



RENEWAL OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND PROGRESSIVE POLITICS IN EUROPE – THE STATE OF THE MOVEMENT

Helsinki 2nd June 2016

Intervention by **Ernst Stetter**,
Secretary General of FEPS

FEPS
JUNE 2016

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



It is a great pleasure to be here in Helsinki today and to be able to share with you some of our reflections regarding the state of the progressive movement and its perspectives as for today.

Coming to Helsinki and thanks probably to the effective branding of the last years, one cannot not think of Tove Jansson and her brilliant “**Moomins**”. These are the stories that were written in dark times and that offer more than much in terms on hope, belief in what sort of an amazing place the world around can be and how important it is for one to belong – to a family, circle of friends, a community. And this thought made me think of all the quotes that I may recall from this literature – having chosen perhaps two that will guide my presentation today.

The first one is from the answer of Snufkin to Moominpapa upon the question what is happening in the world – to which Snufkin replies “**Fuss and misery**”. That will probably be the feeling, while I will be touching upon the difficulties at hand. But as **Tove Jansson**, I will finish on another note – providing some concrete ideas on how to emancipate ourselves from the predicament – and with that I hope to embody the quote of her from the “**Moominland Winter**” – which is:

All things are so very uncertain, and that's exactly what makes me feel reassured...

1. The European social democracy is in an unprecedented crisis.

- The electoral results it is noting subsequently are **the worst in 70 years** (hence in the entire post-War history)
- In the system that used to be two-partisan (bi-partisan) it has lost the **guaranteed position of minimum second largest parliamentary party**.
- It finds itself in a position, where **its' traditional political priority are becoming its liability**. This concerns the welfare system that is being under pressure, cuts and attacks that it no longer can deliver. And this also concerns the pro-European approach – whereby the EU is seen as drowning in its own incapacity to stand up to the challenges that it is facing.

2. The European social democracy is in its transitional moment.

- The post-war history saw social democracy evolving from a movement closely related to trade unions and workers' organization into a parliamentary, eventually governmental party.
- In that sense it has become **a part of the system** – the very same one that so many contest these days.
- While transforming its structures on the wave of professionalization and mediatization of politics, it has lost the previously natural connection and herewith also started drifting in terms of whom it wanted to mobilize or/and represent.
- The historic social democratic movement **used to be about one, core idea** – which was to build a socialist society. In the 1970s (due to geopolitical situation first and foremost) this ideal was replaced in programmatic documents with the objective **“to build a society based on equality and solidarity”**.
- It would seem that a **tangible translation of what that means is missing**. And that is also one of the reasons social democracy is losing in the times when **political competition is first and foremost on ideas, and this is what predefines the large volatility of the electorate**.
- Social democracy is suffering from the crisis **regarding the leadership**. The current generation of leaders across the EU has one thing in common – and that is their CVs (with exception of Jeremy Corbyn perhaps). Most of them have been active in youth (students) politics, and served as political assistants and then **step by step approached the high circles**, in which they were recruited for leadership position the moment the

party would lose the elections.

- That is why **the current generation does not come with a new, generational agenda to answer 'its times'** (to paraphrase Willy Brandt here) – but is rather simply '**next in succession**'. As such it may be a transition between now and the next stage.

3. The European social democracy is seen as incapable to deliver, while in government.

- On the European level, social democrats have become hostages of the unfortunate grand coalition. This means that they **are associated with both unpopular (and also wrong) decisions regarding austerity – as also they are seen as part of the group**, that has the steering wheel in their hands but fails to steer Europe really out of the trouble. Some of the opinions are even harsher, seeing social democrats as part of those, who mismanaged the post-crisis times and failed to punish effectively those, who caused the 2008 predicament.
- On the national level, neither of the governmental constellations seem to be serving social democrats well:
 - a) Grand Coalitions are the source of frustrations – of which we have just seen an imminent **outburst in Austria** two weeks ago. Similarly to SPÖ, also SPD finds itself in a bad situation – whereby there is no single week without press foretelling the end of SPD. Although this is exaggerated and there are good things that the grand coalition governments have delivered, that seems to be passing rather as taken for granted (see the introduction of minimum wage in Germany).
 - b) Minority governments – like in Sweden – **are also facing grave times**, as people wish reforms to be on a faster track than they are nowadays. Especially that the negotiation processes seem to take forever, while the reality changes rapidly, in every instance. Hence although Stefan Löfven's policies are solid, solidaristic and sustainable in their design – still his government is not ranking high in terms of popular support. It is also being trapped from time to time – of which we saw an expressive case whilst the budget was negotiated.
 - c) Single party majority – which has been the glorious victory 2012 of Hollande and its Parti Socialiste in France under the slogan 'Le changement maintenant' – **has raised the expectation bar too high for the President and government to actually reach it**. To that end, the crisis and diverse pressures prompted the reforms, which as President Hollande claims were necessary to adjust the old-fashioned welfare state, but that are vastly unpopular. That has been especially visible in the last weeks,

when thousands went on the streets to protest against the labour reforms.

d) The left block solution is the one that is exercised in Portugal – and there **has been much hope** expressed regarding seeing that as an optimal solution for the divided centre left to unite and to neutralize the competition that it saw growing on its left. **But if this will deliver, the time will need to show.**

e) And then there are also the cases, where the social democracy seems to be fading away without much of a hope that this trend could be reversed. This is the case in Ireland, in the Netherlands, in Greece. It may not be as speedy as the changes that took place in less consolidated democracies (such as Hungary or Poland, where parties are either barely or no longer in the parliament) – **but worrying they are for sure**

4. The European social democracy lost its character as an ambitious party movement

- Of course, it is hard to believe and continue being enthusiastic, when the picture of social democracy is as doomed as it is – however perhaps the malaise, uncertainty and disbelief are in fact core reasons for which centre left is where it is.
- **It used to be a movement that pleases people to believe that another, better and fairer future for all is possible.** This is the first thing that it needs to re-establish in order to survive – especially that there are many others who talk about alternatives (starting from alter-globalist movements in 1990s, finishing with the 99% movements quite recently or some of the left wing newly movements).
- That means that on one hand it raises the expectations (as did Presidents Hollande or Obama's campaign on 'change') on the other it defines the change via prospect of minima. Surely the minimum standards are relevant, but they do not respond to the aspirations people have and rights they want to enjoy. It is also the case in Grand Coalitions, where often only minimum changes are implemented after big promises in the campaigns and when entering in the coalition.
- Because of the crisis, social democracy focused on two debates. The first one concerns the "ways out of crisis" (focused on management and not re-booting of the declining, shocked economy). The second one was the return to familiar "was the Third Way wrong". Now both are not enough to carry on forward. The first one, because it does not offer an answer what role social democracy envisaged for itself – when the era of prosperity is over and when it is impossible to regulate relationships within the post-industrial financial capitalist reality via singular national governmental structure. The second one is a blind street, especially that it seems quite depressing to be talking about

the idea that was invented twenty years ago – by one could say already ‘past generation’. It is sad that nothing different and if one wanted ‘better’ came along to be disputed about/vehemently criticized since then.

- While the preoccupation was the political competition for the office, the social democratic parties de-emphasised their efforts to attract new members. This process coupled with the professionalization of politics and the tendency to lean onto the parliamentary support in terms of organising political processes. The role of members further declined, while the parties obtained the state donations for their activities and had sufficient resources to outsource diverse part of its traditional activities – from campaigning to policy development. That left very little of a role for members.

5. The European Social Democracy has still time to rescue itself from becoming history.

- It is puzzling that the movement that shaped the course of the previous century is now in such an incredible decline. But it does not have to be its destiny to continue on the trajectory of fall. It is possible to change the course with a number of ideas:
 - a) **The ideological framework:** Instead of complaining about Third Way, the debates we did not have or the things we did not do – we need change the focus. From the past into the future is the direction that it must take, imposing on us certain degree of intellectual discipline to seize the perspective of not only the next electoral round, but of a generation ahead. That is what has been guiding our FEPS Next Left reflection process.
 - b) **The socio-economic paradigm:** We must understand that the socio-economic model that we built after the Second World War and revamped in the 1990s while trying to deal with globalization, is not the one we have at hand. This one sees a detachment between financial and so-called real economy, and is debated in a very fragmented manner. We talk separately about green economy, separately about care economy (which is a growth sector, but isn’t considered as one – because its output is not defined in narrow GDP categories), separately about digital future and separately about re-industrialization. This divide must stop – especially that they are cross-cutting and require us to give a coherent answer what rules we want for economy altogether, what sort of a labour market we hope to create with it and what sort of social policies it will be accompanied with. This is the logic of us at FEPS, when together with J. Stiglitz we discuss ‘Re-writing the rules’.

- c) **The new way of organizing:** We have to accept that the society has changed and that the people, especially young have different approach to politics and engagement in it. This is what we learnt through and through the FEPS Millennial Dialogue, which has become a global bank of answers regarding the attitudes, dreams and needs of young people across the globe. If we want to engage them – and that is a condition sine qua non for social democrats to stop declining in numbers (of voters, members, sympathizers) – we must understand that the ideological, responsible and straight-forward politics is not at all out of fashion. This is why we need to rethink on how we do policies and have to find ways to make things possible, instead of explaining to people that they are impossible. The best example is the welfare state, which for years has been described by politicians as ‘unappealing to the younger generations’ – and our survey result clearly prove that to the contrary, they love it, take it as something that they are entitled to benefit from and wish to expand, especially in terms of education and health care policy provisions.
- d) **The new way of thinking about political battleground:** We need to stop strategizing if that is the middle or the left we should move onto in order to gain electoral majority. It is probable that the majorities we knew from the past are also the feature of the past, and what awaits us nowadays is the need to build continuously ad-hoc coalitions in the name of ideas that carry or can potentially carry majoritarian support within society. This does not mean giving up on ideological compass, to the contrary – it means using it to set the new dimensions of the political conflicts. That is essential to get out from the defensive position, which places social democrats at the side of the contested ‘elites’ (system). The system and anti-system divide social democracy can only loose from – which we have seen in Austria, which we have seen in the context of referendum in Scotland and nonetheless we are likely to see in the upcoming general elections in Spain and in the context of the EU referendum in the UK. Unless we redefine the rules of the political game, we may share the faith of those who did not – and became a history on the course of unavoidable transformations of the partisan system. Vivid example of it is what happened with the liberal parties, ones neo-liberalism took its course and found more effective advocate in the shape of conservative parties in Europe.

- e) **The political competition:** There is no need for social democrats to define themselves in comparison to the others. That means that there is no need to neither enter into the debates that are initiated in a manner that contradicts all the basic rules of democratic culture of respect for each and everyone. To that end, there is also no ethical excuse for competing on the grounds that are morally wrong – such as hostility and xenophobia. The European social democrats are not declining because anti-systemic, populist, extremist or (left) radical parties are on the rise, but they are on the rise because the social democrats are in decline. What that means is that social democrats must define themselves alongside its' own agenda, and not alongside the commentaries of what they are not. As the migration crisis especially in the South and Central Europe, as also attempt to scrap women rights abuse in Spain or Poland showed – people do cherish and express solidarity towards one another. One should focus how to channel this and make it mainstream, instead of focusing on how to respond to the margins that don't.
- f) **The governing agenda:** Next to the ideological framework, socio-economic paradigm, new way of organizing and new way of thinking about the political battleground and of a political competition, we need to also define the governing agenda. It must be multi-layered and as much as it should focus on the national level priorities, it must also define what the aspiration is regarding the EU and its future. Both the features – government and Europe – seem to be a point of liability for the centre left – as they both suffer from negative image of powerless structures. Centre left must make it about power again. That means that not only it must come to power prepared (with ideas and leaders that can gear the reforms that had been promised), but also must invest in what the French call 'pedagogy of the reform'. This means finishing off with excuses or generic explanations about the powers 'that can't be controlled'. To the contrary, it must be about readiness to stand up, self-confidence that would make people regain feeling of security and determination that would make people trust that social democrats are never to give up. Even if the crisis of theirs is as powerful as the one at hand.

6. Some concluding core guidelines that could help to find out of the crisis:

- *Find one comprehensive sentence what the prior mission is!*
- *Breaking out of the defensive position. Nowadays Politics is of identity and not of ideology!*
- *Reclaiming the leadership in making a difference to the others!*
- *Aiming really a new socio-economic paradigm: People must relate to it – rationally and emotionally and connect it with the modernity!*
- *Establishing as the main fighter against rising inequalities!*
- *Embracing a new way to attract and empower the members in the way that the party speaks for, on behalf and through its members*
- *“Doing politics” instead simply aiming to acquire the “office”.*
- *Going forward with European integration.*