



| The three Nordic Social Democrat Prime Ministers (PM) elected in 2019. From right to left: Antti Juhani Rinne, Finnish PM and Party leader since 2014, Mette Frederiksen, Danish PM, Party leader since June 2015 and Stefan Löfven, Swedish PM, Party leader since 2012.

# HORIZONS AND DEMARCATION LINES: WHAT ARE THE RELEVANT CLEAVAGES FOR THE NEXT POLITICAL BATTLES?

by *Ania Skrzypek*

From today's perspective, the 1990s may seem like ancient history. The images of the Polish Solidarność trade union rising and the fall of the Berlin Wall remind us of the transition, during which the populations of Central and Eastern Europe chose a democratic path and reunification with the West. Soon after came the excitement of Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder, and Lionel Jospin's electoral victories, which brought a feeling that times of progress, social justice and the promise of something greater were upon Europe. After decades of divide and the neoliberal project

of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, this was a hopeful breakthrough indeed.

A time equivalent to one generation has passed and social democracy finds itself at the crossroads – partially stuck in the nostalgia of the past, and partially anxious about making any alterations to assume a new kind of a future. Indeed, the successes and failures of the Third Way still seem the most divisive lines of the debate on the movement's future. The context however has changed: these are no longer times when victories occurred through

conquering a solidified electoral left and centre. Today, the electorate is volatile, alliances are shifting, and the prophecies about the end of ideologies may have just fulfilled themselves.

As people on the streets and those returning in greater numbers to the polling stations demand a different quality of politics, Social Democrats need to respond to those demands. They should start by shaking off the shadow of previous debates and rejecting certain old and traditional concepts. In that sense, they must accept that they

are up for a new kind of political battle, where the horizons of what is possible has changed and hence the demarcation lines have shifted too.

First, shifting political contexts matter – and possibly more than ever than in the past. Before, people would sign up or vote for a party searching for an explanation and seeking a sense of belonging. Today's most informed citizens in human history rather cast ballots as a short-term investment in those who give a voice to their most relevant concerns in that precise moment. It is more about political agency than about well-established political movements. This explains the victory of the Portuguese PS in 2015, when citizens looked for a feasible way to stop austerity, and the Social Democrats were the party guaranteeing that to happen. The lesson here for Progressives is to move from the logic of the catch-all-party to focussing on the topics that could give them the lead – election per election.

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default anymore. Inequalities for example are addressed across the political spectrum. The way and rationale may differ, but the interest doesn't. Growing awareness of climate change and the worldwide 'Fridays for future' rallies are often used to explain the Greens' recent successes. Although these rallies might have contributed to their success, there is another explanation: the Greens can also be seen as a positive progressive alternative, which is viable because they are already part of the existing political system. They succeed to embody a new kind of politics as well as giving an answer to the climate crisis – but only when no competing party credibly owns the climate issue as well. The unprecedented success of the Spanish PSOE for example is also due to the fact that they managed to reassure voters that they are indeed the party of climate justice – as well as that of egalitarian social progress.

Thirdly, old concepts no longer explain inter-connections between local communities and their attitude towards the rest of the world. A firm believer in international solidarity can be a fierce opponent of the current model of trade agreements and vote centre-left. A globalist can be a devoted patriot, supporting the state as a framework that collects taxes and provides opportunities as well as care through robust welfare policies. In Denmark, for example, Social Democrats ran on a platform that raised eyebrows on their migration policies – but firmly put the welfare state in the focus. In times of change, the understanding of concepts such as internationalism, globalism, patriotism and others need to be updated to be usable in the progressive narrative.

These three observations – that context matters, that nobody owns an issue by default, and that concepts need updating – show why, in an era where democracy is questioned, Progressives need to go beyond their traditional concepts that served them well in previous decades, but are now becoming futile now. But then, does it still make sense to talk of ideologies and the left-right cleavage?

*Updating progressive answers to new realities*  
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The answer, against all odds, is: absolutely yes! Social cleavages may have shifted or are blurred, citizens however are more than ever keen on being – directly or indirectly – at the heart of the decision-making. That is why they search for politicians, who 'listen and speak their mind'. What is valued is authenticity and a moral compass. That is how the Social Democrats managed to bounce back in places where they were bound to disappear. If additionally they are ready to consolidate a new definition of the centre-left, they may as well be the ones to emerge even stronger in the next chapter of post-post-truth politics.



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