Third Ways or New Ways? The Post-Communist Left in Central Europe

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CENTRAL European party politics has made interesting viewing over the last fifteen years. If the trend in western Europe in recent decades has been towards a dealignment and increasing instability of electoral preferences, then this has been surpassed in almost every regard by the widespread non-alignment and electoral volatility of central European voters. Parties of all colours have experienced electoral highs and lows, riding on waves of popular support before experiencing significant drops in popularity and an almost inevitable eviction from high office.

Across academia, interest in central European party politics has been, not unsurprisingly, considerable. The accession of, amongst others, all of the Visegrad states (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) to the European Union in May 2004 has ensured that elites in western European countries also started to take a much deeper interest in central European party politics than they did when these countries were 'merely' prospective EU members. More specifically, politicians began asking what programmes the central European parties of government were pursuing. A further concern was how difficult (or otherwise) it was likely to be to do business with the leaders of these newly democratised countries. It is with this in mind that this article analyses the reform strategies and programmatic orientations of one group of important political actors—the reformed and rejuvenated former communists—who have led (and continue to lead) a number of central European countries. Is their success built on a successful articulation of reform-communist goals, or have they undergone processes of social democratisation? If so, what sort of social democracy do they espouse? Does it appear to have more resemblance to the social democracy of Tony Blair and the 'third wayers', or are they more akin to the labourist, union-orientated defence of explicitly working class interests (best illustrated by the Oskar Lafontaine inspired wing of the SPD in Germany)? Have parties—or their descendants—who opted for a much less radically reforming strategy embraced a form of Eurocommunism, the type of which existed in Europe across the 1970s, or do they remain fixated on theoretical questions of ideological purity? And, finally, how do these broad ideological tendencies play out in everyday practical politics?

Communist successor parties in the 1990s

In spite of their disadvantageous starting positions, communist successor parties (CSPs) have come to form an important part of the post-communist left across east central Europe. In Poland the left is dominated by a CSP (the Alliance of the Democratic Left, SLD) that now espouses broadly social democratic ideals and has largely distanced itself from its previously anti-democratic past. The SLD has built sound electoral platforms and spent a considerable period of the post-1990 period in government. In the Czech Republic the former communists remain a relevant electoral force, even if there is

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no immediate indication they that are going to be permitted to enter national government any time soon. The Czech communists remain loyal to communist ideals and fight it out on the left for votes with a strong social democratic party. The Hungarian Socialist Party maintains a stable and wide basis of support even if it has lost out to the centre-right in recent elections. The Hungarian CSP was one of the first to embrace third way ideas, even if it has struggled a little to implement them in practice. In Slovakia, on the other hand, the left remains in a state of almost permanent flux thanks largely to its inability to unite under one ideological and organisational banner. Communist successor parties have therefore not just contributed to a broadening of the ideological spectrum—they are actors that in the future may well (continue to) have genuine influence on the policies of the states where they are active.

The rejuvenation of communist successor parties is, of course, all the more surprising when one considers their historical legacy. Post-1990 it was widely believed that central European communist movements would die a swift and sudden death, and very few people expected them to be playing any role at all in political life come the twenty-first century. Devoid of their entrenched positions of power, communist parties and their successors were expected—if only for a short period of time—to represent those who had stakes in the previous regime before meekly leaving the party political stage. Unsurprisingly, CSPs did not perform particularly well in the first round of (largely) free and fair elections in east central Europe, confirming what many proponents of the 'rapid demise' thesis were claiming (and hoping):

- In Hungary, the Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt—MSZP) polled a mere 10.9 per cent of the vote in the 1990 election.
- In the first Polish elections of October 1991, Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (Socjaldemokracja Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej—SdRP) polled 13 per cent of the popular vote.
- In Czechoslovakia, in the elections of June 1990, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická Strana Československa—KSČ) recorded 14.9 per cent in the Czech regions and 16.3 per cent in Slovakia. The Slovak Party of the Democratic Left (Strana Demokratickej L'avici—SDL) polled 13.3 per cent.
- In the exceptional case of the Party of Democratic Socialism (Partei des demokratischen Sozialismus—PDS) in the GDR, the PDS managed, as the promise of unification loomed large, a respectable 16.4 per cent in the first (and last) elections of March 1990 to the East German parliament.

In these initial elections in central Europe, CSP supporters were, for the most part, loyalists who remained true to the ideals that they had staunchly advocated over many years, dogmatically defending their 'achievements' in state-socialist times.[1] This was in itself no surprise: these voters had nowhere to go politically and used CSPs as vehicles to (attempt to) legitimise their own past behaviour.

Yet, as it widely known, the CSPs have not 'died away'. In some cases they have proven remarkably resilient, finding new niches in party systems where they initially appeared to have no natural home at all. By the time of the second round of democratic elections starting, in some countries, as early as 1992, popular opinion across central Europe towards the CSPs had changed—on occasion quite dramatically. The CSPs had attempted (to greater or lesser extents) to streamline their organisational structures and to transform their ideological platforms in order to make themselves electorally competitive, while the 'new' parties of government were struggling to cope with the considerable challenge of

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complex economic and political transformation.

As, in the early 1990s, it became clear that electoral support for the CSPs was slowly reviving, a number of possible routes appeared open to the former communists. Initially, it was intimated that if they were to stabilise themselves and halt their electoral freefall—not to mention harbour dreams of returning to government—then they would do so as a reactionary force on the far left of the political spectrum. On top of the true socialist believers, CSPs could also give political voice to those who were becoming increasingly bitter about the fallout from the transition process (and who possessed a strong sense of nostalgia for the comforts of the state-socialist welfare system) more than any articulation of a revitalised political agenda. This role would principally be a reactive one, as they growled about the inadequacies of capitalism from the party system's far left reaches. Another—indirectly linked—strategic option would be for the CSPs to re-emerge as brazen populists, advocating the need for strong leaders to 'save' their countries from the capitalist charlatans who now ruled in their own interests.[2]

CSP party organisation and programmatic path-dependence

Parties that develop in states that are undergoing rapid transition come under a different set of pressures to those parties that can develop—over time—in party systems that gradually evolve. The nature of the institutional context therefore shapes, constrains and influences organisation building and power relations within political parties.

In central Europe most of the parties that competed in the first free elections in 1990 were newly created, ensuring that a narrow group of leaders played a disproportionate role in dictating their ideological and programmatic orientation. In many cases parties were confined, or at least heavily restricted, to their roles in parliament as they lacked the resources (in terms of money, but also of time and personnel) to build expansive extra-parliamentary apparatus. Only over time were they (at least to some extent) able to spread their organisational net over society. CSPs, unlike most other parties in these nascent party systems, possessed a dense network of local and regional offices, large (if rapidly shrinking) memberships, relatively sound finances and access to the main bulk of society's intermediary structures. They therefore found themselves in a fundamentally different structural position—given their bloated organisational structures of the pre-1989 period, they needed to slim down (rather than build up) their extra-parliamentary organisation and seek to rebuild themselves as flexible, pragmatic democratic actors.

The CSPs that chose to centralise decision making structures have had both greater ideological and programmatic flexibility as well as, invariably, greater electoral success.[3] The costs of decision making remain much lower, and efficiency in terms of vote seeking has been greatly increased. The opposite also applies: the more organisational layers that exist and the more actors that have a right to a say in internal party life, the more cumbersome processes of programmatic change have become and remain. The less centralisation that CSP leaders undertook in the immediate post-1990 period, the less likely it was that the party was able to fundamentally transform itself in later years. Party elites were not able to sideline (traditionally conservative) members, and the CSP was not able to radically overhaul its own ideological and programmatic self-understanding.[4] These initial organisational decisions have profoundly influenced the development of all CSPs. Those that were controlled by a small

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elite circle headed off towards the centre ground while those that remained less centralised remained very much to the left of the social democratic movement. In concrete terms, parties opted for one of two broad approaches:

- A 'leftist-retreat' option. The party's Marxist traditions were embraced and many notions of modernity as well as the free market and individualism were (emphatically) rejected. Although the CSP paradoxically dismissed many tenets of 'westernism', it instinctively placed itself in the same ideological corner as parties of the far left in western Europe.
- A 'pragmatic-reform' option saw CSPs distance themselves (even if a minority of their members may have been reluctant to do so) from their pre-1989 predecessors and much of the ideological rhetoric that they espoused. Reforming elites, such as those in Poland and Hungary, firmly took control of the party and sought to redefine it in the (vague) style of left-wing social democratic parties in western Europe—consequently looking to traditional social democratic actors, and even to parties such as New Labour in the UK, for policy inspiration.[5]

Leftist-retreat parties: back to the future?

The majority of former ruling parties in central Europe were quick to realise that their survival in the post-Cold War world rested on a rejection of much of their behaviour in the pre-1989 period. However, a small minority of parties refused to embrace such actions and remained true to a radical socialist ethos. The two most explicit examples of such parties remain the eastern German PDS and the Czech KSČM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia—Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy), though smaller communist movements do exist in most central European countries. These smaller communist movements tend, however, to have developed in relatively recent times and they did not directly descend out of the ruling communist party of the pre-1989 era. This ensures that parties such as the Slovak KSS normally possess many members who were once in the ruling Communist party, even if they have found their way into the present organisations in a roundabout way and normally through a CSP. In both the Czech KSČM and eastern German PDS, elites were not able to drag the party away from its pre-1989 ideological roots. Social democratisation was not an option. The PDS had to compete with the (western German) Social Democratic Party (SPD) and knew that any attempt to move rightwards in ideological terms was destined to fail as the SPD had long since occupied centre-left territory. Although the SPD was a 'new' party in the eastern states, it could call on a strong historical tradition in the region as well as a popular acceptance rooted in eastern Germans' awareness of, and orientation towards, political life in West Germany. Instead, the PDS attempted to broaden its ideological platform in order to offer a home to those possessing broad left-wing orientations but who did not define themselves as social democrats.[6] This involved taking on broadly anti-capitalist positions, adopting strong pacifist rhetoric and articulating diverse and largely self-defined eastern German interests.[7] In practical terms this has led to the PDS calling for sweeping tax increases for higher earners, concerted efforts to redistribute wealth and opposition to most aspects of Germany's foreign policy (including a flat rejection of German troop involvement in any missions outside of Germany territory, whether they be UN led peacekeeping missions or more aggressive military acts such as the 2003 Iraq War). The intrinsic conservatism of its membership and, more importantly, the radical process of internal democratisation and

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decentralisation undertaken in 1989–90 restrained party leaders' ability to dictate ideological and programmatic change. Rich and diverse though the left in Germany is, there is very little chance that the PDS will ever be meeting Green and SPD ministers in Berlin's cabinet rooms; their anti-capitalism and stringent, almost dogmatic, pacifism would be too radical for the SPD and Greens to stomach, rendering the PDS an irritating and vocal, if largely irrelevant, actor at the national level.

In terms of gaining practical influence, the situation of the Czech KSČM is almost as dire as that of the PDS. In the immediate post-1990 period the KSČM faced similar problems to the German post-communists. It remains in many ways more anachronistic and introverted than the PDS, growling about the evils of capitalism from its niche in the far left reaches of the party system. Following the reconfiguration of democratic politics in the Czech Republic, the social democratic ČSSD (Česká strana sociálnì demokratická—Czech Social Democratic Party) quickly took up a nominal position on the centre-left. It used its historical roots in society to embed itself in the Czech party system at an early stage and never gave the KSČM the opportunity (should it have wished to, which in itself is by no means certain) to move towards the ideological centre ground. The tactics adopted by what was essentially a weak reformist movement within the KSČM assisted neo-communist elements in their attempts to maintain the party's strong links with its communist past. The membership forcefully argued that the word 'communist' be retained in the party name and the KSČM continued to use the language of Marxism-Leninism in its publications. The KSČM is passionately eurosceptic and anti-American, reflecting not only the ideological class indoctrination of many members, but also deficiencies in terms of learning how to compromise and how to work within democratic institutions. Some KSČM deputies even look to China for future models of emulation, not only stressing that in a multipolar world China and Russia will be able to rein in US imperialism (which lies at the root, in most KSČM minds, of US policies in Serbia, Afghanistan and especially in Iraq) but also seeing Chinese economic growth and a retained commitment to socialism as seductively impressive. The reasoning behind this is simple: the Chinese party has introduced capitalism while maintaining a monopoly on political power.[8]

Neither the Czech nor the German post-communists therefore saw any reason to radically reform themselves, and programmatic change was incremental and largely undirected. Party members continue(d) to matter and they were actively empowered so as to give the impression that these once anti-democratic organisations were actually transforming into the *most* democratic post-1990 political parties. These internal developments prevented an open orientation towards vote maximisation—ideology remained both significant and controversial—and party leaders were increasingly constrained in their attempts to broaden out their party's political appeals.

Pragmatic reform parties—third ways or new ways?

The leaders of pragmatic reform parties have faced far fewer structural constraints in mapping out a new ideological path and have shown considerable skill in carving out electoral niches for themselves. While leftist-retreat parties did not attempt to (or perhaps were not able to) break out of the far left ideological ghetto, pragmatic reform parties had no such limitations on their programmatic options. In the immediate aftermath of communism's collapse, the new leaders of the Polish SdRP/SLD—the SdRP officially

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transformed itself into a single unitary party, the SLD, joining a group of 30 other left-wing movements, in June 1999—the Slovak SDL and the Hungarian MSZP had little interest in turning their parties into mass organisations appealing to relatively narrow societal interests. They believed that programmatic broadening—above and beyond narrow class, religious or ethnic bases—would assist in unshackling themselves from their communist pasts and help in finding some sort of legitimacy as reform-orientated social democratic parties. These parties were not going to embrace unfettered free-marketism—but they were willing to admit that the state was not the most effective tool in generating wealth and prosperity. Office-seeking strategies were popular and party elites were not scared to articulate their wish to regain power: these elites were, after all, the very same people who were progressing nicely through 'the system' before that system collapsed in 1989–90. They retained their instinct for power and saw no reason to hide it in the post-1989 era.

These parties subsequently looked with interest—particularly in the mid- and late 1990s—at the third way ideas of the Anglo-Saxon social democratic parties, principally as they appeared to promise a path towards modern centre-left thought without the need to get bogged down in the traditional ideological battles of the 'old left'. The pragmatic reformers of central Europe did not have the tools to be mass parties in the mould of the 'traditional' centre-left, both in organisational and historical terms, and needed to find a way of governing that stressed practicability, pragmatism and a commitment to a (vaguely defined) set of centre-left values. They were not constrained by the narrow demands of affiliated organisations, so the rhetoric of Tony Blair and, to an extent, Gerhard Schröder from 1994 onwards appeared to strike a number of chords.

The watering down of ideological commitments was not, however, 'parachuted in' during the mid-1990s: the seeds of a much more pragmatic programmatic development were sown in the first few months after the collapse of state socialism. The new party leaders realised that in order to 'sell' new political messages (whatever they ended up being) to both their members and their voters they would have to avoid dispersing power away from their own inner circle. The last thing they needed was loud and conservative memberships forcing them to justify their actions in the language of Marx and Engels. The initial organisational reforms that party elites made in 1990–91 were therefore clear and calculated; rather than radically democratise their parties—as the Czech and eastern German communists did—the elites at the centre of the party ensured that small groups around the leadership retained the ability to guide and steer the party in the directions that they preferred—whilst still meeting the norms of democratic accountability. Party members were given a say—but not necessarily the final word. The elites saw that the left in western Europe had been successful not by stressing ideological purity and a commitment to 'battling it out' with capitalism, but by seeking to carefully link market efficiency with solidarity and social justice—and this was the path they the reformist parties in central Europe aimed to set out on.

Given the conscious efforts made to distance themselves from their past, it is not surprising that the SdRP/SLD, MSZP and SDL sought to play down programmatic consistency. Links to the trade unions were not particularly strong, and in Poland—on account of the unique nature of the Polish transformation to democracy—the trade unions naturally allied themselves with the anti-communist centre-right; institutionalised Labour was therefore not granted the influential position it possessed in the

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politics of the German SPD, the French PS and the British Labour party. The leaderships of the reformist CSPs were aware that they were searching for a new raison d'être and were open to the ideas of successful parties that encapsulated a commitment to social justice, economic efficiency and managerial competence—and, given its electoral and ideological failures, the western European socialism of the 1980s appeared to be a particularly *unattractive* model. Traditional social democratic parties were not, at the beginning of the 1990s, good at winning elections and appeared to lose ideological battles with all but the conservative communist left. The western European centre-left was therefore also—if in nationally specific ways and at different speeds—setting out on a process of ideological and programmatic rejuvenation and it was this gradual acceptance of the market, coupled with traditional welfare commitments and the protection of minorities, that appealed to reforming post-communist party elites.

This is not to say that each of the pragmatic reformist parties adopted identical programmatic platforms. The programmes of the Polish SdRP/SLD, for example, tended to be vague wishlists, even if the general orientation was one of social and economic reform coupled with greater social justice, equality and administrative competence than the centre-right coalition had been able to demonstrate. By 1993 it was calling for different forms of privatisation and only for limited strategic intervention by government in market activities. It sought to join the Socialist International, eventually doing so in 1996. The SdRP/SLD subsequently conducted the most radical transformation of any CSP in central Europe, overhauling its programmatic self-understanding in order to metamorphose into an elite-driven pragmatic party of the centre-left. By as early as January 1994, for example, SdRP leader (and current Polish President) Aleksander Kwaniewski was claiming that NATO membership should be an SdRP aim and by 1997 it was clear that the SdRP was embracing one of the key pillars of the transatlantic alliance. By 2003 the SLD was strongly supporting the US-led war with Iraq, while other social democratic (let alone socialist / reform communist) actors—most notably in France and Germany—were keen critics of American policy.

The Hungarian MSZP's predecessor, the MKP, had implemented technocratic party reforms as early as the late 1980s, and the MSZP continued this reform process in the early 1990s. It took on economic agendas that parties of the centre-right would normally favour, as pragmatists within the party leadership—led by Gyula Horn—pushed for socio-economic reforms in partnership with organisations such as the World Bank and IMF. The MSZP was not scared to open up the Hungarian economy, introducing market competition and aggressively privatising state industries through the 1990s. It only sought to correct its free market positions from 1998 when it was evicted from national office. Although the MSZP lost power in 1998, it remained committed to a centrist understanding of social democracy, stressing the importance of markets in wealth creation and of meddling in economic activities only where absolutely necessary. The new party programme adopted in 2000 subsequently referred directly to the third way and sought to use it as a guiding principle in shaping party policies—even if this tends to be in the form of a hidden agenda rather than as a point of conviction. While attempting to link into broader European reformist social democratic ideas, processes of internal bargaining between factions prevented the MSZP from presenting detailed policy preferences and the third way rhetoric remains—for the most part—lacking in genuine programmatic substance.

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The Slovak Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), meanwhile, committed itself to democracy and the key tenets of the free market, even if it did so with a fair degree of inconsistency and without gaining any sort of genuine popular resonance. The SDL attempted to sideline orthodox communists and positively encouraged them to join one of the smaller breakaway movements that formed (and periodically imploded) on its left flank, concurrently forcing party members to accept the new programme that reforming elites developed. The party's centralisation around a small, intact leadership circle subsequently helped it minimise the trade-off between appeasing members and broadening its electoral appeal. In short, the SDL also caught the catch-all bug and attempted to maximise votes rather than produce an ideologically coherent and member-driven party.

In the long run the SDL's willingness to sacrifice ideological and programmatic principles on the altar of vote-winning has had a disastrous effect on the party. Although it was a member of a number of Slovak governments in the late 1990s, its programmatic zig-zagging eventually caused the party to factionalise and party leaders to wage public war on each other. Programmatic change strained internal cohesion and in 2002 the party split and eventually imploded. The main body of the party was able to live with the 'democratic socialism' of the western social democratic and socialist left of the late 1980s and early 1990s. It became alienated, however, by the shifts in socio-economic programme and the policies of those advocating a third way as well as by security issues, such as NATO enlargement, which the party's modernisers endorsed. In fact, the two major streams in the SDL—the modernising party elite and the much more traditionalist membership base—wanted to take the party in altogether different directions. The modernisers were well informed of the intellectual discourse in the western left and sought inspiration from it. They also worked for the translation of their own programme into policy. The mostly conservative socialist majority of the party, however, had had no experience with, and knowledge of, this democratic discourse and tended to reject it (when asked) out of hand. They merely adjusted to the programmatic orientation imposed upon the party by the sweeping changes and by the activism of the modernisers. The SDL did not shirk from being populist, naively hankering after one group of voters, only to 'drop' them at later elections. The eventual destruction of the SDL in Slovakia has left the future for social democrats in the country looking most uncertain.

Western European social democratic parties and central European reformist CSPs

Pragmatic approaches to questions of programmatic reform have prompted the social democratic left in central Europe to openly look westwards in their search for new ideas. Internal demands and constraints have naturally shaped discourse, but—as and when the opportunity has arisen—these parties have been open to influences from the centre-left modernisers in other countries. Given their geographical proximity, the German Social Democrats remain an instinctive partner for many of the reformist CSPs. Germany is closely linked, both economically and politically, to the region and the German SPD was quick to realise that it was in its interest to actively engage with like-minded political actors across central Europe. While the SPD has naturally not been able to *dictate* programmatic and ideological developments in the region it has been able to use tools such as its party foundation—the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES)—to exert influence and offer reform-minded CSPs the opportunity to engage with western

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social democratic ideas. Ideally, the SPD preferred to work with 'historical' social democratic parties such as the Czech ČSSD, but such parties had—for varying reasons—very little success in establishing themselves across the region. The ČSSD was not tainted by participation in state-socialist politics and appeared—at least initially—to share and uphold many of the values and beliefs that the SPD incorporated. Yet it quickly became apparent that the ČSSD was an exceptional case: new social democratic actors were frequently former communist parties who had developed into social democratic actors. This left the SPD and other western European social democratic parties in a dilemma: do we continue to view these parties critically, given their complicity in the crimes committed under state socialism, or do we actively embrace them as the new representatives of the social democratic tradition? Do we continue to criticise social-democratic inclined CSPs, or do we accept that—like it or not—they appear to be the only relevant parties active in the field who appear to share at least some of our beliefs and ideals?

It was clear that, for their part, their search for external legitimacy prompted the reformist CSPs to view—in general terms at least—the western European social democratic left as an attractive ideological partner, and they strove to develop close contacts with individual parties. The German SPD's institutional leverage—again, mainly through its party foundation—saw it develop into an important bridge between east and west. The FES opened offices in Warsaw and Prague in autumn 1989 and spring 1990, and actively sought to work with Polish and Czechoslovak actors with the aim of institutionalising means for building social consensus and social equality, discussing labour policy and communal politics as well as foreign policy, European integration and the media.[9] The KSČM none the less remained off limits, and the SPD maintained much closer contacts with the social-democratic ČSSD and even members of the liberal and conservative parties in an effort to facilitate democratic consolidation.

The rush for acceptability that the SdRP/SLD experienced in the 1990s prompted it to be particularly open in attempting to carry through processes of voluntary reform. Germany's position as advocate-in-chief of Polish membership of the EU as well as the close personal relationship between Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Aleksander Kwaniewski has ensured that the SPD and SdRP/SLD enjoy high levels of communication and considerable collaboration when it comes to programmatic and ideological questions. In September 2001 the then Polish Prime Minister, Leszek Miller, underlined this explicitly by stressing that the East German post-communist PDS was not a party with whom the SdRP/SLD any longer had anything in common. As he put it, 'we don't have any contact with the PDS. We meet with the SPD, on the other hand, very frequently.' Miller was also quick to emphasise that the SLD has much more in common, programmatically speaking, with the SPD and parties such as the British Labour party and the French PS.[10]

Conclusion

The paths of development that CSPs have undertaken have been neither linear nor identical. The nature of the organisational reform that CSPs undertook in the immediate period after the collapse of state socialism placed them on a programmatic trajectory which has proven difficult to successfully modify in later years. Parties that centralised power around a small group of elite actors have possessed more flexibility in their attempts to maximise votes and remain ideologically broad. Parties that radically democratised by empowering their memberships and/or middle-ranking officials have

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remained much more ideologically conservative and have remained neo-communist rather than social-democratic in orientation.

Western European parties have unsurprisingly been the premier points of orientation and there is evidence that CSPs have sought to deepen knowledge and practical experience of their practices, policies and programmes. The PDS and the KSČM, meanwhile, continue to represent relatively narrow interests, and have shirked radical processes of programmatic reform and renewal. They have looked to the communist/socialist movement for inspiration as this enabled them to package their policies within an expressly left-wing, anti-capitalist framework. It offered them the option of stressing strong elements of programmatic continuity while turning away from their anti-democratic pasts.

The SdRP/SLD, MSZP and the SDL have opted for an altogether different route that has led them to turn to the social democratic movement for policy inspiration—even if they have experienced differing electoral fortunes in the process. The parties attempted to become centre-left, catch-all parties, with policy packages that resemble (in loose terms) those of traditional social-democratic actors. The SdRP/SLD in particular has built up links with these parties, and especially the German SPD, and it has sought to draw lessons from it in how to draw up programmes that allow it to incorporate ideas of social justice, redistribution of economic wealth and a defence of the welfare state without rejecting the positive aspects of the social market economy. One should be careful, however, in not overstressing this point: the considerable divergence between these parties in foreign policy, and particularly the recent Iraq war, indicates that western European social-democratic parties are not dealing with tame poodles who will behave as they would perhaps like. Reform-pragmatist CSPs have developed their own interests, shaped by their own national context, and whilst western European social democracy is an important reference point, offering interesting ideas and strategies, the uniqueness of national party political competition ensures that reformist CSPs are still different in quite fundamental ways from their western European brethren. Given their commitment to democratic ideals and their behaviour in and out of government over the last 15 years this should not be seen as a negative development; rather, it is another example of the diversity evident across the centre-left party political spectrum in Europe today.

Notes

1 For more in depth analysis of the programmatic development of communist successor parties in central Europe see Dan Hough, James Sloam and William E. Paterson, eds, 'Policy transfer and programmatic change in the communist successor parties (CSP) of east central Europe', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol. 21, no. 1, special issue, spring 2005.

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10 See 'Erster Partner Deutschland', in *Der Spiegel*, 3 September 2001, no. 36, http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/0,1518,155987,00.html

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