



## **Why the centre left and centre right should stand up to the far right**

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The rise of the far right in national and local elections across Europe fills socialists and social democrats with fear for the future. Our values are clear, and in total opposition to the intolerance and hate that the far-right spreads like a poison.

In 2001 the PES adopted at its Berlin Congress a declaration for a “modern, pluralist and tolerant Europe”. It states “The free expression of different cultures, different faiths, different orientations and different life choices is the basis of an open society”. It calls on all PES parties – and other European political families – to “refrain from any form of political alliance with any political party which incites or attempts to stir up racial or ethnic prejudices and hatred.”

I am proud that the PES has taken such a clear stance, and has put its beliefs into practice. I wish that other European political parties had taken a similarly strong stance to stop their member parties entering coalition with extremists. In recent years centre-right parties have entered into coalitions with extreme, xenophobic, intolerant populists in Austria, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.

But differences between social democrats and Christian democrats or liberals towards extremist nationalistic, xenophobic, intolerant populism are not what matter most now. What really matters today is that parties that less than ten years ago were considered the lunatic fringe have become much more acceptable – even respectable - in too many voters minds throughout Europe. Extreme hate-driven populism now poses a serious threat to European politics, not only in the new member states but throughout Europe. In the face of this danger, the centre left and centre right can and must make common cause in opposing all forms of intolerance.

In the EU 15 xenophobic populism focused on migrants from outside Europe. Today, an intolerant populism, especially in new member states, focused on national and linguistic minorities, and even authoritarian religious extremism, has been added to the mix.

Extreme intolerant populism pollutes the political debate. Its rhetoric generates not just hatred and fear, it is also profoundly dishonest. By making promises they cannot possibly deliver, populist extremists make voters cynical about the entire political process. At least some of the blame for low voter turnout lies with populist extremists.

Let us spell out our beliefs – we are not simply opposed to intolerance, we respect diversity, and see strong social and economic benefits from a positive attitude towards diversity. We respect diversity because we want a more inclusive society. As social



democrats we do not believe in leaving people behind or excluding people from society. A more inclusive society brings benefits to everyone – from a greater sense of security to higher employment rates with all that means for prosperity. In short, in a diverse society, embracing diversity adds value to our lives. How can we have a dialogue, for example with the Arab World, how can we talk about an “alliance of civilizations” if our own societies are divided?

In Belgium the centre left and right have stood together in refusing to cooperate with racist nationalists. The “cordon sanitaire” is a good strategy, and other parties in other countries should consider whether it might make a positive contribution to politics in their own country.

The centre left and centre right cannot remain silent. The extreme will not go away if we ignore it. We must confront their hatred. We must expose their attempts to identify scapegoats. We must expose their unworkable solutions.

We must reassert the value of democratic, peaceful dialogue to find workable, acceptable solutions to our economic, social and environmental challenges. In central and eastern Europe we should also not overlook the specific need for continued support for the far from complete process of building modern, stable political parties.

But the democratic parties must go beyond words in tackling extreme populism. We must deliver solutions to genuine popular grievances, such as unemployment, crime, or failures of integration. This is the only way to stop populist extremists inflaming genuine grievances with hatred and blame. And here there is a debate to be had with the centre right on its commitment to social cohesion and its willingness to embrace neo-liberal policies that generate social insecurity.

We must acknowledge real problems – and find realistic solutions. That is the core of mainstream politics - left and right. To some it may seem boring or too complex, but it is a thousand times better than the alternative offered by Jean Marie Le Pen, Jorg Haider, the League of Polish Families or any other hate-filled extremist.

