



Introduction

András Bíró-Nagy^{id} and *Ania Skrzypek*^{id}

The herewith presented book is an attempt to study and compare the social democratic parties within the four countries of the Visegrad group (V4). These are the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The regional, intergovernmental cooperation among them is well established, which justifies the focus on these states as selected from within the broader spectrum of Central and Eastern Europe. And it explains why they were extracted from within the group of states that joined the European Union within so-called Eastern Enlargement in 2004.

Subsequently, the four respective country case studies abide by the same outline. The scheme includes elements such as a historical overview; the party organisations; the position of the social democrats within the party system; programme; voters' and electoral appeal; conclusions and a

A. Bíró-Nagy
Policy Solutions, Budapest, Hungary
e-mail: andras.biro-nagy@policysolutions.hu

A. Skrzypek (✉)
Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Brussels, Belgium
e-mail: ania.skrzypek@feps-europe.eu

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature
Switzerland AG 2023

A. Skrzypek and A. Bíró-Nagy (eds.), *The Social
Democratic Parties in the Visegrád Countries*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30792-8_1

1

bibliography. This coherent and comprehensive setup had been designed to ensure consistency in focus and enable the qualitative comparative analysis, of which main findings are featured in the fifth chapter.

When it comes to the historical overview, the country case studies look at the perspective of the last three decades. The starting point for each of them is the dawn of the Soviet Block, the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the transformation of the political systems within the so-called *client* states. There, the methodology derives from history and analyses of the historical sources, whereby the authors refer to a vast but fragmented literature that describes the developments in the 1990s and 2000s in the region. The scope of the respective texts does not permit entering nuances. And hence only the most relevant events are being referred to and the qualitative analyses are limited to the minimum. Even then, the book shows that yes, there have been many common experiences, but there have also been many disparities in the way things unfolded. This is an important insight, especially for those, who otherwise give in to the tendency to generalise and consider the paths to democracy in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary as *fairly* the same.

Consequently, against this historical background, the authors motivate their choice as per which parties they selected to be analysed under the label “social democrats”. While some may assume that this is relatively obvious to categorise and extract organisations relevant for such a study, it is worth remembering that especially in the 1990s the political systems were very fragile and volatile. Some parties had operated in exile (like CSSD), some others came to exist as successors of the former communist parties (see SdRP or MSZP). Quite a few parties emerged and disappeared, of which perhaps the most telling examples are Slovakia and Poland. And later, there have also been numerous splits, unifications and temporary electoral alliances. As these all have been complicating factors, the authors converged around a definition that would see social democrats as the parties that would adhere PES (Party of European Socialists) and/or have its representatives subscribe to the PES Group (currently: S&D Group) in the European Parliament. This denominator allowed the selection of the organisations that would be carefully then examined.

The subsequent sections of the chapters investigate the respective parties’ origins. Because of the dynamic context within which those organisations emerged (either as the ones returning from exile or as successors of the communist parties or as new beings), they all needed to

define not only their own space within the political party scene. By extension their task was to determine what *centre-left* would in case of their countries would comprise of. Hence, they embarked on the search for modern political identity. This formative period correlates with the emergence of the reformist agenda for the centre-left in the Western Europe, which started to be known as *Third Way*.

To examine the connection, the authors look at the relevant, vast literature that echoes a grand ideological debate around it. Evidently, the sister parties inside of the PES were at that point divided about the way forward. It became an unamendable split, which was then visible especially when Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder signed jointly a common letter to the electorate that was meant to be an alternative to the PES Manifesto 1999. The rift from those days resonates until today, both in the relevant writings and in the political debates. Evidence of that is also the recent speech of the UK Labour Party Leader Keir Starmer at the occasion of the Labour Party Conference in Liverpool in September 2022, during which he claimed the legacy of the Blair and Brown governments as proud achievements of the Labour Party.

Three decades after the emergence of the Third Way debate, the literature offers many important volumes that critically assess its heirloom. In this book the authors quote several of the key publications arguing that hardly any among these makes a connection with what kind of an impact the Third Way ideas had in the CEE. By filling in that vacuum, this book may help understanding why the British and German programmatic shifts were so influential there and what made the leaders of MSZP, CSSD and SLD try to import Third Way proposals into their own domestic context. It appears that they shared the understanding that it was an agenda of modernisation, and it would help them *westernise* and solidify their position as organisations with the potential to fulfil the voters' hopes for the future. While the authors lean towards an unenthusiastic approach to these reformist attempts, they point out that the new type of progressivism in CEE countries that emerged as Third Way inspired was the most neoliberal version of it since it intertwined with parallel transformation processes.

Approaching the evolution of the social democratic parties in V4 countries from the angle of the contemporary political thought only partially clarifies the quick rise to power and almost equally rapid decline of the social democratic parties in the Visegrad region. Essential supplementary explanation derives from the further explores, which anchor in the

perspective of the sociology of organisations and use the quantitative methods from within the studies of the political parties' systems. It is true that CSSD, MSZP and SdRP could count on a set of resources that made their respective organisations persevere through the hard times on the 1990s. Just after the transition the centre-left was maliciously associated by the citizens with negative experiences of the past and with communism ("*real socialism*"). And consequently, it was met with resentment from the citizens. When that first wave of hostility was over (of which duration was again a country-specific issue), the analysed parties could bounce back because they were able to rely on solid organisational frameworks. These involved: infrastructure, understanding of organisational procedures among the members and also a long so-called *front bench*. The latter meant that a new generation of leaders could have been recruited from among younger members, many of whom already had relatively high profiles. The fact that they were familiar to the public was an advantage as voters perceived those politicians as experienced, predictable and well prepared to govern. All these qualities shouldn't be underestimated in their appeal, especially that societies amid transformations seek some reassurance and stabilisation.

The reflections about the organisations provoked authors to look deeper into the question of the party structures. On one hand, they took onto their respective workshops the statutes and examined the internal procedures, trying to assess these against the criteria of degree of internal democracy, openness and embedding in the external environment. On the other hand, the authors looked at the issue of representativeness and this brought them to deliberations about the party membership, elites and electorate. The individual chapters include an analysis of the parties' leadership structures and the key internal party processes, including programme formulation and candidate selection. Methodology used to analyse these was mostly qualitative, anchored in the studies focused on elites and structures of voters. Diverse conclusions have been drawn, some of which could further help in endeavour of framing theories of the party change. But perhaps the most outstanding one among them concerns the fact that the politics in Visegrad countries, and consequently within the social democratic parties, is exceedingly personalised. Therefore, also *who* and *in which style* held the leadership at the given time would determine the electoral chances of the party in question, prompting a reflection that these parties are more *presidential* than *collective leadership* type of organisations.

The time census of the three decades of the developments permits also to look at the transformation that the analysed parties have undergone as organisations. Firstly, they are being looked at from the prism of the functionality and assessed based on their performance in opposition and in the government. Secondly, they are studied as parties that have chosen to adhere a traditional political family, which came with benefits (such as legitimacy) and with challenges (such as the crisis of the historical parties). Consequently, they were on the side of the *system* when the wave of contestation and disapproval for the institutions arrived. In Western Europe the disappointment manifested itself with initial electoral abstention, gradual social mobilisation and search for alternative. It fuelled fragmentation and polarisation of political scenes. And this was the understanding with which the researchers involved in this book approached the Visegrad region. Their subsequent work shows that the hypothesis about the crisis of the traditional parties found confirmation also there. One could even say it hit harder since the political party systems have continued to be volatile to the extent in which parties in power could as well be failing to cross the threshold in the subsequent elections. The authors offered a number of observations, however, they also had to struggle and propose a qualitative method to capture the developments, since there is no model that would allow to investigate party change comprehensively.

The passing time also meant a generational change alongside with giving into tendencies known in the West as *professionalisation* and *mediatisation* of politics. The social democrats in V4 followed these footsteps, which meant internal transformations and outsourcing of many of the processes. The most relevant examples of what happened were of course their campaigns. Although the papers do not refer directly to them, as yet again it would fall beyond of what the word limits of the chapter allows, they analyse the exposure of the centre-left in the leading media using the quantitative methodologies deriving from the communication studies. The outcomes of these reflections show that in Poland and Hungary, the state media are under the supervision of the authoritarian governments, which translates into a lack of accessibility for any of their political competitors. The exposure for the latter is more significant in commercial ones, however, far less extensive than for the centre-right and right-wing parties. In Slovakia the relations between SMER and media is simply tensed and full of distrust. But while the deficiency in publicity opportunities could have been relieved by the emergence of the so-called social

media, the authors show that just by comparing the number of followers, the centre-left leaders fall significantly behind and prove unable to pierce the bubbles.

Since these parties can hardly count on the media effect that would support their strive for power, the authors found also necessary to seek an answer in how far the multiplication effect could potentially come from strategic partnership with trade unions, civil society organisations and others. Having examined the context, yet again by using methods from within sociology of organisation, authors come to several conclusions. Perhaps three are a common thread among them. First, the environment in which these parties operate is showing tendencies for volatilities of the possible partnering organisations. This relates to the rather weak position of the trade unions, as also with the hardships experienced by civil society in the context of authoritarian policies of the government. They evidently affect the existing NGOs, as also make some civil society mobilisations appear more as ad-hoc partners, who later fade away once the protest moment passes by. Secondly, the earlier mentioned crisis of the traditional parties resonates in a certain distrust that the civil society also shares, being extremely cautious about pledging allegiance to only one of the political actors. This is a difference with the Western Europe, where some associations, students' unions and social coalitions are distinctively left or right. And finally, there is also an aspect, which possibly is best explained is examined with the lenses of political culture. This is a question of a compromise, which is essential for any coalition to emerge, and which is frequently regarded in V4 countries in the categories of capitulation and concession.

And that bridges to the pre-last valid point to be made in this methodological note. The authors looked at the evolution of the programmatic platforms of the parties, where it would seem that an interesting phenomenon is taking place. The qualitative analyses show that the social democratic parties in the V4 are predominantly focused on two questions. The first is the notion of social progress, which is translated into the proposals that aim at keeping societies open, vibrant, egalitarian, democratic and benefitting from cultural liberalism. There, Europe, NATO and international orientation play also an important role, and this is how they draw the demarcation line of the conflict with right and authoritarian right. The second is the issue of socio-economic dimension. There they generally take on the modernising proposals, discussing equity and solidarity, embracing socio-ecologism, defending premises of a big

and active state with adequate provision of public services. The specific policy proposals vary, also within the countries—of which an outstanding example are differences between MSZP and DK. But the point that is interesting to make here is that in comparison with what was happening in the 1990s with the embracing of the Third Way, the current programme shows much more self-confidence. This may be paradoxical, as before these parties were on the rise and now several among them are in truly precarious position. But an explanation may lay in the fact that they have been active for 3 decades within which they acquired an understanding that it is trustworthiness and proximity of the proposals that may convince the voters.

Finally, equipped with the previously outlined understanding, the authors investigate the electoral appeal of these parties. All chapters reveal the composition of the current electorate of social democratic parties, but also look at who the potential voters of these parties are. They provide interesting insights which allow to depict the median voters, as also understand the limitations of the social democratic parties outreach. Comparing to the relevant literature on the matter, the authors come to the conclusions that have been drawn for the other social democratic parties. With the erosion of core electorates, it can rely predominantly on the urban, better educated, median income voters. In several cases the electoral outcomes showed also that they were able to win those, whom their policy benefits would benefit more indirectly than directly but failing to acquire the trust of those most vulnerable and impoverished.

To that end, each of the chapters finishes with a summary that attempts a SWOT—outlining the strengths and weaknesses of social democratic parties, alongside with what opportunities and threats they face. They also attempt at suggesting what would need to happen in order to make these once-great social democratic parties in the countries of the Visegrad region rise again.