

On a plane with Nicolas Schmit, the lead-candidate of the European Socialists in the coming EU elections

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Key words: EU elections; European Union, Healthcare, Social Europe, Stability and Growth Pact, Public Spending; Public Services

Sunday morning, 7 April. Nicolas Schmit, the EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights and *Spitzenkandidat* of the European Socialist for the coming EU elections and I bump into each other on board a morning flight to Charleroi. Schmit is returning from an election campaign rally in Romania. I am on the way to a European demonstration in Brussels against the looming cut backs in healthcare services (European Federation of Public Service Unions, 2024), as EU leaders are planning to reinstate the EU's fiscal rules they had suspended during the Covid-19 emergency (Erne et al., 2024).

Nicolas Schmit is reading a book: “30 idées pour 2030” published by the centre-left, francophone European think tank Confrontations Europe (2024), which is calling for a social and democratic European Constitution! Around us, a lot of tired Romanian workers on their way home to Belgium, like Dariu next to me, who travelled to Bucharest airport on a minibus through the night after visiting his parents in a village next to the Moldavian border. I ask Nicolas Schmit if he is willing to answer some questions about his work. He agrees. I take out my mobile and start: “So what are your priorities?”

Schmit replies: “In three words, building a democratic Europe, a social Europe, but also a strong Europe. Economically strong, also politically strong in a totally different geopolitical environment.

For me, it's very important to strengthen our democracy inside, because democracy is attacked from the outside, the war in Ukraine, Putin and all the authoritarian regimes. But also from the inside, as we know, we have some countries where there is an authoritarian aspiration, so we have to protect democracy. But also the way how the Union has to function has to be further democratised. That's my first priority.

The second one is about a social Europe obviously, and this means that there has to be a general social clause. We cannot have a climate transition without social justice. We have already started to strengthen the EU's social dimension with the minimum wage directive, the platform

work directive, and other initiatives. But we must make sure that there is now no social pause. We have to further develop and strengthen the social dimension of the Union.

Third, the Union must also be more autonomous. Europe has to invest more in its industry and this must always mean good jobs with good wages. Further developing our strategic autonomy means both: to strengthen the Union internally, but also externally given the security issues we are facing today.”

I reply “That sounds all well. But calls for a more democratic and social Europe have been part of EU declarations for many years. However if you look at the antisocial interventions of EU executives after the financial crisis in Ireland and elsewhere, and the EU’s shift to a new economic governance regime after 2008 which by-passes both national and the European Parliament (Erne *et al.*, 2024), I wonder if the European Commission and Council are also responsible for the current problems of democracy in Europe?”

Nicolas Schmit responds: “Well, I would say that Europe has fallen into a neoliberal trap. Its policies have been very much inspired by the neoliberal ideology, believing that what was most important were the markets. This total blind trust in the markets had as consequence: the financial crisis and so-on. In the last few years, I think we have reached some kind of a turning point, where we have started to put social demands back high on the agenda. But it’s not sure, you know, what comes next. Turning points are important but you have to make sure that this work towards more social policies continues because there is always the possibility to go backwards again. So, what I’m standing for is that we continue working in this direction. We have really to build up the social dimension in many new areas because things are changing very rapidly. If you look at the world of work, for instance, algorithms are present everywhere and that’s why we have adopted this platform work directive to protect workers in that sector and we have to continue on that.”

A few hours later, I am standing before the European Parliament. Healthcare trade unionists from across Europe are protesting against the commercialisation of healthcare services. The next day, I have been invited to the European Parliament to present the findings of our UCD ERC research project on the EU’s new economic governance interventions on healthcare services in Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Romania from the financial crisis of 2008 to the Covid-19 emergency (Stan and Erne, 2023; Erne *et al.* 2024). A left-wing Belgian MEP Marc Botenga, who is, like Sinn Fein and three Irish independents, a member of the Left group in the European Parliament, opens the European Parliament’s healthcare conference. He is doing that by waving a front-page article of the respectable Belgian daily, *Le Soir* (“[Nouvelles règles budgétaires: la Belgique incapable d’investir suffisamment dans ses écoles et ses hôpitaux](#)“, 8 April 2024). The article is based on a new study of the New Economics Foundation and European Trade Union Confederation by Sebastian Mang and Dominic Caddick (2024), which showed that the application of the new EU fiscal rules would mean that the governments representing 90% of Europe’s population won’t be able to meet their social and climate targets.

This puts Schmit’s warning about the imminent risk of going “backwards” into a dramatic context, also because the European Parliament and Council approved the revised EU Stability and Growth Pact law only a few days later just before the end of the current legislative period. Whether the new EU fiscal rules will lead to a return of the anti-social interventions of the Troika period will depend on the political priorities of the new European Commission, and thus also the new EU Parliament, which is electing the Commission’s next president. That is why the coming EU elections are by far the most important elections in Europe this year.

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