

THE CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY: DOWNFALL AND RESILIENCE AS REFLECTED BY THE ROMANIAN (PSD) AND DUTCH (PvdA) CENTER-LEFT

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Introduction

■ Social democracy shaped the evolution of most Western European societies in the decades following WWII. When authoritarian regimes in Southern and Eastern Europe began to collapse (in the 1970s in the Mediterranean area, in 1989 in the Socialist bloc), the democratic left was a key player in the transition towards liberal democracy and market economy. Yet, at the turn of the century, the influence of the Social Democrats started to crumble. Nowadays, many parties that built welfare states in the West and post-authoritarian regimes in the South and East are on the verge of irrelevance.

Important studies are confirming the depth of this decline (Sassoon 2014; Mudge 2018). The center-left experienced dramatic electoral losses in the last 10–15 years in countries like France, Greece, Hungary, Great Britain, or Bulgaria. Although it managed to occupy the first position in the parliamentary elections held in September 2021, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) is also significantly more vulnerable than two decades ago.

The crisis of European Social Democracy seemed to be milder in Scandinavia and in the southern part of the continent. However, recent developments suggest that the parties from these areas are less resilient than they appeared. The Swedish Social Democrats were unable to remain in power after the legislative elections held in September 2022 (Nilsson 2022). In Finland, their counterparts were outmaneuvered at the polls on April 2, 2023, both by the Conservatives and by the

populist right (Kirby 2023). In Spain, opinion polls are indicating that the Socialists are in danger of losing the parliamentary elections scheduled for the autumn of 2023 (Heller 2022).

One of the European center-left parties that suffered one of the most shocking downfalls is the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA). In 2012, PvdA was the second largest political party in the Netherlands; at the legislative elections, it obtained almost a quarter of the votes, being only narrowly defeated by the Liberal-Conservatives led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte. In 2021, the score of the Social Democrats was below 6% (Schaart 2021). On the other end of the continent, in Romania, the situation seems less grim. The Social Democratic Party (PSD) obtained the largest number of votes, on its own or as part of electoral alliances, at all the parliamentary elections since 2000. Moreover, PSD is, starting with November 2021, a member of the governing coalition, holding several important positions in the cabinet.

During the same storm, one party was shattered while the other seems unharmed. What are the reasons behind this difference? At the same time, PvdA continues to be highly influential at the level of the PES, while the international position of PSD is less secure. How can we explain this paradox? Is an analysis that focuses on these two groups relevant for understanding the causes of the crisis that is endangering the very existence of European Social Democracy? The role of the present paper is to put forwards some answers to these questions.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

Since the 1990s, the center-left parties from the EU countries went through a process of ideological transformation, moving towards the political center. This metamorphosis, which has its roots in political and economic evolutions from the 1970s and 1980s, was heavily enhanced by the theories of the British sociologist Anthony Giddens. Giddens argued that the survival of Social Democracy can be guaranteed by engaging in a third way that rejects both the neoliberal recipe of the right and the obsolete Marxist and Keynesian visions of the old left (Giddens 1998). His philosophy became a guideline for several leaders of the PES members, with the British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder being the main advocates of Social Democracy's „divorce“ from its post-war path (Blair–Schröder 1998).

The establishment of a *Third Way* hegemony was followed by the global financial and economic crisis that started in 2007–2008, and by the expansion of the electoral and organizational crisis of the European Social Democracy. Is the democratic left slowly disintegrating in several EU countries because Giddens and Blair heavily altered the doctrinal foundation that characterized the 1945–1975 period? Is the recession the main factor behind the downfall we are analysing? The correlation is obvious in both cases, but, as every scientist must always keep in mind, correlation does not automatically imply the presence of causation.

The German political scientist Frank Bandau developed an overview of the academic explanations regarding the roots of the above-mentioned decline. According to him, we can identify four main categories: sociological, materialist, ideational, and institutional (Bandau 2022). *The sociological explanations* focus on the modification of the social structure. The post-industrial society is seen as the final point of the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Nowadays, the working class, in the original sense of the term, is shrinking. This process is forcing the left to modify its discourse in order to attract voters from the middle class. One of the consequences of this approach, which is progressive from a cultural perspective, is the migration of voters from the precariat towards populist right-wing parties (Bandau 2022: 5).

The materialist explanations argue that Social Democracy is weakened by the convergence of three factors: globalisation, European integration, and the end of the Keynesian economic model. According to them, the compatibility between capitalism and Social Democracy reached its end in the 1970s (Bandau 2022: 6). Sporadic efforts to revive this relationship are usually blocked by European institutions (Lupițu 2020).

The ideational explanations consider that Social Democracy's downfall was triggered by its willingness to accept neoliberal policies. This process, which gained a theoretical background after the publication of Anthony Giddens' studies, altered the core values of the European left. Its new shape has been described as progressive neoliberalism (Bandau 2022: 7). The arguments of the representatives of this category suggest that a Social Democratic revival could be facilitated by an ideological strategy inspired by the abandoned Keynesian philosophy.

Finally, the *institutional explanations* highlight the organizational transformation of the center-left parties. The mass party model is being replaced by the cartel party model (Bandau 2022: 7). The historical relationship with the trade unions is severed, the Social Democrats losing their ability to mobilize the voters from the lower social categories. As noticed before (Ionescu 1999), the similarities between the left and the right are growing stronger as time goes by.

Our paper takes into account the four categories presented by Bandau in order to extract the relevant conclusions from the two analyzed cases. The methodological approach used by us is a qualitative one. We build a comparative historical analysis that focuses on recent evolutions regarding left-wing politics in two countries that, although quite similar in population, have different positions in the informal hierarchical structure of the EU.

PSD in the last decade: ideological ambiguity and electoral resilience

PSD is considered by many to be the *de facto* successor of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) (Stan–Vancea 2017: 198; Ban 2014: 110). However, the party abandoned the Marxist-Leninist approach that characterized its past in the 1990's.

After some turbulence, at the beginning of the century, it was accepted as a member by the Socialist International (SI) and the PES. From an ideological point of view, PSD slowly accepted the Third Way model, overcoming the opposition of the group's founder, the former president of Romania Ion Iliescu.

Electorally, the Social Democrats had their ups and downs but nevertheless managed to retain their position in the front row of the Romanian political stage. In 2012, PSD participated in the parliamentary elections as a member of the Social Liberal Union (USL), which included one of the main Romanian right-wing structures, the National Liberal Party (PNL). This partnership, established first and foremost for tactical reasons, reflected the European left's reorientation toward the center. At this point, PSD was led by Victor Ponta, a jurist who stated that Tony Blair represents his political model. The policies he implemented as Prime Minister, between May 2012 and November 2015, were clearly influenced by Giddens' theories (Abraham 2017: 178).

At the polls, in December 2012, USL obtained 58.63% of the votes¹ (Badea 2012). Two years later, Victor Ponta was defeated in the second round of the presidential elections, in the aftermath of the disintegration of his coalition with the Liberals. Nevertheless, the electoral strength of the Social Democrats proved to be unaltered. In December 2016, PSD, this time without being part of an alliance, obtained a crushing victory at the legislative elections (45.47%) (Dobrescu 2016). Under the leadership of Liviu Dragnea, the party regained access to power. However, Dragnea's legal problems affected the effectiveness of PSD's policies.

Ideologically, PSD's new president distanced the party from the Third Way model preferred by some of his predecessors. He pivots towards an illiberal approach, characteristic of right-wing populists like Viktor Orbán (Păun 2018). Obviously, this action strained relations between PSD and PES and also had a consistent electoral impact. In May 2019, Dragnea was convicted in a case of abuse of office, and in the autumn of the same year, PSD's candidate was once again defeated in the second round of the presidential elections.

The current president of the Social Democrats, Marcel Ciolacu, seems to revive the era when Tony Blair's vision was a guideline for the PSD. Under his leadership, the party once again occupied the first place in the legislative elections, with a score of 28.9% (Stoica 2020). In November 2021, PSD returned to the cabinet, forming a coalition with PNL and with the political group that represents the Hungarian minority.

PSD's average score in the last three parliamentary elections (alone or as part of an alliance) is 44.3%. The situation is a bit different if we analyze the results of the Social Democrats in the elections for the European Parliament (EP). In 2014, the coalition led by Ponta was in the first place with a score of 37.6% (Parlamentul European 2014). Five years later, mainly because of the social tensions fueled by Dragnea's actions, PSD (22.5%) was defeated at the polls by PNL (27%). The average score of the Social Democrats at the last two European elections is 30.05%, which is 14% lower than the one registered at the legislative elections.

The profile of PSD's Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) is useful for better understanding the evolution of the Romanian Social Democrats. In 2014, PSD obtained 16 seats. The list included experienced politicians like Ioan Mircea Pașcu (former Minister of Defense) or Dan Nica (former Minister of Communications). Given their backgrounds, both are viewed by the public not just as politicians but also as experts, being partly associated with the field of technocrats. On the other hand, the list also included younger politicians, like Corina Crețu (former advisor to Ion Iliescu), Daciana Sârbu (adept of an ecologist version of Social Democracy), or Victor Negrescu (future minister in Social Democratic cabinets). Last but not least, another PSD MEP was Viorica Dăncilă, a politician without a clear ideological identity who later occupied the function of Prime Minister (2018–2019). The overview is unambiguous: the doctrinal image is eclectic, and the MEP positions are used both as a reward for experienced politicians and as a launching pad into internal politics for younger ones.

In 2019, the number of the PSD's MEPs was reduced to 9. Dan Nica and Victor Negrescu were once again in eligible positions, but otherwise, the Social Democratic list reflected the chaos that engulfed the party under Dragnea's leadership. It included a TV celebrity, a former priest, an MD, and a controversial representative of a smaller right-wing group.

Overall, the 2012–2022 period was fruitful for the Social Democrats, although they experienced moments of crisis. Economically, Victor Ponta often considered that protecting the interests of the business domain was more important than reducing social inequalities. In the interval when Dragnea was president of the PSD, neoliberal policy proposals regularly coexisted with Keynesian ones. Currently, PSD is arguing in favor of leftist reforms while accepting important components of PNL's neoliberal vision.

Culturally, the presence of a conservative component is a constant for the PSD. Perhaps here we have the biggest difference between the Romanian Social Democracy and the Western core of the PES. Victor Ponta, Liviu Dragnea, and Marcel Ciolacu have all rejected at least some elements of the postmaterialist progressive philosophy.

At the European level, the influence of PSD is limited. Corina Crețu occupied the position of European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms between 2014 and 2019, and currently, Victor Negrescu is vice president of the PES, but besides these aspects, the Social Democrats have almost no tools at their disposal for shaping European policies, although they have one of the most important center-left national groups in the EP. The cultural differences mentioned above have an important role in shaping this reality. Of course, we must also consider the fact that Romania is a part of EU's periphery both geographically and influence-wise.

It is difficult to put forward a conclusion regarding the crisis of European Social Democracy after analyzing the case of PSD, mainly because the party seems to have neutralized its effects efficiently. The image we are trying to present is poised to become more clear after introducing the Dutch case in the discussion.

PvdA in the last decade: progressive neoliberalism and electoral downfall

PvdA was founded in 1946. Initially, it included Social Democratic and right-wing currents. Gradually, it engaged exclusively on a left-wing path, preferring the Keynesian recipe that fueled post-war Western development. Starting with the 1950s, PvdA held an important role in the construction of the European Socialist family. Its representatives unsuccessfully argued in the 1960s in favor of creating a genuine European Progressive Party (Skrzypek 2013: 11).

In the 1980s, PvdA slowly begins to move ideologically towards the center. Initially, the Social Democrats preferred to build governing coalitions with the centrist Christian Democrats. In 1994, they modified their approach, establishing a partnership with the right-wing Liberal-Conservatives (VVD) (Keman 2008: 150).

From a cultural point of view, PvdA was (and still is) one of the most progressive European parties. During one of the cabinets led by the Social Democrats, in 2001, the Netherlands became the first country in the world to legalize gay marriages. PvdA is rejecting the conservative approach in a multitude of other areas (gender equality, abortion, etc.).

In 2012, the Social Democrats, whose electoral strength had been previously shaken by their new economic vision, occupied the second place in the parliamentary elections (24.84%²). The leader of VVD, Mark Rutte, formed a governing coalition with PvdA. We can notice that in 2012, both Romania and the Netherlands had Social-Liberal governments. In the Dutch cabinet, some of the main representatives of PvdA were Lodewijk Asscher (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Social Affairs), Frans Timmermans (Minister of Foreign Affairs), and Jeroen Dijsselbloem (Minister of Finance). Asscher was a psychologist whose father was a member of PVV. Timmermans was a diplomat who previously worked for the Dutch military intelligence structures. Dijsselbloem was one of the most aggressive supporters of neoliberal policies in regard with the Greek crisis, shocking many European politicians with his chauvinist remarks (Mehreen–McClean 2017).

Overall, the activity of the Social Democrats in the second Rutte cabinet (2012–2017), although occasionally having some Keynesian shades, proved that PvdA can be associated with the *progressive neoliberalism* concept. The electoral implications of this approach were clear: in the parliamentary elections held in March 2017, PvdA occupied the 7th place with a score of 5.7%. In 2021, the score of the Social Democrats was identical (Politico 2022).

PvdA's average score in the last three parliamentary elections is 12.08%, which is more than 32% lower than the same score of the PSD. The difference is a bit less striking if we analyze the European elections. In 2014, PvdA obtained 9.4% of the votes, a result that guaranteed three MEP seats. Although the Social Democrats were only in sixth place, they managed to impose Frans Timmermans as the First Vice-President of the European Commission, using in their favor the fact that they were part of the governing coalition. In 2019, in an evolution that surprised many analysts, PvdA occupied the first position in the European elections (19%),

obtaining six MEP seats. The average score of the Social Democrats at the last two European elections is 14.2%, which is slightly higher than the average score from the legislative elections but almost 16% lower than the same score of the PSD.

Regarding the profile of the PvdA MEPs in 2014, we have the following image: a 47-year-old economist (Paul Tang), a 54-year-old trade unionist with progressive cultural views (Agnes Jongerius), and a 35-year-old specialist in international relations, born and raised in Hungary (Kati Piri). We notice the gender diversity and the progressive neoliberal background mentioned above. In 2019, Tang, Jongerius, and Piri retained their seats.

PvdA's influence at the European level is significantly higher than the influence of the PSD, although, as we saw above, the Romanian Social Democrats had far superior electoral performances. Timmermans continues to be one of the most important leaders of the PES. The historical role of the Dutch left in building the European Socialist family is one of the reasons behind this anomaly. Obviously, the ideological compatibility between PvdA and the core of PES was also higher than PSD's ideological compatibility with Western Social Democracy.

Is the Dutch case relevant for understanding the causes of the European left's crisis? First of all, we observe that both the Romanian and Dutch societies were affected by a modification of the social structure in the last decades. Secondly, globalization, European integration, and the end of the Keynesian economic model impacted both countries. Thirdly, the Third Way ideological „revolution“ had effects on PvdA and PSD, but in the Romanian case, some of these effects were temporary. Fourthly, regarding the organizational model, indeed, both parties distanced themselves from the mass model. The elements presented in this paragraph are useful for suggesting answers to the questions presented in the first part of the paper.

Conclusions

Our overview casts a shadow of doubt on the sociological explanations. Romania is today far from the situation at the beginning of the 1990s, when it had a consistent working class. However, the left is, for the time being, not in danger of collapsing. The materialist explanations cannot be overlooked, but they are not sufficient for clarifying the origins of the difference we identified. Although to a smaller degree than in the Netherlands, Romania's current situation is also shaped by globalization and European integration. The ideational explanations are more helpful. PSD, although it continues to be ideologically ambiguous, never fully embraced Western progressive neoliberalism. The eclectic identity of the Romanian center-left, seems to be, for now, an electoral asset. Regarding the institutional explanations, once again we are confronted with question marks. PSD is also moving towards the cartel party model while having the characteristics of a catch-all party.

An important conclusion is that history matters. The Netherlands was one of the founders of the European project. Moreover, the Dutch model of consensus democracy (Lijphart 1999) influenced PvdA's ideological evolution. In Romania, the Social Democrats managed in the 1990s to build local structures that are essential to this day for their electoral resilience. Moreover, PSD managed to survive the grimmest years of the transition because Ion Iliescu preferred a social and economic recipe that had Keynesian elements.

Our conclusions are not definitive or exhaustive. Clearly, future studies could complete or modify them. A possible approach that would benefit a better understanding of the topic could include the expansion of the number of analyzed countries.

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Notes

¹ The Parliament of Romania is bicameral. In this study, we mention the results of the elections for its lower house (the Chamber of Deputies).

² Just like in the Romanian case, we are mentioning the results from the elections for the lower house of the Parliament.