



The Social Democratic Parties in the Visegrád Countries

Predicaments and
Prospects for
Progressivism

Edited by
Ania Skrzypek · András Bíró-Nagy

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“This path-breaking volume examines the transformation of social democracy in the four countries of Visegrád – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The analysis demonstrates that there was not a single path to power for these parties but distinctive national trajectories reflecting the unique political traditions and histories of each country. Yet a common occurrence across the Visegrad is the comparative electoral weakness of social democratic parties in recent times. These parties performed strongly in the 1990s, but found it increasingly difficult to differentiate themselves from their centre-right opponents. Voters apparently doubted whether the social democrats offered a robust alternative to market liberalisation. Overall, this study offers a brilliant account of the politics and performance of social democratic parties in Visegrád over the last three decades. Rich in detail and cogently argued, the work is a major contribution to debates about the changing nature of social democracy across Europe, and will be required reading for scholars and students alike.”

—Professor Patrick Diamond, *Queen Mary, University of London*

“A group of renowned NGO experts from progressive think-tanks have authored a must-read primer for everyone interested in the challenges of contemporary politics in Europe. From progressivism to illiberalism, the book delivers a particularly insightful glimpse at the political currents of Central Europe. An important contribution to the debate on the future of social democracy in Europe.”

—Aleksander Kwaśniewski, *President of Poland (1995–2005)*

“This volume is an essential contribution to the European debate about the state and future of social democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. It depicts the trajectories alongside which the four and then five parties in Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia (re) emerged after the 1990s, consolidated and grew to be a viable political alternative. It provides insights into their traditions, achievements, and legacy in shaping the post-transformation reality and paving the way for the EU. Being completed with academic precision and an excellent understanding of the socio-economic reality of the country-cases studies, the book is a long-awaited, absolute must-read.”

—Biljana Borzan, *Vice-President of the S&D Group in the European Parliament*

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Editors

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FOREWORD

VISEGRAD: FROM HOPE TO HORROR AND BACK AGAIN

At the time of joining the European Union, social democrats were strong in Central Europe. Péter Medgyessy, Vladimír Špidla, and Leszek Miller governed in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland. Shortly after, Robert Fico led Slovakia into the eurozone. Today neither these politicians nor their successors are in government. The Hungarian and Slovak centre left is split, the Czech social democrats took a leave from parliament and the Polish united new left has just re-emerged in legislative work after four years of marginalisation.

Of course, there are countries in Western Europe too where progressive parties are just shadows of their previous selves. The meltdown in France has been spectacular, and the situation is not much better in the Netherlands or Ireland either. “Pasokification” has been a political science category in the past decade, used to describe the phenomenon of the shrinking centre-left, replaced by a more radical challenger. But in Western Europe we can also speak about strongholds: Northern Europe where the erosion has not given way to a breakdown, Portugal and Malta where the center-left has gone from strength to strength, together with Spain, Germany, and Italy, where the recent years brought revival, and a solid role in national governments as well as municipalities.

The broader Eastern picture shows that there were only two cases where social democrats proved to be considerably strong for a longer-lasting period: Slovakia and Romania. In both cases progressive politics has been pursued with a nationalist blend which may not be replicable or even desirable elsewhere. But it would be wrong to assume that the decline of a political tendency is just a matter of the wrong tactics. In the 1990s, the decade of the Washington Consensus, the programme of progressive parties in this transitional region was social-liberal at best—; contributing to the new capitalist political economy with strong semi-peripheral features, which in turn undermined the social base that would have been needed to stabilise social democratic politics for the next generation.

It is yet to be proven that the semi-peripheral development of East Central Europe can converge on the social market economies of the West. For many, convergence became an individual as opposed to collective strategy, producing the Westward migration of millions, which in turn generated major social-policy conflicts, like in the case of the posted workers. The lack of strong industrial relations has caused further tensions around wage-dumping, triggering the legislative campaign for EU-level minimum wage co-ordination, while stubborn social problems like Roma exclusion raise questions about social citizenship and resilient welfare states in general.

The weakening of progressive parties in the Visegrad region did not only give us the unpleasant experience of being in opposition and missing out on social convergence, sometimes for a very long time. It also brought Poland and Hungary into a constant conflict with the EU institutions regarding the rule of law, and Slovakia to be a border line case from the point of view of governability. In Czechia, the decline of social democrats opened up a large playing field for the neoliberal populism of Andrej Babiš, whose reign was followed by a further shift to the right in a parliament with no progressive representation.

These are, however, not identical patterns. Visegrad as a group was defined over three decades ago not on the basis of homogeneity of domestic social, cultural, or political trends, but on the basis of geopolitics and economics: a shared endeavour to finally and firmly connect the three and then four countries to the Euro-Atlantic sphere instead of the declining but still apparently dangerous post-Soviet Russia. Interestingly, this common definition broke down during the 2022 war of Russia against Ukraine, due to the behaviour of the authoritarian Viktor Orbán,

but this does not mean that other structures of this geopolitical mini-bloc could not function and survive for a long period.

Do we have, after all, common features of Visegrad weakness that explain why a joint research makes sense and the connected studies should appear in a dedicated volume? The answer can only be yes since, despite some important differences, the nations of the region have shared much of their history, often lived in common federal states or empires, understand each other well thanks to their overlapping cultural heritage, and probably also share some of the key factors that shape their future.

The authors of this book do not only reflect on the causes of decline, but also explore the various factors that either support or block the restoration of social democratic influence. They point out the important role of media, which after the rise of various social media platforms cannot be interpreted in the same way as in the early stages of the labour movement. Sometimes they find a paradox: an appeal of the progressive economic programme while the deficit of credibility, which is often linked to the assumed or sometimes real connections between contemporary socialists and pre-1989 communists.

Crucially, the point in this collective exercise is not to find silver linings in the current situation, but to provide necessary inputs for the development of new strategies. A major question from the point of view of progressive political reproduction is the appeal to the youth, which also is conditioned on by education and participation. A shared conclusion might be that the future of the centre-left largely depends on combining genuinely progressive social policies with systemic (and not superficial) climate and environmental policies. While the former mainly affect older left-wing voters, the latter tend to be decisive for younger age groups, without which we cannot speak about a social base preserved or broadened.

Such lessons, of course, are not confined to the Visegrad group, which allows us to conclude that the analysis and insight of this volume should be interesting for readers elsewhere in Europe and perhaps in an even broader geography interested in progressive politics. The specific point in

Visegrad is that an effective social democracy here requires a strategy that combines the fights against authoritarianism and neoliberalism, instead of just choosing one of the two evils.

Brussels, Belgium

Dr. László Andor
FEPS Secretary General
European Commissioner
2010–2014

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The articles reflect the opinions of the respective authors, not those of the European Parliament, or the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), or its partners. The responsibility of FEPS is limited to the publication in as much as it is considered worthy of attention of the readership.

With that in mind, this volume was edited by Ania Skrzypek and András Bíró-Nagy, whose work was vastly supported in terms of project coordination by Celine Guèdes.

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