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‘Impossible’ is a matter of opinion

If pessimism about upcoming electoral performances was the mood with which European progressive parties entered 2021, events in the course of the year would prove that, against all odds, a change of tide was perhaps taking place. The electoral success of Scholz’s SPD in Germany gave hope to Social Democratic parties in Europe, and at the same time showed that occupying the traditional Social Democratic ground and running on topics such as employment and social protection could be the right path to recover the lost ground among progressive voters. However, if the experiences in Germany, Norway and to a certain extent in Sweden are reassuring, those of other Social Democratic parties that also faced elections in the course of 2021, namely in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, have shown, by contrast, that lack of predictability and coherence are not rewarded. In spite of the German success, however, it is no time for European Social Democrats to linger. They need to stick to their own trajectory and engage in a deep debate on what kind of Europe they want.

Social Democrats were entering 2021 in a strange, rather pessimistic mood. Several key elections were awaiting them in Europe. And clearly, the context of the ongoing pandemic would make it very hard to campaign. Hence, even before the battles would begin, there was a sense of exhaustion and disbelief. If the current circumstances hadn’t been hard enough, there was also something else. They felt an overpowering insecurity. It resulted from a rather persistent narrative of almost two decades. It claimed that the internal crisis of the centre-left was existential. Naturally, it was taking a toll, making Social Democrats doubt their own chances for success.

Additionally, for those Social Democrats who were in government, these have been troubling times. On the one hand, the polls were consistently showing approval for the direction that the Progressives in power decided to go, meeting harsh and hardly ever straightforward choices. But they had been somewhat second-guessing themselves in how far these were real numbers or rather a reflection of what in political sciences has been named as the ‘rally round the flag’ effect. In other words, that the support was only fear-induced and would easily crumble when the worst of the pandemic was over. On the other hand, the spectre of 2008 kept hunting them. Back then, many Social Democrats in

government saw no other way but to effectively suspend governing, focusing narrowly on crisis management. Scaling down meant reaching for what, back then, seemed rational and looked like providing an immediate resolution: namely austerity. The results were infuriating and led to further disenchantment that would make more progressive voters drift away from Social Democratic parties. From difficult, the situation became grave, with just a handful of centre-left parties remaining in power and many of them seriously imperilled.

The credibility of the movement was at stake. And rebuilding it was never going to be a straightforward task. There were those who claimed that the focus should remain on ideological and programmatic renewal. The problem was that while it seemed clear which directions should *not* be considered, there was no one, unifying agenda to push the movement forward and to open a proverbial new chapter. Sure, there have been plenty of various valuable ideas floating around and, not to forget, also several timely reforms proposed by those in power. But at the same time, there has been no unifying concept that would determine the mission for Social Democracy in the coming decades. There has been no new kind of distinctive generational agenda. At least not yet. There was no notion that would be complex, bold, and thought-provoking. That would be powerful enough to make Social Democrats drop the conflicts about the past and agree about something profoundly new.

Fundamental elements of the traditional Social Democratic vision have become the building blocks of the contemporary welfare state and are not any longer firmly associated with Progressives

Against this backdrop, it wasn't obvious how to define what Social Democracy would be in relation to the other players on the political stage. The demarcation lines were blurred, and Progressives learnt that there are three things that no longer work for them. First, voters wouldn't be motivated any longer by the warning 'unless you vote for us, we won't be able to defend you'. It turned out that it was not only plausible not to have Social Democrats in parliament. In some countries, like Poland in 2015 or in the Czech Republic just recently, it became a reality. Second, there was no way in which Social Democrats could go on with a campaign narrative suggesting that the others claimed their proposals as their own. Indeed, fundamental elements of the

traditional Social Democratic vision have become the building blocks of the contemporary welfare state and are not any longer firmly associated with Progressives. But at the same time, they have also been flirting with proposals made by others, especially in the times when it was broadly believed that the 'elections are won in the middle'. Nowadays, they are the ones, who run with parts of what used to be the Greens' agenda. And third, Progressives were captured in their very own 'catch-22'. They couldn't gear up the enthusiasm necessary to return to government, as they were already perceived as governmental and hence establishment parties. Paradoxically, the more this was their image, the more they wanted to control their appearance and the more they would close ranks. And in the age of new kinds of social mobilisation with years that see more and more civic protests, being an organisation that is perceived as unapproachable has been a serious political handicap.

These all have been the reasons why, at the beginning of 2021, there was little excitement among progressive politicians or analysts. If anything, there was a rather minimalist hope. It wasn't even about not losing. It was about not losing terribly. And this was the chord that the win by the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) struck. 26 September became an incomparable moment of glory. It was the day Social Democrats finally could permit themselves to celebrate and to hope that there may be a change of tide. Against all odds. And because initially nobody, including most SPD members, had been giving this election any chance – it was so incredibly relatable. Now, every Social Democratic party, and especially the ones with support in the single digits, could rise up and say – 'we can accomplish that, indeed we can. Impossible is a matter of opinion'.

This text is written at the beginning of December 2021, when the traffic light coalition is already well in place and the SPD has just elected its new leadership. And while every Progressive follows this journey, feeling a little bit in need of internalising at least part of the success and sense of accomplishment, evidently the year brought more. Both to cherish and to worry about this is what this article aims at analysing.

Getting the welfare state right

The beginning of 2021 was still marked by lockdowns. It is true, vaccines had been developed and it was announced that they would be administered soon to large segments of the European population. But the anticipation was that it would still take a while before majorities are protected against Covid. With so many people either themselves infected or seeing others getting sick in their proximity, the dependency of healthcare and care had only continued to grow. For school kids and for young people, there was a sense of being deprived of diverse opportunities that education and training would offer. For many, finding themselves in either temporary unemployment or in precarious employment conditions, the need to be able to rely on social security was extraordinary. Their expectations kept growing, especially as they had reason to expect that the post-Covid reality would be marked by recession and inflation. Altogether that also made the crisis incomparable to the one in 2008 – there could be no cuts, there had to be expansion and impeccable crisis management.

Furthermore, the new reality made several things clear. First, that need is the mother of invention, or re-invention, in this case. After years of depressing analyses about the atomisation of contemporary societies, when the time came, many have felt a duty to help the less fortunate, lonely and/or elderly. They would organise themselves inside communities and neighbourhoods to offer help and support, and perform some tasks that could seem trivial, but were of a great value instead. They walked their neighbours' dogs, delivered shopping to the elderly lady around the corner, or simply checked in on one another. It was assumed to be a sign of solidarity, which perhaps was wishful thinking. But these attitudes were certainly an expression of human decency, respect and sense of togetherness.

Second, it appeared that a third of the workforce could continue professional activities via teleworking. The adaptability across all generations, the pace with which employees

learnt new skills, and the speed with which the digital reality made a leap forward were impressive. Still, it was not all trouble-free, as new working conditions have emerged with little space yet to do anything about their negative effects. Things on the virtual work floor happen faster with the rigid calendar of back-to-back meetings, are more demanding and leave no space for relativisation in the collegial circle. The emerging issues span from difficulties in defining working and leisure time, to the constant interference into private lives, to serious health and mental health issues.

Third, there was a somewhat impressive multiplication of so-called 'green issues'. Even during the first wave of the pandemic, the media reported how the environmental situation had altered. Headlines such as 'Dolphins have been spotted in the clear water of the Venice lagoon' would appeal to people's imagination, making them ponder that perhaps indeed there could be different production and consumption patterns. The discussions about how to help farmers and fishers, whose businesses were affected by closed shops, markets and restaurants, brought back the hope that both, farming and fishing, could be modernised and made more environment-friendly at the same time. And finally, with the geopolitical situation becoming even more complex, and with supply chains being affected (which remains engraved on citizens' minds as the picture of a vessel stuck in the Suez Canal), there was also a more intense debate on how Europe could become more independent in its energy production. This made green issues more tangible than they had ever been before.

All these were clear signs that citizens would support a compelling idea on how to safeguard, modernise and manage the state, and by extension the welfare state. And while Social Democrats started to feel their momentum, as this was about the issues at the core of their political competence, they were incomparably more careful than in 2008. Unlike over a decade ago, they did not get blind-sided by an unfounded belief that all this would make them citizens' first choice by default. Instead, in Germany, Norway and Sweden,¹ they consistently kept on speaking about solutions that would make the welfare state work again.

Since the adoption of the new programme in February 2021, the SPD had chosen the motto 'A future for you. Social. Digital. Climate neutral'.² The leading candidate, Olaf Scholz, emphasised in all the debates the party's slogan 'a social policy for you'³ and that the issues of jobs, social security and welfare remain at the core of the party's mission. In the campaign manifesto *The SPD's Programme for the future. What we stand for. What drives us. What we are striving to achieve* the focus remained on 'Future. Respect. Europe', as described through answers to five core questions that evolved around: how to ensure full employment; how to fight social inequalities; how to change economies and make them sustainable against the backdrop of the climate crisis; how to control the digital transition; and finally how to ensure social cohesion and democracy. The document of almost 50 pages explained in detail how the SPD was planning to tackle these questions, not shying away from topics that are not usually at the forefront of campaign

1 Sweden did not have general elections in 2021, but due to a profound governmental crisis and the election of a new prime minister, it should still be considered in the scope of this chapter.

2 See: www.spd.de/zukunftsprogramm/.

3 Soziale Politik für Dich, see: www.spd.de/aktuelles/soziale-politik-fuer-dich/.

documents – such as taxes. The narrative was moderate and pragmatic. It was made accessible for many voters as it referred to everyday concerns – the need for security and opportunities, to value work and a focus on fairness, to make sure that solidarity is understood in a transformative sense and that equality translates into tangible proposals (such as equal pay). Olaf Scholz and the candidates stuck to the message throughout all the debates and interestingly, even in times when a particular context could derail them from the chosen track (like during the fall-out from the departure from Afghanistan). And whenever they faced criticism, they skilfully steered the conversation back to the issue of a modern welfare state.

There is evidently much more to draw from the SPD experience, which would go beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, one should still make one crucial observation here. The programmatic approach of the SPD enabled it to reframe and reclaim the concept of ‘solidarity and fairness’. This was of key relevance, as it may be at the core of moving away from the image that they created for themselves a decade ago. It reminds the traditional claim that quality employment, adequate care and universal social insurance are the key ingredients of a social progress for all. The same understanding underpinned Magdalena Andersson’s report *Distributional policies for equality and fairness* in Sweden⁴ or the Norwegian Labour Party’s campaign manifesto, alongside the statements of Jonas Gahr Støre. The latter won the elections,⁵ after consistently repeating during the campaign that “the welfare state must embrace everyone”.

The hypothesis might sound daring, but compared to what happened in countries where Social Democrats did not celebrate comparable successes, it seems that this was because they fell short in reclaiming the position of those forging a new welfare state and hence a new social contract. This was one of the explanations of the consecutive unfavourable results of the BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party) in the three general elections that took place in 2021 in Bulgaria. As observers claim, the party failed to be seen as a driver for change that could repair the Bulgarian labour market, care sector and social security system. The party simply did not manage to occupy this politically opportune ground, following the many social protests of the preceding year.⁶ Even worse was the case for the Dutch Labour Party. Their second all-time-lowest electoral result evidently not only reflects the difficulties of the

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4 Socialdemokraterna (2021) *Underlagsrapport från partiets arbetsgrupp för Fördelningspolitik för jämlikhet och rättvisa* (See: www.socialdemokraterna.se/download/18.3a4645e7179129c10c74edca/1622820316173/Underlagsrapport%20för%20jämlikhet%20och%20rättvisa%202021.pdf).

5 Støstad, J-E. (2021) ‘Norwegian Labour success: the right policies, the right strategy and a pinch of luck’, FEPS European Progressive Observatory, *The Progressive Post* (<https://progressivepost.eu/norwegian-labour-success-the-right-policies-the-right-strategy-and-a-pinch-of-luck/>).

6 Pirinski, G. (2021) ‘The Bulgarian parliamentary elections of 4 April and the quest for a new social contract’, FEPS European Progressive Observatory, *The Progressive Post* (<https://progressivepost.eu/the-bulgarian-parliamentary-elections-of-4-april-and-the-quest-for-a-new-social-contract/>).

last few years, and hence should be seen with both a long-term and a short-term view.⁷ But when it comes to the latter, the elections were taking place just after the publication of a report that exposed racial profiling was applied when trying to identify cases of fraud in claiming social benefits. The PvdA leader and former Minister for Labour and Social Affairs, Lodewijk Ascher, under whose watch that happened, resigned, bravely claiming responsibility. His act was however too late for PvdA to recuperate its reputation and convince voters of its credibility when it comes to framing the welfare state. Even though the nine-member PvdA-group in the Dutch parliament are doing their utmost to regain ground, it is likely to be a long march – especially because the consequences of the report’s findings continue to have an asymmetric impact on the Dutch society.

Building on progressive leadership’s predictability

Even before 2021, there have been several cases in which the electoral predictions turned out to be misleading. Quite memorable among them were perhaps the general elections in the United Kingdom in 2015. Ahead of them, Ed Miliband was considered a sure winner by many, crashing spectacularly when it turned out that the power of the Conservative Party had been gravely underestimated. This taught the Progressives to be cautious and not to trust too much the opinion polls predicting their win. But while they wouldn’t any longer trust in these, they also grew rather frantic, looking fearfully at the data to reassure themselves that the choices they made in the meantime hadn’t cost them any voters.

The erosion of trust in opinion polls was yet another factor contributing to the Progressives' overall sense of insecurity

The erosion of trust in opinion polls was yet another factor contributing to the Progressives' overall sense of insecurity. As mentioned already, they were haunted by the spectre of their very own misguided decisions for a decade before and they still haven’t got over the anxiety that perhaps their economic credentials make their welfare vision seem rather utopian. Furthermore, they had a reputation that hardly sounded inviting or inspiring; as part of a contested establishment and as inaccessible organisations. And finally, their leaders frequently seem a little bit feeble in comparison to their mouthy rivals, either from the radical left or from the extreme right.

In a time when the personality of the leader and how she/he deals with political duels are important, the fact that Social Democrats were not considered strong or charismatic kept impeding their chances in the electoral battles right from the start. What is more, there had been a sense that the generation of party chairs that came after the heyday at the beginning of the century was composed too often of individuals who previously had only been political trainees, assistants and advisors to other famous

7 Keman, H. (2021) ‘Dutch elections: no recovery for social democracy!’, FEPS European Progressive Observatory, *The Progressive Post* (<https://progressivepost.eu/dutch-elections-2021-no-recovery-of-social-democracy/>).

politicians. This prompted an image of Social Democrat parties being led by people with no other experience than politics. This, dangerously, echoed the words of their opponents, who would call them ‘detached from reality’ and who would not hesitate to exploit those leaders’ vulnerability: their readiness to compromise, often in order to retain power (even if ‘power’ was often very relative – for example within their own party only).

But while Progressives knew that in *the age when leadership matters*, their situation was unsustainable, they were not exactly sure of what kind of archetype of a leader they should be looking for. Many cherished hopes with the emergence of personalities like Jeremy Corbyn. His initial powerful appeal and narrative about driving the party to the left attracted new members and among them young people. Nevertheless, being bold meant also being controversial, strangely enough especially internally. Soon after, it seemed that any major decisions in the party were accompanied by an internal crisis and yet another reshuffle of the Shadow Cabinet. What the general opinion does not stand for is the internal faction-fighting done in public. Hence the question arose of how far the essentially moderate party could be, not so much ‘driven’, as rather pulled, into one or another direction, without cracking internally. The lesson was two-fold.

First, that the leader must keep the party together, especially in times when it is electorally weak. In order to do so, she or he needs to enable a fair competition between the left and the right wing, allowing both to identify with his or her candidacy for the prime minister’s office.

Second, that the promise that centre-left parties regularly make after losing an election, that it would now ‘understand its mistakes and return to real left values’, was rather directed at cheering up the centre-left itself than anything else. Especially that the left altogether was no longer a static concept, seeing other organisations (like the Greens, and the radical left) also claim their ground. What Progressives could hope to be, was to *simply be Social Democrats* – in a very traditional, pluralist and expansionist sense of the term. And that called for accepting that what was said about the movement, namely how moderate it has become, could no longer be taken as an offence or even used internally with an intention to fight one another. The label ‘mainstream’ had to be embraced instead, but not as a submission. It had to be used as a symbol of amalgamation of lower and middle classes, of urban and rural, of young and old, of old traditions and new answers, of the centre left and the left. Rather than the pejorative description of something blurry, it had to become a powerful symbol of something familiar and distinctive, something defined in the past and hence predictable.

Then, there was also another variable: the first 12 months of the pandemic were marked by panic that the disease could not be controlled. People were getting infected, and the daily repetition of the death toll in the media made many think about the scary images of the medieval plague, which are said to have wiped out entire regions. Many suffered at home, struggling to persevere, to fight loneliness, to resist in case of pathological households, to hold onto any kind of a hope. And this is where ensuring understanding, respect and empathy were perhaps needed first. The qualities that especially the female leaders of the progressive family – such as Jacinda Ardern or Sanna Marin – were recognised for. Their

attitudes were what made them appear humane and relatable. And from that position they also openly asked for advice, bringing to the debate about Covid the scientists and hard facts on the one hand, and on the other making sure that despite all limitations there is enough space for deliberative processes focused on long-term visions for their respective countries. Those experiences became indicative: a progressive leader could be knowledgeable without being dismissed for being arrogant; could be compassionate without being seen as weak; and could ask for advice of experts or citizenry without being suspected of lacking the sense of direction.

All those elements were contributing to the creation of an idea of what the progressive leadership should translate into. But still, back at the beginning of 2021, it was only an intuitive picture and so, when Olaf Scholz entered the centre stage of the campaign, not too many believed that he would be the one. To the contrary, several serious opinion pieces accused

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him of being a terribly unexciting candidate, who would possibly be the proverbial last nail. But then the unthinkable happened. Something that no early polls had predicted. Weeks and months into the campaign, Scholz's personal popularity grew,⁸ so much so that even by the summer it was much higher than that of the entire party. Scholz as a candidate was no longer leaning on the SPD – he was leading it to the top of the podium.

The strategy around him, built by his trusted advisors Wolfgang Schmidt and Lars Klingbeil, was all about consistency with the Social Democratic credo and about political integrity. Scholz was campaigning with a traditional centre left agenda, focused on issues such as minimum wage, more affordable housing, protecting pensions,⁹ with the addition of what – as written earlier – has become characteristic for the renewed concept of the welfare state, namely proposals on how to face climate change and digitalisation. He was pragmatic, which was also characteristic for him in the previous functions of mayor of Hamburg and federal Finance Minister. When attacked and faced with examples of his own or the party's mistakes, he didn't flatly deny them – he felt strong enough to recognise the legitimate ones. However, for example during the televised debates, he was able to steer the conversation towards the avenues contained in the SPD campaign manifesto. He, himself, didn't attack or try to benefit from other candidates' faults (and there were many of these in the summer). Scholz came across as calm, but compassionate; as competent, but open to dialogue; as composed, but still very much taking interest in other people's wellbeing and their respective futures. His slogan 'respect' was something voters grew to believe in and they by far saw him as a natural candidate to take the seat of a Chancellor, regardless of how the composition of the political

8 While the popularity of the other Spitzencandidates was in fact fading away.

9 Russel, I. (2021) 'Olaf Scholz resurrected German Social Democracy – what are the lessons for progressives elsewhere?', FEPS European Progressive Observatory, *The Progressive Post* (<https://progressivepost.eu/olaf-scholz-resurrected-germanys-social-democrats-what-are-the-lessons-for-progressives-elsewhere/>).

spectrum would look after the vote. And finally, they knew that he was bringing along with him also a new team with many really young candidates and many women, which altogether meant that a change involving 'one and a half' generations was about to happen.

Of course, every political context is different and especially when it comes to popular ideas about leadership (including progressive leadership), there will be a variation in the archetype. It far from guaranteed that a Scholz doppelgänger would swing the electoral pendulum elsewhere. But there are vast chances that a person embodying some of the characteristics may have had a better chance elsewhere as well. This makes one look optimistically at Magdalena Andersson's recent (and not trouble-free) appointment as Swedish Prime Minister and as leader that will guide the party through months of a very challenging campaign. Andersson, similar to Scholz, represents the cohorts who in the 1980s and 1990s were already very much involved in progressive politics, who led their respective youth organisations (Andersson as Chair of SSU, Scholz as Deputy Chair of the Jusos) and who gradually build their own strong positions. They have seen the Progressives from up close in their heyday, but they also had the opportunity to see what led to mistakes and to learn from them without prejudice. They both belong to very well defined factions inside their parties, but succeeded in uniting the majority in the parties behind them. In that sense their *moderation* stands in opposition to an alternative: alienation of one or the other wing. With all that they set the course forward.

This very calm, down-to-earth style in the case of Scholz and Andersson seems to be the source of their charisma. They are predictable, because of the values they represent and spent decades arguing for. And that makes voters trust that they will indeed hold on to their promise, hold on to what they know, and act in everyone's best interest.

That is not the sentiment that the citizens in Bulgaria or in the Czech Republic felt, when approaching the ballot boxes. In the latter, Jan Hamáček and the CSSD entered the campaign under enormous pressure. Hamáček, the former leader of the MSD (CSSD youth) and the youngest-ever speaker of the House in the previous legislative period, had agreed to enter the problematic governmental coalition with Andrej Babiš in 2018 'out of responsibility'. He claimed that this was the only rational thing to do in the complex political situation the country found itself in, and that he would personally push for Babiš to be brought to justice for all the indictments that he had collected. But not much of this became reality, and additionally, even though Hamáček was depicted by media in the neighbouring countries as a minister able to deal with the pandemic, the internal impression was quite different. The conflicts erupting inside the party and in his closest circles, the impression that Hamáček is driving the party towards the right¹⁰ (however defined) and the very divisive spring congress, made Hamáček appear to be the opposite of a composed, predictable, and politically coherent leader. And in the end, not too many saw him as prime minister-material or the CSSD as a political alternative, leading to this historically proud party's worst result and its elimination from parliament.

10 Eichler, P. (2021) 'The Czech Right will rule, the Left will stay out of the parliament', FEPS European Progressive Observatory, *The Progressive Post* (<https://progressivepost.eu/the-czech-right-will-rule-the-left-stays-out-of-the-parliament/>).

Cherishing the success to challenge ourselves more

When writing a chapter such as this one, that presents some selected fragments of the electoral history of Europe in 2021, one finds a great comfort in looking at the recent developments in Northern Europe and in Germany. Of course, even though the overall situation isn't easy, especially as long as the pandemic persists, there are reasons to think that what Social Democrats have accomplished or are aiming to achieve is quite inspirational.

Certainly, there are those who would try to diminish the victory of the SPD by making the numbers relative. And of course, there are those who would point out that Magdalena Andersson may be the first female Prime Minister of Sweden and may have a great agenda, but she still is heading a minority government and has to execute a budget that is far from what she would have wished for. But while the needling could continue, it is perhaps the first time that Social Democrats can actually let those critical voices just be and, without any feeling of guilt or shame, simply give in to the unexpected excitement.

Indeed, especially the German electoral experience, but also those of the Norwegian and Swedish (in the parameters clarified earlier in the text), have been incredibly reassuring. It seems that Social Democrats could finally emancipate themselves from the spectre of their past mistakes, which have been haunting them for far too long. And they could do so by simply sticking to what they have always been good at: the welfare state agenda, remodeling it to make the concept tangible and fit to respond to the challenges of the new times.

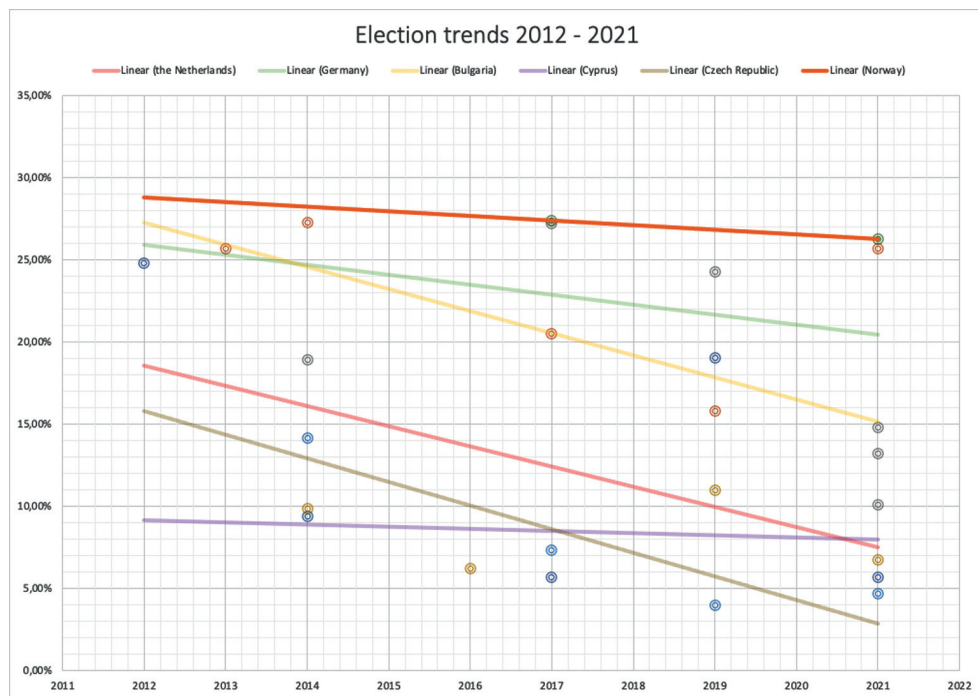
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As the examples have proven, they can have the audacity to be themselves, to stop fighting the labels that others pin on them – and turn literally all of them into the qualities that voters are also ready to appreciate in a modern centre left party. And yes, that also means that with an approach that is natural for them, one that focuses on respect for the others, on building a sense of togetherness and responsibility for one another, they may reconnect with many more than even the most strategic polls would have ever suggested.

What is more, the impact of the vote in Germany is a very powerful one, as so many seem to identify themselves with the success of the SPD. It reminds of a phrase that Frans Timmermans coined in his interview for the first FEPS Progressive Yearbook. Commenting on the recent European elections and their unexpectedly favourable outcome for Social Democrats (especially in the Netherlands), he said: “they let us out of the dogs’ house”. And that is a little bit how it feels today as well. There are legitimate reasons to start regaining confidence and see the last months as a moment in which the page has been starting to turn, bringing the new framing, positioning and formation of a new leadership archetype inside of the movement.

But while granting themselves this moment of joy, Social Democrats should remember that if this is meant to be the beginning of a new and exciting chapter, they need to reinvest the newly gained energy into the next steps. They may have learnt their lessons from 2008,

Figure 1: Support for the PES sister parties in the countries where the elections took place in 2021



Source: own resources.

among which that things don't just happen by default and that the political pendulum doesn't just swing in their direction regardless of the circumstances. This knowledge may be especially important to apply now, when the conservatives across Europe find themselves in a deep crisis and are looking for a new formula. The recent debates, including those in the European Parliament, showed that there is an appetite from the side of the radical right to expand into what used to be political ground for Christian Democrats and conservatives.¹¹ Time will show who succeeds and what composition will be there in the end. But whichever it may be, it is important that Social Democrats consistently stick to their own trajectory, sustaining the reasons for which, for example in Germany, they are considered coherent, consequent and predictable (in a good way).

They will also need to have a serious debate about what kind of Union they jointly would consider progressive. They have no choice but to get to the bottom of that, especially that the EU has been extending its prerogatives in the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, and at the same time the differences among them seem to go deeper and deeper.

¹¹ Especially that many Conservatives and Christian Democrats have already been testing if they could be more radical, making the dividing lines between centre-right and radical right more flexible.

The situation in which they stand on opposite sides, as it was the case in the context of the NextGenerationEU, and call each other names, cannot be repeated. And, judging from the fact that the German governmental programme has a number of bold proposals to boost European integration, this makes the need to clarify the details rather a pressing issue.

Finally, the results of the German elections are encouraging, but the overall situation of Social Democrats after 2021 really isn't. Figure 1 depicts the level of support for the Social Democratic parties from the countries where general elections took place and compares them also with the outcomes of the previous popular votes (both national and European).

Though the picture is by definition a fragmented one, it is still useful to show the scale of the challenge. In that sense, Progressives should indeed cherish their success, but in a way that will make them translate the lessons and good examples into something new and lasting. And then, regardless of what the polls show today, the outcomes of the key battles next year – in Portugal, Hungary, France and Sweden – may astonish and amaze. Because if to boil down what happened in September 2021 to one phrase, undoubtedly it would be that *impossible is a matter of opinion*.