

## The role of progressive policies in the fight against populism.

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In order to formulate some guidelines to enable progressive policies to counter the rise of populism, I first need to define them.

### A polysemous concept

The concept of populism is polysemous. Sometimes it is used to stigmatise an opponent, other times to describe illiberal regimes such as Orban's, or to define far-right formations such as the Rassemblement National in France or Georgea Meloni's post-fascist party in Italy. Some, like Mélenchon in France or the Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe, even argue for a left-wing populism. Pierre Rosanvallon, who has written a book on populism<sup>i</sup> calls it a rubber concept or a screen word.

For my part, without claiming to define the concept, I will confine myself here to referring to the political currents of the radical right, some of whose characteristic features we can identify;

- The notion of a "one people", which is opposed to taking into account the plurality inherent in any democracy.
- The reference to a vertical power that rejects all forms of social intermediation, including trade unions. Elected governments need not bother with discussions or negotiations with civil society. Their election gives them full power
- Failure to respect the rule of law
- The search for and stigmatisation of scapegoats, including foreigners, and racism.
- Anti-feminism and homophobia.
- Contempt for elites, be they political, economic, institutional or even social
- A retreat to a nostalgic vision of the nation and a rejection of the European idea
- A vision of a family based on the authoritarian patriarchal model<sup>ii</sup>
- For some, this is a more than ambiguous attitude towards Putin's regime.

I would add that these movements construct their discourse around simple causalities, oversimplifying realities. Progressives, on the other hand, have a duty to take account of systemic realities, which require them to be educational in

order to make the natural complexity of things accessible to as many people as possible. In order to keep within my allotted speaking time, I shall confine myself to a few points that seem essential to me, without attempting to be exhaustive.

### **1°) Say and explain what the European Union does**

The disenchantment of a significant proportion of the population with politics and the institutions is not unique to the European Union; it is worldwide and affects all levels of government. As far as the European Union is concerned, it is reinforced by the lack of proximity and knowledge of how the European Union works and the policies that are implemented.

Brussels is a long way away, and MEPs are not very visible. Spending most of their lives in Strasbourg or Brussels, they have little direct contact with their constituents. They need to redouble their efforts to make the most of every moment and every opportunity to stay in touch with their constituents. Proximity and human contact are decisive factors, and we need to be aware that democratic time cannot be limited to election periods.

As for the media, it has to be said that they generally give too little space to European issues. This is a shared responsibility between media professionals and politicians.

We must constantly demonstrate and explain the added value of the European Union in concrete terms. Highlighting tools like Erasmus, which only concerns a limited part of the population, is not enough. We need to get down to the nitty-gritty, the things that affect people in their daily lives. If we have been able to respond to the challenge posed by the pandemic, it is thanks to the EU, which has been able to organise the ordering and distribution of vaccines. In companies, with the trade union teams, we need to show concrete progress in terms of non-discrimination, health and safety and social dialogue. For example, we need to show that the directives protecting employees from carcinogenic substances save tens of thousands of lives every year. The EU's added value must be demonstrated on a daily basis.

### **Saying who does what**

Defending the European project also requires a more courageous attitude on the part of many politicians. All too often, our national politicians, out of

convenience, explain to the public that what is not going well is the fault of European policies and thus think they are protecting themselves from any criticism of their actions at national level. This is not the way to reconcile citizens with the European idea. At the time of the Brexit referendum, Cameron expressed surprise at the difficulty of countering the "noisemakers", forgetting that for years he had continually explained that the Union was the source of all Britain's ills.

All too often, certain politicians or certain media denounce EU policies when the EU has no competence over the matters in question or when these matters depend solely on the national states. I am thinking, for example, of social security, a large part of migration policy or taxation. Politicians and the media need to do more to educate people about who decides what - the Member States, the Council, the Commission or the Parliament. At the same time, it is important to strengthen Parliament's powers.

### **Policy coherence**

One of the answers we need to provide is to pursue the development of a social Europe. This is what was put in place by the late Jacques Delors and continued, after the disastrous Barroso parenthesis, by Jean-Claude Juncker and then Madame Von der Leyen. Of course, all this needs to be developed further, and there is a huge amount of work to be done.

The same applies to the ecological dimension, where policies must respond to expectations for fair transitions. Incidentally, I'm not convinced that calling into question the green strand of the CAP is, in the long term, an appropriate response to the agricultural crisis. Aligning ourselves with the demands of agribusiness will not strengthen the position of quality family farming.

Coherence is to be found above all in the link between social and environmental policies and budgetary policy. How can we be credible when on the one hand we talk about strengthening social policies and at the same time impose budgetary rules that lead to austerity? For example, the agreement on economic governance will force a country like Belgium to make additional savings of almost one percent of GDP (0.65).

The target of the promised savings is already known, it is in the programmes of the right-wing parties: limiting unemployment benefits, calling into question the role and resources of mutual health insurance funds, attacking trade unionism

and, as the icing on the cake, reducing the resources of social security through tax deduction policies.

We should also be able to expect this consistency from employers, who on the one hand call on us to limit social conflict and on the other refuse, for example, to take part in an ambitious reform of European Works Councils as proposed by our friend Denis ~~Radote~~.

### **Combating regional desertification**

Policies inspired by ultra-liberalism are leading to the abandonment of certain areas, such as outlying districts, suburbs and rural regions. In our villages, there are fewer and fewer "administrations", banks are disappearing one after the other, and medical services are less and less accessible.... The result is a feeling of abandonment that inevitably strengthens the arguments of the extreme right.

### **Meeting social expectations**

Combating the rise of populism certainly means responding to people's social expectations. These responses can be found in the manifesto of the European Trade Union Confederation or in the programme of the Workers' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee. I'm not going to develop them here, as I imagine this has already been done, but I will mention the most important points;

Employment and income

Improving working conditions

The end of precarious work (including the issue of platforms)

Social dialogue

Health and safety

The fight against social dumping

Responding to climate challenges with a just transition.

### **A European benchmark in crisis**

I believe that we can only understand the rise of populism and currents opposed to the deepening of European integration if we take into account the crisis of the political movements that were the builders of the EU. At the end of the Second World War, it was the social democrats and the social Christians who helped to advance the idea of the need for European integration. Today, these two political currents, which have played a structuring role for decades, are in crisis. On the one hand, social democracy has lost its way between a tendency content to support neo-liberalism by limiting its negative effects on workers and another tendency to take refuge in left-wing verbiage. For its part, Christian democracy has increasingly presented itself as the spearhead of neo-liberalism and ethical conservatism. The social market economy, with its emphasis on the market and treating social issues as secondary.

### **Rebuilding positive narratives**

I am convinced that, faced with the rise of the currents we denounce, we need to rebuild positive narratives. We can do this by drawing on those who have gone before us. We often hear about the importance of the Franco-German axis. I, too, would like to do this, but on the basis of ideas that I believe can help us to rebuild narratives for the future. European Christian democracy has been able to draw on thinkers such as Emmanuel Mounier and Marc Sangnier, who thought about social progress and Europe. I would like to recall two powerful words, one by Sangnier who said that *"to ask a man to vote and then to crush him under the excessive weight of economic inequalities is to mock him"*, and the other by Mounier who affirmed the complete subversion of the capitalist economy *"where the person is subjected to production which is in turn subjected to the service of speculative profit"*. For him, *"a personalistic economy, on the contrary, regulates profit on the basis of the service rendered in production, production on the basis of consumption, and consumption on the basis of an ethic of human needs placed in the total perspective of the person<sup>iii</sup>"*.

In Germany, it seems to me that we can rely on thinkers like Habermas or Axel Honneth, who has done a lot of work on recognition and the fight against contempt.

Building a bridge between a way of thinking that has its roots in France, with Mounier, Sangnier, Ricoeur and intellectuals such as Claude Lefort and Pierre Rosanvallon, and another that draws on the Frankfurt School of sociology, with Habermas, Honneth and Hartmut Rosa, who recently published *"Why democracy needs religion"*.

If there's one issue that should be at the heart of our stories, it's the health of human beings and the planet.

**Don't sell your soul to the devil.**

I'll end by mentioning a crucial issue linked to the forthcoming European elections. Fighting populism, fighting the far right, means countering its strategy of de-demonisation.

This means refusing to adopt its themes, refusing to endorse by a political presence in the media outlets that promote extreme right-wing ideas and, finally, refusing any alliance with these groups in the European Parliament.

In this regard, I would like to highlight the clear positions of the Christian Workers' Association CDA (the CDU's workers' wing), which has clearly called for a ban on the AfD, and the UECDW, which declared at its last Congress in Rome that "As Christian Democrats, we cannot accept any cooperation with extreme right-wing parties, at any level whatsoever. We must not make the mistake of cooperating with the enemies of democracy for the sake of power. Clear limits are needed to strengthen our values and our democracy.

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<sup>i</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, le siècle du populisme, Seuil - 2020

<sup>ii</sup> George Lakoff, La guerre des mots, Les petits matins - 2015

<sup>iii</sup> Emmanuel Mounier " Ecrits sur le personnalisme " Seuil 1961 - p146