Each unhappy in its own way?

The rise and fall of Social Democracy in the Visegrád countries since 1989

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Abstract: It is often said that we live in a time of crisis for social democracy. Many of the West European centre-left parties that seemed the natural parties of government in the second half of the twentieth century, are in decline. The most common long-term explanations centre on a shrinking working class, a widening gap between the party elite and their core voters, and the challenges from new populist parties and/or greens. Short-term policy factors include the failure to address the recent financial and refugee crises. None of these factors carry much explanatory weight for developments in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic in the three decades since the transition from communism. We find that much of the explanation for the rise and the fall of the five social democratic parties in these countries lies in the dynamics of party competition and party system change. All parties face dilemmas of policy, electoral appeal and coalition-building. The Central European cases suggest that it is how social democrats handle such challenges, and make difficult choices about strategy and tactics, that ultimately shapes their long-term fate. Centre-left parties are stronger masters of their fortunes than much of the literature on the decline of social democracy suggests. Consequently, seeking a common structural explanation for the rise and decline of social democratic parties might be a double fallacy: both empirically misleading and a poor base for policy advice.

Keywords: Central Europe, social democracy, political parties, party system change, democratization.

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Social democratic parties are struggling all across Europe. Their electoral support is plummeting, and many erstwhile big governing parties have lost power in recent years or are relegated to junior partners. Pundits have explained the decline of social democracy in Western Europe by long-term value changes among the voters, decline of class voting, the inability of the parties to broaden their appeal while keeping their core electorates, and competition from the new left and the new right. Recently they have also pointed to the parties' failure to cope with the economic crisis and the migrant crisis in combination with government fatigue (Politico 2 March, 2018; Keating & McCrone, 2015).

All four Visegrád countries have at some point featured big social democratic governing parties: In Poland and Hungary, the successors of the former communist ruling parties – the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP) – returned to government as early as 1993 and 1994 respectively. In the Czech Republic, the historical Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) formed a minority government in 1998. In Slovakia, the Democratic Left Party (SDL) never passed 15 percent, and eventually fell below the electoral threshold in 2002. Direction – Social Democracy (Smer-SD) had more success after the turn of the century, and governed in coalition or on its own for most of the period between 2006 and 2020. Yet, by 2020 all the four current parties were struggling, and only the Czech party served in government (as a junior partner). The Polish party was the first to collapse, losing three quarters of its voters between 2001 and 2005. Then the Hungarian party lost more than half of its support in 2010. The decline of the Czech party was more gradual but also more devastating. Smer was the last party to peak, and the last party to fall from power.

In this article we set out to explain the rise and fall of social democratic parties in the four Visegrád countries since the transition to democracy. The analysis is organised around three research questions: 1) Why did the Polish, Hungarian and Czech parties rise to become big government parties during the first decade after democratic transition, but not the Slovak SDL? 2) Why did Smer succeed where SDL had failed? 3) Why did all these social democratic parties experience dramatic loss of support after their peaks? We argue that party strategy and opportunity structure go a long way in explaining the rise of these parties, whereas the reasons for their subsequent decline are more complex. Long-term factors cited in the literature on West European social democracy do not explain much, and some of the specific reasons for decline differ from case to case. Hence the question in the title: is each social democratic party – like Tolstoy's unhappy families in *Anna Karenina* – unhappy in its own way? In the first section below we briefly present the theoretical context. This is followed by an overview of the history of social democracy in the region, and two sections that analyse the rise and fall of the five social democratic parties.

Theoretical framework: Organisation, party competition and cleavages

A political *party* can be defined as an organization that seeks to propel its candidates into parliament, and usually government, in order to pursue specific policy goals (Sartori, 1976, p. 63). Parties seek power in order to implement policies, and party competition is about how parties interact with each other in the pursuit of votes and office, given the rules of the game and their competitors' strategies (Bakke & Sitter, 2013). The core of any party system *qua* system is therefore the structure of competition for government (Smith, 1966, p. 362). While this is normally beyond the control of smaller parties, bigger parties shape the main dimension of competition by parcelling together salient issues. In Western Europe this has mainly been a socio-economic left-right dimension (Sartori, 1976; Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Lijphart, 1984), whereas post-communist Europe initially saw more variation across states (see e.g. Lijphart, 1992; Smith 1993; Mair 1997; Lewis 2006; Bakke & Sitter, 2005). Short of parliamentary majority, however, even big parties need coalition partners to govern, and this is clearly easier when potential coalition partners are close on the main dimension of competition. This also means that parties can win votes and still lose power, or the other way around. The linkage between the 'current and systematic electoral weakness' of social democracy and social democracy being 'banished from office' is therefore less self-evident than the literature on the crisis of social democracy would have it (Keating & McCrone, 2015, p. 1).

The rise of political parties in old democracies was part and parcel of a gradual democratization process, during which suffrage was extended from the few to the many. The first parties in Europe were founded in parliament as socially constricted and loosely organized caucuses. Towards the end of the 19th century these parties gave way to mass parties founded outside parliament, featuring large memberships, hierarchic organisations and a dense network of local branches, underpinned by strong ties to particular groups, classes and interest organisations (Katz & Mair, 1995; Krouwel, 2006). Social democratic parties were the prototype of such mass parties and achieved their electoral breakthrough only after universal suffrage had been introduced. Of the four cleavages that according to Lipset and Rokkan (1967) structured party system development in Europe, the class cleavage was historically most important for the strength of social democratic parties, while three other crosscutting cleavages (church–state, urban–rural and centre–periphery) divided the right and to some extent even the left. Yet, the success of social democrats also depended on their ability to appeal to broader groups, like fishermen, smallholders, agricultural workers and the like, and on the presence or absence of strong competitors on the left, and especially communist parties.

Conversely, many scholars use the shrinking working class, decline of class voting – regardless of how it is measured (Knutsen, 2008)¹ – and voters' value changes to explain the long-term decline of social democracy in Western Europe (Benedetto, Hix & Mastroiocco, 2020). The catch-all strategy, first applied in West Germany, was a response to these challenges. Parties became more ideologically diffuse, more leadership-dominated, and less dependent on a large membership (Kirchheimer, 1966; see also Katz & Mair, 1995). A second answer was 'third way' strategies aimed at the new middle classes, like Tony Blair's New Labour, which tended to shift the policy platforms of social democratic parties to the right

(see Brandal and Bratberg's chapter in this volume). However, this entailed the risk of turning away the party's core electorate on the left (Karreth et al, 2013), especially as party elites become increasingly middle class (Heath, 2015). We address the importance of party organisations and elites in the first part of the analysis, and the importance of economic factors in the second part.

At the same time, social democracy has faced competition along the post-materialist cleavage from the new left over issues such as the environment and equal rights, and from the new right over issues such as immigration (Inglehart 1990; Keating & McCrone 2015). We address this in the third part of the analysis. Short-term factors like government fatigue and the parties' inability to handle the recent finance crisis and migrant crisis also played a role. Thus, in so far that they had won the battle for the welfare state, and other parties adopted similar policies, social democratic parties in Western Europe were to some extent the victims of their own success (Keating & McCrone, 2015, p. 2; Bremer, 2018).

By contrast, the rise of social democratic parties in post-communist Europe started in a situation of 'instant democracy' (Bakke, 2010). When the erstwhile one-party systems opened up for multi-party competition, universal suffrage was long established, while most of the parties and movements that ran for election were quite recent creations. Scholars therefore expected parties and party systems to be volatile, and to some extent they were (Mair, 1997; Markowski, 2006; Wołek, 2007). However, in terms of organisation, one group of parties had a head start – namely former regime parties (Bakke & Sitter, 2005). Much of the early literature on social democracy in the region set out to explain how such former communist regime parties managed to win elections and return to government so soon, focusing on the character of the previous regime, the composition of the former communist elites, and their ability (and willingness) – or lack of such – to break with the past (Ishiyama, 1995, 1997; Grzymała-Busse, 2002; Agh, 1995; see also Kopeček, 2005). In a more recent study, Milada Anna Vachudová (2015) explains the electoral success of social democracy in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1993, 1994 and 1998 as a result of their cultural liberalism and their economic appeal to the lower and middle classes.

Several scholars used theories developed for analysis of West European politics to analyse emerging cleavage structures and prospects for party system development in post-communist Europe. Gordon Smith (1993) and Peter Mair (1997) analysed the prospects for new catch-all parties developing without going through the mass party stage, and suggested that patterns of competition would depend on which parties defined the 'right' and 'left' in each country. Herbert Kitschelt (1992) argued that the main dimension of political competition after the economic and political transitions of 1989 would be very different from that in Western Europe. He predicted that culturally conservative parties with interventionist economic policy would appeal to one of the two biggest constituencies: voters that feared both social change and economic liberalisation. Conversely, the other well-populated part of the electoral space would be voters that wanted both economic and social change. As it turned out, all this played out in different ways in the four Central European states (Bakke & Sitter, 2005).

Historical background

The history of social democracy in the Visegrád countries started in the late 19th century, under Habsburg (and in the Polish case, Prussian and Russian) rule. Like elsewhere in Europe, the rise of socialist parties went hand in hand with the emergence of a well-organised working class. They were therefore strongest in the Czech lands and on the territory of the former Congress kingdom of Poland. A 'Czechoslav' Social Democratic Party was founded already in 1878, and won parliamentary elections in the Czech lands after universal male suffrage had been introduced in 1907 (Malíř, 2005, p. 41). The first Polish socialist formation emerged in the Russian partition in the 1880s, but soon split into an internationalist wing, the precursor of the Communist party, and a patriotic wing, which founded the Polish Socialist Party. The social democrats were much weaker in predominantly agricultural Galicia, and in the Prussian partition, where they were little more than a sect (Blobaum, 2010, pp. 64–65, 84–85). Finally, the first socialist party in Hungary appeared in 1878, under the fitting name the Non-Voters' Party. The Hungarian Social Democratic Party was founded in 1890 (Hoensch, 1996, p. 27). It had a Slovak wing that briefly operated as an independent organisation (Mésároš, 1992, p. 83).

Because of the illiberal electoral system, a differentiated party system never had the chance to develop in Hungary. The social democrats did not win more than a handful seats in any election before or after 1918, and boycotted the democratic 1920 elections. By contrast, independent Poland and Czechoslovakia combined universal suffrage with proportional elections to their bicameral parliaments, thus favouring parties that appealed to workers and peasants. The Czechoslovak Social Democrats won the 1920 elections convincingly, but were weakened permanently after the left wing split off in 1921 to found the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. The social democrats were especially weak in Slovakia (Ruman, 1992, p. 123). In Poland, Józef Piłsudski's old party, the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), increased its electoral support steadily and peaked at 13 percent in 1928, having merged with the socialist parties of the other partitions in 1919 (Hloušek & Kopeček, 2010, p. 23).

After the Second World War, only Hungary (in 1945) and Czechoslovakia (in 1946) held fairly free elections. The social democrats lost to the communists in the Czech lands, to the Democratic Party in Slovakia, and to the Independent Smallholders' Party in Hungary, where they beat the Communists narrowly. Social democratic parties in all three countries were forcibly merged with the respective communist parties after the last take-over in 1948, after which some of the leaders were jailed and others left the country. Only the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had been a mass party in the interwar period, but after the war Communist parties in all three countries made a strong effort to recruit new members. Membership in Czechoslovakia peaked at an impressive 2.67 million after the 1948 merger with the Social Democrats, while the Hungarian and Polish parties reached 1.4 and 1.5 million, respectively (Wong, 1996, p. 65, 67; Staar, 1982, p. 164). Attempts to revive social democratic parties during the 1956 uprising in Hungary and the 1968 Prague spring were ultimately unsuccessful.

The communist regime in Poland was repeatedly pushed to concessions; collectivisation was reversed already in 1956, the Catholic Church retained an independent position that was

unheard of elsewhere, and Solidarity was from the outset the only independent trade union in the Eastern Bloc (Linz and Stepan, 1996, p. 255). In Hungary, a peculiar form of ‘Goulash communism’ developed under János Kádár, after the 1956 revolt had been crushed. The fairly high living standards earned Hungary the title ‘the happiest barrack’ in the Communist world (Staar, 1982, pp. 147–150). In both countries, reform communists had gained the upper hand in the ruling party by the late 1980s. By contrast, Czechoslovakia had the most state-dominated economy and the most rigid post-totalitarian regime of the three in 1989. The Warsaw pact invasion in August 1968 had put a stop to all political and economic reforms initiated during the Prague spring, apart from federalization, and reformists were thoroughly purged during the so-called normalization period. When the Velvet Revolution started, the generation who came to power after the invasion thus still dominated the Czechoslovak *nomenklatura*.

The founding, rise and fall of Social Democracy since 1989

Although 1989 was a revolutionary break in all four cases, the parties that came to dominate the left in the 1990s did not start from a completely blank slate. The early period of the trajectories of social democracy in the four Visegrád countries was shaped by efforts to reform the communist parties and re-found historical social democratic parties. Much hinged on the former regime parties’ strategies and resources.

In Poland and Hungary, where the reformist wing controlled a majority in the communist regime parties, the successors adopted a social democratic platform already before the first free elections. In both cases, the party congress first dissolved the old party and then went on to found a new one, (intentionally) losing the bulk of the old members in the process. The Hungarian party completed this step already in October 1989, while the Polish party followed suit in January 1990. At dissolution, the Polish communist party had 2.1 million members and the Hungarian party stood at 870,000. Three years later the successor parties had 60,000 and 40,000 members, respectively (Grzymała-Busse, 2002, p. 82).²

In Czechoslovakia, ideological reorientation was more protracted, and only the Slovak branch (formally the Communist Party of Slovakia, KSS) made the transition to social democracy (Hloušek & Kopeček, 2010, p. 54). An extraordinary party congress in December 1989 replaced most of the Central Committee with younger, more reform-oriented cadre, and by the end of 1991 this new leadership had dropped the communist label, adopted a social democratic platform and made all members re-register (Kopeček, 2002, p. 105–6). SDĽ membership dropped from 450,000 in 1989 to 47,000 by the end of 1991 (Kopeček, 2007, p. 187). By contrast, the orthodox wing won the battle over the Czech successor party, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). It did not make members re-register, but membership nevertheless dropped from 1.25 million in 1989 to 317,000 in 1993 (Linek, 2004, p. 181), probably in part because party branches in work places became illegal.³

The victory of the orthodox wing opened the space for the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), the only successful historical social democratic party. Founded two days into the Velvet Revolution, on 19 November, 1989, the ČSSD traced its roots back to the 1878 origins, but was for all practical purposes a new party. There was no organizational continuity, and

little elite continuity, apart from a few individuals who had been active in the party-in-exile (including the first chairman Jiří Horák), and/or during the Prague spring in 1968.⁴ Moreover, it had only 11,000 members in 1990, and this number did not increase much in the following five years (Linek, 2004, p.181). Organisationally, it was by far the weakest of the four social democratic parties in the 1990s.

The second generation social democratic party in Slovakia, Direction (Smer) was founded in December 1999 as an ideologically diffuse, centrist populist party (Učeň, 2007). Apart from the party leader Robert Fico (a former vice chairman and incumbent MP of the ex-communist SDL) most of the party elites were new faces, and the party was organised top-down, with rather few members (6600 in 2003, according to party headquarters). Smer had from the outset deliberately positioned itself between the then ruling rainbow coalition and the national populist opposition. However, by the 2006 election it had swallowed all the small parties on the social democratic left, including Fico's old party, rebranded itself as a social democratic party and joined the Socialist International (Marušiak, 2006). Membership more than doubled between 2004 and 2006, and peaked at 16,800 in 2010.⁵

The first free elections were in practice referenda on the transition to democracy, and the 'custodians of the revolution' won: in Hungary the 'Christian national' parties in the Opposition Roundtable, and in the Czech Republic and Slovakia the umbrella movements Civic Forum and Public against Violence. In Poland Solidarity won all contested seats bar one in the partly free elections of 1989, and its successors the first free elections in 1991. The former Communist regime parties won 11 percent of the votes in Hungary, 12 percent in Poland and 13 percent in Czechoslovakia (about the same in both republics). Historical social democratic parties were uniformly unsuccessful: The Hungarian, Slovak and Czech parties failed to cross the electoral threshold and the entities that claimed the heritage of the Polish Socialist Party did not even field a list (in 1991 or later). Their main problem was arguably 'guilt by association', but in addition, their election manifestos were vague, it was too early for class-based appeals, and they lacked the resources of the former regime parties in terms of elites, organisation, and property (Bakke, 2010, p. 71; Lindström, 1991; Steinwede, 1997).

Starting with the second free elections, the trajectories of social democratic parties in the Visegrád countries began to diverge. In Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, the ex-communist parties easily won the bid for the social democratic left place on the political spectrum, against historical social democratic parties. With only slightly over 20 percent of the votes the Polish SLD returned to government already in 1993, as part of a coalition with the Polish Peasants' Party (PSL). The Hungarian MSzP won a majority of the seats in the 1994 election, but nevertheless invited the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz) into the government. The Czech social democrats barely crossed the threshold in 1992, but had their big break in 1996 and formed their first (minority) government in 1998. SDL in Slovakia was the least successful ex-communist party and the first to collapse. It never surpassed 15 percent throughout its existence, but took part in two broad coalition governments in the 1990s as a junior partner. Smer was ultimately more successful, and Robert Fico formed his first coalition government in 2006.

Of the parties that still exist, the Polish SLD was the first to peak, in 2001 (figure 1). Since the disastrous 2005 election it has run as part of an electoral alliance in three of four elections, but results have been dire. Between 2015 and 2019 it was not even represented in the parliament, because the United Left failed to cross the eight-percent threshold for alliances. The 2010 earthquake elections set off the decline of the Hungarian MSzP and the Czech ČSSD. MSzP lost power along with more than half of its electoral support, and has since formed electoral alliances with other centre-left parties without much success. Despite having lost a third of its electoral support, ČSSD returned to power in 2013, and is currently a junior partner in the minority government of Andrej Babiš. Smer was the last party to peak, and the last party to fall from power. It lost its parliamentary majority, but retained the prime minister in 2016, then lost government power in the most recent election in February 2020.

First cut: party organisation and elites

Although organisation and resources were significant to the development of political parties on the social democratic left in 1989–90, differences in party organisation, origins, or elites mattered much less for the post-1990 development of the social democratic parties in the Visegrád countries.

As Bakke (2010) has argued, former regime parties initially profited from experienced elites, large memberships, newspapers, office facilities, and other property. To be sure, this did not help them win the ‘founding’ elections, but it did help them beat the historical social democrats. Where the successor parties of the former ruling party adopted a social democratic platform (in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia), they easily won the bid for the social democratic left. Superior organisational resources were an obvious advantage in the competition with disorganised and weak historical social democratic parties (Grzymała-Busse, 2002, p. 62, 135).

However, organisational strength is not a plausible explanation for the diverging trajectories of the social democratic parties in the Visegrád countries after the second free elections. As we have pointed out elsewhere, membership correlates only weakly with longevity. There is in fact little to suggest that variations in the strength of party organisation as such explain why parties win or lose elections or form governments (Bakke & Sitter, 2013). First, the moderately successful Slovak SĎĽ had a stronger party organisation and (relative to population size) more members than the more successful Polish, Hungarian and Czech social democrats in the 1990s. Moreover, SĎĽ had more members when it failed in 2002 than Smer had even at its peak in 2012 (figure 2c).

Second, the correlation between electoral support and social democratic party membership is weak in the Czech case (figure 2d) and negative in the Hungarian case (figure 2b). In the case of the SLD (and SĎĽ) the rise and fall of party membership *lagged behind* changes in electoral support (figure 2a), suggesting that electoral gains or losses drive changes in membership rather than *vice versa*. Third, there are examples of parties with far more members and a wider network of branches that have been less successful than the social democrats (chiefly the Communists and the Christian Democrats in the Czech Republic, and the Polish Peasants' Party in Poland). Conversely, a number of parties across the region that have recently won representation have had few members and hardly any organisation whatsoever. The extreme example is Ordinary People and Independents (OĽaNO), the winner of the 2020 election in Slovakia, which has won representation three times with only a handful of members (Dolný & Malová, 2017).

Likewise, the class profile of the party elites did not change much, and therefore cannot have played a big role in driving away core left-wing voters (cf. Heath, 2015). ČSSD and Smer had no workers among their MPs, and SĎĽ only in 1998. Apart from the very first election, the share of workers was two percent or lower among MSzP MPs. The Polish SLD is the exception (figure 3). Here the share of workers was close to ten percent in 1993 and 1997, but fell to less than four percent in the election when SLD peaked (2001), and remained stable until the party failed to cross the threshold in 2015. The higher share of workers in the 1990s is probably due to the fact that SLD between 1991 and 1999 was an electoral alliance that also included the (former communist) trade union OPZZ. As for social democratic governments, only one single worker, representing SLD, has ever been a minister.

If we instead use the share of MPs with higher education as a proxy for the class composition of the party elites, the conclusion remains the same. Members of parliament are an educational elite in all four countries, and four of the five social democratic parties have a larger share of MPs with higher education than the average party in their country (figure 4). The exception is ČSSD, whose MPs are less likely to have higher education than the average party. However, of the 67 individual social democrat MPs without higher education, 19 were already politicians when they were first elected, and another 12 were businessmen. The middle-class character of the political elite did not change much since the mid-1990s.

Second cut: ‘It’s *not* the economy, stupid!’

The second set of factors that is often invoked in the comparative politics literature to explain the different trajectories of the social democratic parties – economic hardship and class structure or level of industrialisation – likewise played a minor role in the Visegrád cases with the exception of the Czech Republic.

First, there is little to suggest that class structure or level of industrialisation explains anything. All four countries have seen a steady decline in industry as well as in manual workers’ share of the workforce since 1989, and these trends do not correlate with electoral support for social democratic parties. The rise of social democracy coincided with *decline* of the working class in all four countries (figure 5). The percentage of the work force employed in industry was lower in Hungary and Poland (the countries with the strongest social democratic parties) than in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the early 1990s (figure 6). Wolek found no differences in income, unemployment or education between the electorates of SLD and AWS, the two biggest alliances in Poland in 1997 (Wolek, 2007, p. 57–59), and based on 2009 data, Knutsen (2013a, p. 36) found that workers were actually *less* likely to vote for MSzP than for its right-wing rival Fidesz. This is not surprising, considering that SLD and MSzP to a large extent drove the transition to market economy during their first spell in government, and neither party has been particularly left-oriented in economic policy. Knutsen (2013b) found that class voting was generally weak in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, but somewhat stronger in the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic also had the highest share of manual workers (figure 5).⁶

Second, the economic transition caused hardship in *all* the Visegrád countries, and thus cannot explain why the Slovak SDL did worse than the other two former regime parties in the early 1990s. Poland's economy hit rock bottom first, and recovered faster, while 1991 was the *annus horribilis* in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Industrial output dropped by up to 25 percent (Poland) in the worst year, and GDP by up to 15 percent (Czechoslovakia). Inflation peaked at a staggering 586 percent in Poland, while Czechoslovakia exceeded 50 percent in 1991, and Hungary peaked at 35 percent (Balcerowicz, 1994, p. 84). Czechoslovakia was *not* better off at the time of the second free elections in 1992 than Poland was in 1993 or Hungary in 1994, and Slovakia was still worse off than Hungary in 1994 but SDL nevertheless *lost* votes. If economic hardship alone drove the rise of social democratic parties, Czech and Slovak social democrats should have done better earlier. Moreover, when SLD and MSzP won the elections in 1993/1994 and returned to government, the respective economies were

already growing and inflation on the way down. The same applies to the Czech Republic when ČSSD had its break-through in 1996, and even to Slovakia when Smer had its break-through in 2006 (figures 7–10). The Czech Republic did, however, have an economic recession prior to ČSSD's victory in 1998.

Third, while the transition to a market economy undoubtedly increased income inequality in all four countries, particularly in the mid-1990s (figure 11) this does not necessarily explain the rise of social democracy. Based on national survey data for Poland, Kotnarowski (2016) found that the losers of the transition were *not* more likely to vote for SLD in 1993 and 1997. In Hungary, nostalgia for the Kádár era did result in short-lived support for MSzP among the losers of the transition in 1994, but this evaporated with the MSzP government's introduction of austerity measures in 1995. According to Zsolt Enyedi (2006, p. 194) most of the Hungarian losers of the economic transition did not vote. In the Czech Republic, however, they started to flock to the ČSSD in late 1993, propelling the party's rebirth (Doyle & Fidrmuc, 2003). All in all, economic factors seem to have played a role for the rise of social democrats only in the Czech Republic.

Likewise, some of the long-term factors that are conventionally held to explain the decline of social democratic parties in Western Europe can therefore be dismissed right away: if the rise of social democratic parties in the Visegrád four was not associated with the strength of the working class, neither was their decline, and as we have seen, the minimal changes in the class composition of the party elites hardly explains anything. Interestingly, the global economic crisis of 2008 (figure 7) affected only one of two the social democratic parties that were in government at the time: MSzP. While both MSzP and Smer lost office in 2010, Smer actually *increased* its electoral support, mostly at the expense of its junior coalition partners.

Third cut: Party strategy and opportunity structure explain the rise

In addition to party organisation and social structures, a long line of West European comparative politics scholars from Gordon Smith (1966, 1993), Giovanni Sartori (1976), Peter Mair (1997) to Tim Bale et al. (2010) have explored the role that party strategy and opportunity structures play for the changing fortunes of political parties, including those on the social democratic left. This line of inquiry is the most fruitful for explaining the rise of these parties in Poland and Hungary from 1993/1994, in the Czech Republic from 1996, and in Slovakia from 2006, as well as the failure of SDL to become a major player in Slovakia.

Let us start with Poland and Hungary: First, the Polish and the Hungarian social democrats were – through a combination of luck and skill – able to position themselves as the main opponents to the incumbent government in the second free elections in 1993/1994. In both cases, the former regime party chose a catch-all strategy rather than appealing one-sidedly to the working class or to the losers of the transition. With chaos and fragmentation on the right in the early 1990s, both came across as comparatively competent. Second, the electoral system played a role in the early return of the former Polish and Hungarian regime parties to *government*. Third, both parties subsequently helped stabilise the pattern of competition through their choice of coalition partners. Moreover, once in power, both proved willing to implement (even ruthless) pro-market reforms. The Polish SLD and the Hungarian MSzP thus differed from the ‘right’ mainly in cultural terms, and came to occupy the secular and libertarian pole against the anti-communist, Christian national and conservative right (Grzymała-Busse 2002, pp. 162 ff.; Enyedi 2006, pp. 179–181; Bakke & Sitter, 2005).

In Poland, Solidarity had fragmented into a number of parties before the first free elections in 1991, which made it extremely difficult to form stable governments and triggered snap elections in 1993. Because a number of these post-Solidarity parties failed to meet the new five-percent electoral threshold, causing the share of wasted votes to skyrocket, SLD won the elections with just over 20 percent of the votes. Together with its coalition partner, the Polish Peasants’ Party (PSL),⁷ it controlled 66 percent of the seats in the Sejm. Ten years of confrontations between the Polish communist regime and Solidarity had created a divide that was not easily overcome, and SLD’s choice of the post-regime PSL as coalition partner cemented this post-regime/post-Solidarity divide for another decade.

In Hungary, the parties of the Opposition Roundtable were divided into a liberal and a Christian national camp even before the negotiations about regime change. Having won the 1990 elections, the Christian national camp, headed by the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), formed the government. The two liberal parties and MSzP went into opposition. Thanks to the disproportional mixed electoral system – which favoured large parties – the MSzP won an absolute majority of the seats in the 1994 elections with only 33 percent of the votes. Partly to ensure legitimacy for government policy and partly to disarm its own left wing, the MSzP offered the largest of the two liberal parties, the Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz) a coalition – which it duly accepted (Sitter, 2011, p. 252; Enyedi, 2006, p. 184). This set in motion a restructuring of party competition in Hungary from a three-way to a two-way contest, as the other liberal party, Fidesz, moved sharply to the Christian national right under Viktor Orbán's leadership. By 1998, Hungarian politics had polarised into a two-by-two contest with MSzP and Fidesz as the main contestants.

By contrast, the opportunity structure was less favourable to the social democrats in Czechoslovakia. First, the timing of the second free elections in 1992 mattered: SDĽ had just finished re-registering its members, the factional struggle in KSČM was still going on, and ČSSD was still a young party with an unresolved conflict on how to relate to the (former) communists. Second, and more importantly, the successors of the umbrella movements – Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and Movement for a democratic Slovakia (HZDS) – emerged as each other's main opponents at the federal level in the run-up to the election, thus side-lining the social democrats. ODS combined the role of the champion of rapid economic reform with a strong federalist stance vis-à-vis the Slovaks, while HZDS – running from opposition – was the only major party in Slovakia to advocate a confederation, the preferred solution in wide circles. It thus managed to present itself as the guardian of the Slovak 'periphery', against the political dominance of Prague as well as against the adverse effects of the rapid economic reform initiated by the 'centre' (Wolchik, 1995; Hloušek & Kopeček, 2004, p. 147). The social democrats ended up in an awkward middle position on state form, and faced strong competitors on the left: KSČM on the Czech side, and HZDS on the Slovak side.

Once Czechoslovakia was history and the hardliners had won the factional struggle in KSČM, however, the new ČSSD leader Miloš Zeman set out to present his party as the main leftist alternative to the incumbent centre-right coalition, picking up voters and MPs from small centrist and centre-left parties on the way (Vlachová, 1999, p. 269–70).⁸ Like the Polish and the Hungarian parties, the Czech social democrats chose a catch-all strategy, but unlike the two other parties, they differed from the 'right' mainly on the socioeconomic dimension, and started to appeal to the losers of the transition around 1993 (Hloušek & Kopeček, 2004, p. 24–25; Doyle & Fidrmuc, 2003). Yet, government formation has always been more complicated for ČSSD, mainly because of a self-imposed limitation on coalition strategy: the Bohumín declaration banned future government coalitions with KSČM. Its first government in 1998 was a minority government, and later coalitions have been with parties on the centre-right.

In Slovakia, by contrast, HZDS occupied the socio-economic centre-left, which gave the social democrats less room for manoeuvre. After the 1992 election, SDĽ initially took an intermediate position between the Mečiar government and the centre-right opposition.

When Mečiar lost his parliamentary majority due to defections, the SDL' leadership cut a deal with the centre-right opposition to secure snap elections. At the time the party was on par with HZDS in the polls (figure 12), and allied with the historical social democrats, the Greens and an Agrarian party in the hope of becoming a major player. However, its own left wing was not happy and flocked to the new, leftist Association of Workers of Slovakia (ZRS). Moreover, Mečiar's HZDS – again running from opposition – capitalised on dissatisfaction with the new government's renewed emphasis on rapid economic reform, for which SDL' was held partly responsible. As a result, the SDL'-led alliance barely made the ten-percent threshold for four-party alliances (Kopeček, 2002, p. 112).

The increasingly authoritarian practices of the Mečiar government after 1994 served to polarise the Slovak party system into a national populist government camp and a civic-democratic opposition camp allying across left-right, religious and ethnic cleavages. After winning the 1998 election, this opposition formed a 'rainbow coalition' that was dominated by the centre-right, but included the SDL' and a left-populist party. The SDL' thus found itself competing with the HZDS for the economic left but allying with the broader anti-Mečiar alliance dominated by the centre-right. This is the key to the party's lack of success in the 1990s as well as to its total failure in the 2002 elections.

So what had changed when Smer had its electoral breakthrough in 2006? The short answer is that HZDS no longer blocked the rise of a social democratic party, and that left-right competition had replaced the inherently unstable yet enduring 'Mečiar-and-allies versus the rest' pattern. First, the collapse of the leftist parties in the rainbow coalition (including SDL') and the decline of the national populist camp in the 2002 election paved the way for the first centre-right government in Slovak history. In the meantime the 'power pragmatists' in the HZDS leadership had (without success) tried to re-brand the movement as a centre-right people's party in order to become a more attractive coalition partner. Second, Robert Fico set out to fill the void on the centre-left by re-branding Smer as a social democratic party and presenting it as the only leftist alternative to the incumbent centre-right government, much like Zeman had done in the Czech Republic in the mid-1990s (Marušiak, 2006; Rybář & Deegan-Krause, 2008).

Each unhappy in its own way?

The timing and type of social democratic crises vary, and it is therefore tempting to conclude that each social democratic party is unhappy in its own particular way. In this section we discuss how far this holds, and what the common denominators are.

The Slovak SĽ was the weakest of the five parties, and the only one that became defunct. It paid the price for its participation as junior partner in two broad coalition governments dominated by the centre-right: the short-lived Moravčík government in 1994, and the rainbow coalition between 1998 and 2002. Its collapse in 2002 was the combined effect of government fatigue, leadership changes and competition from *Smer*. First, the decision to govern with centre-right parties and accept the portfolio of finance minister in a situation where a strong austerity policy was necessary did not sit well with the party's core constituencies (Haughton, 2004, p. 185). Second, SĽ got a strong competitor in the form of *Smer*, which profited on the popularity of the former SĽ vice chairman Robert Fico. A split in late 2001, prompted by the victory of the left wing at the party congress, was the last nail in the coffin. However, the brief success of the orthodox communist KSS in 2002 was a consequence of SĽ's failure rather than a cause. Having polled well below five percent until the last moment, it was the only leftist party that had a shot at the electoral threshold.

The Polish SLD was the next to collapse, in 2005. Its decline began soon after winning office in 2001: amid economic crisis, the "Rywin-affair" corruption scandal, a poorly handled health service reform, and the loss of its coalition partner, its approval ratings dropped below 10 percent in early 2004 (Szczerbiak, 2005). Since 2007 it has run as part of various centre-left alliances in three of four elections, without much success; in 2015 the alliance even fell below the eight-percent threshold. The three main reasons for the party's decline cited in the literature include the economic costs of policy reforms to the party's low-income voters, corruption scandals that undermined the party's credibility, and the prevalence of communist/anti-communist and liberal/national cleavages over the classic socio-economic left-right divisions (Markowski, 2006; Szczerbiak, 2007, 2017; Jasiewicz, 2008).

The Hungarian MSzP collapsed in the earthquake elections of 2010, after having governed (with the liberal SzDSz) for two consecutive terms. The party subsequently split, when its centrist faction left to form the Democratic Coalition (DK). They fought the 2014 election together, while DK ran on its own in 2018. As in the Polish case, the main factors that stand out are economic crisis, unpopular reforms, problems linked to corruption and lack of accountability, as well as the populist right's ability to mobilise around a nationalist/liberal cleavage rather than socio-economic left right divisions (Enyedi, 2006; Batory, 2010). The 2010 result reflected both tactical blunders and strategic challenges. Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány infamous 'we lied' speech at a closed party meeting after the 2006 election (where he admitted having lied about the state of the economy) was particularly damaging, but the global economic financial crisis exacerbated local factors. As for the subsequent decade, once in government Fidesz dismantled democratic checks and balances to such an extent that the OSCE judged the 2014 and 2018 elections to be free but not fair, and Freedom House downgraded Hungary to 'partly free' in 2019 (Bakke & Sitter, 2020).

Unlike the other four parties, ČSSD started its decline from opposition. Opinion polls had the party at almost 30 percent a month before both the 2010 and the 2013 elections, suggesting that low turnout among its core voters is at least part of the reason for its loss, along with lack-lustre campaigns (Bakke, 2016, p. 433; Havlík et al, 2014, p. 71; Stegmeier & Linek, 2014; CVVM 2010). Moreover, because ČSSD had its own history of corruption, it was not able to exploit the scandal that brought down the ODS-led coalition and prompted snap elections in 2013. Instead, the party that benefitted most was ANO, the new centre-right party of billionaire Andrej Babiš, which has been described in the literature as a case of centrist technocratic populism (Buštková & Guasti, 2019). However, government fatigue and internal coalition squabbles obviously played a role in 2017, when ČSSD dropped below 10 percent for the first time since 1992. Having ‘won’ the 2013 election, the party formed a coalition government with KDU-ČSL and ANO. Even after its disastrous results in 2017, and after some hesitation, ČSSD decided to enter the minority government of Babiš in June 2018.

When Smer lost power in March 2020 it had been the most popular party in Slovakia since 2003, and governed for most of the period since 2006. In 2016 the party retained the prime minister in an improbable coalition with the nationalist SNS and the ethnic Hungarian Most–Híd, despite having lost a third of its votes since 2012. Among reasons cited in the literature are corruption scandals in the health sector, the wave of anti-government strikes among teachers and nurses in the run-up to the election, and the failed attempt of Fico to exploit the refugee crisis through anti-Muslim rhetoric, which backfired (Rybář & Spáč, 2016; Rybář et al 2017, p. 54; Baboš et al 2016). Four years later Smer’s electoral support fell below the 20-percent mark. It never recovered after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018, amid accusations that members of the government were linked to Italian organized crime.

Although long-term (economic) factors thus do not explain much in any of our cases, many of the factors that explain short- and medium term dips in social democrat support in Western Europe also apply to the five Central European cases. Three such factors are particularly important – the organisation and strategies of the non-socialist parties, challenges from far left or post-materialist parties on the social democrats’ left flank, and the wear and tear that socialist parties (or indeed any party) in government are subject to.

First, in all conflict, including political conflict, the ‘enemy’ gets a say. In many West European cases, the main competitor for left-wing voters have been the rising populist parties on the right, as much as than the mainstream conservative right (Bale et al, 2010). The combination of a nationalist/cultural right-wing agenda with protectionist and high-public-spending economic policy proved a more attractive alternative for former social democratic voters than a conventional low tax/low spending market-liberal conservative right. In the Hungarian and Polish cases, most analyst assign an important role to Viktor Orbán and the Kaczyński twins (Jarosław and Lech) in terms of their personal leadership styles and strategies of rejecting liberalism and opposing the EU (see e.g. Rupnik, 2016; Gryzmala-Busse, 2017; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018; Sitter & Bakke, 2019). Fidesz and PiS deployed the classic populist strategies of pitting their representation of *the people* against a corrupt elite, of defending the nation against foreign interests, and of presenting (simple) protectionist

policy solutions to economic challenges. Combined with powerful organizational skills (Fidesz more or less built up a new party organisation based on the local Civic Circles after losing office in 2002), the populist right presented a strong challenge to the social democratic left in these two counties.

However, while competition from the populist radical right may be part of the reason why the social democrats have not been able to recover and return to government in these two countries, it hardly explains the collapse of SDL and SLD in the early 2000s, or the decline of ČSSD since 2010. The only radical right parties that won representation in any of the four countries before 2010 were the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP), which failed in 2002 as MSzP was still on the rise, and the Czech Republicans (SPR-RSČ), which failed in 1998, when ČSSD formed its first government. Moreover, immigration was not an issue in any of the four countries before the onset of the 2015 refugee crisis, and thus cannot explain social democratic decline in the region prior to this. To be sure, in Hungary the far right Jobbik came from nowhere to win nearly 15 percent in the June 2009 European Parliament elections, with a campaign focused on ‘gypsy crime’. But it did so on the back of MSzP decline. Medián opinion polls first recorded Jobbik above 1 percent in February 2009, by which time support for MSzP had fallen from a post-election peak of 37 percent in May 2006 to below the 20-percent mark.

In the case of ČSSD the challenge came from the centre-right rather than from the populist radical right. In 2010 and 2013, the party’s main problem had been low turn-out among its prospective voters; when it collapsed in 2017, it primarily lost voters to its coalition partner ANO (Povolební studie 2017; Havlík, 2019). Like Public Affairs (VV) before it, ANO targeted both major mainstream government parties, and accused them of corruption and incompetence, but in 2013 it mainly attracted the votes of former VV and ODS voters (Kopeček, 2018, p.103). Since then, ANO has become even more centrist, thus posing an even stronger challenge to ČSSD. The existence of a large centrist party has also changed the dynamics of party competition in the Czech Republic, with the so-called ‘democratic’ parties on the centre–right against ANO, the extreme left and the extreme right. On this new dimension, ČSSD occupies an uneasy position in the middle as a junior partner in government, much like SDL did in Slovakia in the mid-1990s.

By contrast, Smer was a populist party from the outset. It allied with the national populist parties (HZDS and SNS) in 2006 and grew at their expense in the two subsequent elections. Much like HZDS before it, it came to combine a leftist position on the socio-economic left–right dimension with moderate cultural conservatism and it did best outside the biggest cities. To be sure, Smer lost to Marian Kotleba’s extreme-right People’s Party Our Slovakia and the populist Sme Rodina in 2016, but the largest chunk of its departing 2012 voters went to its old junior partner SNS (Gyárfášová & Slosiarik, 2016, p. 9). While the socio-economic centre-right in Slovakia has always been divided along ethnic, religious-secular and liberal-conservative lines (and extremely so since 2012), Smer has monopolized the socio-economic left. This is also the key to understand why Smer until 2020 has done better than the three other parties. However, this is not likely to last; as the book went to press, former Smer prime

minister Peter Pellegrini was in the process of establishing a competing social democratic party (Sme 10 June, 2020).

Second, social democratic parties across Europe are open to challenges both from the far left side of the political spectrum, and from the green/post-materialist left, particularly after winning office by moving to the centre ground. The post-materialist green challenge has been somewhat less of a problem for the Central European social democrats than for their West European sister parties, and was certainly not a significant cause of their decline. Before 2010, only the Czech Greens polled over five percent in any election in Central Europe. And this is a centre-right green party, which chose to govern with ODS and the Christian Democrats. Moreover, it fell below the threshold more or less at the same times as the ČSSD's decline started. In Poland and Slovakia no green party has made it to parliament on its own since the Slovak Greens crossed the three-percent threshold in 1990.

Even in Hungary, where the green left-populist Politics can be different (LMP) and its splinter party Dialogue for Hungary (PM) played a significant role in keeping the so-called democratic opposition divided in the 2010s, this was as much a consequence of social democratic decline as a cause of it (Sitter, 2011). As in the case of the above-mentioned brief success of the KSS in 2002, which was a direct consequence of the collapse of the SDL, the rise of LMP (established in February 2009) followed in the wake of the MSzP's troubles. The split between DK and the rump MSzP after the 2010 election disaster was over leadership and policy, and had nothing to do with how to deal with its new green competitor.

Likewise, in Poland the SLD split before the 2005 electoral defeat and it was only after this that it faced significant competition from other parties on the cultural left, notably the Palikot movement (RP), which replaced SLD as the main anti-clerical movement and came third in the 2011 election. Even so, Aleks Szczerbiak explains the SLD's continued decline as much by the party's own 'anaemic efforts' after 2007 (2013, p. 489). Across the border in Slovakia, Smer avoided this kind of self-destruction by absorbing its smaller left and centre-left rivals in the run-up to the 2006 election.

As for competition from the far left, only the ČSSD had faced a persistent challenge, in the form of the Communist party. While this contributed to limiting the rise of the ČSSD in the early 1990s, it may also have softened its fall somewhat inasmuch as there was little scope for new left-wing parties to emerge in an already crowded electoral market.

Third, government fatigue is both a systemic and a specific issue, perhaps even more so in Central Europe than in the west (because of generally lower trust in political parties). Across Europe, governments tend to lose popularity after two terms in office. Although the specific reasons differ from case to case, the strain of government includes both internal party issues (divisive policy and personnel decisions) and the challenge of defending unpopular government policy. Eurobarometer has asked voters on a regular basis since 2004 whether they trust the government in their country. Figure 13 (reporting the percentage that 'tend to trust' the national government) shows that this varies considerably both within and across these four states. Trust was at a low point in Poland right before the fall of SLD from power in 2005, and reached a low point in Hungary a few months before MSzP lost office. In the Czech Republic, the last

ODS government (2010–2013) had the lowest rating, but a dip is also visible in 2017 during ČSSD's premiership. Likewise, trust levels in Slovakia were lowest during the last centre-right Dzurinda government in 2005, with dips in 2014 (after the presidential election) and 2018 (after the journalist murder). One lesson seems to be that it is not so much the cost of governing or presence of rivals in the same part of the electoral market that matters, but how the mainstream parties respond to these challenges (Bakke & Sitter, 2013).

The key point here is not that the decline and fall of social democratic parties in Central Europe followed a predictable pattern, or that it was somehow inevitable – even in the sense that it was driven by structural changes. Government fatigue, the presence of competition on the left, or the shift from socio-economic left-right competition to identity politics, or even the strengthening of the populist right, did not simply and directly cause the weakening of social democratic parties in a way that could be easily modelled and tested over time. The five parties faced different combinations of challenges, and responded to them in different ways. The SDE never reached the strengths that the other four did. The SLD and MSzP faced a ‘perfect storm’ of economic crises, unpopular public sector reform and corruption scandals almost immediately after their respective 2001 and 2006 victories, and both made the situation worse by handling the challenges poorly and eventually losing their coalition partners. After losing the subsequent elections, both suffered from a combination of new challengers on the centre-left, internal divisions (more severe in the Hungarian case), and the increasing salience of identity politics over the socio-economic left right division. In both cases, but more so in Hungary, democratic backsliding then constrained further these parties’ opportunities to rebuild.

The ČSSD and Smer faced less severe versions of these challenges, both in terms of policy problems and competitors, but they also chose more effective responses, including pricing organisational unity above principled in-fighting. The idiom about not rising to challenges but falling to the level of training (attributed variously to Navy SEALs and the Greek warrior poet Archilochus), could perhaps be adapted to suggest that parties do not so much rise to the occasion after losing elections, as fall to their level of skills and leadership. It is not only the challenges that matter, but also how robustly social democratic parties meet them.

Conclusion

The rise and fall of social democratic parties is a salient issue, both for academic and policy reasons. The relative merits of class-oriented versus catch-all party strategies and of de-alignment or realignment as explanations for changing voting behaviour have been debated since the 1960s. Across Europe, academics, journalist and politicians debate whether social democratic parties would be better off sticking to the centre-left, co-opting some of the policies of the populist right, or moving to a more radical socialist left (or indeed reinventing a populist left). In Italy and France the centre-left divided over the issue, as the MSzP did in Hungary. In the Nordic countries and Germany, the social democratic parties have adopted tougher stances on immigration to various degrees, under pressure from the populist or radical right (see also Meret's chapter in this volume); in Slovakia and the Czech Republic Smer and ČSSD have likewise sought to reduce their vulnerability to populist attacks from the right. So far, no Central European social democrat party has opted fully for Labour's 'Corbynista' strategy in the UK, no doubt because of the communist history and the presence of hard left-wing parties (in the Czech case, even in parliament). On the other hand, the demise of the SLD and SDĽ took place in unstable political settings, and has no clear parallel in Western Europe. Understanding the dynamics of the rise and fall of social democratic parties in terms of both electoral support and access to executive office has important normative implications for party strategy.

The Visegrád cases indicate that seeking a common structural explanation for the rise and decline of social democratic parties (or indeed any party) might be a double fallacy: both empirically misleading and a poor base for policy advice. There is no evidence for the kind of de-alignment that produced increased electoral volatility in western Europe in the late 1960s and 1970s, with voters giving up class-based voting for issue based voting, simply because class voting was weak to begin with; neither is there much to suggest the kind of re-alignment along new post-materialist cleavages that was much debated by analysts of West European politics in the 1970s and 1980s. On the contrary, both the rise and the fall of the five social democratic parties in the Visegrád four suggest that much of the explanation lies in the dynamics of party system change – in a combination of party strategy and policy performance. Social democratic parties performed well in Poland and Hungary in the second free elections, when the centre-right suffered from internal disputes and the high cost of the economic transition. The reasons for the belated rise of social democracy in the Czech and Slovak cases were linked to other factors – notably the presence of the Communist left in the Czech case and the salience of the nationalist cleavage in Czechoslovakia before the dissolution and in newly independent Slovakia until the turn of the millennium. Likewise, the fall of the SLD and MSzP was inextricably linked to economic crisis, unpopular reforms and corruption scandals, as well as to how the two parties managed these crises. The ČSSD and Smer faced somewhat different challenges, both in type and magnitude, and adopted different strategies for handling them. To be sure, some of the explanation for the continued weakness of the social democratic left in Hungary in the second half of the 2010s lies in Fidesz' democratic backsliding (Sitter and Bakke 2019, Bakke and Sitter 2020). However, the effect of the MSzP's split and the subsequent inability of the centre-left parties to cooperate is also part of the explanation.

In short, careful analysis and assessment of the five parties in the Visegrád cases suggest that political parties on the centre left might well be more masters of their fortunes than much of the literature on the decline of social democratic parties suggests. All governing parties face challenges, both in terms of policies that do not work out as planned, by way of exogenous shocks that are unrelated to their policies, and because their competitors also play the game. Parties in opposition face a related set of challenges, but have an advantage inasmuch as they can make promises that are not tested as long as they remain in opposition. In either case, political parties face dilemmas of policy, electoral appeal and coalition-building. The Central European cases suggest that it is how they handle such challenges, and how they make difficult choices about strategy and tactics, that ultimately shape the long-term fate of social democratic parties.

Appendix 1.

Party positions, ca 2014, authors' calculations based on data from the Chapel Hill expert survey, retrieved from <https://www.chesdata.eu/ches-stats>.

Horizontal axes: Socio-economic left-right, 0 = left; 10 = right.

In the figures this axis is presented from left (left, 0) to right (right, 10)

This axis is a composite of three variables in the CHES dataset for 2014, each weighted equally

- REDISTRIBUTION = position on redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor (0 = Strongly favours redistribution; 10 = Strongly opposes redistribution)
- SPENDVTAX = position on improving public services vs. reducing taxes (0 = Strongly favours improving public services; 10 = Strongly favours reducing taxes)
- DEREGULATION = position on deregulation (0 = Strongly opposes deregulation of markets; 10 = Strongly supports deregulation of markets)

Vertical axes: Identity politics, 0 = nationalist; 10 = liberal (note that this is the inverse of the original CHES scale, since liberal positions are commonly presented at the 'top and nationalist ones at the bottom of the vertical scale in this kind of figure).

In the figures this axis is presented from bottom (nationalist, 0) to top (liberal, 10).

This axis is a composite of three variables in the CHES dataset for 2014, with the scale reversed and each weighted equally.

- CIVLIB_LAWORDER = position on civil liberties vs. law and order (reversed: 0 = Strongly supports tough measures to fight crime; 10 = Strongly promotes civil liberties)
- NATIONALISM = position towards nationalism (reversed: 0 = Strongly promotes nationalist rather than cosmopolitan conceptions of society; 10 = Strongly promotes cosmopolitan rather than nationalist conceptions of society)
- MULTICULTURALISM = position on integration of immigrants and asylum seekers (multiculturalism vs. assimilation) (reversed: 0 = Strongly favours assimilation; 10 = Strongly favours multiculturalism)

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Notes

¹ Based on a comparative analysis of class voting in eight West European countries, Knutsen found that the old class parties (Communists, Social Democrats and Liberals) were still most firmly anchored in social classes (Knutsen, 2008, p. 183–185).

² The original Polish successor party was the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SdPR). It constituted the core of SLD, originally an electoral alliance between SdPR and other former regime organisations founded before the 1991 election that merged into one party in 1999. The (former communist) trade union OPZZ opted out of the merger (Grzymała-Busse, 2002, p. 82; see also Steinweide, 1997).

³ The remaining territorial branches were virtual senior centres – by 1993, an estimated 80 percent were pensioners, and the vast majority were orthodox, loyal communists (Grzymała-Busse, 2002, p. 86–87).

⁴ A group of social democrats who had been actively involved with the dissident Charta77 decided to run – and were elected – on the Civic Forum platform in the first free elections (Hloušek & Kopeček, 2010, p. 24–25).

⁵ This was only partly due to the merger with the other parties. According to then general secretary Ján Richter (interview, 2008) about 5100 members came from SDĽ, 100 from the break-away Social Democratic Alternative, 500 from the historical Social Democrats (SDSS) and under 50 from Schuster's SOP.

⁶ The figure includes only ISCO-group 8 occupations (plant and machine operators and assemblers), mostly in the industry. If we also include group 6 (skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers) and group 9 (elementary occupations), the Czech Republic is still ahead in 1991 (at 36 percent), and the gap between the Visegrád four and Western Europe increases from 6 to 9 percent for 1991, and from 5 to 11 percent for 2018. See ILO homepage for more on ISCO-groups.

⁷ PSL was a 1990 merger of several peasant parties, of which the United People's Party (ZSL) constituted the core in terms of members and organisation. ZSL was a satellite party during communism – used as a transmission belt by the communist regime.

⁸ In the run-up to the 1996 election mainly the Moravian movement and the Liberal Social Movement; in 1998 even the radical right Republicans. Interestingly, the ČSSD's electoral breakthrough in 1996 coincided with a shift in the geographic pattern of support, from strongholds in north-west Bohemia to strongholds in north-east Moravia-Silesia and the Olomouc region (Bakke, 2011, p. 234).