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What kind of world do you want to live in?

The social democratic vision of a just society is currently mobilising very few people — for various reasons

The timing for the first 'Global Progressive Mobilisation' was excellent. One week after Viktor Orbán`s crushing defeat in the Hungarian parliamentary elections, more than 6000 social democrats from around the world met in Barcelona upon invitation of Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez to work on a counter-mobilisation against the global networking of the radical right. This was long overdue, as Raphaël Glucksmann pointed out: '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.'

The radical right is on the rise worldwide. This is no coincidence; it is a strategically organised, transnational social movement. It uses shared frames and narratives for self-identification as well as to describe its 'enemies,' and it funds an infrastructure of conferences and think tank networks. Its common goal: to destroy the liberal world order and replace it with national sovereignty, anti-pluralist hypermajority (extending to autocracy), and 'traditional' values.

Yet, even though the radical right operates on a transnational level, the national political arena remains the decisive battleground. For example, the international network of foundations and think tanks dedicated to spreading Orbán's 'illiberal democracy' — which, not least, inspired Trump's 'Project 2025' — is now losing its government support.

Money and attitude

At the same time, the Hungarian election results make it quite obvious that progressive mobilisation is urgently needed — not a single progressive was elected to the Hungarian parliament. And it should be applauded that the transnational mobilisation of the radical right is to be countered by transnational action. The Barcelona meeting is supposed to

only be a first step to overcome the fragmentation of progressives and it explicitly featured the willingness to learn from radical right strategies, specifically from their international conferences like the Conservative Political Action Conferences (CPAC) and the National Conservatism conferences (NatCon).

However, for this progressive networking project to effectively counter the global radical right, its efforts at transnationalisation must be carefully analysed. For the radical right possesses organisational, ideological, and communicative advantages — and it benefits from a significant mobilisation advantage.

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The organisational advantage of the radical right stems from generous funding provided by wealthy donors and corporate foundations. Even more importantly, right-wing gatherings are not typically paralysed by quasi-diplomatic preliminary negotiations and protocollary agreements. While their organisers do take care to attract prominent speakers and public officials, the bulk of active participants are 'organic intellectuals,' as Antonio Gramsci termed movement organisers linked to significant social currents. At international gatherings of the radical right, a wide range of positions is tolerated, extending to hate speech and conspiracy narratives. Thus, pro-Israel speakers can launch sharp attacks against pro-Palestinian student protests, while anti-Semitic 'Groypers', who now dominate the staff of the US Republican Party, roam the hallways. International progressive gatherings all too often become bogged down in formulaic compromises when they focus on attracting the highest-profile participants rather than people with a particular talent for mobilisation, even if they hold controversial positions. There is a lack of courage to tolerate controversies and their protagonists for the sake of mobilisation.

This problem is exacerbated by the tendency of progressive actors to focus on policy solutions. In contrast, the radical right has understood: 'The public square is not the same thing as an economics seminar room. Symbolic policies ... can do more to communicate whose side a party is on than more substantive policies'. There is no doubt that responsible

governance is needed, but because so many interest groups must be 'accommodated,' the debate over the best policies often leads to complicated compromises that are perceived as 'lazy.' Advocates of a liberal society appear divided, while the radical right presents a comparatively united front in its rejection of 'globalism,' 'wokeness,' and 'corrupt liberal elites.' No wonder: their policy solutions have always been set in stone. While tax cuts and privatization were panaceas for neoliberals, for the radical right it is the fight against immigrants, LGBTQ people, and 'corrupt elites.'

The role of emotions

On top of that, progressive actors have a communication problem. A motto for the meeting in Barcelona was: 'Democracy is worth defending.' But mobilisation works better with aggressive rhetoric: It is easier to attack 'globalism' and 'wokeism' in broad strokes than to defend complex realities in a nuanced way — just as it is easier to discredit institutions than to advocate for them. Not least, in today's attention economy, it is more promising to attack identifiable 'enemies' with rumours and disinformation than to persuade with rational arguments and facts. Political mobilisation today takes place under hardened conditions that do not align with the ideals of self-empowerment. It is about mobilisable emotions, and progressive actors regularly come up short in this regard. The fear, anger, and anxieties about losing status among right-wing voters are authentic. One should not pathologize them, but one cannot simply dismiss them as irrational either. The anger is directed at the status quo, for which progressives are often partly responsible — at the national as well as at the global level.

Those most willing to engage in aggressive confrontation with the radical right tend to wield the 'fascism' label. Yet the attempt to instil fear of fascism in people can even be counterproductive if those addressed react with defiance. Not least, this strains the coalitions with mainstream conservatives necessary for the defence of democracy — paradoxically this is precisely where the kind of differentiation is needed that makes emotional, hyper-political mobilisation difficult.

Progressives could focus on hope, also a strong emotion. Yet the social democratic vision of a just society is currently mobilising very few people — for various reasons: in large parts of Europe, large segments of the population likely lack experience with a deeply unjust society; social achievements are taken for granted, and the struggle for them has been forgotten.

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This makes the fundamental problem all the more evident: the mobilisation and motivation gap. In short: political energy currently lies clearly on the right. The 'reactionary revolutionaries' of the radical right are successfully transforming growing scepticism toward democracy and fatigue with transformation into a fundamental distrust of 'the system' in order to generate a revolutionary mood. The storming of the US Capitol showed what price people mobilised in this way are willing to pay — after all, they couldn't have known that Trump would pardon them. However, even the radical right cannot simulate this 'revolutionary spirit.' This year's US CPAC in Texas in March was a remarkable flop. Trump was absent; the MAGA movement appeared divided. No wonder: everything is different once you hold power. The urgency of opposition fades, there is conflict over government decisions, and on top of that comes the inevitable scramble for positions.

Still, future progressive mobilisation needs to take a closer look at what radical right is doing, as they are already moving on from Orbán´s defeat. The first UK CPAC will be organized in July and will provide a stage for Nigel Farage's Reform UK, who are on the verge of upsetting British politics. And on the same weekend that progressives were gathering in Barcelona, the Patriots for Europe, the European parliament group and Europarty that includes Fidesz but also the Rassemblement National, the Austrian FPÖ and many others, met in Milan. Matteo Salvini (Lega) seemed ready to try to assume Orbán's mantle as European leader of the radical right (a role that he tried to play before). While this meeting received even less media coverage that the Progressive Mobilization Summit, it showcased the radical right's ability to focus on controversial but memorable frames such as 'remigration.' This term had previously caused a rift between the RN and the German AfD, leading to the latter's expulsion from the now defunct Identity and Democracy group in the EP, but it has now apparently been mainstreamed across the various factions of the radical right.

The crucial question is: How can we counterbalance the structural advantages of the radical right? There is certainly no 'silver bullet'; what is needed is persistent organising within society and a long-term commitment. Protests and demonstrations are visible, but they cannot

replace a lasting foothold. Progressives must once again engage with society, be present on the ground—and achieve hegemony. For which 'frames' prevail is not decided on the drawing board, but in social practice: in direct contact, in conflicts, in everyday communication. It is certainly advisable not to waste energy on the opponent's memes, images, and conspiracy narratives (the 'chainsaw'), but rather to develop our own striking visual language that is close to people's lived reality: intelligent, witty, and clear. It is less about balanced policy solutions than about the fundamental question of what kind of world we want to live in. The vast majority of people worldwide wish to live in justice and freedom — a progressive narrative that takes up this desire with a global perspective would be politically and morally superior to the far-right vision of ruthlessly competing nation-states. We can certainly build on that.



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