

# AN ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF THE LEFT AFTER THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

*The rise of far-right parties was a surprise for no one. However, even though they garnered maximal exposure in the media, it does not necessarily mean that everything is lost for progressive parties. We must analyse the reasons of this populist surge and see what the left can do in order to recover and move forward.*



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## *Beyond the grand coalition*

by Matjaž Nahtigal

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**I**n his analysis of the 2009 European Parliament elections, Simon Hix, from the London School of Economics and Political Science, argued that the outcome of the elections was a disaster for Social Democrats with the smallest representation of socialists since the first elections in 1979. 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.

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 the 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. The question about the low turnout should be also contemplated in this context.

### **SIMPLE ANSWERS TO COMPLEX PROBLEMS**

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.

### CONTRADICTIONS & INSUFFICIENCIES

In the last five years of implicit grand coalition in the European Parliament, there were too many inconsistencies and missed opportunities 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 restrictive policies. 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.

### CHANGE OR DISAPPEAR

The historical opportunity to revive progressivism in Europe did not succeed. 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 pseudo-Keynesianism, as well as beyond classical federalism.

The frequently stated 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.

The call for reinvention of 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.

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Revolution for real Democracy in Barcelona on October 15, 2011.