THE EUROPEAN LEFT AFTER 1989

WEST AND EAST

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CONCLUSIONS[1]

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Social democracy has a tumultuous and interrupted history in East Central Europe. In most of the countries, whether independent, or part of the larger multi-ethnic empires, social-democratic movements were established during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Until the end of the Great War they generally led a politically marginal existence, much more so in fact than in most West European countries. The Great War brought unforeseen and dramatic changes. In the newly-established nation states of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia in particular , social-democratic parties were among the major players in the first and highly volatile, post-war years. It was only in the latter, which would subsequently prove an exceptional case in many respects, where social democrats found themselves (because of electoral success and governmental responsibilities during practically the whole interwar period) in a position to have a lasting impact on national policies. Elsewhere under the combined effect of dictatorship and economic crisis, social-democratic parties were forced into political impotence, if not obscurity.

The Second World War brought another turning-point for East Central European social democracy. This time, facilitated by the victorious Red Army, they were once again able to enter the political stage. Once more, though, its duration was short. Under the weight of communist intrigue, pressure, and outright terror the initial enthusiasm among social democrats to finish with the legacy of the ancient regime turned into an atmosphere of distrust, internal differences and fear. As in the inter-war years, it was forced into submission by the very same powers with which it had previously cooperated: the conservative, authoritarian rulers in the interbellum, the communist dictators in the 1940s. The essential difference was that the communist rulers of the region took their mission much more seriously. Social democracy was to practically disappear from political life and the personal memory of the peoples of East Central Europe.

Social democrats were never able to make a lasting impact on East Central European societies. Political powerlessness, both in ideological and in practical terms, was one of the movements' main historical features. Two qualifications need to be made, however. Firstly,

such a generalisation should not obscure the fundamental complexity and multifarious nature of the social-democratic experience in the region. Secondly, the fact that social democracy was not in a position to make history in East Central Europe, that it was more of an object than a subject in the region's past, does not justify the historical image of passivity, impotence and victimisation. At various crucial moments social-democratic parties did matter politically. And what is more, in the highly polarised, often xenophobic and intolerant political atmosphere of the interbellum, social democrats, generally refraining from political bigotry and narrow-mindedness, exerted a moderate, 'civilised' political influence. With that in mind the relatively poor performance of East Central European social democracy can be attributed to three conditions.

The first, probably the most important but at the same time the least tangible factor is the region's comparatively underdeveloped socio-economic basis. Here we find a rather convincing line of division between the Central European countries and the rest of the area. There is a positive correlation between the level of socio-economic development in a given country and the achievements of social democracy. This not only goes for the early history of social democracy and for the inter-war years; it also seems to apply to the post-communist era. It is no coincidence that the social-democratic parties in the generally more highly developed Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, irrespective of their different roots, more closely resemble the 'ideal-typical' western type of social democracy than the parties elsewhere in the post-communist world. These are also the only countries where social democracy had a trace of historical continuity under communism, no matter how thin it was, either in the form of communist revisionism and reformism or of oppositional dissidence.

The second factor which accounts for the relatively poor performance of East Central European social democracy, is the supremacy of the national question. Issues of ethnicity and national identities were difficult to integrate in a social-democratic world outlook, whereas for most of the other political groups in inter-war Europe they formed the nucleus or cornerstone of their activities, if not, indeed, their raison d'être. By and large, social democracy has been more successful in ethnically homogeneous countries than in ethnically divided ones. In a way, this is still the case. Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic are definitely less divided in ethnic terms than the countries further to the east and the south-east.

A third explanatory factor was the particularly unfavourable course of events in the region. Firstly, the collapse of most of the formal democracies during the 1920s. Secondly, at the end of the 1940s, the establishment of communism's hegemonic rule. Social democracy proved to be too weak to really influence, let alone to stop or to inhibit these processes – which subsequently resulted in the destruction of social democracy across the region.

Another major continuity in the history of East Central European social democracy is its ambivalent relationship with its western comrades. This has not so much to do with a lack of good will, on the part of western European social democracy, but rather a lack of understanding. The heart of the matter is that ideological kinship alone was not enough to harmonise the diversity of interests, opinions and priorities which social democrats from East and West derived from their own realities. Although foreign socialists played a decisive role in the inception and early history of social democracy – in terms of organisation and ideology – and although mutual relations were, at times, close, they were also tense and burdened by this lack of understanding, interest and political commitment. East European social democrats developed an increasing sense of frustration stemming from an insufficient susceptibility to the enormous political relevance of the national question during the inter-war years, to a far too conciliatory attitude vis-a-vis the Soviet Union and the other communist regimes during the Cold War.

During the final years of communism, social democracy continued to suffer from a poor image in East Central Europe. The message of the émigré socialists carried very little weight in their home countries and with few exceptions, East Europeans considered it irrelevant. Social democrats were rare among the anti-communist dissidents in East Central Europe, either within its 'democratic' or its 'nationalistic' current. Very few prominent dissidents openly declared themselves to be social-democratic. Apart from the reasons given above, they were also disappointed with the somewhat lukewarm sympathy shown by western social democrats with the fate of the peoples of East Central Europe. Moreover, West European social democracy itself was undergoing its own crisis of identity faced with over a decade of unfettered liberalism. Neither in terms of ideological attractiveness nor in terms of political power could social democracy compete with the liberal Zeitgeist.

As we highlighted earlier, solidarity with left-wing regimes in far-

away places often came more easily to West European social democrats than a serious interest in the fate of their fellow Europeans under communism. And the policies of western social-democratic parties vis-à-vis their political friends in East Central Europe remained somewhat ambivalent and hesitant, even after the fall of the communist regimes. The initial hope of a widely shared social-democratic alternative to communism evaporated rapidly. The former democratic opposition was unwilling to carry the flag of social democracy; the 'historical' social-democratic parties were generally unable to do so; and the population at large was simply not interested. As neither the former dissidents, nor the old-time social democrats proved to be attractive partners (the former did not even want to be closely associated with social democracy) most West European social-democratic parties, some at an earlier stage others later, shifted alliances and welcomed most of the post-communist parties as their new friends. The latter did not hesitate to accept the invitation in light of their own desire for domestic and international legitimacy.

In terms of organisation, social-democratic parties emerged from three different roots: from anti-communist opposition movements, from revived historical parties, and from reformed successors of the former communist parties. Of these three groups, only the successor parties have been able to assert themselves as a powerful political force. The Czech Republic and the Social-Democratic Party (ČSSD), as we stressed repeatedly, is an exception to this rule. The Czech party is the only 'historical' party which has successfully adapted to the post-communist environment to become a prominent political actor. Aided by a relatively strong democratic and industrial tradition, a unified trade union movement, and an orthodox Communist party reluctant to reform, the ČSSD could attract most of the votes in the Czech Republic which were captured by the successor parties in the other Central European countries.

Generally, the performance of social democrats is correlated with the speed of the transition and the level of development which can be traced back to the inter-war period. The faster the transition process has established a market economy, through an appropriate framework of property rights and regulations, liberalisation of prices and foreign trade, and privatisation, the sooner the population becomes interested in the 'social tuning' of that new market economy in order to ensure a more equitable distribution of its costs and benefits.

With that in mind, it is clear that since the collapse of communism East Central European social democracy has continued to face very particular problems:

Its essential predicament has emerged from the paradoxical if not contradictory nature of the objectives which it derived from the post-communist reality: to 'create' and to 'tame' capitalism at the same time. The credo of modern social democracy, namely 'pro-market economy' but 'anti-market society', in other words the need to find a compromise between the rules of the market and the needs of the society, had a very specific meaning in the post-communist world. Given the popularity and seemingly sacrosanctity of the liberal economic approach, social democracy was at a disadvantage before the process of transition had even started.

Social democracy has suffered from the fact that transition was driven by various motives: by a desire for democracy, by the disappointment with the performance of the command economies (and, thus, a demand for higher living standards which was expected, as an automatic outcome of market-oriented reforms), and by the wish of oppressed nations and nationalities to be liberated from either foreign, Soviet, rule or the political dominance of federalist centres such as Prague and Belgrade. Only the first motive, political freedom, clearly belonged to the canon of social-democratic values. The differing emphasis upon the various motives led to a different set of transitions. These have been characterised, on the one hand, by rather dramatic change in the Central European countries and, on the other hand, by hesitant or slow reforms (if reforms at all), dominated by distressing and sometimes violent nation-building, in South-Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

The transition process caused deep socio-economic changes and a substantial increase in social inequality. Production, income and employment declined drastically in most countries, and only began to slowly recover, in some of them, after 1994. New political and cultural cleavages emerged, between national traditionalists and 'cosmopolitan' modernisers, between anti-communists and the successors of the old regime, and between the losers and winners of the transformation. In this turmoil, voters and parties had difficulties in connecting with each other resulting in weak party identification and volatile voting behaviour.

The social problems, caused by the transformation, have been, and remain a potentially, fertile ground for social-democratic parties

advocating a social market economy. Actually, to date, there have only been a few cases where social-democratic parties have succeeded in catching the popular discontent on a scale large enough to come to power, notably in Poland (1993), Hungary (1994) and in the Czech Republic (1998). That discontent was based not only in economic disappointment but also in the displeasure with conservative cultural politics of the first post-communist governments. The workers wanted better protection against its social costs, in addition to a modern, western, secular approach to the problems of transformation. They disliked the style of the former conservative rule as much as the substance of increasing poverty and inequality. However, the victorious social democrats, unable to change the overall reform course of their predecessors, continued (or seriously started, as in Hungary) economic reforms and international integration.

In doing so the social-democratic 'successor' parties in Poland and Hungary have shown themselves to be a crucial actor in the peaceful process of regime change. They not only accepted, but actively promoted, democratic and market reforms. They have been among the major 'westernising' forces, as against the more nationalistic, authoritarian, traditionalist and clericalist parties inclined to statism and autarchy, political confrontation and cultural domination. At the same time the successor parties were, more so than most other political formations, rooted in transitory society, with strong links to those who benefited from the emerging capitalist order as well as to those who still clung, either mentally or socio-economically, to the recent past and to the state economic sector. In ideological terms the successor parties committed themselves to social-democratic values, adapted corresponding programmes, and to the extent that it can be really measured, they did so convincingly. As to their public policy record (especially in the field of the economy and welfare), the Polish and Hungarian social democrats acted as typical 'modernising' parties, steering the construction of capitalism (both in the domestic and in the international dimension), but more or less failing to 'tame' it, i. e. to realise an optimal mix of economic rationality and social justice.

The factors which could account for this social-democratic 'deficit' are many. Obviously, the 'construction' of capitalism, and its rather devastating social consequences do not go hand-in-hand with classical social-democratic values. The same goes for the combination of a social democratised market economy and the requirements of westernisation, including the adjustment to the global market and the fulfillment of the criteria of EU-accession. The pre-eminence of old boys' networks, political patronage, extensive clientelism and the decisive interests of old-new economic elites in policy formulation add to the social-democratic 'shortfalls' of these parties. In addition to this, their catch-all heterogeneity and factionalism, and their rather autocratic leaders and leadership structures which favour technocratic short-termism, has resulted in a shunning way from critical discussion and self reflection.

Given the imperative of renewal for the successor parties, which involves both a clear distance from their communist legacy and a shift to 'softer' ways of westernisation and economic transition, they face a crucial political challenge: the political place which social democracy traditionally occupied, in the West, after World War II, could be occupied by the parties of the 'cultural right'. In response to the synthesis of westernisation, post-communism and neo-liberalism as incorporated by social-democratic parties, the 'cultural right' focuses upon anti-communism, law and order, a strong centralising state and Christian values. They are thereby combining the defence of national and cultural identity with the demands and slogans of social protection, and the regulation and limitation of the market, i. e. a 'taming' of capitalism. Two variants of this current have emerged: a radical, populist and rather xenophobic trend, and a more moderate variant, namely patriotic Christian parties committed to the priority of national identity and the 'promotion' of national middle classes. The (re-) appearance of this illiberal anti-communism is at least partly a reaction to the increased political, economic and cultural power of the social-democratic parties and their clientele.

In the past few years, contradictory tendencies have emerged across East Central Europe. While recent elections in Romania (1996) and Slovakia (1998) seem to have moved these countries away from the model of 'illiberal democracy', Hungarian voters recently supported a deliberately planned 'pseudo-social-democratic turn' of FIDESZ (Alliance of Young Democrats). Istvan Stumpf, one of the chief-engineers of this transformation, head of the prime minister's office, admits to the conscious instrumentalisation of a – partially – social-democratic image. *'The shift brought about by FIDESZ has been the model of successful consolidation'*, he claims. *Ten years after the regime change, one does not need any more to fight for civic liberties, but one has – among many other things – to regulate the harsh effects of the mar-*

ket, to counterbalance the excessive inequalities in this respect. FIDESZ has recognised in due time that all over the world a change of paradigm has taken place. Capitalism has reached a new stage. FIDESZ has adapted -both from an ideological and a pragmatic point of view- in due time to this quickly changing space of social organisation. We have drawn the conclusions from the failure of one-sided monetarist crisis management. We are willing to incorporate solutions into our program which may even appear to be social-democratic if this, from a social point of view, seems to be progressive. The socialists, themselves, would have, probably come out with similar proposals, but they gave preference to the 'There Is No Alternative' option, and, accordingly, they lost. But we recognised the social deficit and we were able to fill the gap between pragmatic economic policy and social sensitivity'. Nemszabadsag October 1, 1998).

The electoral success of AWS (Solidarity Electoral Action) in Poland reflects an analogous development: a reanimation of the symbolic content of the pre-1989 dichotomy: 'the society' (if not the 'nation') versus 'the communists' (my i oni).

Both, Poland and Hungary, seem to have experienced a consolidation of the party system with the emergence of two major political forces and the prospect of a regular and stable political alternation (although it remains to be seen as to whether AWS, which is composed of over 35 different groups, can survive in its present form. Until now the main dynamic has been a gradual fragmentation rather than the leaderships attempts to homogenise it as a single entity). Besides the priority of the anti(post-)communist edge, we also see the continuity of a clear cultural dimension. Both FIDESZ and AWS stress their 'us against them' opposition to both the successor parties and to secular liberal forces. This position is based on a clearly defined ideological profile, including an appeal to national and religious feelings. In its strategy to integrate the fragmented forces of the cultural right, FIDESZ stressed the necessity of resistance to a foreigner-like (fremdartig) social-liberal governance, for which it was more or less openly supported by the Catholic Church. Similarly, but with a stronger emphasis, the draft Solidarity constitution that was submitted for debate in 1995 started with the following invocation: *'We, the Polish Nation, bearing in mind our history, connected with Christian faith and culture,... create and ratify this Constitution in the name of God.'*

The traditionalist value-based opposition to libertarianism also implies an antineoliberal and a quasi-socialist orientation. The AWS

program demands extensive economic and social rights: decent pay, active policy for full employment, free education, even 'common ownership of property'. (see for a comparison between the AWS and SLD 1997 election programs. *'Polish politicians must not treat people like idiots (. . .) or simply follow the trends of western liberalism or neoliberalism'* as Marian Krzaklewski, leader of AWS, declared. Similarly, in a televised public debate with socialist party leader Gyula Horn, FIDESZ leader Viktor Orbán referred to a political advertisement of the Socialist Party from 1994 connected with Horn's name. The advert contained a rich list of social promises which were soon after heavily criticised within the party leadership and withdrawn because of alleged populism. Electoral posturing and government policies are different things, however, especially in post-communist polities. AWS and FIDESZ will hardly 'social-democratise' the transition process in East Central Europe. On the contrary, there are increasing signs of a continuity of liberal economic policies in both Poland and Hungary, which in certain respects means that the electorate have once more been promised something that cannot be, or is unlikely to be, fulfilled.

Notes

1 The last chapter of the book by Michael Dauderstädt, André Gerrits, Gyorgy G. Markus, *Troubled Transition: Social Democracy in East Central Europe.* Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Bonn 1999.