



THE STATE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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Introduction

In the past decade social democratic parties lost ground in Central and Eastern Europe. However, this generally observed trend in the region affects the involved countries to different degrees. While in some countries, slipping popular support notwithstanding, governance remains a reality or at least a realistic option for social democrats, there are also cases where parties struggle for survival or try to rebuild former strength. Far- right, even new-left, green or liberal rivals have set their sights on a once apparently solid electoral base, fended off by the parties of the region with varying success so far. The social democratic parties of Central and Eastern Europe show a wide spectrum not only based on their past record and place within the party system, but also in respect to their values and the composition of their support base.

This study presents the apparent similarities and differences in the region through case studies and a comparison of social democratic parties in seven Central and Eastern European countries (Austria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia). Our study covers the leading social democratic party of each country under review. These parties define themselves as social democratic,

and in the family of European political parties also align themselves with the social democrats. While in the specific case studies we will take a brief look at radical left, green and liberal rivals, these parties will not be in the focus of the study. In the first chapter we present the major trends characterizing the social democratic parties of Central and Eastern Europe. In addition to performance at the polls and government experience, we take a close look at their respective value systems, voters and political rivals. In the second half of the study, we present the achievements, declared values, electoral composition and political challengers of the major social democratic parties in the seven countries under review.

Executive summary

A look at the election results of the region's dominant social democratic parties over the past decade shows a consistently declining trend. By the evidence of the last three parliamentary elections, as well as the 2009 and 2014 EP elections in Central and Eastern Europe, in the majority of the countries under review popular support for the social democratic parties declined significantly. Aside from the Croatian left's ability to "hold out", the social democrats managed to attract new voters only in Romania.

In Austria, the Czech Republic and Poland one finds a linear decline: in these countries popular support for social democratic parties has declined with each parliamentary election. In Hungary, between 2006 and 2010 the voter base of MSZP, once a dominant force on the left, effectively collapsed, and after 2010 support for the party may be described as stagnant at best. In Slovakia support for the social democrats has been on a roller coaster over the past decade. In the 2016 election the party saw its base shrink not only compared to its 2012 peak performance but also relative to the 2010 election results: a 28 percent showing at the polls represents a 16 percent plunge within four years that, following MSZP's slide from 2006 to 2010,

is the second largest setback between two parliamentary elections in the region. The Croatian Social Democratic Party (SDP) followed a similar trajectory when, after robust growth over several years, it dropped to a low last seen a decade earlier – although, at 30 percent, it is still considered impressive in Central and Eastern Europe. In the region, the parliamentary presence of social democrats increased only in Romania and, in fact, support for PSD increased dramatically in parliamentary elections. As early as 2004 and 2008, PSD won by an impressive level of voter support of over 30 percent, receiving 37 percent and 34 percent, respectively. Then, in 2012, the social-liberal coalition led by the party all but doubled the number of votes received to 60 percent, seen as an unprecedented achievement not only among the region's social democratic parties, but in the entire European Union as well.

At the same time, it is important to point to the lack of correlation between the economic crisis erupting in 2008 and the electoral successes or failures of the region's social democratic parties. Of the seven Central and Eastern European countries under review currently social democrats are in power in three countries (Austria – SPÖ, the Czech Republic – ČSSD and Slovakia – SMER-SD). Accordingly, it is safe to say that social democrats are still capable of shaping political developments in the region, although it must be added that in all cases they exercise power with coalition partners standing on radically different ideological grounds. Moreover, until recently leftist parties in two other regional countries have been in power. In Croatia SDP, and in Romania PSD governed until 2015. In the Central and Eastern European region only in Hungary and Poland have leftist parties been prevented from exercising power in two successive parliamentary cycles. On the whole, both in respect to the time spent in office and its current governing position, the Austrian SPÖ is considered the most

successful leftist force in the region for, since 1990, it had governed for 20 years and has been in power for almost all of the past 10 years. Social democratic parties were in power for the shortest time in Croatia and Poland: the Croatian SPD between 2000-2003 and 2011-2015 and the Polish SLD between 1993-1997 and 2001-2005, each for eight years and two terms.

Typically, in respect to economic policies these parties announce socially sensitive programs that, however, often remain nothing more than promises; once in power, in many cases the region's social democratic parties essentially pursue liberal economic policies. In respect to cultural matters – varied as their original orientation may be – the parties tend to be more consistent. Taking their cues from Western social democratic parties, SPÖ and Croatian SDP subscribe to liberal, individualistic and post-materialistic ideals. PSD and SMER–SD promote conservative values: the two parties represent culturally traditional and collectivist values (e.g., national identity and family). None of the regional parties studied may be described as a genuine green party. While all the parties support European integration, from time to time there are some critical voices. When it comes to their views on immigration, most parties simply reject or take very guarded positions on toleration and social inclusion.

A look at the social composition of the voter base of the parties under review shows that their supporters are typically older and young voters and blue-collar workers are increasingly underrepresented. By now, SPÖ, MSZP, PSD and SMER–SD share the common characteristic of being supported by an aging population; moreover, parties in Austria, Hungary and Slovakia, as well as the ČSSD are steadily losing their younger voters. At the same time, Croatian SDP, the only party bucking that trend, is capable of addressing young, highly educated

voters with post-materialistic values. However, the Croatian party finds it increasingly difficult to engage the working class, and SPÖ, ČSSD and MSZP face the same challenge, even though – in contrast to the Croatian social democratic party – historically they were known to represent this social class.

Unless they pay sufficient attention to their social base, the proliferation of challengers poses a grave threat to social democratic parties. Due to the social democrats' complacency and loss of credibility, far-right, new-left and liberal parties may enter as serious contenders. The former category includes Austrian FPÖ, Hungarian Jobbik and Slovak Kotleba – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko, ĽSNS (People's Party Our Slovakia). The group of green-leftist-liberal rivals includes Austrian Greens, Polish Razem and Hungarian Lehet Más a Politika (Politics Can Be Different, LMP), Együtt/Together and Párbeszéd/Dialogue; these parties attract financially more fortunate, typically young voters with post-materialistic values. Attracting older voters, Demokratikus Koalíció (Democratic Coalition, DK) also poses a clear challenge to MSZP. The threats are further exacerbated by such center-right parties as Tradition, Responsibility, Prosperity (TOP 09) in the Czech Republic, Modern (Nowoczesna.pl) in Poland, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and Network (#SIEŤ) in Slovakia, or the People's Movement Party (PMP) in Romania. In some places rivals also include populist forces, such as the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) in the Czech Republic and Ordinary people and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) in Slovakia.

1 | **The social democratic parties**

– in a regional context

1.1. The performance of social democratic parties at the polls in East- Central-Europe

A look at the election results of the region's dominant social democratic parties over the past decade shows a consistently negative trend. By the evidence of the last three parliamentary elections, as well as the 2009 and 2014 EP elections in Central and Eastern European countries, **in the majority of the countries under review popular support for the social democratic parties declined significantly (see Table 1). Aside from the Croatian left's ability to "hold out", the left managed to attract new voters only in Romania.**

Table 1.

The performance of Central and Eastern European social democratic parties at the polls in three parliamentary and two EP elections.

Austria	2006	2008	2009 EP	2012	2014 EP
Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (The Social Democratic Party of Austria)	35,30 percent	29,30 percent	23,70 percent	26,80 percent	24,10 percent
Czech Republic	2006	2009 EP	2010	2013	2014 EP
Česká strana sociálně demokratická (Czech Social Democratic Party)	32,32 percent	22,38 percent	22,08 percent	20,45 percent	14,17 percent
Croatia	2007	2009 EP	2011	2014 EP	2015-2016
Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske (Social Democratic Party of Croatia)	31.20 percent	-	40.40 percent	29.93 percent	32,31%-33,82 percent
Poland	2007	2009 EP	2011	2014 EP	2015
Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (Democratic Left Alliance)	13.20 percent	12.34 percent	8.24 percent	9.44 percent	7.55 percent
Hungary	2006	2009 EP	2010	2014	2014 EP
Magyar Szocialista Párt (Hungarian Socialist Party)	43.21 percent	17.37 percent	19.30 percent	25.57 percent	10.90 percent
Romania	2004	2008	2009 EP	2012	2014 EP
Partidul Social Democrat (Social Democratic Party)	37.20 percent	34.16 percent	31.07 percent	60.1 percent	37.60 percent

Slovakia	2009 EP	2010	2012	2014 EP	2016
Smer – sociálna demokracia (Direction – Social Democracy)	32.01 percent	34.79 percent	44.41 percent	24.09 percent	28.28 percent

Note: SLD in 2015, MSZP in 2014, PSD in 2012 and SDP in 2011 ran in parliamentary elections as members of electoral alliances

In Austria, the Czech Republic and Poland we find a linear decline:

in these countries the rate of support for social democratic parties decreased after each election. In Austria, between 2006 and 2013 SPÖ's voter base declined from 35 to 27 percent. However, their shrinking support notwithstanding, the Austrian social democrats managed to remain in power throughout the period under review. The Czech socialists are in a somewhat similar position; despite losing ground in public surveys, they are in power to this day. In 2006 still one third of the electorate, in 2010 just 22 percent and in 2013 only one out of five Czechs voted for ČSSD that, as a result, in a period of seven years lost close to two-thirds of its voter base. The Czech social democrats faced the additional hurdle of having to compete for votes against a communist contender, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, a party that, unlike the social democrats, actually managed to slightly increase its voter base in the period under review. In a departure from the examples cited above, in Poland the social democrats were in a weak position already in the second half of the 2000s, sliding further as time went on: following the most recent elections, the Democratic Left Alliance (receiving 13 percent of the votes in 2007 and only 7.5 percent in 2015) shrank from medium-size to a small party and dropped out of the Polish parliament.

In Hungary, between 2006 and 2010 the voter base of MSZP, once a dominant force on the left, effectively collapsed, and after 2010

support for the party may be described as stagnant at best. This is true even if one considers that at the most recent parliamentary elections the parties of the left formed a coalition and received 26 percent of the votes cast, and even so their total count failed to match that reached by MSZP on its own eight years before. In 2006, the largest Hungarian leftist party won 43 percent of the votes, although following a series of domestic political scandals it suffered a huge loss of confidence within a short time, with devastating effect at the next parliamentary election: it managed to collect less than 20 percent of the votes, i.e., its support was halved and it went into a decline unprecedented in the entire region. In 2014, despite joining forces with the Democratic Coalition, Együtt-PM and the Liberals, it still only managed to appeal to 26 percent of the electorate, and lagged far behind Fidesz (considered a powerhouse in the region) winning 45 percent of the total votes cast. **The fact that following 2010 the left became extremely fragmented leaves MSZP with few options: a number of political parties compete to attract social democratic voters, while a single-round election system forces rival parties to cooperate.**

In Slovakia support for the social democrats has been on a roller coaster over the past decade. In 2010 SMER won over one-third of the votes in Slovakia, yet it was unable to form a government. In 2012, adding 9 percentage points, its 44 percent victory at the polls turned out to be one of the most outstanding achievements among leftist parties in the region and in the period under review. At the same time, at the next election in 2016 support for the party plunged below levels seen in both 2012 and 2010: its 28 percent showing at the polls represents a 16 percent drop within four years, the second largest decline, after MSZP's 2006–2010 collapse, between two parliamentary elections in the region.

The Croatian Social Democratic Party (SDP) followed a similar trajectory when, after robust growth over several years, it dropped to a low last seen a decade earlier. In 2007 30 percent of the electorate voted for the party, and four years later it managed to attract 9 percent more voters – albeit, at this time it did not receive sufficient support to form a government on its own, but only as a member of the Kukuriku coalition. Yet, in 2015 the electoral coalition led by the party managed to match only the results achieved eight years earlier, and at the 2016 early elections it won 33 percent, i.e., slightly fewer people voted for SDP than a decade earlier. Relative to the performance of other leftist parties in the region, the fact that it managed to preserve its voter base puts the Croatian social democratic party in a category of itself.

In the region the popular support of social democrats increased only in Romania. As early as 2004 and 2008, PSD won by an impressive level of electoral support of over 30 percent, receiving 37 and 34 percent, respectively. Then, in 2012, the social-liberal coalition led by the party all but doubled the number of votes received to 60 percent, seen as an unprecedented achievement not only among the region's social democratic parties, but in the entire European Union as well.

As opposed to parliamentary elections held at different dates, European parliamentary elections allow for a real-time comparison of popular support and its shifts for Central and Eastern European leftist parties. **In 2009 the social democrats had their best performance in Romania and Slovakia,** the two leading leftist parties winning close to one-third of the votes cast. The 24 and 23 percent received by the Austrians and the Czechs, respectively, is considered average at the regional level, while the Hungarian and Polish socialists did rather poorly, failing to capture even one fifth of the total votes.

In 2014, the EP-election results already hinted at the crisis facing the region's social democratic forces and, even as in Romania they won 37 percent, i.e., significantly consolidating their position, in other places they failed to improve on 2009 results to any significant degree. In Austria, while managing to hold on to the 24 percent reached five years earlier, in the V4-countries the socialists produced significant declines without exception. In Slovakia the percentage of the votes received, starting from an already relatively low level, dropped from 30 to 24 percent, in the Czech Republic from 22 to 14 percent, in Hungary from 17 to 11 percent and in Poland from 12 to 9 percent. In short, the most recent EP-election results reinforce trends reflected in the results of national elections that, with the exception of Romania, point in the direction of stagnation and/or decline in Central and Eastern Europe.

At the same time, it is important to point to a lack of correlation between the economic crisis erupting in 2008 and the electoral successes or failures of the region's social democratic parties.

The Austrian SPÖ has been in power since 2006, the Romanian Social Democratic Party (Partidul Socialdemocrat, PSD) managed to take over the government during the crisis, the Direction – Social Democracy (SMER–sociálna demokracia, SMER–SD) was the ruling party in Slovakia between 2006 and 2010 and managed to win the highest number of votes in 2010 as well, although, faced with a four-party right-wing coalition, it was forced into opposition and later managed to return to power. The Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická, ČSSD) and the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske, SDP) were not in a governing position when the crisis erupted, although later, in 2013 and 2011, they managed to form respective governments. The Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) is the only regional party whose performance at

the polls may have been affected by the economic crisis. The effect of the crisis on the Polish SLD is considered irrelevant in this context; the party had already collapsed back in the 2005 elections.

1.2. Central and Eastern European social democratic parties in government

Of the seven Central and Eastern European countries under review currently social democrats are in power in three countries. Based on this data, it is safe to say that social democrats are still capable of shaping political developments in the region, although it must be added that in all cases they exercise power with coalition partners standing on radically different ideological grounds. In Austria, SPÖ runs the country in a grand coalition with ÖVP (People's Party) and cooperation between the two parties goes back a long time. In Slovakia SMER governs as the strongest member over four-member, extremely heterogeneous coalition. Along with prime minister, Robert Fico's Social Democratic Party, the coalition also includes a Slovak nationalist party (SNS), a Slovak/Hungarian party with ties to the European People's Party (Most–Híd), and a liberal pro-business organization (SIET). In the Czech Republic, the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) governs in coalition with populist ANO and the Christian democratic KDU–ČSL party.

The Austrian socialists have been in power for the longest time (see Table 2), running the country as part of a coalition since early 2007 i.e., for 10 years without interruption. SPÖ is in its third consecutive term, last receiving a mandate from the electorate in the 2013

election. In Slovakia, SMER has been in power over the past four and a half years, managing to form of a government in 2012 and 2016 alike, i.e., the Slovak socialists are leading the country for the second consecutive term. In the Czech Republic, ČSSD rose to power three years ago, in 2013.

Table 2.

The number of years Central and Eastern European social democratic parties spent in office after 1990.

Country	Number of years in office	Form of government
Austria (SPÖ)	20	coalition
Czech Rep. (ČSSD)	11	Minority, and coalition
Croatia (SDP)	8	coalition
Poland (SLD)	8	coalition
Hungary (MSZP)	12	Coalition and minority
Romania (PSD)	14	single-party and coalition
Slovakia (SMER-SD)	9	Coalition and single-party

Source: own research

Aside from these, until recently leftist parties have been in government in two other regional countries. In Croatia the Croatian Social Democratic Party (SDP), and in Romania the Social Democratic Party (PSD) were in a governing position until 2015. In other words, in the Central and Eastern European region only in Hungary and Poland do we see leftist parties left without the opportunity govern in the past two parliamentary elections. The Hungarian Socialist Party lost

the elections in 2010 and was forced into opposition over six years ago. The social democrats are in the worst position in Poland, and here one must go back many years to find a leftist governing party: the last time the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) governed the country was between 2001 and 2005, i.e., it has been in opposition for over a decade and, in fact, today it is as a party without a single parliamentary mandate.

Based on the above overview it is apparent that, with the exception of Poland and Hungary, while in Central and Eastern Europe the left has lost political ground, in recent years and in the current political arena social democratic parties have remained dominant players with the potential to govern. If one extends the timeframe under review and looks at the quarter century since the regime change, the policy-shaping potential of the region's leftist parties is even more apparent when measured in the number of years in power.

Over the past 26 years, leftist governance has been prominent in Austria where the SPÖ–ÖVP coalition ruled the country for almost two decades, except the term between 2000 and 2006. The other leftist parties of the region filled governing positions for much shorter periods, although typically over at least two or three terms – in other words, for 30 or 50 percent of the time since 1990. **Based on the number of years in power, with 12 years Hungarian social democrats are ranked third in Central and Eastern Europe;** MSZP played the leading role in national politics between 1994–1998 and 2002–2010 over three full terms. **In Romania PSD ruled for a period of 14 years, while the Czech ČSSD currently in power may match MSZP based on the number of years at the helm. Slovakian SMER (born in 1999, a few years later than its sister parties) has been a prominent player in Slovakia's political life since the middle of 2000s and to date has ruled the country for nearly nine years.** If it completes its mandate running through 2020, it may join

the club of leftist forces with three terms already behind them. **Social democratic parties have been in power for the shortest time in Croatia and Poland:** Croatian SPD between January 2000 and December 2003 and, subsequently, between 2011 and 2015, and Polish SLD between 1993-1997 and 2001-2005, each over a period of eight years and two terms.

On the whole, both in respect to the time spent in office and its current governing position, the Austrian SPÖ is considered the most successful leftist force in the region for, since 1990, it had governed for 20 years and recently has been in power for nearly 10 years. **In contrast, social democracy has the weakest track record as a ruling force in Poland:** the Socialist party has been kept from power for over 10 years and in the past quarter century SDL managed to hold power for the shortest time, a total of only eight years.

1.3. Central and Eastern European social democratic parties – their sets of values, support base and rivals

In many cases, there is a contradiction between the region's social democratic parties' declared values and implemented public policies, and the rate of differences varies by policy areas. **In respect to economic policies, as a rule the parties promote socially sensitive programs that, however, usually remain but promises.** Once in power, however, in many cases the region's social democratic parties tend to pursue liberal economic policies. The two most vulnerable parties, SLD and MSZP, have exercised self-criticism concerning their respective economic

policies while in government, and in opposition have announced a shift to the left. Compared to their earlier more liberal platforms, in the crisis years SPÖ and PSD also moved left; both tried to overcome the negative effects of the crisis by implementing leftist measures. ČSSD's classic left-wing ideology on business is kept in check by its liberal coalition partner.

In respect to their cultural profiles, the parties are more consistent. **Taking their cues from Western social democratic parties, SPÖ and Croatian SDP subscribe to liberal, individualistic and post-materialistic ideals (e.g., feminism and LGBT)** and they also support the rights of various minorities – although for SDP its position comes at the cost of losing the votes of non-resident, typically conservative Croats. Similarly, MSZP has adopted liberal and secular values and, when in power, it governed in that spirit, although it takes a more cautious approach when it comes to various minorities. In the case of PSD and SMER–SD one finds a conservative consistency: the two parties represent culturally conventional and collectivist values (e.g., national identity and family). Even as ČSSD espouses liberal ideals, it refrains from putting these in the forefront. While the SLD applies a liberal rhetoric, in reality it is careful not to confront the Catholic Church, considering an attack on conservative values as an obstacle to growth in a highly conservative society.

None of the regional parties studied may be described as a genuine green party. Although to different degrees, in their rhetoric all parties support the cause of environmental protection and the principle of sustainable development. In Hungary and Austria this can be explained by the dynamics of the political balance of power: social democratic parties could keep pace with relatively successful green parties by supporting environmentally friendly policies, at least in theory.

However, more often than not, in position of power these values are regularly subordinated to economic objectives (see SPÖ, ČSSD, SMER–SD and PSD).

While all the parties support European integration, from time to time there are some critical voices. Since the accession of their respective countries, SPÖ, SMER–SD and PSD have regularly criticized the European Union for pragmatic reasons, typically when they could make political hay by doing so. In the Czech Republic, where the majority of the population holds strongly euro-skeptical views, the ČSSD has gradually toned down its openly pro-EU rhetoric. Since in Croatia anti-EU views do not reflect the ruling party's legitimate position, the SPD's extremely supportive attitude is seen as a natural stance to take. European integration is ardently supported by MSZP and SLD; the latter party's long-term plans also envision a European Federation.

When it comes to their views on immigration, most parties simply reject or take very guarded positions regarding toleration and social inclusion. (See Table 3). With the exception of MSZP and PSD, all parties of the region have criticized Germany's "open-door" policy and SLD has blamed Angela Merkel personally for the crisis. SPÖ and MSZP as a general rule, and some ČSSD politicians have pledged their support for a EU-wide management of the crisis, while the other parties communicate that in this case European solidarity would not work. Polish party president, Leszek Miller, Robert Fico Slovakian and Victor Ponta Romanian premiers explicitly opposed the distribution of migrants among member states. Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann in 2015, Zoran Milanović and Robert Fico last year called for heightened security along external state borders. Without exception, all bombastic slogans on immigration have been expressed by top politicians from several social democratic parties – albeit, pragmatic yet essentially

empathetic politicians must be distinguished from those waging anti-migrant campaigns. Werner Faymann and Victor Ponta compared Hungary's immigration policy to those enforced during the Holocaust. At a EU summit, Zoran Milanović declared that the EU couldn't force any policy on Croatia. Leszek Miller claimed that no one had asked the Europeans whether they wish to welcome anyone. PSD president, Liviu Dragnea, used harsh language when he announced his desire to spare Bucharest of a repetition of the tumultuous events seen in Budapest. Robert Fico waged an openly anti-migrant campaign, insisting that refugees following the Muslim faith have no place in Slovakia.

Table 3.

The position taken by Central and Eastern European social democratic parties during the migration crisis

	Criticize Merkel for her migration policy	Ready to cooperate with the EU on solving the migration crisis	Recommend the defense of the state's external borders
Austria (SPÖ)	✓	✓	✓
Czech Rep. (ČSSD)	✓	✓	✗
Croatia (SDP)	✓	✓	✓
Poland (SLD)	✓	✗	✗
Hungary (MSZP)	✗	✓	✓
Romania (PSD)	✗	✗	✗
Slovakia (SMER-SD)	✓	✗	✓

Source: Own research

A look at the social composition of the voter base of the parties under review shows that their supporters are typically older and young voters and blue-collar workers are increasingly underrepresented.

By now, SPÖ, MSZP, PSD and SMER–SD share the common feature of being supported by an aging population; moreover, parties in Austria, Hungary and Slovakia, as well as the ČSSD are steadily losing their younger voters. Croatian SDP is the only party bucking that trend, and as a ‘youthful’ party it is capable of addressing young and highly educated voters with post-materialistic values. However, the Croatian party finds it increasingly difficult to reach the working class, and SPÖ, ČSSD and MSZP face the same challenge even though – in contrast to the Croatian social democratic party – historically they would represent the interests of this social class. Voters of the parties under review do not show a clear pattern as to their economic position or place of residence. **SLD, MSZP and PSD supporters are characterized by a strong indifference to religious issues.**

Unless they pay sufficient attention to their social base, the proliferation of challengers poses a grave threat to social democratic parties. Due to the social democrats’ complacency and loss of credibility, far-right, new-left and liberal parties act as serious contenders. The former category includes Austrian FPÖ, Hungarian Jobbik and Slovak Kotleba – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko, ĽSNS (People’s Party Our Slovakia). These parties are successful in attracting young voters uncertain about their financial prospects in their future life. The group of green-leftist-liberal rivals includes Austrian Greens, Polish Razem and Hungarian Lehet Más a Politika (Politics Can Be Different, LMP), Együtt/Together and Párbeszéd/Dialogue; these parties attract financially more fortunate, typically young voters with post-materialistic values. Appealing to older voters, Demokratikus Koalíció (Democratic Coalition, DK) also poses a clear challenge to

MSZP. The threats are further exacerbated by such center-right parties as Tradition, Responsibility, Prosperity (TOP 09) in the Czech Republic, Modern (Nowoczesna.pl) in Poland, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and Network (#SIEŤ) in Slovakia, or the People's Movement Party (PMP) in Romania. In some places rivals also include populist forces, such as the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) in the Czech Republic and Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) in Slovakia.

2 | Social Democratic Parties in Central and Eastern Europe - Case studies

2.1. Austria – The Social Democratic Party of Austria (Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs)

The Social Democratic Workers' Party of Austria (SDAPÖ) was founded at the end of the 19 century, and re-established in 1991 as the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ); currently it is the country's oldest party in existence. Its evolution doesn't fit the standard Central and East European model as its area of operation lies west of the "Iron Curtain"; following World War II it did not fuse with the Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ), i.e., it has no communist "legacy". On the contrary: in 1945 it watered down its earlier Marxist tenets to move in the direction of social democracy and become a pragmatic mass party. With the exception of a single term (1966–70) it was in power on its own during the Cold War era (1970–1983) or in coalition

with the Austrian People's Party as its sole partner. The party reached the peak of its political power in the 1970s when 10 percent of the population (roughly 700,000 people) was dues-paying members.

With the exception of two terms (2000–06) Austria has been ruled by SPÖ since 1990; throughout that period the party managed to remain the majority partner in subsequent governments joining forces with ÖVP. Although the party finished first in the 1999 elections, following lengthy consultations between parliamentary parties SPÖ was sidelined and a new government was formed by the runner-up, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and third-place ÖVP. At the elections held in 2002 SPÖ's winning streak running since 1970 was broken; it came in second behind the winner ÖVP, which continued to govern in coalition with FPÖ. However, since 2006 SPÖ has recaptured the lead in the political race; while steadily losing popularity, the party has won all three parliamentary elections (2006, 2008 and 2013) and in each case chose ÖVP as its coalition partner.

Today, SPÖ is a governing party, as well as the largest party in the National Council (Lower House), and the second-largest party in the Federal Council (Upper House). Historically and by all measures, the party plays a dominant role in the Austrian political system, although its mobilizing capacity is on the decline. While until recently it has managed to mobilize voters against ÖVP, in absolute terms its appeal has faded in recent years. **Since the 1979 elections, the party has been unable to form a government on its own.** As, after the 1983–86 term, it would no longer enter into a coalition with FPÖ as a matter of principle, and it does not have the number of mandates required to govern even with the Austrian Greens on its side, **over the recent years the party has tied its political future ÖVP.** However, ÖVP looks at FPÖ as a potential coalition partner against SPÖ both in respect to

FPÖ's political platform and the size of its support base. Moreover, **FPÖ stands to challenge SPÖ on its own**; people with dwindling prospects, especially young workers seen as the "losers of globalization", vote for the far-right party in increasing numbers. **To some extent, a left-wing alternative to SPÖ is represented by KPÖ** (the Communist League of Austria) **and more threateningly by the Greens**. However, while the former enjoys substantial support only in Steiermark, the latter is capable of addressing post-materialistic members of the younger generation, something SPÖ has tried to do for a long time without much success.¹

Essentially, old age has come to define the electorate supporting Austrian social democrats. There is a generation gap between the supporters of SPÖ and the other parties, demonstrating that following the successes of the 1970s the party's platform and communication is on the way to becoming irrelevant and it has been unable to reinvent itself in terms of content and form alike. While historically the party is considered to represent the working class and to this day its supporters include a large number of low-skilled workers, **in the past few years blue-collar support for SPÖ has declined**, in part attributed to FPÖ's populist rhetoric.² **Typically, the average social democratic voter in Austria has no higher education and lives in urban centers** (e.g., Vienna, Burgenland or Carinthia). By today, the party has managed to overcome the city/country fault line, historically represented and perpetuated by the rivalry between SPÖ and ÖVP.³

1 Pelinka, Anton: 'Austria.' In: *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*. Eds: Jean-Michel de Waele, Fabien Escalonaés Mathieu Vieira, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 40.

2 Betz, Hans-Georg és Susi Meret: 'Right-wing populist parties and the working-class vote: What have you done for us lately?' In: *Class Politics and the Radical Right*. Ed: Jens Rydgren, Routledge, 2013. 107–108.

3 Aichholzer, Julian, Sylvia Kritzinger, Markus Wagner és Eva Zeglovits: 'How has Radical Right Support Transformed Established Political Conflicts? The Case of Austria.' In: *West European Politics*. Vol. 37(1), 2014. Published online: 2013 Aug. 5. doi: 10.1080/01402382.2013.814956

Regarding its economic philosophy, for the most part SPÖ has not represented social democratic values in all cases and in all areas. In respect to the ownership of the country's productive assets **it has never taken a strong stance on nationalization**, and in the 1980s and 1990s **it played a major role in setting off a wave of privatization**. In the years spent in opposition, it developed its economic policy under the slogan of "social justice", essentially standing for progressive taxation. **To manage the 2008 financial crisis, the government of Werner Faymann (2008–16) took steps to protect the labor market and society's more vulnerable groups, implemented fiscal belt-tightening and offered investment subsidies.** The first set of objectives has been served by a four-level progressive taxation and a consumption tax reduction, and the second set of objectives by infrastructural developments and support for research and development.

SPÖ's cultural policies reflect liberal views; the party is committed to modernization and the need to accept risks, it takes a pro-feminist stance and supports the fundamental rights of homosexuals and immigrants. **In recent years the party took responsibility for the role it played in the Holocaust** when a number of socialist party members welcomed the Anschluss and some of them even joined the Nazi party – the subject of a report published by the SPÖ in 2005.⁴ As party president (2008–16) Heinz Fischer made several critical remarks concerning the party's involvement in World War II stating, among others, that instead of being the first victim of Nazi aggression, Austria was in fact the first state to collaborate.⁵

4 DW: *Austria's Reds Check for Brown Spots*. <http://www.dw.com/en/austrias-reds-check-for-brown-spots/a-1649990-1>

5 *Der Standard: Falsche Opferrolle in österreichischer Unabhängigkeitserklärung 1945*. <http://derstandard.at/2407834/Falsche-Opferrolle-in-oesterreichischer-Unabhaengigkeitserklaerung-1945>

While far from being a typical green party, in principle SPÖ is receptive to the green agenda. In order to appeal to a growing number of citizens looking at environmental protection as a top priority, the party is working to develop a green profile; in theory, it subscribes to ecological objectives and, for instance, for years it has taken an anti-nuclear- energy position.⁶ At the same time, it supports industrialization and puts a priority on economic growth, placing SPÖ to the right of genuine green parties.

While SPÖ is committed to European integration, its support is not without conditions. In the early 1990s SPÖ campaigned for the country's accession to the EU, although in the past few years it expressed critical views on a number of occasions. For instance, in 2008 the party's leadership suggested that all major EU agreements should be ratified only after a referendum, even in cases where ratification by parliament would suffice.⁷ The party's representatives sitting in the European Council and the European Parliament tend to support pragmatic pro-EU policies without openly advocating the idea of a federal Europe. Typically, relative to its national standing SPÖ has a poor showing in EP elections. It is liable to oppose its European parliamentary faction; based on VoteWatch data, it votes with European social democrats in slightly over 90 percent of the cases, making it the fifth least loyal faction member in the European leftist bloc.⁸

SPÖ's attitude on immigration is essentially informed by its left-wing values, and in strategic matters its policies are shaped by ÖVP

6 *Wiener Zeitung: SPÖ adamant about anti-nuclear energy course.* http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/english_news/46290_SPOe-adamant-about-anti-nuclear-energy-course.html

7 *EurActiv: Eurosceptic chancellor to take lead in Austria.* <http://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/eurosceptic-chancellor-to-take-lead-in-austria/>

8 *DemSoc: The Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ).* <http://www.demsoc.org/2014/02/03/the-social-democratic-party-of-austria-spo/>

and FPÖ positions. Today, the party rejects anti-migrant attitudes and considers it important to defend the rights of Austria's Muslim community. **In contrast to ÖVP's pragmatic approach, initially the social democrats subscribed to *Willkommenskultur*. Former Chancellor Werner Faymann,** who in the fall of 2015 sharply criticized Hungary's anti-migrant measures, in 2016 **already argued for tighter controls along the borders of Austria and the Schengen Area under EU auspices.**⁹ In June, the next Federal Chancellor, Christian Kern had questioned the legitimacy of Austrian identity-based, far-right movements when they held street demonstrations against migrants. However, at a state meeting held in Budapest in July he already stated that following the implementation of more stringent immigration policies by Hungary fewer migrants are arriving in Austria and Germany, i.e., these two countries should support measures benefiting them.¹⁰

In short, historically SPÖ's economic policies have been dominated by liberal tendencies, offset by leftist measures implemented in the past few years; culturally it is a liberal, although not the typical green party. The party faces the danger that decades in power have made Austrian social democratic politicians 'smug' that, in turn, has led to the erosion of the party's support base, the postponement of its revitalization and allowed its political rivals to gain a foothold.

9 Politico: Austria suspends Schengen. <http://www.politico.eu/article/austria-suspends-schengen-border-checks-eu-migrants/>

10 Euronews: Austria's Kern: only lesson to be learned from Donald Trump is 'never dye your hair'. <http://www.euronews.com/2016/07/27/austrian-leader-only-lesson-to-be-learned-from-donald-trump-is-never-dye-your>

2.2. The Czech Republic – Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická)

The Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) is the Czech Republic's leading left-wing political force with a history going back to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In the first Czech Republic the ČSSD played a crucial role in the consolidation of democratic institutions, and in the years of Russian occupation its leaders attempted to preserve the country's democratic traditions from exile. Building on its historic legacy, following the Velvet Revolution the party gained new lease on life and in **the 1990s it became the most prominent leftist party in Czech political life.** For a long time, its traditional rivals included the right liberal-conservative Civil Democratic Party (ODS, marginalized following the 2013 elections) and from the left, The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) that, unique in the Central and Eastern European post-Soviet region, did not drop the 'Communist' moniker from its name.

In the early 1990s, preoccupied with the consolidation of the party, ČSSD lost to KSČM in the 1992 elections. In 1996, by the time of the first independent Czech parliamentary elections, under the leadership of Miloš Zeman the ČSSD quadrupled its mandates and became a serious, albeit, as yet unsuccessful challenger to Václav Klaus' center-right government coalition. By 1998 Zeman came out the winner of the Zeman-Klaus fight. However, as he failed to form a majority government, he was forced to sign an opposition agreement with Klaus. Accordingly, in return for a number of parliamentary posts Klaus made the commitment not to initiate the vote of no-confidence against the social democrats governing from a minority position. At the 2002 elections, ČSSD – by that time led by Vladimír Špidla – won again

and formed a government with two smaller center-right parties, the Christian and Democratic Union (KDU-ČSL) and the Freedom Union-Democratic Union (US-DEU). While in the 2006 and 2010 elections the social democrats performed well, they were unable to form a government coalition and were forced into opposition again against an ODS-led government. In 2013, in the wake of huge corruption scandals tied to ODS, the Bohuslav Slobotka-led ČSSD returned to power forming a coalition with KDU-ČSL and ANO, which replaced ODS as the most successful right-wing party. **However, the party had little reason to celebrate as its victory was due more to the collapse of the right than to any broad-based public support for ČSSD; the party's support base fell to 20.45 percent, well below the 25 percent benchmark.**

Regarding the social composition of its supporters, ČSSD has an extremely varied and homogeneous base with voters coming from all segments of Czech society. This is attributed to the party's rather loose ideological framework that has many common features with other parties.¹¹ Thanks to a support base with little commitment, **there is significant voter fluctuation that, in an already rather fractured Czech political scene, tends to harm ČSSD.** In many cases the party's supporters are siphoned off by new parties emerging right before the elections that, while receiving wide media coverage, rarely manage to achieve much. A case in point is the Party of Civic Rights founded by Zeman that, with its promise of direct democracy, took crucial votes from ČSSD, yet failed to cross the parliamentary threshold. In territorial distribution, typically the social democrats **do well outside large urban areas and postindustrial regions.** By now support for the party has

¹¹ Perottino, Michel; Martin Poláček: 'Czech Republic' in: *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*. ed. Jean-Michel De Waele, Fabien Escalona, Mathie Viera, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 420. o.

declined among the residents of the capital, large urban centers and the younger generation, who tend to identify with the promises of a youthful, competent political elite untainted of corruption, represented by TOP 09 and ANO, as opposed to tedious establishment politicians of ČSSD and even OSD.¹² This explains **the record-low support for both mainstream parties in the 2013 elections,** where neither formation managed to field a candidate to match engaging Karel – “agent 009” – Prince of Schwarzenberg.

In its social and economic policies, ČSSD is ranked among classic social democratic parties. It promotes a social market-economy consistent with the demands of sustainable development. While the party supports various forms of ownership, it gives preference to state ownership over privatization. **The state is seen as the active guardian of the free market, social rights, such as education, healthcare and social security.** Maintaining that the country’s development should not come at the expense of social welfare and families with children, **the party advocates progressive taxation.**¹³ 2013 campaign promises included the implementation of a more equitable tax system, minimum wage increases, higher taxation for the banking and the energy sectors and mandating the filing of financial statements by those with income above a certain level. Its declared platform notwithstanding, **once in power ČSSD typically pursues more liberal policies;** since 2013 this may be attributed to KDU-ČSL and ANO that, **as coalition partners, have opposed a number of ČSSD proposals,** such as the reform of the tax system.

12 *The Centre for Eastern Studies: The crisis of traditional parties in the Czech Republic*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2013-10-09/crisis-traditional-parties-czech-republic>

13 *Magyar Külügyi Intézet: Czech parliamentary elections: results and consequences*, http://kki.gov.hu/download/4/d9/b0000/Tanulmanyok_2010_13_A_cseh_k_percentC3_percentA9pvisel_percentC3_percent94h_percentC3_percentA1zi_v_percentC3_percentA1la.pdf

Even as the party takes **liberal views on cultural matters, due to the strongly conservative traditions of Czech society these positions are pushed to the back burner.**¹⁴ Nonetheless, the party promotes civil partnerships, it fights for the elimination of gender inequality and supports single mothers. With the emergence of the left-wing Green Party, **environmental issues have found their way into ČSSD's platform**, although as a rule these are subordinated to economic considerations, including support for nuclear energy. **While in the last two elections the Green Party failed to make the grade, it took important votes from the social democrats.** In the 2006 elections the Green Party accused the social democrats of plagiarism and, after just passing the parliamentary threshold, it joined the government coalition.

The ČSSD is a strong supporter of the Czech Republic's membership in the European Union. The party takes the position that the common currency and deepening integration would greatly contribute to the country's development.¹⁵ At the same time, the situation is made more complicated by the fact that since the 2008 crisis the majority of Czech society is characterized by Eurosceptic attitudes that has only deepened in response to the migration crisis. Based on 2016 surveys conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, **44 percent of the Czechs (10 percent more than the EU average) believe that the country's EU membership has more downsides than benefits, while 57 percent think of the EU as a risk factor.**¹⁶ All the same, prime minister Sobotka has stood up for the country's membership stating that **the EU is the**

14 Perottino, Michel; Martin Poláček: 'Czech Republic' in: *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*. ed. Jean-Michel De Waele, Fabien Escalona, Mathie Viera, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 428. o

15 CEE Identity: Czech Social Democratic Party, <http://www.ceeidentity.eu/database/manifestoesoun/czech-social>

16 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung: *The European Union Facing Massive Challenges – What are Citizens' Expectations and Concerns?*, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/12346.pdf>

best guarantee if the Czech Republic is to have stability, peace and prosperity. At the same time, calls for deeper integration have clearly been toned down in government communication and replaced with more critical voices.¹⁷

Regarding the issue of migration, **Sobotka has blamed Merkel for the situation created in Europe and rejected proposals for mandatory settlement quotas.**¹⁸ However, this does not mean that Sobotka would fail to express his country's readiness to find a swift solution for the EU's migration crisis or promote xenophobic ideas. This role has been assumed by the current president and the party's former leader, Miloš Zeman, who describes migrants as invaders. This, in turn, has been rejected by Sobotka, calling Zeman a populist politician legitimizing xenophobia.¹⁹ Throughout the country there are regular demonstrations against the EU and migrants, usually attended by Czech youth supporting the far-right Dawn - National Coalition in increasing numbers.

One of the characteristic features of the Czech party system is the presence of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, currently ČSSD's only viable challenger on the left. At the elections the party typically finishes third behind the social democrats and the most prominent right-wing force of the day. The 2013 elections, where they managed to win close to 15 percent of the votes cast, were one of the most successful for the Communists. For the most part, the party is successful in the rust-belt, where they can count on the votes of

¹⁷ *Daily Mail: Post-Brexit, Czech PM urges EU to respect states' rights*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/reuters/article-3663887/Post-Brexit-Czech-PM-urges-EU-respect-states-rights.html#ixzz4PS7vAX4n>

¹⁸ *Deutsche Welle: Czech Prime Minister chastises Merkel over refugee crisis*, <http://www.dw.com/en/czech-prime-minister-chastises-merkel-over-refugee-crisis/a-18935902>

¹⁹ *Český rozhlas: Czech top officials in war of words over migrant crisis*, <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/curraffrs/czech-top-officials-in-war-of-words-over-migrant-crisis>

small-town residents and the unemployed (as opposed to those living in the capital and large urban centers). This is explained by the party's nostalgia for the Soviet era, an attitude young people are unlikely to identify with. Therefore, the vast majority of the party's support comes from the population over the age of 60, who find it difficult to adjust to the new order emerging after the regime change.²⁰

2.3. Croatia – the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske)

The Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP) was founded in November 1990 as a successor to the League of Communists of Croatia, which had governed Croatia within the Yugoslav federation after World War II. Following the spring 1990 parliamentary elections the state party was officially dissolved in November after it finished only second behind the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Its name was changed to the Party of Democratic Changes, signaling that its members reject communist ideals. The party assumed its current name in April 1993, drawing the ire of another leftist dwarf party with the same name, although one year later the two parties merged.

SDP is currently the largest center-left party in Croatia and also – acting as a counterweight to HDZ – the other dominant party in the Croatian party system. For ten years following its foundation the party was in opposition, although in 2000 it successfully exploited

20 *Political Critique: Tensions in the Czech Republic* <http://politicalcritique.org/cee/czech-republic/2016/tensions-in-the-czech-republic/>

the political crisis created by HDZ and won the election as part of an electoral coalition. Through 2003, the government coalition led by Ivica Račan (SDP) included a number of other parties as well: aside from SDP, the social liberals (HSLs), a pensioners' party (HSS), the people's party (HNS-LD) and a regional party from Istria (IDS) were all given seats in the government. Subsequently, between 2003 and 2011, coalitions led by HDZ were back in power. However, **in 2011, running under the colors of the 'Kukuriku' electoral coalition bringing together the SDP, HNS-LD, the pensioners and the Istria party, Zoran Milanović (SDP) managed to win the elections** and form the 12th government of Croatia celebrating the 21st anniversary of its independence. In the field of earlier Croatian governments consistently failing to complete their respective term, this government proved to be the most resilient.

In the 2015 elections the race between the two largest political forces, HDZ (leading the Patriotic Coalition) and SDP (at the head of the electoral coalition 'Croatia is Growing'), resulted in a hung parliament that left a third party, the Bridge of Independent Lists (MOST) in the role of kingmaker that, after protracted negotiations, eventually formed the government with HDZ. However, soon afterwards the government faced a crisis of confidence, parliament dissolved itself and new elections were held in September 2016. Nonetheless, SDP (as the leading party of the People's Coalition) failed to take advantage of HDZ's fragile position despite finding itself in a unique situation considered auspicious by analysts. In respect to the vote count, the party lagged behind the winner HDZ by 2.5 percentage points, while MOST finished third; the 2015 scenario appears to repeat itself.

Aside from its 26-year power struggle with HDZ, for all practical purposes SDP has no real challengers in the Croatian political arena.

Typically, leftist or left-leaning parties have younger followers, are rather fragmented and represent the interests of specific social groups without a comprehensive demand for representation or a political agenda. **SDP's coeval, the social liberal HNS-LD**, for a long time the third largest party in parliament, **by now has become SPD's most loyal coalition partner. The Istria party, established in 1990 as well and representing regional minority rights, is also a close ally** that, with its strong regional roots, is a major champion of SDP. In 2016, the green Sustainable Development of Croatia party (ORaH, emerging on the political scene in 2013 as a potential challenger of SPD) failed to win a single seat in parliament.

The typical SDP voter is young, middle class, urbanized and for the most part lives in the country's north-eastern regions (in the capital, in Istria and for the most part on the mainland). The majority of the party's supporters are more educated than the average,²¹ although this trend has declined at the most recent elections: according to public opinion polls, in the fall of 2016 even those with higher education voted for HDZ in higher numbers. Supporters of the social democratic party **are more likely to come from one of the national minority groups**, first because historically the party has always had a multi-ethnic profile, and second because the first SDP-government (2000–2003) increased minorities' parliamentary representation by the force of law, and offered them positions in the government, the judiciary and state administration. On the other hand, **the party is unable to appeal to Croatian minorities living in the Diaspora**; typically, they support HDZ's nationalist politics. **Moreover, the typical SDP voter prioritizes economic problems over religious and ethnic issues and**, particularly

21 Ferić, Ivana és Vesna Lamza Posavec: *Opinion Polls, Voters' Intentions and Expectations in the 2011 Croatian Parliamentary Elections*. In: *European Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities*. Vol. 2(4), 2013. 13.

since the middle of the 2000s, **it is more likely to be young and/or a woman.**²²

SDP's economic policies are determined by leftist and liberal components in equal measure. When in power (2011–15), the party pursued privatization and economic liberalization policies, although in its 2015 platform leftist concepts already predominated: the party planned to implement radical VAT cuts, introduce family-subsidy measures aimed at helping women and young people to find jobs, as well as social pension.²³ **Compared to this, in 2016 measures aimed at stimulating both consumption and business growth received equal weight in the program** (simultaneously, the party dropped its plan for a radical VAT cut). Moreover, the protection of low- and medium-income earners, the introduction of progressive taxation (along with an across-the-board tax reduction) the downsizing of the state apparatus, the rationalization of the budget and measures to attract foreign capital were also put on the agenda.²⁴

In respect to its cultural profile, SDP relies heavily on Croatian anti-fascist traditions and the legacy of anti-fascist movements that emerged in World War II. Its stance becomes all the more relevant in light of the rhetoric of HDZ hardliners reflecting the nationalist narrative of the Balkan war.²⁵ **In addition, the party devotes special attention to the protection of minority groups and workers, to**

22 Pickering, Paula és Mark Baskin: 'What is to be done? Succession from the League of Communists of Croatia'. In: *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*. 41, 2008.

23 *Total Croatia News: Comparison of Economic Manifestos of HDZ and SDP*. <http://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/1153-comparison-of-economic-manifestos-of-hdz-and-sdp>

24 *Total Croatia News: HDZ and SDP Debate Their Economic Ideas*. <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/item/13674-hdz-and-sdp-debate-their-economic-ideas>

25 Pavlavković, Vjeran: 'Remembering War the European Way: Croatia's Commemorative Culture on the Eve of EU Membership.' In: *Croatia and the European Union: Changes and Development*. Eds: Pero Maldini és Davor Pauković, Routledge 2015. 130–131.

gender equality and also supports same-sex marriage.²⁶ In its 2016 platform, SDP promised the “separation” of politics and culture through the elimination of political pressure on state-run radio and television channels, the democratization of the management of media and cultural institutions and increasing the autonomy of cultural councils. Moreover, the coalition planned to establish social-cultural centers and the decentralization of cultural programs, with financing coming from a EU fund.

SDP is not a typical green party. In principle it supports the need for environmental protection, although this is not unique in itself as its position is shared by all the other parties in the political arena. **Splitting from SDP in 2013, ORaH, established as a genuine green party, managed to exploit this ‘missing link’ in SPD’s platform,** and in the 2014 European parliamentary elections it won a single mandate (by comparison: the ‘Croatia is Growing’ electoral coalition led by SDP and HDZ’s collision managed to win four and six mandates, respectively). However, today none of the green parties, ORaH being the largest one today, have a seat in Parliament.

Regarding its political ties to the EU, the SPD occupies a consistently and uniquely pro-EU position. The party is a member of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, and during its last term in office (2011–15) it did not set the date for introducing the euro. In Croatia SDP was the first to support membership, and in 2011, Milanović promised to prepare the country for accession to the EU as one of his major objectives. In this context it is worth noting that **SDP is in competition with HDZ in developing the image of the ‘most European’ party** and also tries to present itself as the only party deserving credit for the

26 Karolina Leaković: *Political Party Quotas in the Croatian Social Democratic Party*. <http://www.quotaproject.org/fr/CS/Croatia.pdf>

country's successfully accession – in the hope of attracting young, urban and highly educated members of society. With time, its ambition created a situation where it was forced to cover all pro-EU positions as to make itself attractive to a variety of potential coalition partners. **Pro-EU positions have gained such preponderance in the Croatian party system** that, by now, many people look at euro skeptical parties as pariahs that promote anti-establishment policies.²⁷

In respect to the migration crisis developing over the past few years, the party takes a pragmatic view. While the party attacked Germany's 'open door' policy, it was equally critical of Hungary's decision to close its borders, and accused Serbia of exporting migrants to Croatia.²⁸ **In response, last September Milanović barred Serb citizens from entering Croatia.**²⁹ By June that year, on a bridge connecting Croatia and Serbia a gate was erected to "prevent the entry of illegal immigrants and end the operation of smugglers".³⁰ **To stop "Croatia becoming a migrant hotspot", last September premiere Milanović announced the policy of moving forward** where the state provides food and medical assistance to those in need, and then lets them pass through the country.³¹ At a conference, attended by the representatives of 11 countries, held last October on the coordination of migrants passing through the West-Balkan migration route, Milanović took a rather

27 Raos, Višeslav: 'Transformation of the Croatian Party System in the Process of EU Accession.' In: *Croatia and the European Union: Changes and Development*. Eds: Pero Mladinić és Davor Pauković, Routledge 2015. 169–170.

28 *EU Observer*: Economy, refugees on voters' minds in Croatia. <https://euobserver.com/political/131010>

29 *The Telegraph*: Refugee crisis: Croatia seals border crossings with Serbia. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/hungary/11873012/Refugee-crisis-Hungary-declares-victory-in-border-strategy-as-migrants-head-to-Croatia-instead.html>

30 *Balkan Insight*: Croatia Erects Serbian Border Fence to Deter Migrants. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/croatia-suddenly-raises-fence-on-serbian-border-06-30-2016>

31 *The Guardian*: Croatia 'will not become a migrant hotspot' says prime minister. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/18/croatia-refugees-zoran-milanovic-migrant-hotspot>

isolationist position when he stated that in the name of finding a common solution, "There will be no obligations for Croatia ... not a single one".³²

2.4. Hungary – Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt)

The Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) came into being on October 7, 1989 as a successor to MSZMP (the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party). After much deliberation over whether to accept a role as a successor to MSZMP, the party finally decided that it was in its interest to accept the consequences of political continuity given the social embeddedness and infrastructural background of its predecessor. In spite of this legal continuity, the formation of MSZP represented a significant change in direction: the Socialists accepted not only the multi-party system but also a limited, "humanized" version of capitalism, and considered themselves as a part of the family of Western European social democratic parties.

In terms of its electoral results in the post-regime-change period, **MSZP may be described as the Hungarian party most successful in-between two failures; apart from a weak performance in 1990, it always achieved first or second place at parliamentary elections.** In 1994 it stopped being a small party and became a key player in the Hungarian party system when it received nearly 33 percent of votes and 54 percent of parliamentary seats. Even though it gained an

³² Politico: Western Balkan countries agree to work together on migration. <http://www.politico.eu/article/commission-migration-proposal-draws-fire-merkel-refugee-merkel-junker/>

absolute majority, MSZP decided to form a coalition government with the liberals in order to bolster its legitimacy. In 1998 MSZP performed similarly well, ranking first out of all the parties in terms of list votes, yet it lost the elections to a right-wing alliance. After four years in opposition and following an intense election campaign, in 2002 MSZP achieved its largest ever number of votes, which proved just about sufficient for a win. In 2006, MSZP and Fidesz fought a similarly tight race, and again there was once only a 1 point difference in list votes, to the advantage of the Socialists. Given such tight competition, MSZP was unable to achieve a majority on its own in either election and, in both, it entered into a coalition with SZDSZ (Alliance of Free Democrats), a liberal party that barely managed to clear the 5-percent parliamentary threshold.

The summer of 2006 was a turning point for MSZP as its support started to weaken in the wake of austerity measures introduced by the second Gyurcsány government; the party's indicators declined steeper than at any other time in the previous ten years.

Ferenc Gyurcsány's leaked speech at Őszöd made the earlier loss in popularity permanent. This was followed by slower and gradual erosion, and the continued deterioration of the situation led to, first, the resignation of Prime Minister Gyurcsány in March 2009 and then to a serious defeat at the polls in 2010. At the 2010 elections MSZP lost 58 percent of its voters of four years before, and its 19.3 percent showing only permitted it to come in ahead of the radical Jobbik and create the largest opposition fraction. **MSZP failed to move up from the mid-size party category in the 2014 elections either: even in alliance with several left-wing and liberal political parties, it achieved a mere 26 percent.** Between 2010 and 2016, three successive party chairmen were unable to achieve lasting improvements in the support for MSZP.

After the regime change, the Hungarian party system was first characterized by a multiplicity of parties that with time evolved into a two-party structure, which proved to be permanent. However, the 2010 elections significantly reshuffled the bipartisan system, as protest parties emerged on both the left and the right. This is attributable mostly to dissatisfaction with mainstream parties and an overall lack of trust in the entire political system riven by corruption and other scandals. **MSZP was the worst affected by these trends: losing their earlier status as the main opposition party, it was challenged both from the far-right and within the left.** Instead of the left-versus-right rivalry of the preceding period, MSZP now had to face opponents on three fronts:

- 1. Its politics continues to be determined primarily by its opposition to the government policies of Fidesz–KDNP.**
- 2. Far-right Jobbik may markedly differ from MSZP in its ideology, yet its program contains a number of left-wing elements that are akin to those of the Socialists, enabling it to reach left-wing voters as well. Jobbik's progress towards a people's party status may represent a further challenge for MSZP, as Jobbik may now offer an alternative to the dissatisfied opposition voters who so far have been unwilling to support it due to its extremism.** Moreover, Jobbik positions itself as an anti-establishment party against not only the governing party but MSZP as well, as it competes for the position of main opposition party.
- 3. MSZP's most urgent challenge lies in the fragmentation of the left. Following 2010, several parties with social democratic and liberal values entered politics to offer left-leaning voters an alternative to a crisis-ridden MSZP, from which they had**

distanced themselves. The Democratic Coalition (DK) was the first to be created when a platform of MSZP left and became an independent party in 2011. They were followed by Együtt ("Together"), which had started out as a left-wing umbrella organization and was later, in 2013, established as a party by a number of liberal and left-wing movements. The third new left-wing grouping is Párbeszéd Magyarországért ("Dialogue for Hungary"), which split off from the Lehet Más a Politika party ("Politics Can Be Different", LMP) in 2013; its members decided to leave LMP after that party refused to enter into an alliance with Együtt. Although rooted in left-wing traditions, these organizations have adopted new-left and liberal ideologies and, unlike MSZP's, their self-definition is not predicated solely on a social democratic value system. The voters of these parties also tend to switch allegiance from one to the other. **The fragmentation of the left thus results in a division of voters with the negative consequence that by now MSZP has to compete for solid left-leaning voters as well.** The party continues to be the most socially embedded organization on the left, it has the largest organizational and institutional base, and it enjoys greater support on its own than all the other three organizations combined. Nevertheless, the existence of left-wing rivals entails a significant loss of votes and prestige for MSZP as a result of the divisions on the left.

MSZP's party membership is declining and inactive: while the party did not release official figures in 2016, estimates put its member count at around 15 to 20 thousand, which is still high within the left, although far-right Jobbik already has as many members as the leading force on the left³³. MSZP's membership is dominated by men, representing

33 *Népszabadság: Kezd összeesni az MSZP, a párt inkább hallgat a taglétszámról. (On the Way to Collapse, MSZP Prefers to Stay Silent on Membership Figures.)* <http://nol.hu/belfold/kezd-osszeesett-az-mszp-a-part-hallgat-a-tagletszamrol-1625233>

over 60 percent. **It is a chronic problem that MSZP is not an attractive choice at all for younger generations, so that the party is grappling with the major problem of an aging voter base: almost half of its voters are over 60 years old.** At the same time, MSZP members are highly educated: as of 2011, 40 percent of MSZP members had university or college degrees and one-fourth had graduated from secondary school³⁴.

MSZP entered the elections in the 2010's with an election platform of a left-wing people's party critical of the liberal orientation pursued in the Gyurcsány era. By proposing a role for the state and standing up for the less fortunate members of society, as well as focusing on employment and social welfare issues, in terms of its economic policies the party tried to return to a reality experienced by its voters.

Concerning environmental issues, MSZP politicians and voters are essentially in agreement: **while they recognize the urgency of green issues, they are not among the most fervent supporters.** Nevertheless, MSZP has accorded greater importance to green matters in recent years, treating the question as a shared minimum in a potential cooperation with new left-wing and green forces.

MSZP is a secular party that rejects any rapprochement between the state and the church. MSZP sees a political opportunity in the culturally liberal area of gender equality; not only MSZP voters but also most people in Hungarian society are closer to MSZP's position on this matter. **Also, MSZP rejects all forms of exclusion, discrimination and incitement of hatred. Socialist voters, however, are also characterized by strong anti-gypsy sentiment, which creates a gulf**

34 MSZP: *Egy összetartó Magyarországért (For a United Hungary)*. Budapest: MSZP, 2011.

between the more liberal approach of the elite and the attitudes of the supporters³⁵. The party encountered similar problems in 2015–2016 concerning migration. Similarly to right-wing voters, a significant proportion of Socialist voters oppose immigration and reject the more tolerant liberal approaches to this question³⁶; this has been a considerable concern for the party leadership and often results in confusion regarding positions and communication on the subject.

MSZP has been a stable supporter of Euro-Atlantic integration over the past twenty years and, not surprisingly, **Hungary's continued membership in the European Union and support for further integration constituted key elements in its programs in the 2010's.** MSZP voters favor EU membership: in 2016, three-quarters would have voted for membership.

2.5. Poland – Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej)

In 1991 an electoral alliance of socialist and social democratic parties was created in Poland under the name “Democratic Left Alliance”. This coalition included the predecessor of today's Democratic Left Alliance, a party called Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SdRP). SdRP was the successor to the Polish United Workers' Party

³⁵ Ipsos: A Jobbik táborában mérséklődött a cigányellenesség (Antiziganism Decreasing in Jobbik's Camp) <https://pcblogger.atlatszo.hu/2014/07/17/a-jobbik-taboraban-merseklodott-a-ciganyellenesség/>

³⁶ Závecz Research: Szétrobbantja az MSZP-tábor a kvótanépszavazás? (Quota Referendum to Burst MSZP Camp?) http://www.hetek.hu/belfold/201608/szetrobbantja_az_mszp_tabor_a_kvotanepszavazas

(PZPR), the state party until 1989. As soon as it was established, SdRP took over PZPR's infrastructure; while this granted it a competitive advantage over the smaller parties newly formed at the time, in the long term it proved to be damaging for its reputation. The party therefore rejected communist ideology right at the start and openly declared its support for a democratic political system; in 1999 it adopted the name it is known by today. **To this day the party is unable to shake off the "post-communist" label due to a party membership inherited predominantly from PZPR and the series of scandals associated with its communist past.** In one such scandal in 1996, revelations about the earlier KGB connections of left-wing prime minister Józef Oleksy led to his resignation. In the Rywin case of 2004, articles appeared in mainstream media highlighting corruption in media policy and suggesting that prime minister Leszek Miller and a number of leading politicians from SLD were involved. This also exposed the relationships the party maintained with former communist political functionaries and ultimately led to the prime minister's resignation.

SLD's electoral history is characterized by growing popularity up to 2001 and gradual decline subsequently. The party has been in government for eight years out of the twenty-six years since its formation. At the first free, democratic elections (1991), the electoral coalition achieved the second largest number of votes, earning it a mere 12 percent of support in a highly fragmented party system (a total of 29 parties were elected to Parliament). **SLD came to government first in 1993: it received one-fifth of votes and formed a coalition with the Polish People's Party (PSL).** At the next elections (1997) it lost to Solidarity Electoral Action, an alliance of the right-wing opposition, even though it achieved better results than four years earlier. **The party achieved its best election outcome in 2001, in an electoral alliance with the Workers' Union (41 percent), and formed its second, and**

so far last, government until 2005 with the Workers' Party and PSL (which left the coalition in 2003).

The party went into a freefall after the millennium. In 2004 SLD's popularity dropped below 10 percent, mostly as a result of the Rywin case. Prime Minister Leszek Miller resigned, and some prominent SLD politicians formed a new party (Social Democracy of Poland, SDPL); SLD returned only a fourth of its previous membership to Parliament at the next elections in 2005. It entered the elections in 2007 as a member of the alliance of center-left parties called "Left and Democrats", which received a mere 13 percent of the votes cast. SLD entered the 2011 elections alone and received 5 percent fewer votes. **The "United Left" electoral alliance formed for the elections in 2015** by SLD and Your Movement (TR, which had grown out of the Palikot Movement), Labor United (UP) and the Greens (PZ), **did not get into Parliament.**

SLD's role within the party system has evolved differently from other left-wing parties in the region; in this the post-communist label appears to be the decisive factor. After the regime change, the parties emerging from the Solidarity Movement did not wish to ally themselves with SLD, which **significantly curtailed its options for a coalition:** in the nineties, it managed to ally itself only with PSL, an agrarian party. **As the largest left-wing force, however, it was able to exert influence on the internal dynamics of other left-wing formations** that were similarly divided on the question of whether to ally themselves with the post-communist party or not; SLD thus managed to cause several of these alliances to dissolve.³⁷ **SLD remains the largest left-wing force in Poland although Razem, a new and**

37 Paczeński, Anna: 'Poland'. In: *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*. Eds: Jean-Michel de Waele, Fabien Escalona and Mathieu Vieira, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 516.

dynamically growing left-wing party has appeared as a potential challenger. Formed in the early months of 2015, the party has a horizontally structured organization, supports left-wing economic and social policies as well as culturally liberal values. **Razem supporters tend to be potential SLD voters, highly educated city dwellers in their thirties,** and while the party failed to enter Parliament in 2015, it has already gained a substantial support base (3.6 percent of the votes) in spite of its relatively brief political career thus far.³⁸ **SLD has been challenged successfully from the center as well, by Modern (Nowoczesna.pl), also founded in 2015;** with its neoliberal program calling for a reduction of the role of the state, it was the fourth most successful party and now has representatives in the Sejm.

A dominant feature of SLD's voter base is a lack of religiosity. In spite of its left-wing profile, the party managed to build a rather wide social base in the nineties as it successfully addressed market-friendly and right-wing groups alike. Its main supporters were middle class public sector employees and pensioners. **Its voter base is now limited to persons in their thirties or above, typically intellectuals or highly skilled workers, resident of major (although not the largest) cities. Economic position does not appear to be a defining feature of these voters.**³⁹

The economic policy of the party reflects left-wing values only in theory. The first SLD government (1993–97) continued liberal finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz's (1989–91) shock therapy

38 *Kettősmérce: A semmiből építik fel az újbóloldalt Lengyelországban („New Left Built from Scratch in Poland”).* http://kettosmerce.blog.hu/2016/10/16/a_semmibol_epitik_fel_az_ujbaloldalt_lengyelorszagban

39 *Pacześniak, Anna: 'Poland'. In: The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union. Eds: Jean-Michel de Waele, Fabien Escalonaés Mathieu Vieira, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 515.*

of mass privatization and the deregulation of the financial sector as well as public policies leading to unemployment and a rise in social inequality. **In the second SLD government (2001–05), Leszek Miller introduced an essentially flat-rate tax system of 19 percent,** significantly contributing to the alienation of former social democratic voters. **In recent years, SLD has shifted its economic policy leftwards:** the party now advocates raising the minimum wage, free public and higher education, European-level public health care and a progressive tax system more generous to less privileged groups.

In Poland the character of political parties is determined primarily by their cultural value choices. In this aspect, SLD may be regarded as a liberal party. The party supports gender equality in business, politics and society and proposes governmental instruments to further such equality (for instance by improving child care institutions in order to enable women's reintegration into the labor market). It considers **sexual orientation and reproduction a private matter** where everyone has the right to make their own decision, rather than one to be regulated and solved at the societal level. **However, these principles have not always been put into practice:** in government, SLD failed to grant the right to abortion, mostly due to the powerful influence of the Catholic Church. **The history of its relations with the Church is shaped by its communist legacy:** when first established, the party was fiercely anti-clerical and exhibited religious intolerance, whereas later it sought to avoid open confrontation for pragmatic reasons.⁴⁰

Green values and environmentally aware practices are not a significant part of the SLD profile as it takes a pragmatic view of these issues. The party has developed a positive view regarding the concept of an environmentally friendly economy, primarily by supporting the transition

40 Marjorie Castle: 'Poland.' In: *Politics in Europe*, 6th edition, Sage, 2015. 616–617.

to renewable sources of energy. The inconsistencies in its values are demonstrated when one considers that, while in opposition, SLD had criticized the governing parties for their environmentally friendly policies.

SLD is characterized by a pro-EU attitude. The party was highly supportive of EU accession in the nineties and is markedly enthusiastic about the future of the European Union today; it even envisions a federal Europe. The party is an unreserved supporter of joining the Euro area.⁴¹

SLD takes a critical stance on immigration similar to that of the Law and Justice party (PiS). Prior to the refugee crisis, it tended to approach this phenomenon from a human rights perspective, mostly calling for the protection of refugees' rights by preventing abuses of the law and thwarting human traffickers, and for the social integration of refugees.⁴² **The party changed its position, however, when the crisis intensified:** Leszek Miller declared last November that Poland was not willing to accept anybody and said that no one in Europe had been asked whether they were willing to live with the influx of refugees in such volumes. The party leader also called German chancellor Angela Merkel the greatest parasite in Europe for introducing an open-door policy, which he claimed was causing Europe immense damage.⁴³ **However, as the party has not had a realistic chance of entering power at any time in the last decade, among others it has failed to develop a detailed program for handling the refugee crisis.**

41 Cesareo Rodriguez-Aguilera de Prat: *Political Parties and European Integration*. Translated from Spanish by Jed Rosenstein. Peter Lang, 2009. 123.

42 Materska-Sosnowska, Anna: *The Crisis of Social Democracy in Poland: A New Start for the Left?* <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/igp/ipg-2010-4/materska-sosnowska.pdf>

43 *The News: Poland's new cabinet to make U-turn on refugees over Paris attacks?* <http://www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/228958,Polands-new-cabinet-to-make-Uturn-on-refugees-over-Paris-attacks>

In recent years SLD has taken a rather ambivalent attitude to leftist values. When in government, it pursued liberal economic policies, whereas on the matter of migration it articulated explicitly right-wing views even in opposition. It has been unable to fill the political gap that a left-wing or liberal party could occupy in Poland against the religious and conservative right.

2.6. Romania – Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat)

The Romanian Social Democratic Party has a convoluted history of four transformations in the twenty-seven years since its establishment. Even so, many still believe its political image is marked by its post-communist heritage. It was during the Romanian revolution of 1989 that its legal predecessor, the National Salvation Front (FSN) was established by politicians leaving the Romanian Communist Party in rejection of Ceaușescu's abuse of power and economic policies. The resulting radical nationalist party even resorted to violence (for instance during the anti-government demonstrations in 1990 and 1991, when it transported miners to Bucharest to break up the mostly peaceful demonstrations, resulting in deaths), but after its hardliner members left, the Democratic National Salvation Front (FDSN) was created in 1992. Just one year later, this new formation then merged with four other parties, the Party of Romanian Democratic Socialists (PDSR), the Social Solidarity Party, the Republican Party and the Cooperatist Party, and adopted the name Party of Social Democracy in Romania (PDSR). **In its current form, the party was created in June 2001** following the merger of PDSR and the Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSDR).

PSD (or one of its predecessors) has been in government for a total of fourteen years since the first free and democratic elections in Romania (1990). Over this period, it has entered into coalitions with a variety of parties from the far-right to the far-left; it governed in coalition with the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ) for nine months in 2014 after the previous government coalition broke up with the withdrawal of one of the parties (National Liberal Party, PNL). The 1990 parliamentary elections were an exception: at the time, FSN achieved a two-thirds majority and also won the presidential elections easily. Nevertheless, inner tensions within the party made it unfit to govern, and new elections were called in 1992. The party, now called FDSN, achieved a relative majority and formed a government, to which it admitted in 1994 the chauvinist Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR), the far-right irredentist Greater Romania Party (PMR) and the far-left Workers' Party. The government was divided by clashes among the coalition partners and economic indicators declined throughout the four years of its rule, so the party lost the elections in 1996 and remained in opposition until the millennium.

The party entered the **elections in 2000** as PDSR and obtained a relative majority; **leading the "Social Democratic Pole of Romania" coalition, it governed Romania for four years with PSDR** and the Humanist Party of Romania (PUR). At the 2004 elections the largest number of votes went to PSD and PUR but the other parties in the electoral alliance switched at the last moment to the Justice and Truth Alliance, thus making the latter electable to government. In 2008 PSD once more received the largest proportion of votes but remained the second force in Parliament behind the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL) largely due to the earlier modification of the electoral system. **At the 2012 elections, the Social Liberal Union (USL) led by PSD**

achieved an absolute majority, resulting in a coalition between the social democrats and the Centre Right Alliance (ACD), i.e. PNL, and PUR's successor, the Conservative Party (PC). The coalition remained in power until its collapse in 2015.

Although PSD is the largest party in Romania today, it spent all but the first two of its fourteen years in government under pressure to form coalitions. In the highly fragmented and constantly changing Romanian party structure this led to the emergence of an extraordinary number of different coalitions; the high-amplitude coalition fluctuations of the early years were later replaced by a more balanced, centrist attitude of a mainstream party. **Nevertheless, due to the idiosyncratic dynamic of this system where raw political interests apparently bridge ideological gulfs between parties with ease, any party may be a challenger and a potential coalition partner at the same time.** PNL, for instance, which is currently the second largest party in Parliament and held power while PSD was in opposition, governed Romania together with PSD from 2012. In 2014, however, PNL left the government because Social Democrat prime minister Victor Ponta failed to support the party's presidential nominee, Klaus Iohannis, and instead entered the race himself. **Center-right PNL is the second most popular party in the country**, due largely to support in the western, central and north-eastern regions of the country. It was able to mobilize the majority of Bucharest's traditionally right-leaning citizens at the municipal elections this summer but **the popularity of this highly divided party has been declining across the country in recent years.**⁴⁴

The People's Movement Party (PMP), which was established in 2013 and is seen as the party of Traian Băsescu, former head of state

44 *Balkan Insight: Romanian Social Democrats Win Local Elections.* <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/low-turnout-in-romania-s-local-elections-06-06-2016>

between 2004 and 2014, successfully absorbed one of the old allies of PSD, the National Union for the Progress of Romania (UNPR) in July 2016. PMP's fundamentally Christian democratic–liberal profile was supplemented with leftish elements, offering an alternative to disaffected PSD voters; yet its popularity was only around 6 percent, according to a September 2016 survey by 'Avangarde', an opinion polling firm.⁴⁵ Currently ranked as the fourth largest party, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) is barely a year old and was created by the merger of the Liberal Reformist Party (PLR) and PC; it works in alliance with PSD as a, for now, minor allied satellite party. RMDSZ, which is the fourth largest party in Parliament today, represents the interests of the Hungarian minority and its support within Romania is therefore circumscribed. Far-right PMR has not been represented in Parliament since 2008, whereas the nationalist and populist People's Party–Dan Diaconescu (PP–DD) merged in 2015 into UNPR, which has been fully subsumed into PMP.

An analysis of PSD voters reveals that **a large part of Romanian society continues to be characterized by an aversion to the left. The majority of PSD voters are elderly, and two thirds are pensioners or unemployed. PSD voters active on the labor market tend to be employed in the public sector. Two thirds of the party's supporters have secondary school education**, while the proportion of degree holders is below 10 percent. **Around half of the supporters live in villages and less than one-fifth live in cities; Bucharest citizens, who represent around a tenth of all voters, are mostly right-leaning, although support for the left is slowly increasing. Most voters are indifferent to questions of religion.**⁴⁶

45 *Romania Journal: Opinion poll: PSD and PNL top political preferences.* <http://www.romaniajournal.ro/opinion-poll-psd-and-pnl-top-political-preferences/>

46 Soare, Sorina: 'Romania'. In: *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*. Eds: Jean-Michel de Waele, Fabien Escalona és Mathieu Vieira, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 536.

PSD's economic policy was initially predominantly liberal, whereas today it is marked by leftist features. A program favoring a state-controlled economy would not have been popular **in the atmosphere of the period following the regime change**, which, compounded by pressure from international creditors and the EU, caused **the party to turn towards certain liberal economic tenets. Following its reelection in 2012, however, PSD has introduced a number of left-wing measures:** it significantly increased the wages of public sector workers and introduced several new types of taxes and duties, the petrol tax affecting the largest number of people. It also introduced a progressive tax system, increased VAT on luxury goods and reduced it on basic consumables; it also removed taxes on low pensions.

Having never adopted liberal values, culturally PSD is not a typical Central and Eastern European left-wing party. In Romania, a wide segment of society does not identify with post-materialistic views and it would be impossible at this point in time to win elections with a program largely predicated on such values.⁴⁷ **Green values also fall into this category;** Ponta supported the Roșia Montană Project aimed at the exploitation of the gold and cyanide reserves of that mountain and is opposed to the shale gas extraction plans proposed in recent years; initially, he supported these plans but later switched his support to the Black Sea natural gas industry, which is considered much more damaging for the environment.⁴⁸

47 Soare, Sorina: 'Romania'. In: *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*. Eds: Jean-Michel de Waele, Fabien Escalona és Mathieu Vieira, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 540.

48 *Romania Libera*: Ponta: Inițial, eram împotriva exploatării de la Roșia Montană, pentru că Băsescu susținea proiectul. <http://www.romanialibera.ro/politica/institutii/ponta--initial--eram-impotriva-exploatarii-de-la-rosia-montana--pentru-ca-basescu-sustinea-proiectul-312178>; Mediafax: Ponta: Se pare că nu avem gaze de șist, ne-am bătut foarte tare pe ceva ce nu avem. <http://www.mediafax.ro/economic/ponta-se-pare-ca-nu-avem-gaze-de-sist-ne-am-batut-foarte-tare-pe-ceva-ce-nu-avem-13519457>.

Although PSD has supported a pro-EU discourse since 1990, it became a full member of the Party of European Socialists only in 2005, after a long series of thwarted attempts. During its EU accession process, Romania made an effort to comply with all the recommendations of the European Commission but **ever since its accession in 2007 it has responded with increasing antagonism to the Commission's reports on the country and the criticisms of the party's practices regarding the rule of law. Nevertheless, Ponta has reiterated at several media events that the EU accession of the West Balkans states is essential for progress in the region** and that his party therefore supports further European integration through the accession of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.⁴⁹

PSD takes a pragmatic position on today's migration crisis. Ponta announced last September that Romania was able to care for only 1500 refugees and would accept more only if it was allowed to join the Schengen zone.⁵⁰ Adrian Năstase, who had served as prime minister between 2000 and 2004, wrote in his blog on the geopolitical aspects of the migration issue and claimed that EU solidarity had failed right from the start and that Romania would have to work with the V4 to reject the refugee quotas if it is to halt the gradual decline in its ability to enforce its interests. In an interview last autumn, party chairman Liviu Dragnea spoke of the thousands of immigrants walking the streets of Budapest he had seen during his visit to Hungary and stated that he would not like to see anything similar in Bucharest.⁵¹

49 Agerpres: Romania backs Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine in EU integration moves. <http://www.agerpres.ro/english/2014/06/22/romania-backs-moldova-georgia-ukraine-in-eu-integration-moves-16-54-53>

50 EurActiv: Romania to accept refugees if admitted to Schengen. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/romania-to-accept-refugees-if-admitted-to-schengen/>

51 Nine O'Clock: Migrant crisis: Bucharest's officials are waiting for the European Commission's plan. <http://www.nineoclock.ro/immigrants-crisis-bucharests-officials-are-waiting-for-the-european-commissions-plan/>

It follows from the nature of the Romanian party system, therefore, that PSD and all other Romanian parties are under constant pressure to form coalitions. The situation is further complicated for PSD by the fact that its communist heritage continues to generate considerable resentment in all areas of society. This trend is also reflected in the party's values; its left-wing position is mostly demonstrated in its economic policy, while in the refugee crisis PSD sees a political opportunity rather than a humanitarian catastrophe.

2.7. Slovakia – Direction – Social Democracy (SMER–sociálna demokracia)

SMER, the dominant left-wing political force in Slovakia was created by Robert Fico in October 1999, in the wake of the breakup of the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL). As a successor to the Communist Party of Slovakia, SDL had been a key progressive party in Slovakia in the nineties but eventually it became increasingly unstable politically due to infighting between its reformer youth and its old hardliner leaders. Fico, who was already a popular politician at the time but unable to achieve his political ambitions, left the disintegrating SDL in 1999 and formed his own party: SMER – The Third Way. As its name suggests, the party initially **defined itself as a new left-wing alternative** for those disappointed by the weak political performance of the left and the impact of right-wing government policies on the standard of living. In 2005 it **absorbed** the by then completely **fragmented left-wing parties and changed its name to SMER – Social Democracy. With this step, the Slovakian left was consolidated in a single party that remains dominant to this day.**

At the very first parliamentary elections after its formation, SMER gained 13 percent of the votes, and thus proved a serious challenger to the coalition government led by Mikuláš Dzurinda's Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and later the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ). By 2006, the liberal economic measures of Dzurinda's right-wing government had proven increasingly painful for the population, and Fico took advantage of the situation when he **built a campaign on a highly left-leaning, socially sensitive vision of the state's role and won the elections**. His promises included reduced taxes on food products, the introduction of a new and progressive tax system, raising the minimum wage and increasing health and welfare spending.⁵² With just 29 percent of the votes, however, SMER was forced to build a coalition, and Fico entered into alliance with the Slovak National Party (SNS) led by a Ján Slota, who was infamous for his extreme nationalist outbursts, and the People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS–HZDS), headed by Vladimír Mečiar, a politician with one of the most divisive reputations in Slovakia. At the next elections in 2010, SMER won more than a third of the votes and thus finished first, but was nevertheless forced into opposition against a four-party coalition led by right-winger Ivetta Radičová. In 2011 Radičová's right-wing coalition was brought down by a parliamentary vote, combined with a vote of no confidence in the government over Slovakia's contribution to the European Financial Stability Facility. Taking advantage of the "Gorilla" corruption scandal, which affected Dzurinda's party the most, **SMER built a campaign around the incompetence of the right-wing parties and swept up 44 percent of votes in the early elections of 2012, achieving absolute majority in Parliament**. Fico remained in government after the 2016 elections

52 Malová, Darina: 'Slovakia' in: *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*. ed. Jean-Michel De Waele, Fabien Escalona, Mathie Viera, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 566

too, as his traditional challengers, **KDH and SDKÚ both performed abysmally**. Their place was taken over by **newly formed right-wing parties**. These new formations split the voter base in the country, as a result of which SMER **had 16 points fewer votes** than at the 2012 elections. The liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and Network (#Siet'), the populist Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) and We Are Family – Boris Kollár (SR), as well as the far-right Kotleba – Our Slovakia People's Party (ĽSNS) all gained voters from SMER's base.⁵³ The tenuous options for coalition made it doubtful for a long time whether a functioning government could be formed at all. In the end, SMER formed a government with SNS, by then free of Ján Slota, Most – Híd, a party promoting Slovak-Hungarian cooperation (the words mean bridge in Slovak and Hungarian, respectively) and the newly formed Network, supported by young voters it lost right after entering into coalition with Fico.⁵⁴

Ever since its establishment, SMER has been the only left-wing party able to govern in Slovakia. In terms of the composition of its supporter base and its ideology, SMER is nevertheless rather **far from a conventional western European understanding of a left-wing party**. As a new party, SMER **initially proved an attractive alternative for educated young people but as Fico's populist/nationalist rhetoric intensified, its voter base declined among the young**. At the elections in 2010 **SaS**, which set out to curb corruption, **took 37 percent of SMER's young voters**.⁵⁵ At the 2016 elections, SMER received **7.6 percent** of

53 *Aktuality: Kam utiekli voliči: #Siet' lovila u Freša, extrémisti v Smere a liberálov (grafy)* <http://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/320409/siet-lovila-volicov-najviac-u-fresa-extremisti-zas-v-smere-a-u-liberalov-grafy-kam-odisli-volici/>

54 *Aktuality: Ak by volili len mladí, Smer by mal silného súpera*, <http://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/312973/ak-by-volili-len-mladi-smer-by-mal-silneho-supera/>

55 Malová, Darina: 'Slovakia' in: *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*. ed. Jean-Michel De Waele, Fabien Escalona, Mathie Viera, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 560

votes in the 18-21 age group **and one-fourth of votes in the under-30 age group**. Compared to the composition of the party's total voting base, this proportion is **below SMER's average**.⁵⁶ **Young people voted mostly for the newly formed right-wing anti-establishment parties**. Young people with low educational qualifications had remained loyal to SMER at recent elections, but 23 percent now **voted for Kotleba's far-right party**. In Slovakia, establishment parties tend to hold power for extended periods but then, due to corruption scandals and cronyism, **increasingly lose popularity** among young voters who **turn to** newly formed, fresh, youthful **parties**. Today, the great majority of SMER voters are **50 or older, blue collar workers and employees as well as pensioners**. Over half of this latter group voted for Fico at the last elections thanks to SMER-SD's socially sensitive program.⁵⁷ In a regional analysis, one finds that SMER-SD tends to do well in **rural constituencies but less well in the capital and in Košice, as well as the Hungarian-majority regions of Dunajská Streda and Komárno**.⁵⁸

In terms of program and ideology, the party uses **rhetoric intensely opposed to right-wing economic policy**, with emphasis on a **strong, centralized but socially sensitive state**, plans for redistribution and programs to develop education, healthcare and disadvantaged regions, as well as providing solid pensions. **These generous programs tend to remain promises** and are mostly undelivered. The period of Fico's first government may be better described as a continuation of Dzurinda's policies, which had facilitated the adoption of the euro. Thus, for example, **VAT was not reduced in the food sector**, nor was

56 *Učiteľské noviny: Odkaz mladej generácie - voľby 2016*, <http://www.ucn.sk/blogy/odkaz-mladej-generacie-volby-2016/>

57 *Aktuality: Väčšina dôchodcov volí Smer. Je to pravda alebo len populárny mýtus?*, <http://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/312255/vacsina-dochodcov-voli-smer-fakt-alebo-len-popularny-mytus/>

58 *Aktuality: Výsledky volieb 2016: grafy*, <http://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/319522/vysledky-volieb-2016-grafy/#>

a carefully designed new tax system implemented. The government was also unable to curb financial abuses and corruption. Yet Fico's rhetoric continues to emphasize **embracing the cause of the poor and the elderly. In 2016 voters considered the party's welfare program a decisive argument for voting for SMER-SD.** By contrast, its economic and anti-corruption program was far less popular among voters than the alternatives offered by the newly established right-wing formations.⁵⁹ It is important to note that while SMER-SD regularly **refers to the protection of the environment** in its programs, these considerations are mostly **subordinated to economic priorities.**

The success of SMER-SD is largely **attributable to a party structure built around Robert Fico's charismatic personality.** In political terms, SMER-SD's strategic aim is to maintain **order, justice and stability.** To achieve this, the party follows the **pragmatic-opportunistic policy** of allying itself with anyone it can form government with, irrespective of political ideology. **SMER was criticized** by the Party of European Socialists and numerous left-wing intellectuals for entering into a government coalition with SNS and ĽS–HZDS in the years 2006 to 2010. After the 2016 elections, Fico again formed a coalition with parties that had gained votes with programs diametrically opposed to SMER's policies.

Taking into account the **Christian/conservative tradition** shaping Slovakia, SMER-SD **represents markedly more conservative and nationalist views** than left-wing parties in the west, **giving special attention to nation, family and religion.** As a result, it tends to center its concern for human rights on economic and social rights as opposed to the rights of ethnic or sexual minorities.

59 *Aktuality: Kam utiekli voliči: #Siet' lovila u Freša, extrémisti v Smere a liberálov (grafy)*
<http://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/320409/siet-lovila-volicov-najviac-u-fresa-extremisti-zas-v-smere-a-u-liberalov-grafy-kam-odisli-volici/>

Although SMER **did not support Slovakia's membership in the European Union when it was first formed**, since then it has revised its position for pragmatic reasons. **The European Union provides the country with essential structural funds and it is therefore in Slovakia's strategic interest to maintain good relations with the EU.** The Common Agricultural Policy is highly important for Slovakia, which also supports the EU's efforts towards successful economic governance. Under the SMER-SD government in 2006–2010, Slovakia **joined the Schengen area and then adopted the euro** as its currency. Today, the **Slovakian prime minister is highly critical of the EU**, saying it has become overly elitist with the largest countries deciding matters affecting the whole of the EU behind closed doors, excluding the smaller member states.⁶⁰

On the migration crisis Robert Fico takes the hardline position that Islam has no place in Slovakia. The prime minister declared that the country was ready to accept only Christian refugees. **Fico takes the view that migrants represent a serious existential threat for the united identity of his small country. For this very reason, Fico does not support the EU's migration policy** – so much so that he appealed to the Court of Justice of the European Union against the EU decision on the mandatory refugee quotas. In view of these steps, many believe that Slovakia, which currently holds the presidency of the Council of the European Union, **may prove to be a major obstacle in developing a comprehensive solution for the migration crisis.** The roadmap adopted at the EU summit in Bratislava in September focused on defending borders and halting the influx of immigrants rather than on quotas.

60 Topky: Fico prezradil krutú pravdu: Bez EÚ by sme neprežili, hrozí jej koniec!, <http://www.topky.sk/cl/100535/1557117/Fico-prezradil-krutu-pravdu--Bez-EU-by-sme-neprezili--hrozi-jej-koniec->



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THE STATE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

In the past decade, social democratic parties lost ground in Central and Eastern Europe. However, this generally observed trend in the region affects the involved countries to different degrees. While in some countries, slipping popular support notwithstanding, governance remains a reality or at least a realistic option for social democrats, there are also cases where parties struggle for survival or try to rebuild former strength. This study presents the apparent similarities and differences through case studies and a comparison of social democratic parties in seven countries of the region.

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