



# EU SOCIAL- DEMOCRATS AND A NEW 'SUSTAINABLE EQUALITY' MODEL

EVENT REPORT | 22 - 26 MAR. 2019  
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*The social democrats in the European Parliament organised last week 'The European week for democracy'.*

*In light of the rise of extreme-right populism, S&D has been pushing progressive political forces across Europe to stick together ahead of the crucial EU elections in May.*

*They proposed a new "sustainable equality" model, which according to them will help EU societies avoid "Orbanisation", protect against aggressive capitalism worldwide and simultaneously provide environment with long-term sustainable solutions.*

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# S&D chief: Conservatives and liberals didn't allow Greta to speak in EU Parliament

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By Sarantis Michalopoulos | EURACTIV.com



Bullmann said the progressive political forces (socialists, greens and leftists) invited Greta because they were keen to listening to young people and entering into a dialogue. [Shutterstock]

The European People's Party (EPP) and the liberals (ALDE) have blocked climate change activist Greta Thunberg from speaking in the European Parliament because "kids belong in schools", according to the chief of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Udo Bullmann.

Speaking at the "Shaping our society - Time for another future" event organised by the (S&D) group of the European Parliament, Bullmann said the progressive political forces (socialists, greens and leftists) had invited the 16-year old Swede because they were keen to hear young people

and have them join the dialogue.

But the EPP and ALDE blocked the initiative to invite her as a speaker in the EU House, he said. The leaders of EPP and ALDE and ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists)

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rejected the proposal during a conference of presidents (leaders of all parliamentary groups), saying “kids belong to schools on Fridays”.

Thunberg is a Swedish activist who leads a movement of young people to stop global warming and climate change.

The progressive forces ultimately invited Thunberg and 70 other young people in their own group and held discussions.

### SUSTAINABLE EQUALITY

The EU socialists are organising the “European week for democracy”, which aims to present an alternative to halt the rise of extreme-right and populism across Europe.

Bullmann said the only viable solution was to push for “sustainable equality”, which consists of a holistic approach combining the economy, environment and society.

“The basic idea is that we cannot afford to kill the planet [...] we want the healthy way for the many not only for the few. We are able to master change not with the capital but with people,” he said.

“We will never talk again about the environment without involving the society,” he added.

The German social-democrat said that was the difference between socialists and French President Emmanuel Macron.

“He agreed to change the conditions for the environment but did not agree to change the social dimension of the society by cutting taxes for the rich and asking ordinary people to pay for a change. He will fail.”

He also lashed out at the EPP, saying that its recent decision to suspend and not expel Hungary’s Fidesz party has zero value.

“What did they do with Orban? They said ‘we are not friends, for now, after I become European Commission

President we will become friends again’.”

Bullmann said the socialists would work with the “good people of the EPP” and will stop the ‘urbanisation’ of our societies.

He also said the greens needed to make clear what they are looking for and if their objective includes all people regardless of their social background. “You started as an anti-authoritarian movement – please be aware not to become a bourgeois party,” he said, adding that greening the neighbourhoods of the rich was not enough.

Regarding the European Left, he said they were increasingly divided into two groups and attacked France’s Melenchon, saying he is turning his historical perspective into nationalism.

“A part of the left should stop having backward thinking such as a return to nation-state [...] the EU is the only guarantee to face international capitalism”.

### BREXIT: THE FIRST FAR-RIGHT TEST

As regards Brexit, he said it was the “first test” of Steve Bannon, a former ultra-conservative adviser to US President Donald Trump, and the far-right in general.

“Don’t even think for one second that this is for Brits and Europe, this is about the direction of history,” he said, adding that there are political forces across the globe (US, China, Russia) who wish to get the planet back into the dark ages.

He added that thousands of people will take to the streets of London on Saturday, making clear that they are Europeans and would like to fight for Europe.

“We are in solidarity with the people in London and the Labour Party [...] please make them strong. I still believe there is a European solution possible only if we are united,” he said.

### “TRUMP”

At the start of the event, a person pretending he was Donald Trump also made a speech, criticising the progressive push by some EU political forces.

“Many exported these ideas in the US as well, look at Bernie Sanders, crazy people,” he said ironically.

“Trump” also expressed his admiration for Viktor Orban, saying that he is a “tremendous guy” who knows that we don’t need an asylum policy but walls.

# Citizens' march in Brussels against 'Orbanisation' of EU societies

By Sarantis Michalopoulos | EURACTIV.com



The march started from Place Poelaerts and ended in Place Luxembourg, where members of the civil society, artists, students and activists made speeches about the future of Europe. [Sarantis Michalopoulos]

**A**round 1,000 people marched in Brussels on Sunday (24 March) urging pro-EU forces to remain united in order to tackle the rising extreme-right and halt the "Orbanisation" of European societies ahead of the May EU elections.

The march started from Place Poelaert in front of the Justice Palace and ended at Place Luxembourg, where members of civil society, artists, students and activists made speeches about the future of Europe in front of the EU Parliament building.

They all called on pro-EU political

leaders to stick together against right-wing populism.

The rally was part of "The European week for democracy" organised by the social democrats in the European Parliament (S&D). Several NGOs and other political movements, such as Volt Europa and the European federalists, also took part.

Samir El Khanza hails from the Students' Association of the Institute for European Studies (SAIES) in Brussels. He said pro-EU citizens must stick together to face the ongoing 'Orbanisation' of European societies, a reference to Hungary's Prime Minister

Viktor Orbán and his authoritarian rule.

"Europe is not just an economic union. We have to tackle the growing fear of the EU and racism the way we tackled the war problems," El Khanza said.

Maxime Cayrou, also from SAIES, said the idea of Europe was clearly in danger. "The increasing problems in Europe cannot be answered on a national level. Populism cannot be tackled all alone," he added.

For Loes Rutten, a member of

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the European Youth Forum, which represents more than 100 youth organisations across Europe, there is no nationalist solution to transnational problems.

She said young people should be more present in the decision-making process because the main social problems, such as high unemployment, disproportionately affect them.

She also pointed out that a key factor in this respect is to make changes in the education structure.

"If we don't learn what it means to be an EU citizen, how the EU system works, how to take in tons of information, especially online, one cannot expect EU citizens to be fully informed and they will, therefore, be vulnerable to fake news," Rutten said.

## BREXIT

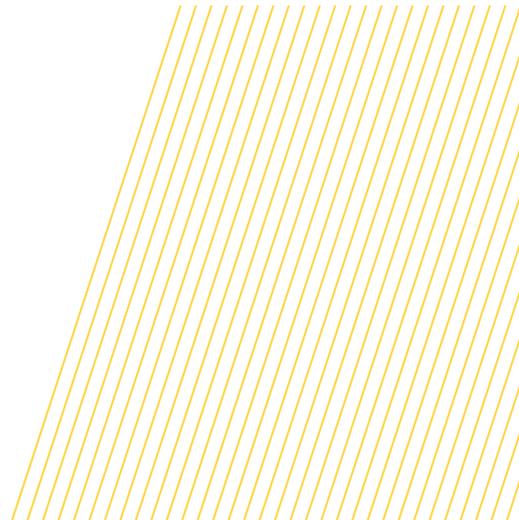
Many British citizens living in Belgium also took part in the rally.

On Saturday (23 March), the chief of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Udo Bullmann, participated in a massive pro-EU demonstration in central London that called for another EU referendum in the UK, which is due to leave the bloc in the next few weeks.

In a tweet, Bullman said hundreds of thousands sent a clear signal to Prime Minister Theresa May and her government: the only way to resolve the Brexit crisis is to give UK citizens the final say.

The German social democrat said last week that Brexit was the "first test" of Steve Bannon, a former ultra-conservative adviser to US President Donald Trump who is now active in Europe, and the far-right in general.

"We are in solidarity with the people in London and the Labour Party [...] please make them strong. I still believe there is a European solution possible only if we are united," he said.



## INTERVIEW

# Bullmann: May should put the Brexit question back to the people

By Sarantis Michalopoulos | EURACTIV.com



S&D chief Udo Bullmann [L] with Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn [R] [Shutterstock]

**U**K Prime Minister Theresa May should stop wasting time and start working with the Labour Party for a closer EU-UK relationship, or put the question back to the British people, socialist chief Udo Bullmann told EURACTIV.com in an interview.

“Brexit was supposed to be about taking back control. Instead, we are witnessing a UK Prime Minister openly incapable of taking decisions back in

the UK, trying to blame others for the conservatives’ disastrous strategy,” Bullmann stated.

*Bullmann is the leader of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in the European Parliament. He spoke to EURACTIV’s network editor Sarantis Michalopoulos.*

**You have repeatedly called for all EU progressives to join forces against the rise of the anti-EU extreme right.**

**Considering that progressives have different candidates for the European Commission Presidency, how will this be possible? Is structured cooperation among the progressives after the EU election on the table?**

The European Socialists and Democrat have chosen Frans Timmermans as the lead candidate

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for the post of EC President and he is leading our campaign. As to alliances, the European elections in May will not only draw the line between pro-European forces and the ones that aim at destroying Europe but also between those who want to change Europe fundamentally and those who want to go on with business as usual.

This is our political and moral battlefield. We will put our programme for a better – more sustainable and just – Europe on the table and are happy to discuss it with all progressive forces based on a political platform, on content. We will strike an alliance with all those who believe that social, ecological and economic sustainability must be the core of EU action in the next five years.

To us, this is the only way forward.

**Do you find it possible for the progressives to collaborate also at EU Council level, besides the EU Parliament?**

The next five years will be crucial for the future of the European project. They will require an alliance for change. This means of course that progressive forces will need to act together and coordinate action across institutions, in order for the next EU to deliver a programme for equal and sustainable societies. This is the Europe we stand for and the Europe we will try to shape. Of course, we invite all the pro-Europeans in the next European Parliament, Commission and Council to be united in this endeavour.

**Do you believe that the EPP could collaborate with forces on the right of the political spectrum such as Salvini, in order to secure a majority in the European Parliament?**

Indeed, we see the EPP moving to the right side of the political

spectrum. We see the President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani flirting with the far-right, or we see the EPP watching Orbán's anti-democratic drift for years and then distancing itself only half-heartedly. Conservatives who are not clear about their relationship with the far-right raise questions of whether they are still reliable partners when it comes to defending the European Union.

**According to you, could socialists see Macron's 'République En Marche' as an ally considering he has also publicly backed a progressive EU agenda?**

We have always welcomed Macron's pro-European approach. We need and support his pro-European commitment. However, though pro-European is necessary, it is alone not enough. We need to change Europe if we want to protect it. We need leaders who want to fight for a fairer and sustainable Europe. In this respect, we invite President Macron to discuss our proposals with all pro-European partners in Europe. They are the way forward for a real change for Europe. Change is necessary to rebuild the trust of our citizens in the European project.

**Brexit: What would you advise Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn to do following yesterday's extension? Do you believe a snap election is a way out of the current deadlock?**

Brexit was supposed to be about taking back control. Instead, we are witnessing a UK Prime Minister openly incapable of taking decisions back in the UK, trying to blame others for the conservatives' disastrous strategy. May has failed to engage in dialogue with the opposition and find broad support for a softer Brexit. She has always put Tories' interest ahead of her country's and citizens' one.

This is causing today's disaster. Brexit is a tragic mistake. Labour should keep on showing responsibility

and working in a constructive way to ensure citizens are protected and the peace process in Northern Ireland is maintained. May must not waste any more time, instead she should work with Labour for a closer EU-UK relationship, or put the question back to the British people.

**You recently criticised the EPP decision to suspend and not expel Orbán's Fidesz party. However, critics draw parallels with the Romanian socialist party. Do you envisage a serious debate and an Orbán-style solution in this case too?**

I have criticized the EPP for waiting for 9 years before at least partially reacting. For years Orbán's Fidesz party has been adopting actions and legislative measures in open contrast not only with the European law but also with our common European values. By weakening the judiciary system, undermining media freedom, running anti-migrants and anti-Semitism campaigns and attacking NGOs, Orbán has systematically undermined fundamental European values.

The cases of Hungary and Romania are not comparable. But when it comes to problems in Romania, we have immediately reacted, we had a frank exchange with the Romanian PM in the S&D Group before the Presidency semester started, I wrote her a letter expressing our concerns for developments concerning judicial proceedings and the reform of the criminal system.

Recently, with Frans Timmermans and Sergei Stanishev, we sat in Madrid with the PSD leader and made it clear that we needed Romania to engage in a clear reform path for the implementation of the Venice Commission recommendations. This dialogue is ongoing, both at institutional and party political level. We see progress but we still need swift and constant results for our political relationship to be consolidated.



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