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Fighting the wrong battles

Why the European elections are about more than a simple fight between pro-Europeans and anti-Europeans

Read this article in German.

There's a very one-sided – politically correct – debate about Europe at the moment. That makes the discussion a difficult one. Criticism of Europe seems to be taboo, or at least attracting a lot of negative feedback. Criticism is labelled with the adjectives 'nationalistic' or even 'social nationalist' to exclude it from the realm of politically correct and acceptable discourse. 'Social Europe' has become a ritual incantation, like whistling in the dark, to protect against something unpleasant – an 'unsocial Europe' or a 'neoliberal Europe'.

Is Social Europe simply an illusion, an unattainable dream, a much-loved myth? This question cannot be answered until something else is clear. What can we expect from Social Europe? Everyone means something different when using the term. Can a nation or a supranational institution be 'social'? And if it can, what are the criteria for a social Europe? And what if we say no to the question? In this case, we have to concede that the concept can be filled fairly arbitrarily with all sorts of possible meanings. Perhaps it's suitable as one of those glitzy campaign slogans that are regularly taken off the shelf before elections.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, trade unions have been stuck with the following dilemma: the demands of a Social Europe do not match the neoliberal reality of the EU. Admittedly, there's the more vague concept of the 'social dimension'. But this is only supplementary to the construction of the EU's single market, never as an end in itself. As a goal, Social Europe is so ambiguous that many political actors can cosy up to it.

Before European elections, socialist and social democratic parties often conjure up 'Social Europe' as an aim or simply as an election campaign slogan. The slogan allows them to appear pro-European and social without defining specific demands or political content. The promise of 'Social Europe' has been regularly repeated but, up until now, barely been achieved.

Standing up for workers

'Social Europe' is not a myth, it's a means to an end. The choice of political leaders plays a role here too. It's an unclear how Frans Timmermans, one of the European 'Spitzenkandidaten' (the candidate to be European Commission President), who has often been more right-wing than Jean-Claude Juncker in terms of social policy and has proactively blocked social legislation, should now help with a creating a Social Europe? Can a 'Spitzenkandidat' who generates wariness and precious little enthusiasm among trade unions expect some support? Can he win votes with this profile?

Or at the national level: the German social democrats' 'Spitzenkandidat' who would like to take social Europe forwards, keeps a low profile on the EU company law package negotiated at the moment. This way, she condones the fact that workers' participation is put in jeopardy.

Social promises have not been kept and this is not only a matter of perception.

In the EU Commission's draft proposals on company law, there are very real dangers for workers' participation regulations in numerous countries. Her predecessor too should have emphatically sent back the Commission's proposal instead of remaining inactive – the proposed single-member company would have certainly been a final nail in the coffin for German workers' participation.

Therefore, it's no surprise that some trade unions are inclined to defend national institutions and national regulations first and foremost, for example preferring to protect the German company workers' participation rather than engaging with a questionable neoliberal project for the completion of the EU's internal market. They do not want any new liberalised company law which will formally serve the flexibility of the 'Business Community', but endangers the achievement of workers' participation. Advocates of Social Europe have to ask themselves a central question – can they achieve real progress or have they long been part of a system which allows the social dimension only as the icing on the cake? Are they still part of a solution or already part of a problem?

The shady slogan 'Social Europe' tends to gloss over things rather than taking them forward a decade after the financial crisis. The German federal government bears a large part of the responsibility for that. It's not delivering a response to Macron's EU policy ideas.

Even the social democratic coalition partners in the German government

don't seem to feel any rush in pushing forward. The German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz blocks the digital tax arguing that we first need take it forward at the international level before Europe considers a European solution. This is important because paying taxes is a matter of fairness. In other words, further democratisation of Europe goes hand in hand with the question of taxation.

On the migration issue, the German government seems disoriented and acts in an un-European manner. It has always decided on its own without consulting other countries and then, after the fact, demands solidarity from others (such as Greece or Italy). We're talking about solidarity that it should have offered in the past but chose not to.

Not just for or against Europe

So what happens next? Does 'Social Europe' only give rise to moaning and groaning, is it misused by thoughtless opportunists or it is appropriate for a new start? Many people are disillusioned. Social promises have not been kept and this is not only a matter of perception. The state of play is sobering. Austerity policy, social dumping and deregulation are preventing an alternative narrative. Macron wanted to mobilise people for the European elections by presenting a simple narrative: the advocates of Europe taking the fight to the Eurosceptics. In the meantime, however, Macron is backpedaling.

These elections are not just about checking whether you are for or against Europe.

At a time when populists are clearly picking up momentum, the European election campaign isn't the appropriate platform for a confrontation between pro-Europeans and anti-Europeans. Our current Europe doesn't really show enough for the populists or Eurosceptics to be easily convinced. Of course Europe does ensure peace but also maintains an underdeveloped social dimension, a protracted crisis with high unemployment in the periphery, a U-turn from convergence to divergence (economic and social north-south differences) and much more.

Therefore, we need to ask ourselves: Which kind of Europe do we actually want? Various versions of it have to compete with each other. Here, we come back to Social Europe again. The slogan alone is not enough. A concrete alternative must be developed.

It's about putting your money where your mouth is: for example, do we

want European company workers' participation, as the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has been demanding for years? There is no such proposal in any of the existing party programmes.

We must be grateful to Martin Höpner for a stimulating contribution to the debate! As an empty shell, Social Europe must be filled with content! Which specific proposals are worth being considered as 'Social Europe'? There are a few things: the trade unions have delivered enough proposals to the parties. A big step forward would be the introduction of company workers' participation or a legally guaranteed access to social security systems, i.e. to income, health and unemployment support. Then, 'Social Europe' would take a very concrete form.

Now, and in particular after the European Parliament elections, it's up to the parties to create this Social Europe! The issue of democracy is equally crucial. Will it be possible to democratise Europe and at the same time strengthen democracy in the workplace? Dare to have more democracy! Everywhere in Europe! Or will the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas be right when he says that the EU is turning into a 'postdemocratic executive system' based on the principle of competition? Both these questions – in terms of the specific shape of a social and democratic Europe – couldn't be more central in the European elections. These elections are not just about checking whether you are for or against Europe.



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