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The Central and Eastern European Left

A Political Family under Construction

Jean-Michel De Waele and Sorina Soare

The destruction of the Berlin Wall has had an influence well beyond the political boundaries of former “people’s democracies,” directly challenging left and center-left parties all over the world. The most common forecast of the early 1990s was that “socialism was dead and that none of its variants could be revived” (Dahrendorf 1990, 38). Eastern Europe during the following years thus rapidly became a breeding ground for neoliberal and pro-market ideas and an endemic “allergy” to the left. The main dilemma that the new democracies faced was how to bolster the legitimacy of their new regimes. Anti-communist elites advocated total condemnation of the past, with “lustration laws” to purge remnants and reminders of it that were based, it would seem, on an underestimate of how completely Marxist ideologies had disappeared (Hermet and Marcou 1998; Mink and Szurek 1998; Teitel 2000; Letki 2002; Stan 2002; David 2003). An astute observation about Bulgaria works for the entire region, save the Czech Republic: “None of [Marxism’s] postulates, its main policy recommendations such as central planning, completely administratively controlled prices, obligatory employment, state property, collectivism, proletarian dominance through one-party rule, were left standing” (Ganev 2005, 444). This was also, of course, a moment when the western left faced its own crisis because of the end of Fordism, shifting class structures and the weakening of class, changing voting trends, the coming of “post-materialist” rivals, and the crisis of the welfare state (Callaghan and Tunney 2001, 63). Some scholars even argued that the end of the twentieth century could make traditional socialism and even social democracy impossible everywhere (Przeworski and Sprague 1986).

The direction and extent of Eastern European transformations were also much constrained by the prospect of joining the European Union. Democratic politics were essential for membership in the EU, and this obliged the
post-communist lefts to declare more or less complete allegiance to market-oriented programs in ways which disregarded traditional left concerns (Agh 2004). These constraints also seemed likely to prevent new lefts from emerging and to hasten the departure of older ones. Parties of the left and center-left in central and eastern Europe were thus left to transform themselves in an inhospitable environment, and very few observers or participants anticipated the resurrection of communist parties. Thus while in Romania the National Salvation Front (FSN) and in Bulgaria the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), successor parties to the communists, managed to stay in power after 1989 and even win the first free elections, in most other places the past was brutally rejected. Successor parties in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia all lost their first electoral contests. Yet after starting as an endangered species, these successor parties would in fairly short order become stunning success stories.1

Democratization also brought traditional social democracy back to life after years in exile. Parties such as the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), the Romanian Social-Democratic Party (PSDR), and the Hungarian MSzDP were good examples. These parties had been repressed or forcibly incorporated into Soviet-sponsored communist parties after the Communists seized power in the late 1940s. Forty years later, in the first democratic elections, they seemed set for a political comeback. Their success proved limited, because weak organizations and inexperienced leaderships hampered their visibility and limited their electoral relevance (Waller 1995, 478). They were in most cases destined to disappear during the 1990s or merge with ex-Communist rivals. The exception was the Czech Social Democrats (ČSSD), which became one of the most stable center-left parties in the region. Another group of hybrid or highly specific and localized left parties emerged, like Smer in Slovakia, led by Robert Fico, a charismatic former reform-Communist. And some parties like the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), its Slovak counterpart the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), and the Romanian Socialist Labor Party (PSM), chose not to drop their old ideology and instead made but minor programmatic revisions to fit the new democratic institutional framework. The Czech party has been the only success story in this category.

This chapter surveys the post-communist left or center-left spectrum in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. Its main goal is to assess whether the evolution of these parties will be marked by a long and quiet path toward lasting success or rather enduring weakness, indicated by their current electoral problems. In light of these questions, the bulk of the chapter focuses on electoral results from the early 1990s through 2008. Later we shall consider internal and external stimuli leading to the re-
invention of parties more generally in the region and reflect upon the likelihood of their long-term success.

Before we begin our analysis we need to clarify certain conceptual issues. At a comparative level we see a distinct evolutionary pattern. During the initial post-communist transition at the start of the 1990s, the political context blocked the emergence of parties, either left or right, with real ideologies that translated into programs and policies for well-defined electorates. Instead these were years of high politics, when debates were about the past, the large changes to be undertaken, and the positions of different countries in international affairs. In these conditions both right and left became stuck in rhetorical postures with few clear and realistic alternatives, and the region embraced a politics based on a superficial consensus in favor of democracy and Europe, in which most other problems became secondary.

In these circumstances left-of-center parties faced a threefold rebuilding task. Ex-communist parties first had to demonstrate acceptance of new democratic rules, including explicit renunciation of their earlier monopoly status and a willingness to live in a new multiparty world. Next they had to carry out organizational restructurings which included a massive loss of existing members, made more difficult by the emergence of a new generation of leaders whose presence did not help public visibility and recognition. Finally, the parties needed to rebuild their programs, abandoning the principles of Marxism-Leninism and importing ideological platforms from western European social democrats.

By the middle of the 1990s the return of left parties to power had demanded constructing a new image as “competent agents of change” that would distinguish them from parties of the right, using arguments that it was better to have “a steady hand at the wheel rather than inexperienced learner-drivers” (Hough 2005, 5). By this point their initial weak democratic legitimacy seemed for the moment overcome, and in all the countries we analyze, ex-communist parties had begun to demonstrate a political professionalism and organizational coherence that gave them substantial claims on electorates. Problems in the program persisted nonetheless. With a few exceptions the role of the government party constrained them to follow rhythms of reform coordinated by the EU and international creditor organizations. No matter what happened at elections, therefore, political agendas were dominated by needs to guarantee stabilization that necessitated policies of economic liberalization and privatization and brought extensive social costs. In such a situation, “while there may be a clear social-democratic profile in programmatic documents and electoral campaigns, this does not necessarily have any bearing to the actual policies of a party in government” (Dauderstädt, Gerrits, and Markus [1999] as cited in Paterson and Sloam 2005, 37).
Thus however different parties’ genealogies, social democracy often became an empty label. The parties were caught between their positions managing democratization and economic reform and historic affinities for taking care of those less well-off. These parties also came to contain numerous successful “red” millionaire entrepreneurs, and their policies often sacrificed social commitments for fiscal rectitude. Moreover, pro-European positions were often mainly electoral slogans, open to competing interpretations of the EU’s policies and its future that were vague and slippery. In brief, with the exception of the Czech communists in the KSČM, the central characteristics of social democracy—its social values and its ties with trade unions and the working class—became at best elements in campaign rhetoric. “Policy transfers” from western social democracy were typically superficial and meant mainly to establish credentials in the eyes of European allies. In this context it must be asked whether one is discussing a real political family, with organic links to the peoples, societies, and classes whose interests it purported to represent.

The parties’ genealogical patchwork does not in itself preclude a positive answer, but it does imply the likelihood of profound differences between these different social democrats operating in different national party systems. Virtually all the successor parties quickly began to label themselves “center-left,” with rather more weight placed on centrism. Ties to the broader social democratic family were nevertheless typically used to demonstrate democratic credentials and not to inform program or policy. Therefore the family in general was a heterogeneous group of parties who from the outset renounced commitments to equality and social justice in favor of pragmatism. Left-wing activism and a political culture oriented to the left were quite absent, and the parties came to be dominated more by charismatic leaders than by particular political appeals. The discourses traditionally associated with social democracy have for that reason turned out to be of little use in mobilizing supporters, particularly in the face of growing competition from populist parties claiming to defend the “rights of the poorest and weakest.” Today’s economic crisis has made even clearer this long pattern of convergence between the left and the populist and often nationalist parties, most notably on issues of guaranteeing minimum social standards.

Successor Parties: An Electorally Resistant Species?

In the aftermath of 1989 new competitive electoral markets boosted domestic and international confidence in the democratization process (Linz and Stepan 1996). Except in Romania and Bulgaria, during the first Central and Eastern European free elections, lefts—social democrats, successor parties,
and others—suffered severe electoral defeats, results that did not promise brilliant futures (table 1). Yet a brief few years later the defeated parties “took advantage of a . . . political environment where weak competitors systematically made strategic mistakes” (Hough 2005, 4). Left successor parties were geared toward power, ready to agree to programmatic compromises, and eager to occupy central roles in the new political game, which they soon proved able to do.

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1. In coalition with the Bulgarian Agrarian People’s Union, Alexander Stanboliski, and Ecoglasnost.
2. Part of the Democratic Convention, the PDSR obtains only ten deputies and one senator out of the sixty-two CDR mandates.
3. The Social Democratic Alliance unites the PD and the PDSR.
4. The Party of the Democratic Left is part of the coalition Common Choice, which also includes the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia, the Farmers movement, and other small political parties.
5. Starting with the 2001 elections the Coalition for Bulgaria unites the BSP and a number of smaller leftist formations such as the Party of Bulgarian Social Democrats, the Bulgarian Agrarian
Growth and Decline of the Polish Democratic Party

In chronological perspective, the Polish story began in the late 1980s with the Polish Round Table. Intricate negotiations between the Polish United Workers Party (PZPR), sponsored by the regime, and Solidarnosc were supposed to lead to partial liberalization and not wholesale democratic transition. Solidarnosc and opposition parties were allowed to run for 35% of the seats in Sejm, while voting for the upper chamber was completely open. Despite these precautionary measures “Solidarity’s sweeping electoral success sounded the death knell of communism” (Millard 2003, 25). By the end of 1989 the Polish

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People’s Union “Aleksander Stambolijski,” the Movement for Social Humanism, and the Bulgarian Communist Party.

6. During the 2007 elections the Left and Democrats coalition unites the Democratic Left Alliance, the Social Democracy of Poland, the Labour Union and the Democratic Party.

7. Initially part of the electoral alliance with the PSD, the PSDR merges with the PSD in 2001.


Workers Party had been dissolved and Alexander Kwasniewski elected the leader of its successor, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), in parallel with the coming of a multiparty system and completely free elections in 1991. Owing to the lack of credibility of parties associated with the past and the predominance of pro-market discourses, voters then gave massive support to parties opposed to communism, with the SLD obtaining only 12%.

After the post-1989 coalitions fell apart, early elections were called in 1993. With functioning democratic institutions in place, political debate was centered around the introduction of property rights, the pace of economic reform, inflation, and unemployment. The SLD and the agrarian Polish People’s Party (PSL), neither of which disputed the need for change, pledged gentler economic reforms that would be accompanied by increases in social spending. The elections, held under new electoral laws, thus led to severe losses for the other parliamentary parties, while the SLD, with 20%, came in first and formed a new government with the PSL. The defeat of the center-right was caused mainly by hardships tied to the reforms promoted under Leszek Balcerowicz, which had made voters impatient and desirous of less harsh reforms. One of the explicit goals of the Democratic Left, which drew its inspiration from the German SPD, was to build a welfare state and implement social programs robust enough to provide protection through the economic transition period (Buras 2005, 92). Likewise, the party distinguished itself from others in the party system by its secularist positions, like those defending the rights of women and sexual minorities.

It was not only economic problems that lay behind the electoral shift toward the ex-communists, for there was also a practical issue of credibility. The Democratic Left (SLD) was an organized party with professional elites energized by young leaders promoting secular values. The anticommunist parties, in contrast, had discredited themselves with nationalistic, pro-Catholic discourses and political amateurism. The “pro-SLD” air du temps continued into the presidential elections of 1995, which saw Lech Walesa, the historical leader of Solidarnosc, face off against the SLD leader Aleksander Kwasniewski, who won a surprising victory with 51% of the vote.

After this a pattern of regular electoral rotation seemed to take over. Despite continuous economic reforms and Poland’s image as Eastern Europe’s economic “tiger,” the next elections in 1997 were won by Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS). Four years later, with 16% unemployment and very high budget deficits, voters focused on the ills of the Polish economy and turned sharply against the center-right coalition. The results were a limited victory for the reformed communists and the complete removal of the AWS from Parliament. The Democratic Left (SLD), in alliance with the small
center-left Labor Union and the People’s Party, formed the new governing coalition.

Starting in the mid-1990s the SLD focused most on macro-policy issues and on reinforcing its organization under the leadership of Leszek Miller (Millard 2003, 36). For almost a decade no other party could match the SLD either in territorial strength or in membership (table 2). This pattern was not peculiar to Poland, and scholars have often pointed to ex-communist parties’ superiority in membership, territorial organization, and material resources (Szczerbiak 1999; Szczerbiak 2001; Van Biezen 2003; Lewis 2003). Most new parties tended to be concentrated in urban areas and among a young and educated electorate, but the SLD had a socially broader and more widespread network. In its internal life the leader was the party’s major cornerstone. In time, the party gradually consolidated an image of pragmatism that looked more to its

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voters than its members (Buras 2005, 88). In the longer run, however, the fragility and superficiality of its organizational structure and clientelistic relationships between leaders and members weakened the party’s electoral grip. Corruption became systemic and a series of scandals rocked the party, inducing a hemorrhage of members and the creation of a splinter party, Polish Social Democracy (SdPl).

In 2005 the Democratic Left (SLD) was therefore moved to restate its official stance: “We want a Poland that is just, democratic, tolerant . . . . Poland must be a country for everyone, and not just for the chosen few. We want a strong and efficient state in equalizing opportunities for Poles, sensitive to human pain, exploitation and inequality. We want a Poland that is open, European and proud of its history, treated without falsification and concealment. We want a Poland that does not forget the achievements of 45 years of the People’s Republic and without nationalistic, right-wing fictions.” Social policy proposals, Pro-Europeanism, and anti-nationalist arguments were thus central to the program. Electoral results nonetheless confirmed the relative decline of the SLD that had been identified in various pre-election surveys. The collapse of the coalition led by Jaroslaw Kaczynski led to early elections in 2007 and seemed to offer a chance for redemption to the SLD. The final competition was between the Law and Justice (PiS) and Civic Platform (PO) parties, while the SLD and other left-of-center parties formed a new grouping, the Left and Democrats (LiD), which to its dismay obtained merely 13.15% of the votes (fifty-five seats in the Sejm and none in the Senate).

More than twenty years after the Berlin Wall fell, the Polish left is at a crossroads in a political landscape where the right is now predominant. Populist parties have challenged the center-left’s credibility, while internal conflicts and scandals have progressively undermined it. Despite efforts in 2007 to forge a coherent message and Kwasniewski’s personal comeback, the LiD clearly needs both programmatic and organizational reshaping. The coalition and its constituent parties have had consistent problems creating an identity for themselves, even if they have continued to advertise their interest in policies tied to work and social rights, secularization, and building a social Europe.

**The Hungarian Socialist Party: Constancy and Compromise**

Hungary was the second communist state to breathe the air of democracy. Liberalization had started after the Budapest revolt of 1956 with the abandonment of Stalinist positions on social matters and the implementation of cautious economic reforms to enlarge and consolidate the legitimacy of the
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regime. Despite these changes, beneath the official consensus an opposition quickly organized, and by 1987 the monopoly of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSzMP) had been broken. The Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) was created, followed by the Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz) and the Hungarian Civic Union (FIDESZ) (Pittaway 2003, 58). The Hungarian case is thus unusual because the reformed successor party “emerged before the collapse of the state socialism and not after . . . and played a very active and instrumental role in bringing down the former system” (Agh 1995, 492). By the end of the 1980s a widening gap had isolated hardliners among the communists (MSzMP), János Kádár had been removed from the leadership, and almost one-third of the Central Committee had been replaced.

Negotiations in June 1989 between the democratic opposition and the ruling Communist Party led to the first free elections in 1990. By September 1989 the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP) had become the successor to the Communist Party, carrying over a majority of the party elite, rank and file, and resources (Van Biezen 2003, 124). Continuity gave the party an important advantage in territorial network, financial assets, and real estate. But there was a break at the organizational level. The new MSzP adopted a flexible organizational model based on secret-ballot voting and decentralized selection procedures (Agh 1995, 493). Thus, “in line with the party’s aspiration to bury the organizational model of the past . . . the MSzP was quite loosely organized and its organizational structure scarcely formalized” (Van Biezen 2003, 125). Membership was never the top priority of the new party (table 2), in part because only about 2% of the Hungarian electorate belongs to any party. The ironic effect was to make its membership relatively large, the typical member being “middle-aged, male, urban, and intellectual” (Agh 1995, 498). Programmatically the MSzP’s prime concern at first was to advocate free-market policies and prove its loyalty to the new regime. Especially after its comeback in 1994 the Socialists (MSzP) were the promoters of market reforms based on austerity and rapid privatization. Their foreign policy from the beginning was open and internationalist, replete with anti-nationalistic and Europhile statements, and they worked to separate themselves from the nationalism regularly promoted by their opponents, mainly the Civic Union (FIDESZ).

Like other countries in the region, in the early 1990s Hungary experienced the perverse consequences of economic reform. Despite support by the Democratic Forum (MDF) for gradual economic transformation, the country’s transition proved difficult. GDP declined and there was a deterioration in living standards. Conflicts inside the government and the amateurism of new, non-communist elites accentuated the climate of distrust. In the elections of 1994, held during an economic slump, the Socialist Party’s organizational net-
work and its renewed party elite attracted ordinary voters and even seduced its former enemy, the Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz). Like its Polish counterpart, the main successor party used its policymaking and administrative experience as key assets (Grzymala–Busse 2002, 138). But once back in power it was obliged by international lenders to cut social spending; and in the years that followed, Hungary had one of the highest unemployment rates in the entire post-communist region. During its time in power, allied with the liberals in SzDSz, the party thus became the advocate of austerity and worked to dismantle the institutions of the state economy. These economic reforms eventually paid off, and by 1997 GDP had started to rise. The credibility of the MSzP government was nonetheless hurt by austerity and corruption scandals while, in parallel, the opposition had already begun to reorganize.

The electoral campaign in 1998 was dominated by the charisma and populism of Viktor Orbán, the leader of FIDESZ. Until a few weeks before the elections the Socialists seemed likely to be reelected, but the party won only 134 seats versus 148 for FIDESZ. The MSzP held on to 33% of the vote and its dominance in traditional industrialized districts, but opposition unity made the difference. Whereas in 1994 fragmentation of the right had helped the center-left, four years later a unified opposition blocked its reelection. In 2002 and again in 2006 FIDESZ, which was becoming a standard center-right party, and the MSzP progressively reinforced their electoral power while the other parties were falling apart. In an almost bipolar electoral market in 2002, the MSzP in alliance with the Free Democrats (SzDSz) gathered a limited majority with 198 seats. The same formula worked in 2006, and the MSzP-SzDSz coalition won 210 seats in Parliament.

After the forced resignation of Prime Minister Peter Medgyessy, the Socialists installed the young businessman Ferenc Gyurcsany, one of the richest men in Hungary, as its leader. Under his stewardship the party adopted a Blairite “third way” agenda. The MSzP soon joined an exclusive club of post-communist parties to have won two successive elections while in government. Despite numerous scandals and riots in Budapest in 2006, the MSzP seems to be the healthiest left party in the region, despite organizational underdevelopment and an ambiguous programmatic posture between centrism and liberal policies.

The Hungarian Socialists (MSzP) have thus been in office for more than half of the two decades of post-communism, and they are one of the most pro-European parties in the region, with a history of compromise between an inherited left culture and an ambition to win elections. Still, the future remains in doubt. Confronted with one of the largest budget deficits in the region, especially after 2000, the party has been forced to shift policies so as to
lower public spending, a policy that led to growing criticism among its supporters. This tense situation worsened after the crisis of 2006 and especially in 2009 under the new prime minister Gordon Bajnai, who was obliged to reduce wages, raise taxes, and cut social spending. In these conditions Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary), a right-wing nationalist party that had only been founded in 2002, became more and more important and registered a significant advance in the European elections of June 2009.

Common Origins and Divergent Paths: The Czechoslovakian Case

Czechoslovakia was the third country in Eastern and Central Europe to be swept up in the wave of democratization. Besides the challenges of the “double transitions” to democracy and free-market capitalism, the country also faced a serious nationality question (Kuzio 2001). After a “velvet revolution,” the “velvet divorce” put an end to one of the most important states in the entire region (De Waele 1998, 49). Czechoslovakia has been regularly depicted as the region’s only genuine democracy before communism, and ironically it was the one country where the Communist Party had been a relevant political force before 1948. It was known also for a strong social democratic tradition linked to the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Worker’s Party (CSDSD) and Czechoslovak Social Democracy (CSD). In Slovakia, in contrast, a traditionally rural economy and the strength of the Catholic Church had prevented the emergence of a strong pre-war left party.

In 1946 the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ) had won 38% of the votes and then occupied most ministerial posts. Despite this, in February 1948 the party chose to seize power in brutal fashion. Twenty years later troops from five Warsaw Pact countries repressed the Prague Spring and ended the party’s and the nation’s attempts to reform from within. The once well-rooted ruling party then experienced a progressive decrease in membership. The party had 1.79 million members in 1948–49, 1.38 million in the mid-1950s, and only 1.17 million by the 1970s, the lowest number since the coup of 1948. By 1987 party membership had gone back up to 1.61 million (Stoica 2005, 703), but despite this, strong demonstrations in 1988 culminated in six weeks of protest in November and December. In the same period the Slovak branch of the party developed a softer version of communism: “far away from both party supervision and decision-making, the then Young Turks from the Bratislava-based Institute of Marxism-Leninism, Peter Weiss and Pavol Kanis, had organized seminars to discuss the social and economic problems of society” and effectively created a reformed party (Haughton 2005, 179). These same young communist leaders would be in charge of the party after the Vel-
vet Revolution. The bloodless overthrow of the communist regime initially gave power to the Civic Forum (OF) and the Public against Violence (VPN), while the former ruling party remained practically unchanged and “retained much of its orthodox profile in both ideological and organizational terms, with the hardliners within the party successfully withstanding pressure for change” (Van Biezen 2003, 136). The first free elections in June 1990 brought sweeping victory to movements and parties opposed to the old regime. At the same time divisions between Slovaks and Czechs deepened, and after the elections of 1992 leaders in Prague and Bratislava declared the dissolution of the former Czechoslovak Republic.

No fewer than twenty-two parties and movements registered for the first free elections. Despite everything in its past, the Communist Party finished second with almost 14% of the votes (table 2). The Social Democrats (ČSSD), who had been forcibly merged with the Communists but were now newly independent, failed at the national level to reach the 5% threshold required to win parliamentary representation in the country’s proportional electoral system (Van Biezen 2003, 135). Initially hesitating between functioning within the Civic Forum and establishing an independent political organization, the ČSSD in the early 1990s was strongly divided. Those favoring collaboration with Civic Forum managed to win several seats under that label. Their opponents, led by Jiri Horák, controversially chose to collaborate with dissident communists expelled from the party in 1968. The effect was to cause turmoil in a party run by anticommunist dissidents. Still, Horák’s openness to collaboration with other leftist leaders reinforced the party as an independent political force after Civic Forum broke apart in 1991 and allowed it to prosper.

The parliamentary campaign of 1992 was taken up by economic issues and disagreements about the future of the federation, whose breakdown they nourished. In the Czech half of the former country a coalition between the new Civic Democratic Party (ODS), led by the free-market enthusiast Vaclav Klaus, and the Christian Democratic Party (KDS) won thirty-seven seats. A left bloc led by the former communists (KSČM) won thirty-five and the Social Democrats (ČSSD) sixteen. In the Slovak half the elections were won by the successor party to the communists, the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL). At this point the former communists in the Czech half of the republic, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), as it was known since 1989, came under internal pressure to change (De Waele 1998, 60). “Soft-liners,” represented by the chairman Jiří Svoboda, were keen to promote a smooth transformation to the post-communist era, but strong reluctance from the base and hardliner control over the organization limited their attempts. Svoboda was forced to resign and the party held on to its orthodoxy under Miro-
slav Grebeníček (Handl 2005). In a subsequent document the KSČM publicly rejected the practices of former regimes but also put strong emphasis on its “aim to create a modern socialist society, which will guarantee real and lasting freedom and equality, regardless of property and social status. This concept is based on Marxism and an open dialogue with new ideas and experiences. Communists have always actively striven to defend and promote the interests of the exploited, the restricted, and the oppressed classes.”9 Thus while in the rest of the region Marxism seemed to have vanished, it remained alive in the Czech Republic. Organizationally the former communists preserved broad territorial coverage but rapidly lost membership—by 1991 they had about 750,000 members (Van Biezen 2003, 139), by 1999 about 130,000, and by 2008 only 77,115.10 More than two decades after 1989 the party’s core membership consists of male pensioners, with 15% active blue-collar workers. The majority of members have but a modest education, and only 10% have university degrees. Party statutes continue to emphasize the active involvement of ordinary party members: “Membership of the Czech Communist Party, moreover, is not restricted to activities in the public realm but also extends to the private and requires a dedication to personal and political involvement” (Van Biezen 2003, 142). The extent of this involvement has been considerable, a pattern also characteristic of the Social Democrats (ČSSD). Both parties’ linkages with members and interest organizations have therefore been higher than for other Czech parties.11

After the “velvet divorce” took effect in 1993 it was clear that communists would maintain key positions in the Czech Republic, even if they were ostracized by other parties. In addition, the Social Democrats (ČSSD) began to gather increasing support. The leadership of the Social Democrats changed at its Congress of February 1993, and its new leaders emerged as strong opponents of the privatization by vouchers promoted by Vaclav Klaus, which aimed at rapid and massive redistribution of state property. The party also increased its credibility by unequivocally refusing to cooperate with the former communists (KSČM). By its promotion of gentler economic reforms, it was progressively recognized as a left alternative and thereby reinforced its electoral appeal.

In the mid-1990s Czech economic results were regarded as miraculous because of rapid privatization with low unemployment and inflation.12 These achievements provided the setting for the elections of 1996, which produced a vote of confidence in Klaus’s government and its call for a market economy inspired by Thatcherism (Orenstein 1995, 184). The government had been strongly shaken by the strikes of 1995, including actions by professors, doctors, and railway workers which served to garner support for the social policy
positions of the Social Democrats (ČSSD) and to lend credence to the criticisms of the Communists (KSČM). The campaign of 1996 was thus dominated by such social and economic issues. The parties of the left were able to expand their electoral base, particularly in rural areas, but the right (ODS) was nonetheless able to hold on to its support in the cities and among retired voters.

Despite this favorable context the successor party’s appeal remained limited, and it won only 10.3%. During this entire period the party adhered to its communist credo, including Pan-Slavism and Russophilia. It also advocated continued collaboration with what remained of the array of communist states—Cuba, China, and North Korea—and other opponents of “American imperialism” like Milosevic’s Yugoslavia and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq (Handl 2005, 126). The leaders and supporters of the not-so-former Communists (KSČM) were apparently nostalgic for the ancien régime and eager to protest and punish the compromises of the Social Democrats (ČSSD) (Handl 2003, 4). The party’s biggest challenge remained its aging and shrinking electoral base, and despite some modest modernizing efforts, the organization attracted few voters in the election of 1996.13

The Social Democrats (ČSSD) won almost 27%, putting them just behind the Civic Democrats (ODS). But the economic situation then changed very quickly, and the Czech Republic fell into a deep recession. The unexpected resignation of Klaus, the ODS leader, who had been implicated in a financial scandal, deepened the political crisis. The Social Democrats won the elections in 1998 with 32.3% of the votes, while the communists won 11%. Refusing to collaborate with the successor party, the Social Democratic leader formed a minority government bolstered by an agreement guaranteeing opposition involvement in all major decisions. The party (ČSSD) maintained its strength in the elections of 2002, and its new leader, Vladimir Špidla, then formed a coalition government with the Christian Democrats and the Freedom Union, again refusing collaboration with the communists, who nevertheless won 18.5% and thereby increased their number of seats in the lower chamber from twenty-four to forty-one. During their extended period in office the Social Democrats (ČSSD) sought to consolidate their middle-class and public-sector supporters and progressively moved toward the center, a shift that became official under its new leadership. This repositioning nevertheless weakened the party in the presidential elections in 2003 and the European elections in 2004; now plagued by scandals and a blurred identity, the Social Democrats (ČSSD) lost in 2006, while the communist KSČM declined to 12.8%. Twenty years after the cold war’s end the Czech political landscape remained deeply marked by the same ideological confrontation between Social Democrats and
former and largely unreformed Communists that had emerged soon after the breakup of Czechoslovakia (Handl 2003, 7).

In Slovakia the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) was the successor and heir to the once powerful Communist Party. Starting in the early 1990s it undertook a process of internal and programmatic reassessment. At the same time the Social-Democratic Party of Slovakia (SDSS), a historical party led by Dubček himself, was reborn. The more hardline Communist Party (KSS) briefly won several seats in Parliament, but from the outset the ability of the new Democratic Left (SDL) to adapt and the positive effects of its role in rural Slovakia reinforced its credibility. Moreover, the harsh economic reforms announced by President Václav Havel promised difficulty for what there was of Slovak industry; in consequence, “The pro-reform, anticommunist consensus was far less clear” in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic (Grzymala-Busse 2002, 151).

In the elections of 1992 the Democratic Left (SDL) obtained 14.7%, the hardliners (KSS) less than 1%. Both left parties were successfully challenged by the People’s Party, or Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), led by Vladimir Mečiar (Haughton 2005, 180). Initially a reaction against the right-leaning pronouncements of the government dominated by the Public Against Violence Party (VPN), the People’s Party program was an eclectic blend of social policies, nationalism, and populism that directly challenged the Democratic Left (SDL) in its core constituencies (Williams 2003, 50).

In the face of this challenge “the SDL saw its commitment to democracy as the main distinction between itself and the HZDS,” and the key feature of its program became a formal and explicit commitment to democratic loyalty rather than a more typical social democratic identity (Grzymala-Busse 2002, 151). Like other successor parties the Democratic Left (SDL) “engaged in an acknowledged and deliberative emulation of programmatic and political ideas from Western social-democratic parties, the Socialist International and the Party of European Socialists” (Handl and Leška 2005, 106). As the party chairman Weiss declared, “we are for the market mechanisms and plural democracy . . . we do not want to be an ideological party” (Weiss, quoted by Grzymala-Busse 2002, 152). Yet the effort was largely superficial, for the party really saw itself as more liberal than the People’s Party, while its free-market statements progressively distanced it from the trade unions that had been attracted to its populist discourse and program.

Aiming to broaden its electoral appeal, the Democratic Left (SDL) took part in the elections as the main member of the Common Choice coalition formed by the Greens, the Social Democrats, and the Farmers’ Movement.
The coalition strategy backfired and obscured the party’s visibility, “muddying the party’s image and program in the mind of the electorate” (Haughton 2005, 185). Common Choice won only 10.41% of the vote, while its populist rivals (HZDS) became the main party in the Slovak republic with 34.95%. The hardline KSS did worse, obtaining less than 3%. Typical voters for Common Choice were young, urban, and highly educated, with a predominance of state employees.14

Four years later, in 1998 the People’s Party (HZDS) obtained 27% of the votes, an unsatisfactory result for a party with limited coalitional potential. A centrist coalition—made up of the Democratic Union, the Christian Democratic Movement, the Democratic Party, the Green Party, and the SDSS combined in the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK)—won 26.33%; the Democratic Left SDL won just under 15% and the unreformed KSS less than 3%. The SDK leader became prime minister and the Democratic Left (SDL) joined in the government coalition, in which it promoted a series of aggressively pro-market reforms and thus alienated its traditional left electorate (Haughton 2005, 185). The party was riven by debates between a “Third Way,” with proposals for economic stabilization that its enemies claimed were inspired by the IMF and Milton Friedman, and more orthodox socialists who favored building a strong welfare state (Handl and Leška 2005, 114). This second position won out, but not without leaving deep scars. At the same time, during the coalition of 1998–2004 the party was plagued by scandals, something that seemed a common denominator in the entire post-communist political spectrum. In this context one of the best-known party leaders, Robert Fico, left the SDL to form the Smer (Direction), whose original name included the phrase “Third Way,” illustrating Fico’s Blairite programmatic inspiration. Like New Labour, Smer sought a “modern” social democratic balance between equal opportunities and liberal economics.

In the elections of 2002 the Democratic Left (SDL) suffered a major defeat, securing just 1.36% of the votes while the former communists in the KSS registered their highest score in the post-communist elections with 6.32%. These elections indicated how much the party had been marginalized, while the recently created Smer broke through with 13.46% of the vote (Handl and Leška 2005). Three years later Smer became the catalyst for a unification of the Slovak left, merging with the Democratic Left (SDL), the Social Democratic Alternative and the historic Social Democrats (SDSS). In this format Smer won the elections of 2006, taking 50 of 150 seats. Surprisingly, the party then formed a coalition with the former ally on the right of the People’s Party, the SNS, leading it to be suspended temporarily from the Party of European Socialists (PES), the EU-level social democratic organization.
"Once a Big Party":

The Rapid Decline of the Romanian Social Democratic Party

It is widely acknowledged that the annus mirabilis after the Wall fell had more limited effects in Romania than in the rest of the region, particularly since the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) continued in power. The successor National Salvation Front (FSN), under various appellations like FDSN (Democratic National Salvation Front), PDSR (Party of the Romanian Social-Democracy), and the current PSD (Social Democratic Party), was the undoubted winner of the events of December 1989. Enjoying organizational superiority and two charismatic leaders, Ion Iliescu and Petre Roman, the FSN won the first free elections with more than 66% of the vote against a motley collection of opposition parties—the agrarians (PNTCD), the liberals (PNL) and the historic social democrats—which together barely won 10%.

In this first part of its new existence the FSN proclaimed a revolutionary identity and until 1993 even refused to call itself a party, preferring instead the label of Front. This label, which had strong emotional connotations of official revolutionary origins, legitimized the FSN by reference “to the virtuous and unified people” (Soare 2004). The Front recalled the emotional solidarity of the early days of the “Revolution” and emphasized a direct link between the demos and the leaders, a quality reinforced by its leader Iliescu’s paternalistic approach (Tismăneanu 2000, 11). The party’s catch-all discourse guaranteed a broad electoral appeal, with particular penetration among a middle-aged electorate in rural areas outside the capital (Dătculescu 1994).

Benefiting directly from the former communists’ organizational structures, the Salvation Front built a professional political apparatus to wrest control over state institutions and reinforce its territorial support and electoral strength, while encouraging broad membership as a substitute for credibility (table 2). For six years the FSN squashed its competitors and profited from its hegemony by deconstructing the wealthy communist state into a capillary system of patronage to reward those who supported its positions by giving them preferential access to the state’s assets (Soare 2006). Joining the FSN was thus not only an issue of status but also one of opportunity for economic and professional benefits. An unwritten rule has existed since then that whatever the turnover, rival parties would do similar things for their own benefit.

Immediately after the elections of 1990 tensions emerged within the quite heterogeneous Salvation Front (FSN). Opposition between hardliners and softliners echoed differences in perspectives within the governing party, as the visions of the party’s two major leaders—Ion Iliescu and Petre Roman—clashed. The split was progressively institutionalized within FSN, and by 1992
two purportedly social democratic parties had emerged. In elections that year the parties together won nearly 40% of the vote, but the real winner was Iliescu's party, the FDSN (which soon became the Party of Social Democracy, or PDSr). Still, with fewer than 30% of the votes and the refusal of the Christian Democrats (CDr) to form an alliance, the party was left to soldier on in a minority government until it managed in 1994 to establish the so-called Red Quadrilateral Coalition with three right-wing parties: the Great Romania Party (PRM), the Party of the Romanians' National Unity (PUNR), and the small nationalist-socialist Socialist Party of Labor (PSM).

There were also traditional social democratic players during the first series of elections. Despite repeated electoral failures in the 1990s due to unwise strategic alliances, the historical Social Democrats (PSDr) succeeded in becoming a regular parliamentary party. In a landscape dominated by issues of “high politics,” it was the only party interested in developing a coherent social democratic program. Its individual electoral weakness and coalitional missteps limited the impact and visibility of traditional left culture, however, and in 2001 the party merged with its larger rival, the Party of Social Democracy (PDSr) descended from the largest successor party.

Beginning in 1993 the FDSN/PDSr had begun a complex programmatic realignment. Symbolically it deemphasized its revolutionary claims and changed its name. This did not represent a fundamental break with the past, and the party’s potential coalition partners were limited to other “outcast” parties. The second step of its strategy was a long campaign to join the Party of European Socialists and the Socialist International. By 2000, having been again renamed, as the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the party itself initiated its own, internally oriented campaign for change: it openly affirmed a social democratic identity, built greater linkages with trade unions and a more developed organization, and even introduced new mechanisms for designating electoral candidates.

From 1992 until 2005, of course, the party faced competition from a rival successor party. The Democratic Party (PD) was an alternative social democratic group that came together around the reformist leader Petre Roman. The party advertised itself as a new social democratic party inspired by western social democracy, and Roman’s personal connections with leaders like Felipe González were used to open doors in the European family. But after electoral failure in 2000 and the election of a new leader, now president of Romania, the PD progressively distanced itself from international social democratic networks and also refused collaboration with the PSD, preferring instead to ally with center-right partners. In 2005, in a major programmatic shift, the PD became a people’s party. Behind this shift lay a pragmatic
strategy which had immediate results. Since the political disappearance of the Christian Democrats (PNTCD) in 2000, the EPP—the European alliance of Christian Democratic and Center-Right parties—did not have a major Romanian partner. This new connection was therefore extremely useful for both the EPP and the Romanian party. International visibility and EU parliamentary seats were prizes for which the new party—soon to be known as the Democratic Liberal Party and after 2007 as the Liberal Democratic Party—would gladly trade in its social democratic heritage and identity.

In spite of these strange moves the electoral results from 1990 through 2004 suggest that the Romanian social democratic family has been perhaps the most stable in the post-communist arena. Ever since the coming of a new democracy, at least one supposedly social democratic party has been in power. But the record of the Romanian social democratic family also draws attention to the strategic capacities of the parties for adapting to their environment. The Liberal Democratic (PD) realignment just discussed is one consequence of the persistent political marketing of post-communist social democratic parties and of a strategy that has indirectly been made easier by fluctuating societal cleavages. We have pointed out elsewhere that in Central and Eastern Europe major socioeconomic divisions have not been effectively tapped by parties, which instead have engaged in clientelistic trade-offs between parties and local leaders (Soare 2004). In Romania the fragmentation of the social democratic family—both branches of which profited organizationally from being successors to the communists—was determined more by personal and factional differences than by socioeconomic issues, and endemic clientelism has been inimical to the creation of strong parties. Partly in consequence, a “once big” party, the Social Democratic Party (PSD), is currently plagued by scandals and internal power struggles, while political patronage has in the long run been of limited utility as a substitute for organization to a party in opposition.

At the same time, beginning in 2000 the Social Democratic Party (PSD) did launch numerous programmatic documents focused on questions of equality and social justice. The party’s position in government between 2000–2004 and 2008 limited the significance of these issues. It is significant, though, that the new program launched by the Social Democrats in 2006, “A Social Romania,” proposed “equal chances and treatment for everyone regardless of their background; lifting the minimum salary to the level of the minimum pension so that the low-paid can meet day-to-day living costs; investing in the village economy; investing in the health system; improving the competitiveness of our economy; ensuring that income taxes are progressive; improving absorptive capacity of communitarian funds; and finally, significant investment in
education” (Birchall 2007). But once back in power in 2008, and allied with their longtime rivals on the center-left, the Liberal Democrats, the party retreated from pursuing these policies.16

The Constancy of the Bulgarian Socialist Party

Influenced by perestroika and glasnost and pushed by the Bulgarian political elite, the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP), led by Todor Zhivkov, had to open itself to change even before 1989. Beginning in the early 1980s young reformers inside the party quietly promoted a leadership change (Gallagher 2003). By 1987 the party had announced multiple-candidate regional elections as a sign of political liberalization. Then, in an apparently calm situation, during a European environmental conference in Sofia in October 1989 street protests led to a major mass demonstration in the capital city. Unable to control either the party or the situation, and under scrutiny from the international community, Zhivkov resigned and Bulgaria began its tortuous transition to democracy led by Mladenov, the former foreign minister. The BKP chose a social democratic path to political redemption, becoming the new Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), renouncing Marxism, and accepting the market economy. It then proved its loyalty to the new regime by accepting negotiations with the more anticommunist Union of the Democratic Forces (UDF in English, SDS in Bulgarian) and supporting the first post-communist free elections (Touykova 1997, 5).

As in Romania, the rigidity of the Bulgarian communist regime hampered the creation of effective alternative organizations. Noncommunist groups lacked the territorial organization and professional resources to compete with the successor party, the Socialists (BSP) (Spirova 2005, 602). Most of the forty-two organizations competing in the elections in 1990 were unknown and without widespread support (Karasimeneov 2004, quoted by Spirova 2005, 602). The campaign was monopolized by the issue of economic transition, and the Socialists endorsed gradual economic reform while also promoting the decollectivization of agriculture and reform of the banking system. With over 47% of the votes, they formed the first freely elected post-communist government in coalition with their strongest opponents.

In July 1991 a new basic law was adopted, and elections held in October were won by the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) with 34.4% of the votes. The Socialists did almost as well—33.1%—but the party was at the moment politically ostracized and without possible coalition partners. The noncommunist coalition’s victory was reinforced by the philosopher Zhelyu Zhelev’s victory in presidential elections against a candidate from the Socialist Party
(BSP) in 1992. From this position of strength the SDS then launched deep economic reform, supported strongly by the international community. But as early as 1992 the first signs of serious social conflict had appeared in the form of regular strikes. The coalition government experienced conflicts between its dominant partner and the Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS), while the Socialist Party continued its renewal and organizational rebuilding (Karasimeneov 1995, 579; Touykova 1997, 5). Statements in support of the EU and economic reform enhanced its national and international credibility, while its political visibility was enhanced by a functioning organization inherited from the Communists—350,000 members and an elite of political professionals (Spirova 2005, 603). The party maintained direct contact with its members through highly popular meetings like the annual May Day celebrations. The party’s strategy was therefore to attempt to change and adapt to post-communist challenges while preserving continuity in its social base (Karasimeneov 1995, 581). And beyond a discursive commitment to promoting a market economy accompanied by equality and justice, it could easily be argued that in Bulgaria, as in Romania, “the declared interest . . . to enhance social protection was still not visible at the level of social expenditures” (Sotiropoulos, Neamţu, and Stoyanova 2003, 661).

By the mid-1990s the country was experiencing an economic crisis, and in the resulting political instability President Zhelev dissolved Parliament and called early elections for 1995. The Socialist Party then used its organization to advantage against an opponent plagued with internal dissension to win a huge victory: 43.5% of the votes and an absolute majority in Parliament. “The landslide victory of the BSP was,” according to one analyst, “a vote of hope for change to more stability and security” (Karasimeneov 1995, 584). The hopes were soon undermined, for once in power the Socialists were forced to comply with IMF pressures for rapid economic reforms. By 1996 the Bulgarian economy faced a severe financial crisis with dramatic social costs, a shrinking GDP, high inflation, and a collapsing currency. The result was the calling of new early elections in 1997, at which point the Socialists were under fire both nationally and internally. Events had called the party’s commitment to its “social” policies sharply into question, and an electorate nostalgic for the security of the old regime abandoned the party: the Socialist (BSP) vote dropped to 22.5%, while the liberal Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) won 137 seats in Parliament.

Stability proved elusive, and the elections of 2001 were dominated by a new populist party, the National Movement (NDSV), led by King Simeon II and campaigning under the motto “People Are the Wealth of Bulgaria.”17 Its discourse was a mixture of nationalistic appeals and simplistic solutions for
the country and economic crisis. Claiming messianic legitimacy, King Simeon was strongly critical of traditional political parties and corrupt institutions. The result was that both the liberals (SDS) and the left (BSP) were roundly thrashed and the National Movement (NDSV) obtained 42.7% of the vote. Its success also proved short-lived, and just four years later the Left Coalition for Bulgaria, led by the Socialists, won the elections with almost 31%. In the process the Socialists confirmed their role as a regular government party and one of the most consistent socialist parties in the region, whose strong electoral results are facilitated by its stable organization and broad membership. Equally important, despite the fragmentation of the left and center-left after 1989, the Bulgarian Socialist Party has progressively become a trendsetter for the entire Bulgarian political arena (Spirova 2005). At the same time policy implementation lags. Even if party documents argue for raising living standards, improving social services, and enhancing the quality of healthcare and education, it is obvious that once again “this does not necessarily have any bearing to the actual policies of a party in government” (Dauderstädt).

**Tortured Paths to Redemption and Incomplete Social Democratization**

Told one after the other, these stories are fascinating. After 1989 the ex-communist parties were supposed to rapidly disappear, and scholars foresaw a crisis of the left in general once they did. Yet these parties have managed to survive and challenge scholarly predictions with their remarkable electoral consistency. Throughout the region successor parties, historical parties, new party formulas, and even orthodox communist parties have managed to survive initially grim situations. In most cases the successor parties monopolized the entire left spectrum, and “no significant social democratic alternatives arose where the successor parties could preempt their moderate leftist rhetoric. In contrast, where the communist parties failed to regenerate, other parties could take up the moderate left side of the political spectrum” (Grzymala-Busse 2002, 283). More recently, increasingly balanced political competition and increasingly stable party systems may have diminished the prominence of successor parties on the left as the region’s only well-organized and more or less coherent political alternatives. For such parties, discredited by their past, the new regime required complicated changes (De Waele 1996). Following a classic assumption that “Parties don’t just change,” the last part of our chapter will focus on who and what gave left parties the motivation and resources to comply with the norms of the new political order (Harmel and Janda 1994).

The answer to what were the primary inputs of change is relatively simple.
First came the domino effect that brought down communist regimes and induced the rapid implosion of the USSR, which suddenly narrowed space for returning to the past. Overnight Moscow ceased to provide relevant political support, making loyalty to the new order the only pragmatic alternative. Next, despite the ostracism faced by formerly communist parties, the transition to democracy almost by definition meant that no political party, other than openly extreme groups, could be excluded from political competition. These circumstances effectively sealed the successor parties’ commitment to the new order.

The transformation of the ex-communist parties has been quite fundamental, involving acceptance of multiparty competition and support for the market economy. Even so, it was eased considerably by the institutional framework. The transition process presented three main challenges: democratization, the creation of functioning markets, and the rebuilding of state institutions (Offe 1996). State change has been the paramount challenge for ex-communist parties, since the end of the cold war dismantled communist regimes and the states that embodied them. Under the ancien régime communist parties had an effective monopoly on legally acceptable political activity, and the state itself was deeply rooted in the parties. Throughout the entire region “the weakness of the communist state left its successor open to predation” during the early transition (Grzymala-Busse 2003, 1127). Post-communist institutional arrangements that characterized states run by parties with flexible identities and few principles allowed these groups to make these states compliant with the party in power. All around the region post-communist parties were able to penetrate new states and use public offices to their own advantage (Van Biezen and Kopecky 2007). Reformed communist parties benefited from a state model that was open to the influence of parties in power (Ganev 2001; Grzymala-Busse and Jones Loung 2002; Grzymala-Busse 2003). In other words, the political experience, know-how, professional capital, and broad territorial organization of ex-communists led new leaderships to seize the opportunities provided by fluid institutional frameworks.

The rapid strategic metamorphosis of ex-communist parties translated into well-disciplined, centralized, and efficient party organizations, and the process was further eased by their economic viability. They inherited financial capital from their predecessors at the start of the transition. The privatization process and their economic expertise then put the parties in a favorable position for doing business and balancing business and politics. A Romanian ex-cadre who had become a big-time entrepreneur explained the smooth transition: “Questioned about his miraculous transformation,” his interlocutor explains, “he declared he sees no contradiction between his past and current
career: ‘On the contrary, I was a good communist and I’ll be an even better capitalist!’” (Stoica 2004, 271). Of course other structural factors such as electoral systems have been significant as well. In most of the case studies, for example, proportional representation facilitated the comeback of left parties. But being the “successor” to the previous rulers was critical.

At the electoral level it is hard to construct an ideal picture of the base of left parties and to discern the typical voter at the regional level. The Romanian Social Democrats (PSD) and their Bulgarian counterparts (BSP) were better implanted in rural zones, where their voters were older and had minimal education. More recently the changing nature of party systems has challenged this profile and the two parties have lost these electoral fiefs, but they have also made inroads into urban areas. In this respect the victory of the Social Democratic candidate for mayor of Bucharest in the most recent local elections is significant. Hungarian socialist voters, in contrast, remain urban-based. The ways the recent economic crisis has hit Polish social democrats make identifying their typical voters more difficult. Urban voters are still the most important base in Czech and Slovak social democratic electorates. Yet in virtually all cases one finds parties appealing to voters over the heads of their own party members, a reflection perhaps of ideological weakness but also an explanation of membership decline.

Moving beyond this basic balance sheet, it is difficult to identify the precise trigger for change. The scholarly literature regularly emphasizes the inertia of big organizations as “a wall of resistance” to change, and one would expect even more resistance from highly centralized communist parties (Harmel and Janda 1994, 261). But in moments of great uncertainty the actions of leadership are strongly influenced by circumstances. The vanishing credibility of communist parties at a time of pervasive economic crisis and the powerful intuition that transition was unstoppable accentuated pressures for change. In most cases the communist parties also experienced a rapid and drastic erosion of their membership (table 2), which made breaking with the past less a choice than a necessity. The parties’ organizational centralization nonetheless allowed elites to control the dimensions and pace of adaptation. Finally, the legacies of the past and the rigidity of communist regimes further enhanced the appeal of change. In Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, and Slovakia the new communist leadership after 1989 consisted of younger party members keen for rapid transformation. In the Czech Republic, where old apparatchiks dominated, reformers had less visibility and space for maneuver. The Romanian case is unusual because the new leadership of “softliners” and promoters of moderate reformism were inspired more by perestroika than by democratization.
Twenty years is too short a time to reach definitive conclusions, so we must be tentative. We have told the story of an extremely resistant species. A historical and structural approach that favors legacy-based explanations for the evolution of the Central and Eastern European post-communist left is particularly relevant to account for the commonalities and divergences of the various political actors. Thus the reluctance of Czech communists (KSČM) to change and the longstanding political tradition of the Czech Social Democrats (ČSSD) offer a convincing argument for how historical legacies and national opportunities can be combined, and in this case explain how the Czech path diverged from paths taken elsewhere in the region. As for analyzing the shift from Marxism to capitalism by the descendants of the former ruling Communist parties, history reminds us that for the most part these parties had been imposed from abroad, and despite almost half a century in power, they had failed at building the socialism they preached. *Homo sovieticus* had been almost exclusively an issue of propaganda, while Václav Benda’s theory of the “parallel polis” was closer to reality. In the end the successful transformation of the ex-communist parties thus attests to a paradox. Communist parties had been the only relevant political actors in the region for almost half a century. But except in the Czech Republic they all failed at direct continuation into the post-communist era. Symbolically, Marxism and its corollaries have been totally and effectively superseded by variants of liberal and pro-market theories. Yet the successor parties themselves often succeeded.

Historically driven explanations of the success of the left and center-left parties, and in particular of the ex-communists, focus mainly on their organizational advantages (De Waele 2002). Transformation of the communist parties was an organizational strategy without clear programmatic baggage. In the fluid political competition of the early 1990s, organizational continuity allowed these parties to preserve their influence and at least partially their skilled, experienced political elites. Their organizational resources contrasted sharply with those of the fledgling proto-parties that came to power immediately after the end of the old regime. While holding on to these resources, the successor parties also adopted a twofold strategy to achieve new legitimacy and respectability. They first gave full support to economic reforms, and in government these “social democrats,” old and new, worked at “building capitalism.” They then went on to embrace the EU and NATO.

Their concern for integration in the new capitalist system meant abrupt disengagement from traditional ideologies and at times traditional social bases. Successor parties and historical social democrats also neglected the development of a left or center-left political culture and outlook. Despite pervasive organization, the absence of such a political culture has eventually
hampered these parties. Support for a market economy and regular stays in
government have not been cost-free. All over the region populist parties have
come to exploit this and in several cases have been able to find fertile breed-
ing ground. In addition, traditional alliances between these parties and the
trade unions, themselves operating at a disadvantage in the new era, have
been weakened (Mudde 2004). In general the absence of intermediary orga-
nizations and committed social actors must be considered when reflecting on
the limits of the center-left throughout the region. Domination of the political
scene by parties, the weakness of civil society, and the alienation from poli-
tics regularly emphasized by surveys have blocked the emergence of a partici-
patory culture. This participation deficit has progressively generated a real
representation crisis, with a major impact on the center-left in particular.

The strong support for European and NATO integration has also created
problems for center-left parties of whatever origin. The paradox is clear: “So-
cial democrats have been the strongest advocates of accession in many coun-
tries . . . Who did social democrats support EU membership in spite of the costs
and partial drawbacks for their own clientele?” (Agh 2004, 5). The reasons
for this exaggerated Europeanism were the need for international credibility,
pragmatism tied to a lack of alternatives, and perceived national diplomatic
interests. Twenty years on, however, center-left parties are now progressively
squeezed between EU requirements, national needs to comply with transition
goals, and popular disenchantment due to the social costs of the new system.

From the beginning the attempts of parties of the left to develop a coherent
programmatic identity through the prism of national and local needs and
social requirements have been neglected in favor of the choice for Europe.
Despite a certain amount of electoral stability, the progressive shrinkage of
the blue-collar working class and the appeal to the left’s traditional working-
class base of new right-wing populist parties have thus become very large
challenges. In such new political circumstances, the center-left is on the de-
fensive all around the region.

Twenty years after the fall of “peoples’ democracies,” the post-communist
political landscape has changed fundamentally. The resurrection of old lefts
in central Europe was helped by their political experience and organizational
networks, and by the weakness and fragmentation of their opponents. But
in time, their weaknesses in ideology, organization, and relationships with
party members and voters, along with accusations of corruption, have be-
come much more visible with the consolidation of the right and the emer-
gence of new forms of populism. Thus the successes of the 1990s seem mainly
to have obscured the Achilles’ heel of these left parties, their ideological
weakness. The ever greater convergence of social policies across different
national party systems has also limited their margins of maneuver and progressively eaten away at their traditional electoral bases. Throughout the entire region the center-left thus remains trapped in a process of reconstruction which is made more difficult by outside pressures and a troubled past.

Notes

1. By successor parties we refer to those parties “that were formerly the governing party in the pre-1989 communist regime and which inherited the preponderance of the former ruling parties’ resources and personnel” (Ishiyama 1998, 62).
2. Between 1991 and 1997 the Eurobarometer surveys measured high levels of dissatisfaction with the untoward consequences of democratization, in particular its social costs (Dauderstädt and Gerrits 2000, table 6).
3. Outside this divided family the KSČM looks to be the only large Communist party in the region continuing into post-communism, defining itself as “the only genuine Czech left party,” whose goal remains “the transformation from capitalism to socialism” (Zprava, 5th Congress 1999, quoted in Handl 2003, 4). The KSČM may be related to the other parties, but it has become a separate case, following its own left social democratic paths while denouncing the “laxity” and loss of Marxist-Leninist political principles by others.
4. Even though the notion of the political family is a category of analysis often criticized as vague and based on common sense, it remains a useful tool in analyzing political parties, for it offers at the same time a “domain of identification” for party elites, members, and voters and a reference point in the “domain of competition” at the level of party systems (Mair and Mudde 1998; Sartori and Sani 1983).
5. On ideological groups and the link with structural cleavages see Lipset and Rokkan 1967.
7. The MSzP was to rapidly assume a central role in the rogue privatization of the public sector, which will allow the accumulation of capital in the hands of party leaders.
8. The MIEP (Hungarian Justice and Life) fell short of the electoral threshold in 2002, the Independent Smallholders’ Party (FKGP) collapsed after corruption scandals, the MDF (Democratic Forum) merged with the FIDESZ, and the SzDSz progressively shrunk to 5% of the vote.
10. According to an internal analysis, “the decline in KSČM membership oscillates at 6–7 percent a year, while the membership grows by 0.6 to 0.68 percent a year.” “Czech Communist Party Membership Steadily Shrinking,” 9 May 2008, www.praguemonitor.com/en/331/czech_politics/22449.
11. It is worth noting that all Czech parties experienced a steep decline in member-
ship starting in the early 1990s, with the ČSSD, whose numbers rose from 16,200 to 18,300, the only exception.

12. Significantly, the unemployment rate was much lower in the Czech Republic than elsewhere in the region. In 1995 unemployment stood at 2.9% in the Czech Republic, in contrast to 10.3% in Hungary and 14.7% in Poland. Similarly, the poverty rate was less than 1% in the Czech Republic, 2% in Hungary, and 31% in Poland (Graham 1998, 202).

13. Handl (2003, 5) observes: “During 1990–1998, 3289 new members entered the party. 67.3% party members are pensioners, 64% have only the elementary education” (based on Zpráva 5th Congress, 1999, 52–54).


15. “Access to patronage typically provides party leaders with the means to build and maintain party organizations through the distribution of selective incentives to party supporters in exchange for organizational loyalty” (Van Biezen and Kopecky 2007, 241).

16. Elections pitting the two dominant parties, until recently in coalition, against each other were scheduled for late 2009.

17. www.ndsv.bg/content/531.html.