

Dan Hough
University of Sussex

The Left in Central Europe: Challenges and Opportunities¹

Contribution for the International Conference of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, October 29 – 31, 2003, Warsaw

Introduction	2
The Left and Central European Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis	3
Party Organisation and Path Dependency	6
CSPs in the Early 1990s – Which Way Now?	8
CSPs in the Early 1990s – Which Way Now?	9
Challenges and Opportunities	9
Concluding Remarks	13
References	14

Parties and Social Movements

Published by the Policy Research Department of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation

Franz-Mehring-Platz 1, D-10243 Berlin, (+49-30) 44 310 160, politikanalyse@rosalux.de

The logo for the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, consisting of the lowercase letters 'rls' in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

¹ Daniel Hough works at the Department of International Relations and Politics, University of Sussex, Arts E328, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9SN, Email: d.t.hough@sussex.ac.uk.

This paper has been written with the institutional support of the Institute for German Studies, University of Birmingham and the Leverhulme Trust, London, and within the context of a project based on the external influences on Communist successor party programmatic development.

Introduction

Parties of the left in central Europe face a number of challenging tasks. They need to develop convincing programmatic profiles suitable for shaping their states' macro-economic development in an increasingly integrated European economy; they need to engage with the challenges that the eastward expansion of the European Union brings with it; they need to develop policies suitable for overcoming high rates of unemployment and considerable levels of social dislocation; they need to develop foreign and security policies suitable for a much-changed international environment and, finally, they need to convincingly 'get their messages across' to a frequently unconvinced electorate.

These challenges are considerable and, in many ways, daunting. Yet they are no less daunting than were the challenges that faced the left as state socialism collapsed in 1989 and 1990. At the beginning of the 1990s, the left appeared disgraced, disorientated and disgruntled, defeated by the pro-market forces of the centre-right and right and without a 'mission' around which to base any future political comeback. Yet, often in remarkably short periods of time, social democratic, socialist and even Communist parties started to successfully bounce back. First in Lithuania in 1992, and later in every state across the region, the social democratic/socialist left grew strong enough to turnaround their political fortunes and regain the reins of power.

Although social democratic, socialist and Communist parties have undoubtedly performed remarkably well in democratic elections through the 1990s, the reasons that lie at the root of their success are by no means identical from state to state. Some have benefited from disenchantment with the parties and politicians (principally of the centre-right) who governed in the early 1990s; others have succeeded as they have mopped up disillusioned voters who, while not necessarily strong holders of socialist or Communist beliefs, have been eager to express their dissatisfaction with the social and economic conditions in which they now find themselves, approaching a decade and a half after state socialism collapsed. Add to this a bedrock of loyal supporters and it is not difficult to see why, contradicting some of the more excitable claims of the early 1990s, the left has been able to politically re-invent itself (Denitch, 1990).

As ever, with the benefit of hindsight, the programmatic and electoral rejuvenation of the left (and particularly the CSPs - Communist successor parties) in the 1990s seems eminently explainable. The economic upheaval, social dislocation and psychological pressures of wholesale transformation have been skilfully used by left-wing politicians to re-brand their parties with the aim of making socialism attractive again (Ishiyama and Shafqat, 2000). They have therefore been able to cement places for themselves in central European party systems. It is, of course, not just reorganised former Communist parties that have effectively mobilised on the left and centre-left in central Europe: other social democratic, socialist and Communist actors have sprung up and competed (more or less) effectively with other parties for 'left-of-centre' votes.² The Czech ČSSD, for example, built on a historic tradition of Czech social democracy to rapidly establish itself as the most prominent actor on the left in the Czech party system, while the Slovak Communist Party (KSS), formed in 1992,

² Communist successor parties (CSPs) are defined as those parties that have roots in the old pre-1989 regimes. This link will involve inheriting the bulk of the former Communists' property and leadership as well as some sort of continuation in party membership. The central European parties that fall into this category are the Polish SLD (SdRP), the Czech KSČM, the Slovak SDL', the Hungarian MSZP and the eastern German PDS. The paths of CSPs may, of course, have diverged considerably in programmatic, electoral and organisational terms since 1989 - their combined heritage none the less means that it is still relevant to refer to them as a specific group of political actors.

openly opposed the rightward drift of the Slovak CSP, the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL'). CSPs and their competitors can therefore come in a number of different forms.

While there are a considerable number of left wing parties in existence across the region, their political future appears, as ever, a little uncertain. One can quite plausibly argue that CSPs in particular have benefited as much from structural advantages that are out of their control, as they have from their own programmatic and electoral successes. Although very few central Europeans wish(ed) to return to the political structures of the pre-1989 era, equally few remain(ed) convinced that 'real-existing capitalism' was the path to enlightenment and contentment. Many citizens rejected the parties that had promised them liberty and prosperity in the transformation period - offering the left a chance to re-organise and offer a new alternative to central European electors. A fresh avenue of opportunity opened up for CSPs and the other parties of the left alike.

That was, however, the 1990s. This paper discusses the much more uncertain challenges that lie ahead for the left in the years to come. Put another way, it highlights the opportunities and challenges that the left will need to overcome (or at the very least come to terms with) if it is to make the most of the positions that it has inherited – in whatever way and for whatever reason – in central European party systems. While some of these challenges are considerable, none are insurmountable. The left, providing that the parties that comprise it are well led and providing that it realises the limits of its own ambitions, can and may become/remain the dominant forces in everyday political life for many years to come.

The Left and Central European Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis

The precise nature of the left's ideological, programmatic and electoral development in each nation-state is in many ways unique, depending as it does on a unique matrix of national opportunity structures, historical constraints and external (i.e. party system) dynamics (Orenstein, 1998). The positions of the former Communist parties are particular cases in point: some CSPs developed out of Communist parties that in the pre-1989 period remained hardline and intolerant of dissent (Kitschelt, 1995; Waller, 1995; Evans and Whitfield, 1995; Ishiyama, 1997). Opposition factions within the party were given little opportunity to voice their concerns and subsequently were under-prepared for the revolutions of 1989/90. This happened in states such as the Czech Republic – where the Communist party was particularly authoritarian – as structural conservatives in the party were able to easily and systematically outmanoeuvre more reform-minded factions. In other states, where internal opposition groups enjoyed greater levels of autonomy, many CSPs underwent more thorough and convincing processes of reform, guided by reforming elements who were none the less still committed to socialist goals and ideals. Some CSPs, of course, also found themselves forced to compete with strong and able social democratic parties, limiting the opportunities for reform and ideological renewal. The Czech KSČM, for example, would not have been able to convincingly social democratise, even if it had wanted to. Other CSPs grasped the opportunities offered to them in fledgling party systems, where all parties were seeking to embed themselves afresh – both in relation to each other and in relation to the wider electorate – and metamorphosised as completely different political animals.

These national opportunity structures – the structural constraints that shape the parameters of political competition as a whole - are therefore broad and diverse. In the post-Communist context, it can be hypothesised that five dimensions are of key importance and it is these which shape the environment within which all parties have to compete. These are generally taken to be (Kitschelt et al, 1999: 63-9):

1) Political Regime Divide

The past is always important in understanding the present – in central Europe just as anywhere else. The nature of real-existing socialism, and the citizen's view of the pre-1989 regime, can have a pervasive effect both on shaping attitudes to post-socialist politics in general and voting behaviour in particular. This importance of this dimension of competition is of particular relevance for Communist successor parties, who may find that some voters who possess values, beliefs and interests that essentially correlate with their own none the less reject the party out of hand. And they always will - largely on the basis of the behaviour of its predecessor in the pre-1989 period.

Yet strong attitudes to the previous regime need not always provide negative fallout for parties of the left. Many genuine supporters of the previous ruling parties will share the ideological and programmatic goals of their successors. Although such electors will by no means form a majority, then will none the less contribute a solid basis of political support on which these parties can rely. The cynicism and disenchantment – rife in the pre-1989 era – may also manifest itself in contemporary political behaviour. Citizens may choose to a) reject all parties and withdraw from the political process altogether; b) reject the parties who promised economic affluence and political liberty in the 1990s (normally the parties of the centre-right); c) reject the former Communist parties on account of their behaviour in office during the years of state socialism. Come what may, attitudes to the previous regime therefore had and continue to have important effects on contemporary political activity.

2) – An Economic-Distributive Divide

This cleavage closely corresponds to the most important parameters of political competition evident in western Europe. Social protectionist forces seek to maintain the status quo and defend hard won rights and privileges (particularly in terms of social welfare, trade union rights and labour market policy) while 'neo-liberal' pro-marketeters seek to de-regulate economies in the name of wealth creation and personal liberty. The clash between these two groups is as obvious in central Europe as it is in western Europe and this dynamic subsequently has a key bearing on both political competition and electoral outcomes.

In the early 1990s, as citizens looked to take advantage of greater opportunities for political liberty and individual prosperity, parties whose economic policy incorporated reduced levels of economic regulation, lower taxation levels, a much reduced role for the state and a 'laissez-faire' approach to economic management achieved considerable electoral successes. Vaclav Klaus' Civic Democratic Party (ODS), for example, dominated Czech politics between 1992 and 1998, creating an agenda that skilfully incorporated economic liberalism with political nationalism (Williams, 1997; Hanley, 1999; Williams 2003). In Poland a variety of parties, all with strong roots in the solidarity trade union and favouring 'shock therapy' approaches to economic management, formed the governments of 1991-93, while from 1997-2001 Jerzy Buzek's Solidarity Election Action party led a centre-right alliance that continued to remain true to a liberal economic agenda (Millard, 2003: 26-27).

The pendulum none the less quickly swung away from such parties and those demanding greater levels of social protection, demand management and economic control soon challenged for political power.³ Just as the centre-right won the first elections based on a particular programmatic package, so the left responded by 'protecting' citizens from the

³ The likelihood of some sort of pendulum effect occurring was highlighted as early as 1990 by Lord Dahrendorf. He stressed that processes of marketisation and liberalisation were bound to prompt a reaction as the social cost of economic restructuring became apparent. See Dahrendorf, 1990: 71-72.

vagaries of ‘neo-liberal’ economics. The left returned with a vengeance. The bases of a class orientated cleavage divide had been set with four particular processes shaping and reinforcing the traditional left-right spectrum. These processes are (Mateju, Rehakova and Evans, 1999):

- The emergence, in the early 1990s, of a clearly visible class of proprietors and entrepreneurs. Although not all of them became exceptionally wealthy, they did haul themselves out of poverty and into middle-class affluence. The further existence of a class of ‘nouveau riche’ - unambiguously benefiting from the marketisation of the economy and an influx of ‘new money’ – prompted a backlash from sections of the population who had no access to such opportunities.
- The rationalisation of industrial production and employment threatened the material interests of the working classes. Economic liberalisation ensured that jobs-for-life were no longer guaranteed and the social net that once existed was either punctuated or dismantled.
- Post-Communist societies saw increasing levels of social and economic inequality. Workers were prompted to defend their interests in trade unions in an attempt to ‘get the best possible deal’ and in an attempt to alleviate class inequalities.
- The strengthening of the materialist ethic. The much vaunted rise of post-materialist values in western Europe has yet to take place in central Europe. The transition from an economy characterised by shortages to one characterised by choice further *encouraged* materialist politics and prohibited any significant increase in post-materialist values.

Contemporary battles for economic supremacy are, therefore, still fought on what, to westerners at least, appear to be ‘traditional’ left-right grounds. The party forwarding the more convincing socio-economic arguments therefore places itself in an extremely strong position in terms of winning any forthcoming election it may contest.

3) A Social-Cultural Divide

Socio-cultural issues are in many ways the most diverse and difficult to quantify of all the dimensions of political competition. These issues can range from the role of the church in society to positions on social issues such as abortion and euthanasia. Sometimes this cleavage may be divisive whereas on other occasions it spawns hegemonic cultural values. In Poland, for example, there are very few politicians would dare to criticise the Catholic church in anything other than the most rudimentary of ways. The strength of support that the Catholic church, and particularly the Polish born Pope, John Paul II, enjoys would render any such political adventure almost certainly futile.

Most socio-cultural issues therefore remain less salient than they are in, say, the USA. Widespread hegemonic discourses prevent politicians from engaging in moral discussions about issues such as abortion and homosexual marriages as there is very little party political capital to be made from discussing such topics in an overtly political manner. Communist successor parties in particular do not, as a rule, attempt to profile themselves on socio-cultural issues – the traditional protectionist-libertarian divide is much more relevant to them – with the notable exception of the eastern German PDS, which seeks to represent eastern German interests, based on a nascent eastern German identity, within the national political process (Hough, 2002).

4) National-Cosmopolitan Divide

Issues of statehood and national consciousness have traditionally been more politically salient in the eastern and South-eastern parts of the European continent. Most central European

states have thankfully avoided potentially dangerous nationalist debates and discourses. Even in states with substantial national minorities such as Hungary, nationalist rhetoric has not been nearly as destructive as it has been in other European states. Yet nationalism is not dead. The Velvet Divorce offers an excellent example of nationalist discourses hijacking the conventional political process and states such as Bulgaria and Romania have seen CSPs adopt bold nationalist stances with the simple aim of reaping political reward. Even in the Czech Republic one can identify nationalist currents within the KSČM, seeking, as they do, to create and shape communism within the confines of the relatively small Czech state.

The young and well-educated, as one might expect, tend to be more cosmopolitan in orientation and more dismissive of nationalist agendas. This is in itself not surprising given that they are best placed to take advantage of the opportunities that are on offer now that their countries have opened themselves up to the market and to the outside world. Nationalist supporters, on the other hand, tend to oppose the penetration of western liberalism in favour of much more a communitarian sense of identity and belonging. This affinity also lends itself to more authoritarian outlooks in terms of socio-cultural policies – the likes of which were discussed above. (3) and (4) can therefore often go hand in hand. Once again though, these sorts of societal divides do not generally help us predict the nature of party competition in post-Communist societies. They are important, and they affect political discourse, but rarely are they conclusive in shaping party political dividing lines.

5) – Ethnic Divisions

The most divisive and potentially dangerous of these dimensions of political competition is that which is based on ethnic lines. Ethnic wars in South-East Europe highlight the dangers that mobilisation on ethnic grounds can highlight. While such ethno-nationalist parties are few and far between in central Europe, the existence of various ethnic groups – and particularly the gypsies – offers populist politicians plenty of ammunition with which to mobilise support. Thankfully, they have generally tended to be unsuccessful in their attempts to do this and ethnic divides remain less salient than they have done in previous years.

Party Organisation and Path Dependency

These dimensions of programmatic competition combine to shape the ideological direction, policy orientation and electoral strategy of each party in a post-Communist party system. It is, however, clear that the way a party organises itself will also have a considerable influence on the programmatic and ideological direction that it takes (Grzymala-Busse, 2002). A party's genesis, furthermore, will often fundamentally shape the organisational route it takes – and the nature of the organisational decisions made in this formative period can have a fundamental effect on its behaviour in the long-term (Panebianco, 1988). The nature of the institutional context therefore shapes, constrains and influences organisation building and power relations within political parties (Dahl, 1971; van Biezen, 1998).

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 and/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 (van Biezen, 2000: 396). Only over time were they (if at all) able to spread their organisational net over society. The former Communist parties, unlike most other parties in

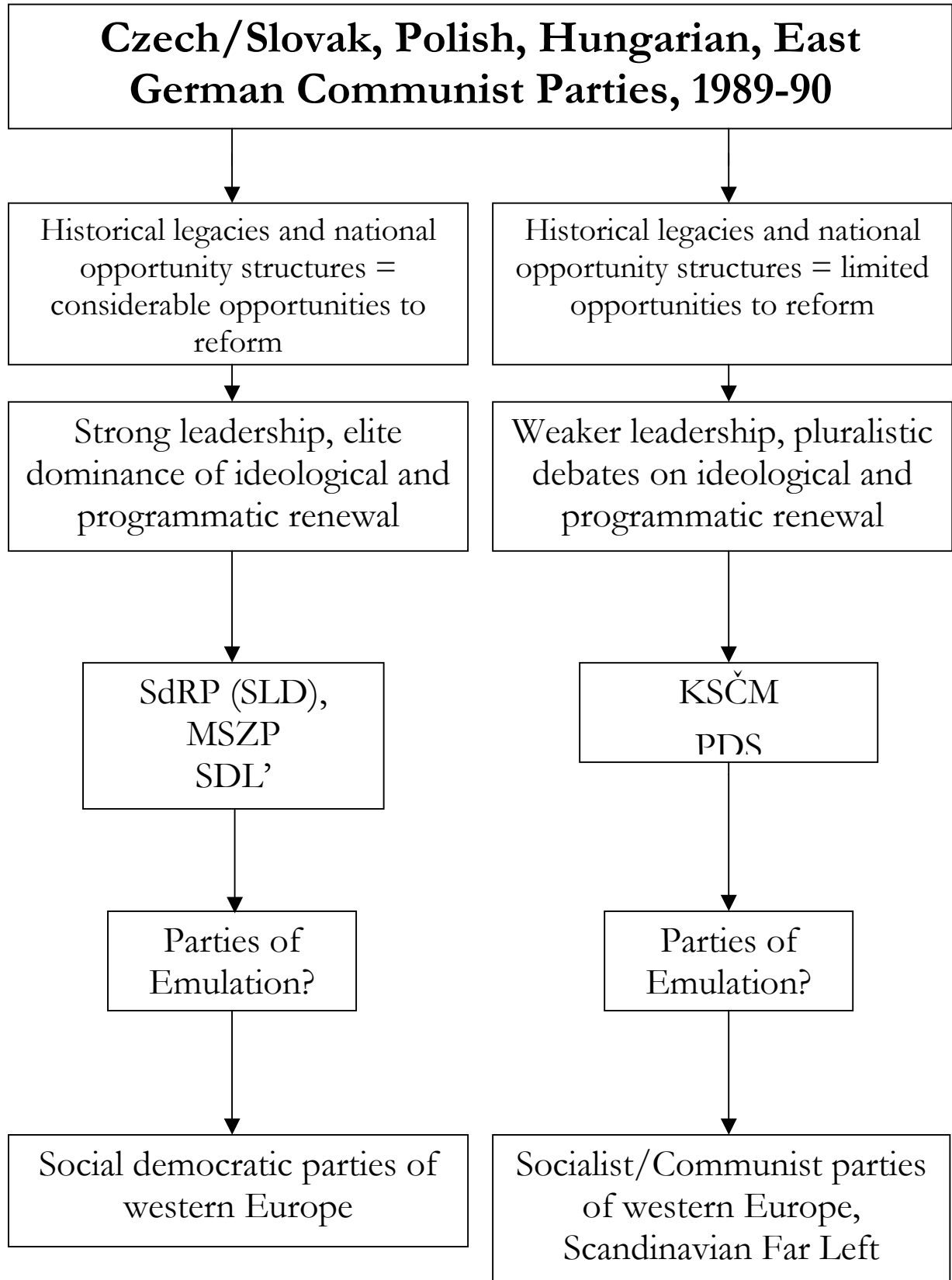
these nascent party system, did, however, possess a number of characteristics which made them unique:

- they possessed a dense network of local and regional offices
- they enjoyed large (if rapidly shrinking) memberships
- they benefited from relatively sound finances
- they had access to the main bulk of society's intermediary structures.

CSPs therefore found themselves in a fundamentally different structural position. Given their bloated organisation structures of the pre-1989 period, they needed to slim down their extra-parliamentary organisation and seek to re-build themselves as flexible, pragmatic democratic actors. A number of CSPs chose to centralise their organisational structures and to rapidly transform themselves into elite driven cadre parties. They have subsequently enjoyed (1) greater ideological and programmatic flexibility as well as (2), invariably, greater electoral success (Grzymala-Busse, 2002: 75). The costs of decision making remain much lower and efficiency in terms of vote seeking has been greatly enhanced. 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/will remain (Kitschelt, 1994: 212). As Anna Grzymala-Busse persuasively argues, the less centralisation that CSP leaders undertook in the immediate post-1990 period, the less likely the chances 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 grasp the nettle and radically overhaul its own ideological and programmatic self-understanding (Grzymala-Busse, 2002: 82).

These initial organisational decisions have profoundly influenced the programmatic orientations of the CSPs. Those that were controlled by a small 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 (see figure 1).

Figure 1: CSP trajectories, organisational constraints and programmatic developments



CSPs in the Early 1990s – Which Way Now?

Given the predominant position of CSPs in a number of central European party systems (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, (eastern) Germany), it is worth briefly assessing how and why they have managed to reform themselves into successful, democratic parties of the left. In the 1990s most of the literature on CSPs focused on *why* they were able to reform and revitalise themselves (Kitschelt 1995; Waller, 1995; Ishiyama 1997; Orenstein, 1998). Initially, authors stressed that the more electorally successful CSPs tended to be parties that had undergone a thorough process of programmatic and ideological change (and with this a move ‘rightwards’ in ideological terms) while the ‘less successful’ parties were viewed as being unwilling and unable to adapt to their much changed environment (Ishiyama and Bozoki, 2001: 34). Yet this dichotomy immediately runs into problems: how does one define successful? Some might see stabilisation in a party system on the basis of a clear and coherent party programme as success. Others may choose to stress the electoral imperative and the need gain broad societal support while yet more may pursue blatant office-seeking imperatives, stressing the need to approach and work with other left-wing actors with aim of getting into government. The academic discourse through the 1990s came to stress two routes towards the various goals that a party set itself: the ‘entrenchment’ option and the ‘pragmatic reform’ option.

- If a CSP opts for the entrenchment option, it tends to embrace its Marxist traditions and rejects many notions of modernity. It also remains highly sceptical of the free market and of individualist, libertarian claims. Although the CSP paradoxically dismisses many tenets of ‘westernism’, it instinctively places itself in the same ideological corner as parties of the far-left in western Europe. The PDS in (eastern) Germany is an example of this (regardless of the new programme it agreed in mid-October 2003), as is the KSČM, albeit in different structural surroundings, progressing along a similar path (Grzymala-Busse, 1999; Hough, 2002; Hough and Handl, 2004).
- The pragmatic-reform option sees CSPs distance themselves (even if a minority of the hard left are still 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 take control of the party and seek 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.

Although these two broad categorisations do not, and cannot, do justice to the plethora of different CSPs that now exist, they offer a starting point for understanding to whom and under what circumstances CSP elites turn when trying to increase their political legitimacy and develop popular policies (Ishiyama and Bozoki, 2001; Grzymala-Busse, 2002). They also offer a starting point for understanding how these parties are likely to address the challenges and opportunities that the expansion of the European Union offers them.

Challenges and Opportunities

The left in its entirety, however, faces a number of challenges in its attempts to tame the dominant neo-liberal Zeitgeist. But, challenges are frequently also opportunities. A problem solved in a convincing and effective way can quickly transform into an asset and strength in the attempt to win both votes and popular acceptance. The left faces a matrix of challenges that it will inevitably not be able to solve completely. The key to achieving political success (in whatever way this may be defined) none the less remains coming to terms with these challenges and either lessening the negative fallout or developing clear and concise strategies

for overcoming them. In the remainder of this contribution I highlight four challenges/opportunities that the left must come to terms with if it is to retain/expand its political influence within central European polities.

1. Policy

It should go without saying that parties need to develop a programme for government that they believe will a) convincingly attack the ills of contemporary society and b) achieve popular resonance within the broader electorate. Yet this is not always as straightforward as it may appear. Parties can easily be divided and torn between differing ideological and programmatic agendas – leading to dissent, division and, frequently, dismissal by the electorate. The left is especially prone to bouts of internal dissent as it is, in many ways, the more ideological half of the political spectrum. The long and vibrant Communist-socialist tradition has fostered an environment where discussion and debate is actively encouraged and differences of opinion are seen as the meat and drink of everyday life. While this is certainly welcome from a democratic perspective, it is not always conducive in helping to achieve long-term party goals.

All parties exist to try and change society for (in their minds at least) the better. In order to do this parties in democratic systems have to receive votes from the public at large – and in order for this to happen voters must know a) what parties stand for; b) that they are offering a realistic programme that is implementable and c) that parties are coherent enough not to fall apart once the difficult process of government begins. Put another way, politicians and party members have to be prepared to reign in their inner-party discussions and remain unified in public. This is not something that Communist, socialist and social democratic parties have always been particularly well versed in.

If and when parties of the left enter government, they must be careful not to raise expectations too irresponsible levels. The wave of CSP successes in the mid-1990s was built on hopes that the parties could never expect to genuinely fulfil – ensuring that it was simply a matter of time before the ‘rascals were kicked out’. Governing programmes must be practicable. Over-indulgent claims made in opposition will not just cause politicians to renege on promises no doubt well meant, it will cause long-term harm to the parties electoral chances in the future.

2. Adjusting to the parameters of the international environment

On accession to the European Union, the left will have to continue making hard choices. These choices will be particularly difficult in the sphere of economic policy. Many commentators continue to complain that the rhetoric of globalisation is, in fact, a hollow one, with neo-liberal actors creating an international environment that suits their own goals of deregulation and free-marketism. I am not going to argue for or against this proposition: rather, and regardless of whether one believes that globalisation is a force worth slowing down, speeding up or reigning in, *something* has clearly changed. Rhetoric may have prompted changes in behaviour or structural adjustments may have forced it – but the integrated economies of the advanced world are at a quantitatively different stage than they were just ten short years ago. The left will have to create a package of policies – built very much around existing international networks of hard and soft left groupings, as well as social movements in civil society – that can convincingly come to terms with this.

Tony Blair’s maxim of ‘what works counts’ may not be what many want to hear, but it undoubtedly has a ring of truth in it. There is no point fighting lost battles: the left in government has to be innovative, creative and practical. Otherwise they will render

themselves politically ineffective, electorally unpopular and, eventually, incapable of changing the political and/or economic system within which they work.

3. The Media

The importance of the media in contemporary societies cannot be underestimated. Parties need to expend considerable amounts of time and money in attempting to create profiles that can be well portrayed in newspapers, on the internet, over the radio and, most importantly, on television. In Poland one only has to look at the rise of Andrzej Lepper in the 2001 election to see how the media can prompt and facilitate rapid changes in the political landscape.

Through the mid-1990s the left, and particularly the CSPs, benefited in some countries from being able to strongly influence the output of the electronic media. This structural advantage has, however, not proven to be a long-standing one as the electronic media across the region is now widely perceived as being more or less neutral in its political coverage. The challenge for the left in central Europe (as frequently is the case in western Europe) comes in the form of the print media, where media consortiums are often critical of left-wing politics. Where parties have genuinely social-democratised, the worry is not so stark but where retrenchment has occurred, socialist-Communist parties can be shut out (or kicked out) of popular debates. The normal processes of market consolidation and the intervention of media moguls such as Rupert Murdoch are unlikely to assist the left in getting a value-neutral message across. In fact, it is often remarkably difficult to find a discussion of left-wing politics in some countries as more centre-right/right leaning owners exert their editorial influence.

The left does not have the option of relying solely on one party paper or on a number of small party produced documents to get its message across. The 52,000 readers of Neues Deutschland in Germany, for example, are already converted to the PDS cause (48,000 of them have subscriptions to the paper) and there is little opportunity for the PDS to expand its voter base or reach out to other societal groups through this medium (although publishing ND does, of course, serve the exceptional useful purpose of keeping the membership up-to-date with PDS politics and left-wing politics in general) (http://www.ivw.de/auflagen2/web/registriert/index_regged.htm).

Parties need to grasp the opportunity to create web presences that not only convey modern, slick and professional images but also actively cater for the ever-changing needs of a curious electorate. Traditionally parties have been cautious in exploiting the interactive capacities of this new medium, and have tended to focus more on information provision. This is even alleged to be so in the US where, one would have presumed, such communication techniques would be most developed: during the 1996 presidential election two academics observed that rather than utilise the potentially revolutionary democratising potential of the internet, “it appears that campaigns restrict their usage to relatively non-interactive, one directional ways of communicating with voters, supporters and reporters” (Klinenberg and Perrin, 2000: 34). Yet, just as is the case in the non-electronic sphere, where parties do attempt to make the most of the internet, it is the larger ones that are most prepared (for understandable reasons) to invest time, energy and resources into the electronic sector. As Rachel Gibson et. al stress in their study of German parties’ use of the internet during the 2002 election campaign, the “major parties are now beginning to take the internet very seriously as a communication tool, particularly in terms of election campaigning” (Gibson et. al., 2003: 77).

This is a clear example of a challenge that could be an opportunity. The socio-structural environment in central Europe is much different to that in the USA or western Europe: but internet usage will rise and the importance of electronic communication will increase. The parties of the left in central Europe must therefore try and react quickly to these challenges in

order to establish a clear competitive advantage in both broadly political and specifically electoral terms. The modern political consumer in central Europe, just as in western Europe and the USA, is likely to want specific information from specific sources at specific times: and this is a challenge that *all parties* are going to have to come to terms with. The political consumer is quite prepared to go and look for this and it is imperative that they have little difficulty accessing the information that they require – otherwise they (as a potential voter) will be politically lost. Although levels of internet usage in central Europe remain lower than in western Europe, ever more people will use this medium to gain ‘snapshots’ of information on politics. Parties have to be able to respond to this. Citizens may conceivably want to know a party’s position on a particular issue or problem and the easiest way for many to do this is via the internet. They are not going to want to have to fight through masses of other information to get there though. The left therefore has to adapt to the changing media landscape and to broaden its methods of societal penetration. This may not enable it to ‘make-up’ structural deficits, but it will enable it to get its message across in a clear and concise way to those who are interested.

4. Party Resources: The Organisational Dilemma

In western Europe, the age of the mass party appears to be over. In recent years political science journals have been filled with contributions attempting to re-define the different types of political party that now appear to prevail in an era where membership numbers have plummeted to unprecedentedly low levels. Traditionally, this was seen as a potentially dangerous development as core channels of interest representation were being neglected and the population was withdrawing from active participation in the political process. While this interpretation is by no means widely accepted, it is clear that the nature of democratic party competition is changing. This is as true in central Europe as it is in the older western democracies.

The left in central Europe, including the former Communist parties, of course, have hardly been beacons of hope in this process of de-memberisation. But, the CSPs still remain in a position of strength as they have many more members than do their competitors. This may well not last into the long-term, but it still gives them a competitive advantage at the turn of the 21st Century. As empirical political science continues to prove, strong linkages to collateral organisations (i.e. trade unions) and strong membership bases do equate to better performances at the polls. Thomas Poguntke unambiguously argues that maintaining a web of linkages through society and attempting to hold onto (and even recruit) members is worthwhile as they still represent “important electoral assets” (Poguntke, 2002: 58).

At the end of the 1990s parties such as the KSČM, despite suffering considerable membership losses through the decade, still had approximately 140,000 members while the Democratic Left Alliance in Poland registered around 80,000. Some of the prominent government parties have had many fewer members – the Czech Social Democrats, for example, had a mere 18,000 paid up supporters, while the Civic Democrats only had 19,000 (Lewis, 2003: 166). While it is certainly *not* the case that membership and resource advantages guarantee electoral success, it is fair to assume that they assist parties in getting their message across and expanding their voter base.

The members of former Communist parties are naturally older on average than members of other parties. The PDS in eastern Germany has turned this to its own electoral advantage and the ‘Knochenarbeit’ of its ‘Turborentner’ has greatly assisted the party in its attempts to stabilise its position in Germany and a neglect of the membership in the name of appealing to the wider electorate is indeed a dangerous game. While excessive member empowerment can hamstring political elites, members none the less need to be factored into

political processes. If CSPs are able to continue to do this, then their considerably larger memberships will indeed remain an electoral asset in at least the medium-term.

Concluding Remarks

The paths of development that parties of the left have undertaken have been neither linear nor identical. The constellation of left-wing forces that exist across central Europe is therefore different from state to state. In some a strong, united and resilient Communist movement has established itself to the left of a reform-orientated social democratic party. In others, parties of the hard left are in much weaker positions as parties of the centre-left dominate. Parties that centralised power in a small group of elite actors in the immediate post-1990 period have enjoyed 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 remained much more ideologically conservative and have remained neo-Communist in orientation rather than social democratic.

Many of the challenges that the left faces are not unique. All parties in central European party systems face considerable challenges in attempting to successfully shape the dynamics of the transformation from prospective to genuine EU member. While many of these challenges are similar, the left may well need to adopt unique means in attempting to overcome them. The left will, for example, need to continue re-defining and re-stating what a socialist/Communist political economy would look like in a 21st Century EU. The left also needs to avoid promising too much to its supporters and to concentrate on delivering when in government. To misquote Napoleon, “glory is fleeting but electoral obscurity is forever”. When the left enjoys the glory of winning an election, it must have an agenda worth implementing to hand – otherwise obscurity will be its long-term destination. The left needs to meet the challenge of shaping some of the EU’s flagship policies: the Common Agricultural Policy, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Regional Policy etc. All of these will need reforming/genuinely creating in the years to come, and if the left in central Europe is going to enjoy political acceptance it will have to come together and seek common positions and policies. The parties of the left will also have to come to terms with their ever shrinking memberships and with a press that will never be intrinsically supportive of their political platforms. Challenges are not in short supply. But, as the famous British war-time leader Winston Churchill once said: “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty”. If the left takes this attitude, then the future need not necessarily be that bad at all.

References

- Biezen, Ingrid van (1998): 'Building Party Organisations and the Relevance of Past Models: The Communist and Socialist Parties in Spain and Portugal' in *West European Politics*, 21 (2): 32-62.
- Biezen, Ingrid van (2000): 'On the Internal Balance of Power: Party Organisations in New Democracies' in *Party Politics*, 6 (4): 395-417.
- Dahl, Robert A. (1971): *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Denitch, Bogdan Denis (1990): *The End of the Cold War: European Unity, Socialism and the Shift in Global Power* (London: Verso).
- Evans, Geoffrey and Michael Whitfield (1995): 'Economic Ideology and Political Success: Communist-successor Parties in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary compared', in *Party Politics*, 1 (4): 565-578.
- Gibson, Rachel, Andrea Römmele and Stephen Ward (2003): 'German Parties and Internet Campaigning in the 2002 Federal Election', in *German Politics*, 12 (1): 79-108.
- Grzymala-Busse, Anna (1999): 'Czech and Slovak Communist Successor Party Transformations After 1990: Organizational Resources, Elite Capacities and Public Commitments', in John Ishiyama (ed.): *Communist Successor Parties in Post-Communist Politics* (Carmack, New York: Nova Science).
- Grzymala-Busse, Anna (2002): *Redeeming the Communist Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Hanley, Sean (1999): 'The New Right in the New Europe? Unravelling the Ideology of Czech Thatcherism', in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 4 (2): 163-190.
- Hough, Dan (2002): *The Fall and Rise of the PDS in Eastern Germany, 1989-2000* (Birmingham: Birmingham University Press).
- Ishiyama, John (1997): 'The Sickle or the Rose? Previous Regime Types and the Evolution of the Ex-Communist Parties in Post-Communist Politics' in *Comparative Political Studies*, 30 (3): 299-334.
- Ishiyama, John and Andras Bozoki (2001): 'Adaptation and Change; Characterizing the Survival Strategies of the Communist Successor Parties' in *Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 17 (3): 32-51.
- Ishiyama, John T. and Sahar Shafqat (2000): 'Party Identity Change in Post-Communist Politics: The Cases of the Successor Parties in Hungary, Poland and Russia', in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 33: 439-455.
- Kitschelt, Herbert (1994): *The Transformation of European Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Kitschelt, Herbert (1995): 'Formation of Party Cleavages in Post-Communist Democracies: Theoretical Propositions', in *Party Politics*, 1 (4): 447-72.
- Kitschelt, Herbert et al. (1999): *Post-Communist Party Systems: Competition, Representation and Inter-Party Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Klinenberg, Eric and Andrew Perrin (2000): 'Symbolic Politics in the Information Age: The 1996 Republican Presidential Campaigns in Cyberspace', in *Information Communication and Society*, 3 (1): 17-38.

- Lewis, Paul G. (2003): 'Political Parties' in Stephen White, Judy Batt and Paul G. Lewis (eds.): *Developments in Central and Eastern European Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave), pp.153-172.
- Mateju, Petr, Blanka Rehakova and Geoffrey Evans (1999): 'The Politics of Interests and Class Realignment in the Czech Republic, 1992-96', in Geoffrey Evans (ed.): *The End of Class Politics? Class Voting in Comparative Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Millard, Frances (2003) 'Poland' in Stephen White, Judy Batt and Paul G. Lewis (eds.): *Developments in Central and Eastern European Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave), pp. 23-40.
- Orenstein, Michael (1998): 'A Genealogy of Communist Successor Parties in East-Central Europe and the Determinants of their Success', in *East European Politics and Society*, 12 (3): 472-99.
- Panbianco, Angelo (1988): *Political Parties: Organisation and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Poguntke, Thomas (2002): 'Party Organisational Linkage: Parties Without Firm Social Roots?' in Kurt Richard Luther and Ferdinand Müller-Rommel (eds.): *Political Parties in the New Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 43-62.
- Waller, Michael (1995): 'Adaptation of the Former Communist Parties of East-Central Europe: A Case of Democratization?' in *Party Politics*, 1 (4): 373-90.
- Waller, Michael, Bruno Coppieters and Kris Deschouwer (eds.) (1994): *Social Democracy in a Post-Communist Europe* (London: Frank Cass).
- Williams, Kieran (1997): 'National Myths in the New Czech Liberalism', in Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin (eds.): *Myths and Nationhood* (London: Hurst), pp.132-140.
- Williams, Kieran (2003): 'The Czech Republic and Slovakia' in Stephen White, Judy Batt and Paul G. Lewis (eds.): *Developments in Central and East European Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave), pp.41-73.