

Resetting Europe

Growth and Jobs plan to unify the citizens of the Union

POLITICO

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SOCIALISTS

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People ask me a lot lately, 'what's the use of the EU?'. I usually chuckle and answer, 'what would you like it to do?'

Most of the time my answer is met with surprise, not only because people don't expect it but also because very few people have been asked such a question before. Some of them know what they would like Europe to be. Many don't feel a part of the process of building Europe. They feel they are being dictated to from Brussels, or somewhere else abroad.

It is time that we listened to our citizens and challenged that perception with concrete action.

In my position at the Party of European Socialists, I have had the opportunity to speak with many Europeans from all EU countries. They want protection from an aggressive economy, they want a Europe with a social sensitivity, they want us to solve the refugee issue in a united way and they want to be able to travel to a neighboring country without queuing up for hours at border controls.

Over the past few years, the response to all our common challenges has lacked unity and a common narrative. The economic crisis and the euro crisis were managed from the national capitals, sometimes with disregard for the effects of austerity on other European countries. Not only have we ignored each other's needs and arguments, we sometimes have spoken and campaigned against each other. All of this has hurt the trust between us and the confidence of the citizens in the EU.

The refugee crisis has now highlighted our division and has led some Europeans into the arms of populists, nationalists and extremists, or even violent ideologies. We have hit rock bottom.

I believe that the time has come for Europe to focus on its citizens with a common project. We, the European Socialists and Democrats, have that

project. It is a project of more employment and better jobs, a project where fiscal flexibility is used to boost growth and a sustainable economy, a project where immovable macroeconomic figures don't matter more than the wellbeing of the people.

At our meeting in Paris last Saturday, the Party of European Socialists, heads of state and government, or leaders, discussed ways of improving the financing of European companies – big or small. We have committed ourselves to fast-tracking the Banking Union and the Capital Market Union and to using the full potential of the European Fund for Strategic Investments.

We will continue to fight unemployment, especially among young people. They are the most vulnerable, when it comes to the seductive narrative of the populists and the calls to action from the extremists. We will not let the next generation of Europeans be divided on common values such as democracy, equal rights and freedoms, will we?

Therefore, we want to extend the successful employment tool of the European Youth Guarantee for at least three years and up to the age of 30. We would like to build upon the good results it has had.

We will promote culture and education on the European level. We would like to see a broadened Erasmus+ programme for high school and technical school students. And we will raise awareness about child poverty, one of the untold truths about the austerity policies Europe has been implementing.

Our project is one of secure external borders and an open Schengen space. We should be able to reopen our borders by the end of this year.

Part of our problem comes from our immense success in the previous decades, a success in which Socialist and Democratic parties were key. We now take Europe for granted and sometimes we don't see the need to fight for it. The first truly European generation feels disconnected from the EU.

Last week, speaking in front of the European Parliament, Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven said: "Europe's winter of despair has been long and hard. I couldn't agree more.

Populists will not offer solutions, they are happy just pointing at the problems we all see. The conservatives are pretty far from a consensus in their own family, or at least much further than we are – the Socialists and Democrats.

That is why on March 12 in Paris we found common ground for growth. More meetings like this are to follow, more common tasks are about to be agreed upon.

I know it is easier for people to agree on a negative program than on any positive task. We, the European Socialists and Democrats, are willing to take leadership. Nobody else is.