europe and a lack of democratic embedding of the *Brussels bureaucracy*. Sadly, because of the strong belief that these are a different sort of election, analyses regarding participation, performance of the traditional parties and subsequent protest votes would be conducted as detached from the research on the state of contemporary democracy.

Thirdly, there has been another harmful, however comforting theory coined that would be continually brushed up every five years. It refers to the assumed lack of knowledge about the European Union among the EU citizens. It has been argued that *if only* the citizens had known more about the institutions and processes, they would most evidently rush to cast their votes in the European elections. Additionally, they would not believe in the scapegoating when it comes to Brussels imposing diverse unpopular decisions on the member states, and they would not get trapped in the vicious arguments of the nationalists (as was allegedly the case ahead of the UK referendum on EU membership). There are many problems with this line of reasoning, but the two most profound are that the contemporary voters are possibly at their most aware ever in the history of democracy, and that assuming ignorance also suggests a relatively high degree of arrogance on the side of those making such claims.

Explaining the European elections as a second-order tactical vote for some, a referendum on the EU for others, and a quite random act for yet another group is among the reasons why these elections are both cherished and feared. They are indeed celebrated as the only mechanism enabling direct democratic legitimisation for the citizens, while they are also always anticipated with precaution that they will end with yet another disappointment when it comes to scarce turnout, growing fragmentation of the European Parliament and an increase in seats gained by the anti-EU forces. Not surprisingly, ahead of May 2019 these were also the sentiments shared among the traditional European political parties, their groups in the EP and their members gearing up to run the campaigns 'back home'.

In other words, looking back 12-18 months, the overall mood was depressive. While the EU seemed to have been unable to pull itself out of the overall crisis, it appeared to have kept failing subsequent other tests as well. The challenge of enhanced migration exposed its incapacity to live by the principle values, both when it comes to humanitarian approach towards those seeking refuge and when it comes to exercising solidarity among member. Furthermore, the lines of internal divides of the Union deepened: the UK filed an intention to leave the EU; the eurozone members kept on pondering mechanisms of enhanced cooperation for EMU participants only; and the East and West split has become critical.

These issues began to also matter a great deal in the national context, which some called the Europeanisation of domestic politics. They added to a struggle that the traditional parties (conservatives, social democrats and some liberals) were particularly entangled in. They were already facing a critical crossroads with the national elections and referenda being more frequently called for, with the prolonging and frequently inconclusive attempts to form governments, and with the still persistent lack of trust in politics from the side of the voters – but now, on the top of all of that, they needed to come up with a convincing, cohesive position on Europe and its future. And that has not been easy at all, especially as saying 'no' to the EU has always been a straightforward answer and saying 'yes' has always been a complex task ending in being attacked on all flanks either way.

For the social democrats in particular, the run-up to the elections was not a great period. Once again, they have been experiencing a phase of electoral defeats. Many of them were noted as historically 'new low' points, not only because they had never sunk that deep, but also because they had never imagined that they would fall that much. That meant

subsequent internal crises and division when it came to a choice of both paths for renewal and personalities of leaders. That meant that they were approaching the European battlefield with broken frontlines, as well as with a sense of insecurity multiplied by all the polling results. The forecasts were suggesting that social democrats will not only lose, but will also be the third or fourth group in the EP as a result. Against this backdrop imagining an energising campaign, to *keep the red flag flying* and be a political force to make a difference, seemed not only unrealistic, but possibly also infantile and inappropriate. Nevertheless, and totally against all the odds, progressives did just that – they dared to believe that they could break out of the vicious circle of defeats and draining self-criticism. And when it came to call, on 26 May 2019, they were in a position to say: *addirittura si muove – albeit it moves*. Both because they rose above their own threshold, and the contribution they made through their campaign was a factor in changing the face of the European elections. This was no longer yet another piece of the puzzle depicting the overall democratic crisis, but rather a turning point heading towards a new counterphase.

The 10 points below look further into this, exploring both the supporting evidence from the campaign and its aftermath, and also suggesting a couple of issues that the centre-left could further develop to maintain the momentum that they had the audacity to create.

Against all the odds, progressives dared to believe that they could break out of the vicious circle of defeats and draining self-criticism

1. Progressives made a contribution to a debate on the future of Europe through their successful campaign

In the paragraphs above, several reasons were listed as to why the time directly ahead of the campaign was one of doubt and hesitation. At that point there was no sign that the upcoming electoral round would be any different to the earlier ones, and to that end that there was a chance to either provide another kind of quality debate on the future of Europe and herewith encourage more people to actually choose among the programmes, go to the polling stations and vote. The polls across the EU were still insisting that citizens (especially young ones) remain disenchanted with politics and hence would abstain, and what would prove a major challenge for the traditional parties would be the fact that the campaign would be stirred by the anti-Europeans. Their messages would evidently not focus on how Europe connects but on the issues that divides states, regions, inhabitants.

To that end, for those active on the European level, there may have been an additional spoiler. In the preceding months the discussion about democratisation of the EU seem to have been heading down a blind alley. The proposal regarding the establishment of transnational lists was rejected, despite strong backing of people such as President Macron. And there seems to have been little appetite among conservatives or liberals to try to accelerate the design of the campaign. The ghosts of the past concerning the Council's unfavourable attitude

towards the European Parliament's interpretation of the Lisbon Treaty when it comes to election of the President of the Commission were still haunting Brussels. So the question that could be colloquially phrased as "why even bother" did not seem to be that inappropriate.

But while social democrats may have still been focusing on preventing losses in the summer of 2018, the dynamic had already changed by autumn. The first sign of it was the fact that two highly respectable candidates presented themselves to be elected as Top Candidates in the 2019 race. Then, following the PES Congress in Lisbon in December 2018, as well as the PES Election Congress in Madrid in February 2019, the attitudes altered further. There was a certain strength that transcended from the speeches of not only Frans Timmermans, but also especially the party leaders and hosts Antonio Costa and Pedro Sanchez. Subsequently, social democrats entered into the campaign with eagerness to believe that they could make a difference. They reached the turning point where much more than listening to what the polls were saying, they committed to listening to what they themselves and the voters had to say directly. It was a breakthrough indeed.

This was refreshing. Finally, the progressives stopped whining, and categorically refused to give in and give up. And while the momentum of Frans Timmermans assuming the leadership with freshness and eagerness is best depicted by the photo of him with young campaigners biking through sunny Lisbon, the enthusiasm of the next stage resonates best with a thousand

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people standing up to cheer and sing in the heart of Madrid two months later. This is when the programme was presented and adopted, and what made it unique was its positive tone.

The 2019 PES Manifesto called for a new social contract, which stood for a promise of social justice, of quality jobs for all and for environmental sustainability. These messages were also echoed in the electoral platforms of all these member parties that decided eventually to additionally adopt their own election programmes. While offering hope, progressives became more hopeful themselves yet again. Especially as time has shown again and again during the campaign that a positive approach and proposals on how to proceed was precisely what the voters were longing for. The tide was changing, and the national elections taking place in the meantime in Spain and in Finland

brought further good news for the centre-left. Cautious, but encouraged, the social democrats continued campaigning intensively until the very last minute. And when they reached the finishing line, collectively on the European level they could look back and say: it would seem that we not only changed our own tides but we ensured a new kind of quality in the campaign, and we also introduced some very relevant issues into a debate on Europe.

These last points remain a strong legacy, and it is most exciting to see social democrats pursue them – either in the shape of the New Green Deal as outlined by Frans Timmermans in the capacity of the Commission Vice-President, or the launch of an idea of a European Minimum Wage announced just at the end of the year as a valid proposal from another progressive Commissioner, Nicolas Schmit.

2. Frans Timmermans has progressed to become the leader for Europe, consolidating social democrats during and after the European elections

The Lisbon Treaty's article implying that the candidate backed by the majority in the European Parliament should become the President of the European Commission was seen as a breakthrough at the time of its introduction. But soon after it became a reason for many tensions – amongst the EU and its member states, among the institutions, as well as within the political families. The social democrats themselves were not in a position to agree on having a top candidate in 2009 (which many still look back on with disappointment) and while they did succeed in uniting behind Martin Schulz in 2014, half the term later they were reviewing their internal procedures and at that point there may have been no clarity as to who would run it the next time round.

The broader context was not particularly encouraging either. The conservatives had a good start with a public sparring of two candidates, but the winner – Manfred Weber – turned out not to fulfil the hopes what the EPP entrusted him with. The liberals did not choose anyone to be the *Spitzenkandidat* this time, which was a surprise indeed, as ALDE had been one of the most forceful proponents of the idea itself. Instead they presented a team, which, however, was not at all a team of potential commissioners – which, had it been the case, could have been seen as a political innovation. The Greens went with the safe option of the already known candidate from the 2014 race Ska Keller, paired with Bas Eikhout. In that sense the battlefield was not exactly well defined and for social democrats the issue was not only to eventually come up with a Top Candidate, but also to determine the conditions in which the campaign would evolve as much as possible.

To that end, when Frans Timmermans emerged to be the PES *Spitzenkandidat*, there still were quite a few questions, and many tried to compare him with Martin Schulz and his undoubtedly inspiring, exciting campaign from five years before. But although Timmermans, as Schulz, was a European through and through, and like him had a rare ability to speak (and joke) freely in a handful of languages and also a skill in connecting with people, he was a politician with a very different kind of a profile. That soon after turned out to be to a great advantage, proving that not only every time needs its own answer – but also that every campaign requires a different kind of leadership. Consequently, looking from a perspective of that time, as well as now – half a year after the vote – it is evident that Frans Timmermans indisputably became the perfect Top Candidate for PES in the context of the European elections campaign 2019.

To begin with, he was very well known, both in his home country – the Netherlands – and also abroad. The level of his recognition was therefore already initially significantly higher than that of anyone else in the race. As a commissioner, he was a symbol of the fight for democracy and against any policy or any state that would threaten that. Moreover, throughout the campaign he let himself be known also as a politician striving for equal rights for men and women, for a European minimum wage, for just corporate taxation and for action against climate change – all those core issues that both traditional and renewed social democracies

would stand for. This made him such a powerhouse that the negative electorate that he would face, especially at the beginning (alongside the internet trolling), started melting to the extent in which adverse advertisements against him would backfire. As the campaign progressed, a decisive shift in Frans Timmermans' rating became particularly visible during the subsequent Top Candidates debates. He actually won each sparring match, starting from the initial one at the University of Maastricht. This was a symbolic victory, since it has been continuously claimed that social democrats do not poll well among young people. The outcome suggested the contrary.

All these cumulated in the phenomenon called 'Timmermans effect'. Most tangibly, it led to two outcomes. First, the list he led for PvdA in the Netherlands re-emerged from the depressive lows of previous electoral defeats and reached the proverbial sky of winning an overwhelming number of six seats in the EP. Secondly, in the context of the EU, it elevated him as the strongest contender for a leadership position in Europe. And at the start of the negotiations it was certain that neither he nor the social democrats would give up that easily in the approaching negotiations, even if they did not have the highest number of seats in the European Parliament and even if at that stage the call for a gender-balanced Commission was being used as an argument against him. What followed was a vicious attempt to destroy his candidacy further by hammering on the argument that Timmermans does not enjoy the trust of at least two member states – Hungary and Poland. But even that proved not to be sufficient to side-line him from a solid leadership position, which is why he still remains an authority today, an unquestionable leader of the progressive family (also inside the Commission) and a person behind the European Green Deal – which is likely to be the most important overall project of the current legislation.

3. Social democrats presented a community of very strong candidates across the national lists, who have been making a difference since the beginning of the mandate

In the introduction, it was mentioned that the European elections used to be seen as less relevant than the national ones. That was the case both for the voters, as well as for some of the national parties. This attitude considerably influenced the composition of the electoral lists in the past, with the result being that many of them were often a strange mix of famous political veterans and little-known names. Many of the Members of the European Parliament would re-run, frequently successfully, and many would remain recognisable voices on respective dossiers. In the 2019 election this was about to change, as the predictions were already suggesting that it would be the largest turnover so far among the representatives.

The PES member parties anticipated it. Additionally, because of the context, already broadly described above, they made an effort to ensure that the composition of their respective European election lists would involve a set of very strong names. On one hand, there would be quite a few very well-known personalities heading the lists and offering them a boost. Being able to run on famous names was an asset, as the European campaigns are shorter

than the national ones and it is hard to gain a serious profile during its rapid course. From today's perspective, this strategy translated into a great degree of knowledge, competence and experience among the MEPs as in their ranks there are several former prime ministers and ministers. On the other, there was also a fair degree of young(er) contenders placed in positions that perhaps would not offer election by default but would provide a better chance to fight for it. This prompted a desirable transformation, which remains in sync with the generational change that seems to be taking place across the social democratic parties (with Finland, Denmark and the Czech Republic paving the way on the level of leadership of course). What is also worth noting is that social democrats did better than ever before in terms of making their electoral lists gender balanced, with most national parties using the so-called 'zip-system'. To that end, some countries went for a shared responsibility of top men and women to present themselves as 'joint leadership of the list'.

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What was interesting was that, also because of such a mix on the list and effective, very diversified campaigns that they run, social democrats were able to break out of the curse that seem to have been hanging above the traditional parties in the past. To offer some examples, in Austria, it was the first election since the right-wing government was formed and the SPÖ emerged from it as a party with higher approvals, perceived through the work of its candidates as the one "closer to the people". In the course of the pre-electoral struggle, the party also promoted the chair of the youth organisation – who has become not only known, but also reaching top approval figures – which translated into socialist solid result in the student elections shortly after. In Slovenia, the campaign brought additional positive energy and saw the party double in terms of the seats at the end, which was also the case for the social democrats in Estonia. Furthermore, against the previously established tendencies of second-order election that would see the governing parties punished, the Swedish SAP, the Maltese Labour Party, Portuguese PS, and particularly the Spanish PSOE came out victorious, additionally consolidating their positions in their respective countries.

So while social democrats (as every other Group in the European Parliament) saw a high turnover in terms of members, the new community of elected MEPs is clearly a force to be reckoned with. The very initial look at the new MEPs' profiles indicated that the Progressive family gained in terms of the capacity to further strengthen its voice in such policy areas as Common Foreign and Security Policy; Economic and Monetary policies; Democracy, Diversity and Human Rights, and Gender Equality. And the first months that are now rounding up have been a period in which it became clear that although S&D is not the largest of the groups, it is definitely there when it comes to striving for a primacy of political initiatives – having in their ranks many heavy-weights and potential spokesperson in the key dossiers that the EU is bound to tackle in the course of this parliamentary term.

To that end, the power of the new group lies in the coherence that it can bring about. Of course, one could potentially still frown at such a claim, referring to some of the clear divides

from the beginning of the mandate and the tensions that were even more clearly exposed around the election of Ursula von der Leyen as the new Commission's President. But even if those disagreements have been an issue, they have rather evolved around the strategy and not around specific policy dossiers. Here the centre-left can be proud of having reached a consensus and having consolidated policy positions around a vast amount of questions. This is an advantage vis-à-vis the liberals in particular, who have recently undergone a profound transformation and even renamed the Group 'Renew', or the Greens for that matter, which as successful as they may be, still remain quite divided internally.

4. The increased turnout is a signal that the European elections are no longer a second-order vote, and also that the times of permissive consensus and overwhelming abstentions are over

Since the first vote in 1979, the turnout in the European elections has shown a steady tendency of a decline. Dropping from the level of 61.99%, it hit an unprecedented low at 42.61% in 2014. It was especially striking that the countries who joined the EU in and after 2004 would be among those having the smallest percentage of the population taking an active part, with Slovakia's 13.05% and Czech Republic 18.20% voters showing at the polling stations. Initially, the high degree of abstention was attributed to two factors. Firstly, that the European elections are the second order vote and hence, among its features, attract fewer people. Second, that there is a phenomenon called 'permissive consensus', which means that the Europeans generally go with the flow when it comes to deciding on the future of the EU.

The situation already began to change by 2014, whereby the turnout stayed low, but the number of votes that could be described as protest ones have increased, as a consequence of an overall dissatisfaction with traditional politics and with the EU itself in the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis and austerity's era. Raising protest votes were expected to be the characteristics of the European elections 2019, but even anticipating them did not prepare anyone for the final figures, and the increase in turnout to 50.9% came as a surprise to many.

Evidently, there have been also some specific national reasons when it comes to mobilisation within the respective member states. In Poland, for example, the major issue was about picking sides in a battle between the governing party and the opposition united in the European Coalition, which to some extent was also an expression of attitude towards possible 'Polexit'. In the UK, the campaign was run as if this was not an election, but rather another (so much demanded by so many) referendum on the country's membership in the European Union. In Spain, the European elections coincided with other votes, so the country has seen an almost continuous mobilisation throughout 2019, in all of which stages the EU as a topic was present. So although specificities differed, in general the turnout was higher because people wanted to come and decide which Europe they wanted to live in and whom they wanted to see it governed (or not governed) by. Herewith the previously established

tendencies for the smaller or opposition parties to perform better were undermined, decisively breaking with the patterns of the second order election.

What is also worth noting is that the European elections took place in the midst of media fascination with the youth protests and a new kind of social mobilisation in the name of climate change. These attracted many people to engage, to rally for a positive message (sustainable world) and in themselves were a kind of breakthrough. Unlike in the past, participants of those demonstrations – and among them young people in particular – were no longer stating their revolt against the system or political stakeholders *sensu largo*. They were not anti-political, but to the contrary; they were arguing that another kind of politics was possible. They have not formed new parties but argued that one should take part in the elections as they are the tool to enable having a say and, to that end, choose those who could improve the quality of democracy. Seeing the grown turnout in this way, one can ask if perhaps this was not a sign of a profound shift that would see Europe moving from the democratic predicament into a new phase, a period of deepening engagement, and hence a kind of a counter-revolt. Should such hypothesis prove valid, coining a better understanding of this new momentum may be of a great importance, especially in regard to the preparations towards the Future of Europe conference.

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5. Votes in the European elections have triggered changes within the member states, showcasing the Europeanisation of national politics

As already hinted in the previous passages, these elections were also different because of the phenomenon that some of the political scientists label as ‘Europeanisation of the national politics’. The term refers to the presence of the EU issues in the national debates, which then transcend into being the topic of conversation also within populations. The term Europeanisation has been very controversial in the past, whereby it has met with opposition of those (also amongst progressives) who would hear in it a note of conquest and hence would rather give it a pejorative meaning. But as it stands today, this is perhaps the best term to reflect the fact that European Union is no longer an additional, rather foreign layer of politics.

Naturally it is hard to pin in down to one moment when EU affairs became inseparably connected with national issues. It was not yet the turn of the century, whereby of course certain questions would animate different nations (such as the struggle for the Constitutional Treaty or the quest for accession from Central and Eastern European countries). But towards the end of the decade, when the crisis (firstly financial, then economic) hit, the EU became the reference point, especially in those countries who were more affected by the crash. Following

the further challenges connected with the strive for recovery, for an answer to migration and then for the preservation of the core values in the member states, the Union's presence in the debates increased and was also enhanced in the minds and hearts of the citizens. This was quite strongly illustrated i.e. by the increasing number of EU flags appearing at demonstrations – in France, in Poland, in the UK, to name just a few. This prompted further efforts from politicians, a number of whom tried to influence the direction that the EU should take to reform itself. Consequently, the years 2014 to 2019 saw the largest amount of lectures on Europe – from heads of states and of governments, among them President Macron, Prime Minister May and Prime Minister Costa. The European Commission and its President Jean-Claude Juncker even proposed five scenarios, to which the social democrats added a sixth one that re-emphasised the need for a strong social dimension. With all those, at the time of the European elections there was no longer primacy of the crisis and crisis management discourse. It was time to provide answers that would not only inspire further integration, but also would show commitment and consequences for the member states in which the campaign was led.

Beyond the European elections 2019 moving away from the second-order-vote pattern, what counts is the impact that the electoral results have already had and will have on the member states' domestic politics. For the parties in government, it was a chance to consolidate their mandate. To give an example, a month before the European elections the Spanish PSOE had emerged as the first party from the general elections. Although its victory was unquestionable and was received by other sister parties in Europe with enthusiasm, the situation in Spain remained slightly precarious in terms of prospects for the government negotiations. The prompt strong victory in the European round therefore evidently reinforced the position of Pedro Sanchez's party and this fact in itself was another game changer, even if there was no possibility to form a government then and yet another general election had to take place the same year. But what remains an interesting aspect is that in the case of Spain and especially PSOE, the regional, national and European campaigns closely intertwined. In mutual support for one another, Pedro Sanchez and Frans Timmermans frequently appeared in public together. Timmermans travelled to Spain to take part in countless rallies. He was in the frontline of the Women's March, which was included in his Tour de Frans. And when the campaign was over, two issues were clear: PSOE consolidated its profile as a pro-European, reformist party and there was no doubt that its leader, Sanchez, would lead on behalf of the social democrats the negotiations regarding the composition of the next Commission.

Of course, Spain (alongside i.e. Portugal) remains a positive example. But there are also others, where the European elections have been a moment of – if we may use poker terminology – the parties had an "I'll see that bet" moment. For some member states, the results have become a cause of destabilisation. The key example here is Greece, where the ruling party Syriza was defeated by 10% by the New Democracy. Having evaluated the elector's message, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras decided to call for snap general elections. In the Czech Republic as well the outcome of the vote seem to prompt questions about the CSSD's strategy for the future, also within the governing coalition. Six months later, one can say this was a crunch moment that gave a new impetus for a stronger political course, whose positive effects are now visible. However at the time the fact that the cabinet crisis mixed with

not having any Czech members within the S&D Group suggested quite a grim prospect and even a possible transformation of the entire party system.

In several states the results have proven to be decisively different from the composition of respective parliaments and governments. In the United Kingdom, Nigel Farage's Brexit Party won one third of the votes, followed by the LibDems with 18% of support. The two traditional parties - Labour and the Conservatives – noted 14.1% and 8.7% respectively, not even jointly matching the result of the winner. Even if in overall terms there were more 'remain' than leave votes. This put in motion a number of events: on the one hand inspiring citizens to mobilise and manifest in the hope that the decision about their country's membership of the EU could be reversed, and on the other, contributing to further deadlocks and eventually culminating in general elections in December. In Germany, both governing CDU and SPD suffered grave losses, with the latter losing the position of at least second largest party for the first time. German social democrats have been battling ever since, engaging in a contested leadership election and taking new blows at the regional level. In the Netherlands, the outcomes were at odds with the composition of the parliament as well, which at the time suggested that the internal situation is yet to evolve and, if anything is certain, it is that *nothing can be taken as certain in politics these days*.

This is just a handful of examples to showcase the phenomenon of Europeanisation of national politics and the role it played in the European elections 2019. More could be named, but it is rather evident that a specific qualitative change has occurred that social democrats could further build on. The more European matters enter national politics, the more there is a need for providing people with a hopeful vision, tangible answers and reassurance that one could make the suggested changes happen. To that end, progressives – being pro-Europeans and well positioned both in the EP and in the Commission (about which aspect a few words will be shared later) – stand a chance to become the parties that make change happen both on the EU and national level. The key to success here is more programmatic reflection and political cooperation, two fields in which PES and FEPS can play an important role.

The more European matters enter national politics, the more there is a need for providing people with a hopeful vision

6. The votes cast in the European elections underline an urgent need for a unifying project, but much more must be done to stop disruptive forces

As indicated before, the preceding legislative period 2014-2019 was marked by an extraordinary number of debates, leader's speeches and European Commission's proposals devoted to the question of the 'Future of Europe'. Evidently, however, the preoccupations before had been of a different nature than they are today. The European Union has been torn by diverse dividing lines, putting in opposition North and South, East and West, eurozone and non-EMU

members, beneficiaries and net-payers, centre and (assumed) periphery – to name just the most visible ones. To that end, it had been trying also to re-emerge after the crisis, while simultaneously battling its image as a Union that could neither take decisions in due time nor ensure their execution. In the ambition to consolidate, strengthen and move the vote forward in the UK referendum was of course a blow. While that all continues to resonate, it would seem that the European elections campaign was a decisive turning point, where the debate moved from depressive negativity to constructive criticism for what needed to be done.

Thanks to its Manifesto and to the reflection about a working programme for the new Commission, the Progressive family broadly contributed to also steering the general exchange into a new direction. Through Frans Timmermans, but also through the other candidates, it pursued the questions regarding Social Union, and also phrased new objectives for the years to come. Therefore, their electoral platform's title, 'social contract', contained an agenda, which focused on diverse *Deals* that the EU would need to make in order to deliver according to the citizen's expectations. Evidently the first of the deals was a New Green Deal, which now also has the shape of a concrete proposal, introduced by Timmermans in his capacity of the Commission's Vice-President. It is a multilayer programme that would transform economic, agricultural, industrial and also social policies in Europe. It embodies not only the principle of Climate Justice – which in the past was perhaps more of a political competence of the Greens than it was of social democrats – but it also strongly anchors the idea of Social Justice and Intergenerational Solidarity. Its endorsement within the European Parliament marks the establishment of a new kind of majority in Europe, ready to act now for a more sustainable world. A majority which without progressives' commitment may have not been possible.

But while this may have been attainable on the EU level, the question remains: how far will this further translate into a unifying set of commitments, policies and actions on the level of member states? Here, following the European elections outcomes, social democrats most evidently face further challenges, as though the above-mentioned lines of division may have not disappeared – even when it comes to the positioning and programmes within their own political family. Electoral results show that S&D came first in the South of Europe, second in the North, third in the East and only fourth in the West. In the first two, with respective specific differences, the parties on the national level did have (aside from PES Manifesto) their own clear position on the EU and the possible next steps of integration.

The national elections that took place in the last six months have changed the political map when it comes to the North, but not when it comes to the East and West, which would suggest that a broader reflection is needed on how to recuperate in those regions. Here the worrying part about the East in particular is that the representatives expected to join the European Conservative and Reformists Group (ECR) took the second place on the podium. In the West it was ALDE, EPP and Greens (and not even new or small parties) that benefited from the decline of the social democrats.

This possibly prompts three recommendations. First, all the social democrats – being better or worse off at the moment – need to develop a project that would be clearly European but also tangible in the national context, and that would give them a *raison d'être* in the decades to come. Once again, looking at the European election' results it is clear that combining clarity

when it comes to progressivism and pro-Europeanism was its key to success. And some of the building blocks are already in place. Secondly, as the European campaign proved, it is time to pick a hopeful, positive message that portrays the everlasting core value of social justice. Disputing that or not, this was at the heart of the proposals that were formulated in the 1990s, which insisted on being 'new', in the sense of being applicable in the era of grand transformation, and were focused on providing people with equal opportunities. It was included in the successful programmes of the first decade of this century, whereby *change* was a key word and attention went to the issues of empowerment and (minimum) standards. Looking back at those and looking at how the campaign went, one cannot resist an impression that this is a high time for a new, profound programmatic debate that finally can be free from purely tactical questions regarding survival in the next vote. This connects with the third recommendation.

As the European campaign proved, it is time to pick a hopeful, positive message that portrays the everlasting core value of social justice

The phrase "never waste a good crisis" has been frequently repeated. In the light of the described developments, one should perhaps amend this statement to say: "(never) waste the chance to debate the Future (of Europe)". Whilst there have been so many fundamentals laid by introducing the idea of a 'new social contract', progressives should make sure that they are in a position to be at the frontline of this new Commission's flagship initiative. They should have an ambition that it is not framed by habits or old patterns, but that is run in an innovative way and gears a new kind of legitimacy for all the *Deals* and *Agenda's* with which they themselves have promised to frame the new mandate.

7. Following the campaign, Europe has to deliver on: fighting climate change, social rights, tax justice, gender equality and safeguarding democracy in the member states

The striking point of the British debate about the country's membership in the European Union was that it evolved around four central issues: Europe's ability to restore itself as a prosperous economy; Europe's capacity to secure its borders while being able to help those in need – both migrating in and remaining abroad; Europe's aptitude to remain the project that ensures wealth to all its citizens, also in the context of guaranteed freedom of movement; and finally the possibility of making Europe more democratic and accountable to its citizens. If to take the rhetoric away (and especially here to tune down all the offensive claims made by Brexiteers), it seems quite obvious that those four issues stand for the four pillars of hope on which the European Community has been established – the promise of peace, prosperity, welfare and democracy.

There have been many claims made that the UK's situation and hence its attitude towards the European Union have always been particular or peculiar to say the least. But in fact in their sentiments the British voters do not position themselves that far away from what the citizens of the

other member states have been articulating as their respective concerns. To that end, recalling again the social mobilisation of recent years and looking also at the main issues that framed the run-up to the European elections, they all have been about making Europe strong in terms of these fundamentals, because of them grand (again) and capable to act in a coherent, executive way. In that sense, the 2019 campaign did not only see the phenomenon of Europeanisation (as described extensively in point 5), but also a greater correlation of the themes that the candidates would touch upon in their different national contexts. In 2014 it was only the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) that the respective countries' debates had in common as an issue. Five years later, it has become a set of a minimum of five issues and the number

Young people finally emerged from apathy and abstention and clearly stated their expectations

is likely to grow, depending on the EU's performance in the course of the current mandate. Among them: climate change, social rights, tax justice, gender equality and safeguarding democracy in the member states. Most evidently, the first issue (please also see point 4) was picked up with a sense of urgency because of the ongoing climate strike and the powerful appeal that it had, especially for the younger generation. While Greta Thunberg grew to become a face and an icon of this struggle, the decision-makers of all the levels and politicians from right to left tried to respond by making sustainability an issue of prior importance. Along with the sense of responsibility,

they would also realise that it would reconnect them with young people – who finally emerged from apathy and abstention (as diagnosed by numerous political scientists) and clearly stated their expectations.

But when we think about the years 2014 to 2019, the climate strike was perhaps the most prominent issue in the media and social media, but it was not the only mobilisation to introduce new topics to the debate. In that sense, the infamous yellow jackets, for better or for worse, have been a vehicle in bringing forward the demands for social justice and social rights. October 7 became the Global Protest Day against tax havens. The Black March in Poland and the Women's March in Madrid, though in different contexts, both emphasised the need for more action for gender equality. And finally, among the others, citizens united in Hungary with a demand for protection of democratic standards, receiving much evidence of solidarity from other European countries. All those issues came together to become the subjects in the European campaign's debates. And attitudes towards them became, in fact, an electoral compass, and determined how voters marked their ballots. In that sense, although it is too early to speak about a 'European electorate', the themes may have forged some common base on which, in the next rounds of pan-European debates and campaigns, such EU-wide electorate could eventually be established. It would, strangely enough, be a side path, which could potentially prompt the EU to revisit the instruments of transnational politics (for example introducing transnational lists), sooner rather than later.

Progressives had been very fortunate to have anticipated those issues in their Manifesto. They were not at all in odds with their earlier programmes in any case, but emphasising the right points was what made a great difference this time. To that end, those questions also

remained in focus after the vote – resulting in the social democrats going for those portfolios in the European Commission that would allow them to deliver precisely on these. Hereafter what needs to be underlined is not only the fact that they have great representation, holding one third of the seats in college – but they also hold the keys to the major dossiers. This is a great opportunity, but also a great responsibility in which they must remain focused, and finally also feel self-assured in being able to deliver.

8. The electoral result offers a new opening by putting an end to a grand coalition in Europe and opening a space for political innovation

Political scientists and analysts have been debating an overall decline of the support for so-called traditional parties. As noted in the introduction, the deliberations have been mostly focused on the statistics available following the national and regional elections, as well as (if available) data regarding the membership in the respective formations. Whilst this debate has been a very important one and has provided yet another way to understand the proclaimed democratic crisis, it may also have been misleading in some of its aspects. First of all, because it has been unclear which of the criteria that define the parties are the traditional ones. One could argue that both the Liberals and the Greens belong to the world of the historically well-established political parties. If taking the history of the former, in many countries the initial organisations were established earlier than the workers and social democratic parties came to exist. So even if Renew is a formation with a new influx, its roots reach quite extensively towards past traditions. When it comes to the Greens, although they successfully claim to be fresh and through their own manifestoes describe themselves as novel, they have been part of the European political landscape for over three decades and have also been part of some of the governing coalition in the member states. Furthermore, the hypothesis of the crisis of the traditional parties draws from very general conclusions based on average, taking liberty in disregarding specificities. But context does matter. Which is also why more prudence would be advised and revisiting the premise on which the theory has been founded, there may be a space for another reflection nowadays to emerge instead.

Those two precautions are most relevant when analysing the results of the European elections and the new composition of the European Parliament. Indeed, both EPP and S&D Groups noted losses, having established themselves with the numbers of MEPs equal to 182 and 154 respectively. This evidently would not be enough to sustain the governing logic that guided especially the European Parliament since its beginnings, which have been described as a sort of a Grand Coalition. This may have been lamented by some, while in fact it does in itself constitute a moment for a new opening that many have been asking for, for a long time. That is because while now the majoritarian solution will require more effort, there is also more space for building broader issue-driven coalitions.

In practical terms, the new context has been working out for social democrats. First, they saw S&D Group Member David Sassoli elected as the President of the European Parliament.

This may not sound as extraordinary, but it is important to recall that in the second half of the previous mandates the EPP had the Presidents of the EP, Commission and Council in their hands, which could have been seen as a heavy load on the Grand Coalition's previous logic and its implicit balanced approach. Secondly, when it comes to the EP Committees and the portfolio inside of the Commission college, the social democrats not only gained leadership positions, but also were amongst those preventing i.e. ECR representative from Poland to be elected as a chair of the Employment and Social Affairs Committee (EMPL). This was meaningful at the time it was happening, but it is also the stronghold position when it comes to social democrats' capacity to mentor and own the political issues.

Finally, this new context was also a trigger to seek another set of instruments than those used and known in the past. In the midst of difficult negotiations, which took many detours around the candidacies of Ursula von der Leyen in particular, the social democrats came up with a letter that was issued by Iratxe García, the (new at that point) President of the S&D Group in the EP. The letter enlisted the matters and benchmarks that the Progressives believed the candidate-designate had to address and provide satisfying answers to in order to get the Group's support. The content of the communication has been the reference point ever since – not only inside of the House, but also for other members of the political family. Being therefore a step between Manifesto and legislative agenda, it provided a coherent approach and a battle plan for all (even if on the question of von der Leyen the Group still remained internally divided). What is more, the document prompted von der Leyen to alter her position on several matters and re-evaluate the initial standpoints on some others. This was the only way she could possibly win the progressive votes, which was in fact key to be able to call herself elected by the *democratic* forces inside of the EP. The other option for her could have been to seek the supplementary votes among the right wing, but that would immediately place her far from what the voters in Europe would approve and from the possibility of delivering upon what they would expect from her cabinet in terms of the fight for democracy. While it may have been a side-product, the approach of social democrats was central in terms of both allowing space for political innovation and of solidifying the coalition that would strive to defend fundamental values in Europe.

9. The extreme right and anti-European forces may not have noted a victory, but they came in stronger and will obstruct further integration

The anxiety ahead of the then upcoming European elections was not only related to projections of expected social democrats' results. Equally discouraging were the increasing numbers of the extreme right and anti-European forces. It was anticipated that they would enjoy a greater gain this time and some of the forecasts would even see them as the second political force. In the end, they did not reach any such level, and in that sense the votes casted remained fairly consistent with the preferences expressed by the voters in the national and regional elections in roughly the same period. This, by the way, is yet another reason for which the characteristics of the European elections as the second-order vote is a thing of the past.

Consequently, the Identity and Democracy Group (ID) united 73 members; while the euro-sceptic ECR (which includes, among the others, the Law and Justice party from Poland) began the mandate with 62 seats. On top of that there were 57 unattached MEPs. Therefore, although none of these came even close to the results of EPP, S&D or Renew, the ID was only one seat behind the Greens (whose results have been applauded as being particularly great this time). Jointly however – if to imagine for a moment that they would uphold one line – they had at their disposal 192 votes: 10 more than the largest group, the EPP. Therefore their enlarged representation is not to be taken lightly. Since the beginning it was predicted that, if encouraged, they would play a role of being an *operational and non-constructive opposition*, having amongst them enough power to obstruct diverse processes.

Calculating those numbers, some of the commentators have been asking themselves if those votes are enough to either be that influential as to corrode European integration or to be in a position to call themselves, as especially ECR members have tried, “the rightful opposition group inside the European Parliament”. The problem here is that the grain of truth in such a hypothesis has less to do with numbers and more to do with the incredible viciousness with which they are ready to protest. In that sense, once again, it would seem that the ‘no’ position on the European integration has the obvious advantage of being a very straightforward one. In the past it had already been observed that their necessity to rally – like infamous Nigel Farage or Janusz Korwin-Mikke – made them take the floor and tarnish in speeches all that United Europe holds dear in terms of founding values. And then, even if disciplined with parliamentary penalties, they would still persist and persevere, exhibiting the attitudes that are foreign to norms of democracy and simply unacceptable in the world of a civilised, humane kind of politics. Now, by being so numerous, they can become very vocal. And they will be using the EP as an arena to phrase messages, which rather than being addressed at the assembly will be directed as a show of steadfastness for the anti-European voters back home.

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Looking back at the European elections’ direct aftermath and the first half a year of the new legislative period, the representatives of the euro-sceptic and anti-European right did not only manage to live up to, but actually surpassed all the negative expectations. Indeed, they presented themselves as climate change deniers, as opponents of the minimum standards and adversaries of gender equality. And most recently they were the ones to speak up against the resolutions that would condemn the ever-evolving situation in Poland and in Hungary. When it comes to the representatives of the Law and Justice (which scored a victory of 45.5%), they went as far as accusing their compatriots from other political groups of treason and the European Union of trying to limit the rule of a democratically elected government of a sovereign member state. Their leverage is additionally stronger, since as a party they form a government and therefore are directly represented in the Council. What that means was already experienced by the EU and social democrats in the case of the negotiations regarding

the composition of the Commission, when the Polish and Hungarian Prime Ministers' potential veto was used as a key argument and eventually resulted in freezing further consideration for the candidacy of Frans Timmermans as President of the Commission.

These are of course all very worrying signals, but there is also some hope in the fact that these forces are so determined to “stand on the other side of the barricade”. Once they line up, it has a side effect in influencing others to stand in rank as well. This was the case when Beata Szydło tried to become the chair of EMPL Committee, and also during the hearings of the subsequent candidates presented by Victor Orbán for the European Commission. Here one has to make an obvious disclaimer that although Orbán's government contradicts the EU, undermines its values, and keeps on dismantling democracy back home, FIDESZ MEPs belong to the pro-European EPP Group and the party has only been suspended from the European People's Party. So all in all, although these euro-sceptic and anti-European forces are verbally over-represented and are likely to obstruct all attempts to integrate Europe further, their power to effectively act can be limited, if others, including social democrats, remain smart and refuse to be pulled into their game. To that end, it also means that in the countries where these forces are on the rise, Progressives need to ensure that the delivering and executive capacities of the EU are particularly tangible, so that the democratic voters there have enough encouragement, confidence, and feel a sufficient degree of solidarity to continue counteracting them themselves back home.

10. The changing character of the European elections requires that progressives already start to prepare for the mid-term and look ahead to be pioneers in 2024

All the points made previously constitute a set of convincing arguments as to why the European elections are changing in nature. They may have not yet become the first order vote, but they are definitely no longer second order. They have been reasons for tectonic shifts of the political map, which, however, should not be seen as reason to settle on the doomsday scenarios, but to the contrary, as an impulse to seek political innovation and search for new openings. The courage to perceive them this way has already benefitted social democrats greatly. And last but not least, they were the momentum in which there was the greatest ever transposition of the European issues onto the national level along with an unprecedented connectivity between the questions that the candidates and voters chose to discuss in respective countries. Again, social democrats anticipated these in their Manifesto and campaign, as also when striving for leadership positions in both the European Commission and the European Parliament (and its Committees). Therefore, even if they are not the largest Group, they are seated exactly where the key initiatives and decisions – that the electorate evidently had considered to be the most important – will be taken in the next five years.

This makes the centre-left a powerhouse again, as long as they remain in the same high spirits with which they finished the electoral race under the leadership of Frans Timmermans. That means an obligation to assume responsibilities, to keep launching proposals and to

finally stand tall after so many years of self-pitying, and possibly being proud of what will be achieved. There is of course a great deal to achieve if one looks at the Manifesto and the thoughts that were invested last year by many stakeholders that had been deployed inside the PES to analyse a battle plan for the current mandate. But in the mid-term and by the end of the mandate, while it may prove to even be too ambitious and therefore too much, it is also likely not to be enough to run on the next time around.

Evidently, proverbially speaking, the world spins faster and faster, and nothing can be taken for granted, but additionally, not much can be predicted. The best example of this are the polls, which especially recently have been wrong about the electoral outcomes more frequently. But there is a critical number of issues that progressives may consider worth looking into in order to remain pioneers, stay trendsetters, and keep on owning the power of initiative.

First among them is the window of opportunity that the European Commission's initiative regarding the Conference on the Future of Europe already created. It has already started to live its own life, benefiting from attention and reflection of all the Brussels-based stakeholders. The question for the social democrats is why not take it further. Why not think about making that a unique experience, totally different to the Convention that was held at the beginning of the century. Why not see it as an opportunity to experiment and innovate, seeking to find out how to make such a discussion become a field of connectivity and creativity, where leaders and citizens literally come open-minded on the same page?

Secondly, at this point social democrats can be confident that the issues that have 'always' belonged to their core political competence are the ones that are framing the agenda. But there is a need to look further than the standards and deliverables. The argument about a need to restore self-confidence will only work, of course, if the situation for all the parties that belong to the movement also continues to improve, and when the existential question about its future will be put to bed, at least for a while. For that, progressives need a profound ideological, programmatic and political reflection. It should not only be European or national, but should be done in conjunction with a search of another great, unifying social democratic project that in its core could be sustained by the entire political generation. The moment is, in fact, here, because on one hand there is a clear generational change taking place especially on the national level, where the steer is taken by a very different kind of charismatic leaders. On the other, because as the last elections have shown, the key to success is consistency – which means that a new project cannot be a plan for UK, for France, for Germany or Greece – but has to be a vision for Europe and all its member states at the same time. Only that could – by the way – hope to find answers to the divisions that perhaps were not so obvious this time around, but are still draining Europe.

Thirdly, it is crucial to preserve the legacy of the great campaign under the leadership of Frans Timmermans and all its achievements. This means that before it becomes a story that is just recounted, the conclusions should be summarised and, on their bases, an action

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plan should be drawn to start preparing ahead of 2024. There is a number of issues that could be considered, among them: role and shape of the Manifesto – and how far it should be an extract of a larger programme and translated into a governing agenda afterwards; the process of nominating not only *Spitzenkandidat*, but also other Commissioners; the potential to imagine transnational lists in an alternative way that could enable them to happen within the PES, at least symbolically at first; the role of the members, activists and voters. There could be many more, but, even if many people would demur at first, what is needed is time for them to be debated, to be examined from different angles, and perhaps to be framed as utilitarian mechanisms for the party to use.

These are just few of the reflections, articulated in the heat of the moment just six months after what was undoubtedly a historical vote. It seems to be relevant to formulate them however on the bases of the conclusions regarding the recent European elections, so that their legacy does not vanish but is translated into a further boost. Perhaps with these and other observations in mind ahead of the next time, when May-June 2024 arrives, the progressives will not only whisper with disbelief about their own luck and the turning tide that *eppur si muove*, but they will be able to say loud and clear that they *did seize the day* and reached the proverbial stage, having travelled *per aspera ad astra*.