A social-democratic decade ahead?

Austria's SPÖ has surged in recent polls, while the conservatives have imploded. Is this another sign that Europe's Zeitgeist is moving to the left?

At the beginning of the year, the newly elected co-chair of the German SPD, Lars Klingbeil, said success in last September's *Bundestag* elections was one thing — but what was really at stake was a 'social-democratic decade'. Nothing less than a new, formative era should begin when Olaf Scholz became chancellor.

This may sound a bit pompous and overblown but there are more unbiased observers who believe a social-democratic *Zeitgeist* is possible. Let's take a look at the European political picture.

Social hegemony

Social-democratic parties are in government across Scandinavia — in Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark — with the majority of prime-ministerial posts held by a new generation of women. Social democrats are also in power in Germany and the Iberian peninsula.

In Portugal the charismatic António Costa is something of a role model for a social democracy which can not only secure strategic political majorities but also establish a social hegemony in a more profound sense. In Spain meanwhile the left coalition is pursuing an ambitious course of socio-political reform, in the teeth of bitter resistance not only from the far right but also the conservative *Partido Popular*.

Nor should France be overlooked: although the French socialists have been in a kind of coma for years, the recent election rounds brought a leftward shift. Emmanuel Macron had come under pressure precisely because of his centrist course and the presidential contest was by no means a triumphant vindication of his incumbency.

The social-democratic SPÖ has been rising

Whatever one may think of the leader of *La France Insoumise*, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and his

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new *Nupes* red-green electoral alliance, the future National Assembly will certainly tilt to the left and also force the president to adopt more social-democratic policies. This is, at least, a symptom of something.

In the parliamentary elections in Slovenia in April, the ultra-right populists were voted out of office and a more progressive alliance won by a landslide. Next door, in Austria — turning to my home country — remarkable things are happening too.

Orgy of scandals

Last autumn, the former populist-conservative beacon Sebastian Kurz had to resign as chancellor, as a result of an orgy of scandals, having taken over the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and governed from 2017, first with the far-right FPÖ and then in a right-left coalition with the participation of the Greens. The ÖVP, in government without interruption since 1986 and retaining the chancellorship, has been badly shaken by corruption revelations which have become a weekly soap opera. It must already fear the fate of Italian Christian democracy, which after decades of dominance simply perished amid the *mani pulite* ('clean hands') movement of the early 1990s in Italy.

The social-democratic SPÖ has been rising steadily in the polls for months, and in the past ten weeks opinion researchers have perceived a sea-change in the popular mood. The SPÖ now enjoys around 32 per cent support. The ÖVP is far behind with about 21 per cent — even adding the Green tally only brings this up to about 30 per cent. A German-style *Ampelkoalition* of the SPÖ, Greens and liberal NEOS would almost certainly be backed by a comfortable majority of seats.

Yet the social democrats' leader, Pamela Rendi-Wagner, has not exactly had it easy in recent years. In 2018 she succeeded Christian Kern, voted out as chancellor the year before. Contested personnel changes and inner-party trench warfare had left the SPÖ quite shattered internally. The leader had to hold a divided party together and contend with provincial politicians who regularly questioned her authority.

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Quite understandably, party supporters did not exactly have undue confidence in Rendi-Wagner's capacity. She had only entered politics and joined the party a few years previously and

decade' possibly hoving into view?

lacked political know-how and instinct. But she proved to have staying power and stamina.

In recent months she has acquired Machiavellian skills, kept the party on a clear 'social justice' course and, through her appearances, familiarised the electorate with the prospect that she is most likely to be the next chancellor, as the polls reflect. The strength of the SPÖ is, still, mainly a product of the conservatives' demise. Yet the ultra-right FPÖ has not been able similarly to exploit the weakness of the government — which, while the next parliamentary elections are not routinely due until 2024, may not make it until the full term.

Significantly different

Is the resurgence of the SPÖ another indication of a 'social-democratic decade' possibly hoving into view?

On a sober assessment, national circumstances significantly differ. A common European *Zeitgeist* roughly existed in the 1970s and 80s (Willy Brandt, Olof Palme, Bruno Kreisky, François Mitterrand) and at the end of the 1990s (Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder, Franz Vranitzky, Lionel Jospin). Today that is not easily recognisable.

In addition, social-democratic election victories, even where they lead to the assumption of government, are not usually glorious triumphs these days. In fragmented party systems, 25 or 26 per cent at the polls is often enough for the party leader to become prime minister.

But then the exigencies of a parliamentary majority usually require a complicated coalition, with the alternative a shaky minority administration, which means ambitious policy changes cannot be pushed through. After four or five years in government, there may be little in the way of signature projects on which to claim a renewed mandate.

In today's mediatised politics, moreover, those election results largely depend on top public figures. It is not primarily the party, but the personality, who wins.

Similar challenges

Despite all these differences, however, there are often very similar challenges. Today, social-democratic parties and their supporters are usually an alliance of the progressive, urban middle classes (for which they compete with the Greens and Liberals, for example) and the (post-

)proletarian, culturally more conservative working classes from suburban areas and small towns (for which they often compete with the populists).

The social question is becoming more central: with inflation at a peak of some 8 per cent, the threat of loss of prosperity and fear of decline is reaching far into the middle class.

The economically most oppressed members of the *classes populaires* have felt in recent decades abandoned, even betrayed, by politics in general and, in particular, by social democrats as their 'natural' representatives. Noisy right-wing politicians have taken advantage of this, banging the drum that nobody else is taking notice — and then affirming: 'I am your voice.'

Social-democratic politics is to a certain extent in a permanent strategic dilemma. On the one hand, it has to win back trust in these fragmentated new and old working classes, milieux from which it has alienated itself, where there is real anger and fear as to economic prospects. Yet on the other hand, it must not lose the progressive, urban middle classes and the new generations of activists of a diverse left. That is not easy, but recent evidence indicates it is not impossible.

Rebuilding trust

In particular, the SPD's 'respect for you' (*Respekt für Dich*) election campaign, with some striking demands and programme points — such as raising the minimum wage — rebuilt trust in traditional working-class milieux as well as making gains among the new precariat. The same applies to the SPÖ's path and positioning, including in federal provinces and cities where it is still dominant, such as Vienna, Burgenland or medium-sized towns such as Traiskirchen. Often it is more charisma, body language and style of address that lead to social-democratic functionaries appearing persuasively as 'one of us'.

At the same time, the social question is becoming more central: with inflation at a peak of some 8 per cent, the threat of loss of prosperity and fear of decline is reaching far into the middle class. In view of the multiple crises — the pandemic, the war and the climate catastrophe — a need for security is to the fore.

The language of 'modernisation', which helped Brandt or, decades later, Blair to gain majorities under different conditions falls flat when the public are simply afraid. Social democrats can win when they credibly address this craving for security.

Those who see themselves

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energy, 'free the markets' is not a credible compass. The coronavirus and now the shockwaves of war show that markets often simply do not work or are at least prone to herd instincts and panic reactions, which in turn lead to price rises. In fatal crises, citizens hope for protection from the state, so social-democratic policies almost automatically gain traction.

Primacy of politics

Those who see themselves as 'regular', 'ordinary' people want their problems to be noticed. Many are terrified, no longer knowing how to pay their bills. Today, hardly anyone in their right mind would dispute the primacy of politics over leaving the markets to their own dynamics.

But that also means preferring politicians who 'can do it', who are trusted to govern professionally. This is no longer the moment for dazzlers, populist scramblers and showmen. Who wants to bet on firebrands when there are already fires on every corner?

That is more or less the prevailing picture of today's times and it at least gives reasonable liberal-left parties every chance. Take all these elements together and yes: it could indeed be a 'social-democratic decade'.

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