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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE: THE LEFT-WING PARTIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, TRAJECTORY OF A DECLINE FROM THE POST-COMMUNIST TRANSITION

Abstract. This article reviews the electoral results of left-wing parties in Central and Eastern Europe since 1991 and the fall of Communism. By following the trajectories of left-wing parties, we can identify a three-phase periodization leading to the decline of left-wing parties. First, the reform of the heirs to communism, who converted to Western social democracy and reformed their political élite. This period is characterized by electoral success and government participation for the heirs of communism who have become social democrats. Then came the accession negotiations with the European Union, which brought the European issue to the forefront of the region's agenda. The social-democratic parties held the issue, giving themselves an image of modernizers with the promise of social and economic progress. This period was marked by even greater electoral success, demonstrating the strength of these parties. Finally, the decline which followed the disillusionment of EU membership after 2008: social-democratic parties have lost their status as modernizers and are no longer able to regain a foothold in society, to the benefit of radical right-wing parties. This periodization leads us to consider the state of the left in the region today, and its reconstruction.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe, elections, left-wing parties, political decline, post-communist transition

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Introduction

This special issue is the result of an effort to think about the left-wing parties in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), three decades after the collapse of communism. This effort was pursued through two international conferences: one organized at Tirana University in April 2024, and a second one at the Free University of Brussels in April 2025. The point of these two conferences was to grasp the essence, and the condition of the left-wing parties nowadays in the CEE. Also, these meetings tried to shed light on the trajectories and transformations of left-wing parties, as "new" social-democratic parties, or as heirs of communism. It seems necessary to conduct a broader reflection on the CEE as a whole, since recent comparative scholarship on the condition of the left in the region remains scarce, especially when it comes to including the Balkan and Baltic states. This means our understanding of CEE encompasses the geographical and political space from the Czech Republic to Romania for the East-West axis; and from Estonia to Albania for the North-South axis.

Over the past two years, many CEE countries have held elections, most of which have resulted in right-wing parties gaining or maintaining power. The most recent example is Poland, where the conservative Karol Nawrocki was elected president after a tight duel with a progressive opponent in early June 2025. While Nawrocki and his opponent battled for the presidency, the various left-wing candidates together received 11% of the vote. Adrian Zandberg (RAZEM) scored 4,86%, Magdalena Biejat (Lewica) scored 4,23%, and Joanna Senyszyn received 1,09% of the vote. One cannot think of many countries that faced elections during the same period, including Albania and Lithuania, which witnessed victories of left-wing parties. More recently, Romania saw a breakthrough of the radical right at the cancelled elections of 2024, as well as at the May 2025 presidential election. The Social Democratic Party (PSD), dominant since 1989, suffered an unprecedented electoral defeat.

In the same way, many countries such as the Czech Republic, Hungary or Serbia, will hold elections within the next two years. This could be seen as an opportunity to start an alternation with right-wing leaders like Viktor Orbán, or Aleksandar Vučić. Almost the whole region will have held elections during these years.

At a time when radical right parties are thriving in Western Europe and occupying central positions, it is important to pay attention to the historical defeats of the left.[3] Beyond comparative analyses of national parties on these issues, the question could allow us a better understanding of the defeat of the left in Europe, in a more global way. Since the collapse of communism these parties have adapted, transformed, and new left-wing parties have emerged. These transformations of the heirs of communism sometimes gave the sentiment of a detachment from their social basis.[4] This leads to a question at the heart of this issue: what is left in Central and Eastern Europe nowadays? Can we talk about *the* left or the *lefts*? The contributions to this special issue aim to answer these questions.

The Transformation of the Left in Central and Eastern Europe

Before delving into the contributions, it is important to look back at the transformations undertaken by social democratic parties in the CEE after the collapse of communism. When the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) collapsed in 1991, it sounded the death knell for communist regimes in the region whereas in numerous countries, state socialist parties had already fallen. The political parties of authoritarian regimes led by communist single parties had to adapt to the new multipartisan competition. This, accompanied by the opening to the Western world, initiated changes within the communist parties of the CEE.

The nature of these changes took different paths, largely influenced by the nature of the former communist regime.[5] This also had an impact

[3] We can make an example of Western Europe where radical right parties govern or participate to government in Italy, Austria, Finland, or Switzerland.

[4] Bartosz Rydlinkski, "Separation or Divorce? The Popular Class and Social Democracy in Poland," The Foundation For European Progressive Studies (FEPS), accessed June 18, 2025, https://feps-europe.eu/publication/separation-or-divorce-the-popular-class-and-social-democracy-in-poland/; Ludovic Lepeltier-Kutasi, "Jean-Michel De Waele : «En Europe centrale, la gauche n'aura pas d'avenir si elle ne s'ancre pas dans la société,»" [Jean-Michel De Waele: "In Central Europe, the left will have no future if it does not anchor itself in society"] CEC, *Le Courrier d'Europe centrale* (blog), accessed May 23, 2019, https://courrierdeuropecentrale.fr/en-europe-centrale-la-gauche-naura-pas-davenir-si-elle-ne-sancre-pas-dans-la-societe/.

[5] Herbert Kitschelt, "Formation of Party Cleavages in Post-Communist Democracies: Theoretical Propositions," *Party Politics* 1, no. 4 (October 1, 1995): 447-72, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068895001004002.

on the extent to which contestation and dissidence were possible inside the party and civil society, deeply influencing the formation of left-wing parties and movements. According to Herbert Kitschelt, we can identify three major types of communist regimes: (1) the "patrimonial" type, present in the former Soviet Union and in the Balkans, with a low degree of contestation allowed inside the party and characterized by a charismatic leader; (2) the "authoritarian-bureaucratic" type, found in Czechoslovakia, is a highly repressive with potential dissidences and with civil society at large, and even more bureaucratized than the former; (3) and the "national-consensus" type, as it was witnessed in Hungary and Poland, which is considered "flexible" enough to allow a small degree of contestation inside the party and within civil society. For instance, the ex-communist party in Poland was challenged during its post-communist transition in the 1990s by the Solidarity movement, supported by social movements from civil society and trade unions.[6] Hence, the transformation could follow three different ideal-typical ways.[7] First, the parties could remain true to their Marxist-Leninist heritage. This implies rejecting entry into the free market and market-oriented policies. They also kept the main rhetoric and political style of the former regime. An example could be the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) in the Czech Republic which, by keeping its name and political line intact, remained inside the Marxist-Leninist principles. The second option was to progressively abandon the communist ideology, especially in its "internationalistic" aspects to focus more on nationalist policies. The third path was to convert to Western social democracy. Parties who embraced this third path accepted entry into the free market and changed their rhetoric to adhere to the Western discourse on economic and social policies.

Although this classification proposed by Hubert Tworzecki in 2003 is getting old from our perspective, it is a good starting point to understand the transformations of left-wing parties since the collapse of communism. The next sections will be dedicated to explaining the trajectory of left-wing parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Our main

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[6] Hubert Tworzecki, "Social Democracy in East-Central Europe: Success by Default?," *Journal of Policy History* 15, no. 1 (January 2003): 94-112, https://doi.org/10.1353/jph.2003.0009.

[7] Tworzecki, "Social Democracy in East-Central Europe: Success by Default?"

argument is that left-wing parties, most of which are heirs to communism, followed a three-phase trajectory. The first is the post-communist transition, during which parties adapted to the collapse of communism by undertaking organizational and ideological changes. This phase is associated with electoral successes. Second, we identified the Europeanization phase, during which the issue of integrating into the European Union (EU) took a significant place in the agenda of CEE party systems. Carried mostly by social democratic parties in the region, this phase is a moment of electoral success as well. And the third phase is the electoral decline of social democratic parties. The main reason that would explain such a decline in countries where left-wing parties were so rooted is the fact that they have lost their function of "modernizers." Hence, this paved the way for the rise of a radical right which seized issues previously considered "leftist." We find the same tendency in the radical right throughout Europe. Yet, as the contributions will show, this party family is rebuilding itself, and it is facing a major crossroads: either stay true to left-wing values, which raises the question of what is *being leftist today?*; or follow another way toward either nationalism or populism?

To assess our definition of what a social democratic party is in the CEE, we referred to a criterion that seemed objectively consistent over time: the membership in the Party of European Socialists (PES). We counted member parties and associated parties approved by the PES. Hence, our selection includes non-EU states such as the Balkan States. This criterion also avoids the drawback of selecting parties that are only socialist by name, since the PES has a mechanism of suspension depending on a party policy position. For instance, in our case, the Slovak social democratic parties SMER – sociálna demokracia (Direction – Social Democracy) and HLAS – sociálna demokracia (Voice – Social Democracy) were suspended after forming a governing coalition with a Slovak radical right party. Similarly, this considers the ideological trajectory of political parties, because, prior to its suspension, the SMER was a member of the PES. This also excludes the Kosovar party Self-Determination too, which is only an observer party in the PES.

Here, we understand social democracy as an ideology derived from the nineteenth century socialism which took form in the partisan field by supporting the workers' side of the "owner/worker" cleavage as

stated by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan.[8] As a political ideology, it claims the "protection of human labor, from which derives [its] support for social legislation and every measure tending to the socialization of the labor market."[9] In our context, it is also important to consider the "Third Way" current of social democracy, which gained political importance in the 1990s in Western Europe. This ideological variation of social democracy looks for a political way between capitalism and socialism and tends to be more economically liberal.[10]

We define decline as a decrease in the electoral results of the social democratic parties at the national parliamentary elections. For each country, we collected the results of the social democratic party currently recognized by the PES from 1991 to 2025. In each case, we took the first election of the country after its independence to observe the trajectory of the national social democratic party. The results are expressed in percentage of votes cast. Some clarification is necessary regarding the specific results. First, in the case of the Czech Republic, we considered both the social democratic and communist parties. We did so because it is the only country in our selection where the communist party was politically relevant until 2021 when it stepped out of Parliament. Then, for the three elections of 2021 in Bulgaria, we averaged the three scores of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) to obtain its score for that year. And finally, it happened that the socialist party boycotted a certain election. In that case, we indicated it with an "X" in the tables, translated through a 0% in the graphical representation of our data.

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[8] Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Structures de clivages, systèmes de partis and alignement des électeurs: une introduction* [Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignment: An Introduction] introd. Pascal Dewilt (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2008).

[9] Fabien Escalona, Mathieu Vieira, and Jean-Michel De Waele, "The Unfinished History of the Social Democratic Family," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*, eds. Jean-Michel De Waele, Fabien Escalona, and Mathieu Vieira (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 3-29, 9, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-29380-0_1.

[10] Hans Keman, "Third Ways and Social Democracy: The Right Way to Go?," *British Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 3 (2011): 671-80, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123410000475.

The Post-communist Transition: From One-Party Rule to Social Democratic Parties

By the end of communist regimes in CEE in 1991, communist parties had to adapt to new electoral and partisan rules. As they adapted, parties changed in two main aspects that we will examine through this introduction: organization and ideology. On the one hand, the heirs of communism put aside their former political elite in favor of a new one. This new party élite was *de facto* in charge of the democratic transition. It is worth mentioning that this new élite was part of the former communist regime, and was mostly composed of senior officials, who were often driven by a reformative will. Although one might not consider this a dramatic change at the head of a still powerful party, this shift lays at the foundations of the turning point in ideology. Indeed, this élite was part of a reformist wing within Communism, born in the 1980s.[11] They subscribed to a more rationalist vision of Communism and attempted to match it with Marxist-Leninist ideology. These senior officials, anticipating the pro-capitalist revolution, started to acquire economic capital and benefited a lot from the conversion to a market-oriented economy.[12] Indeed, they used their political resources to convert themselves into entrepreneurs, holding the former State economy flagships while stepping back from political power.[13] They have kept few ties with civil society or trade unions, which would impact their future relations. Since the former communist élite has been on the regime's side, they embodied order. Consequently, they were more prone to repress civil contestation that could further destabilize the regime.

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[11] André W. M. Gerrits, "The Social Democratic Tradition of East Central Europe," *East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 1 (2002): 54-108, https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325402016001004.

[12] Georges Mink and Jean-Charles Szurek, "L'ancienne élite communiste en Europe centrale: stratégies, ressources and reconstructions identitaires" [The Former Communist Elite in Central Europe: Strategies, Resources and Identity Reconstructions] *Revue française de science politique* 48, no. 1 (1998): 3-41, https://doi.org/10.3406/rfsp.1998.395250.

[13] Georges Mink and Jean-Charles Szurek, "Agir ou subir: les nomenklaturas polonaise and tchèque face à la grande mutation économique (1988-1993)," [Act or Suffer: The Polish and Czech Nomenklaturas in the Face of the Great Economic Transformation (1988-1993)] *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 25, no. 4 (1994): 47-63.

In terms of organization, we can note three different movements operated by left-wing parties in general.[14] First, some tried to revive former social democratic parties forbidden under communist rule. Such attempts resulted in failure except in the Czech Republic, where The Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) succeeded in joining coalition governments.[15] The second movement is the ideological transformation that we will discuss later, clearly the most followed path among left-wing parties. These parties, in their transformation, oriented themselves towards social democracy following a Western pattern. And lastly, new left-wing parties have appeared *ex-nihilo*, claiming links neither with communism nor socialism. An example of this would be the Green parties that emerged in the 2000s. Although these parties position themselves apart from public debate on certain issues, they will never achieve enough political relevance to really weigh in on national politics.

On the other hand, driven by this change in the party élite, the heirs of communist parties underwent deep changes in their ideology, as we mentioned earlier. Following the categorization provided by Tworzecki, the vast majority of parties adopted social democracy principles to a certain extent. As Western European these notions may have been, it is precisely this perspective that the heirs of communism embraced in their transformation. The "social democratization" of parties mostly translated into a liberalization of economy and took the form of "shock therapy" to discard the possibility of a comeback of communism.[16]

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[14] Jean-Michel De Waele, *L'émergence des partis politiques en Europe centrale* [The Emergence of Political Parties in Central Europe] (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1999).

[15] Aleksander Smolar and Jean-Michel De Waele, "La gauche en Europe centrale and orientale" [The Left in Central and Eastern Europe] in *La gauche en Europe depuis 1945* [The Left in Europe after 1945] (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 661-95, https://doi.org/10.3917/puf.lazar.1996.01.0661.

[16] John Ishiyama, "Europeanization and the Communist Successor Parties in Post-Communist Politics," *Politics & Policy* 34, no. 1 (2006): 3-29, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2006.00002.x; Milada A. Vachudova and Liesbet Hooghe, "Postcommunist Politics in a Magnetic Field: How Transition and EU Accession Structure Party Competition on European Integration," *Comparative European Politics* 7, no. 2 (July 1, 2009): 179-212, https://doi.org/10.1057/cep.2008.9; Maria Snegovaya, *When Left Moves Right: The Decline of the Left and the Rise of the Populist Right in Postcommunist Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

Electorally, this period of transition began in 1991, with the collapse of most communist regimes, and ended in 1995-1996 with the start of European Union accession negotiations. Former communist parties remained in power in a large proportion of states and continued to perform well. This is especially true for Central and Eastern European countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria, where the social democratic parties received over 10% of the votes cast. Moreover, they won the first elections in Romania and Bulgaria in 1990. This is important to note due to the general disregard of the former communist formations, but these results were not so surprising, according to Hubert Tworzecki's analysis.[17] In his work on Poland, he noted that the former communist party had one main electoral advantage over its potential opponents: the absence of a well-constituted middle class. This hindered the development of traditional right-wing parties, as seen in Western Europe. Indeed, the living standards under the communist rule did not allow for the enrichment of a certain social class, so the right-wing could not capitalize on this by representing its interests. Tworzecki concludes that the electoral success of the former communist parties was more a "success by default" due to an absence of political alternatives. To add to this argument, one of the crucial advantages that those parties have is their access to resources from the *ancien régime*. Under communist rule, the party and the state were intertwined so the party had access to patrimonial and economical resources that remained in their possession. This makes them wealthy and powerful. Their capitalization over these resources has allowed them to maintain or return to power after a term of alternance.

This ideological transformation could lead to a paradoxical situation from an electoral point of view. Most of the heirs of communism and social democratic parties have to manage their relation to communism. Although the majority decided to move forward with social democratic policies and so rejecting their communist past, it happened that they campaigned on the social benefits in the ideological key of communism, bringing up notions such as the welfare state or housing policies.

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[17] Luke March, "The Eastern European Context," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Left Parties in Europe*, eds. Fabien Escalona, Daniel Keith, and Luke March (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2023), 573-96, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56264-7_20; Tworzecki, "Social Democracy in East-Central Europe."

Now that we have exposed the transition towards social democracy undertaken by heirs of communism, we will refer to these parties as social democratic parties.

In the regional context, transition from communism is a nuanced period electorally for social democratic parties. While in some aforementioned countries, they still perform and succeed in maintaining their place in governments, they perform poorly in the rest of the region, notably in the Baltic states (Table 1).

European Integration as an Electoral Apex for Social Democratic Parties

The Europeanization of social democratic parties is the second phase we identified in the trajectory of social democratic parties. We dated its beginning to 1996, when the European Union (EU) opened negotiations to expand eastward. These negotiations were founded on the Copenhagen criteria, established in 1993. According to these criteria, a candidate must fulfil three requirements to join the EU: a stable democracy based on the rule of law, a market-oriented economy, and the ability to integrate European legislation in the national law. Here we witnessed a double movement from both the EU and CEE states. On the one hand, EU's will to expand turned its gaze towards the East. On the other hand, the opportunity represented by European integration allowed this issue to enter CEE party systems. Consequently, most CEE states applied for membership.[18] Negotiations began in 1998.

As European issues entered party systems, social democratic parties seized them and integrated them into their platforms and ideology, encouraged by the incentive of not being discarded from the accession competition.[19] This European "magnetic field" gave a new dimension to compete on in the electoral arena and allowed for the implementation of

[18] It is not the case for Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

[19] Vachudova and Hooghe, "Postcommunist Politics in a Magnetic Field;" Jean-Michel De Waele, ed., *European Union Accession Referendums* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2005); Jean-Michel De Waele, ed., *La Pologne et l'intégration européenne* [Poland and European integration] (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2003).

market-oriented reforms in line with the EU. Social democratic parties, however, were the ones that drew the most benefits from it. By endorsing European issues, social democratic parties became "modernizers" in that they carried hopes for social change and better living standards. This political image boosted their electoral success, as evidenced in Table 2, which were significantly higher from 1996 to 2008 than in the first period. Additionally, we observe that they access governments more often than before, which tends to validate our assumption that they are electorally driven by European issues. Of all the elections held during this period, the Social Democrats participated in twenty-five out fifty-three governments, representing 47% of the elections won. Furthermore, their participation in governments is concentrated around the years 2000 and 2002, indicating the influence of European negotiations.

Another factor of the success of Europeanization is to be found in the absence of organized Eurosceptic criticism. According to Milada A. Vachudova and Liesbet Hooghe, such a weak criticism of the EU in the political arena is tied to a "magnet" effect: the incentives to join the EU, along with all the benefits that it could offer were so strong that Euroscepticism could not gain a foothold in parliaments.[20] For example, the League of Polish Families and the Hungarian Justice and Life Party were both left behind in the political arena when the European issue was salient. The former was deemed an unusable coalition partner while the latter only entered parliament in 1998 but stepped out in 2002 without having formed any coalition.

This "magnetic effect" starts to phase out in 2006 according to Vachudova and Hooghe, because once accession was acquired, European integration had less leverage in politics.[21] Consequently, the right-wing parties' criticism grew with the dissatisfaction of joining the EU. Indeed, the criticism formulated in the first place about the social cost of joining the EU and the loss of national sovereignty resonated more with the grievances of the population a few years later.

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20 Vachudova and Hooghe, "Postcommunist Politics in a Magnetic Field."

21 *Ibid.*

The Decline of Social Democratic Parties: The Impact of Lost Hope and Disconnection with Citizens

The decline of social democratic parties in CEE has its source in the aftermath of EU adhesion. After endorsing their role of "modernizers" in both the economic and social sphere, social democratic parties were the first to face criticism regarding EU integration. Although integration had been achieved, the promised improvements in living standards had yet to materialize. Indeed, the conversion to "Third Way" policies and neoliberalism came at a high cost to citizens, weakening the public infrastructure in terms of the welfare and health systems. Radical parties have taken root in this ground. Their criticism of the EU has become relevant to populations, and their claim to support social issues found an echo at the beginning of the 2010s.

Moreover, the effect of post materialism gave rise to new left-wing parties *ex-nihilo* throughout the 2000s.[22] One can think of the green parties that appeared to challenge social democratic parties in their initial electoral arena. However, these parties never achieved political relevance within their respective party systems. The only two counterexamples are Možemo! – politička platforma (We Can! – Political Platform) in Croatia and Levica (The Left) in Slovenia, two parties oriented towards ecology that scored 9,10% and 4,81%, respectively, in the 2024 parliamentary elections, but without accessing government. By and large, we can assert that environmental issues did not take root in CEE party systems and were never salient on the political agenda. Most left-wing parties emerging from post materialist concerns remained in the extra-parliamentary arena.

Another reason for the decline of social democratic parties can be found in the sense of being left behind felt by citizens. Indeed, the transition from communism and the privatization of the economy – implying shock therapy – required a great deal of effort from much of the population. This tacit contract required them to restrain themselves in the hope of a better standard of living. At that time, it was difficult to distinguish who perceived themselves as the "losers" and the "winners"

[22] Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

of the political transition. Since the boundaries between the two groups were blurred, social democratic parties could claim to act in the interest of the general public. However, European integration and the globalization that accompanied it clearly defined who were the "winners" and "losers" of the process in the mind of citizens. In the same understanding as Edgar Grande and his colleagues, the "losers" of the European integration were those who experienced the most difficult restraints and expected the greatest improvement in their lives. They had limited mobility opportunities, and their jobs were protected by the state; however, globalization has now been threatening them.[23] This harsh disillusionment has greatly affected the electorate of social democratic parties, that moved towards radical right-wing parties. The latter capitalized on this feeling of being left behind and loss of hope in ascending social mobility, thus winning over this part of the electorate.

After exposing explanations of the decline from the electorate's perspective, it is also important to emphasize that social democratic parties in the CEE have experienced great difficulties since then. As a matter of fact, the link between citizens and these parties is far weaker than in Western Europe. Foremost, the trade unions do not play an intermediary role between the parties and society, as it is the case in the United Kingdom for instance. Largely dispossessed of their role after the collapse of the communism, they faced the ideological dilemma of following the "Third Way" turn while their national economy faced difficult challenges. In this process, they lost a lot of their political weight and their role in establishing a link by aggregating grievances, greatly diminished. This unclear role persists today.[24] Therefore, social democratic parties could not rely on the trade unions to reconnect with those who identified as "losers" in the aftermath of the European

[23] Hanspeter Kriesi, Edgar Grande, Romain Lachat, Martin Dolezal, Simon Bornschier, and Timotheos Frey, "Globalization and Its Impact on National Spaces of Competition," in *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*, eds. Hanspeter Kriesi, Edgar Grande, Romain Lachat, Martin Dolezal, Simon Bornschier, and Timotheos Frey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3-22, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790720.002.

[24] Lepeltier-Kutasi, "En Europe centrale, la gauche n'aura pas d'avenir si elle ne s'ancre pas dans la société;" De Waele, *La Pologne et l'intégration européenne*; De Waele, *European Union Accession Referendums*.

integration. Secondly, the fact that the political élite was not close to civil society caused a problem for social democratic parties as institutions. Indeed, as the link with citizens continued to deteriorate after the collapse of communism, reaching out to citizens seemed an unsurmountable challenge, especially that the citizens themselves were not accustomed anymore to seeing the political élite as problem solvers. Thirdly, the mobilization of a "left heritage" was complex for social democratic parties. Exalting a glorious past and relying on historical figures was almost impossible because of the communist heritage. The ideology was so discredited that it affected the leftist ideals. Hence, mobilizing political history upon an idealistic imaginary turned out to backfire at times, due to the overall ambient anti-communism.

Electorally, the decline period started in 2008, after the European integration enthusiasm faded out. Compared to other political periods, the decline is clear, as nine out of sixteen parties scored under 10% in their last elections. The exceptions to this statement are Albania, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia. We can also notice the decrease in graphic representations modeling the dynamic throughout this period (Appendix, Figures 1-4). In all geographical areas, most social democratic parties are declining, particularly in Central Europe, where the Czech KSČM and the ČSSD lost so much support that they both fell below the 5% threshold in the 2021 election. Even if we consider the global picture only, we can already conclude to a decline. Focusing on the number of times social democratic parties have participated in governments, we observe that they do so in twenty-eight out of seventy-nine elections. This 35% participation rate, inferior to the one registered during the previous period, at 47%, is symptomatic of bipolarization tendencies in party systems. A good example is the case of Poland, where the bipolarization took place at the expense of social democratic parties. This does not mean that all social democratic parties lost their relevance in their respective political contexts, but it severely damaged their political leverage in their political landscapes. Such low scores show how difficult the position of the left is in CEE, overcome by radical right-wing parties.

From this starting point of an "almost deadlock" of the left in Central and Eastern Europe, the contributions of this special issue aim at

a better understanding of the left political forces in the region. The issue will be structured as follows.

Antony Todorov's article "Conditions for the (Re)Construction of Progressive Left in Bulgaria" tackles the question of the left in Bulgaria from the angle of its reconstruction. The article focuses on the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and its ideological trajectory, as the country's leading left-wing political force. The party went from being the heir to the Communist Party and spearhead of the left in Bulgaria to a rapprochement with the nationalists. This ideological divergence has earned the BSP the antipathy of another section of the left: the non-parliamentary left. This is a network of parties, associations and intellectuals who are united in their opposition to the BSP. Many of these organizations and individuals have broken away from the BSP in recent decades. The article highlights the left's divergences on issues such as the communist heritage, the relationship with capitalism and the defense of rights, as cleavage lines that hinder the unification of the Bulgarian left. Thus, despite a common ideological ground, divergences are weakening the left.

Bekim Baliki's contribution, "From a Social Movement to a Left-Wing Party: The Study of Vetëvendosje in Kosovo," looks back at the trajectory of the left-wing party in Kosovo. Although the Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination Movement) party recently won the February 2025 elections, it has not always been a governing party with a well-designed program for this purpose. Drawing on the history of the Vetëvendosje party, the article examines its evolution from an anti-colonial and populist social movement to an anti-establishment party in power, and finally to a party established in the national political space. The article looks back at the formation of a left-wing party using its political programs to establish its populist mobilization strategy, and it shows that the words most used in its early days are clearly geared towards demonizing the ruling élite of the early 2000s. The systematic analysis of the programs also shows that the discursive patterns are increasingly oriented towards the centrality of the people and of the proposals aimed at socio-economic equality.

The contribution by Bartosz M. Rydliński, "Communist Heritage as the Welfare State Point of Reference – Poland's Case Study," examines

how Polish social democracy exalts the country's communist heritage in the construction of its political agenda. This study also aims to understand the extent to which the communist welfare state can serve as a social-democratic response to the dominance of neoliberalism. The Polish left's emphasis on the welfare state is analyzed from historical and memorial angles through the parties' political communication. A welfare state refers to the protective role of the state against a variety of hazards occurring. From the fall of Communism until 2021, the idea of the social gains made under communism was strongly promoted. Since then, the New Left (NL) has tried to distance itself from this narrative, which led to its return to power in 2023. However, the tension between the mobilization of a legacy with an already acquired electoral base and the Polish NL's temptation to forge ahead reflects the situation of many post-communist parties in the region.

The article "What Constitutes the Left in Albania? Defining Communist Successor and Other Left-Wing Parties" by Jordan Jorgji examines the ideological consistency of the left in Albania. By comparing the discourse of the Socialist Party (SPA) with that of other extra-parliamentary parties such as the Together Movement (MT) and the Hashtag Initiative (HI), the author aims to shed light on the Albanian political landscape. With its strong communist heritage, the SPA remains a highly centralized party, sharing power with its rival, the Democratic Party of Albania (DPA). After the fall of Communism, the SPA became a progressive party, but it was under the leadership of Edi Rama that it was transformed. The SPA has been becoming more market-oriented, and it has been trying to attract younger voters. On the other hand, small extra-parliamentary parties claiming to be left-wing are emerging to challenge the SPA's hegemony. MT seeks to combat socio-economic inequalities, while HI fights corruption. This panorama of the left in Albania traces the evolution of traditional parties and their contestation by emerging players.

Tomáš Cirhan and Mattia Collini's article, "The Crisis of the Left in the Czech Republic, a Party-Elite Perspective (KSČM and SOCDEM)," focuses on the crisis of the left in the Czech Republic and the decline of the Communist and Social Democratic parties, from the point of view of partisan élites. Through élite interviews and analysis of party programs, the authors also seek to examine the factors that are holding back the

resilience of these parties. The authors highlight the predominance of the neoliberal narrative, and the fragmentation and factionalism within the Czech left, as well as the arrival of new anti-establishment players. These include ANO (Yes!), which has had a considerable impact on the decline of the two left-wing parties, especially since its coalition with SOCDEM (ČSSD). ANO was able to capture the electorate that had originally belonged to the left. This erosion of the electoral base of both parties is one of the most important obstacles they face, alongside the power of the neoliberal anti-left narratives promoted by ANO since the 2010s. Nevertheless, this is not stopping the restructuring of the KSČM into the *Stačilo!* (Enough!) alliance.

In his article, "At the Roots of the Current Transformation of the Czech Communist Party," Michel Perottino explores in depth the origins of changes in the positions of the Czech Communist Party (KSČM), the only party to survive in the political arena after 1991. The author asks whether the KSČM's recent nationalist stances are the fruit of an ideological recasting in the last decade, or whether these positions were already present earlier in its discourse and actions. Through the Stačilo! coalition, the KSČM took a turn from Euroscepticism to nationalism. Perottino shows that today, the KSČM is struggling to regain a partisan identity as its electorate disappears. Strategically, the party is turning to mobilizing issues such as nationalism and rejection of the euro. This nationalist turn is best illustrated by the migration crisis, where the Communists rejected immigration, but retained part of their original identity on redistribution. However, these aspects are much more subtle, marking a significant shift of the party to the right.

Appendix

Table 1

Results from social democratic parties in CEE from 1991 to 1995

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Albania (PS Albania)		**23,70%**			
Bosnia (SDP BiH)					
Bulgaria (BSP Bulgaria)	**33,13%**			**43,50%**	
Croatia (SDP Croatia)		5,50%			8,93%
Czech (CSSD)		6,53%			
Czech (KSCM)		**14,00%**			
Estonia (SDE Estonia)		9,73%			5,99%
Hungary (MZSP)				**32,99%**	
Latvia ("Harmony")			0,66%		4,58%
Lithuania (LSDP Lithuania)		6,05%			
Macedonia (SDSM Macedonia)				**53,50%**	
Montenegro (SDP)		4,10%			
Poland (SLD)	**11,98%**		**20,41%**		
Romania (PSD)		**27,72%**			
Serbia (Democratic Party, DK)		4,42%	**12,06%**		
Slovenia (SD Slovenia)		**13,58%**			

Source: authors' own elaboration. Results over 10% of the votes cast are marked in bold, and the elections where social democratic parties participate in governments are highlighted in yellow.

Table 2

Results from social democratic parties in CEE except Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia from 1996 to 2007.

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Bulgaria (BSP Bulgaria)		**22,06%**				**17,14%**				**30,95%**		
Croatia (SDP Croatia)					**38,70%**			**22,61%**				**31,22%**
Czech (CSSD)	**26,40%**		**32,30%**				**30,20%**				**32,30%**	
Czech (KSCM)	**10,30%**		**11,00%**				**18,50%**				**12,80%**	
Estonia (SDE Estonia)				**15,21%**				7,04%				**10,61%**
Hungary (MZSP)			**32,25%**				**42,05%**				**43,21%**	
Latvia ("Harmony")			**12,88%**				1,53%				X	
Lithuania (LSDP Lithuania)	6,94%				**31,08%**				**20,65%**			
Poland (SLD)		**27,13%**				**41,04%**				**11,31%**		**13,14%**
Romania (PSD)	**21,52%**				**36,61%**				**36,80%**			
Slovenia (SD Slovenia)	9,03%				**12,08%**				**10,17%**			

Source: authors' own elaboration. Results over 10% of the votes cast are marked in bold, and the elections where social democratic parties participate in governments are highlighted in yellow. "X" stands for the boycott of an election by a party.

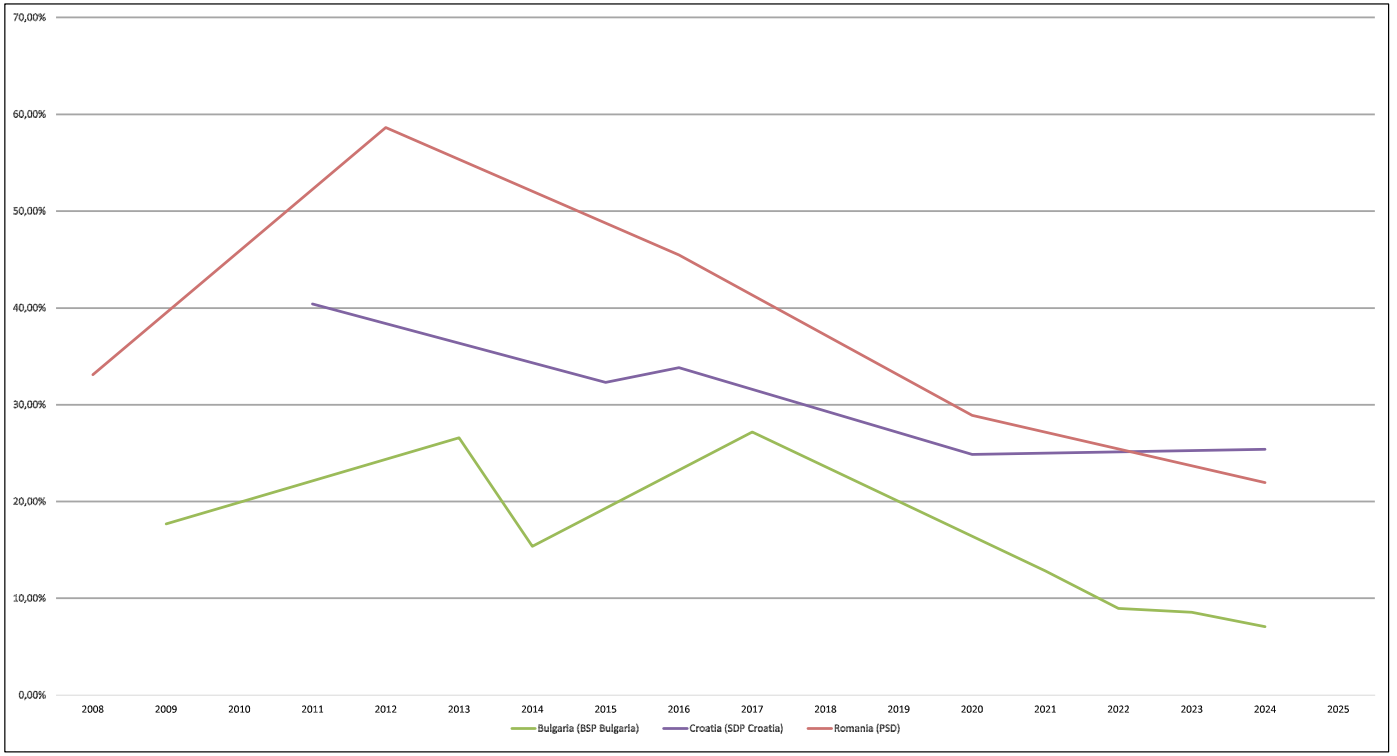

Figure 1. The decrease of social democratic parties since 2008. Electoral graph of social democratic parties of Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania (*Source*: authors' own elaboration)

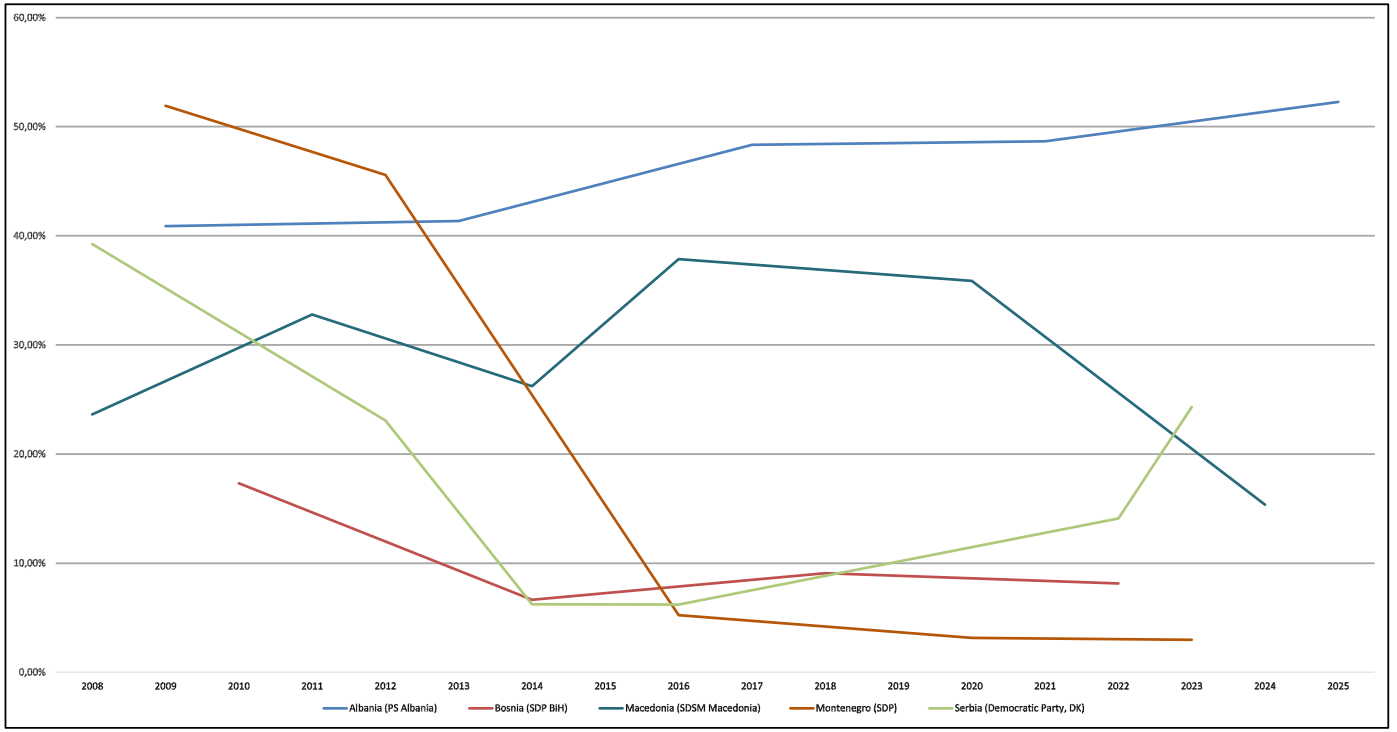

Figure 2. The decrease of social democratic parties since 2008. Electoral graph of social democratic parties of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia
(*Source:* authors' own elaboration)

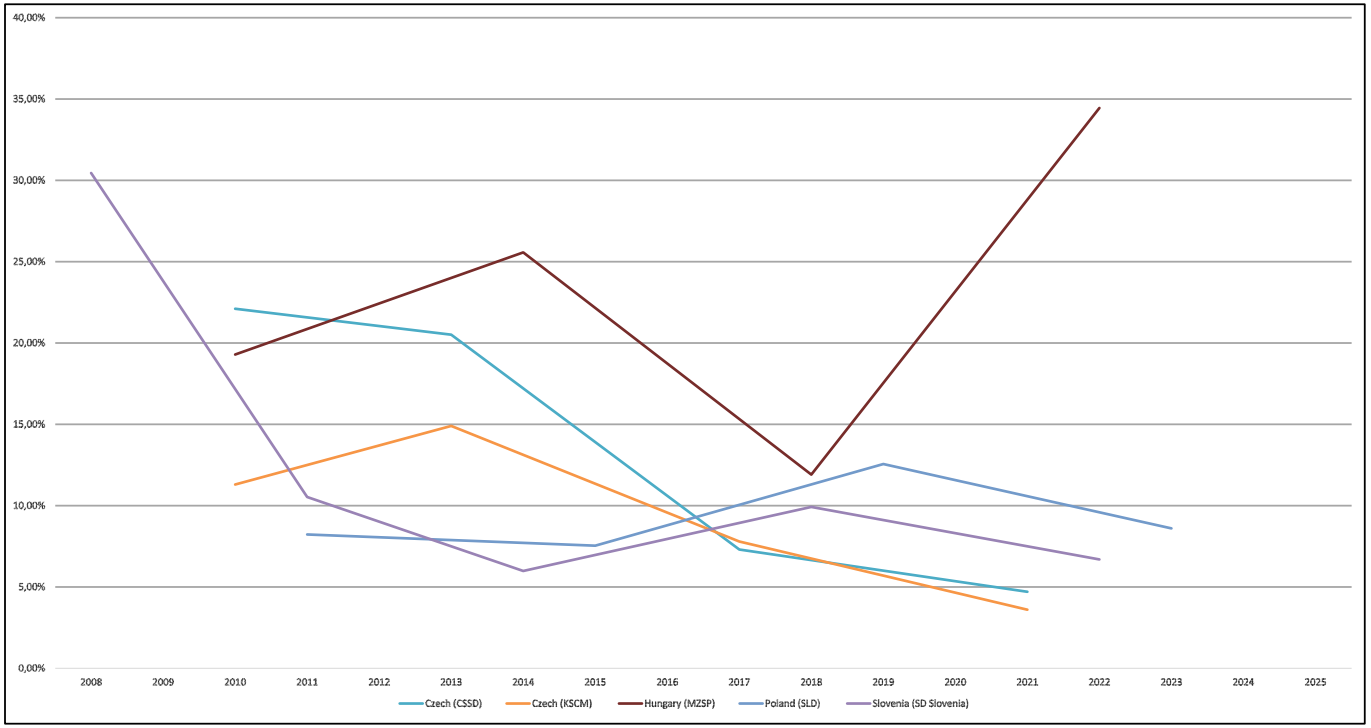

Figure 3. The decrease of social democratic parties since 2008. Electoral graph of social democratic parties of Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia
(*Source:* authors' own elaboration)

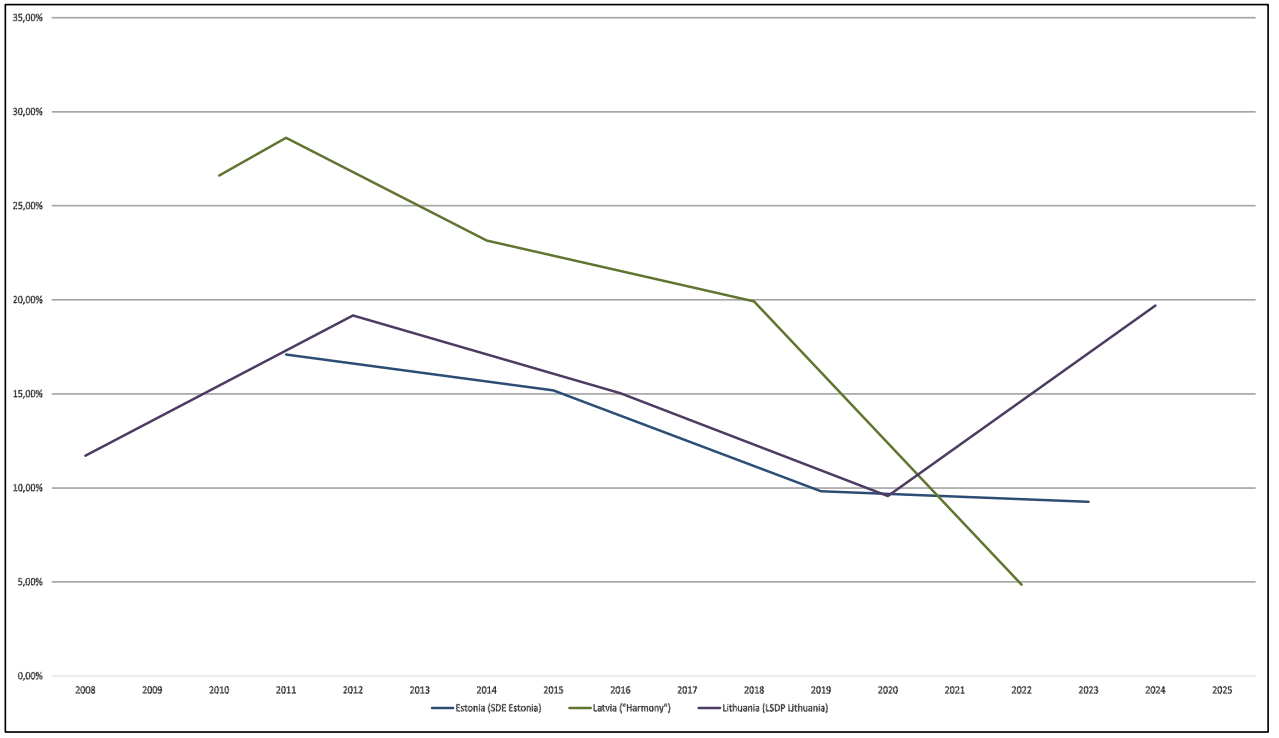

Figure 4. The decrease of social democratic parties since 2008. Electoral graph of social democratic parties of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (*Source*: authors' own elaboration)