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Let's design a European state

What is more progressive than founding a state? How many people aspire to it? Or dream of it if they cannot actually bring it about? Kurds and Kosovars, Catalans and Scots, Tibetans, and many others. Founding a state together, if you feel a strong sense of belonging and a strong sentiment of shared values and culture, seems to be the ultimate aspiration of many people in history. If you talk to elderly people in Israel, what they recount the most and what makes their eyes shine are their tales of the early phases of building the state of Israel in 1948 and of how engaged they were in this process.

What does this state-building aspiration have to do with Europe in 2022? Well, the new German government has just presented its coalition programme. And in the chapter on Europe (lines 4413-4421) it says that the current Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) should be turned into a convention. It also says that this convention should bring about a federal state of Europe. Given the enormity of the goal, it is strange that the European press has reported so little on it. Yet most European newspapers have remained silent on this sentence in the new German coalition programme – hence our decision to dedicate this small piece in the *Progressive Yearbook* to the idea.

Let's first remember that, as ambitious it may sound, the idea of a federal state of Europe is not new at all. Quite the opposite. It is in fact one of the oldest ideas of the founding fathers of Europe that the European integration project should end in the conception of a European state. From the Ventotene Manifesto of the Italian anti-fascist Altiero Spinelli in 1944 to the Schuman Declaration in 1950 and the hope of functional spillovers from economic integration to political union; from plans for a political European Union in the early 1950s to their failure to come to fruition in 1954 because of the proposed European Defence Community – European history for several decades can be read as an attempt to strive for a European state that never came together, and about which only some outlandish members of the Spinelli Group and other federal movements would dream. Yet this dream has now once again found its way onto paper.

True, not everything written in a coalition agreement becomes reality – let alone in just a four-year mandate. But neither is it trivial to have the goal of a federal state of Europe written down in the coalition agreement of the biggest, wealthiest and most important

country in Europe – the country which has not for a long time flagged up many European ideas or much European willingness, and which has sabotaged progress on European integration, especially in the fields of banking union, fiscal union and budgetary union since the financial and austerity crisis. For it was particularly Germany that turned against the proposals for a Genuine Economic and Monetary Union (GEMU) in 2012 and 2015. It was also Germany that blocked the first attempts at a European unemployment scheme in 2014, when the then European commissioner for social affairs, László Andor, presented the concept to the Council. It was also Germany that on several occasions dismissed the progressive speeches of France’s President Emmanuel Macron after 2017, which called for European strategic autonomy in the field of defence policy, digital capacity, climate protection and energy security.

The Covid-19 pandemic has nevertheless triggered slight changes. Germany has thus agreed to the €750 billion rescue package (NextGenerationEU) that was launched in mid-2020. Furthermore, in the second half of 2020 the German Presidency of the EU Council put forward quite progressive formulations on a future European social pillar, and even mentioned a European unemployment scheme. Times have therefore begun to change since the onset of the pandemic and, under a German president of the European Commission, Germany has finally turned its eyes to Europe again.

With the publication of the recent coalition agreement of the new German government, Europe is once again back on the radar of German politics and government. This is good, even if nobody believes that a European state will see the light of day in the next four years. But what is possible in the next four years is to measure all the German government’s European activities against this goal. And what is possible in the next four years is for Germany’s European partners to pin down the German government on this far-reaching goal and to demand political willingness. So, what will finally be possible again is the design of a European future after at least a decade of European renationalisation, Brexit and threats of other member state exits, populism and nationalism. In short, the sentence advocating a convention to bring about a federal state of Europe in the German coalition programme could become the start of the momentum to draw the European yoyo upward, instead of letting it drop further. The trick is not necessarily to get the state building done, but to reach the point of wanting to get it done and of having a positive and concrete goal on the horizon.

In this context, it is notable that when in 1912 Max Weber, the famous German sociologist, addressed the annual conference of the German Society for Sociology, he answered the question “what is a nation?” by saying “a nation is barely more than a group of people that, in a given moment of time and by impulsion, decides to want to create a state”.

Let’s dream that Europe can do this and take pride in it!