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## **Social Democracy in East-Central Europe**

**(Presented at the “transform” meeting November 14-15)**

### *0) Introduction*

The main task is to analyze what is the state of Social Democracy in the region.

Before, I have to explain or two answer two questions:

What means “Social Democracy” in this case?

What means East Central Europe - About what countries is it?

My short answers to that are:

“Social Democracy” means the parties that are affiliated with the Party of European Socialists.

East Central European countries are exactly the East European member states of the EU (NMS).

No doubt, social democratic parties in the region are in crisis. However, the focus of my speech is the level of this crisis and, first of all, its reasons.

At the end I will deliver a short reflection on the future outcome of this crisis for the radical left in Europe.

### *1)How much successful these parties were in the past*

On the definition of “crisis” depends how deep it seems. If “crisis” means only that the parties are no longer in government (Keating/McCrone 2013, 1), than, at the first glance, in the NMS there is not much of a crisis. In 4 out of 10 states, social democrats are governing (maybe soon only in three, because in Lithuania a new party, the Peasant and Greens Union, was the big winner of the parliamentary elections in late October 2016). However, social democratic parties are in many countries the strongest opposition party. (see table 1) It is possible that in the next round of the elections circle they will come back to power. In addition, for many years Social Democrats were at the top of the government in various countries.

Nevertheless, even at this level of understanding signs of a crisis are clearly visible: From the table you can see some clear *decays* of former successful parties (4 column), most important the breakdown of the Polish Social Democrats, the SLD in 2005. In that year, the party had lost three quarter of its electorate. SLD had gained 41 percent in 2001. In 2005 it achieved still more 11 percent. Since then the voters’ support of the party remains at a very low level. Since the elections in 2015, SLD is even outside of the Sejm. Within the bloc “United Left”, its 7.6 was less than necessary to overcome the threshold in 2015. In recent polls, SLD stays slightly over 5 percent.

The loss of Czech Socialdemocrats between 2006 and 2017 was less impressive, but important as well: from a high of 32 percent (in 2006) it has declined until 7 percent (in 2017). In this case it is not yet clear whether a recovery will be possible later on.

**Table 1: Successes and failures of Social Democratic Parties in the EU-NMS in Eastern Europe**

Country/ Social Democratic party (= member of PES)	First participation in government after 1989 (as leading party=PM or in coalition)	Successive participations in government (years)	Breakdown or big loss Year: decline of electorate from the previous elections (Year, per cent)	Recent situation of the party
Poland/SLD	1995-1997 (PM)	2001-2005 (PM)	breakdown 2005: 41->11	Insignificant
Slovakia/SDĽ->smer-sd	1998-2002 (SDL in coalition)	2006-2010; 2012 – recently: PM (smer-sd)	Breakdown SDL 2002: 15->1 Big loss - smer 2016: 44->28	Governing
Czechia/ČSSD	1998-2006 PM (1998-2002: minority gov.)	2002-2005: PM 2014 – 2017: PM	Big loss 2010: 32->22 2017: 22-> 7	In Opposition
Hungary/MSZP	1994-1998 PM	2002-2010 PM	Big loss 41->19	In Opposition
Romania/PDSR...PSD	1992-1996 PM	2000-2004 PM 2012-2015 PM 2017- recently: PM	30 percent and more	Governing
Bulgaria/BSP	1990-1991 PM	1994-1997 PM 2005-2009 PM 2013-2014	Big losses 1997: 44->22 2009: 31->18 2014: 27->15	In Opposition
Slovenia/ZLSD...SD	1992-2004 (in coalition)	2008-2011 (PM) 2014 – recently (in coalition)	Big losses 2011: 31->11	Governing
Croatia/SDP	2000-2003 PM	2011-16 (PM),	Big loss: 2003: 41->23	In Opposition
Lithuania/LDDP->LSDP	1992-1996 (PM)	2000-2006 (PM) 2012-2016 (PM)	Big loss 2000: 31-> 20; 2008: 21->12	In Opposition
Latvia/SDPS + LSDSP			Until 2006 below 10, since then more than 20	In Opposition
Estlonia/SDE	1992–1994,	1994–1995, 1999–2001, 2007–2009, Since 2015 (in coalition)	Big loss: 2003: 15->7	Governing

Data from “parties and elections in Europe”, own recherche (as at October 31, 2017).

The Hungarian Socialists were another big loser. It has crashed in 2010 with the loss of more than 50 percent of the votes from the former elections. Nearly the same big amount of losses the Bulgarian Socialist Party has in 1997 and the Croatian SDP in .2003 but both could recover afterwards. The Lithuanian LDDP has suffered an enormous loss in 1996, since then it is a permanent up and down. It is not yet clear whether there is a more serious problem.

So far, the first message based on election data consists in the assumption: something is going wrong with the Social Democracy in the Eastern European New Member States, but what it is still to understand what is the core of the problem.

The last big loss was that in Czech Republic in October this year: the Social Democrats that were one of the two bigger Czech parties since 1996 sharply declined in last elections after they have lead the government with ANO, a populist “businessman party”<sup>1</sup>. They gained still only 7 percent in 2017.

2) How “social” is Social Democracy in the region?

In an article in (the online journal) “Renewal” about the difficulties of Social Democracy there is a Polish academic quoted who assessed the leading Polish Post Communists Aleksander Kwasniewski and Leszek Miller in the following way: “The label of social democracy was acquired by these politicians for purely tactical reasons. In reality, they were leaders of a narrow group of technocratic businessmen (former apparatchiks of the ruling party), who sought to enrich themselves at their own individual success...” (Meyer/Spiegel 2010, 9). Or, as the Belgian specialist on Social Democracy in Eastern Europe Jean Michel De Waele expressed it in an interview: “in eastern European countries, the question is rather whether social democracy exists at all.” And, a second expression: “With the exception of the Czech Republic, social democracy never managed to take hold in the former Soviet bloc, except in name. The politicians who call themselves social democrats are all former communists who hastily reformed after 1989.” (De Waele/Windels 2016, 5)

To sum up, there is the assumption that East European Social Democrats are in fact no real Social Democrats.

This is partly true. However, it is not the full story. In my opinion, it is not the main question where the social democrats come from, whether they were former (and reformed) communists or the successors of somehow authentic social democrats. The “social democratic-ness” of the respective parties is a question of their real policies in these years. The breakdown of the SLD in 2005 came after a series of corruption scandals of the SLD government and following the mobilization of the public by a then new populist party- the Right and Justice Party (PiS). The breakdowns of the Hungarian and the Bulgarian Socialists in 2010 respectively in 1997 have had similar corruption allegations in the background.

However, corruption is no “unique selling point” of the social democrats. *All politicians* in Eastern Europe were connected by the population with a practice of self-enrichment.

In an opinion poll in 2009 (after 20 years of transformations) the polled answered the question who benefited the most from the changes in 1989. “The politicians” was in all seven countries included in the poll the main answer (see table 2).

Table 2: Who Benefited from Changes Since 1989/1991?

(Answers in percent: “a great deal” and “a fair amount together”)

Country	Ordinary people	Business owners	Politicians
CZ	53	86	94
PL	42	85	92

<sup>1</sup> See on the term “businessmen party” Olteanu, T. and de Nève, D.: Business firm or rather businessman parties? Political entrepreneurs in action. Paper presented at the XXIII IPSA World Congress of Political Science. 19-24 July, Montreal 2014.

RU	21	85	86
SK	21	81	97
HU	17	63	94
BG	11	82	94
UA	10	82	92

Quelle: Pew Research Centre 2009, Nov. 2, p. 114

The high level of corruption of Eastern European politicians came from a certain “political opportunity structure” in the systemic change. The end of state socialism was the starting point for a massive transformation of economics and mainly of the property structure. The core issue was the privatization policy. Whole national economies should be privatized in short time. It was a much more radical shift than the similar privatizations in Great Britain and other Western countries after the start of neoliberal dominance. The main goalkeepers of privatization in Eastern Europe were the domestic politicians. They were supported and propelled by international financial institutions and by Western advisers. That is a first argument.

A second cornerstone of the situation in 1989 was the populations’ hope in the Western way of modernization. In the crisis of the Soviet socialism, the support of population had switched from the socialist order to the promises of the Western consumer society. However, there were clear illusions within the Eastern population. The populations’ observations of this society were a bit updated already. The downgrade of the Western social welfare states has started already when “the West” has gained the victory about “the East” in 1989. The populations’ hopes therefore should be frustrated finally. These frustrations became politically relevant after the joining of the EU by these countries.

So far, the puzzle consists more in the question: why the “social democrats” were *most affected* by the respective frustration of the population.

My assumption consists in the following: The Social Democratic Parties were struck mostly by the frustration of the population because their traditional value represented the original hopes of 1989 in the best way. So far, their practical policies deviated most from their traditional programs.

In order to remember these values, I quote again the book about social democracy edited by Keating and McCrone (2013, 4-5): Social democracy was originally connected to the project of a “socially guided capitalism”. It was identified with a politics of restraining excessive inequalities by public power. Other traditional ideas were the connection between social solidarity and liberal rights; and, additionally, in the area of international politics this party family is characterized by its support of cooperation between the states.

The traditional social democratic program could produce the impression as though in 1989 there would be a chance to continue the social promises of state socialism and add political freedom to this.

However, this was the social democratic past, not the social democratic present in the nineties. The reforming post-communist politicians oriented itself at the Western social democracy of Clinton, Blair and Schroeder. They tried to repel itself from the traditional left policies, mainly from the failed state socialist program.

The reformers in the Post-communist social democratic parties were therefore not the only to blame for the crisis of the left. Not all of them were corrupt personalities, “technocratic businessmen” or only tactical social democrats. Some of the politicians were true believers in the “third way”-ideology

of Western Social Democrats like Blair and Schroeder<sup>2</sup>. They were no better but also no worse than these more experienced politicians in the Western European Social Democracy.

### 3) *Some considerations on the future of left politics*

The main problem of the crisis consists not in the fact that social democrats are not in government, but that its policies contained no real answers to the substantial problems with social solidarity and left policy. The decay of state socialism has damaged the political left in general, and this not only in Eastern Europe. However, this damage was aggravated by the rising of a new *Zeitgeist* – that of neoliberal capitalism. The social democracy is in danger to disappear from the political competition not only in the East. It is not because the peoples' interest was manipulated by somebody. It is due to the real mainstream politics. The political establishment in general is losing its understanding of the real needs of lower classes. Social democratic parties are part of this mainstream.

Two political actors in the East have challenged the political mainstream. Firstly, in many countries right-wing populist parties emerged and gained power. Secondly, there are protest movements in several countries of the area.

The populists should better be described as *national and social* populist parties. Their politics are directed against corruption of the established parties and in favour of the “interest of the nation”. There are partly against the influence of international (Western) big corporations. As an example, I remember on the Hungarian taxes for the (foreign) banks and against the foreign land property. The Polish PiS realizes policies in favour of the needs of pensioners and families. Other words, these politicians react to the damage that has left neoliberal and socialist governments in Poland and Hungary.

The rise of populism in Eastern Europe came after the hope in a more social regulated capitalism died out at the beginning of the 21 century. The electoral cycle of permanent alternation between the conservative and the social democratic camp was broken by emerging new populist parties. Bulgaria was a forerunner in that: After several changes between the blue and the red camp the party of the former King rose to government in 2001. In Poland, the populist momentum came in 2005 when two new parties broke the dominance of SLD. PiS was the nationalist populist one with some social promises for the losers of transformation. The party governed between 2005 and 2007, and again since 2015. In the Czech Republic, the elections in 2010 have generated rising populist parties: at first a party of a TV journalist (Radek John) and an entrepreneur (Vít Bárta), the party “Public Affairs” (Věci Veřejné/VV). Since 2013, there was a new populist agent successful in elections – the party/movement “ANO 2011” (Action dissatisfied citizens) with the entrepreneur Andrej Babiš at the top. This party is part of the coalition and since then leading in the polls. In 2017, they became the strongest party and Babiš has started a minority government. In other countries, the political communication of some parties is more and more populist; examples are among others, Fidesz in Hungary, the leading Romanian parties (both social democrats and liberals), the governing Bulgarian party GERB and so on.

Secondly, nevertheless that there are no strong left (or new left) parties in the region a rising protest movement is present in many countries. There are both social and environmental protests as in Romania in 2012 (protest against austerity) and 2013 (Roşia Montană). In Poland, there were a strong protest movement of women against a new, stricter abortion law at this year. In Hungary, there are many protests against the right wing, illiberal government. In Bulgaria, protests sprung up

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<sup>2</sup>One has to consider that among the rank and file of several parties are groups that are still stick to the program of a “true socialism”, they appreciate values like social solidarity and each rights for all individuals. I know that from social democratic parties in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic.

in 2013 against social consequences of price policies of international corporations and the government. The protest has caused a government crisis and led to early elections.

A structural problem consists in the fact that the numerous protests did not directly lead to a strengthening of the left political camp. The protesters are alienated from the organized political actors. The social democratic parties are regarded as part of the problem not of the solution. Other left parties did not emerge or did not survive. The only parliamentary left party outside the social democracy exists, as I know, in the Czech Republic with the Czech CP. The party has got about 15 percent of votes in last elections. In 2017, its voter support has further declined. Most serious problem of the party consists in its isolation from others. It is still discredited by its past in the so-called “normalization” period (after august 1968). After the last elections, it is cooperating with the governing party ANO 2011 without being formally a coalition partner.

The protest movements did not bring about new political parties, with some exceptions: in Poland there emerged the new left party “Razem” in 2015. Until now, it has no parliamentary representation but it is visible. In Hungary, there was founded a green liberal party LMP (“Politics can be different”) that has some support in Budapest and among the intellectuals and has got in two elections a small representation in the parliament. In Romania, in 2015 a new party, stemming from a former protest movement, the “Save Bucharest Union” (USB). Whether this party can get into parliament in the ongoing elections is unclear. However, the self-definition of the new party is not left but technocratic-liberal.

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To conclude, in the EU-NMS in the East we should consider the existence of social democrats that are not social oriented and less democratic than one would expect. Therefore it is difficult to find partners for left policies. And the agents of the radical left are not so numerous in the region. In only one country, there is a stronger left party outside the social democratic camp, the Communist Party in the Czech Republic. It has got about 15 percent of votes during parliamentary elections since 1989. Other left parties in other countries are rather tiny and more or less political irrelevant, at least – as far as I know. A re-start of authentic social democratic parties in the region did not emerge and IO do not see a strong sign of it.

The only driving force of a political change consists in the protest movements of the last years. In these protest movements, a strong need in social solidarity became visible. Whether these social protests could result in a future radical left party is not yet clear.

In the present, the strongest parties that react to the populations’ concerns are the national and social populist parties. It is not likely, though, that these parties will end the neoliberal dominance. Populists are an expression of the crisis of representative democracy and of neoliberal economic policies but they are more of a parasite of this situation than a trigger to overcome it.

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#### *Quoted Literature:*

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