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# Contemporary Far Left Parties in Europe

## From Marxism to the Mainstream?

■ The far left is increasingly a stabilised, consolidated and permanent actor on the EU political scene, although it remains absent in some countries and in much of former communist Eastern Europe. The far left is now approaching a post–Cold War high in several countries.

■ The far left is becoming the principal challenge to mainstream social democratic parties, in large part because its main parties are no longer extreme, but present themselves as defending the values and policies that social democrats have allegedly abandoned.

■ The most successful far left parties are those that are pragmatic and non-ideological, and have charismatic leaders. The most successful strategies include an eco-socialist strategy that emphasises post-material white-collar concerns and populist anti-elite mobilisation. The contemporary socio-economic and political environment within the EU is likely to increase the future appeal of a populist strategy above all.

■ Policy-makers should not seek to demonise or marginalise far left parties as a rule; such policies are likely to backfire or be successful only in the short term, especially by increasing the tendency to anti-establishment populist mobilisation.

■ A successful strategy towards the far left would involve engaging and cooperating with its most pragmatic actors where necessary, whilst seeking to address the fundamental socio-economic and political concerns that provide the long-term basis for its success.

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## 1 Defining the »Far Left«

»Far left« parties are those that define themselves as *to the left of*, and not merely *on the left of* social democracy, which they see as insufficiently left-wing or even as not left-wing at all. There are two main subtypes. First, **radical left parties**, so called because they want »root and branch« systemic change of capitalism. Although far left parties are often labelled extreme by their opponents, radical left parties accept democracy (verbally at least), although they often combine this with (often vaguely defined) aspirations towards political reform and/or direct democracy and local participatory democracy, including incorporating the rights of the excluded and marginalised (for example, the unemployed and migrant workers) in the political system. Their anti-capitalism involves opposition to »neo-liberal« globalised capitalism, broadly associated with the so-called »Washington consensus« – trade liberalisation, marketisation, privatisation, and so on, although these parties no longer support a planned economy but a mixed market economy with private enterprise confined to services and small and medium-sized enterprises.

»**Extreme left**« **parties**, in contrast, have far greater hostility to liberal democracy, usually denounce all compromise with »bourgeois« political forces, including social democracy, emphasise extra-parliamentary struggle and define »anti-capitalism« far more strictly, usually regarding most market enterprise as anathema.

Compared with the international communist movement 30 years ago, the far left has undergone a process of profound de-radicalisation. The extreme left is marginal in most places – except France, Portugal and Greece – and this niche is occupied by those few parties that maintain a »revolutionary« self-identity, particularly parties of Trotskyist or Maoist extraction. All European countries have half a dozen of these, but very rarely are they more than minor sects. Both the radical and extreme left can be regarded as »left« in their identification of economic inequity as the basis of existing political and social arrangements, and their espousal of collective economic and social rights as their principal agenda. The nature of their radicalism and extremism can clearly be questioned, since all but the most marginal groups participate regularly in the electoral process and, consistent with Marx, they do not spell out in detail either the nature of or the road to their socialism. For instance, the French and Italian Communist Parties now talk not of revolution, but of »overcoming« or »surpassing« capitalism.

The far left can be further divided on the basis of its ideological and policy preferences into four major subgroups (see Table 1):

1. **Communists**. The »communists« are themselves a broad group. Without Moscow's pressure, »orthodox« communism does not exist beyond a commitment to Marxism (of sorts), the communist name and symbols, and a historical sense of »the movement« among activists. The »conservative« communists certainly tend to define themselves as Marxist-Leninist, maintain a relatively uncritical stance towards the Soviet heritage, organise their parties through distinctive Leninist discipline (democratic centralism) and still see the world through the Cold-War prism of »imperialism« although even these parties have overlaid their Marxism-Leninism with appeals to nationalism and populism (above all in Greece and Russia). »Reform« communists, on the other hand, are increasingly divergent and eclectic. They have discarded aspects of the Soviet model (for example, Leninism and democratic centralism in the case of Italy, France and the Czech Republic, significant opposition to the market economy in the case of France and Cyprus), and have adopted, or at least have paid lip service to, elements of the post-1968 »new left« agenda (feminism, environmentalism, grass-roots democracy, and so on).
2. **Democratic socialist parties** define themselves both in opposition to »totalitarian« communism and »neo-liberal« social democracy and fully espouse »new left« themes such as feminism, environmentalism and self-management, advocating a non-dogmatic and in many cases non-Marxist socialism which emphasises themes of local participation and substantive democracy, and support for alternative lifestyles and ethnic minorities. The chief advocates of this position are the »Nordic Green Left« parties in Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland, who have most clearly articulated an »eco-socialist« position that synthesises economic and environmental critiques of capitalism.
3. **Populist socialist parties** have a similar democratic socialist ideological core, but this is overlaid with a stronger anti-elite, anti-establishment appeal, greater ideological eclecticism and emphasis on identity rather than class concerns (especially regionalism, nationalism or law-and-order issues). »Populism« is a controversial term because it is often used against political opponents to imply the irresponsibility and demagoguery associated with unfulfillable promises. However, used in this way the term applies to most small opposition parties

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**Table 1: Main far left subtypes in the EU and the European Economic Area**

| | Radical left | Extreme left |
|---|---|---|
| **Reform communist** | Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC), Party of Italian Communists (PdCI), Communist Party of Spain (PCE), Progressive Party of Working People (Cyprus) (AKEL), French Communist Party (PCF) | |
| **Conservative communist** | | Communist Party of Greece (KKE), Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), Socialist Party of Latvia (LSP), |
| **Democratic socialist** | Left Alliance (Finland) (VAS), Left Party (Sweden) (V), Socialist People's Party (Denmark) (SF), Socialist Left Party (Norway) (SV), Left-Green Movement (Iceland) (VG), Left Bloc (Portugal) (BE), Coalition of the Left, of Movements and Ecology (Greece) (Synaspismós) | Red-Green Alliance (Denmark) (EL) |
| **Populist socialist** | Socialist Party (Netherlands) (SP)<br>Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), The Left (Germany), Sinn Féin (Ireland) | New Anti-Capitalist Party (France) (NPA)[1] |
| **Social populist** | Association of Slovak Workers (ZRS) | |

Note: [1] In process of formation since June 2008.

who must inflate their intentions and capabilities for self-promotion, but who have little chance of governmental responsibility. More accurately, populism refers to a political ideology that »considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ›the pure people‹ versus ›the corrupt elite‹, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people«.[1] So, populist parties are those that tend to define themselves against all other »mainstream« or »establishment« political parties, and see themselves as the only principled defenders of the »ordinary person«, relying heavily on emotional discourse and protest sentiment. Typical of this populist slant were the election slogans of the Dutch Socialist Party in the 1990s: »Vote Against!« (Stem Tegen!) and the German PDS (in 1994), arguing that »Election Day is Protest Day« (Wahltag ist Protesttag).

4. **Social populist parties** have the closest resemblance to classical populist movements (for example in Latin America), with a dominant personalist leadership, relatively weak organisation and essentially incoherent ideology, fusing left-wing and right-wing themes behind an anti-establishment appeal. Most of these parties are not recognised as »left-wing« by the far left, many are not consistently anti-capitalist or even radical, and many are temporary »flash parties« without long-lasting national representation in the EU, and so this paper does not focus on them. However, these parties are important as one factor in explaining why the genuine far left is much weaker in Eastern than Western Europe (with the exception of communists). They often espouse quasi–left wing radical slogans and flourish in the relatively unstructured party systems of Eastern Europe, where »left« and »right« are less clearly defined, and socio-economic distress is greater. Archetypal »social populist« parties – with varying degrees of radicalism – include the now defunct Association of Slovak Workers, the Serbian Socialist Party under Milošević, Slovakia's Smer (Direction), the Lithuanian Labour Party and the Russian »Just Russia« party.

The above categories are changeable and overlapping: for example, since 1990 all far left parties have become more populist in terms of defining the »working class« ever more broadly to reach beyond the traditional blue-collar strata, and nationalistic in terms of trying to present themselves as defending national workers rather than Moscow's foreign policy. Moreover, the contemporary far left is markedly less ideological and more pragmatic than in the Soviet era. There has been a determined attempt to overcome the internecine doctrinal disputes and historical grievances that have made the far left, on occasion, a laughing stock.

1 For example, Cas Mudde, »The Populist *Zeitgeist*«, *Government & Opposition* 39 (3) (2004), 541–63; Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (London: Junction Books, 1981).

Some success has been achieved, particularly since old disputes between Stalinism, Trotskyism and Maoism have lost much of – although not all – their salience. The radical left – although not always the extreme left – aims to concentrate on shorter term pragmatic solutions rather than endlessly debate the nature of socialism. Moreover, its increased nationalism and populism has not – except perhaps with some of the conservative communists, who hold to Stalinist »socialism in one country« – replaced internationalist aims, reflected in the far left's search for cross-national networking and solidarity, and in its assertion that national socio-political issues have global structural causes (such as »imperialism« or »globalisation«).

## 2 Far left mutation after Communism

Six broad far left responses to the collapse of communism can be identified:

1. Many decided finally to renounce the »communist« label. For some – the Swedish Left Party-Communists, which became the Left Party, or the German SED – this was largely a question of renaming themselves and redefining themselves as non-communist radical left parties.
2. Many others – particularly the majority of former ruling parties in Eastern Europe – were transformed into fully-fledged social democratic parties. In Western Europe, the major example was the Italian PCI that evolved into the Democratic Party of the Left and, ultimately, today's Democratic Party.
3. Some Eastern European former communist parties took on an increasingly nationalist–populist tinge – such as the Serbian Socialist Party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party of Romania – although these parties latterly have taken a social democratic orientation.
4. Many parties ceased to exist independently and re-emerged as parts of semi-permanent coalitions either of a democratic socialist orientation – such as the Spanish Communist Party which became the United Left – or as minor allies of social democratic parties (for example the Bulgarian Communist Party forming a united list with the Bulgarian Socialist Party).
5. Others dissolved themselves more completely into post-communist coalitions of various ideologies. For example, the Communist Party of the Netherlands re-emerged as part of the – non-radical – GroenLinks (GreenLeft) in 1989. Others formed so-called »broad left parties«, permanent coalitions of diverse radical and extreme left tendencies, for example the Italian Communist Refoundation, the Scottish Socialist Party, the Danish Red-Green Alliance and the Portuguese Left Bloc.
6. Many parties maintained their former names and identity but sought to adapt slowly – for example, the communist parties of Greece, Portugal, France and Cyprus – and the Dutch Socialist Party, a former Maoist Party founded in 1972 that had gradually discarded its doctrinal purity by the late 1980s.

It is not surprising that far left parties have diverged so markedly since 1989. By the 1980s, the monolithism of »orthodox communism« was a façade. Whilst the demise of the USSR as an external sponsor was the terminal blow to many – turning off their material and financial life support – it at least offered the option of escaping the Soviet stigma and adopting more flexible strategic and ideological approaches. The common aim of all parties since 1989 has been to adopt a »nationally authentic socialism«; that is, to find identities that restore their domestic political legitimacy, stress the domestic socialist heritage and remove any »taint« of identification with a »failed project«.[2]

The only far left response of those outlined above which has proved to be generally successful is the second. Former communists who became social democrats soon shed their communist stigma and governed across Eastern Europe from the early 1990s, and in Italy for the first time in 1996–2001. However, even this strategy has not proved universally promising: for example, the post-communists in Slovakia and the former Yugoslavia have played second fiddle to dominant nationalist and populist forces.

Choosing a strategy which preserved elements of a radical identity and distinctiveness from social democracy was logical for many parties, since usually – except in Eastern Europe and Italy, where existing social democratic parties were weak – a social democratic transformation meant the self-dissolution of the party. In many cases, especially where green parties were weak, an ecosocialist or democratic socialist »new left« strategy was the most natural exit route from communism, although in Eastern Europe, where post-material identities are weaker, this was a less viable option and populist strategies have proved attractive.[3]

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2 Alison Mahr and John D. Nagle, »Resurrection of the Successor Parties and Democratization in East-Central Europe«, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 28 (4) (1995), 393–410.

3 Joan Botella and Luis Ramiro (eds), *The Crisis of Communism and Party Change. The Evolution of West European Communist and Post-Communist Parties* (Barcelona: Institut de Ciències Politiques i Socials, 2003).

**Table 2: Significant Far Left Parties in Parliamentary Elections (European Economic Area), 1990–2008**

| Country/Party | Average vote 1980–89 | Average vote 1990–99 | Average vote 2000–2008 | Increase 1989–2008 | Increase 1999–2008 | Highest vote after 1989 | Lowest vote after 1989 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Cyprus (AKEL)** | 30.1 | 31.8 | 32.9 | 2.8 | 1.1 | 34.7 (2001) | 30.6 (1991) |
| **Czech Republic (KSČM)** | CP | 12.1 | 15.7 | n/a | 3.6 | 18.5 (2002) | 10.3 (1996) |
| **Denmark (EL)** | 0.9[1] | 2.5 | 2.7 | 1.8 | 0.2 | 3.4 (2005) | 1.7 (1990) |
| **Denmark (SF)** | 12.6 | 7.7 | 8.5 | –4.1 | 0.8 | 13.0 (2007) | 6.0 (2005) |
| **Finland (VAS)** | 13.5[2] | 10.7 | 9.3 | –4.2 | –1.4 | 11.2 (1995) | 8.8 (2007) |
| **France (PCF)** | 12.4 | 9.6 | 4.6 | –7.8 | –5.0 | 9.9 (1997) | 4.3 (2007) |
| **Germany (Left)** | CP | 4.0 | 6.4 | n/a | 2.4 | 8.7 (2005) | 2.4 (1990) |
| **Greece (KKE)** | 10.4 | 5.1 | 6.5 | –3.9 | 1.4 | 8.2 (2007) | 4.5 (1993) |
| **Greece (Syn)** | 1.6 | 3.0 | 3.8 | 2.2 | 0.8 | 5.1 (1996) | 2.9 (1993) |
| **Iceland (VG)** | 15.4[3] | 12.6 | 11.6 | –1.0 | –3.8 | 14.4 (1991) | 8.8 (2003) |
| **Ireland (Sinn Féin)** | 1.4 | 2.1 | 6.7 | 5.3 | 4.6 | 6.9 (2007) | 1.6 (1992) |
| **Italy (PRC and PdCI)** | 28.2[4] | 7.1 | 6.0 | –22.2 | –0.9 | 8.6 (1996) | 3.1* (2008) |
| **Latvia (LSP)** | CP | 8.5* | 16.8* | n/a | 8.3 | 19.1*(2001) | 5.6 (1995) |
| **Netherlands (SP)** | 0.4 | 2.4 | 9.6 | 9.2 | 7.2 | 16.6 (2006) | 1.3 (1994) |
| **Norway (SV)** | 6.8 | 7.0 | 10.4 | 3.6 | 3.4 | 12.4 (2001) | 6.0 (1997) |
| **Portugal (PCP)** | 15.6* | 8.8* | 7.3* | –8.3 | –1.5 | 9.0* (1999) | 7.0* (2002) |
| **Portugal (BE)** | n/a | 2.4 | 4.6 | n/a | 2.2 | 6.4 (2005) | 2.4 (1999) |
| **Slovakia (KSS)** | CP | 2.1 | 5.1 | n/a | 3 | 6.3 (2002) | 0.8 (1992) |
| **Slovakia (ZRS)** | CP | 4.4 | 0.6 | n/a | –3.8 | 7.4 (1994) | 0.6 (2002) |
| **Spain (PCE)** | 5.9* | 9.2* | 4.8* | –1.1 | –4.4 | 9.2* (1993/6) | 3.8* (2008) |
| **Sweden (V)** | 5.6 | 7.6 | 7.2 | 1.6 | –0.4 | 12.0 (1998) | 4.5 (1991) |

Note: »Significant« in this table is defined as obtaining at least 3 per cent of the vote *and* gaining parliamentary seats in at least one election.

Key: * signifies in coalition; CP signifies ruling Communist Party; [1] Danish Communist Party (DKP); [2] Finnish People's Democratic League, SKDL (1987 SKDL + Democratic Alternative); [3] People's Alliance (AB) before 1999; [4] Italian Communist Party (PCI).

Source: www.parties-and-elections.de

A large number of parties chose to maintain a communist identity.

The domestic communist traditions mattered much in this decision. If communist parties early on dissociated themselves from Moscow's foreign policy and adopted a reformist, »Eurocommunist« identity – for example, the Nordic parties, the majority of the Italian Communist Party – they found it easier both to adopt a post-communist identity and to survive the USSR's collapse unscathed. It was important, too, to attempt policy reform from a position of strength. Parties which left reform until they were already in steep decline – for example, Britain, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland – effectively disappeared and no strong far left party has since re-emerged. However, in several cases the domestic revolutionary tradition was still strong enough to maintain a stable communist party into the 1990s (for example, Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, France, Czech Republic and Italy).

The electoral performance of the principal far left parties in the EU and European Economic Area (Table 2) presents a very varied picture. There are several cases in which party support has drastically improved since the 1980s (Netherlands, Ireland, Germany), and a few in which it has drastically declined (France, now Italy and Spain since the 2008 elections). Elsewhere it is relatively stable, with little aggregate change over a 20-year period, despite considerable fluctuations between elections. In general, the preservation of communist identity has been the least successful option. At best, this has resulted in a stable rating far below 1980s support levels (for example, Greece,

Portugal), with some startling successes (for example, the Czech Republic in 2002). Cyprus is the main exception. AKEL's success is explicable due to nationally specific features such as a militant proletarian subculture, mass party membership, iron discipline combined with ideological moderation, including gradual personnel renewal and policy reform (for example, the adoption of pro-EU positions and cross-class cooperation).[4] But communist parties have also suffered the largest electoral falls, and in several countries – for example, France, Italy, Spain, Slovakia – their long-term future is now under serious question. Democratic socialist parties – for example, in the Nordic countries, Greece and Portugal – are generally stable, whereas the populist socialist parties (especially in the Netherlands, Germany and Ireland) are the most dynamic, with support in the 2000s reaching all-time highs.[5]

## 3 Causes of Electoral Success and Failure

### 3.1 The Socio-Political Environment

There is general agreement concerning the main factors behind the rise of anti-establishment parties – be they of right, left or green orientation – although little consensus on their relative importance.[6] What is generally agreed is that the general context for the emergence of new anti-establishment parties across Europe since the 1980s is a so-called »modernisation crisis« and the related »populist Zeitgeist«. The »modernisation crisis« describes how the movement towards a post-industrial economy, the decline of the post-war »social democratic consensus« since the 1970s and the flourishing of globalisation provides ample space for new forms of insecurity and protest on the part of the »losers of modernisation«, associated with the perception of the declining ability of the state to control borders, the economy and welfare. The »populist Zeitgeist« describes the phenomenon whereby most major European political actors have become accustomed to periodically using elements of populist rhetoric, especially in terms of presenting themselves as »ordinary« representatives of the »common people«, and depicting their opponents as elitist or out-of-touch.[7] Important factors include the modern mass media, which has »demystified« politicians and put their actions under ever greater popular scrutiny, the emergence of »catch all-parties« which appeal to the centre rather than defined class constituencies and the process of EU integration, which, as an elite-led project which impinges on national sovereignty, has become a »sitting duck« for populist »anti-elite« mobilisation.[8]

Table 3 outlines some of the main factors in the socio-political environment that potentially explain the performance of the far left in the 15 EU states in which it is successful, compared with three of the 12 states in which it is not successful (Austria, Poland and the UK).[9] This table indicates that environment plays a background role. Far left parties flourish in a wide variety of environments, and they do not flourish where we might expect them (for example, as explored in more detail below, Poland has no significant far left party despite low satisfaction with democracy and high unemployment). The optimum long-term factors for contemporary far left success are (in order of importance): a far left predecessor, high unemployment and protest sentiment, the absence of competitor protest parties and a convergent party system, although far from all of these are needed for a strong far left party to flourish. The most obvious connection is a historical one, as shown in column one: by and large, successful far left parties today exist where they were successful in the past. Even apparent exceptions prove the rule. For example, the Dutch Socialist Party only entered the national parliament in 1994, but it had built up a local municipal and provincial presence through door-to-door campaigning and links with tenants' organisations and environmental groups by the 1980s and later benefited from ex-communists dissatisfied with the GroenLinks party.

4 Richard Dunphy and Tim Bale, »Red Flag Still Flying? Explaining AKEL – Cyprus' Communist Anomaly«, *Party Politics* 13 (3) (2007), 287–304.

5 Of course, much of the explanation for the success of Sinn Féin is specific to Ireland, including the party's long past as the political wing of the military Irish Republican Army, and its increasing legitimacy as an expression of (primarily) working-class nationalism since the Good Friday agreement of 1998.

6 For far more detailed analysis of these factors see, for example, Hans-George Betz, *Radical Right Populism in Western Europe* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994); Amir Abedi, *Anti-Political Establishment Parties: A Comparative Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2004); Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

7 In particular, see Mudde, »The Populist *Zeitgeist*«.

8 Margaret Canovan, »Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy«, *Political Studies* 47 (1), (2002), 2–16.

9 These factors are based on Ferdinand Müller-Rommel, »Explaining the Electoral Success of Green Parties: A Cross-national Analysis«, *Environmental Politics* 7 (1998), 145–54.

Although a far left tradition in each country appears to be a necessary condition for success, it is not sufficient. There has been no nationally significant far left party since 1989 in Poland (and indeed in most of the rest of former Eastern Europe except the Czech Republic and Slovakia). In many former communist regimes, communism simply lacked sufficient domestic legitimacy to sustain a post-communist far left party.

The ex-communist social democratic parties monopolised links with trade unions and the formerly communist electorate, including significant numbers of activists who might otherwise have formed independent far left parties (for example, the Marxist Platform within the Bulgarian Socialist Party). The Czech exception – the KSČM has been one of Europe's strongest – is partially explained by a strong domestic socialist tradition that continued during communist rule.

**Table 3: Political Environment and Far Left Electoral Success in the EU, 1990–2008**

| Country | Pre-existing relevant left party | Federalism/devolution | Convergent party system | High unemployment[1] | Low GDP growth[2] | Low satisfaction with national democracy[3] | Low EU support[4] | High globalisation anxiety[5] | No significant green party[6] | No significant right party[6] | *Sum of 10* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Cyprus** | + | | | | | | + | + | + | + | 5 |
| **Czech Republic** | + | | | | | + | + | | + | | 4 |
| **Denmark** | + | | | | | | | | + | | 2 |
| **Finland** | + | | + | + | + | | + | + | | + | 7 |
| **France** | + | | | + | + | + | | + | | | 5 |
| **Germany** | + | + | + | + | + | + | | + | | + | 8 |
| **Greece** | + | | | + | | + | | + | + | + | 6 |
| **Ireland** | | | | + | | | | | | + | 2 |
| **Italy** | + | | + | + | + | + | | | + | | 6 |
| **Latvia** | + | | | + | | + | + | + | | | 5 |
| **Netherlands** | | | + | | | | | | | | 1 |
| **Portugal** | + | | | | | + | | | + | + | 4 |
| **Slovakia** | + | | | + | | + | | | + | | 4 |
| **Spain** | + | + | | + | | | | + | + | + | 6 |
| **Sweden** | + | | + | | | | + | | | + | 4 |
| ***Sum of 15*** | 13 | 2 | 5 | 9 | 4 | 8 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 8 | |
| ***Counter-cases*** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Austria** | | + | + | | | | + | + | | | 4 |
| **Poland** | + | | | + | | + | | | + | | 4 |
| **UK** | | + | | | | | + | | + | + | 4 |
| ***Sum of 3*** | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | |

Note*:* Definitions: [1] when the mean annual percentage of unemployment is over 8 per cent; [2] when the mean annual GDP growth is less than 2 per cent; [3] when those »fairly« or »very« satisfied with national democracy average under 60 per cent; [4] when those stating that EU membership is a »good thing« average less than 50 per cent; [5] where those who believe that globalisation is a »threat to employment and companies in our country« average over 40 per cent; [6] where the relevant party averages less than 3 per cent of the national vote.

Sources: Columns 4 and 5: www.oecd.org; www.worldwide-tax.com; http://indexmundi.com; www.globalpolicynetwork.org. Columns 6–8: Eurobarometer, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/standard_en.htm

Unexpectedly perhaps, poor socioeconomic conditions – columns 4 and 5 – do not translate directly into far left success. Although there seems to be a link with high unemployment – logically, given far left parties' emphasis on job security – far left support has grown alongside declining unemployment in several countries (Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands), and fallen despite rising employment in others (for example, Spain in 2008, Czech Republic in 2005). Levels of unemployment averaging nearly 15 per cent have still not produced a far left party in Poland.

The far left's manifestation in the form of protest parties is shown in columns 6, 7 and 8: in over half the cases (eight) the far left flourishes in countries where the proportion of those who are satisfied with national democracy is less than 60 per cent. The salience of the »modernisation crisis« can be seen in the number of countries – 6 out of 15 – where those who believe that globalisation is a »threat to employment and companies in our country« exceeds 40 per cent, potentially giving some resonance to the far left's anti-globalisation rhetoric and emphasis on employment protection. The connection between support for the EU and the far left is weaker (column 7). Despite the far left's opposition to the current direction of EU integration, this is unsurprising given the general rule that even in most EU elections political parties compete on national issues. Overall, we should not be surprised that the far left is not always able to exploit protest sentiment, in part because it does not always want to. Some parties – such as the Greek KKE, German Left and SP – are far more »anti-establishment« than others (for example, the Danish SF and Finnish VAS).

Moreover, the far left has to share the protest role with the Greens (who, despite de-radicalisation, often still represent non-mainstream and post-material concerns), and above all the far right, which often articulates anti-EU, anti-globalisation and anti-establishment issues better than the far left. In eight cases here, a successful far left party lacks either a Green or far right competitor (and in four cases, both). Nevertheless, as a contra-indication, the UK lacks nationally successful Greens, a far left and a far right, largely due to its majoritarian electoral system, which imposes high entry barriers on new parties.

The remaining elements appear less relevant. Column 3 (convergent party systems) refers to political systems in which the main political forces converge round the political centre. The main features of such systems are (i) a lack of ideological polarisation between the main political players (most evident in increasing policy consensus and multiparty coalitions, and above all »grand coalitions« between centre-left and centre-right), and (ii) »cartelisation« (the propensity of key political actors to monopolise party competition and exclude political challengers through access to funding and electoral rules). Many analysts argue that convergent tendencies among the main political players can increase the propensity to mobilisation around »anti-establishment« (particularly populist) themes. Of the countries in Table 3, Austria, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland and Italy are usually regarded as the most convergent, and former Eastern Europe – with lasting polarisation between communist and anti-communist forces and high electoral volatility, which prevents a defined political »establishment« – the least. What column 3 shows is that convergent party systems appear to help anti-establishment parties in general, rather than the far left in particular. The populist anti-establishment left is strong in Germany and the Netherlands, but Austria (as the latest elections show), and indeed Belgium and Switzerland are convergent political systems with a populist far right and marginal far left.

Finally, elements of federalism or devolution are said to help anti-establishment parties, particularly new ones, articulate their concerns and build momentum from local to national level. Whereas this feature may certainly help, and there are examples of far left parties which have been very successful at a regional level – such as the Scottish Socialist Party, which has no successful UK level counterpart – far left parties are more successful in unitary systems than in federal ones. Furthermore, they are successful in a wide range of electoral systems, so this factor appears insignificant, except, as noted, in the UK, where the electoral system hinders all smaller and newer parties.

### 3.2 Exploiting the Transformation of Social Democracy

Unsurprisingly, since they have historically competed for the same electorate, mainstream social democracy's performance, in particular its ability (or not) to cope with the »modernisation crisis«, provides issues for the far left to exploit. The »neo-liberalisation« of social democracy since the early 1980s has provided a central issue of far left identity and mobilisation. The more the mainstream centre left has appeared to abandon the mainstays of the social democratic welfare consensus, such as public ownership, economic interventionism and full employment, the more the far left has rushed to appear the defender of Keynesianism, welfarism, trade unionism, equality and workers' rights.

Far left parties make capital out of the alleged »betrayal« by social democrats of their traditional »socialist« ideas and constituencies. The populist socialist parties in particular allege that the social democrats and right-wing parties are near-identical »establishment« parties, representing a political class that has abandoned the »ordinary working person«. Typically, the former Dutch Socialist Party leader Jan Marijnessen held the »neo-liberal Ayatollahs« in the mainstream parties as responsible for the »rotting away« of the social democratic welfare state. The word »Left« in many parties' names is designed not merely to sidestep ideological disagreements about the nature of socialism, but also as an identity marker to appeal to members of social democratic parties whose leaders may no longer use the term.

Far left parties make increasingly direct and blatant attempts to appeal to disaffected social democrats and colonise the ground abandoned by them. For example, the Danish SF's brief overtaking of the Social Democracy Party in opinion polls in early 2008 was helped by the latter's move towards centrism, significant policy adaptation on the part of SF – including softening Euroscepticism and hardening its position towards immigration – as well as its leader Villy Søvndal's personal appeal. Notably, one of the German Left's predecessors – Labour and Social Justice–The Electoral Alternative (WASG) – was formed directly by Social Democrats disaffected with the »neo-liberal« direction of the red-green coalition, and in particular by the Hartz IV/Agenda 2010 reforms, which were portrayed as an »anti-social« attack on workers' rights. The choice of Oskar Lafontaine as party co-chair is the most high-profile poaching of a former Social Democrat by any European far left party. The relationship is not always adversarial, however: the Swedish Left Party has often been the beneficiary of the »comrade vote« – social democrats who voted for it to push it over the 4-per cent electoral barrier and to ensure maximum left-wing parliamentary representation, whereas far left voters often defect to the centre-left if a right-wing government is in prospect.

### 3.3 Internal Party Adaptation

The most successful far left parties rely far less on abstract ideological slogans and doctrine, and try to encapsulate all radical left trends under an umbrella of opposition to neo-liberalism that makes little reference to Marxism and socialism. Even Olivier Besancenot, the French presidential candidate of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (formerly Communist Revolutionary League), claims no longer to be a Trotskyist. These parties claim to be »campaigning« parties, often focussing on specific present practical issues – for example, opposition to the EU working time directive – rather than the revolutionary future, and they adopt non-traditional ideological approaches, such as environmentalism, feminism and populism. In the most effective, the role of leadership has also changed. Rather than the rather dour, dogmatic, »democratically centralised« personalities of the traditional communist parties, such as Georges Marchais and Álvaro Cunhal, many modern far left leaders are media-savvy performers who present a non-dogmatic but principled image, and are considered »charismatic« even by political opponents. Such leaders include Gregor Gysi (German Left), Frederico Louça, (BE) and indeed the Swedish Left Party's leader of 1993–2004 Gudrun Schyman, who was popular for her openness regarding past alcohol problems, her feminism and anti-communism.

Such changes notwithstanding, far left parties remain vulnerable to internal dissent. Like the Green parties in the 1980s, they are divided between Realos and Fundis, and their orientation towards grass-roots democracy increases the role of the latter. However, also like the Greens, the Realos have become dominant in the leaderships. Nevertheless, the parties' connections with the anti-globalisation »global justice« movement, which tends to distrust party and institutionalised politics, have often increased internal tensions. Old doctrinal disputes have weakened but not disappeared, and many communist parties in particular tend to retain conservative and sectarian practices. Even ostensibly ex-communist parties are sometimes troubled by long-standing ideological and strategic disputes. Most notably, the leader of the Finnish VAS, Suvi-Anne Siimes, attributed her 2006 resignation to a pro-Soviet tendency within the party and its irreconcilable opposition to the EU and NATO.

## 4 Who Supports the Far Left?

In general, three overlapping groups of supporters can be identified (the balance between these varies between parties).

1. **The far left subculture**. At the core of far left groups are ideologically convinced supporters and activists, many of whom have long-term careers in the far left party, its predecessors, student left groups, trade unions, NGOs and feminist/environmental groups. For example, the former leaders of the Dutch SP and Swedish V, Jan Marijnissen and Gudrun Schyman, were previously in Maoist parties, while the first two leaders of Communist

Refoundation were trade unionists. A declining but still important role among communist and formerly communist parties is played by the »red-belt«, where communist parties long acted as the providers of »womb-to-tomb« local services. Far left voting remains higher than average in several such areas (for example, Creuze and Corrèze in France, Bologna in Italy, Setúbal in Portugal and Northern Finland). Indeed, PDS's core support vote in Eastern Germany during the 1990s was attributed by many analysts to the party's ability to represent the so-called »socialist value culture«; that is, a left-paternalist orientation common to many ex-communist countries.[10]

2. **Disaffected centre-left voters**. Far left parties are deliberately and increasingly successfully recruiting the centre-left. About a quarter of the recent growth in far left support – for example, German Left in 2005, Dutch SP in 2006, Danish SF in 2007 – has come from social democrat defections, the rest from liberal and Green parties or non-voters. Indeed Green parties are a major source for far left votes, since despite their »neither left nor right« image, their activists usually place themselves on the left. The presence of successful Green parties in Finland and Sweden is one of the reasons why the far left parties there have performed more weakly than in Norway and Denmark, where the absence of a Green competitor allows the far left to claim »eco-socialist« credentials. Similarly, the presence of a strong Green Party in Western Germany long hindered the German Left Party's attempts to broaden its support. Conversely, the Left Party's strength in the East has meant that the Greens have struggled to take root there.
3. **Protest voters**. The final element of far left support is simply political protest, particularly for those parties which pitch themselves as populist parties and/or vehemently oppose the EU. For instance, the jump in support for the Greek far left – and far right – in 2007 is attributed to widespread popular anger at the centre-right's incompetent handling of forest fires in summer 2007. The far left often successfully appeals to previous non-voters (as with the Portuguese BE in 2005). However, the far right's ability to limit the far left's protest role is compounded because the far left and far right votes can overlap: the word gaucho-lepeniste was coined to describe French communist voters who defected to the far right. The Czech KSČM's strong performance in 2002 was attributed in part to the collapse of the far-right Republican Party. However, the far right vote overlaps as much, if not more with the centre-left. Recent studies have shown that many working-class voters experiencing a sense of »globalisation anxiety« may defect directly from the social democrats to the extreme right (although all parties have suffered).[11]

Several generalisations can be made about far left supporters. First, this is not predominantly a working-class electorate – even in the Soviet era although communist parties were predominantly working-class parties, the majority of the working class did not vote for them. Second, compared with other far left parties, communists tend to have an older, more working class, more male and less educated electorate, except for very successful parties (for example, AKEL) or the most unorthodox (for example, PRC). This increasingly ageing, conservative and marginal electorate places their future existence under increasing threat. Third, the democratic socialist parties – although the Finnish VAS retains a more communist electoral profile – have a much more left-libertarian electorate akin to green parties, attracting younger, more white collar and female supporters, with stronger support bases among student groups and the more educated, particularly among the public sector.

Far left party ties to trade unions and other civil society groups and NGOs are weak but strengthening. Communist and former communist parties – for example, VAS – still have strong links to trade union activists but »communist« trade unions as such no longer exist (except in Portugal). Far left parties are certainly becoming increasingly attractive to trade unions disaffected with social democratic parties. The WASG is the most obvious example of trade union activists joining a far left party, but the main trade unions in several countries – for example, in Scandinavia – have looked on far left parties increasingly favourably, supporting »left–left« coalitions between the centre-left and far-left wherever possible. In the UK, sections of the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) and Rail Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) left the Labour Party for the Scottish Socialist Party in 2004. We should not expect the trade unions to disaffiliate from the main social democratic parties in the near future, since as governing parties these still make the best lobbying points for union interests. However, the more social democratic parties loosen their

10 Dan Hough, Michael Koß and Jonathan Olsen, *The Left Party in Contemporary German Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

11 Hilde Coffe, »Social Democratic Parties as Buffers against the Extreme Right: The Case of Belgium«, *Contemporary Politics* 14 (2) (June 2008), 179–85.

traditional ties to trade unions and/or adopt »neo-liberal« policies, and the more far left parties participate in government, the more we might expect individual trade unionists to change affiliation.

Usually, far left parties have better and growing links with a large numbers of NGOs, single-issue groups and social movements, including many pro-peace, environmental and Cuban friendship groups existing since the 1970s. In the UK, for example, a leader of the marginal Communist Party of Britain heads the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Ties have grown with the global justice movement since Seattle in 1999, in particular since 2002 through the European Social Forum, a bi-annual festival of workshops, seminars and rallies for NGOs, civil society and trade unions held across Europe (for instance, in Malmö, Sweden, in September 2008). Most far left parties send delegations to participate in debates on issues such as poverty, privatisation and fair trade. The far left has shown an increasing propensity to participate in and coordinate extra-parliamentary protests, for example in anti-G8 protests, campaigns against the Gulf War, and so on. However, far left links with the wider movement remain underdeveloped. Much of the movement does not regard itself as »left-wing« and indeed is strongly anarchist (principally the »Black Block«, much noted for its confrontational tendencies at anti-G8 meetings). Other components – such as the French ATTAC movement – are relatively reformist and oriented towards lobbying the state rather than provoking insurrection. More to the point, the movement tends to regard party politics with suspicion and the ESF does not allow political parties in its organising bodies. Whilst the global justice movement provides a strong extra-parliamentary mobilisation potential for the far left, there is little prospect of it developing into a global left party.

## 5 Far Left Programmes and Their Impact

Over the past 15 years, far left parties have consolidated as an increasingly clear »party family« with a widely shared policy agenda outlined in the first section of this paper. Concrete proposals include opposing or limiting privatisation, supporting a 35-hour maximum working week without loss of pay, alongside greater rights for union recognition, increasing abortion rights (for example, in Portugal), drug decriminalisation and the extension of political democracy (for example, through increasing local authority powers and the use of referenda). Internationally, far left parties support: controls on international trade (including widespread support for the Tobin Tax on international financial transactions); nuclear disarmament and demilitarisation as a principle of international relations; opposing NATO as a US-led military Cold-War institution; enhancing the roles of organisations such as the OSCE and the UN, with an emphasis on peacekeeping; reform or abolition of the current international financial institutions (IMF and World Bank) to emphasise sustainable development and economic deregulation.

There are still strong divisions: the communists – particularly to the East – are less concerned with »libertarian issues«, such as lesbian and gay rights, drug decriminalisation and opposition to nuclear power. Attitudes to the EU still prove divisive: in general, far left parties support »social« Europe and pursue European cooperation in order to formulate common policies and campaigning strategies that further labour, women's and environmental rights but oppose »political Europe« (greater federalisation), »military Europe« (the development of a common foreign and defence policy) and »market Europe« (unhindered competition and the loss of national economic levers). Accordingly, all significant far left parties opposed the Constitutional and Lisbon treaties on the grounds of (i) their neo-liberal emphasis, (ii) perceived political federalisation and (iii) the lack of democratic consultation involved, without necessarily disapproving of EU integration per se (one slogan was »say no to the treaty for a better treaty«). However, there is little consensus beyond this and it is hard for the far left to move from a defensive to a more positive position. Several parties – for example, the Greek KKE, Portuguese PCP, Swedish V – are profoundly opposed to further integration, others advocate non-accession (for example, Norwegian SV, Icelandic VG) and still others (for example, Finnish VAS, Danish SF, Greek Synaspismós and Cypriot AKEL) are increasingly integrationist.

The feasibility of the far left's central proposals might well be questioned – particularly since many parties are too electorally feeble to consider implementing them – but they are hardly extreme. Indeed, what the far left defines as to the left of social democracy is essentially what in the 1970s and early 1980s would have been regarded as on the left of mainstream social democracy (for example, Keynesian economics, an emphasis on full employment and public ownership). They have supplemented this with greater attention to grass-roots participation, green and feminist politics, extra-parliamentary cross-border campaigning and an anti-Atlanticist, pacifist foreign policy. Nevertheless, the far left insists that this »defensive« fight to protect the social democratic state does

**Table 4: Far Left Participation in Government after 1989**

| Country | Date | Type of support | Vote trajectory at following election |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Italy** | 1996–98 | Support (PRC) | |
| | 1998–2001 | Support (PdCI) | –1.9 % (total PRC and PdCI) |
| | 2006–2008 | Coalition (PRC and PdCI) | –7.1 % |
| **Finland** | 1995–99 | Coalition | –0.3 % |
| | 1999–2003 | Coalition | –1.0 % |
| **Cyprus** | 2003– | Coalition | –3.6 % (2006) |
| | 2008– | Coalition | Not yet known |
| **Denmark** | 1994–98 | Minority support (SF) | +0.2 % |
| | 1994–98 | Minority support (EL) | –0.4 % |
| | 1998–2001 | Minority support (SF) | –1.1 % |
| | 1998–2001 | Minority support (EL) | –0.3 % |
| **France** | 1997–2002 | Coalition | –5.1 % |
| **Sweden** | 1998–2002 | Minority support | –3.6 % |
| | 2002–2006 | Minority support | –2.5 % |
| **Norway** | 1994 | Minority support | –1.9 % |
| | 2005– | Coalition | Not yet known |
| **Greece** | 1989–90 | Coalition (Syn/KKE) | –0.7 % |
| **Ireland** | 1994–97 | Coalition (Democratic Left) | –0.3 % |
| **Spain** | 2004–2008 | Minority support | –1.2 % |

Source: Bale and Dunphy (2007), author's own calculations.

not preclude a future more radical (but undefined) »socialist« agenda.

The biggest change in far left strategy since the Cold War is in its attitude to government participation. Whereas between 1947 and 1989 only the Finnish Communist Party was a regular participant in government – more than the remainder of the West European far left combined – since 1989 there has been no example of a left party in advanced liberal democracy that has turned down a realistic offer to join a government coalition.[12] Radical left parties, although not extreme left parties, no longer view bourgeois parliaments and social democrats as simply designed to »dupe« the working class, and have abandoned the Leninist »tribune« role in which they put forward non-constructive demands designed to wreck the capitalist system. They have been increasingly open towards coalition government with social democrats and Greens (and occasionally, as in Finland, with parties of the centre and centre-right), or at least to ad hoc cooperation in parliament and support for social democrat minority governments (see Table 4).

In general, as Table 4 shows, participation in government has not been a very happy experience for the far left. In most cases, the party has lost support after government participation, with the important exception of Cyprus, where despite a vote loss in 2006 AKEL leader Demitris Christofias was elected as president in 2008. The losses have been particularly severe where there have been alternative left or right protest parties for dissatisfied voters to defect to (for example, in Italy and France). In general, far left parties join coalitions in order to resist government neo-liberalism (diluting, slowing or opposing it outright), and to steer the governmental centre of gravity to the left, by making incremental advances for their own policy agenda and acting as the »left-wing conscience« of social democrats.

The widespread movement towards far left government participation has been spurred by the experience of minority support status, which is regarded as providing the worst of all worlds – responsibility for government policy without the power to affect it.

12 Tim Bale and Richard Dunphy (2007), »In from the Cold: Left Parties, Policy, Office and Votes in Advanced Liberal Democracies since 1989«, paper presented at a PSA workshop on radical left parties and government participation, on which some of this section relies.

The possible losses incurred by government participation are now seen as no worse than electoral losses when in opposition. However, government participation still presents acute dilemmas for the far left. Some of their problems are common to small parties with few ministers – generally a handful looking after social, welfare environmental or women's portfolios – in terms of demonstrating concrete benefits to their supporters, and to anti-establishment parties which have to combine a protest and a governing role. The far left choice is between a populist anti-establishment strategy which guarantees medium-term electoral success and mobilises discontent against the social democrats, but provides little policy influence and a pragmatic attitude to governmental compromise and partnership with the social democrats that may provide influence but risks de-radicalisation. It is notable that two of the fastest growing populist socialist parties, the German Left Party and the Dutch Socialist Party, have not yet had to temper their anti-establishment image through national government participation. Admittedly, at local and regional level the picture is more complex. For example, the Left Party's participation in Bundesland governments (for example, Berlin) and the SP's representation at local council level have moderated their policies and contributed to a more »responsible« image.

In office, the far left can point to fairly modest reforms – incremental increases in welfare and employment benefits, the dilution of privatisation and marketisation, some increase in governmental subsidies and regulation, but hardly a »radical« reformulation of neo-liberalism. Some successes – for example, the employment measures of the Jospin government – had support in the Socialist Party, and would have occurred without the far left. Even in the few cases where the far left has been the dominant party in government – as in Cyprus and indeed Moldova – it is difficult to demonstrate that government policy has been markedly different from that offered by a left-wing social democratic party, greater emphasis on the state's role in the economy and greater scepticism towards the Euro-Atlantic institutions notwithstanding.

Indeed, on some of the biggest questions – for example, joining the Euro zone, government participation in NATO operations, austerity measures – far left parties have scarcely been able to turn the tide, and have had serious difficulties in carrying their supporters with them. Where parties have tried to play an incoherent »double game« of government participation combined with mobilisation against government measures they dislike – especially in France in 1997–2002 and Italy in 2006–2008 – they have jeopardised party unity and often suffered serious losses in the following elections. In Italy in particular, party Fundis in the PRC, which has strong »movementist« and Trotskyist elements, briefly brought down the Prodi government in January 2007 when two communist senators voted against the government decision to extend war credits for operations in Afghanistan. Demonstrations against the government's defence policy and the perception that the party in government and in the movements were becoming diametrically opposed were significant factors in the communists' eventual electoral fiasco in 2008. Many far left parties now realise that such a »double game« is ultimately self-defeating, and it is preferable to concede the necessity of compromises than either to pretend they have not occurred or present them as unconvincing victories.[13]

## 6 Competitors' Strategies towards the Far Left

We can identify several strategies of competing parties towards the far left, all of which have provided them with significant advantages and disadvantages:

1. **Exclusion**. For example, in the Czech Republic and Germany 1990–present (particularly during the »red socks« campaigns of 1994; Italy 1947–96, UK 1920s–present). This strategy denies the far left legitimacy by consistently painting it as a pariah: anti-democratic, totalitarian, »communist«, Trotskyist/Stalinist, and so on. The far left may be subject to a cordon sanitaire, denied coalition potential, key positions in parliamentary committees and excluded from most cross-party policy discussions. However – as in the Czech Republic and Germany in the 2000s – exclusion may co-exist with some informal, behind the scenes cooperation. This strategy successfully excludes the far left from key decisions, while preserving policy influence among a number of self-selected political actors. Political isolation may increase integrationist and moderating pressures within the far left – for example, the Italian communists' movement towards »historic compromise«, and the desire of several leaders of the Czech communists and German Left Party to »come in from the cold«. However, exclusion may reduce far left influence but it is not successful in reducing its vote (for example, the Czech communists and German Left Party have hit historic highs while being excluded). Indeed, exclusion may well

13 Ibid.

increase the far left's image as a victim of »establishment« intrigue. As noted above »grand coalitions« may increase the vote for anti-establishment actors, and so help the far left claim that the centre-left has »sold out«. Painting the far left as dangerous extremists may work with parties which contain significant numbers of die-hard Stalinists and/or which have not fully confronted their communist past, but it is much harder to do convincingly with parties that are increasingly post-communist and which use democratic rhetoric extensively (as does the radical left). Furthermore, this strategy reduces other parties' flexibility by permanently excluding the far left as coalition partners.

1. **Aggressive marginalisation**. An intensification of the previous strategy and discussed within many social democratic parties but carried out most consistently by the UK Labour Party under Tony Blair, and the Democratic Party under Walter Veltroni as part of the social democratic »modernisation« agenda. This comprises an explicit attempt to occupy the centre ground permanently, to de-link the social democratic party from trade unions and to adopt a more »pragmatic/technocratic image« modelled on the US Democratic Party as a progressive non-socialist catch-all party. There is an emphasis on modernity and cross-party cooperation. The far left is portrayed, explicitly or implicitly, as retrograde, and as in Italy and the UK there are explicit attempts to marginalise the far left within the social democratic party and as an independent electoral force. Such a strategy promises maximum flexibility and pragmatism for the social democratic party. The social democratic party's new centrist voters should compensate for those it might lose to the left. The far left may face permanent marginalisation and decline. However, so far marginalisation has proved markedly unsuccessful. Whereas the UK Labour Party won three elections on a Blairite centrist agenda, the technocratic approach disoriented party members and contributed to apathy and voter disaffection. Labour lost 60 per cent of its membership between 1997 and 2007, and was re-elected in 2001 and 2005 with fewer voters than during its heavy loss in 1992. Veltroni's refusal to ally with the far left in 2008 successfully weakened them, but the new Democratic Party did not manage greatly to improve on the vote share of the previous Olive Tree. It is not clear how a strategy derived from the US two-party presidential system can translate to a multiparty system where a move to the centre opens up space for other parties to exploit. For example, the success of the UK Liberal Democratic Party in 1997–2005 was seen by many as partly due to its adoption of a more left-wing social agenda (for example, on taxation issues). Furthermore, the decline of the far left may increase the number of those – particularly in the white working class – who vote for the far right. In 2008, the populist Lega Nord party doubled its vote in the former red region Emilia-Romagna (from 3.8 to 7.8 per cent). In the UK, the racist British National Party increased its votes – often from former Labour voters – from 35,832 in 1997 to 192,746 in 2005, despite not contesting every constituency.
2. **Pragmatic cooperation**. This approach is common in the Nordic countries and has been operable in France since 1981, and in Italy in 1994–2007. This treats the far left as a legitimate and normal actor to be dealt with pragmatically, occasionally, competitively, occasionally cooperatively. Selective cooperation is promoted where necessary at national and local level, from ad hoc legislative cooperation to the extent of including the far left in coalition. This approach treats the far left realistically – increasingly pragmatic, not necessarily intrinsically anti-democratic – rather than through an ideological prism. As such, it reduces the ability of the far left to play the role of the martyred outsider. It also increases the array of coalition and policy options available to other parties, and reduces the risks involved in a »grand coalition«. Furthermore, it can result in progressive policies which are supported across the left and even beyond, including by members of social democratic parties (for example, the French socialists' introduction of the 35-hour working week and the Portuguese left's cooperation over the decriminalisation of abortion in 2006–2007). Moreover, given the far left's problems in acclimatising to a governing role, encouraging the far left to participate in government might appear a good way both to moderate their policies and to reduce the far left vote. Nevertheless, if the far left is unprepared for government participation – as in Italy – it can prove an unreliable governmental partner. Dealing with the far left pragmatically is risky for social democrats in particular: it can legitimise the far left among their supporters as the authentic representative of left-wing social democracy. Ultimately what may emerge is the acquiescence of the far left as a »fellow traveller« of social democracy, polling 5–15 per cent alongside the social democrats' 20–35 per cent.
3. **Aggressive co-optation**. This has been promoted by elements within both the French Socialist Party (especially since 2002) and the SPD (especially since

2005 at Länder level at least, although a national coalition with the Left Party is still excluded). This strategy would not exclude cooperation with the far left to the extent of potential coalition. However, in contrast to the previous strategy it is combined with the »leftwards« tilt – either short- or long-term – of the social democratic party itself, designed to re-colonise the political space from the far left and prevent social democratic parties being outflanked.

This strategy can help marginalise the far left – and possibly the far right too – or at least contain its growth. A selective adoption of the far left's policy agenda might again lead to »progressive« policies that might satisfy the social democratic parties' own constituencies. The need to reconnect, somehow, with elements of social democratic parties' former constituencies, to appeal to modernisation and globalisation losers, to move away from purely technocratic solutions and provide an emotional appeal to marginalised constituencies is recognised by increasing numbers of social democrats, even to the degree of becoming more egalitarian, even »populist«.[14] Far left arguments cannot be simply dismissed a priori, especially given the current crisis on the financial markets, the perceived »democratic deficit« within the EU and the crisis of the Euro-Atlantic institutions regarding (for instance) policy towards Russia, all areas where far left parties have demanded policy interventions. Some movement leftwards may be an intrinsic part of how social democratic parties redefine themselves and confront their own crises.

However, if the co-optation of some far left themes is too transparently a short-term »bait and switch« strategy designed to hook in disaffected voters, but to be abandoned in office, then it potentially compounds supporters' disaffection. Moreover, absorbing or co-opting elements of the far left agenda is problematic, especially on an EU and international level, since that would imply a radical transformation of Europe as it currently exists. For instance, far left policies advocate a strengthening of EU economic protectionism and the reduction of unbridled competition, alongside a reduction of political integration, a rethinking, if not dissolution of NATO and a more critical stance towards US foreign policy. Some of these sentiments are not the sole property of the far left (they are shared across the political spectrum in France, for example). However, to adopt them would involve a fundamental shift in the social democratic policy agenda of the last 15–20 years. Furthermore, adopting such policies may not consolidate party ranks but open up new disagreements between »left« and »right« factions within social democratic parties. Even if it consolidates party ranks it may reduce the party's strategic options to red-red coalitions, meaning that the social democrats struggle to reach the centrist vote. Finally, becoming more »populist« is problematic and necessitates finding a language to engage with »ordinary people« without simultaneously discrediting the political elite, of which social democratic parties are an intrinsic part.

## 7 Far Left Networks at European Level

After periods of considerable disintegration and disorientation up to the mid-1990s international consolidation has been increasing. However, there has been no serious attempt to create a new Comintern, and in general far left parties remain quite divided at European level, with a number of competing and overlapping initiatives which have struggled to find a common European agenda beyond the lowest common denominator. For example, the principal conservative communist parties in Greece and Portugal maintain traditional networks, involving seminars and conferences with a range of global parties. The European Anti-Capitalist Left (EACL) was set up in 2000 as a forum to coordinate the social movements and relatively minor parties of a broadly (ex-)Trotskyist disposition, but has been relatively quiet since 2005. The first major cross-party network was the New European Left Forum (NELF) founded in 1991 as a biannual conference. NELF successfully helped bridge ideological and strategic divides between the different currents in the far left, but has never attempted to strengthen its organisation significantly. The most significant far left cooperation is now either through the social forums (mentioned above) or the EU institutions.

In particular, the European Parliamentary group, the Confederal Group of the United European Left–Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) has since 1995 helped bridge the deep divisions that hindered European cooperation in the 1970s and 1980s, when the far left was consistently unable to form common policy positions such as a European election manifesto. GUE/NGL entails only a loose form of cooperation (hence the term »confederal«). Nevertheless, it has become more representative, consensual and active over time:

14 John Cruddas, »How Did We Become the Party of the Establishment?«, *The Independent* (12 September 2008: 37); René Cuperus, »The Populist Deficiency of European Social Democracy«, *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 3 (2003), 83–109.

its 2004–2009 party group represented 16 parties from 12 of the EU's 25 member states.

GUE/NGL has furthered the policy convergence of the radical left over support for a democratised EU that promotes labour protection, environmentalism, feminism and minority rights, and has helped to soften most component parties' outright opposition to European integration. Nevertheless, it remains one of the least unified European parliamentary groups, and encompasses a wide spectrum of views, from the relatively moderate, pro-integrationist, anti-communist Finnish VAS to the extreme, anti-integrationist, fiercely nationalist and unapologetically communist Greek KKE. Although numerically stronger at the European level than the far right and Greens (who ally with regionalist parties in the European Parliament), the far left is relatively marginal to policy making within the EP. For instance in 2007 it had just one of 24 committee presidencies (International Trade), with little chance of developing its own policies in isolation. The weakness of far left parties in Europe's East meant that GUE/NGL's share of EP seats fell from 6.7 per cent in 1999 to 5.2 per cent in 2004.

The formation of the European Left Party (EL) in 2004 was a major step forward, when the far left joined the other major European party families in having a transnational party (TNP) to coordinate its European election manifestos and policy formulation. By the beginning of 2008, EL boasted 19 member parties in 17 countries, around the core of the German Left, Italian PRC and Greek Synaspismós. It promised a new stage in far left cooperation, aiming to bridge policy gaps between »socialist, communist, red-green and other democratic left parties of the member states and associated states of the European Union«. EL intends to comprise a qualitatively new phase in transnational cooperation and not simply the kind of loose cooperation that characterises the NELF and GUE/NGL. Specifically, EL intends to accelerate coordination of a common manifesto in the run-up to the 2009 European Parliament elections, which its member parties will seek to contest on a common platform, and afterwards potentially to coordinate its efforts further. We can expect further common positions to emerge opposing the European Constitutional Treaty process, and attempts to develop an alternative vision to neo-liberalism, highlighting parliamentary and social movement struggles against unemployment, war, environmental damage, denial of immigrants' rights, marginalisation of minorities and social injustice. So far EL is certainly consolidating, but remains relatively weak. As yet, it has not succeeded in encompassing all the most relevant actors within the European far left.

For example, unlike many other TNPs the EP parliamentary group and party federation are not part of the same organisation. Certainly, several of EL's leading components belong to the EP's GUE/NGL group. However, this group also includes a number of significant parties – for example, the Dutch SP, Finnish VAS, Swedish V and Irish Sinn Féin – that have not joined EL. Moreover, several of EL's constituent parties – for example, Czech Party of Democratic Socialism, Romanian Socialist Alliance, Estonian Left Party – are micro-parties, insignificant in their respective national party systems. Parties did not join for a variety of reasons: the Nordic Green left parties – traditionally sceptical of federal institutions in any case – saw EL as too dominated by old-style communists and irrelevant micro-parties. Many of the most Eurosceptic parties – for example, the Dutch Socialists – were further troubled by EL's relative moderation and dependence on EU funding. Old debates had not entirely subsided: EL's condemnation of »undemocratic, Stalinist practices and crimes« was insufficient for some parties and too provocative for communists, such as the Czechs (who eventually joined as observers), and the Greek and Portuguese communists, who in addition regarded the EL as too reformist and pro-EU, and refused to join. Clearly, EL has in a short period attained a level of integration and common purpose that the European far left has not possessed for decades. However, absentees deprive EL of some of the most significant parties, an absence hardly compensated by the adhesion of its smaller members. Whether EL can further deepen integrative tendencies among the far left, as well as widening its geographical reach across Europe, remains an open question.

## 8 Summary, Implications and Recommendations

1. The European far left is here to stay. Although it has clear weaknesses – it is under-represented in Eastern Europe and in some individual countries, and the communists have (except in Cyprus and Moldova) been unable to recapture their former support – most European countries confront a far left that has stabilised or expanded since 1989, and which has become the principal challenge to mainstream social democratic parties. Moreover, in every case this far left is now a domestic phenomenon which does not rely on Soviet support for its existence. In several countries – for example, the Netherlands, Germany and Cyprus – it is in the ascendant. As a European party family, the far left is increasingly confident, coordinated and

consolidated, and is as strong, if not stronger than the Greens and the extreme right.

2. The most successful far left parties are those which have undergone significant internal ideological and strategic evolution, have overcome internal dogmatism, have pragmatic, charismatic leadership cadres and concentrate on practical campaigns in coordination with extra-parliamentary actors and the global justice movement. The weaker parties are those still dogged with past internecine disputes and doctrinal questions, with lingering opposition to governmental participation, and ageing and conservative activists (the communists above all).
3. Far left parties have pursued three basic strategies with varied success. The communist strategy is, with few exceptions, the least successful, and even traditional communists are now appealing to forms of democratic socialism or national populism. The democratic socialists promote an eco-socialist strategy which seeks to influence social democratic parties from the left and potentially join in coalition. They are particularly strong where existing Green parties are weak but face problems with distinguishing themselves from social democracy and with involvement in government compromises. Populist socialist parties are the most dynamic since their position is best able to exploit discontent with mainstream social democratic parties and to address issues of contemporary disenchantment such as Euroscepticism, although they face stiff competition from the extreme right.
4. Far left parties flourish in a broad variety of external circumstances, but are helped above all by economic discontent, protest sentiments, the absence of protest party competitors and political systems in which the mainstream left and right converge. In the near future, the worsening socio-economic situation in the EU is likely to increase the appeal of the far left (in particular the populists). Moreover, an increasingly consolidated European far left is likely to use the forthcoming EU elections and the ongoing discussion over the EU Constitutional/Lisbon Treaty to mobilise. If the Constitutional Treaty debate is handled in an »elitist« way – for example, it is perceived that Ireland is being forced to vote until it gets the right answer – this is likely to increase the temptation for the far left to mobilise on a more populist anti-establishment platform.
5. The main raison d'être of the radical left parties is no longer revolution, but the preservation and enhancement of the traditional social democratic welfare consensus, albeit with a more environmental, feminist, Eurosceptic and extra-parliamentary slant. Observers and policy-makers are therefore likely to understand and react to the far left most appropriately if they lose expectations that the radical left is either an obsolete Soviet relic doomed to imminent demise or a »threat« to contemporary democracy equivalent to the far right: one may doubt the practicality of a revived Keynesian agenda, but many of the themes of the far left's discourse refer to participation, inclusion and democratisation of the political system rather than the reverse.
6. The policies of social democratic parties directly affect the trajectory of the left. In particular, real or perceived movement rightwards has provided a niche to those who claim to defend values and principles abandoned by social democrats. Ultimately, social democrats need to decide whether to contest this niche and thereby confront the need to rethink or at least reformulate their strategies of recent years, or to abandon this niche and potentially accept the existence of radical left parties as a permanent irritant.
7. There is little prospect that the far left's popularity will outflank social democrats in the near future, since social democratic parties are still far larger, have greater governing experience, political and organisational capital – including still existing relationships with trade unions – and flexibility, but we might expect some continued recalibration of the balance between the centre and far left in favour of the latter.
8. Attempts by opponents to aggressively combat, demonise or marginalise the far left in European politics are unlikely to work and may even backfire because the most significant, dynamic and successful are not Stalinists or anti-democratic extremists, even if a minority of their activists may tend towards such views. Indeed, attempts at marginalisation may increase the repute of the far left as victimised outsiders.
9. Likewise, attempts to combat »leftism« in general by repositioning social democratic parties as parties of the centre and downplaying the left identity in its entirety may succeed in the short term in demobilising and disorienting the far left, but do not offer a stable basis for the future of the left as a whole, particularly if such reform is resented by portions of the social democratic party's supporters. Indeed in the longer term this may simply increase the vote for protest and populist parties, on the left or the right.
10. Essentially, the only sure-fire way of »dealing with« the far left is to attempt to engage with it

on a pragmatic case-by-case basis, approaching it as a normal political actor, cooperating with it where necessary, engaging with it in debate and dialogue, considering it as a potential coalition partner if appropriate. This is not likely to work in all cases – for example, the policies of the Greek and Portuguese communists are »beyond the pale« for most. However, exposing the far left to the oxygen of publicity deprives it of the luxury of permanent opposition and outsider status, allows it to test and potentially moderate its policies, and grants – for social democratic politicians above all – the flexibility of extra coalition options and perhaps a mutually beneficial strategic or tactical left–left partnership.

11. In the long term, the appeal of the far left cannot be separated from wider problems both in the EU and national political systems, and within contemporary social democracy. Its root causes are: anti-establishment sentiment, socio-economic distress, the perception that mainstream political actors – above all, social democratic parties – are becoming increasingly technocratic and near-identical, and that citizens are defenceless before the forces of globalisation. It will not be easy to develop concrete policies to address these sentiments, but they might include measures to »democratise the EU« and make its institutions and decision-making more transparent and »closer to the people«. Is it time to reconsider thorny issues such as an elected EU president, or moving the EU parliament to one location? Is it time for European social democracy to rethink its – now often reflexively uncritical – attitudes towards issues such as privatisation, market regulation and progressive taxation, particularly given the contemporary traumas of unregulated, globalised capitalism? Is it time for contemporary social democracy to attempt to become more populist, engaging more directly with identity issues, the perception of distance between political elites and the population, perhaps to the degree of attempting to re-invigorate its local democratic, community and even extra-parliamentary identity? Whatever the answers to such questions, it is certain that if politicians – and social democratic ones above all – do not begin to engage with them in a systematic way, then the far left will continue to flourish.

## Appendix

| | |
|---|---|
| AKEL | Progressive Party of Working People (Cyprus) |
| BE | Left Bloc (Portugal) |
| EACL | European Anti-Capitalist Left |
| EL | European Left Party |
| EL | Red-Green Alliance (Denmark) |
| GUE/NGL | Confederal Group of United European Left/Nordic Green Left |
| KKE | Communist Party of Greece |
| KSČM | Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Czech Republic) |
| KSS | Communist Party of Slovakia |
| LSP | Socialist Party of Latvia |
| NELF | New European Left Forum |
| NPA | New Anti-Capitalist Party (France) |
| PCE | Communist Party of Spain |
| PCF | French Communist Party |
| PCI | Italian Communist Party |
| PCP | Portuguese Communist Party |
| PdCI | Party of Italian Communists |
| PRC | Party of Communist Refoundation (Italy) |
| SF | Socialist People's Party (Denmark) |
| SP | Socialist Party (Netherlands) |
| SSP | Scottish Socialist Party |
| SV | Socialist Left Party (Norway) |
| Syn | Coalition of the Left of Movements and Ecology (Synaspismós) (Greece) |
| V | Left Party (Sweden) |
| VAS | Left Alliance (Finland) |
| VG | Left-Green Movement (Iceland) |
| ZRS | Association of Slovak Workers |

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Luke March

# Parteien links der Sozialdemokratie in Europa

## Vom Marxismus zum Mainstream?

■ Parteien links der Sozialdemokratie sind ein zunehmend stabiler und permanenter Akteur auf der politischen Bühne in Europa. Sie stellen eine Herausforderung für sozialdemokratische Parteien dar, weil sie sich von extremen kommunistischen Positionen losgesagt haben und teilweise für Werte eintreten, die die Sozialdemokraten angeblich aufgegeben haben.

■ Die erfolgreichsten Parteien links der Sozialdemokratie agieren weitgehend nicht-ideologisch. Sie folgen einem pragmatischen Kurs und konzentrieren sich auf Sachthemen. Sie haben charismatische Führungspersönlichkeiten und mobilisieren ihre Wähler mit ökosozialistischen oder populistischen, antielitären Positionen.

■ Das derzeitige sozioökonomische Umfeld der EU begünstigt einen weiteren Zuwachs bei diesen Linksparteien. Politische Akteure sollten deshalb nicht versuchen, diese Parteien zu dämonisieren oder zu
Erfahrungen zeigen, dass eine Ausgren
demokratie diese pur

■ Erfolgre
Führungsp
stärker den
demokratie



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