INTERVIEWS 21.11.2025

'Moral outrage is not enough'

Raphaël Glucksmann on the crisis of social democracy, overdue self-criticism and the looming election victory of the right wing in France

You are serving as a 'special envoy for social democratic renewal' within the S&D Group in the European Parliament. What does this renewal mean to you? What are its key aspects?

Across Europe we are facing almost the same situation. The crisis is not national — it is European, even Western. What we see in the United States with the MAGA movement is mirrored here. When confronted with the rise of the far right and the lack of energy and substance from our own side, we must ask fundamental questions: *Who are we? What do we stand for? How can we not only save European social democracy, but also European democracy itself?*

That is why, in our group, we decided that drafting a joint manifesto three weeks before elections is not enough. Then we just repeat slogans — social justice, fair transition, social ecology. We need deeper reflection. First, what have we done wrong? Losing elections everywhere means something is not working. Second, why are we social democrats in the first place? What do we want to change? And third, *how* do we want to do it?

Politics is not only transactional, responding to demands or fears, it is also transformational. We must shape the agenda, not only react to one imposed on us. Otherwise, we play every match on the opponent's field. We want to play on our field at home, too – but we need to redefine first what 'home' actually is for us. Paradoxically, the nationalist far right has managed to coordinate across borders better than we have. They act internationally, while we, the supposed internationalists, remain fragmented. That contradiction has to end, or we will keep losing.

You have spent some days in Germany, speaking with SPD politicians and intellectuals, as the party works on a new basic program to be completed by 2027. How important are such long-term programs

today? Do they still give the necessary orientation?

It is not just about a program. What matters is the process of questioning ourselves, the same questions we ask in France and across Europe: *Who are we, and what vision are we offering?* Yes, a credible policy program is necessary. But before policies, there must be values and a shared understanding of politics itself. The SPD's challenge is particularly complex. It has to draw lessons from recent elections and the mood in Germany, while governing at the same time. That creates conflicts — not only of interest, but of timing.

When you are in government, especially as a junior partner, you carry responsibility for decisions that may not originate from you, while facing one crisis after another. Still, you cannot sacrifice long-term thinking for short-term survival. In France, we have too often done that — responding tactically to each crisis and neglecting deeper renewal. You survive each wave, but in the end you have no substance left for a transformative agenda. Everyone I have met here understands that beyond tactical errors or single issues there is a deeper crisis of social democracy. And this is exactly the right time to confront it.

You mentioned this 'deeper crisis.' Many argue that social democratic and centre-left parties have lost the working class, which increasingly votes for the far right. How can this trend be reversed?

This is indeed the core of the problem. The working class has shifted. Former socialist voters in France now vote for the extreme right. But this is not only a crisis of social democracy; it is a crisis of democracy itself. For decades, Western democracies were stable because they kept a central promise to working people: through work, you can build a better life. That promise was fulfilled for a long time, and it sustained both prosperity and faith in democracy. Now that promise is broken. When it collapses, populism grows.

We can no longer just say 'No pasarán.' Moral outrage is not enough. We must understand *why* a blue-collar worker in Michigan, or in northern France, who voted left all his life, now supports Trump or Le Pen. The answer is that he no longer sees progress or dignity within democracy itself. Renewing social democracy therefore means returning to its sources. Working people must again see a democratic future that offers improvement in their lives. Otherwise, democracy weakens, and the far right becomes the party of workers — as has already happened. That is not only a mortal danger for social democracy, but for democracy itself.

Of course, the working class today is not the same as it once was. It is diversified, fragmented, more individualised. We must understand

this transformation, not romanticise the past. And we must clearly define both whom we speak for and whom we confront. Today we face what I call the *capitalism of loneliness*. Huge digital platforms dominate not only the political debate but everyday life itself. They profit from atomisation and isolation, which in turn erodes solidarity — the foundation of social democracy. We are confronted by powers such as Elon Musk or even the Chinese Communist Party with TikTok, where business interests merge with ideological influence. To defend democracy, we must know both whom we fight *for* and whom we fight *against*.

Let's turn to French politics. The situation there appears extremely tense. How do you assess the current moment, and would you consider running in the next presidential elections?

The 2027 elections will be a life-or-death moment for French democracy and for the European project as a whole. The possibility that Marine Le Pen or another far-right candidate could win is very real. There is no longer a ceiling to their support. This means that every decision taken today must be made with a sense of gravity that is too often absent in French politics. We will be judged by history on what we do, or fail to do, now. If French democracy collapses, the entire European democratic project will be shaken.

So, we must act with one goal: preventing that collapse. Social democrats must show that they are the true bulwark of democracy. Yes, we share with conservatives the belief in a strong defence against Putin's aggression. But we understand 'defence' in a holistic way: it means military strength, social cohesion and ecological transition. These three pillars together form the defence of democracy. Only we can offer such a comprehensive vision — an alternative to the anti-democratic forces. In France, I am working to build that approach, without sectarianism or dogma. In this fight, we will need everyone who believes in democracy, including those who voted for Macron in the past.

What happens personally, I don't yet know. But this is not about individual ambition. It's about avoiding collapse. The choice ahead is not victory or defeat — it is renewal or ruin. To succeed, we must first clarify who we are. It's not enough to be 'against the far right.' People must also know positively what we stand for. They may understand that we support social justice or higher wages, but our political identity remains vague while nationalist forces have a very clear one. That clarity is our missing piece.

How do you view *La France Insoumise* (LFI) in the broader struggle for democracy and what about possible cooperation in future

elections?

When you lead the fight for democracy, you cannot ally yourself with non-democratic forces. If you do, you hand victory to the far right. They will simply point to our inconsistency: 'You accuse us of being authoritarian or pro-Putin, yet you ally with populists who oppose the EU and European defence.' Being a social democrat means, first of all, being a *democrat*. That distinguishes us from the populist left. If we blur this difference, we lose our identity. And blurring it is not only a moral failure but a strategic mistake.

Therefore, no alliance with *La France Insoumise*. It would guarantee defeat. If an LFI candidate reached the second round of the presidential or legislative elections, it would ensure a far-right victory. Even if we were the candidate, we would lose the moral argument. We would be accused of complicity with forces that have toyed with the worst instincts of populism. Yes, refusing such alliances will bring local setbacks. But coherence brings long-term credibility. I will ensure there is no 'blurry strategy.' People deserve clarity.

At the end of the day, what voters doubt most is not our competence, but our *sincerity*. Credibility problems can be solved with policies; sincerity problems cannot. People must believe that we mean what we say, even when it costs us something. What I want for social democrats in France, and across Europe, is to re-embrace without hesitation their place in the European social democratic family. We should stop pretending to be radicals in opposition and liberals in power. Tell people the truth about who you are. In the long run, they will prefer authenticity to pretence.

This interview was conducted by Philipp Kauppert.



Raphaël Glucksmann
Brussels

Raphaël Glucksmann is a French journalist, documentary filmmaker and politician. He is a member of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats group in the European Parliament. Previously, he was editor-in-chief of the French magazine *Nouveau Magazine littéraire*.