



THE ROLE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN THE ERA OF DEMOCRATIC MALAISE:

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Activity Report

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The event took place at the headquarters of the Rafael Campalans Foundation in Barcelona, Spain on 16th of April. The event aimed at assessing the role of progressive social democratic ideas in the uneasy times of low democratic participation of European citizens - the so-called era of democratic malaise.

The event was divided in two sessions, one focused on how social democracy is dealing with the new populist parties, and another session outlined the emergence of new voices of the left in Europe. Both sessions targeted some EU member states in particular, namely France, Italy, Spain and Greece.

OPENING SESSION

Esther Niubo, Director of Campalans Foundation, Ernst Stetter, Secretary-General of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and Javi Lopez, Spanish S&D member of the European Parliament launched the debate by questioning whether the legacy of social democracy is still fitting in an era of democratic malaise and growing populism in Europe. The typical cases of the far-right in France with its extreme-right Front National populist party and Spain with its extreme-left also populist party Podemos were referred to.



The speakers questioned the reason why citizens are detached from national and European politics and most importantly why the younger generations are not confident in casting their vote and confidence for social progressive parties.

With such a challenging European environment for social democracy, some statements and possible solutions were put forward, namely:

- Populist parties are a sign of a sick Europe;
- A different and more effective path should be considered for economic policies (the end of austerity);
- Social democracy should adapt itself to these challenging times and be more assertive about its own discourse;

SESSION 1 - How social democracy is dealing with populist parties: the cases of France and Italy

The first session focused largely on the issue of populism. **Meritxell Batet, member of the Spanish Parliament** sees the growing support for extremist parties as a sign of citizens dissatisfaction towards the typical centre-right / centre-left way of ruling. In her view, populism is the denial of politics in itself as it shows no room for ideology – populism is the shadow of democracy.

Xavier Casals, PhD in Contemporary History and author of several books on the evolution of the extreme right perceives the emergence of extreme-right movements as a natural adaption between offer and demand of politics.

Nicola Genga, Post-doctoral fellow in Political Science at the University of Rome « La Sapienza » and researcher with the Centro per la Riforma dello Stato explained that populism thrives as it promises fast and visible political solutions in comparison to what normal party-politics offer. The speaker also referred that social democrats are often populists themselves. In Genga's perception, the Italian social democratic response to populism was to absorb in its policies the populist discourse. This happened not only with the Letta government but also Renzi's government which is also a sort version of populism.



Eric Mass, political representative of the French PS in Barcelona brought in the French social democratic perspective on populism with the extreme-right wing party Front National winning 4 municipalities in France 2012. The participant called for more democracy and for regionally focused political actions in view of an increasing globalized world.

SESSION 2 – New voices of the left in Europe: the cases of Greece and Spain

Didac Gutierrez Peris, researcher in charge of European projects at the Institute Viavoice in Paris chaired the second session and provocatively called for a change of paradigm – a renewed social democratic voice is needed in Europe. He also introduced the Greek crises as a potential sign of something to come to the European project. In his opinion, it was the economic crises that potentiated the lack of legitimacy of the social state that currently is unable to protect its citizens. Furthermore, national austerity reforms lack democratic legitimacy, as the public power does not respond to the economic power anymore ensuing the transfer of powers to the European Union.



Oriol Bartomeus, professor in Political Sciences at the University Autònoma de Barcelona said that the social democratic parties were unable to respond to the current European battle of values and culture and that a paradigm shift was called for.

Sofia Vasilopoulou, Lecturer in the Department of Politics at the University of York, stated the current political situation in Greece. The state and parties failure as well as corruption led to scenarios of clientism,

patronage and corruption networks. Apart these growing practices amongst Greece's traditional party systems, the economic crises led to an institutional crisis and people became pessimistic about governance. Greece is experiencing an acute crisis of democratic representation. In this scenario, social democracy in Greece imploded – PASO politicians moved to extreme-left governing party Syriza. In the speaker's point of view Syriza is becoming mainstream and social democrats need urgently to consider in changing its internal system.

Carlos Carnero, Managing Director of Fundacion Alternativas, outlined the worrying support of Spanish citizens towards Podemos, the country's left-wing populist party. The speaker criticised the political stances of this party – it claims it wants change but does not explain how; the party does not

have a political programme. Mr. Carnero then enumerated a number of ideas related to the social democracy response to populism:

- The only way to defeat populist parties is to have more democracy and more debate;
- Social democracy has lost its merit and needs to be reformed within;
- The social democratic programs should not change; the internal party system however is in need of deep reform;

Jose Montilla, President of the Rafael Campalans Foundation, closed the event and presented its conclusions. Mr. Montilla stated the socialist strategy should be forward-looking and that it should aim at improving the democratic reality – societies and institutional systems should be fairer. In his opinion, Podemos is taking stock, as it is mobilising citizens with passionate discourse. He concluded that the EU should be fighting for a federal political union having as an objective social justice.