

## EP 2014 Elections – How To Reinvent European Social Democracy?

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### 1. Introduction

In his analysis of the 2009 European Parliament elections, Simon Hix argued that the outcome of the elections was a disaster for Social Democrats: “with only 184 seats this was the smallest representation of socialists since the first elections in 1979... and the smallest socialist group of over 50 years.” Among the key reasons for such an electoral outcome, Hix cited the adoption of many traditionally centre-left economic policies by the centre-right political parties, the fact that the voters in Europe exhibit a pattern of leaning rightwards in times of economic crisis, and the inability of the centre-left to nominate a common candidate for the Commission President. On the basis of his analysis of the outcome of the election, he urged European Social Democrats to engage in a careful self-assessment in order to prepare for the elections in 2014 (Hix, 2009).

Now that the outcome of the 2014 elections is clear, the Social Democrats have won 191 seats, whereas the EPP has won 214 seats, down from 265 in 2009. The S&D Group President Hannes Swoboda reacted to the outcome of the elections by emphasizing that the EPP lost massively and that the shocking gains by extremists in some countries can be attributed to the strong national component to the anti-European gains. He praised the common S&D candidate Martin Schulz, who has put forward a strong European campaign for the first time, despite various distractions, and has proved that such a campaign is possible (S&D press release).

A few days after the outcome of the European elections, it became clear that the path toward the new European Commission will be long and protracted and will involve a great deal of institutional wrangling. The process may further alienate European citizens from European matters and substantive issues. It will also likely serve as a reminder that the EU lacks strong European leadership at the supranational and national levels, which was so clearly demonstrated during the

last five years of unsuccessful attempts to deal with the crisis in many countries and regions across the EU.

## **2. Two possible views on the electoral outcome for the European Social Democracy**

There are two possible views when providing a preliminary assessment of the European parliamentary elections of 2014 with regard to European social democracy that remained close to the historically low levels of 2009 elections. Both views deal with the question of why 'massive losses' of the EPP did not accrue to the European Social Democrats, but rather the seats went to the European populists and demagogues.

One possible explanation for such an outcome would be to conclude that, in the midst of the protracted economic and social crisis – which has resulted in the highest levels of unemployment in many EU countries, especially for the young people; the rise of job precariousness and uncertainty for much of the European middle class; and cuts in education, health and regional funding, accompanied by an increase in general taxes – these hardships have opened the door for various demagogues and populists across Europe to provide simplistic explanations and propose even more simplistic solutions, creating an illusion of shortcuts to end the crisis. This view suggests that it is almost impossible to confront the rise of populism and demagoguery, because people experiencing a period of hardship will always cling to illusory solutions, no matter how unrealistic they may be.

There is, however, another and more substantive explanation regarding the electoral outcome. The European social democracy has largely failed to reconnect with the citizens, regions and member states in many places across the EU. It has failed to articulate and convey a comprehensive progressive alternative future toward a more inclusive, more balanced and more pluralistic EU.

In the last five years of implicit grand coalition in the European Parliament, there were too many inconsistencies and missed opportunities how to reorganize markets across Europe. For

example, it was not sufficient to criticize the devastating effects of austerity while adopting the excessively rigid and restrictive rules of the Fiscal compact. There have been many other contradictions in the past five years, including support for massive bail-outs of large financial institutions but very limited support for retraining and re-skilling of workers; very limited support for educational opportunities for young and unemployed people; and very limited support for small and medium-size companies' access to various resources. The program of economic orthodoxy, imposed top-down, was the only real program that originated from European institutions; the rest were insufficient and half-hearted measures to compensate for the negative impacts of these measures. The implicit grand coalition in the European parliament was an important part of this context. People across the EU understood this policy orientation either directly, indirectly or intuitively. As a result, in the absence of credible social, economic and political alternatives at the national and supranational levels, the opportunity to mobilize populists and demagogues across Europe emerged. A large majority of people across the EU stayed at home, disillusioned about the lack of programmatic alternatives and the lack of leadership.

The historical opportunity to revive progressivism in Europe did not succeed, despite many efforts and attempts. The programs and practices of many social-democratic governments across Europe have adopted most of the elements of conservative opponents. The European social democracy has failed to move beyond economic orthodoxy and vulgar keynesianism.

### **3. Conclusion**

Simon Hix's argument that the problem with the social democracy is that their conservative opponents adopted many traditional centre-left economic policies is inaccurate. In fact, the opposite is true.

To reconnect with the people and social groups across Europe, it is necessary to articulate alternatives in a form of decentralized fiscal consolidation based on socially inclusive growth and responsive to the productive potential of various localities, regions and member states across

Europe. Local networks of banks must support the development of local producers and consumers. Divergent development strategies, tailor-made for the diverse productive potential of various European regions and member states, must be encouraged. European institutions can launch programs for the mass retraining and reskilling of European workers. The move from the traditional tax-and-transfer approach toward a productivist paradigm could become one of the crucial elements of renewed and enhanced social democracy in Europe. Institutional reimagination, both bottom-up and top-down, in the form of an experimental Union can present the beginning of a comprehensive social, economic and political restructuring of Europe (see more in FEPS progressive studies, Vol. 8, 2013).

The call for more soul-searching for European social democracy in order to address issues, challenges and opportunities for the twenty-first century should be put forward. Emerging social movements with new ideas, initiatives and energy should be embraced as partners rather than excluded. If conventional social democracy does not transform, open and enlarge its social base, it risks becoming a marginal political force, much to the delight of populists, demagogues, and well-organized interest groups.

#### References

Hix, Simon (2009) "The 2009 European Parliament Elections: A Disaster for Social Democrats", *EU Studies Association Review*, 3 November 2009.

FEPS 8th vol. (2013) "Framing A New Progressive Narrative".