

POLICYSOLUTIONS

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Stuck in second place forever?

**An analysis and interpretation of the social democratic
parties' results in the 2014 EP election**



September 2014



Executive summary

The 2014 EP election marked the fourth time in a row that the parties of the centre-left lost a European election. Social democracy certainly did not suffer a fatal defeat, but the fact that it has not been able to score a victory in an EP election since 1994 - thus for 20 years now - is definitely a warning sign. Though mainstream parties in general lost massively, social democratic parties in particular failed to even make it into the top three in seven countries.

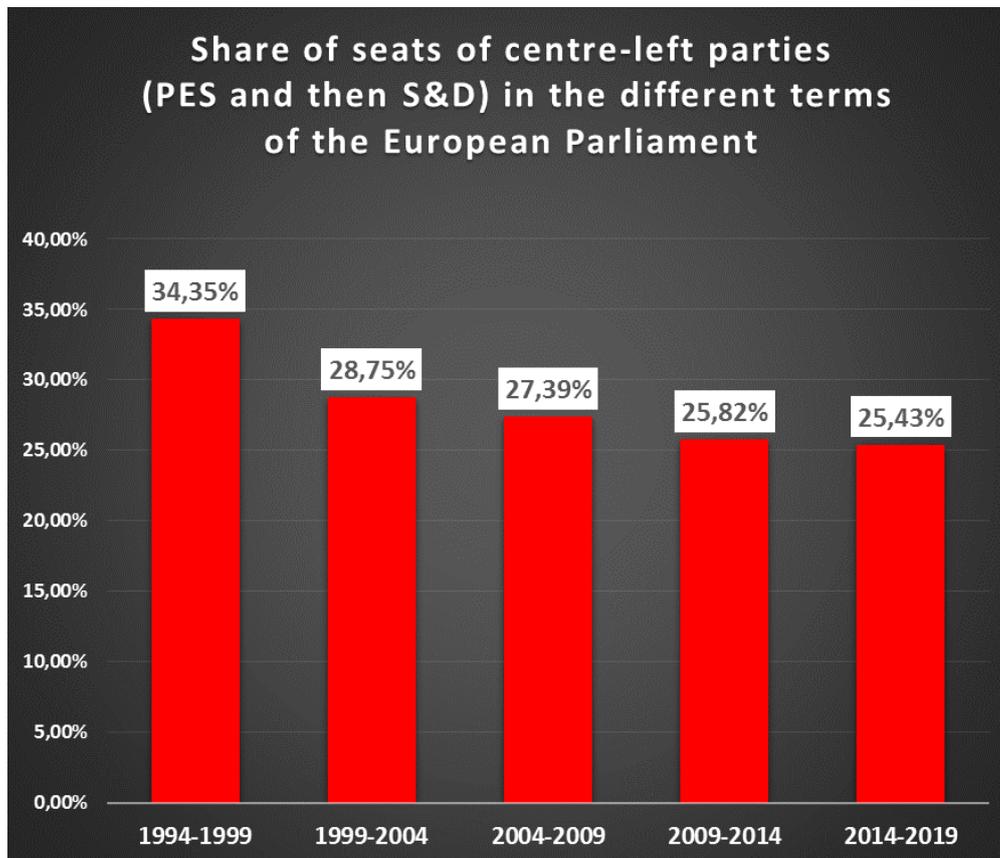
Thus, together with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Policy Solutions has undertaken to offer an initial review of the processes that have been going on in Europe since 1994. Specifically, it wishes to explore in which regions and countries the left has lost most ground since 1994 (or where it has gained in strength), and in which geographical areas and in what ways it must exert greater efforts to help social democratic values attain a majority position by 2019.

Thus in the following study we will seek the answer to four basic questions:

- 1) How did the centre-left parties' share of seats in the European Parliament evolve, and what reasons explain the substantial volatility in these figures?
- 2) How did the support for left-of-centre parties develop between 1994 and 2014 in certain key EU Member States, and what reasons might explain drops or surges in support?
- 3) What role might the accession of post-communist Central and Eastern European states to the European play in the left's weak EP election performances?
- 4) Overall, what reasons can we identify for the dismal electoral record of the European left in the EP elections of the last two decades?

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The study observes that while between 1994 and 1999 every third MEP (34.35%) belonged to the PES group, following the 2014 EP elections only a fourth (25.43%) belongs to S&D group, which succeeded the PES. The greatest single drop occurred between 1994 and 1999, when the centre-left group suffered a 6 percentage point decline in the share of its EP seats. Since then, the left has been stagnating and declining slowly rather than dropping spectacularly.



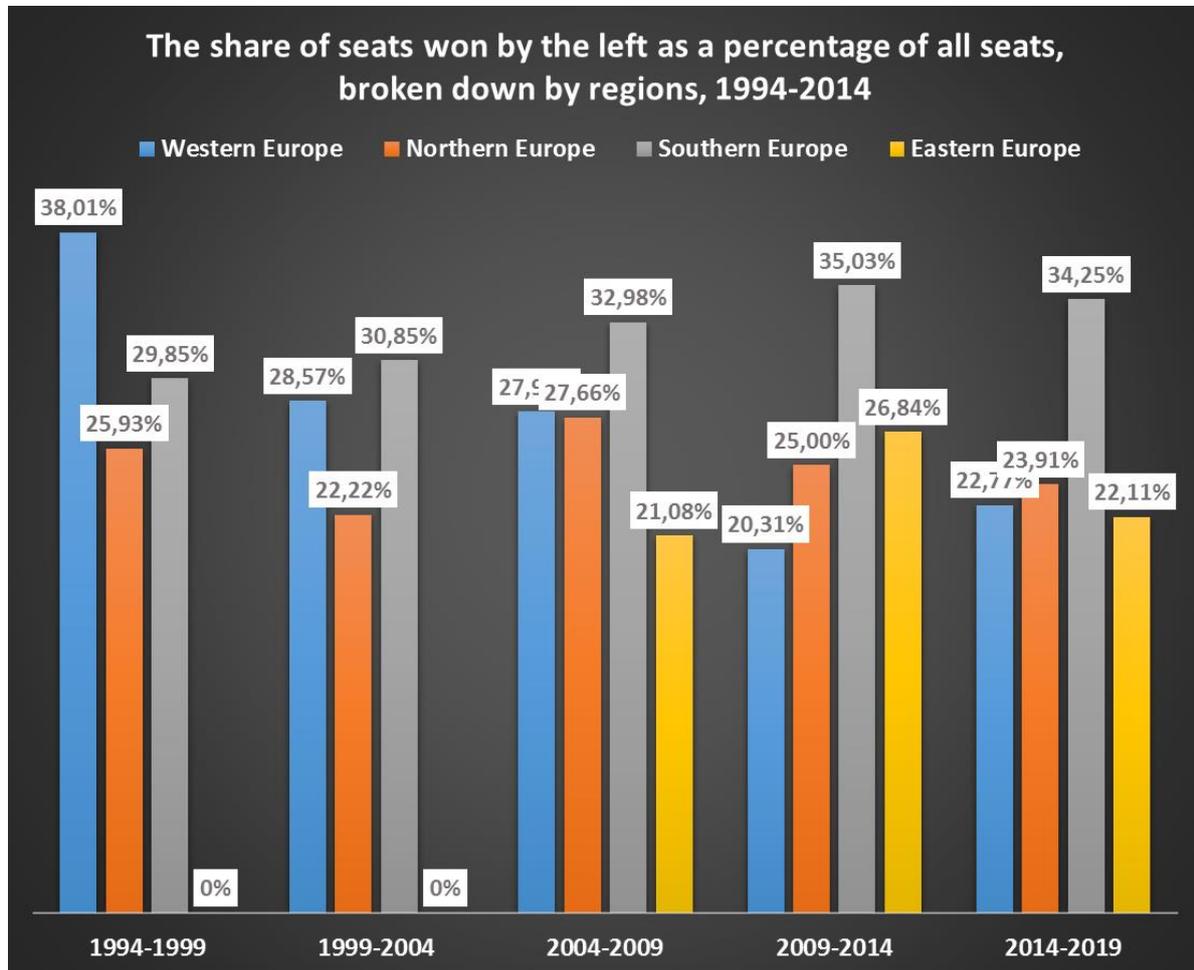
In 1994 it was primarily the outstanding results of the **Western European parties (38.01%)** - and primarily the voters of the **British and the German centre-left** - that catapulted the left into the top position. Five years later, in 1999, the **Western European left** suffered a 10 percentage point decline in the ratio of its **MEPs**, owing primarily to the weakened state of the **British Labour Party** and the **German Social Democratic Party**.

In 2004 the left's support dropped further, but this result was also due to the accession of the **Central and Eastern European countries**. Support for the left was far lower in the new **Eastern European member states** than in the **EU-15**, a mere fifth (21.08%) of **MEPs** in this group joined the centre-left faction. The weak performance of the regional centre-left owes in large part to the disintegration of **Polish social democracy**.

The **Western European left** reached its low point in 2009. Yet at the same time the **Southern European left** was breaking records. The electoral defeat of 2014 did not hinge on the **Italians**, for they delivered their best results in the past two decades. The **Spanish centre-left** has not performed this badly in any EU election



in the past twenty years, but the French, Dutch, Greek and Polish left were also at a low point. In the comparison of various regions, the left's European average result suffered mostly from Eastern and Western social democracy performing below their usual standards.



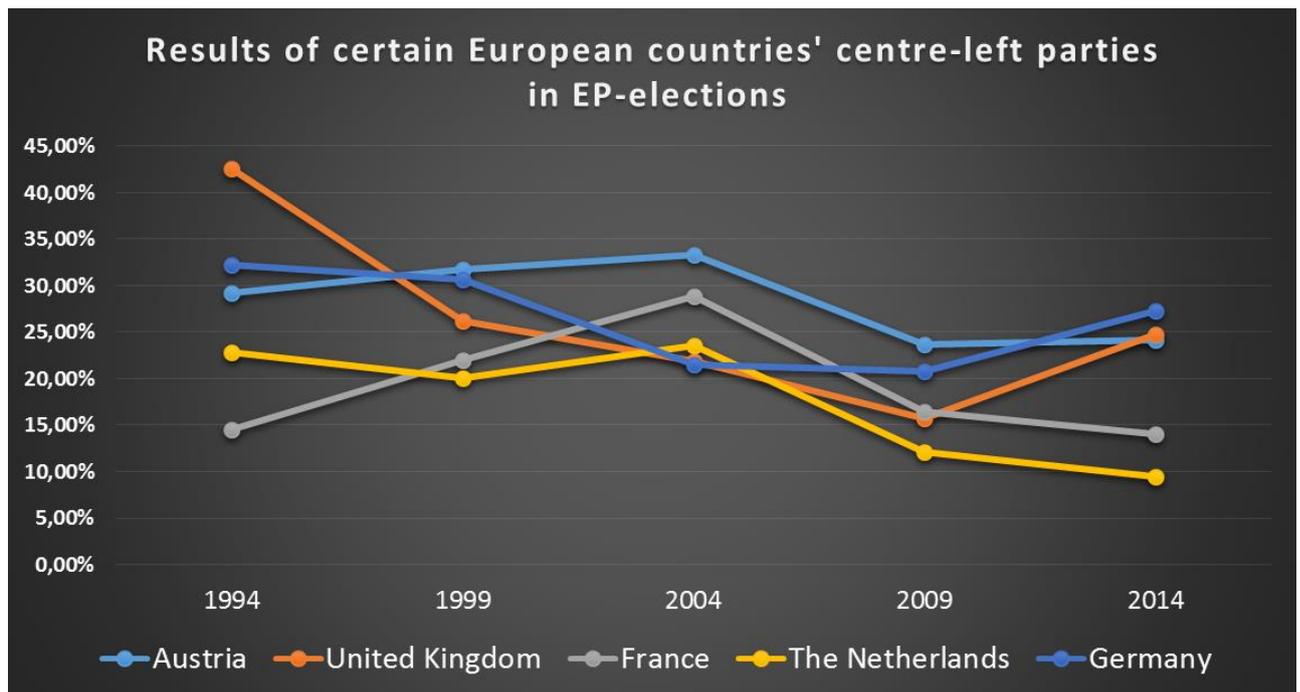
In some key countries, such as France, Poland, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Greece and Hungary, the centre-left performed far below average in May 2014. As long as the left won't be able to gain strength in at least a portion of these countries - or else perform outstandingly in the major member states – a relative majority in the EP looks impossible to attain.

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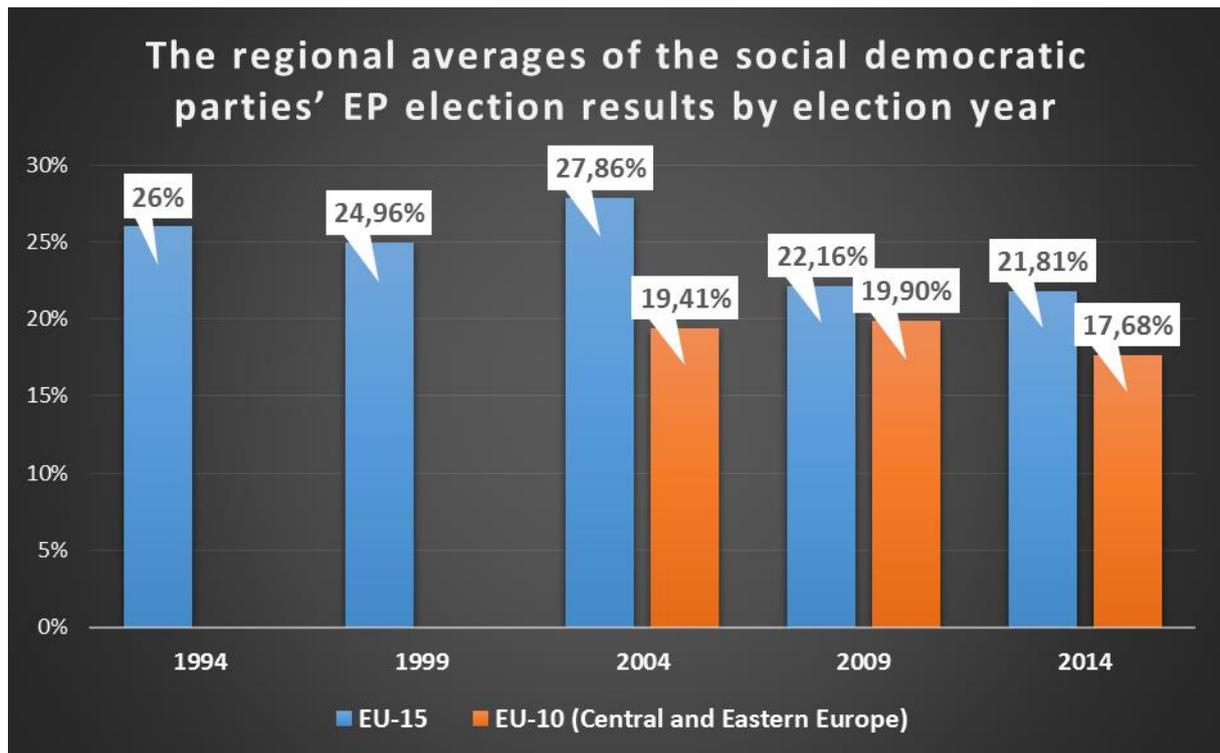
If we look at the popular vote rather than the number of seats in parliament, then we observe that there were only four countries in 2014 where social democratic parties were in a better position than 20 years ago. The Swedish SAP is slightly, 1.6% stronger than in 1994, while the Danish social democrats



performed 3.2% better than they did in the EP election two decades ago. Since the Irish and the Italian left competed as parts of electoral alliances in the EP election, their results are difficult to compare. The biggest fall in the centre-left's support occurred between 2004 and 2009. At that time only two social democratic parties saw their share of the vote increase: the Irish Labour Party, which is exceedingly weak by European standards, managed to raise its tally from 10.6% to 13.9%, while the Greek Socialists - who have since been nigh completely destroyed - improved their results from 34% to 36.65%.



Centre-left/social democratic parties started out with a huge disadvantage in Central and Eastern Europe (CES). Among the many problematic legacies of the old communist regime is the negative connotation of classical left-wing values and catchwords, such as equality or solidarity. The situation of social democracy was further encumbered from the very start by the lack of working welfare models, the low levels – in comparison with western European countries - of tax compliance and low standards of living. Because of these material considerations, specifically quick growth, became an overriding priority, especially in the immediate aftermath of transition, which was usually characterised by liberal economic policies.



It is important to stress that today the positions of social democracy tend to be a lot stronger in those countries of the region where the centre-left was mostly marginalised in the 90s than in the countries where it belonged to the dominant political forces during that time.

On the whole the weak results of these CES parties exert a downward pull on the European left. This is exacerbated by its effect on the crucial issue of the political balance in the European Council. Among the 15 old member states social democracy is certainly excluded from leading the government and thus occupying a seat on the European Council in only two. Among the 11 Central and Eastern European member states, the centre-left faces certain or very likely exclusion from political power in five countries (Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Slovenia), with three of these (Poland, Estonia and Latvia) almost definitely "locked in" in the long run. On the whole, the lacking power prospects in these countries is very damaging for the left's possibility to control a majority in the European Council.

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It would be definitely wrong to assert that the past 20 years were exclusively about the declining strength of social democracy in the European Union. For one, there are countries and regions where such a trend is not clearly discernible, where social democracy has fared very well for some or most of the



time under examination. During this time the EU-15 saw social democratic parties lead all major member states (after 16 years of opposition in Germany and 18 years in the United Kingdom). In the following, we will make six observations concerning the underlying reasons that might explain why the centre-left has suffered electoral setbacks in the EU.

1. The left has become the victim of the success of its own ideas

In some sense social democracy has become the victim of the success of its own ideas. Even if the commitment to the state's regulatory and classic welfare functions is often only rhetorical on the centre-right, they, too, cannot fully ignore the left-ward drift in the public mood on these issues. While it would be a wild exaggeration to say that as compared to the right of 20 years ago the current right has become left-wing, the consensus on many issues the parties of the centre right often find themselves moving right along with this consensus.

2. Disillusionment in the party base as a result of the economic crisis

The spectacular crash of the stock exchange and the corresponding downward spiral in economic indicators following the seemingly unstoppable economic boom in certain sectors of the economy in the 2000s lead to a widespread disenchantment especially in the economically most vulnerable strata, who often expressed their disappointment by turning away from politics. The centre-left was hit worst by this particular problem: social democracy is (in many cases was) the political home of the working classes, which benefitted too little from the previous gains but suffered a lot from the crisis, and naturally these strata had expected more from social democracy, particularly in the area of economic regulation and keeping the social network robust.

3. The Third Way as the reformist left

The Blair/Schröder type of social democratic left that typically governed at the end of the 90s and early 2000s followed the idea of a Third Way and accepted a reformist role. Initially, they were wildly successful politically, but in the medium term this role proved unpopular. Social democracy was only able to profit from the modernisation achievements in the short run, in the long run this orientation resulted in substantial losses of votes.



4. The appearance of rivals on the left side of the political spectrum

A surge in the support of far-left and/or green rivals is typical of most Western European countries. The challenge for the social democratic left is to hold on simultaneously to the centre, which has its own unique policy and communication challenges, and the far left, often with policies and communication needs that are diametrically opposed to the former. The centre-left parties find delivering this kind of political "trickery" is increasingly difficult for.

5. Challenges of governance

It is no coincidence that of the 17 instances when the centre-left suffered losses of 5% or more between EP elections in given countries, 13 occurred when social democrats lead the governments. Though an overwhelming majority of serious left-wing defeats occurred when the centre-left was stuck in unpopular governing positions, it is also important to point out that lost EP elections did not always foreshadow a loss of governmental positions in the subsequent national elections.

6. The transformation of European societies

For a long while now there has been a discernible trend of gradual but more or less steady decline in the popular support of established parties, which is especially pronounced in the context of EP elections. The role of traditional social organisations (e.g. trade unions, churches) is generally in decline, and thus far political parties have not found an antidote to the negative impact this development has on their own social support. Greater levels of social fragmentations and increased variations in life circumstances and individual interests make the traditional role of bundling individual interests into organisations representing vast macro-communities much harder, maybe even impossible, to fulfil. Protest-voting has also become more widespread, especially in low stakes elections. With the decay of the classic mediating organisations and institutions (mass party membership, trade unions, churches, party media, etc.), and the corresponding decline in the traditional binds that tie parties to their voters, the communication of political parties has become increasingly professionalised. The goal is no longer to create lasting personal ties to voters, which would be futile anyway. Furthermore, this process can have a destabilising



effect on governments, for coalitions are needed more often, and coalitions in turn often depend on more parties than previously. At the same time the weight within the coalition of the party that delegated the head of government is usually diminished, and hence the government's leaders are also often comparatively weaker than the prime ministers who used to govern before. Another disconcerting aspect of these social transformations is that the political beneficiaries are often populist and/or extremist parties. This existing trend was significantly reinforced by the worldwide financial and economic crisis, and its enduring consequences, such as economic stagnation and seemingly endless cycles of austerity policies.

The good news with regard to the above is that these are not irreversible trends. Though it is obvious that almost throughout the entire continent populist far-right and far-left parties tend to enjoy stronger positions than, say, 10 years ago, there is little reason to assume that their support cannot be scaled back. What is far more likely is that the grand parties of yesterday will increasingly struggle to retain their relative positions within the party systems, and on occasion - the 2014 EP election was an example - they will lose this fight. In the latter cases the overriding objective of democratic politics ought to be to ensure that it is not extremist and anti-democratic forces than end up benefiting.

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I. Introduction

The 2014 EP election marked the fourth time in a row that the parties of the centre-left lost a European election. Though a few months earlier most public surveys had predicted a breakthrough for the left, ultimately the centre-right European People's Party came in first, though its lead was slim. Social democracy certainly did not suffer a fatal defeat, but the fact that it has not been able to score a victory in an EP election for 20 years now is definitely a warning sign. **One of the striking developments of the 2014 election was the surge of right-wing euro-sceptic forces, and especially the fact that in three countries they clinched the top spot among competing parties, while they came in second in four countries and third in a further five.**

The European left now has another five years at its disposal to discern the reasons underlying its stagnation and to develop a winning strategy for 2019. **Thus, together with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Policy Solutions has undertaken to offer an initial review of the processes that have been going on in Europe since 1994. Specifically, it wishes to explore in which regions and countries the left has lost most ground since 1994 (or where it has gained in strength), and in which geographical areas and in what ways it must exert greater efforts to help social democratic values attain a majority position.**

In the following study we will seek the answer to four basic questions:

- 1) **How did the share of the centre-left parties' seats in the European Parliament evolve, and what reasons explain the volatility in some countries?**
- 2) **How did the support for centre-left parties develop between 1994 and 2014 in certain EU Member States?**
- 3) **What role might the accession of post-communist Central and Eastern European states to the European Union play in the left's weak EP election performances?**
- 4) **Overall, what reasons can we identify for the dismal electoral record of the European left in the EP elections of the last two decades?**

The present study is part of our series analysing the results of the 2014 EP election. Our previous study, which examined euro-sceptic parties, is available on Policy Solutions' website (the executive summary is available in English as well).



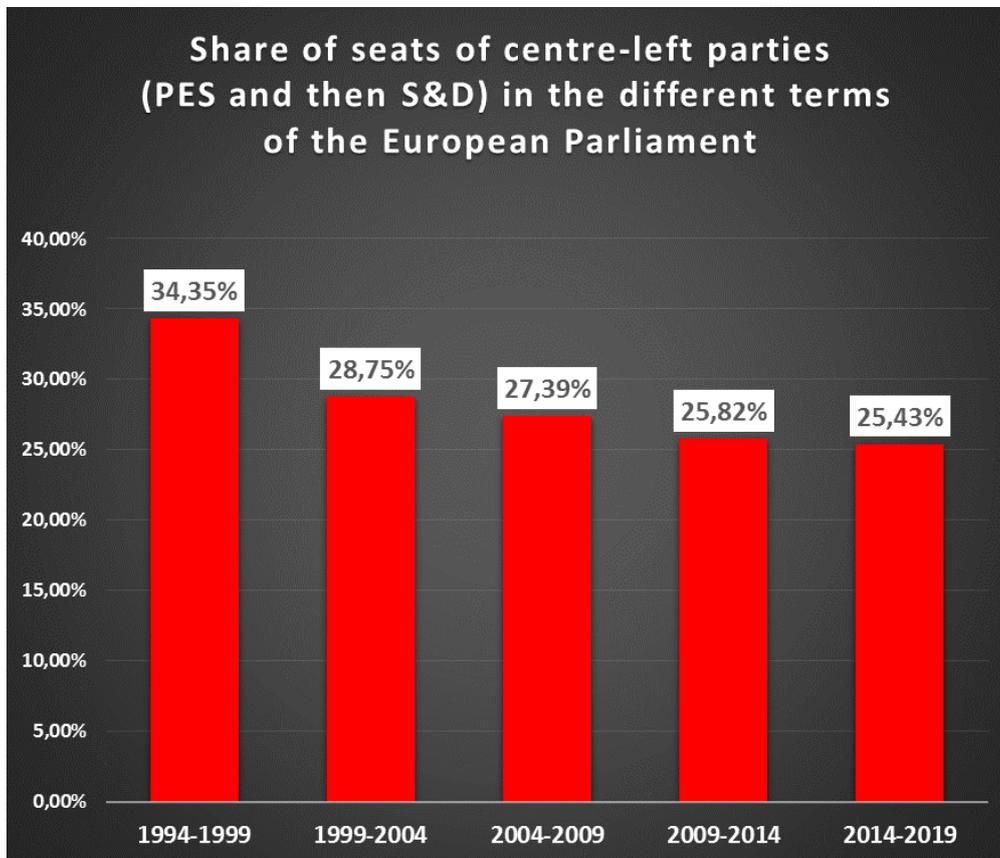
2. The left-wing parties' results in the EP elections

2.1. The left-wing parties' share of seats in the EP between 1994 and 2014

An examination of the five EP cycles between 1994 and 2014 unequivocally reveals that the centre-left party family is losing ground. **While between 1994 and 1999 every third MEP (34.35%) belonged to the PES group, following the 2014 EP elections only a fourth (25.43%) joined the S&D group, the PES' successor.** Currently, there are 191 centre-left MEPs, which means that the S&D group lags only slightly behind the European People's Party, which lost a significant number of seats but nevertheless maintained a lead with 221 MEPs.

The left's relatively weak performance at the European level is not a novel phenomenon, however. **Its greatest single aggregate drop occurred between 1994 and 1999, when the centre-left group suffered a 6% decline in the share of its EP seats. Since then, it has been stagnating and declining slowly rather than dropping spectacularly.**

Graph 1

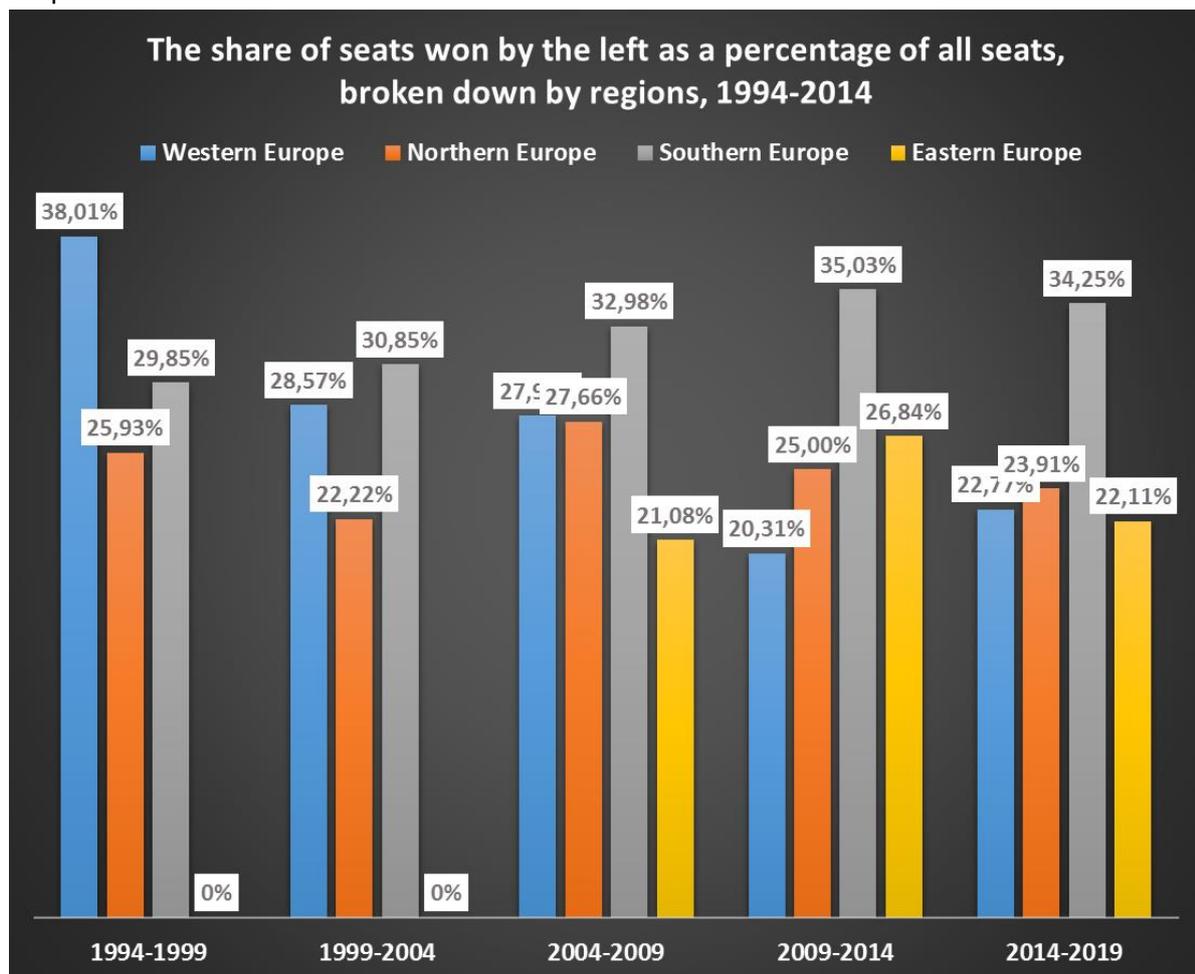




If we look at regional distribution of the left's rise and decline, then we observe that in 1994, which we have used as a point of reference, it was **primarily the outstanding results of the Western European parties (38.01%)** - and especially the voters of the **British and the German centre-left** - that catapulted the left into the top position at the time. The Northern European left-wing parties' tally was roughly average as compared to the two decades since, while the Southern European left was at its low point.

Five years later, in 1999, the Western European left suffered a 10 percentage point decline in the ratio of its MEPs (see the graph below), owing primarily to the weakened state of the British Labour Party and the German Social Democratic Party. There were no major changes in the other regions of the European Union, the Southern European parties won a few seats more than previously, while the Northern Europeans won a few less. Nevertheless, the six percentage point decline in share of seats at the European level was only enough for second place behind the EPP.

Graph 2





In many respects, the 2004 elections completely reshaped the composition of the European Parliament. There were 10 new member states, 8 from Eastern Europe and 2 from Southern Europe. After the accession of Bulgaria and Romania three years later, almost every fourth MEP hailed from new member states. Support for the left was far lower in the new Eastern European member states than in the EU-15, a mere fifth (21.08%) of MEPs in this group joined the centre-left faction. The weak performance of the regional centre-left owes in large part to the disintegration of Polish social democracy.

The Western European left reached its low point in 2009. Not only did the relative weight of Western Europe decrease with the entry of the new member states, but the British, French, German and Dutch social democrats and socialists lost voters in previously unprecedented numbers. It is revealing that the left-wing parties of the four largest Western European centre-left parties sent fewer MEPs to Strasbourg than Labour had alone in 1994. **Yet at the same time the Southern European left was breaking records.**

A look at the election figures of the past 20 years shows that the left's **defeat of 2014** did not hinge on the Italians, for they delivered their best results in the past two decades. **The Spanish centre-left has not performed this badly in any EU election in the past twenty years, but the French, Dutch, Greek and Polish left were also at a low point.** In the comparison of various regions, the left's European average result suffered mostly from Eastern and Western social democracy performing below their usual standards.

For the objective of winning a European Parliamentary majority, a good performance in the EU's largest member states is essential. As it emerges from the table below, while in some of the large member states (such as for example Germany and the United Kingdom) social democratic parties have achieved results roughly on par with the European average of the centre-left, in some **key countries, such as France, Poland, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Greece and Hungary, they performed far below average. As long as the left won't be able to gain strength in at least a portion of these countries - or else perform outstandingly in the major member states – a relative majority in the EP is impossible to attain.**



Table I – Seats won by centre-left parties in member states at the 2014 EP election

Country	Total number of seats	Seats won by the centre-left	Divergence from the European mean
Germany	96	27	2,70%
France	74	13	-7,86%
United Kingdom	73	20	1,97%
Italian	73	31	17,04%
Spain	54	14	0,50%
Poland	51	5	-15,63%
Romania	32	16	24,57%
Holland	26	3	-13,89%
Belgium	21	4	-6,38%
Czech Republic	21	4	-6,38%
Greece	21	4	-6,38%
Hungary	21	4	-6,38%
Portugal	21	8	12,67%
Sweden	20	6	4,57%
Austria	18	5	2,35%
Bulgaria	17	4	-1,90%
Finland	13	2	-10,05%
Denmark	13	3	-2,35%
Slovakia	13	4	5,34%
Ireland	11	1	-16,34%
Croatia	11	2	-7,25%
Lithuania	11	2	-7,25%
Latvia	8	1	-12,93%
Slovenia	8	1	-12,93%
Estonia	6	1	-8,76%
Luxemburg	6	1	-8,76%
Cyprus	6	2	7,90%
Malta	6	3	24,57%



2.2. How the results of individual centre-left parties evolved between 1994 and 2014

Several distinct trends emerge from the election results of the social democratic parties between 1994 and 2014. **For starters, for analytical purposes it is worthwhile to distinguish the social democratic parties of the 15 "old" member states from the centre-left parties that competed in member states which joined the Union in 2004.** There are of course some newly democratised countries also among the old EU member states, but unlike the states that acceded to the Union in 2004, even the most recent democracies among the older member states - Greece, Spain and Portugal - had consolidated democratic party systems with at least 15-20 years of history in 1994. **Though there are clearly some trends which point to major changes in the party system of countries that can be considered established democracies, but with some - crisis-stricken - exceptions, the decline of old parties and the rise of new or previously marginal forces is generally a far slower process than what we were able to observe in several Central and Eastern European states.** The new Central and Eastern European member states are characterised by vast fluctuations in voter preferences and corresponding changes in the strength of parties.

In analysing EP election results, we must keep in mind that over half of the 506 million strong EU, roughly 270 million people, live in the four largest member states (Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Italy). The population of the ten smallest countries in the EU, by contrast, is a mere 25 million. Even though the large member states have a somewhat diminished representation in the EP as compared to their size, they still have a considerably larger impact on the European results than the smaller member states. It is crucial to highlight this at the outset because in the following we will be comparing the results achieved by social democracy in individual countries. What this means in effect, therefore, is that the Italian left, which received 11.2 million votes (41% of all Italian votes) will have the same weight in the analysis below as the Croatian left, for example, which won 276,000 votes, equal to 30% of the national total. This would be misleading, of course, if all we wanted to know was how social democracy is faring in total across the continent. What we sought to look at in the comparative analysis below, however, was how the centre-left parties fared relative to one another, how the results and political weight of social democracy evolved in individual countries and regions. In that particular respect, the absolute number of their votes or their weight in Europe would be misleading - there is no other option but to compare their percentage results, even if the given percentages denote vastly different popular vote figures.

So let us first take a look at the comparison of the 2014 results, and then analyse the trends that are discernible since 1994.



Table 2: The results of the social democratic parties in the 2014 EP election

Country	Party name	Party name abbreviation	Party of prime minister/other governing party vs. opposition party*	EP election result
Austria	Social Democratic Party of Austria (Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs)	SPÖ	main governing party	24.09%
Belgium	Different Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij.Anders)	sp.a	governing party	8.08%
Belgium	Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste)	PS	main governing party	11.15%
Bulgaria	Coalition for Bulgaria (Koalitsiya za Bulgaria)	BSP	main governing party ¹	18.93%
Cyprus	Movement for Social Democracy (Kinima Sosialdimokraton Eniaia Dimokratiki Enosi Kentrou)	EDEK	opposition	7.68%
Cyprus	Democratic Party (Dimokratiko Komma)	DI.KO	opposition	10.83%
Czech Republic	Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická)	ČSSD	main governing party	14.17%
Denmark	Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterne)	A	main governing party	19.10%
United Kingdom	Labour Party	Lab	opposition	24.74%
Estonia	Social Democratic Party (Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond)	SDE	governing party	13.60%
Finland	Social Democratic Party of Finland (Suomen)	SDP	governing party	12.30%

¹ Since the election the prime minister supported by the Socialist Party has resigned.



	Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue)			
France	Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste)	PS	main governing party	13.98%
Greece	The River (To Potami)	Riv	opposition	6.61%
Greece	Olive Tree – Democratic Alignment (Elia - Dimokratiki Parataxi)	Elia	governing party	8.02%
Holland	Labour Party (Partij van de Arbeid)	PvdA	governing party	9.40%
Croatia	Kukuriku (Social Democratic Party of Croatia) [Koalicija Kukuriku (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske)]	SDP	main governing party	29.93%
Ireland	Independents/Others	Ind	governing party	25.70%
Poland	Democratic Left Alliance-Labor United (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej-Unia Pracy)	SLD-UP	opposition	9.44%
Lettország	Harmony Centre (Latvian Social Democratic Party) [Saskaņas Centrs (Sociāldemokrātiskā Partija „Saskaņa”)]	SC-LSDP	opposition	13.04%
Lithuania	Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (Lietuvos socialdemokratų partija)	LSDP	main governing party	17.26%
Luxembourg	Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party (Lëtzebuurger Sozialistesche Arbechterpartei)	LSAP	governing party	11.75%
Hungary	Democratic Coalition (Demokratikus Koalíció)	DK	opposition	9.75%
Hungary	Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt)	MSZP	opposition	10.90%
Malta	Labour Party (Partit Laburista)	PL	main governing party	53.39%
Germany	Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands)	SPD	governing party	27.30%
Italy	Democratic Party (Partito Democratico)	PD	main governing party	40.81%



Portugal	Socialist Party (Partido Socialista)	PS	opposition	31.49%
Romania	Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social-Democrat)	PSD	main governing party	37.60%
Spain	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español)	PSOE	opposition	23.00%
Sweden	Swedish Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokratiska arbetarpartiet)	S	opposition	24.40%
Sweden	Feministisk initiativ	FI	opposition	5.30%
Slovakia	Smer (Smer - sociálna demokracia)	SMER-SD	main governing party	24.09%
Slovenia²	Social Democrats (Socialni demokrati)	SD	governing party	8.02%

* At the time of the election. There have been some changes since.

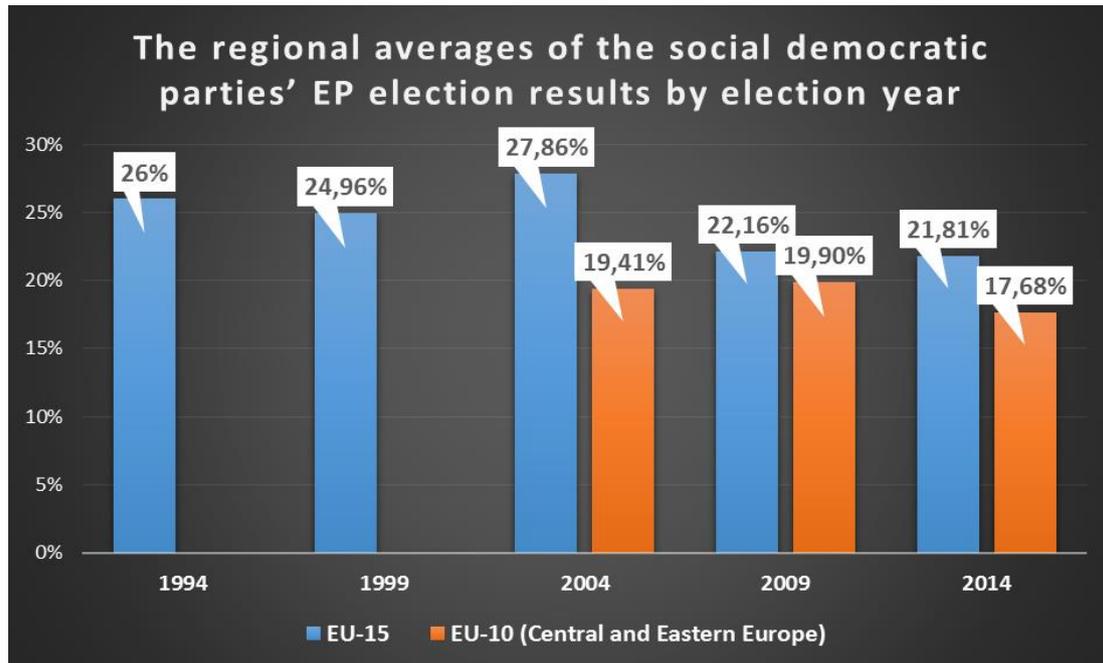
What is striking, for one, is the huge spread: at the top is the Labour Party in Malta with 53.4%, whose result far exceeds that of Fidesz in Hungary.³ With 41%, the Italian left has also performed exceedingly well. In addition to a few countries where the left polled over 30%, there are also some where it failed to break 10% (the Netherlands, Slovenia and Poland) and quite a few, a further 12, where it was stuck below 20%. With 20.6%, the Hungarian social democratic left was weak compared to its previous results (the representative of Együtt-PM, one of the three parties that had competed jointly in the national parliamentary election in April, joined the green party in the EP). Still, this is hardly below the European average. In fact, it is a rather strong figure by Central and Eastern European standards, seeing as only the Slovakian and Romanian centre-left fared better in the region. With the 13th spot out of 28, the Hungarian social democratic left falls in the medium range in European comparison.

² The government that had also been supported by the social democrats had resigned in Slovenia at this time already, but it was still in office pending the early elections.

³ Unusually for Europe, Malta has a two-party system, which results in overwhelming percentages.



Figure 3



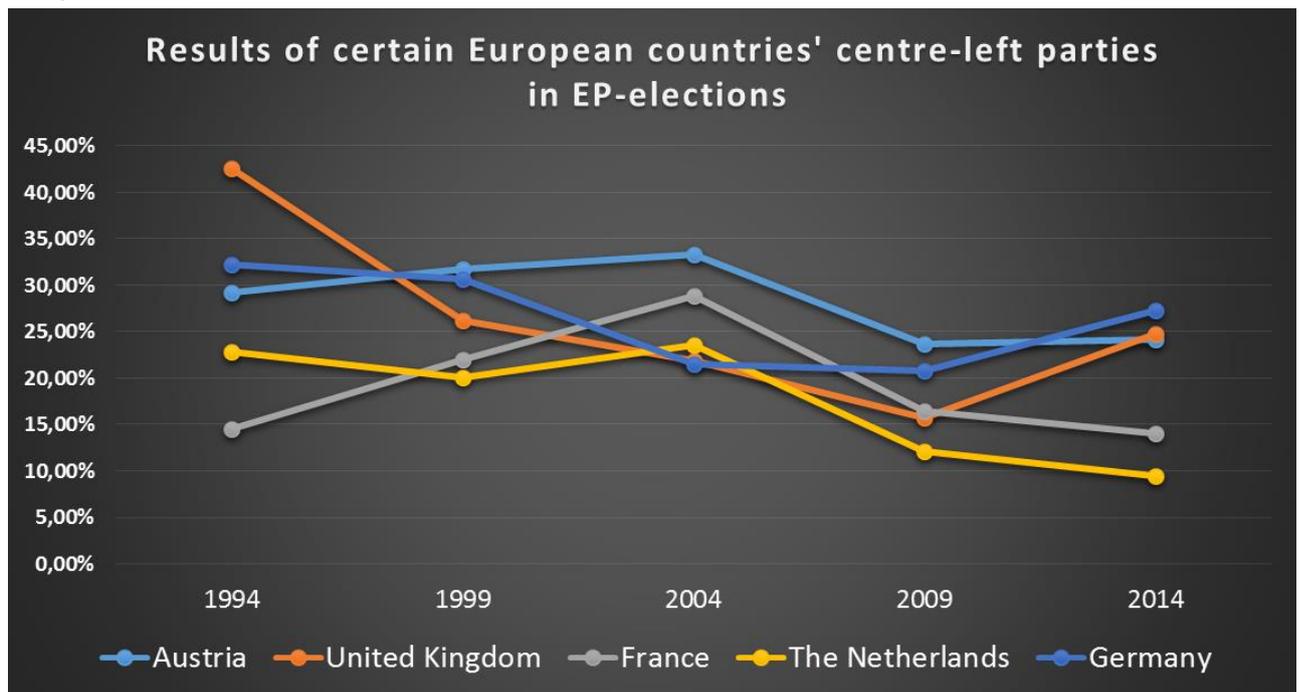
This regional averages of social democratic parties' EP election results show several trends. **The first is that save for a slight surge in Western Europe in 2004, the left has suffered losses continuously since 1994 in both East and West, not only in terms seat share, but also in terms of its share of the popular votes.** In Western Europe this decline has been rather extensive - with the exception of a brief reprieve in 2004 - though a lion's share of the losses occurred during one particular term, the cycle beginning with the comparatively successful 2004 election and ending in the quagmire caused by the 2008 worldwide financial crisis. At that point, the left lost almost 6% in support across Europe. Outside this term its decline was gradual. In the fateful 2004 to 2009 cycle only two social democratic parties saw their share of the vote increase: the Irish Labour Party, which is exceedingly weak by European standards, managed to raise its tally from 10.6% to 13.9%, while the Greek Socialists - who have since been nigh completely destroyed - improved their results from 34% to 36.65%. Apart from these two, all Western European social democratic parties suffered losses, often quite significant ones. The Dutch (-11.5%), French (-12.3), Danish (-11.2%) Austria (-9.6%) and Portuguese (-18%) centre-left each lost over 10%. It is important to point out that in the entire twenty year period from 1994 - 2014, there were only two other instances when European centre-left party lost more than 10% of the votes between two EP elections: from 1994 to 1999 the British Labour Party lost 15.6%, while in the most recent 2014 election the Greek Socialists declined by 22% (some of the social democratic votes were picked up by other centre-left parties).

Though the huge negative swings were mostly contained to one election, a gradual decline is typical of some Western European social democratic parties that are in a very sorry state. **In**



five countries of what used to be the EU-15, the left has suffered losses in three of the four EP elections since 1994 (Holland, the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden and Finland); in a further eight it lost votes in two of the four post-1994 elections, and in one case (Luxembourg) it did worse than previously in all four elections. The only party that did almost always better was the Portuguese PS, though its single instance of losing votes - 18% between 2004 and 2009 - exceeded the total of all its gains in the other elections.

Graph 4.



In this respect it is essential that there were only four countries in 2014 where social democratic parties were in a better position than 20 years ago: the Swedish SAP is slightly, 1.6% stronger than in 1994, while the Danish social democrats performed 3.2% better than they did in the EP election two decades ago. Since the Irish and the Italian left competed as parts of electoral alliances in the EP election, their results are difficult to compare. Nevertheless, the Italian centre-left has made obvious gains, though arguably it also benefits from the recent selection of a new premier, Matteo Renzi, which might have given the party a temporary high in the polls. In contrast to these rather modest success stories, the centre-left is at a historical low in the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Greece, Spain and Austria. And though the British and the German centre-left are not at their historical low, they have not exceeded it by much.

For most of the twenty-year period under investigation, the Mediterranean centre-left has managed to avoid being caught up in the downward spiral that



has engulfed the European left, until the crisis of 2008 struck the Greek left with the force of a Hurricane. It also significantly damaged the positions of the Spanish and the Portuguese left. In Greece, both mainstream parties, PASOK and New Democracy, which had completely dominated politics since the democratic transition in the '70s and enjoy vast social embeddedness, are now facing the very real possibility of becoming secondary players or, especially in the case of the Socialists, even disappearing entirely from the political scene. Even within the left, PASOK is lagging significantly behind its far-left competitor, Syriza. In Spain, too, there has been a dramatic fall: While 10 years ago PSOE garnered 43.5% in the EP election, in May 2014 it dropped to 23%.

The situation in Central and Eastern Europe differs from that observed in Western Europe in several respects, but what is most worth highlighting on the whole is that the lack of social democratic traditions and the rejection of communism in wide segments of the population has resulted in significantly lower support for the moderate left than in Western Europe. This is also apparent in the average values exhibited in Graph 3. At the same time, the decline of the western left is also indicated by the decreasing gap between the average centre-left results in the western and the eastern regions of the EU. For quite a while the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) was the strongest and most stable centre-left party in the region, and as late as 2004 its EP results were the fourth strongest in the entire EU among social democratic parties, even though they were considered a defeat in the context of the – then bipolar – Hungarian political competition. In several countries of the region the left was either marginalised from the start or was relegated to a diminished status at some point after transition. Just like their western sister parties, even the remaining strong social democratic parties of the region (e.g. the Bulgarian, Romanian or Slovakian) often perform worse in EP elections than in national ballots. MSZP has always performed worse in European elections than in the temporally nearest national elections, and the situation was similar in the case of the Slovakian social democratic party, Smer. The Czech and Bulgarian social democratic parties did very slightly better in 2014 than in their own national elections, but at the same time the national results marked a low-point in the public standing of both parties.

2.3. The performance of left-wing parties in Central and Eastern Europe

Centre-left/social democratic parties started out with a huge disadvantage in Central and Eastern Europe (CES). Among the many problematic legacies of the old communist regime is the negative connotation of classical left-wing values and catchwords, such as equality or solidarity. Though many citizens identify with the substantial meanings of the terms, they also often relate cynically to their use in political communication.



The situation of social democracy was further encumbered from the very start by the lack of working welfare models, the low levels – in comparison with western European countries - of tax compliance and low standards of living. Because of these material considerations, specifically quick growth, became an overriding priority, especially in the immediate aftermath of transition, which was usually characterised by liberal economic policies. The objective of creating a framework that would be capable of attracting capital investments, which all the countries of the region felt was ineluctable in the interest of developing working economic structures, also failed to serve the greater acceptance of social democratic policies.

At the same time, however, there was also a significant opening for social democratic politics, since in the years following regime transition an economic and social crisis emerged as a result of which hundreds of thousands – millions in the region overall – lost their jobs and found themselves without skills that would have allowed them to return into gainful employment in the new economy. Despite its innumerable flaws and the widespread poverty it engendered, “real existing socialism” had provided a sense of material security - though at a very low level – and a relatively large degree of equality as compared to income distributions in the West. **The wealth accumulated since regime transition, in contrast, has tended to be distributed very unequally, which has resulted in growing poverty and existential insecurity for many.** The lack of social safeguards and the absence of a functioning welfare regime often led to widespread angst even among those who at the given time did not have objective reason to feel financially insecure. Social democratic parties – just as right-wing populists – generally quickly moved to exploit the political opportunity therein. When elected, however, they also found that government was mired in difficult circumstances and failed to extricate themselves from the problematic economic realities and the limitations those posed for fiscal governance. Possibilities for spending were generally extremely circumscribed, and, correspondingly, the realisation of campaign promises tended to lag significantly behind the expected level. The left does not bear sole responsibility for the resulting disillusionment with politics (which of course was also manifest in the West), the political sphere in its entirety failed to offer alternative pathways, but the fact is that centre-left politics also failed in this regard. Frequently exacerbated by the impact of endemic corruption, the growing distrust ended up turning against the entire political elite. This trend has been given a further impetus by the economic crisis, which continues to leave an imprint on the politics of the region to this day.

Whichever party was in power usually received a greater share of the widespread public frustration than the opposition forces, and of course elections which are typically used as outlets for protest-voting manifested this trend with particular intensity. **In the context of the CES, it is important to stress that today the positions of social democracy tend to be a lot stronger in countries where the centre-left was mostly marginalised in the 90s than in the countries where it belonged to the dominant**



political forces during that time. In Slovakia, for example, it appeared for a long time that no significant left-wing force would emerge at all. Yet after 10 years the left-wing populist Smer rose, profiting to a significant extent from the perception that the centre-right elite was worn out. With Smer, the left first won an election in Slovakia in 2006 and has – despite the occasional electoral failures – emerged as the strongest political player by far. In Slovenia, until 2008 democratic alternations in power were limited to a back and forth between conservative and liberal governments. It took the centre-left nearly two decades to attain the support of 30% of the voters, which made it temporarily the largest force in Slovenian politics. Croatia – somewhat like Slovakia whose political system also featured authoritarian elements in the first years after transition - was a semi-authoritarian regime in the 90s, where the situation in terms of the left's weak start and subsequent surge ended up being very similar to that of the previously discussed two countries. It took a long-time for a potent centre-left to emerge in Latvia as well, based primarily on the support of the ethnic Russian minority, but despite becoming the strongest party it is still excluded from power. Recently, Russia's actions in Ukraine have also had an electoral impact on the centre-left in Latvia.

At the other end of the spectrum are the two formerly strongest parties of the CES centre-left, the Hungarian MSZP and the Polish SLD, both successor parties to their respective countries communist parties. Though once major players in their countries, they have lost significant ground since then, and especially the Polish left has removed itself from contention for leading the government in the foreseeable future, while MSZP is struggling to regain its position as the major party on the left and the main alternative party of power again. **Among the left-wing parties that were major forces in the 1990s and even managed to attain positions leading the government, currently only the Romanian and the Lithuanian parties have managed to retain their strong positions, though only the former was really successful in the most recent EP election.**

Where social democrats govern, they often fail to convert their success in national elections into EP electoral success: the main governing centre-left parties of the region, that is the Czech, Croatian, Slovenian, Lithuanian, Bulgarian and Romanian centre-left forces that lead or are involved in governments have all performed worse in the EP election than in the most recent national parliamentary elections, though in the Croatian and Romanian case the direct comparison is encumbered by the fact that the respective parties ran as part of electoral alliances which makes the assessment of individual parties within the alliance difficult. **What is interesting, however, is that as compared to the 2009 EP elections, with the exception of the Slovakian ruling party none of the centre-left forces in the region have experienced a significant decline in the 2014 EP election, though in practice this has meant that they stabilised their results at rather low levels.**



Table 3: The EP elections results of centre-left parties in Central and Eastern Europe, 2004-2014

Country	2004	2009	2014	Wins/losses 2009-2014	Losses as compared to the most recent national parliamentary election (year of the election in parentheses)
Bulgaria	21.41%	18.50%	18.93%	+0.43%	-7.67 (2013)
Czech Republic	8.78%	22.38%	14.17%	-8.21%	-6.33% (2013)
Estonia	36.79%	8.69%	13.60%	+4.91%	-3.50 (2011)
Poland	14.68%	12.34%	9.44%	-2.90%	+1.24% (2011)
Latvia		19.57%	13.04%	-6.53%	-15.36% (2011)
Lithuania	14.43%	18.61%	17.26%	-1.35%	-1.14 (2012)
Hungary	34.30%	17.37%	20.65%	+3.28%	NA*
Romania	23.11%	31.07%	37.60%	+6.53%	NA*
Slovakia	16.90%	32.01%	24.09%	-7.92%	-20.31 (2012)
Slovenia	14.15%	18.45%	14.62%	- 3.83	+3.12% (2011)

* Results are not comparable since the parties in question competed as part of electoral alliances in the national elections.

Since the centre-left parties mostly performed badly in the 2009 EP election, the comparison to that particular election can be somewhat misleading in terms of assessing the current position of the centre-left since then. That is why comparing the 2014 EP election results with the most recent national elections may make more sense.

The sample is too small to assess the impact of governing positions on the popularity of the left, a problem that is exacerbated by the problem that in the national elections two centre-left parties competed as parts of electoral alliances including liberal and, in Hungary, green parties. In another case, Slovenia, party disintegrations have restructured the distribution of power and political support on the centre-left (which also contains non-S&D members) several times during the past few years. Nevertheless, what we can state is that centre-left parties have suffered in electoral terms as a result of their involvement in government in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, nor did they fare well from governing in Slovenia. In Romania, however, the left's popularity has thus far benefitted from governing, while in Latvia even an opposition status has not saved the left from serious defeats in this year's EP and national elections (owing probably to the Russia factor), despite a strong performance in the 2009 EP election and the 2011 national election.



From the perspective of the centre-left in the old EU states, and from an overall European angle, two general observations can be made about the Central and Eastern European left. **For one, on the whole the weak results of these CES parties exert a downward pull on the European left.** Though there is significant variance in these results, and there are some outstandingly potent centre-left parties in the region, on average they perform worse than their counterparts in the old Union. **Moreover, they also have a problematic impact in terms of the very sensitive issue of the political balance in the European Council. To wit, while there are only two countries in the EU-15 where the left is certain to be excluded from leading the government (Ireland and Luxembourg (though in the latter the Socialist Workers' Party is generally part of the governing coalitions), the outlook in the CES member states is worse. On the whole, there are five countries in the EU-15 where the left is either certain or very likely to be excluded from governing positions.** In Poland and Latvia the left is currently too weak and/or too marginalised to occupy a governing position in the foreseeable future (though in the latter cases this owes less to its electoral weight than to the prevailing political consensus). Though in Estonia the social democrats have already been included in a government coalition as a relatively minor partner, both the weak electoral performance and the prevailing political consensus preclude the left from becoming a senior partner in government in the near future. In Slovenia and Hungary the centre-left appears too discredited for the time being to gain positions of power, though that may change in the long-run.

In essence therefore, among the 15 old member states social democracy is certainly excluded from leading the government and thus occupying a seat on the European Council in only two. Even in these two countries, it is usually (Luxembourg) or occasionally (Ireland) a coalition partner and has therefore some impact on the positions that the respective government takes in the Council. Among the Central and Eastern European member states, however, it faces certain or very likely exclusion from political power in five countries, with three of these almost definitely "locked in" in the long run. Based on previous experience, only in two of these five countries (Slovenia and Estonia) is a government participation as a minor coalition partner likely. In terms of its power perspective and impact on European policies, the CES centre-left is rather badly positioned, which has corresponding effect on the chances of the European left to become the dominant player in the European Council. The CES centre-left's impact also exerts a downward pull on the overall results of the European left in EP elections, but this effect is less pronounced both because the differences in the performance of Western and CES centre-left parties have diminished significantly and because the population of the latter is considerably smaller.

Another important factor, however, is that the parties of the Central and Eastern European centre-left often undermine the moral and political basis of European social democracy



through the policies they pursue and the politics they engage in, which occasionally even extends to the violation of democratic principles. On the whole, the centre-left parties of the region have not managed to pursue an altogether different trajectory in terms of the problems that plague regional politics in general, such as corruption, the lack of values in government policies, excessive and self-serving pragmatism and power focus, and, as a result of the aforementioned, the absence of clear ideological alignment. Moreover, the parties of the region - on left and right - are prone to mutually exclusive extremes in terms of excessive populism that does not shrink back from nationalistic and exclusionary rhetoric on the one hand, and, on the other hand, from policies that are completely ignorant of popular needs and desires, relying instead exclusively on "expert" opinions and overemphasising the real or perceived needs of international markets and institutions, even at the expense of rejecting citizens' legitimate and otherwise reasonable demands. Unfortunately, on the whole it would be impossible to assert that social democratic parties in the Central and Eastern European region have done more than their centre-right counterparts to avert the crisis of confidence in democratic politics that has swept the region. Hence one should also add that they also bear commensurate responsibility for the widespread public disillusionment with politics.



3. Why is the left not winning in Europe?

It would be definitely wrong to assert that the past 20 years were exclusively about the declining strength of social democracy. **For one, there are countries and regions where such a trend is not clearly discernible, where social democracy has fared very well for some or most of the time under examination.** If we consider national elections in addition to our overview of EP elections, then it becomes apparent that at the national level social democracy was far more successful in this period than for example in the conservative-dominated 80s and early 90s. In the second half of the 90s and early 2000s, the conservative hegemony in the 80s and early 90s was replaced by a substantial social democratic dominance. **During this time the EU-15 saw social democratic parties lead all major member states (after 16 years of opposition in Germany and 18 years in the United Kingdom).** Between 1995 and 2004, that is the entry of the new member states, there were only three countries in the EU which had no social democratic heads of government at all. Two of these (Luxembourg and Ireland) have never had centre-left leaders, and in a third, Belgium, the centre-left was throughout part of the governing coalition, though not as its strongest party (traditionally, social democracy is not strong in Belgium). We will return to the role of governance on the centre-left's performance in EP elections below, but let us note in advance: **the electoral success of social democrats at the national level has had some impact on the centre-left's weak performance in EP elections.**

Thirdly, it must be stressed that the phenomenon of losing electoral ground is not an issue that is exclusive to social democracy. In large parts social democratic losses are **a manifestation of the decline of traditional parties in general and the shake-up of established party systems, which are resulting in a gradual transformation of democratic politics as we know it.**

In the following, we will make six observations concerning the underlying reasons that might explain why the centre-left has suffered electoral setbacks in the EU.

3.1. Victim of its own success

In some sense social democracy has become the victim of the success of its own ideas, though it is important to add: We mean ideas that the left has failed to implement in reality when it was in power. What may have appeared as the left's unbridled thirst for regulation ten years ago, such as the idea of reining in the more extreme



instruments of financial speculation, maybe even their outright ban, has now moved into the mainstream - at least in continental Europe - thanks to the financial crisis. It is no longer an anathema on the right either. Outside the US, where this view is more widespread, hardly anyone claims that regulation is necessarily destructive or that wealth can only be achieved by scaling back the state to a minimum size. **Even if the commitment to the state's regulatory and classic welfare functions is often only rhetorical on the centre-right, they, too, cannot fully ignore the left-ward drift in the public mood on these issues.** In the meanwhile, right-wing parties now routinely find themselves at least contemplating and debating, and sometimes even adopting women's quotas or more extensive rights for homosexuals, along with other issues whose proponents would have received a condescending smile at best - though hostile rejection would have been more likely - from centre-right politicians 20-30 years ago. **While it would be a wild exaggeration to say that as compared to the right of 20 years ago the current right has become left-wing, but it would correct to say that the consensus on many social issues and - more recently - some economic policies have drifted to the left (though with regard to economic policies, this trend applies only to some issues and arguably not as much as they had previously moved to the right), and that the parties of the centre right often find themselves moving right along with this consensus.**

3.2. Disenchantment in the core electorate as a result of the economic crisis

The spectacular crash of the stock exchange and the corresponding downward spiral in economic indicators following the seemingly unstoppable economic boom in certain sectors of the economy in the 2000s lead to a widespread disenchantment especially in the economically most vulnerable strata, who often expressed their disappointment by turning away from politics. **The centre-left was hit worst by this particular problem: social democracy is (in many cases was) the political home of the working classes, which benefitted too little from the previous gains but suffered a lot from the crisis, and naturally these strata had expected more from social democracy, particularly in the area of economic regulation and keeping the social network robust.** A logical consequence of the failure to satisfy this need led to rising support for the far left, which - on account of its lacking experience in government - could easily say that it was better equipped to represent classic social democratic values and welfare standards. The role that social democrats limited themselves to in the competition with conservatives was that they would reform the welfare states with a greater consideration of social aspects, that is they would do so in a left-wing way. **Nevertheless, in the end the strata that were most sceptical of globalisation and immigration, and who were afraid of falling behind or were actually falling behind, were increasingly leaving the centre-left**



because they perceived that it could not or maybe did not even want to protect them from the impact of rapid transformation.

3.3. The Third Way as the reformist left

The Blairite/Schröderite social democratic left that typically governed at the end of the 90s and early 2000s followed the idea of a Third Way and accepted a reformist role. Initially, they were wildly successful politically, but in the medium term this role proved unpopular. The growing unpopularity of this programme did not imply that it lacked social support, what it means to say is that many turned away towards parties who held out one or more of the following promises: more reliability in preserving the traditional welfare model (far left); a more modern or hip outlook (this niche varied depending on the party system); a better reconciliation between the needs of the economy and environmental and social concerns (greens); or a greater capability in realising economic modernisation (liberals or conservatives). Indeed, sometimes it was right-wing populist parties that benefitted from the left's inability to hold on to its former core electorate, for example by promising that though they would close the community in ethno-cultural terms, they would at the same time protect welfare achievements - in fact the latter oftentimes functioned as the underlying justification for the desire to seal off the community from immigration and foreign influence. And of course opposed to all these there were always strata who were largely satisfied with the way social democracy handled the challenges in question, how it adapted the given countries to the accelerating pace of global capitalism. Though the remaining and occasionally new social democratic voters were often not sufficient in number to help the social democrats preserve their traditional base, they played a key role in helping the parties in question remain major players within their party systems. **On the whole, however, what this means is that in terms of drawing new voters social democracy only profited from its modernisation strategy in the very early periods.**

3.4. The appearance of rivals on the left side of the political spectrum

A surge in the support of far-left and/or green rivals is typical of most Western European countries. The centre-left was under considerable ideological and public policy pressure from both left and right. On the centre-right the competition was aiming for voters who generally prefer moderately left-wing policies (slightly tempered pro-market policies) and were sensitive to real or perceived shifts to the left, while on social democracy's left flank far-left parties gobbled up growing numbers of disappointed traditional social democratic voters. In many countries this was complemented by greens, who generally spoke with greater "authenticity" to those youths who are attuned to this particular issue,



while social democrats often came late to this topic and were even then sometimes hesitant to wholeheartedly embrace it. **The challenge for the social democratic left is to hold on simultaneously to the centre, which has its own unique policy and communication challenges, and the far left, often with policies and communication needs that are diametrically opposed to the former.**

3.5. Challenges of governance

It is no coincidence that of the 17 instances when the centre-left suffered losses of 5% or more between EP elections in given countries, 13 occurred when social democrats lead the governments.⁴ The four exceptions are the French socialists and the Danish social democrats in 2009, and the Spanish and Latvian centre-left in 2014. As far as the Latvians are concerned, social democrats were never in government there, so logically any fluctuations - in the most recent case presumably as a result of the Russian machinations in Ukraine, which made many voters turn away from the centre-left party that is considered the party of ethnic Russians - in their tally had to affect them in opposition. The Spanish socialists' massive defeat in 2014 cannot be interpreted independently of the huge hit that the entire established party system took, since the ruling centre-right People's Party dropped from 42% to 26%, while only the greens - which were rather weak in Spain until now - and the far left managed to improve their standing. In France the greens profited most from the weakness of the main opposition party, the PS, in 2009, reaching a result of over 16% for the first time, ending up in third place behind the Socialists by a mere 35,000 votes. At the time, the then-governing centre-right surged significantly in popularity, adding 11.3% to its previous EP tally (which had been a historic low in an EP election) but its 27.8% was still unimpressive by the standards of national elections.

Though an overwhelming majority of serious left-wing defeats occurred when the centre-left was stuck in unpopular governing positions, it is also important to point out that lost EP elections did not always foreshadow a loss of governmental positions in the subsequent national elections. The British Labour Party, for example, suffered a historic 15.56% loss in the first EP election (1999) after ascending to power in 1997. Five years later, in 2004, it dropped another 6% - this result marked the lowest point for Labour since WW2. Despite these vast losses, however, Labour won the subsequent national elections in 2001 and 2005, though with greatly diminished majorities. Similarly, the German SPD, which claimed the chancellorship in 1998 after 16 years in opposition, performed abysmally in the 1999 EP election (following on the heels of a weak performance in 1994), but nevertheless managed to eke out a close re-

⁴ Though in several of these cases the left was not the leading power in government. A subordinated role as a junior partner often brought about even more painful compromises that the left wing base had difficulty accepting.



election in 2002. These examples indicate that in line with public perceptions EP elections - just like municipal elections - are often vehicles for voters to register their discontent with the governing parties. Anti-government votes in this context do not necessarily indicate a decision to abandon the government, but are often merely a warning that unless they improve, they lose a portion of their previous voters. **Governments that are then assessed as having performed well or all right overall - or at least better than the opposition - often regain the loyalty of these temporarily dissatisfied segments.** But of course it also often happens that a poor performance in the EP elections is a prelude to being voted out of government. The historic defeats of the Hungarian and Portuguese centre-lefts in 2009, for example, heralded the impending defeats of these governing parties in the upcoming 2010 and 2011 elections, respectively. The Portuguese PS fell to a low point not seen since 1987, while the Hungarian MSZP fell to its lowest point since regime transition, and after losing its position as the major party on par with the governing centre-right Fidesz, it is even struggling to hold on to its leading role on the left.

As the 2014 EP election results show, the loss of popularity stemming from a governmental role is not limited to centre-left parties, however. If we look at how the parties performed which either delegate the head of government or constitute the largest governing party faction in the lower house, then we observe that these main governing parties almost universally performed worse in the 2014 EP election than in the preceding national elections, where they had been - by definition - victorious. In only five of the 28 EU countries were governing parties able to improve their results as compared to the national parliamentary elections, and even among these the gains were mostly marginal. In the vast majority of countries, 23 to be exact,⁵ the leading parties in government suffered various degrees of losses, sometimes even massive ones. In 10 countries their losses exceeded 10%. Though left-wing parties were not disproportionately represented among the greatest losers, they were underrepresented among the few "victors", such as they were. The only governing left-wing party that made gains since the last national election was the Italian Democratic Party, even though at the time of the EP ballot there were 12 left-wing heads of government or governments backed by left-wing parties as their main pillar in parliament.

⁵ In some countries the result of the national parliamentary election cannot be compared to the EP elections results because of different electoral alliances. The Romanian situation is one such example.



Table 4. Countries in the EU where the main governing party gained in strength since the most recent parliamentary election

Country	Party	2014 EP elections result	Result at the most recent national parliamentary election	Losses since most recent national parliamentary election	Year of most recent national parliamentary election
Finland	Kansallinen Kokoomus	22.60%	20.40%	+2.20%	2011
Cyprus	Dimokratikos Synagermos	37.70%	34.30%	+3.40%	2011
Luxembourg	Chrëschtlech Sozial Vollekspartei	37.65%	33.7	+3.95	2013
Hungary	Fidesz-KDNP	51.49%	45.00%	+6.49%	2014
Italy	Partito Democratico	40.81%	25.40%	+15.41%	2013

Table 5: Countries where the main governing party's result at the 2014 EP election was at least 10% worse than in the most recent national parliamentary election (social democratic parties are highlighted with yellow)

Country	Party	2014 EP elections result	Result at the most recent national parliamentary election	Losses since most recent national parliamentary election	Year of most recent national parliamentary election
Slovenia	Pozitivna Slovenija	6.61%	28.50%	-21.89%	2014
Slovakia	Smer - sociálna demokracia	24.09%	44.40%	-20.31%	2012
Spain	Partido Popular	26.06%	44.60%	-18.54%	2011
Sweden	Moderata Samlingspartiet	13.60%	30.10%	-16.50%	2010
France	Parti Socialiste	13.98%	29.40%	-15.42%	2012
Ireland	Fine Gael	22.00%	36.10%	-14.10%	2011
Holland	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie	11.90%	26.50%	-14.60%	2012
United Kingdom	Conservative Party	23.31%	36.10%	-12.79%	2010
Portugal	Partido Social Democrata-Centro Democrático Social-Partido Popular)	27.70%	38.70%	-11.00%	2011
Croatia	Social Democratic Party of Croatia - Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats - Croatian Party of Pensioners - Istrian Democratic Assembly	29.93%	40.70%	-10.77%	2011



It is striking that regardless of ideological orientation, governing parties failed to improve their popular standing in EP elections - not only did far fewer countries see the governing party win rather than lose votes, but the average losses were far greater than the modest average gains. Fidesz' own 6.49% plus could be called outstanding by the standard of other governing parties' performance, but at the same time it very likely only reflects the well-known effect of the post-election surge: governing parties often experience a swell in their public support polls right after the election. In the case at hand, Fidesz benefitted from the fact that the Hungarian national elections preceded the EP ballot by only a few weeks. In Italy, by comparison, the most recent national election was further back, but at the same time the government of the young and dynamic new Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi was inaugurated only recently, following on the heels of a long-struggling government that had been regarded as lame. Renzi's election by parliament appears to not only herald a change of direction, but also a newfound dynamism of sorts. One might very well say that similarly to the recently re-elected Orbán government, the Renzi cabinet, too, was still in its honeymoon period at the time of the EP election. It was not worn by the exercise of power and the disenchantment that tends to characterise the election results of governing parties in EP elections did not have the time to catch up with the Italian left at the time.

3.6. The transformation of European societies

The weakening positions of social democracy are only partly attributable - and in fact only to a minor degree - to social democracy itself. **For a long while now there has been a discernible trend of gradual but more or less steady decline in the popular support of established parties, which is especially pronounced in the context of EP elections.** We will not be able to go into detail about the underlying causes of this phenomenon, but the main reasons are found in demographic and social changes. The traditional grand social classes, which in many respects were coherent social strata whose members shared certain common ideological assumptions, were supplanted by considerably smaller strata, and the resulting societies have become more fragmented. It is increasingly difficult to compile majority coalitions involving groups whose ideological orientations, values and specific material interests can be aligned for the purpose of an electoral alliance or public policy in government. **The role of traditional social organisations (e.g. trade unions, churches) is generally in decline, and thus far political parties have not found an antidote to the negative impact this development has on their own social support.** These organisations also constituted value-based communities, and in addition to their other basic functions, they played a key mediating role in politics, connecting major parties with their voter base. Hence both ideologically and organisationally they played a crucial role in mobilising voters for the mass parties.



Greater levels of social fragmentations and increased variations in life circumstances and individual interests make the traditional role of bundling individual interests into organisations representing vast macro-communities much harder, maybe even impossible, to fulfil. While the bonding power of traditional communities is in decline, non-traditional organisations, such as for example smaller religions or sects, some types of civic associations or new parties are experiencing - often temporary - surges. Unlike some major traditional organisations, these are not organically intertwined with political parties but are organised along new value systems - or at least newly formulated value systems. At the same time, for traditional parties it becomes increasingly difficult to hold their previous voters coalitions together, which had enabled them, depending on the country, to amass upwards of 30% or 40% of the vote.

Several phenomena resulted from this, some appearing concurrently and some manifesting themselves independently of one another. First, **the electoral support of traditional parties has suffered, though this process is not uniform, neither in its extent nor in its regional distribution.** In addition to a decline, there is also typically a great deal of fluctuation, sudden surges followed - or preceded - by catastrophic falls. So the implication is not that established parties do not achieve outstanding election results on occasion, but it does imply that their **returns often significantly lag behind their historical peaks.** Many mass parties recently suffered their worst results since the post-WWII consolidation. And, as we noted, **they experience more substantial fluctuations in their election results** than previously, when voters' stronger loyalties resulted in more predictable election results. Traditional major parties do not usually lose their earlier levels of access to governmental power, since the centre-right and centre-left parties have for the most part been able to retain their relative positions as the strongest or second strongest parties in the party systems. **But on account of their declining support they are more often compelled to govern through complex coalition structures - more frequently involving grand coalitions, for example - and play a less dominant role within the coalitions than previously.**

Protest-voting has also become more widespread, especially in low stakes elections. While in national elections voters tend to be more "conservative" - not in the ideological sense of the term -, and many do not want to risk throwing their support behind new and untried political forces, **in elections assessed as having lower stakes - typically municipal or EP elections - voters are, on average, more experimentally inclined.** Not least, this is one way for voters to register their discontent with certain public policy processes, warning traditional parties that they cannot automatically rely on their support. Protest-voting tends to be especially pronounced in countries where the electoral system used in national parliamentary elections gives larger parties an edge, most significantly the United Kingdom and France.



In these countries voting for smaller parties is often inefficient in national elections because these votes usually fail to translate into parliamentary representation and end up being wasted; it precludes voters from avoiding an especially loathsome election outcome by opting for the least worst option. In EP elections, by comparison, representation is proportional to voter support, and thus the risk of wasting one's vote is much diminished, thus allowing voters who are so inclined to express their preference almost risk-free. It is no coincidence that even though in Britain UKIP came in first with a result of 27.5% in the May 2014 EP election, since then it has been trailing far behind the established parties and significantly below its May result. It is expected to gain little or no parliamentary representation in the coming national election next year. Some of the protest voters and most of those who just wanted to temporarily punish one of the major parties have already withdrawn their support from UKIP. (In France, by contrast, it is conceivable though by no means certain that the populist Front national has achieved a more enduring shift in preferences).

With the decay of the classic mediating organisations and institutions (mass party membership, trade unions, churches, party media, etc.), and the corresponding decline in the traditional binds that tie parties to their voters, the communication of political parties has become increasingly professionalised. The goal is no longer to create lasting personal ties to voters, which would be futile anyway. The role of media, communication and PR increases, as does that of charismatic politicians. What is crucial is that the advantage traditional parties enjoy in these areas is not extraordinary, and, most importantly, it is not insurmountable when compared to the smaller parties and new political players. Previously, a membership of several hundred thousand in a large country, complemented by trade unions with millions of members gave mass parties an astounding electoral edge that could not be overcome from one election to the next. **By comparison today a well-funded movement can nominate a charismatic candidate and back him/her up with a professional communications team with relative ease.** Traditional parties continue to retain some advantages, such as a diminished but nevertheless more substantial - and often more loyal - voter and activist base than that of new parties, whereby they often cling on to some of their electoral edge. But this is a significantly diminished advantage, and less reliable, than the one they enjoyed in their heydays.

Seen from the angle of major parties, or from the perspective of political stability, these are worrisome processes. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that in terms of the assertion of democratic principles the greater fragmentation of party systems is not necessarily a problem. More diverse societies - and along numerous dimensions European societies are considerably more diverse than previously - are better represented by more parties than two grand parties. Nevertheless, the fact is that this **process has a**



destabilising effect on governments, for coalitions are needed more often, and coalitions in turn often depend on more parties than previously. At the same time the weight within the coalition of the party that delegated the head of government is usually diminished, and hence the government's leaders are also often comparatively weaker than the prime ministers who used to govern before. And the compromises that are necessary to draw up public policy are also increasingly difficult to attain with a larger number of players. It is also apparent that holding on to power over extended periods becomes more challenging since voters turn away and throw their support behind other parties more quickly; these fluctuations in turn will sometimes result in rash actions and desperate efforts at regaining the lead in public opinion without a strategic approach towards governance.

Another disconcerting aspect of these social transformations is that the political beneficiaries are often populist and/or extremist parties. This existing trend was significantly reinforced by the worldwide financial and economic crisis, and its enduring consequences, such as economic stagnation and seemingly endless cycles of austerity policies. The success of euro-sceptic and/or extremist parties is thus a major challenge for the centre-left, not only in terms of these parties electoral impact but also because they are a reflection of the failure of democratic politics - including and especially social democracy - to address the everyday concerns and frustrations of wide swathes of society, and to channel these into public policies that provide some remedies for these groups and bring about real improvements in their lives. The responsibility of social democratic parties is especially pronounced wherever they held power, since there they share most directly in the blame of failing to reduce the number of people who are the most vulnerable economically, or to mitigate the stress and anxiety of those who (often reasonably) fear financial problems and are also facing up to the fact that the social safety net, which is theoretically designed to kick in in precisely such situations, is visibly losing its vitality even under social democratic governments. The most obvious danger of such a phenomenon is that it might in many cases lead to enduring disenchantment with mainstream and/or democratic politics, that it undermines the democratic consensus and might also easily turn public mood against scapegoated minorities, such as immigrants or - especially in the Central and Eastern European region - native ethnic minorities.

The good news with regard to the above is that these are not irreversible trends. Though it is obvious that almost throughout the entire continent populist far-right and far-left parties tend to enjoy stronger positions than, say, 10 years ago, there is little reason to assume that their support cannot be scaled back. There have been waves of extremism before, these are unavoidable concomitants of democratic politics. They only come to constitute a genuine threat if democratic politics will prove unable to find the right public policy answers whereby it will put the disenchanted voters



back into play for democratic parties. Nevertheless, we need to qualify the previous statement by adding that the age of mass parties is gone, and for now there is little indication that a new such age might be around the corner. **What is far more likely is that the grand parties of yesterday will increasingly struggle to retain their relative positions within the party systems, and on occasion - the 2014 EP election was an example - they will lose this fight. In the latter cases the overriding objective of democratic politics ought to be to ensure that it is not extremist and anti-democratic forces than end up benefitting.**

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