

The Green-Left Future of Europe: A View from the Periphery

Article by Danijela Dolenc

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From perpetual peace to ever-closer union, the European Union's legitimacy has always rested on its vision for the future. For most people, particularly in Eastern Europe, the best part of that story was the European social model: prosperity, protection, and freedom. But what happens if the best bit gets cancelled? As part of the *Green European Journal's* series on where Europe finds itself today, Danijela Dolenc, a critical social scientist based in Croatia, grapples with popular disappointment with a status quo that offers economic inequality and a choice between different flavours of neoliberalism. Still, Dolenc argues, the EU may have taken a wrong turn but it cannot be abandoned. With climate crisis, the task for the Green Left is to build a transition that can overcome class hierarchy and save the planet – electric cars and market solutions will not be enough.

For citizens of Eastern Europe, the EU was for a long time the ultimate political objective as well as the image of their hopes for the future. Europe stood for the most developed region in the world; it stood for human prosperity, coupled with high levels of political and civil liberties. In other words, citizens were dreaming of the famous 'European social model'.

Alas, such a Europe did not come true for them. The guiding principle of the EU, which used to be 'peace for Europe', was in the meantime reformulated into 'prosperity for everyone via the Single Market'. With the Lisbon Agenda for making Europe 'globally the most competitive economy', initial proposals for modernising the European social model were over time strengthened into convictions that it must be abandoned. The cumulative effects of this were a widening gap between the core and the periphery of Europe, growing inequalities and a steady erosion of support for European integration.

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By 2012, one thing was obvious, as European Central Bank President Mario Draghi stated: the European Social Model was dead. 15 or 20 years into the transition to capitalism, this was already clear to citizens of Eastern Europe, who at the time of accession showed historically low levels of support for joining the EU. The Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Croats, Hungarians, and Slovenians raced to the bottom of EU elections turnout below 30 per cent. People's orientations towards the EU had changed from euphoria to disappointment, and, to make things worse, this change in popular mood was long left unaddressed by everyone except the new populist right.

As a result, convincing people in Eastern Europe to go out and vote in the EU elections is a tall order. Europe is

distant and Brussels elites do not hear their voices. This is our problem in 2019: though today the EU has very few fans left, we need it, and we need to remake it into something new.

The European Union is essential to address the main social challenges of the 21st century: rising inequalities, climate change, and migration. These cannot be addressed within the framework of national politics alone. Frequent floods, volatile temperature oscillations, droughts, fires, and storms of unprecedented strength are some of the increasingly present manifestations of climate change. In May 2014 the Western Balkans experienced devastating floods that affected more than 2.5 million people, and brought to the fore the fact that those who are least responsible for climate change often suffer the severest consequences. Similarly, for years, the peripheries of Europe have been part of migration routes from the Middle East and North Africa, witnessing the suffering of people who face grave dangers with a view to a better life in Europe. At the same time, many citizens migrate each year from these peripheries to the west in search of jobs.

In response to these challenges, voters are presented with the same false choice between a so-called ‘open’ and ‘closed’ Europe, while the neoliberal policies that led to the current situation remain unquestioned.

What is the way out of this false dilemma between an ‘open’ neoliberal Europe on the one hand and a ‘closed’ neoliberal Europe on the other?

Open Europe as promoted by liberal parties represents a continuation of the policies of economic liberalism, even though their implementation has increased economic inequalities both within and between member states. Despite overwhelming evidence of the detrimental consequences of these policies, the message of liberal parties appears to be that the dosage was too low, and that efforts to deregulate and liberalise should be doubled in order to free markets of constraints. In other words, liberals cynically attempt to pass policies that are in the interest of the urban, the educated and the wealthy as representing the interests of the majority. They evoke the image of multi-speed Europe, and they dream of a European Union of selective benefits for club members. Theirs is an elitist position that can mobilise only the privileged minorities in the protection of their positions and property.

The right wing, on the other hand, incites xenophobia as a blatantly ineffective cure for the ills of economic liberalism, shifting economic sources of inequality and insecurity onto the grounds of identity and ethnic difference. They suggest that if banks and corporations were not run by foreigners and ‘domestic traitors’ but instead by ‘honest nationalists’, the conflict between labour and capital would disappear by itself. Their evocation of ‘the will of the people’ harbors two illusions. The first one is that affiliation to an imagined community of the nation nullifies class and other differences among us. The second one is that withholding rights to a stigmatised minority improves the life conditions for the majority.

What is the way out of this false dilemma between an ‘open’ neoliberal Europe on the one hand and a ‘closed’ neoliberal Europe on the other? First, the European Union needs to be remade so that it abandons the imperative of building markets, and so that it makes the living conditions of citizens and the viability of life on planet Earth its highest priority. Currently the EU uses 20 per cent of the Earth’s biocapacity although it comprises only 7 per cent of the world population. If everyone in the world consumed at the rate of the average EU resident, we would need 2.8 planets. Therefore, the EU must bear the largest responsibility for changing course and globally reducing the human ecological footprint. Second, in designing policy solutions it must acknowledge the vast differences in levels of development between its core and periphery members, as well as take on board the deepening levels of inequality within states.

A future for the EU, and for the world, demands a green-left perspective which ties urgent action on climate change with a social justice agenda

In other words, not everyone is in the same boat. Much discussion about climate change advances a post-political framing in which humanity is portrayed in unity, as if sharing the same history and the same future. That framing masks the fact that not everyone is equally responsible for climate change, nor is everyone equally affected. As Andreas Malm has argued, “as long as there are class societies, there will be lifeboats for the rich and privileged, and there will not be any shared sense of catastrophe”. Even more importantly, such a post-political framing is demobilising, because if everyone is to blame, then no one is to blame, as Greta Thunberg told the business elites at the World Economic Forum in Davos this spring. We are actually stuck in this situation because actions that would give us the best chance of averting catastrophe, and which would benefit the vast majority, threaten an elite minority.

In April 2019, *Science* magazine published a column arguing a similar point. It states that current measures for protecting the climate and biosphere are deeply inadequate, and it calls for demand reduction and a socially fair distribution of the costs and benefits of climate action. Meanwhile, EU policy responses to climate change keep emphasising shifts to renewable energy, energy efficiency, low-carbon transport and so on, but fail to touch upon the neoliberal fundamentals of European economies, the imperative of growth, or the brewing class conflict caused by growing inequalities. The EU’s focus needs to move beyond portraying adjustment to climate change as new opportunities for profit and acknowledge that adjustment to climate change is a process of deep transformation which must be governed by principles of social justice. A future for the EU, and for the world, demands a green-left perspective which ties urgent action on climate change with a social justice agenda which acknowledges that not everyone is in the same boat. To get broad public support for the scale of technological adjustments necessary, the EU’s policy proposals need to go hand in hand with an ambitious redistributive agenda and a clear direction towards post-growth societies. For the green-left, the future European Union is a post-fossil and post-capitalist society of equals.



Danijela Dolenc researches democratisation and the political economy of Europe. Her book *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe* won the 2013 National Science Award in Croatia. Her recent work includes ‘Exploring Commons Theory for Principles of a Socialist Governmentality’ (Review of Radical Political Economics 2016, with Žitko) and ‘Democratization in the Balkans: The Limits of Elite Driven Reform’ (Taiwan Journal of Democracy, forthcoming).

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