

The European Union: new software is needed

The composition of the new Parliament was expected. Beyond the conventional comments we are hearing these days, how can we think of a European future that would meet the expectations of the tens of millions who feel left behind?

Jan Robert SUESSER, member of Executive Board of the Ligue des droits de l'Homme
Raffaella BOLINI, member of the Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana (ARCI)

The European elections were held just as this article was finalised. The two major political blocs, Christian Democrat and Socialist, no longer have a majority. The centre has been reinforced. The far right has topped its previous results. Ecological parties gained strength in some countries.

Regressive nationalist forces are far from having overwhelmed the European Parliament. The majority, which is in favour of pursuing a European project, is more diverse, both in terms of political orientation and national sensitivities. The key challenges for Europe remain the same.

For many years, there have been multiple electoral upheavals in European countries. They reflected the rise of discontent and despair among entire segments of the population, who see their situation made more fragile, more precarious, or who fear that they will be the next victims to be abandoned.

The manifesto "#PourUneEurope Solidaire" (1), presented by some twenty associations acting for people's access to rights in France on the occasion of these European elections, signed by the LDH, recalls the situation: "In the world's wealthiest continent, 128 million live beneath the poverty line, 11 million are severely deprived of housing, and one in six workers is living in poverty. Too many people lack access to proper social protection and to the basic services needed for their

Although fears of social downgrading are strongly present throughout the European Union, electoral results at all levels (European, national and local) show that there is no inevitability that the most reactionary offers will prevail. This observation is essential to help us think of the future.

This article is adapted from the original French version published in Hommes & Libertés #186 – June 2019

well-being and to fulfil their potential. Increasing inequalities, competition between employees and those in a precarious situation, reduction of social protection, and the lack of a comprehensive response to the environmental emergency, lead to disenchantment and loss of trust in institutions. Also, this causes the unprecedented rejection of migrants who are dying in thousands as they cross the Mediterranean."

In electoral terms, the feeling of being left behind has long been reflected in an impressive increase in abstention, and now, all too often, this is expressed in votes for far right and regressive right political offers that advocate retreating into identities that exclude any diversity.

However, not all electoral developments lead in this direction: as we have seen, for example, in Portugal or Spain with the success of political offers that claim to break with austerity policies; or in Slovakia, with the democratic agenda and the revolt against corruption.

Although fears of social downgrading are strongly present throughout the European Union, electoral results at all levels (European, national and local) show that there is no inevitability that the most reactionary offers will prevail. This observation is essential to help us think of the future.

Elements of the mainstream European parties' answers

Everywhere, the issues at stake for our national (or sub-national) societies have a European dimension. This is the consequence of a crucial contradiction for the European project as it is constructed: wealth is produced thanks to deep economic integration at European level but it is unequally distributed between territories; social and environmental needs are the same everywhere on the continent but they can be addressed by each country only with the resources it has.

The feelings of all those who, in each country, feel that they are left behind are bringing together people living in extreme poverty and those who assess their situation in the light of increasing inequality. No European country escapes this. But how do the dominant parties understand what is causing this feeling of being left behind?

During the campaign for these European elections, maybe for the first time, some prominent leaders of the major European parties gave a lucid explanation for what should have been obvious. The responsibility for the rise of the extreme right is to be found in the policies implemented (or not implemented) for decades.

They also expressed an idea that was classic but which was not central to their discourse, that of the need for a social response to inequalities, fiscal injustice and precariousness. Some of the analyses presented included the fact that the expected responses could not be limited to "equal opportunities" policies, the results of which will be seen long term. If "to say is not to act", at least we have heard a realistic diagnosis.

Concerning the climate change emergency and preservation of the environment, the expectations of the whole population, not only of the young, are being massively expressed everywhere. The European framework is clearly more appropriate than the national framework to provide answers to the challenges posed. A global framework would be even more appropriate, but it is not operational in terms of coordinated policies and funding.

During the electoral campaign, it became clear how the dominant European parties translated their understanding of the ecological issues through their proposals. Their approaches and what they say about their overall vision must be taken seriously. A key element of their programme concerns public action in support for environmental investments considered to largely rely on individuals' decision making. It takes the form of (repayable) financial assistance for the insulation of housing or support to change personal behaviour in terms of food waste. Changes in the mode of production, distribution, and less individual-more collective consumption do not have a major place in their approaches and proposals.

We are therefore left with measures based on the "polluter pays" model such as the carbon tax on fuel, which has been called into question by the recent social movement in France without this being reflected to date in the approaches of the dominant parties.

The EU answers to the challenges of its diversity and unity

Developed as an area of economic integration unified by "the four freedoms of movement" (goods, services, capital, people), the European project has not set up the social protection equivalent on the same geographical scale. This is a major issue as the quality of democracy is strongly related to the quality of the articulation between the wealth produced and its redistribution.

In national spaces, democratic institutions have been built by articulating economic regulation and social protection. It is to be noted that these national spaces are not systematically characterized by ethnic, religious, cultural or linguistic homogeneity. Even their homogeneity happens to be rather the exception.

Today the challenge for European integration is to build a common democratic future while heterogeneities are strong, even growing in some aspects. How can the wealth produced in the unified economic space meet the expectations of social, climatic and cultural security and protection? How can inequalities be reduced to strengthen what needs to be shared?

Mario Draghi, President of the European Central Bank (ECB), gave a meaningful answer in a recent substantive speech on the future of the European Union by saying: "[...] We must address the perception of a lack of equity between countries and between social classes. [...]"

While this challenge is major, some dominant European politicians have chosen to highlight other issues, as shown by Emmanuel Macron's "address to Europeans" and the answer given to him by Anne-Kramp-Karrenbauer ("AKK"), President of the German CDU.

How can inequalities be reduced to strengthen what needs to be shared?

Mario Draghi, President of the European Central Bank (ECB), gave a meaningful answer in a recent substantive speech on the future of the European Union by saying: "[...] We must address the perception of a lack of equity between countries and between social classes. [...]"

Both put their proposals in the same matrix: enemies, dangers, problems to be solved (including "unfair" competitors) come from outside. Accordingly, they are not focusing their proposals on inequalities and insufficient internal redistribution.

The French President states as follows: *"This European project continues to protect us today. What country can act on its own in the face of aggressive strategies by the major powers? Who can claim to be sovereign, on their own, in the face of the digital giants? How would we resist the crises of financial capitalism without the euro, which is a force for the entire European Union?"*

We are stunned when the CDU leader AKK, says that climate action in Europe will only be possible *"if we succeed in taking economic and social aspects into account in such a way that employment and economic strength are preserved, and new development opportunities are created."* The question of redistribution at European level is directly rejected by AKK, who writes *"the communitarisation of debts, the Europeanisation of social systems, and the minimum wage would be the wrong approach"* and gives its alternative "proposal", clearly dilatory, to have *"a strategy to promote convergence that intelligently links national and European approaches"*.





Twilight for the EU or an effective access to rights?

If it is Mario Draghi who has the right diagnosis of the issues to be tackled and solved in the European Union (“*lack of equity between countries and social classes*”), then reducing the challenges to threats coming from outside the EU leads straight to the end of a European project as a shared project.

During the May 2019 electoral campaign, the dominant political forces failed to provide proper answers for a Europe's future that would rely on what should be the three pillars for possible societal stability: producing wealth within the unified European framework with rules that respect climate protection; ensuring social protection for all through redistribution over the same European space; and implementing democracy that meets the diversity of people's expectations and needs.

The lack of a global response allows extreme right parties to propose their model based on a denial of equal access to rights

The scenario that is emerging following the recent elections could well be limited to an alternative: either a European Union of all rights for all; or dark times that would bring nothing good for those who live there.

for all those living in the territory. In the European arena, the confrontation between the concept of societies where rights are restricted to nationals and the concept of universal access to rights could be played again. This is already at stake where these forces have an impact on national authorities. This would be the case on a completely different scale if these forces continue to strengthen.

Some argued during the campaign that there could be another choice: either a change in European treaties; or, in the absence of treaty change, national withdrawals from treaties obligations, claiming it would provide a better framework for social redistribution. It is far from certain that such a choice is open. Nor is it clear that it offers a desirable alternative.

The scenario that is emerging following the recent elections could well be limited to another alternative: either a Europe-

an Union of all rights for all; or dark times that would bring nothing good for those who live there.

(1) Read the Manifesto French and English versions at <https://pouruneeuropesolidaire.org/manifeste>.