

# Neue Gesellschaft Frankfurter Hefte

Journal of Social Democracy

2

2018

€ 3,80

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**European Diversity is at the Heart  
of the Social Democratic Vision**

**Julian Nida-Rümelin**

**The Crisis of European  
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Three demarcation lines  
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INTERNATIONAL QUARTERLY EDITION

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Two of the most serious crises that recently have afflicted Europe – the uncertainty surrounding the continent's unification and the weakness of its social democratic parties – continue to smolder. To some extent, the two questions are linked. In broad terms, the persistence of the EU crisis is defined by two political deficits. First, there is a lack of coordination among the governments of the eurozone on fiscal and wage policies. That shortcoming is partially responsible for rendering the institutions of the Community politically powerless on elementary issues of monetary union. Second, even the most minimally necessary standards of social security and harmonization of wage policies are lacking, thus jeopardizing the EU's cohesion. Both problems may be attributed largely to a fundamental flaw in EU institutions. The Union has elevated the primacy of markets into a constitutional principle, while allocating its vital social and regulatory corrective measures to the governments of the member states, trusting in their ability to agree on all outstanding matters.



But the strongest support for market predominance has come from neoliberal and liberal-conservative parties, while social democratic parties have been the most tenacious advocates of policies to correct the market. Hence, the weakness of the latter is one of the factors that have made it harder to overcome the crisis of the Union. The connection between the two problems becomes even more evident when we consider another dimension of the EU's crisis: the falling-out between the eastern and western member states. Relying on hardline identity politics, national-chauvinist parties in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic have managed to decimate their social democratic rivals in domestic politics, de-liberalize their constitutions, and ostentatiously turn their backs on the liberal-democratic constitutional consensus of the Union. Thus, they are reshaping the character of the Union in profound ways while presenting it to the citizens of the continent as a sort of paper tiger, since – by combining forces – they can block any serious, EU-treaty-based efforts to impose sanctions on such violations. By the same token, it is precisely the weakness of the EU that counts as a major reason for the loss of voter support by social democratic parties. For years, the latter have promised that the progress of European unification would act as a bulwark against the unchecked sway of globalized markets, but so far things have not worked out that way. However, both the initiative launched by French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017 to deepen the Union politically and the highly influential European role assigned to the SPD in the new German federal government offer a glimmer of hope.

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## **European Diversity is at the Heart of the Social Democratic Vision**

The electoral campaign most recently waged by the SPD was marked by »Europe fatigue« which would appear surprising considering the fact that the party's candidate for chancellor was the former president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz. During the campaign the SPD called for significant reforms in European policy, but never managed to make Europe a central issue in the election. The reason for the low profile of Europe during the campaign was the lack of a vision for European politics. Important political demands could have included a protocol on social policy, an offensive against tax avoidance and increased public investment. Nevertheless, those demands alone are not enough to give the issue of Europe a prominent place on the public agenda. What was missing was the much ballyhooed »narrative« that would have embedded politically significant demands in a meaningful context. In this instance, Emmanuel Macron in France has shown how to do it. Even today, elections can still be won on the strength of a visionary European policy. German social democracy could take a page from Macron's book when it comes to summoning up the courage for far-reaching visions of European politics. However, his idea of a sovereign Europe should not be adopted as a blueprint by German social democracy. Instead, a new social democratic narrative could highlight the idea of a European republic of sovereign states.

### **Macron's vision of a sovereign Europe**

In marked contrast to the German Social Democrats, Macron understood how to rally public support for his vision of a sovereign Europe, which then became a major campaign theme. In September of 2017, he delivered a speech at the Sorbonne in Paris in which he outlined the basic elements of his vision. Macron hopes to bring into being a sovereign Europe with its own army, budget and border policy. Yet his speech was far more than a laundry list of progressive reform proposals. He succeeded in embedding the reform proposals in a narrative featuring a hero: either Macron himself or, alternatively, France and its partners. The goal is no less than »the re-foundation of a sovereign, united, and democratic Europe.« The villains busy trying to prevent this outcome by walling off the country are »nationalism, identitarianism, protectionism, and isolationist sovereignism.« By advocating a Europe that »protects us,« Macron has managed to formulate a narrative that has stimulated a pro-Europe euphoria among the French populace and set in motion urgent, long-deferred reform processes throughout Europe.

The problematic element in his vision, however, is the emphasis upon the unity of Europe and of European sovereignty. His vision is based on the idea of a federal Europe, a notion that has shaped political discourse on the EU for decades. Federalists want to achieve a union founded on political unification, a European federal state in which rights of sovereignty largely would be transferred to the European level. As the legal scholar Dieter Grimm underscored in his discussion of the

concept of sovereignty (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 15, 2017), if Macron's vision of a sovereign EU were pushed to its logical conclusion, the current system of rule would be converted into a state.

As I see it, a vision of the EU's future such as this one does not suit the temper of the times, nor would it be desirable from a normative standpoint. It is out of step with the times because euro-skeptical political movements are on the march in many member states. In numerous countries, the unmodulated demand for »more Europe« no longer commands majority support. Indeed, just the opposite is the case. A demand of this kind threatens increasingly to alienate broad segments of the population from the political establishment. According to a survey commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (»What holds Europe together? The EU in the wake of Brexit«), citizens have highly nuanced attitudes toward European integration. They support a deepening in quite a few policy areas, for example defense or the taxation of international corporations, but in other spheres, such as social welfare policy, they want no meddling by European-level institutions. One lesson to take away from the survey is that social democrats should try to carry on the discourse about the future of the EU in a more nuanced manner. The federalist dream of ever closer union no longer holds much appeal. Increasingly large segments of the population will not be swayed by blanket calls for »more Europe«. Social democracy should take seriously the widely-shared skepticism concerning demands for even more transfers of political and administrative responsibilities from nation-states to the EU.

Furthermore, Macron's vision is not even desirable from a normative viewpoint, because transfers of sovereignty to the EU level have gone hand in hand with the weakening of the nation-state. It is highly doubtful whether such transfers have eliminated the legitimation problems of the EU. Many citizens feel close affinities to their respective nation-states. The latter maintain democratic arenas worth protecting, in which institutions with deep historical roots can balance competing interests. Moreover, the national welfare state guarantees a degree of social protection unprecedented in history. As long as the emergence of a European demos still lies far in the future, the nation-state remains the political form of organization in which the ideal of democratic self-determination can be optimized most fully.

### **A European republic of sovereign states**

A new social democratic vision for the EU should begin by respecting the ties that bind a populace to its own nation while simultaneously emphasizing the advantages and necessity of European cooperation. One model that might offer guidelines for this vision would be the idea of a European republic of sovereign states suggested by the political scientist Richard Bellamy in an article for the *European Journal of Political Theory*. His approach draws the logical conclusions from the idea of EU »democracy,« as he calls it. According to Bellamy, there is no homogeneous »demos« at the European level; instead, there are diverse »demoi« organized primarily around nation-states, the positions of which can be represented adequately within the EU's institutional structure. He defends the principle of state sovereignty: For him, it is

the sine qua non for achieving democratic self-determination. Relying on republican theories of democracy, he moves the principle of non-domination into the center of his argument. Simplifying a bit, the point is that citizens should be free from external control and influence. The EU's political system should realize that principle by involving national parliaments as extensively as possible and through a system of checks and balances. In his theory, sovereign nation-states are constitutive elements in a republican association that, confronted by reciprocal global dependencies, creates supranational institutions to prevent individual states from dominating others.

If one wished to develop a social democratic narrative that would do justice to a European republic of sovereign states, one would have to make the diversity of Europe its central theme, not its unity. In this narrative the nation-state would not be the villain, but rather an ally on the road to a democratic and social Europe. In certain cases, it is indeed important to transfer rights of sovereignty to the EU level in order to enhance the Union's ability to act effectively. However, we should reject the scheme of a sovereign Europe that stands above and dominates the member states.



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## **The Crisis of European Social Democracy**

Few would deny that German – and for that matter European – social democracy is in a state of crisis. But its opponents should not rejoice about this state of affairs. Democracies, at least those that feature proportional representation systems, are in trouble without two major catch-all parties in the center, one integrating the left and the other the right.

Austria, possibly Italy in coming months, as well as Hungary and Poland for some time now, all prove that assertion. France is the great exception. There, the Socialists were never a true catch-all party, but they were strong enough to furnish the president or prime minister several times over the past few decades. Yet by now their parliamentary delegation is a shrunken remnant of what it once was. Although the successors to the Gaullists have been unable to absorb large segments of the political right, they have suffered less than the Socialist Party for their failures. Still, they were outflanked by the far-right presidential candidate, Marine Le Pen. The fact that this story had a happy ending is due primarily to the tactical skills of Emmanuel Macron. In the event, the latter won a huge victory over Le Pen with 24 % in the first round of voting and 66 % in the second round. Furthermore, he launched a political

movement that kept the populists of left and right at bay and won a large majority of parliamentary seats, despite the fact that it relied mainly on inexperienced political newcomers. Because this grand experiment depends so completely on the skills of one individual, it is difficult to predict how it will turn out. Nevertheless, Macron did prove that a resolute, energetic, centrist politics that disrupts old political alignments and takes a pro-Europe position can produce electoral success. And he was able to accomplish all that in a county susceptible to nationalist invocations as well as revolutionary romanticism.

In light of the French experience, it seems that political affairs can turn out well even without the entrenched antagonism between catch-all center-left and center-right parties, although that is not a sure thing. But the more likely scenario is that the populist fringes will grow stronger and democracy will erode.

The crisis of European social democracy is a rather paradoxical phenomenon. Socialist parties are losing voters and members almost everywhere, even though at this point in history the issues they traditionally emphasize increasingly have been in the spotlight of public attention. The International Monetary Fund, numerous Nobel-Prize-winning economists, and even the *Financial Times* criticize growing global inequality, especially in the highly developed countries. That trend is regarded as a threat not only to political stability, but even to growth prospects. Moreover, ever since the Great Recession and the subsequent financial crisis in many developed countries, virtually all political actors have come to realize that global financial markets need political regulation. The market euphoria that lasted about three decades, based as it was on a program that its opponents brand as neoliberalism but that can best be described as market radicalism, has few ardent defenders left these days. By now, the critique of casino capitalism has begun to influence even the economic and political elites. In the broader populace it was always taken for granted.

### **How to distinguish and blend political currents**

Social democracy may be distinguished from other political forces by its conviction that politics can influence and shape people's lives for the better. Those forces situated to the left of social democracy put their trust in socioeconomic conflicts; the Marxist version in fact counts on the dynamics of class struggle. Their reasoning implies that political actors are merely the avatars of the contending classes. Allegedly, they do not know what they are doing. After all, they are little more than the representatives of certain interests, even though they pretend to direct and control events. The two most important forces to the right of social democracy are likewise skeptical about the primacy of the political. The liberals put their faith in markets and individuals and fear that politics will lead to losses of rationality and freedom. Nevertheless, two competing currents of liberalism may be identified: economic and civil liberties liberalism. The past 30 years have been dominated by economic liberalism in its radical, pro-market guise. Conservatism, on the other hand, counts on the bonding power inherent in culture and community and mistrusts the utopian potential of political engagement. It dreads the loss of familiar lifeways and values the stabilizing role of the institutions of the state.

There is no simple, one-to-one correlation between modern political parties and these four paradigms of political thought. Today, parties mix and match a variety of theoretical elements, which – while it may jeopardize the integrity of their political programs – also creates opportunities to integrate different schools of political thinking as well as distinct sociocultural milieus. From the very beginning the German CDU/CSU has made this blending of political currents a key element of its political program. It sees itself as Christian, but non-denominational, social-welfare-oriented, liberal, and conservative, all at the same time. When a party conceives of itself in this eclectic way, it doesn't need to have a coherent programmatic agenda. This is simultaneously its strength and its weakness. Angela Merkel's chancellorship is living proof of that.

### **The Corbyn plan**

If we scrutinize political developments both in Germany and in Europe as a whole, everything indicates that social democracy needs to reinvent itself, assuming that the latter is determined to halt its decades-long slide. Although more and more observers are coming around to this view, still no one knows exactly what the next step should be. There are three mutually exclusive projects for revitalizing social democracy. The first of these holds the »third way« pioneered by Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and Gerhard Schröder responsible for the downfall of European social democracy and proposes a return to the programs of the 1970s as a solution. Let's call this option the Corbyn plan, in honor of the leader of the British Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn. It calls for an end to the politics of austerity, higher sovereign indebtedness to stimulate the economy, the nationalization of key industries, and ambivalence toward Europe. Taken to its logical conclusion, a program such as this would be achievable only if the nation-state were to reclaim its full sovereignty. This is the reason that Corbyn refused to say whether he was for or against Brexit. Such ambivalence manifests the tension between left-wing internationalism, on one hand, and the socialist critique of globalization, on the other. Like Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton's leftist opponent in the primary elections for the Democratic nomination, Corbyn boasts a growing and enthusiastic political base among young people. They are feeling growing anger about the marginalization that has been their lot in their own country, and the trouble they have had in getting established in the world of work after completing their secondary or tertiary education. By the same token, they have been influenced by the moral critique of the injustices evident in the exploitative global economy. In short, they pin their hopes on the inflexible »old guard« that represents a brand of politics outraged by the unfairness of this world, whether at the national or international level.

Yet if a Corbyn-style program were to be enacted, it presumably would lead to the same kind of mess that afflicted France in 1981 in the first months after President François Mitterrand and his Socialist-Communist coalition government took over from Giscard d'Estaing. Even in those days, France – like other European countries – was too deeply enmeshed in the global economy, and especially its financial networks, to be allowed to pursue successfully such a radical change of course.



Mitterrand reacted with great presence of mind, abandoning many of the youthful dreams long held by the Socialists as well as their smaller Communist partners, while enforcing a stability-oriented financial policy. Despite these difficulties, during the years to come the Mitterrand government would succeed in advancing the level of socialism in France. Unlike other European countries, France's demographic situation is stable; hence, it does not face as many challenges in financing its system of care for the elderly as other industrialized countries do, including Germany, Austria, and even Italy. Consequently, it has been able to persevere on this political course longer than most of its counterparts. Yet by now the grace period seems to be over, and Macron will have to tackle the very problems that brought his predecessor, François Hollande, to grief: reconstructing the social security system to make it sustainable while simultaneously liberalizing the rigid labor market somewhat. For the social democratic left in Europe, Macron is a »neoliberal,« and many of his comments in the past encourage those suspicions. But the leftist critics' alternatives are backward-looking. The degree of global and especially of intra-European economic integration that we see today rules out a purely domestically-oriented socialism even more completely than it did back in the 1980s. A social democratic agenda must be compatible with the realities of economic competition on world markets. That is, it has to combine social justice with economic efficiency. Within a few short years, a state facing increasing indebtedness would find itself less and less able to act politically and eventually would become dependent either on global financial markets or European bailout funds, as the case of Greece shows.

In other words, a policy of social justice should be designed to maintain stability. It must not lead to structural budget deficits; instead, it should bear in mind the Keynesian postulate that increases in the national debt should be part of a policy to stabilize the business cycle and thus be paid down during boom phases.

### **Anglo-Saxon left-liberalism**

To be sure, the alternative to a »vulgar Keynesian« renaissance of the democratic agendas of the 1970s cannot be the path chosen by Tony Blair or, more recently, Hillary Clinton. Their variety of policymaking combines economically liberal practice with left-liberal rhetoric. That was one of the reasons for the failure of Clinton's presidential bid: her speeches at Goldman Sachs, her advocacy of robust international interventionism by the United States, her close ties to the financial centers of New York and the economic interests of the Hollywood entertainment industry stood in the most glaring contrast to her left-liberal and feminist positions. This brand of left-of-center politics counts heavily on education as a panacea for all a country's social ills. If someone is unemployed – so the thinking goes – it is because s/he is not well enough educated and, for example, has not had an opportunity to attend a university. In fact, the inclusive educational programs of the United States and Great Britain, in conjunction with their economically liberal, largely private scheme of financing schools and colleges, have been a resounding failure. In Great Britain there are almost twice as many university graduates as in Germany, yet the UK has a youth unemployment rate more than twice as high as that of the Federal

Republic. Despite the fact that they have comprehensive education for all in the form of high schools, both of the Anglo-Saxon democracies display far less social mobility than Germany, Austria, or even Switzerland. When the marginalized and left-behind are told that they should make an effort to upgrade their educational credentials, it often sounds to them like a cynical ploy. When your vocational skills have been rendered worthless by companies' decisions to shift production to foreign countries, it makes more sense to attack untrammelled globalization than to go back to college when you are 50 years old. To me, the reduction of social justice to a matter of who works harder to get an education seems to be one of the chief problems in Anglo-Saxon left-liberalism.

In Europe the latter has exerted the greatest influence on green parties, but can also be found in Merkel's CDU and more generally among pro-modernization conservatives and even social democrats. This tacit decision to put brackets around the political center, however appealing it might seem, poses real dangers for catch-all parties. Both the center-left and center-right parties may lose their moorings in their traditional political milieus: the social democrats among the sometimes well-paid, unionized labor force with its core of high-earning skilled workers in industry, and the CDU in the conservative bourgeoisie, whether from the upper middle class or petit bourgeois milieus. When the ties that bind a party to its voter base weaken, members of the latter may opt to stay home on election day or to vote for right-wing populist parties. Voter mobility or migrations studies from the last parliamentary election in Germany as well as the recent presidential election in France confirm this observation. So it is reasonable to ask: Is there a defensible alternative program to the one described above?

To answer that question we must first distinguish between the ordoliberalism that shaped postwar politics in Germany as well as other Western countries and so-called neoliberalism, the radical version of free market thinking that has prevailed over the past 30 years. Ordoliberalism envisages a state that will lay down the rules under which the market is to operate. This assumption presupposes that the state is not itself an economic actor, but rather a neutral referee. It must be strong enough not to be pushed and pulled by economic processes. Therefore, it cannot itself become a competitor of private suppliers; in addition it must act in strict accordance with the common good. In this respect ordoliberalism properly understood is opposed to so-called theories of pluralist democracy, which interpret politics as a set of market transactions organized on the basis of supply and demand with utility-maximizing politicians and a market-like public administration in times of »new public economics«.

In the last few decades, ordoliberalism has been forced onto the defensive as a social-scientific paradigm, but has held its own as a political program. Just recently, a man who did much to shape German politics in the spirit of ordoliberalism, Wolfgang Schäuble, has left the executive and returned to a purely representative role as president of the Bundestag. But Karl Schiller too, who exerted enormous influence on fiscal and economic policy for the Social Democrats, followed a generally ordoliberal approach – albeit one leavened by Keynesianism – which was one reason for his resignation.

## **A coordinated market economy under social democratic auspices**

The chief deficiency of ordoliberalism is the fact that it suppresses the central dimension of politics: social and political justice. It is mainly concerned with how well the economy works and the state's role as a backstop for the rules under which markets are to be organized. A social democracy designed for the future should reorder the political objectives of ordoliberalism such that they culminate in a social democratic coordinated market economy. It is the role of the state as coordinator within the national, European, and global context that makes it possible to give concrete form to the political objectives of social democracy.

The strong state of a future social democracy is not just one economic actor among others, nor is it distinguished by its potential role as a producer of goods and services; instead, it underwrites public infrastructure, general and vocational education, individual security and public order. This set of political objectives certainly can dovetail with the expansion of the public service sector, provided that the latter is supported by a sustainable taxation and fiscal policy rather than by budget deficits.

Thus, the social democracy of the future will abandon the paradigm of a deficit-driven growth policy and reconcile itself to a stability-oriented budgetary and fiscal policy, but will staunchly oppose the tax-cutting plans of liberals and conservatives. It will amplify the redistributive effect of taxes by modulating the progressiveness of taxation, sparing higher-level skilled workers and professional classes from the full brunt of today's progressive rates, in which the top bracket kicks in at an annual gross income of 56,000 euros. On the other hand, more sharply progressive taxes will apply to the truly high earners. In this regard, I do not believe that the taboo upper limit of a 50 % tax rate for the top bracket is relevant, especially since the claim that it is protected by constitutional law is more than dubious. A clearly laid out, graduated income tax system featuring rates of, say, 20 %, 40 %, and 60 %, in which only euros earned above each marginal threshold would be taxed at the higher rate for that bracket (no »leaps« here, as most people believe) would be quite reasonable from the viewpoint of social policy. The upper income limit for assessment of social insurance contributions should be abolished completely in order to enable an inclusive and solidarity-based yet also better financed social insurance scheme across its various sectors.

Social democracy in the future should abandon the absurd idea of an unconditional basic income, because it would push transfer payments by the state into the stratosphere and require an enormous boost in tax revenues, thus raising questions about whether public institutions could be financed adequately. What we do need is a scheme of basic social insurance that would provide an equal basic income for everyone in cases of unemployment, illness, or old age. Such an arrangement would give concrete embodiment to the status of citizen: The citizenry as a whole sees to it that none of its members slips into undignified dependency.

## **The cosmopolitanism of global responsibility**

The toughest challenge facing a future social democratic coordinated market economy is how to direct and channel the global economy. It will be impossible to estab-

lish an economically stable and socially just world economic order if we adopt the model of free trade deals negotiated over the past decades. Here, it would be wise to follow the lead of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to fashion a framework within which more concrete steps could be taken via specific international agreements. The coordinated market economy envisaged by social democracy has a global dimension under the global economic and cultural conditions of the present and the foreseeable future. To do justice to that dimension, European social democracy will have to return to its international roots.

The recent past has taught us that great international challenges cannot be mastered by agreements alone, much less by declarations of intention announced at the governmental level. A similar point could be made about other major world problems. We need politically responsible global institutions to cope with such crises as worldwide famine (currently around 815 million people are chronically malnourished), world poverty (2.5 billion people live on less than two US dollars a day, purchasing power adjusted), widespread child labor, the exploitation and repression of women, the quest for responsible, sustainable management of natural resources, and finally the struggle to preserve species diversity and protect the environment.

We should broaden our efforts to shape and control events democratically, not only in the context of the European Union's project of integration, but in a global context – i.e., in the framework of world politics. The traditional internationalism of the political left must be replaced by a cosmopolitanism of global responsibility. It is not acceptable for the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization to determine the economic and thus implicitly also the social destiny of the international community. On the other hand, the United Nations lacks the requisite structures and functioning democratic decision-making procedures to take on this task.

Social democracy once promised that the peoples of the world would live in friendship. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century this promise belongs at the top of the agenda of world economic and social policy as it attempts to shape and control events around the globe. It is an auspicious time to reassert the primacy of the political, which lies at the heart of social democracy's program; yet so far it does not seem as though the latter has realized how favorable the prospects are.



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*Christoph Zöpel*

## **How is Social Democracy faring in Central and Eastern Europe?**

The prospects that German social democracy will succeed at the European level are closely tied to the outlook for left-of-center democratic parties in the eastern part of the European Union. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) has committed itself to their integration, not least because it too was – and still is – directly affected by the unification of the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic following the collapse of communism. In this respect the SPD differs from the other »Western« parties that belong to the Social Democratic Party of Europe (SPE). In the early 1990s it was assumed that Eastern European party systems would develop in ways analogous to their Western European counterparts. But things did not turn out that way, partly because the simultaneous transformations occurring in the East toward both political democracy and a market economy were historically unprecedented. Indeed, as Claus Offe pointed out as early as 1994, the outcome of those dual transformations was as yet unforeseeable. Today, disappointments and a rush to judgment influence the Western European view.

The fact that the candidate of the European People's Party (EPP), Jean-Claude Juncker, rather than Martin Schulz, was chosen as the President of the EU Commission after the 2014 elections to the European Parliament (EP) can be attributed to the relatively poor electoral showings of »Eastern« social democrats. On average, social democratic parties in the East won 6 % fewer mandates than did the SPE as a whole. The latter eked out a plurality of votes, but lagged behind the EPP in seats won (191 out of 751 for the SPE and/or the S&D, the parliamentary bloc of the Progressive Alliance of Social Democrats in the EP, versus 221 for the EPP).

Of the 199 mandates allotted to the eleven Eastern European countries, the SPE ended up with only 45. Social democracy in Romania fared better than average (16 of 32 seats), as did social democratic parties in Slovakia and Croatia. But their counterparts in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, and Poland turned in below-average results. In the latter the Social Democrats captured only 5 of 51 mandates. The electoral outcomes in the eleven states of Eastern Europe can be explained by both certain fundamental differences between those countries and the states of Western Europe and divergences among the Eastern countries themselves.

Until well into the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, none of those states enjoyed full sovereignty under international law. Their emergence as nation-states following World War I gave rise to conflicts both among and within them that endure to this very day. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were part of the Russian empire until 1918, when they attained their independence. But then in 1941 they became Soviet Republics. So for all of them keeping Russia at arm's length remains a top foreign-policy priority. Catholic countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Croatia were under Hapsburg rule until the end of World War I. Poland had been partitioned among Russia, Prussia, and the Habsburg Empire. Romania

and Bulgaria belonged to the Ottoman Empire and are Orthodox Christian countries. However, the Romanians speak a language derived from Latin and keep their distance from Russia, as they did toward the Soviet Union in the communist era. By contrast, Bulgaria has close ties to Russia, partly because their citizens speak closely related Slavic languages. However, Bulgaria also has a sizeable ethnic Turkish minority that makes up roughly 10 % of its population. Finally, both Slovenia and Croatia were involved in the wars that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia.

In general, the challenge confronting European social democracy was to blend »social-democratized« communist parties with the remnants of social democracy left over from the pre-communist era. This proved successful in most countries. Social democratic parties governed alone or in coalitions everywhere in Eastern Europe except for Latvia. However, more recently they have run into trouble in most countries, a trend associated primarily with the rise of nationalist sentiments and resistance against Muslim immigration. Furthermore, the fluidity of party systems has increased. Finally, individual entrepreneurs, especially those who own media, have exerted a great deal of influence over the development of parties. This trend has been visible in the Baltic states for some time now, but has also made itself felt recently in the Czech Republic.

The problems of social democratic parties in Europe must be compared to those of the EPP parties. The latter were founded on post-1989 anti-communist movements, and without exception they have been in government in all of the Eastern European countries, although they meanwhile have dwindled into insignificance in a few of the latter. In general, the SPE parties have been more stable, whereas the EPP parties have become destabilized in many states.

### **Poland and Romania**

The differing prospects of the SPE parties may be illustrated with reference to both the most recent national parliamentary elections and their status vis-à-vis competing parties and potential coalition partners. Poland is the biggest headache in this context. In the 2015 elections to the Sejm, a coalition of leftist democratic parties led by the Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD) failed by just 0.5 % of the vote to surmount the 8 % hurdle for making it into the parliament. The Partia Razem, another left-democratic party, missed the cut by 3.6 %. In total some 18 % of all the votes cast (for parties that did not cross the 8 % threshold) were reassigned to other parties when it came time to distribute mandates, enabling the national-populist PiS, which secured 37.6 % of the vote, to gain an absolute majority. The liberal-conservative EPP party PO lost 15.1 %, ending up with a total of 24.1 % of the vote.

In the aftermath of the elections, the left-democratic parties had a falling-out. The SLD chose as its chair Włodzimierz Czarzasty over its general secretary, Krzysztof Gawkowski. This was really an inter-generational fight. Of course, conflicts of this kind are not uncommon in other countries, but in Poland they are especially contentious because younger and older generations have different attitudes toward the communist past and the behavior of ex-communist officials who have remained active. At this point the SLD is not willing to engage in any broader form of coop-

eration, while the smaller parties would have no chance if they ran separate candidates. The leading candidate of the electoral alliance of 2015, Barbara Nowacka, meanwhile has founded the Inicjatywa Polska, an amalgam of left-wing activists, while Razem is at odds with all of the others. In addition, an extra-parliamentary movement arose under the name of »Committee for the Defense of Democracy« (KOD). When the regional and municipal elections scheduled for November, 2018 roll around, the democratic groupings will sound out their chances and only then take a closer look at upcoming national and European Parliament elections.

Social democracy has been most successful in Romania. In 2016 the PSD added eight percentage points to its previous share of the vote, winning 44.1 %, while its coalition partner, the liberal ALDE, gained 6 %. Together they claimed 174 of the 329 available seats in the country's parliament. The EPP parties, the PNL and the PMP – the party of the previous state president, Traian Băsescu – won 19.5 % and 5.7 %, respectively. Finally, the UDMR, the party of the Hungarian minority, also did well, as it has in all the elections since 1990. The populist Uniunea Salvati Romania (USR) made its parliamentary debut, winning 8.6 % of the vote. The PSD's candidate in the 2014 presidential election, Minister President Victor Ponta, lost to Klaus Iohannis and resigned as the PSD's chair. He has since left that party. The new chairman, Liviu Dragnea, finally has been convicted of electoral fraud. State President Iohannis refused to nominate him for the post of minister president. As a result, three premiers have succeeded each other discontinuously: Sorin Grindeanu, Mihai Tudose, and then Viorica Dăncilă at the beginning of 2018. The PSD has drawn widespread criticism for its proposed amnesty law, which might legitimize corruption. Large demonstrations against it had a variety of motives, not always those favoring parliamentary democracy. Some even were supported by business corporations or other countries. The government eventually withdrew the bill and entered into an agreement with the EU on how the legislation should proceed.

For the most part, in the other nine Eastern European countries social democracy is in retreat amid an almost total collapse of the EPP parties, the rise of populist parties, and major swings in party support from one election to the next.

### **Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovenia**

Bulgaria shows that a juxtaposition of post-communist or Russia-oriented versus European-oriented parties is highly problematic. In the 2016 presidential elections, the candidate of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), Rumen Radev, beat the candidate of Citizens for a European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), Tsetska Tsacheva. Radev had never been a member of the Communist Party, whereas Tsacheva had been. Also, the fact that Radev had received military training in the United States did not deter anyone from classifying him as a Russophile.

In 2017 the BSP added 11.8 %, winning a total of 27.2 % of the total vote with Kornelia Ninova as the new chair, a questionable choice following a divorce between the BSP and its former state president Georgi Parvanov. GERB, a member of the EPP, remained the strongest party with 32.7 % of the vote. The right-wing democratic Reform Bloc failed to surmount Bulgaria's 4 % hurdle for making it into par-



liament after its lost 5.8 %. The radical-nationalist United Patriots made it into parliament with 9 %, a figure matched as usual by the party of the Turkish minority, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS). Boyko Borisov, the »European« chair of GERB, hoped to put together a »grand« coalition with the BSP, but after being rebuffed, he entered into an alliance with the right-wing nationalist United Patriots.

Croatia has a relatively stable two-party system in which the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP) has governed for long stretches, often in a »nationalist« coalition with the liberal Croatian People's Party (HNS). However, in 2016 it won only 32.2 % as its chair, Zoran Milanović, succumbed to the temptation of running a nationalistically-flavored campaign. The right-wing but still democratic Democratic Community (HDZ), a member of the EPP, ended up winning the election. Moreover, the populist MOST managed to make it into parliament with 9.5 % of the vote. HDZ and MOST formed a coalition that fell apart as early as April, 2017. But a new coalition between the SDP and the HNS also collapsed as the HNS decided to join a government with the HDZ following intra-party disputes.

The party system in Slovenia, especially, has been in a state of flux. Only two parties have been represented in parliament there since 1990: the Social Democrats (SD) and the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), the party of Janez Janšas, which was expelled from the Socialist International at the beginning of the 1990s. By 2014 the SD's vote share had declined to only 6 %. The victor in that year's election was the newly formed Anti-Establishment Party led by Miro Cerar, which corralled 34.5 % of the vote. The SD joined a coalition with Cerar. In the fall, 2017 presidential election, the former chair of the SD, Borut Pahor, ran against Marjan Sarec and was re-elected. The latter is now about to found a new Anti-Establishment Party, because the approval ratings of the old one under Cerar are in free-fall, much as was the case with an earlier party advocating a similar program.

### **Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic**

In Hungary, the social democrats represent the only relevant European-oriented opposition, since EPP parties have disappeared there. In 2014, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz-KDNP won 44.9 % of the vote even after dropping 7.7 % from its previous total. Meanwhile, the nationalist Jobbik party garnered 20.2 %. The divided social democrats needed to enter an electoral alliance because Hungary's electoral system features a high proportion of direct mandates (single-member districts). The alliance enabled it to win an additional 6.3 %, producing a vote share of 25.6 %. The problem is that the MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party) and the Democratic Coalition (the party of former MSZP Minister-President Ferenc Gyurcsány) have trouble cooperating, although both belong to the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) grouping in the EU Parliament. The two parties still have not agreed on the much-needed renewal of their electoral alliance for the 2018 elections.

The difficulty of evaluating Eastern and Western European social democratic parties becomes evident when one compares Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In Slovakia, the social democratic SMER-SD's share of the total vote fell by 16.1 % in 2016, yet it still managed to win 28.3 %. Center-right parties, which governed along



more or less neo-liberal lines prior to 2012, are no longer represented in parliament. Mikuláš Dzurindas' SDKÚ-DS managed to win just 0.3 %. Five of the more successful parties are radical to varying degrees or else right-wing in the sense of being economically liberal and anti-European. Those descriptions fit the neo-liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), the conservative protest party OĽaNO, the nationalist Slovakian National Party (SNS), the post-fascist ĽSNS, and the conservative protest party SR.

SMER formed a government with Most-Híd (The Bridge), the party of cooperation between some Slovaks and – especially – the Hungarian minority, the SNS (considered by SMER to be the least radical of the nationalist parties), and the economically liberal-conservative #Siet. This is the first time that a party representing the Hungarian minority ever joined a coalition with a Slovakian nationalist party. The coalition has continued an active EU policy and – in contrast to Hungary – accepted a verdict of the European Court of Justice on the distribution of refugees among EU countries.

By contrast, the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) is considered highly Europeanized. After 1989 the Social Democrats never merged with the Communist Party, and by 2017 that had serious consequences. The ČSSD managed to win only 7.3 % of the vote, while the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) captured 7.8 % and the Christian-Democratic EPP party KDU-CSSL garnered 5.8 %. The real winner was the populist Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO), run by billionaire and media mogul Andrej Babiš, which won 29.5 %. ANO is a member of the ALDE group (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) in the European Parliament. This is the first time that a right-wing extremist party has made it into parliament. Babiš would like to form a minority government, but at this point it is hard to predict what party alignments might emerge in the parliament. At any rate no one should expect an active EU policy.

Western European observers attribute many common features to the Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, which they in fact possess only to a limited extent. One difference among them is that Latvia and Estonia have large Russian-speaking minorities, while Lithuania has only a small one. In the former, the minority question is the biggest political problem, one that also influences party systems. In Latvia, the strongest party, Saskaņa, belongs to the SPE family but is supported primarily by Russian speakers. In Estonia, the Social Democratic Party of Estonia (SDE) long has been an antagonist of the K party (Estonian Center Party), which is supported by Russian speakers. But in 2015 it joined a coalition led by K and thus overcame its deep distrust of that party. K's membership in ALDE seems rather odd. The party will study the question of whether membership in S&D instead might be possible once European elections are held in 2019.



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## **Shifting Grounds: Three demarcation lines for progressives**

Defeats, decline, and disaster – these discouraging words pop into mind when one reads the reviews of political developments in 2016 and 2017. Unfortunately, these epithets do not merely reflect the opinions of the press. The words describe the mood within the progressive political movement, which not so long ago was the avant-garde political force, still able to shape the course of modern history.

It is disheartening to have to ask the question: Could things get any worse? An old joke that begins with that very query offers a cynical answer: Well, if they could, they already would be. But even though some recent elections have brought us close to a historic low-point, there still is much more that could go wrong. A further downward slide could mean that we had evolved from being a troubled political family to one in which once-thriving parties are on the road to extinction. That doomsday scenario has become quite a popular lament among progressive heralds, who – by announcing the existential crisis of social democracy – want to create a sense of urgency and push for yet another process of renewal.

### **Traditional renewal**

The main problem is that renewing social democracy is a tradition as old as the movement itself. And while many successful restorations have been celebrated, none of them has occurred in the last two decades. In other words, all of those renovations preceded the conflicts unleashed by the »Third Way«. Nowadays, the usual appeals for renewal begin by claiming that we have not moved far enough to the left – a refrain heard especially often in countries where the local social democratic party has just been ousted from the government. Those appeals usually conclude with a pledge that such betrayals of principles must never be allowed to happen again and that the party's past mistakes should be put aside as it presents voters with its new agenda. When that approach fails and the next election does not mark a turning of the tide, the ideologists and spin doctors typically roll out the argument that the party's program and campaign were good, but the voters did not understand what was being proposed. And that claim would buy time until the next elections are held. The assumption then would be that the normal course of events in partisan electoral systems eventually should result in a swing of the pendulum toward the center-left.

Although of course this sketch is a bit of a caricature, it likely will seem quite familiar to any reader with direct experience in social democratic movements. And this is the reason it is high time to say that traditional renewal will not do the trick. The world has moved on; politics has evolved; the established parties no longer have a monopoly in articulating the views of participants in emergent social conflicts. In short, political participation no longer conforms to the patterns one would have observed even a decade ago. More importantly, in the aftermath of such profound transformation, nobody except social democrats awaits

or expects much from the prospect of a progressive reinvention. The so-called »ordinary people« whom progressives have featured in their narratives ever since the word »workers« lost its class connotation are not sitting around waiting for the center-left to reinvent itself. Rather, they anticipate that turbulent times eventually will pass. They hope for better prospects and aspire to regain control over their lives. Meanwhile they still have fears that need to be alleviated. It is in addressing such concerns that social democrats will have to seek their new mission. Willy Brandt once remarked that every age needs to find its own answers. Social democrats can rediscover meaning and purpose by offering answers to the specific problems encountered by ordinary people today.

In that sense, the first step for them is not to focus efforts on renewal, but rather to muster their courage and think about the future instead. Although that may sound like a semantic distinction, words do matter as the previous paragraphs have shown, since we typically think with words and pictures. This observation does not imply that social democrats simply should disregard their traditions. On the contrary, they have every reason to be proud of their political legacy. Nor am I suggesting that progressives should forget about the past, whether the good aspects or the bad. There is always much to be learned from one's own history. That said, progressives should temper their nostalgia and get over their obsession with old conflicts. Above all, they should move on from the fact that, at the turn of the century, they participated in a majority of European governments and stop lamenting the disastrous aftermath of the politics of the »Third Way« and »Neue Mitte«. These battles belong to the past and no longer excite anyone except party insiders. There is a need to turn the page and show that there is much that the progressive movement can offer in terms of guiding the trajectory of new developments. And for that, social democrats themselves have to leave the comfort zone of contemplating the status quo and show citizens of their respective countries that center-left parties again are worthy of their trust and their votes.

### **Leaving the comfort zone**

Consequently, the second step in the rehabilitation of social democracy is to try to define what the parties under its banner would like to accomplish in social and economic policy arenas, whether on the local, national, or global level. While there are core values that should guide the formulation of their ideas, it is important for social democrats to sidestep a dangerous pitfall: the already mentioned temptation for progressives to move further left. Whatever »moving to the left« might have meant in the past, today it has a totally different connotation. The emergence of parties that claim to be farther left than the social democrats implies that the latter's political monopoly has been broken. But this newly-emergent pluralism on the left can be constructive if progressives focus on what they want to do and what the modern center-left should be about, rather than trying to highlight their differences from rival organizations. If progressives are tempted to enter into any kind of competition, then it should be waged over the primacy of socially just ideas rather than about which party deserves the »left« label.

Social democrats clearly would benefit from a reputation for authenticity and credibility in their pronouncements. But authenticity actually involves two distinct ideas. First, which party or political current actually »owns« certain issues or displays certain credentials when it offers viable solutions to unresolved problems? Authenticity in this context is all about one's original beliefs; it is not a race to see which group ultimately can offer the most extreme program. The second idea concerns the power of one's convictions. Deeply-held values and beliefs enable those who hold them to persuade others to follow them. If we look at the leaders who emerged recently within the progressive movement (but also those closer to the center and center-right), they have one thing in common: They are genuine in what they stand for and ready to fight for their principles, even if they seem to have little chance of success. The fact that those leaders have made a choice to stand resolutely behind certain ideas, and refuse to accept supposed limitations encourages others to support them.

That resoluteness, authenticity, and power to garner support lies at the core of the new energy that animates progressivism – which has the potential to become the »politics of the future« – and distinguishes it from the more traditional center-left politics. The old center-left wanted to persuade everyone to believe in boundaries, portraying reasonable and responsible politics as the art of managing the situation. The progressivism of the future should be about showing that the horizons of political imagination must be broadened, and that there is always an alternative. It must involve championing a goal that can elicit the best from people and challenge them to unite in the name of a historically relevant program, one that would benefit humanity and advance human civilization. This is the way in which progressives can and should shatter the assumption that anti-system politics will prevail: namely, by proving that they themselves have been and always will be an anti-establishment movement, as long as that establishment continues to tolerate or inflict inequalities, injustices, and indignities.

There are many possible avenues that could be explored in the effort to create the progressive movement of the future. The argument about which of those avenues to choose has been conducted in the shadow of a debate about institutions and alliances, which in turn has put the spotlight on more overtly political or tactical issues: modalities of governing and the composition of potential coalitions. These discussions of course are relevant, since social democratic parties have long since become participants in parliamentary maneuvering and thus by definition will seek to acquire legitimate power by winning elections. But the conversation over alliances and governing styles misses the so-called bigger picture. It imposes a conceptual framework that induces parties to think primarily about what would improve their poll numbers and how to react in a punchy way to current events. This narrow focus might help the parties survive from day to day and hang onto the remnants of their core voter base. However, if one attends to long-term trends affecting social democracy, one sees that the current approach aims at a very modest goal: not losing any more ground, rather than really winning and building a better future for all of society.

As an alternative to such old-style parliamentary politics, progressives should prove that they can think long term: i.e., that they know how to articulate a vision and are not afraid to make bold choices and to design policies that would help achieve it. Such audacity is necessary, even if it might mean that social democratic parties would have to accept some temporary losses in order to reemerge stronger, more secure, and more solidified in their positions. The three potential political demarcation lines that would allow progressives to make a public display of their change of attitude are: the new debate over globalization, the discussion of the future of Europe, and the dilemma of how to construct a more egalitarian society.

### **Debate over globalization**

In the globalization debate, progressives should both embrace the continuing integration of the global economy, and argue in favor of a new model of global governance. They should demonstrate that the latter is not only possible, but absolutely necessary in order to correct the imbalances that globalization now is causing and to shape the trajectory of future transformations. The progressive position must be anchored in the principle that geo-politics has priority over a relatively free-floating geo-economics. In formulating a New Global Deal, progressives must describe the ways in which each and every continent, state, society, and individual can benefit from the gains of modernity and technological advances. Yet, they must also show how people and their societies can be protected against the risks created by such rapid change. Accordingly, they need to drop the rhetoric of losers and winners of globalization. Such talk tends to intensify polarization and leads its audience to think in terms of open and closed societies. Obviously, that kind of rhetoric serves the political interests of those who argue in favor of illusory nativist protectionism. Progressives need to defeat that narrative and replace it with one that shows that modernity can be reformed to respond to the aspirations and hopes of everyone.

### **The future of Europe**

Regarding the European Union demarcation line, progressives have to make a stronger case for a social Europe. Indeed, their vision of such a Europe must become even more ambitious than it has been up until now. The idea of constructing a European social model that would operate while anchored in the respective national welfare states remains correct in principle; however, it will not bring about much substantive change. That is true for two reasons: first, because those welfare states have been undermined systematically starting in 1990s, and second, because even taken together they do not provide answers to the serious distributional conflicts dividing the EU. Those conflicts have torn Europe apart, pitting north against south, countries receiving an influx of workers against those losing their workforce, eurozone states against those outside the eurozone, and the net contributors against net recipients of EU funds. Here, more ambition is needed. Although the European Pillar of Social Rights represents an important step forward and a breakthrough after the post-2008 years during which the social agenda was suppressed, it will not be suffi-

cient unless the principle of rights is followed by the establishment of binding rules for standards. This is especially the case when it comes to defining high-quality employment and social protection across the Union.

### **An egalitarian society**

Finally, with respect to the egalitarian demarcation line; progressives once again must take an unambiguous position in favor of an egalitarian society. In this context, they need to be clear that regaining power, modernizing the state, and formulating appropriate policies all are simply means, rather than ends in themselves. It will not be easy for social democrats to agree on those positions or to convince citizens of their sincerity. Especially after years of sacrifice that governments have blamed on the »crisis,« citizens no longer believe in rosy future scenarios. They are particularly skeptical about notions such as social mobility. For many, that idea has become synonymous with stagnation or the »race to the bottom.« It is at this point that a new vision must begin to make a difference by looking for ways to bridge gaps in aspirations and offering credible promises of social progress, equal opportunities, and security for everyone. Unless all three of these demarcated policy areas are assigned top priority by a renovated social democracy, there can be no hope of overcoming polarization and fragmentation. To heal the conflicts both among the most impoverished and within the groups of most vulnerable – the young, women, and migrants – social democrats must demonstrate to them that there really are alternatives to the bleak prospects that so many of them face.

These three demarcations are merely starting points that could be developed further. What connects them is an idea. Although many claim that these are the worst of times, they are in fact the only times that many of our contemporaries will ever know. And if progressives stop embracing doomsday dialectics and avoid the pitfall of »same old, same old« renewal, there really is no reason that they should not become once again a force of modernity that in the end will shape the course of the current century. Despite the daunting challenges of the 21st century, these are perhaps also the most exciting times ever to be alive and active. Given the situation at hand, almost anything is possible as long as we are ready and willing to engage in long-term thinking, summon up the courage to believe that a progressive movement can adopt modern methods of organization, and develop a passion to keep fighting in spite of those who call it naïve. As idealistic as it may sound, progressive politics has to become about making world a better place for all once again.



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*Frank Decker*

## **The Plight of the SPD as a Reflection of the Crisis of European Social Democracy**

September of 2018 will mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the red-green coalition's electoral triumph and the beginning of Gerhard Schröder's term in office, the (for now at least) last Social Democratic chancellor. As if to give the lie to Ralf Dahrendorf's thesis that the era of social democracy was over, the social democrats had come out on top not only in Germany but in almost all European countries, and led governments in many of them. Today, two decades later, the political scene is dominated by the image of a social democratic decline that seems as though it will never end. In the Scandinavian countries the social democrats have forfeited their former role as the leading political force. In the Netherlands, Greece, and France, its counterparts have dwindled to the status of fringe parties. And in the Federal Republic of Germany the SPD suffered its third defeat in a row in 2017, having fallen far behind its main competitor, the CDU/CSU. How could things have come to such a pass?

In the older European democracies the political left is divided into three currents just about everywhere. Since the 1980s, ecological parties have sprung up alongside the social democratic mainstream left. As post-materialist parties, the former have occupied the niche created on the left side of the political spectrum by the emergence of new lines of conflict. Moreover, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed a renaissance of left-wing socialist parties that, in some cases, re-emerged as quasi-populist organizations beyond the pale of social democracy. This resurgence of the far left occurred after communist parties either had faded away completely during the 1990s, or had been decimated, or – as in Italy – had been absorbed by social democratic parties.

The German Greens were not a spin-off of the Social Democratic Party, even though they hurt the latter's chances in elections. They represented an outcome of the one-sided pro-growth outlook of the mainstream left, which cared little about the negative aspects of economic development. In the 1980s many social democratic parties tried to tap into the issues of the new politics. The German SPD and its Berlin party platform of 1989 provide a good example of this approach. Not only did that program neglect the epoch-making caesura caused by the overthrow of the communist system in Eastern Europe and German reunification, it also ignored the economic challenges of the era. By the 1970s Keynesianism had slipped into crisis, but no one had any idea what new social democratic scheme of economic and social policy should replace it.

During the 1990s, social democratic parties, now back in government, frequently turned to neoliberal ideas to reform the labor market and the welfare state, but also as a way of responding to accelerated globalization. As a result, a significant portion of their traditional voter base deserted them at the polls. On one hand, this development paved the way for the renaissance or the reinvigoration of competing left-wing socialist or left-wing populist parties. For example, in Germany the party known as The Left was led, significantly, by Oskar Lafontaine, a former chair-



man of the SPD. On the other hand, the availability of former social democratic voters brought about changes in the strategy and programs of right-wing populist parties. Many of them had arisen during the 1980s and, in terms of cultural party system axes, they occupied the opposite pole from the post-materialist left. But now they gradually began to downplay or abandon the strongly neoliberal positions and emphases in social and economic policy that they had originally held, and mutated into defenders of the welfare state.

Thus, the social democrats blundered into a double trap. Along the economic axis they were wedged between two competing political currents. On one side was the mainstream right that, though liberal, still had strong affinities to the welfare state and represented the »meritocratic« center. On the other flank were left- and right-wing populist rivals who courted the »losers of modernization.« Along the cultural axis, it was especially the »little guys« who did not necessarily share the liberal positions on social issues taken by social democrats. This was particularly the case when it came to the immigration issue. Among other things, the explosiveness of that issue derived from the fact that, here, identity issues were so closely associated with social and distributional problems. Competition with migrants for jobs, housing, and social services is largely confined to the lower third of society, seldom affecting its middle or upper ranks. For that reason it should come as no surprise that right-wing populists since the 1990s have managed to make deep inroads into the electoral bases of social democratic or socialist parties, thus depriving them of their cachet as »workers' parties.«

### **Hegemony of the right**

Here we encounter the chief reason for the hegemony of the right in Europe. The case of Germany illustrates in impressive fashion the shifting relationship of forces in party politics. In both 2002 and 2005, the three parties on the left – the SPD, The Greens, and the PDS/The Left – together captured 51 % of the vote, which put them well ahead of the two center-right parties (CDU/CSU and FDP), which together corralled just 45.9 % and 45 % of the vote. In 2009 this ratio was reversed (48.3 % for the right, versus 45.6 % for the left). In 2013, the rise of the right-wing populist AfD widened the gap even more (51 % for the right, versus 42.7 % for the three leftist parties). But there was worse to come. Due to the strong showing of both the right-wing populists and a reinvigorated FDP, the center-right camp was able to boost its total share of the 2017 vote by 5 points, to 56.2 %, while the three parties on the left fell to a historic low of just 38.6 % (even in the dismal year of 1990 they did better than that, having chalked up a total vote of 40.7 %).

How do we explain the fact that, in the countries of southern Europe – particularly Spain and Greece – the mainstream left has been challenged primarily by left-wing populists rivals, whereas in the countries of western and northern Europe right-wing populism has been the dominant competitor? One crucial reason for the difference may be that the southern countries have been buffeted especially hard by the impacts of international financial capital, which played into the hands of the leftist critics of globalization. What is more, the social welfare state in those countries is somewhat underdeveloped and is thus less able to compensate the los-



ers from international competition. Conversely, the highly competitive countries of western and central Europe are more dependent on labor migration to maintain their strong positions than are the southern countries. Moreover, it would have been harder for the states of northern Europe to carry on free foreign trade without their extensive social welfare states. But as the competitive struggle to attract investment intensified among even those countries, the welfare state itself began to come under pressure. As a result, their populations reacted with irritation when they heard stories about supposedly unjustified claims upon social services made by immigrants. Ideologically, this attitude, dubbed »welfare chauvinism,« plays into the hands of the nationalist right.

### **After the golden age of Keynesianism**

As is widely recognized, what divides the left from the right is the different priority each assigns to the goal of social and political equality. If one reviews the development of the democratic systems of advanced post-industrial societies since the 1970s, one notes that there is a mixed balance sheet when it comes to the attainment of those two goals. From a sociocultural point of view – e.g., in respect to gender equality or the elimination of discrimination against homosexuals – progress clearly has been made. But in the meantime, inequality in the socioeconomic sense has been on the rise. In the golden age of Keynesianism high growth rates had insured that the social-service and social-welfare state could be expanded continuously while the great majority of society was borne along by the rising tide of prosperity. Under the pressure of globalization, the leeway for influencing the distribution of income and wealth has grown more constricted, a trend that tends to work to the disadvantage of the lower strata of the populace. Their wealth and incomes have stagnated or even diminished, while the top third either has maintained its previous level or increased it. In fact, statistics for Germany prove that the bottom 40 % of the population has not experienced any wage increases in real terms since the 1990s.

The political consequences of these developments are reflected in voting behavior. On the one hand, voter participation displays increasing social selectivity; on the other, those who do still cast ballots are more and more attracted to left- and right-wing protest parties. Figures for the Federal Republic confirm this trend. While during the 70s and 80s voter turnout, even among the lower classes, always hovered around 70 %, since the 90s it has fallen continuously to less than 50 %. Among the upper strata, however, turnout has remained nearly stable at the high level of about 90 %. One can confirm the increase in the protest vote by adding together the share of the vote won by left and right outsider parties. These would include, besides the AfD which only got started in 2013, both the original PDS and its contemporary successor, the party of The Left. Together, those three parties have more than quadrupled their share of the total vote in federal elections from 5 % in 2002 to 21.8 % in 2017. Nevertheless, compared to the support lavished on similar parties in other European countries, these are still modest numbers.

Contemporary studies in the Federal Republic demonstrate that the materially disadvantaged among the voting public are disproportionately represented in both

The Left and the AfD. Furthermore, the average income of these voters is lower than that of voters who support the other parties – including the SPD – and exceeds only the average income of non-voters. Given those circumstances, one might imagine that the deficiency in representation caused by the rising tide of abstentions among disadvantaged groups would be offset by the simultaneous increase in protest voting behavior. But on closer inspection this turns out not to be the case at all. First, the proportion of the socially disadvantaged among non-voters is much greater than it is among protest voters. Second, because they have no power to govern, the right- and left-wing outsider parties can promote the interests of protest voters only indirectly, by picking fights with the mainstream parties with which they compete. Third, many right-wing populist parties advocate positions closely associated with free market liberalism, and those positions run directly contrary to the interests of socially disadvantaged voters. Fourth, the fact that many of these voters have turned their backs on mainstream leftist parties does not mean that those parties will be more strongly motivated to pay closer attention to their interests. Potentially, there is more to be gained from catering to the highly motivated center (still numerically the predominant group of voters) than there is from bringing disillusioned non-voters or protest voters back into the fold. Realizing this, social democratic parties have tailored their programs and actions in government primarily to appeal to the former group. The consequence is a self-reinforcing process. When parties and politicians no longer represent disadvantaged groups in the population, members of those groups are less likely to have a reason to participate in elections. And if they refuse to participate in elections, their interests will be still more under-represented.

How can this vicious circle be escaped? Many theorists of democracy put the crisis of electoral democracy into perspective by directing their attention to other forms of and opportunities for political participation. All forms of participation besides elections – whether they are provided »from above« by government officials or emanate »from below,« i.e., from the populace itself – suffer from the same problem. They appeal to and are used by people who hold more advanced academic credentials and enjoy higher incomes. Social selectivity in these cases is even higher than it is in elections, so in that respect the latter continue to embody the most »pro-equality« type of participation.

### **We need an agenda**

Even though ultimately proposals for institutional reform are well-intended, they lead to the neglect of a fundamental issue: the socioeconomic and cultural divisions in our societies. Those rifts can be remedied only by attacking their root causes, and their resolution can be achieved only by political means. In other words, we need an agenda that again would enable and genuinely achieve greater equality of opportunity by integrating potential workers more effectively into the labor market and making major investments in education, child and health care, housing construction, and other infrastructural sectors. The strategic challenge to the mainstream left consists in persuading the more well-to-do segment of their potential voter base to favor such a set of policies even though those voters themselves have above-aver-

age educational credentials and incomes. Parties in this position probably will succeed only if they »go easy on« better-educated and higher-income voters when it comes to redistributive measures, while simultaneously »cultivating« them by championing progressive positions on social policy issues. So for many reasons – not least in order to counter right-wing populism – social democrats should work hard to renew the alliance between the left-liberal bourgeoisie and the parties' neglected core clientele of »little people.« To achieve that goal, social democratic parties will have to devise a »realistic« immigration policy. Because migration-related conflicts hit this clientele group especially hard, left-wing parties in particular should throw their weight behind better control of and stricter limits upon immigration. At the same time, they must not suppress the fact that these conflicts have a cultural dimension as well and thus not pretend that such tensions are exclusively social in nature. The British economist Paul Collier reminds us that the interests of those who live in their home countries and want to stay there take precedence over the interests of those who want to leave home. But at the same time Collier's admonition amounts to a practical constraint for those attempting to win elections. If social democrats don't grasp this lesson, they will never regain the ability to cobble together majorities against the center-right camp, nor will they be able to stop the fateful slide toward a so-called »two-thirds« society, in which higher unemployment, poverty, and precarious work are becoming the norm.



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*Jo Leinen/Andreas Bummel*

## **Why a Global Legal Order is Urgently Needed**

The advance of global industrialization and modernization has brought into being an integrated world system that now extends all across the globe. Cash flows and commercial entities have no loyalty to any nation-states. Processes of product development and manufacturing are globally networked. A transnational elite has emerged consisting of the owners and top management of transnational corporations, both supported by high-level officials, politicians, scientists, and media representatives who are ready to implement common economic interests.

At the same time, humanity now shares a common destiny. The dangers posed by nuclear war, global pandemics, environmental devastation, or climate change affect all of us more than ever before.

Yet nuclear disarmament efforts have stalled. There are still over 2,000 rockets carrying nuclear weapons that can be readied for launch within minutes. Their explosive force is great enough to extinguish world civilization. The increasing pro-

portion of CO<sub>2</sub> in the earth's atmosphere due to the burning of fossil fuels continues unabated, and the consequences of the rising temperatures associated with it are incalculable. Climatic processes on this planet could reach a tipping point, ushering in conditions hostile to life. The human impact on global public goods such as the atmosphere must be guided and regulated so that planetary limits are not transgressed and the stability of earth's ecosystem is not jeopardized. Even the supply of important public goods like food security or the stability of the fiscal and economic system depends powerfully on how well global structures and processes are working.

### **Ineffective, non-transparent, undemocratic**

The United Nations and its many affiliated organizations, international financial institutions, the World Trade Organization and various interstate networks already fulfill many functions of a world government. However, this apparatus is ineffective, non-transparent, and undemocratic. The transnational elite exercises a disproportionately powerful influence. The concentration of wealth has reached unacceptable levels. According to Oxfam, the eight richest billionaires hold more wealth than the poorest half of humanity. Besides, this poor half is responsible for only 10 % of global greenhouse gas emissions. According to some estimates, about 8 % of global wealth is parked in tax havens and was routed around fiscal authorities. For decades, average corporate tax rates have been falling.

Technological, economic, and social progress have made possible a degree of prosperity for many people that has no precedent in history. However, it was achieved in large measure at the expense of the rest of the world, the ecosystem, and future generations. As a global model the growth-oriented, throw-away, consumer society leads to a dead end. A second, planetary version of modernity must face up to the risks and consequences of a globalized industrial society and bring about a radical transformation. The challenge is to arrive at a form of global economics that unfolds within the limits of the earth's system and in the framework of nature's regenerative capabilities, while also facilitating the most extensive possible level of affluence for all, compatible with distributive justice.

The world parliament plan is possibly the most important piece of the puzzle when it comes to achieving a democratic, solidarity-based, sustainable, and pacific world order. The loss of national control over events, which has accompanied the hollowing-out of democracy and given a fillip to populist forces, may be offset by the development of a world democracy that makes it possible to maintain transparent, effective control over important global policy sectors. Even if all the nation-states in the world were impeccable democracies, that would not alter the fact that global integration has led to a loss of control nor would it change the undemocratic character of the world system. Underlying the idea of a world parliament is recognition that all human beings are members of a globe-spanning human family and endowed with equal rights. The world parliament would be the one political institution in which humanity would be represented by directly elected deputies.

In the current system of international law, there is no tribunal that represents the higher-order interest of humanity at large. In interstate organizations and negotiations, it is usually only states and their governments that are represented. There, they lobby for their own interests and are accordingly instrumentalized. The principle of consensus usually guides negotiations, so a lot of compromises must be made in order to produce results.

International law lacks many of the hallmarks that characterize a functioning legal system. Normally, legislation defines what is legal and what is not in a way binding on everyone, but that is not the case with international law. Moreover, there is no obligation to let courts decide controversies, nor is there any means of enforcing their verdicts. A new global legal order should possess all of those characteristics. Whereas international law usually imposes only voluntary obligations on states and therefore must be enforced at the national level, a world legal order would be valid in principle everywhere and apply directly to each and every person.

### **One person, one vote**

The world legal system would be created by a global legislature and not by interstate treaties based on the consensus principle. The legislature should consist of two chambers, an assembly of states and a world parliament. While the former would be composed of the representatives of governments and follow the international law principle of »one state, one vote,« the latter would be elected democratically by the world's population, and would adopt the principle, »one person, one vote.« For a bill to become a world law, both houses of the world parliament would have to approve it. Furthermore, depending on the issue, differently qualified majorities should be required for passage of a bill. A world constitutional court would have to review the decisions of the world legislature as well as the actions of global governmental institutions to determine whether they were in accord with both fundamental and human rights.

A world legal order, including a world parliament, will be a long-term project. Yet it is important to recognize that the interstate system has failed and to sketch out, as the ultimate goal, a process of global unification. But even now it would be possible to take the initial step if there were enough political will for it: the creation of a Parliamentary Assembly in the United Nations (United Nations Parliamentary Assembly, UNPA). The proposal is inspired by the evolution of the European Parliament. The rights and functions of the EP were developed gradually in a process that took many decades. Since the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the EP and the Council of the European Union enjoy equal rights in the overall legislative process, at least where most areas of policymaking are concerned. Until direct elections to the EP were introduced in 1979, it was composed of members of national parliaments.

Accordingly, as a first step a UNPA should be set up as an advisory body to the UN. This could be accomplished by a decision of the General Assembly without any changes to the UN Charter or the concurrence of the Security Council. At first, participating countries should be given the choice of whether to appoint delegates from

the national parliaments or have them elected directly. The crucial issue here is that the national oppositions and minorities should be represented as well. Following the model of the EP, the distribution of seats should be based on population, but on a scaled or staggered basis. Small countries would get more representatives per capita than large ones. A UNPA would have a lot to do. For example, who would be in a better position than the representatives of the world's citizens to evaluate progress on the new Sustainable Development Goals? A UNPA should empanel its own human rights commission. It should put pressure on governments to make progress on disarmament issues. It could oversee progress in the battle against climate change. It should appoint a committee to investigate the international system of tax avoidance. In time, the UNPA should acquire rights of information, participation, and control over all relevant global governing institutions. Paralleling advances of democratization in nation-states and the introduction of direct elections, the responsibilities of the UNPA could be expanded little by little. Someday, when the time came for a revision of the UN Charter, it could be upgraded to the status of a world parliament in the framework of a world legal order.

Advocates of a UNPA are convinced that the assembly itself would be a significant engine driving the further development of the international system, much as the EP has moved European unification ahead when critical issues arose. The campaign for a UNPA is backed by a broad spectrum of prominent individuals and institutions from more than 150 countries. Among them are more than 1,500 current and former members of parliament, ten Nobel Prize winners, over 300 professors, and numerous former officials of the United Nations. The European Parliament, the Latin American Parliament, and the Pan-African Parliament all have gotten behind the proposal.

One important advocate of the plan was the former UN General Secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who died on February 16, 2016. His message is more meaningful today than ever before: »We need to promote the democratization of globalization, before globalization destroys the foundations of national and international democracy. The establishment of a Parliamentary Assembly at the United Nations has become an indispensable step to achieve democratic control of globalization.«

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## **Re-election Redux: Russia in the age of acclamation**

He wanted to play hard-to-get. The carefully stage-managed aura of tension even misled a few people into wondering whether he really would run again. But at the end of last year, accompanied by frenzied applause, his mumbled »yes, I will ...« dispelled all doubts. Vladimir Putin had decided to run again for another six-year term. Once his campaign web page was set up, the incumbent president was quoted as saying that he would »take something to its logical conclusion or at least to the point of optimum success.« Putin's re-election in March means that his accumulated time in office will exceed that of Leonid Brezhnev and will fall just short of Joseph Stalin's, making him the second-longest serving leader in the Kremlin. There are some who describe this continuity as paralysis, while for others it expresses new-found stability.

In the case of Russia, the saying that political arrangements cannot be understood unless their historical development is taken into account is more than a commonplace. One should not overlook the fact that all of the people who operate the levers of power in the Russia of today had one experience in common: they were born when the Soviet Union still existed, but they have to live in Russia now. The disengagement implicit in that shared past derives mostly from the experience that literally everything can change completely from one day to the next. There are very few people who can say they have experienced such a drastic reversal as the Russian shift from socialist reality to cowboy capitalism. Moreover, to speak of a »reversal« drastically understates the extent of the calamities that have afflicted Russian society. At any rate, given the background here – the extremes of the previous century – the all too human need for predictability appears to have reconciled quite a few people to its unwelcome relative, stagnation.

So then, you might ask, why did Putin even choose to run in this election? Wasn't the stage management way too costly and elaborate for an outcome that was already foreordained? Couldn't it actually have been risky for Putin to hold elections in light of the protest experiences of past years?

### **Undemocratic reality**

For quite some time now observers have used the expression »electoral authoritarianism« to make sense of the phenomenon of elections in authoritarian or dictatorial systems. That terminology draws attention to the fact that even authoritarian regimes court legitimacy. Its representatives are always seeking to secure a base of support outside of their own ruling circle. Even though this practice has produced countless absurd results, if we focus on the failures alone, we fail to notice how resilient authoritarian systems can be. Elections are an important means of shoring up such stability (in addition to repression of course). A democratic instrument such as an election can prove to be a catalyst capable of shining a spotlight on – and provoking antipathy toward – an undemocratic reality. Nevertheless, authoritarian rulers evidently are willing to put up with this incon-



venience because they value the usefulness of elections more highly than other ways of securing their power.

Besides the advantages that authoritarian systems confer on themselves by adding a patina of democracy through elections, the latter also serve the power-wielders' interest in domestic stability by giving them a clearer picture of opposition forces. Up until now, the Putin system consistently has managed to neutralize the opposition through a mixture of repression and cooptation, as was done with critical elements within business organizations as well as with the »Just Russia« party, founded in 2006. The latter, an amalgam of three parties, functioned initially as a »big tent« for the leftist opposition and for a few years was conspicuous for its sharp criticism of Putin. But because it refused to field a candidate of its own in the election and decided instead to support Putin's candidacy, it seems beyond dispute that Just Russia is a party that strives to remain in the Kremlin's good graces. Thus, its history could be written not only as a vivid example of attrition, but also as a tale of domestication and successful integration.

For decades three parties have been responsible for creating the semblance of competitive elections: the Communist party under Gennady Zyuganov, the mis-named Liberal Democratic Party (actually on the far right of the spectrum) led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and the social-liberal Yabloko Party under Emilia Slabunova. However, when it came to officially approved glamour in this year's campaign, all eyes were on Xenia Sobchak, although her role could be interpreted in many ways. One intriguing fact about her is that she is the daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, the ex-mayor of St. Petersburg from whose sphere of influence Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev – and for that matter Putin himself – emerged. So she knows the president well and at the end of 2011 even sought to let him know that she would join the protest movement. Then last year she informed him in person that she intended to run against him. Even though she may like Putin as an individual, Sobchak, a well-known TV figure, justified her oppositional role by saying that she was not in sympathy with Putin as a politician. A high point of the electoral campaign so far was reached last December when Sobchak, evoking the spirit of Alexei Navalny, confronted Putin with the question of why the state authorities were so afraid of serious competition. Since the prominent opposition figure Navalny ultimately was blocked from participating in the election, Sobchak behaved as if she were his approved mouthpiece.

### **The Putin generation**

Both Sobchak and Navalny represent a youth that has known only the age of Putin. Observers have frequently asserted that this youthful cohort could turn out to be the grave-diggers of the system. Accordingly, they claimed to hear the first notes of the requiem when, in December of 2011, the biggest demonstrations took place since the chaotic early years of the 1990s when the communist system was collapsing. However, the rapidly circulated narrative of a younger generation that saw itself as having been robbed of its future by the ruling system and therefore had taken to the streets turned out to be an untenable cliché of naïve protest romanticism. In fact, the move-



ment had attracted support from all social strata and generations. Now of course one might interpret the broad base of support for the protests as a clear indication that many people in Russia feel that the country has come to a standstill. Yet it is also true that the Putin generation by no means is united in rejecting the established order.

In short, Russian society is divided. Whereas some claim to discern in Sobchak at least a voice that addresses problems openly and thus possibly someone who could emerge as a political figure of the future, others see her as a typical product of the Kremlin laboratory. In the wake of experiences accumulated during the last few decades in Putin's system, voices are raised claiming that Sobchak ultimately will only further divide the opposition while simultaneously insuring that voter turnout will be as high as possible. Depending on one's political preferences, that is a point of view that either could pass for historically sound analysis or be dismissed as a conspiracy theory. At any rate Putin, as the independent candidate, was virtually assured of holding onto his office, which of course he did, winning about 75 % of the vote. Nevertheless, the provisional sovereign wanted to see his power legitimized less by perpetually lofty approval ratings than by high voter turnout (in fact, around 68 %). However, he will be able to expand the power bestowed on him for another six years only if he can use Russia's newly (re)acquired role as a world power to overcome the country's economic problems. Assuming that he goes the full distance, his term of office will end in 2024. Beyond that, he would have to do as he did in 2008: step down from the presidency and run again in 2030 at the age of 77. A quick study of other countries reveals that advanced age does not necessarily deter politicians from running for office again. Be that as it may, we should definitely expect tensions to arise during the next few years. This is so because the succession question is growing ever more urgent and will not be handled without serious conflicts in a system of acclamation like the one created by Putin.



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# Publisher's Information

## **Released for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung by**

Kurt Beck, Sigmar Gabriel, Jürgen Kocka, Thomas Meyer,  
Bascha Mika, Angelica Schwall-Düren and  
Wolfgang Thierse

## **Editorial Staff**

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Tel: 004930269357151, -52, -53, Fax: 004930269359238,  
[www.ng-fh.de](http://www.ng-fh.de), [ng-fh@fes.de](mailto:ng-fh@fes.de)

## **Publisher**

J.H.W. Dietz Verlag and Successors, GmbH  
Dreizehnmorgenweg 24, D-53175 Bonn,  
Tel: 0049228184877-0, Fax: 0049228184877-29, [www.dietz-verlag.de](http://www.dietz-verlag.de)

## **Design Planning**

tiff.any Ltd., Berlin

## **Typeset, Lithography, Printing, Production**

Limberg Druck GmbH, Kaarst

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[heidemarie.pankratz@dietz-verlag.de](mailto:heidemarie.pankratz@dietz-verlag.de)

ISSN 2194-3095

# The Politics of Migration and the Future of the European Left

Michael Bröning  
Christoph P. Mohr (eds.)



Michael Bröning/  
Christoph P. Mohr (eds.)  
THE POLITICS OF MIGRATION –  
AND THE FUTURE  
OF THE EUROPEAN LEFT

360 pages  
Paperback  
26.00 Euro  
ISBN 978-3-8012-0522-5

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Verlag J.H.W. Dietz Nachf. – Dreizehnmorgenweg 24 – D-53175 Bonn  
phone +49 (0)228/184877-0 – fax +49 (0)228/184877-29 – [info@dietz-verlag.de](mailto:info@dietz-verlag.de)



A stylized world map composed of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to indicate specific locations.

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