EUROPE 18.05.2020 | Catrina Schläger

The Left needs to politicise this crisis

The political truce over corona has ended. The Left must now fight for genuine reform or risk being stuck with the status quo

Read this article in German.

Since political, social and economic life ground to a halt because of the corona pandemic, parliaments too have been rather quiet. In their emergency response to the crisis, governing and opposition parties have worked closely together, jointly passing far-reaching emergency legislation that has allowed extensive curtailing of basic rights.

For the sake of the population's health ('flatten the curve'), differences between political parties seemed to have disappeared. Consensus was the order of the day. The Europe-wide lockdown measures were not in line with any discernible party ideology. Countries were hit by lockdown regardless of whether they had a social democratic government or a conservative one. In other words, the coronavirus has no party affiliation.

That said, so far this political consensus has only benefited the parties in government. These are bleak times for opposition parties, as the crisis sees the executive come into its own. According to opinion polls, parties in government have improved their ratings in almost every country in Europe.

In Austria support for the governing ÖVP has risen to 44 per cent, while for the opposition SPÖ it has fallen from 25 to 18 per cent; in the Netherlands the conservative government has seen a 10 per cent increase in support; the governing Danish and Swedish social democrats have each enjoyed an increase of around 7 per cent. Even in Great Britain with its initially faltering epidemiological response, the Conservatives have seen their theoretical vote share climb to over 50 per cent. In Poland, Portugal, Spain and Hungary, approval ratings for the respective governments have remained consistently high. Even the struggling French president managed to increase his ratings from 35 to 40 per cent in the course of a month. Only Italy's right-wing populist parties appear as though they might be able to capitalise on the crisis as the popularity of

the governing coalition parties dwindles.

The polls confirm that, in Europe, trust in governments and public institutions as well as approval for the measures taken continues to be high – despite the gradual appearance of 'crisis fatigue'. As discussions about exit strategies, the creation of rescue packages and the burgeoning question of the 'post-corona world' come to the fore, the political consensus slowly seems to be crumbling. Political conflict between parties appears to be back on the agenda.

The corona pandemic cannot act as a long-term party political silencer, in whose name governments merrily fast-track the adoption of new laws in 'health-driven there-is-no-alternative mode'. Conflict is crucial for political culture in this part of the world. But, more than that, it is also essential for figuring out how democratic and authoritarian states can get through the crisis. Democracies have impressively proven their capacity to act. Now, as they continue to tackle the crisis, they need to show that they have not lost their capacity for effective debate, because, as former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt once said: 'democracy without conflict is not democracy'.

Based on the premise that the corona pandemic exacerbates existing lines of conflict and inequalities, there are at least five aspects – beyond lockdown easing measures – that would be excellent subjects of parliamentary and public debate. Here is a list of proposals for Europe's progressive parties:

Up with the barriers

Eurosceptics feel vindicated by the corona pandemic: the EU is incapable of effective action and we can only rely on the political assertiveness of the nation-states. EU supporters, in contrast, see only one way out of the crisis: greater European integration – meaning increased competences at EU level or meeting the costs of tackling the crisis with a dedicated EU budget. For now, right-wing populist parties can generally be considered the losers in this crisis, but the nation-state has, just on its own, become increasingly important.

The 25th anniversary of the Schengen Agreement was marked by the national heads of state and government taking the go-it-alone step of closing their borders. At the same time, the calls for European solidarity are loud, numerous and dramatic. Many prominent voices have warned against the disintegration of the EU because of a lack of solidarity. At the very latest when Germany assumes the EU Council presidency, we will need a debate on how the EU can become a European community based

on the principles of solidarity. And we need to talk about policy and financial instruments that have been on the table for so long (from a European minimum wage to digital tax) to be implemented. After all, letting down a barrier at the border not only stops traffic, it is also the expression of an entire mindset.

Wanted: The state

Worldwide, the corona pandemic has mercilessly exposed the weaknesses of national healthcare systems. While countries with robust public health services, such as Germany and Denmark, have so far come through the crisis relatively unscathed, countries with weak or privatised systems have been hit particularly hard. The vital assistance programmes launched to secure medical care at best serve to limit the dmange, but are not enough to provide fundamental, long-term protection of entire societies against health risks. It is nothing new that public and privatised services pursue conflicting interests. What was already started years ago in the form of 'remunicipalisation' of local public transport or water and energy supply now has to be continued on a much larger scale. If the aim is for the state to play a stronger role, the consequence would be to shield public services from market forces and to hold a new debate about the future of the welfare state.

Who is footing the bill?

Obviously, we cannot afford a repeat of the bitter outcome of the 2008/2009 financial crisis when 'profits were privatised, losses socialised', if the state does not want to lose its new-found trust again. Concretely, this means tying government assistance for companies to specific conditions. Several social democratic parties (for example in Denmark, Germany, France, Canada and the Netherlands) are refusing to give government support to companies who have relocated their headquarters to tax havens or who are paying out dividends this year. In Argentina and France, discussions are ongoing about increasing the top tax rate or (re-)introducing a wealth tax to meet the costs of the crisis. If the aim is a fairer distribution of costs than during the financial crisis, the only way is to challenge the business and fiscal practices of multinational companies and banks to date and for the government to intervene. The role of the state – also when it comes to the economy – will be quite different in a post-corona world.

This virus is not gender neutral

Typically low-paid jobs traditionally carried out by women are suddenly

classified as essential activities. Billions have been earmarked to rescue banks considered 'too big to fail' but there has been no clapping for the bankers. The rounds of applause for nurses and care workers, cashiers and so on is all very nice, as are the one-off payments that have been announced, but better wage agreements to secure fair wages are the very least that now needs to happen.

A side effect of the crisis has been the exposure of patriarchal patterns in everyday life: Women who are not in essential jobs seem to have disappeared from the scene. Despite Forbes daring assertion that female heads of government are doing a better job at leading their countries through the crisis, male scientists and politicians are still dominating the media, having now become crisis managers or crisis experts.

Even before the crisis, women carried out three times as much unpaid care work as men. Now, in times of nursery and school closures, they are shouldering an even greater burden. Not only has the pandemic sparked a long overdue debate about unpaid care work, it has also highlighted just how 'political the private is' now the home is primarily a place where women work, homeschool, look after children and care for relatives: women barely feature in the media. To avoid women facing a retraditionalisation of gender roles that will be with us for decades to come, a gender policy debate at the kitchen table is just as crucial as in parliaments and the media.

The corona crisis does not trump the climate crisis

The measures to support the economy taken so far have been temporary. Comprehensive government investment programmes, however, have yet to see the light of day. In several countries, including Poland, Ukraine and Mexico, government infrastructure programmes are planned to boost the economy. The EU has also announced that the Green Deal will be at the heart of the European recovery programme. The specifics are not yet known – but industry associations have already started to position themselves and a debate on just how green the 'green economic recovery' demanded from all sides will actually be is inevitable – think Germany's 'Abwrackprämie' (a scrappage bonus for older cars).

According to an international poll, public opinion is fortunately unequivocal: 70 per cent of those surveyed consider climate change to be just as serious as the corona pandemic in the long term and two-thirds want to see economic recovery programmes with an environmental focus. This double window of opportunity – with the support of society *and*

the measures announced, albeit so far only in draft form – is the ideal starting point for a sustainable reorganisation of our economic systems.

Political conflict is not democratic mutiny

So into the arenas of parliamentary and public debate we go. When the crisis was just kicking off, unity was crucial but now we are a step further. Along with the ongoing debate on measures to ease the lockdown, an alluring narrative of normalisation is emerging. But the normality being referred to is a thing of the past, something that, for many reasons, we had wanted to change. Is this really something we want to return to? Nostalgia should not be the main driver of our actions, but instead the question of how we can counter this nostalgia with a progressive, optimistic vision of the future.

If our aim in the coming weeks and months is to manoeuvre societies out of the crisis, we will need a debate between conservatives, greens and liberals, not just about the right instruments but above all about alternative blueprints for the future and a new social contract aimed at a socio-ecological transformation. Even if the virus has no party affiliation, the way out of the crisis should certainly be led by the left.



Catrina Schläger
Berlin

Catrina Schläger leads the Political Consulting Department of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Prior to this, she held various roles within the Foundation's international operations.