GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Government and Opposition, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 32–55, 2011
doi:10.1111/j.1477-7053.2010.01328.x

Michael Holmes and *Simon Lightfoot*[1]

Limited Influence? The Role of the Party of European Socialists in Shaping Social Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE (CEE) in 1989–90 created the opportunity for those states to develop democratic political systems. This was a demanding challenge, requiring the CEE states to put in place new institutions, structures and modes of behaviour in a very short space of time. The changes were driven at least in part by the desire of these states to join the European Union (EU). One very important component of the new political systems was political parties,[2] with the CEE states having to create pluralist parties and party systems. Established party actors from the EU, including EU-based transnational party federations (hereafter Europarties), sought to foster the emergence of the new parties and to shape the new systems in a Western image. In the literature on the subject the role of transnational cooperation is identified as a useful area for research into the Europeanization of parties in CEE states, in

[1] The authors would like to thank party officials from the various social democratic parties and the PES who provided such useful and insightful comments in interviews. Liverpool Hope provided travel funds for Michael Holmes to carry out interviews in CEE states and their support is acknowledged with thanks. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at 'Shaping and Reshaping Social Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe', Cevipol, Université libre de Bruxelles, 28–9 September 2007 and the panel 'Perspectives on European Social Democracy', 59th Political Studies Association annual conference, Manchester, 7–9 April 2009. We would also like to acknowledge the helpful advice and comments on early drafts of this article received from Charlie Burns, Stephen Day, Nicholas Rees, Fiona Ross and two anonymous referees.

[2] Although, interestingly, the Commission chose not to include parties among the political conditions of entry. See Geoffrey Pridham, 'European Union Accession Dynamics and Democratization in Central and Eastern Europe: Past and Future Perspectives', *Government and Opposition*, 41: 3 (2006), pp. 373–400.

particular the role played by Europarties in shaping the nature of post-communist parties and party systems.[3] However, there is a sharp debate about the effectiveness of the activities of Europarties in encouraging the establishment and development of parties in the CEE states.[4]

Three main perspectives can be identified. The first contends that parties from the EU, and especially EU-based transnational party federations, played a key role in encouraging the establishment and development of parties in the CEE states.[5] This is what might be called the 'positive influence' scenario, with evidence of a positive impact both before and after accession. Pridham argues that the federations contributed significantly to the trajectory of the main CEE parties in terms of helping to develop their policy programmes, campaigning techniques and ideological profiles.[6] Work by Desoldato has also suggested the crucial agency of the Party of European Socialists (PES) in the socialization of its affiliated CEE parties.[7]

A second view argues that, while EU party actors might indeed have contributed to the foundation of parties in CEE, their long-term impact has been superficial.[8] In particular, once the CEE states gained membership of the EU, the ability of established Western EU

[3] Zsolt Enyedi, 'The "Europeanisation" of Eastern Central European Party Systems', *epsnet kiosk plus: The Net Journal of Political Science*, 5: 1 (2007), pp. 67–74.

[4] See Tim Haughton, 'When Does the EU Make a Difference? Conditionality and the Accession Process in Central and Eastern Europe', *Political Studies Review*, 5: 2 (2007), pp. 233–46.

[5] See in particular Geoffrey Pridham, 'Complying with the European Union's Democratic Conditionality: Transnational Party Linkages and Regime Change in Slovakia, 1993–98', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51: 7 (1999), pp. 1221–44; Geoffrey Pridham, 'Patterns of Europeanization and Transnational Party Cooperation: Party Development in Central and Eastern Europe', in Paul G. Lewis (ed.), *Party Development and Democratic Change in Post-Communist Europe: The First Decade*, London, Frank Cass, 2001, pp. 179–98; Geoffrey Pridham, 'External Influences on Party Development and Transnational Party Cooperation: The Case of Post-Communist Europe', in K. Dowding, J. Hughes and H. Margetts (eds), *Challenges to Democracy: Ideas, Involvement and Institutions*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001, pp. 169–87; Giorgia Delsoldato, 'Eastern Enlargement by the European Union and Transnational Parties', *International Political Science Review*, 23: 3 (2002), pp. 269–89.

[6] See Pridham, 'Patterns of Europeanization and Transnational Party Cooperation'.

[7] See Delsoldato, 'Eastern Enlargement'.

[8] Tim Haughton, 'Driver, Conductor or Fellow Passenger? EU Membership and Party Politics in Central and Eastern Europe', *Journal of Communist Studies and*

actors to influence patterns of development fell away markedly. Once accession was assumed, the active leverage of EU-based actors over CEE parties all but disappeared. Ágh, for example, argues that the Europeanization of CEE parties may have changed the external face of the parties but, overall, Europeanization has been something of a cosmetic process that leaves the internal roots of the party organization largely unchanged.[9] Ladrech has illustrated this in relation to shallow Europeanization where parties said the right things prior to membership but then showed their true colours once they were in the EU.[10] This can be simplified as a 'declining influence' scenario, with Europarties having a positive effect before the CEE states became members of the EU, and their influence waning thereafter.

The third view is that cooperation improved after accession, with parties converging towards the classic European ideological patterns and integrating rapidly with the European party federations once they had joined the Union.[11] This is a kind of 'increasing influence' scenario. Enyedi and Lewis argue that, while the main Europarties were active before accession, effective cooperation strengthened significantly after membership. Though there are significant exceptions, they argue that CEE parties converged towards the classic European ideological patterns after accession and have rapidly integrated with the Europarties, which act as the most crucial vehicles of standardization.[12]

Transition Politics, 25: 4 (2009), pp. 413–26; Malida Vachudova, 'Tempered by the EU? Political Parties and Party Systems Before and After Accession', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15: 6 (2008), pp. 861–79.

[9] Attila Ágh, 'East-Central Europe: Parties in Crisis and the External and Internal Europeanisation of the Party Systems', in P. Burnell (ed.), *Globalising Democracy: Party Politics in Emerging Democracies*, London, Routledge, 2006, pp. 88–103.

[10] See Robert Ladrech, 'Europeanization of Parties in Western and Eastern Europe: The Variable Nature of the EU's Attraction', *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 10: 2 (2008), pp. 139–50.

[11] Zsolt Enyedi and Paul G. Lewis, 'The Impact of the European Union on Party Politics in Central and Eastern Europe', in P. Lewis and Z. Mansfeldova, *The European Union and Party Politics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2006, pp. 231–49; see also Paul G. Lewis, 'Changes in the Party Politics of the New EU Member States in Central Europe: Patterns of Europeanization and Democratization', *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 10: 2 (2008), pp. 151–65.

[12] See Enyedi and Lewis, 'The Impact of the European Union'; Lewis, 'Changes in the Party Politics of the New EU Member States'.

To test these competing views, this article makes use of a case study of the PES's engagement with social democratic parties in Central and Eastern Europe. The article presents some new empirical material, derived from a series of interviews with social democratic party officials in a number of CEE states.[13] This also allows analysis of how these party officials have interpreted several years of actual membership of the CEE states. The article concludes that the overall influence of party federations has been limited, and that these limitations were as much in evidence before enlargement took place as they were afterwards. Our conclusions indicate a 'limited influence' scenario which contrasts with all three of the earlier analytical perspectives.

Of course, the scenarios above are simplifications. The real-life contribution of the PES to the development of CEE social democratic parties is far too multifaceted to be reduced to such basic terms. However, they are an effective shorthand means of highlighting the differences between the various analytical models. Our argument is constructed on the following basis. First, we need to be able to identify the impact – or absence of impact – of Europarties. To do this, we make use of the framework developed by Haughton, who puts forward 'impact benchmarks'. With particular reference to the impact of links with Europarties, he suggests that a high impact would be 'clear evidence of significant policy borrowing from such groups', a medium impact would involve 'evidence of policy borrowing only on explicitly "European issues" ' and a low benchmark would indicate 'very little evidence of any impact'.[14]

We also utilize the well-established prism of Europeanization, which we take in this context to mean the effect of European integration upon national political parties, as a framework for our analysis.[15] Ladrech's seminal work identifies five features of the

[13] The history and developments of the parties under study are based on analysis of a variety of secondary resources, party documentation and 10 semi-structured interviews carried out with international secretaries, MEPs and officials from the PES between 2005 and 2008. Interviews focused on attempting to gauge respondents' attitudes to the role of the PES in developing social democratic parties in CEE states and ascertaining perceived benefits and problems associated with the strategies adopted by the PES.

[14] Haughton, 'Driver, Conductor or Fellow Passenger?', p. 424.

[15] Robert Ladrech, 'Europeanization and Political Parties: Towards a Framework for Analysis', *Party Politics*, 8: 4 (2002), pp. 389–403; Haughton, 'Driver, Conductor or Fellow Passenger?'; see also Ladrech, 'Europeanization of Parties in Western and

Europeanization of political parties, but we have condensed these into three to create an analytical framework. First, we look at structural adaptation by the CEE parties to the EU and the effectiveness of the PES in facilitating this adaptation. Structural adaptation covers two of the dimensions of Europeanization discussed by Ladrech, the internal re-organization of parties and their development of new relations with transnational federations. Second, we look at patterns of party competition among CEE parties, both in terms of interparty and party–government relations, and again seek to evaluate the effect of the PES in this area. Third, Europeanization involves a programmatic dimension, with parties adapting their policies to fit into the EU. Once again, we seek to examine how the PES has influenced policy change in the CEE parties, both in terms of their policies on integration and on their wider policy programmes.[16]

THE PES AND THE STRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF CEE PARTIES

The first area to examine is the structural adaptation of the CEE parties. We need to be conscious of the fact that parties are bound to adapt structurally to the EU in some form or other, so any measure of the impact of the PES ought to look beyond the simple fact of adaptation to evaluate the significance of that change. Our analysis will suggest that the PES did not intervene early or effectively in supporting structural adaptation. Thus, although the indicators of structural adaptation to the EU are evident – particularly in the form of new internal structures and membership of Europarties – the PES cannot claim great influence.

This is largely due to concerns on the side of the Europarties about the possible detrimental impact of enlargement. Enlargement offered both potential advantages and potential disadvantages to Europarties. As Bardi argues, EU expansions can expose Europarties to disturbances from arenas not yet socialized to EU

Eastern Europe; and Thomas Poguntke, Nicholas Aylott, Robert Ladrech and Kurt Richard Luther, 'The Europeanisation of National Party Organisations: A Conceptual Analysis', *European Journal of Political Research,* 46: 6 (2007), pp. 747–71.

[16] Michael Holmes and Simon Lightfoot 'The Europeanisation of Left Political Parties: Limits to Adaptation and Consensus', *Capital and Class*, 93 (2007), pp. 101–19.

rules and procedures.[17] The PES became involved in a complex scenario in which it was trying simultaneously to promote social democracy and European integration in the CEE states, while at the same time trying to protect the interests of its established member-parties. Indeed, the PES took time to respond to the changed situation after 1989, in part due to fears that enlargement might delay or weaken attempts to reform EU decision-making but also reflecting concerns about the nature of the newly emerging left parties in CEE.[18] The PES was also wary that enlargement could have deleterious consequences for it because of the challenging nature of enlargement to CEE states, unless effective operational practices and coherent organizational statutes were put in place.[19] Therefore, in the early phases of the establishment of social democratic parties in CEE, structural assistance tended to come more from bilateral ties[20] and the Socialist International (SI) took the initiative in including CEE parties, and subsequently sought to persuade the PES in turn to incorporate them. An indication of this was the establishment of the European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity in January 1993, which, although based in the PES secretariat, was an SI initiative.[21]

The approach of the PES changed following the adoption of the Copenhagen criteria in 1993, at which point the PES moved to incorporate CEE parties.[22] Ladrech argues that, apart from obvious notions of social democratic brotherhood, there were two practical reasons why the PES decided to develop and strengthen ties with these parties. First, the PES was in a position to advise parties on

[17] Luciano Bardi, 'European Party Federations' Perspectives', in Pascal Delwit, Erol Kulahci and C. Van Walle (eds), *The Europarties: Organisation and Influence*, Brussels, ULB, 2004, pp. 309–22.

[18] Michael Newman, 'The Party of European Socialists and EU Enlargement to the East', *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, 56 (1997), pp. 29–48.

[19] Stephen Day, 'Developing a Conceptual Understanding of Europe's Transnational Political Parties (with a Specific Focus on the Party of European Socialists)', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 13: 1 (2005), pp. 59–77.

[20] For example, the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party was very strongly supported by the Swedish Social Democrats, who financed the party and helped extensively with organization in the first free elections.

[21] See Pridham, 'Complying with the European Union's Democratic Conditionality', p. 71.

[22] See Newman, 'The Party of European Socialists and EU Enlargement to the East'.

issues such as organizational development in order to influence the partisan composition of governments. Second, by influencing the partisan composition in nation states the PES could try to influence the 'balance of power in an enlarged EU'.[23]

More substantially, the PES also set out a path for CEE parties to become members. The party's articles of membership identify three categories of association: first, observer status for social democratic and socialist parties with 'close links with the PES' (Article 8.5); second, associate status for 'Socialist International parties in countries that are candidates for accession to the European Union, or are EFTA member states, or in countries with an association agreement with the Union' (Article 8.3); finally, full membership for 'Socialist International parties in European Union member states or in states having signed an accession treaty with the European Union' (Article 8.1). Thus, there is a clear hierarchy of membership in the PES, and parties from CEE states have had to ascend that ladder to attain full membership and full voting rights.[24]

They did so at varying speeds. Parties from the Central European states (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) had the quickest trajectory. In 1995 six parties (two of them from Poland) were granted observer status. The process in the three Baltic states took a little longer, with the three parties only becoming observer parties in 1998, along with two Romanian parties. In the case of Bulgaria, the PES sought additional 'observation time' due to the perceived complexity of the case.[25] However, all 12 parties were 'upgraded' to associate party status by the PES Milan Congress of March 1999. This decision provided the accession parties with a much better structure for cooperation as the parties were able to become more involved in policy discussions. A real change in the quality of relations came in May 2001 when the Eastern parties were fully integrated into the PES's internal decision-making machinery.

Overall, it is argued that by incorporating parties from CEE prior to full EU membership, the PES was able to socialize these parties.[26]

[23] Robert Ladrech 'Programmatic Change in the Party of European Socialists', in P. Delwit (ed.), *Social Democracy in Europe*, Brussels, ULB, 2005, pp. 49–58.

[24] PES, *Statutes of the PES*, Brussels, PES, 2006.

[25] Maria Spirova, 'Europarties and Party Development in EU-Candidate States: The Case of Bulgaria', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60: 5 (2008), pp. 791–808.

[26] Stefano Bartolini, *Restructuring Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

In some countries – notably Bulgaria[27] and Latvia[28] – PES influence has been highlighted as playing an important role. However, the PES was more of a follower than a leader in this process. The key catalyst to greater engagement with CEE states was the European Council meeting which adopted the Copenhagen criteria. The greater engagement of the PES came as a consequence of that decision, and this limited the ability of the PES to engage effectively with the CEE parties. There is similar evidence for this conclusion on the part of both the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR) and to a lesser extent the European Peoples' Party (EPP).[29] This analysis supports the argument that the PES lacked effectiveness in its engagement with CEE parties prior to their accession.

THE PES AND THE REORIENTATION OF PATTERNS OF DEMOCRATIC PARTY COMPETITION

In relation to our second criterion, the main debate within the PES was focused on the attitudes of members to former communist parties. To begin with, the PES sought to encourage the emergence of parties that originated from movements opposed to communism,[30] while parties associated with the former communist ruling parties were generally treated as pariahs. The newly emerging social democratic parties in the CEE states had to deal with that taint of the past regime and its failed policies, just through sharing a common left-wing heritage. For example, the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party (LSDSP) included members of the former Latvian Communist Party – indeed, they played a leading role in the party in the 1990s. This led to a deterioration in relations with the PES, particularly because the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) and German Social Democrats (SPD) were suspicious of the role of some of the

[27] Spirova, 'Europarties and Party Development in EU-Candidate States'.

[28] Karl Magnus Johansson, 'External Legitimization and Standardization of National Political Parties: The Case of Estonian Social Democracy', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 39: 2 (2008), pp. 157–83.

[29] See David Hanley, *Beyond the Nation State: Parties in the Era of European Integration*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2008, p. 134.

[30] Pascal Delwit, 'Electoral Developments in European Social Democracy', in Delwit, *Social Democracy in Europe,* pp. 59–78.

former communists. It was only in the mid-2000s that the LSDSP began to re-establish contact with the PES.[31]

In some cases, that problem was not just in the mind, as the new social democratic parties were actually derived from or associated with the former ruling communist parties. Thus, the problems of organizational establishment were particularly fraught for social democrats, as the difficulties involved either trying to create brand-new structures (as in the Estonian Social Democrats (SDE)) or having to deal with the negative connotations that came with the territory if the PES were seen to be associated with a former ruling party (such as the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP)). For example, an official of the Latvian LSDSP noted how 'official ideology and the mass media write every day that left-wing ideology is something wrong, something shameful, something pro-Moscow, something pro-communist'.[32]

Three types of relationship between social democratic and communist parties can be identified: antipathy, adaptation and accommodation.[33] First, there are those who are antipathetic to any collusion with the former communist party. This would include, for example, the Estonian social democrats, though the picture here is muddied by the overlapping ethnic tensions between Estonians and Russians (the social democrats being a largely Estonian party, the former communists being preponderantly Russian). Second, there are cases where the former communists have successfully adapted and have claimed the social democratic mantle for their own. The most prominent example is the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), although the Hungarian MSZP also fits this category to some extent. Third, there are social democratic parties that have sought an accommodation with the former communist party, either through some form of electoral co-operation or through allowing the one-time communists to merge with them. Examples include the Lithuanian LSDP[34] and the Democratic Left Alliance-Labor Union (SLD/UP) alliance in Poland.

[31] Interview, Riga, 2007.

[32] Interview, Riga, 2007.

[33] Delwit, 'Electoral Developments in European Social Democracy'.

[34] There is a Lithuanian Labour Party that was created in 2003. Despite using the label 'Labour Party' it is seen to have an 'indistinct ideological profile' with very little in the party programme that indicates a coherent leftist profile. It did consider joining the PES group in the EP but opted instead for the European Democratic Party. The LSDP as a firmly entrenched PES member would have vetoed the inclusion of this new and populist party, see Kjetil Duvold and Mindaugas Jurkynas, 'Europeanization

It is this latter form that has emerged as the predominant pattern. The continuing transformation of CEE party systems made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the different forms of social democratic parties. Elections throughout the 1990s were marked by persistent regroupings and the foundation of new parties.[35] In some countries, the social democrats emerged as clearly the dominant party. But sometimes successor parties teamed up with newly founded social democrats, often to save themselves from sinking into electoral irrelevance, and thereby created more serious identity problems for the parties. Delwit argues that the most successful strand included the parties from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, and that these were also the ones that were most similar to West European social democratic parties.[36] In these three countries social democratic parties have been able to form governments on a number of occasions, although the implosion of social democracy in Poland in 2005 suggests that they were not all as well established as first thought. In other countries, social democrats have been less successful. The Romanian party has lagged behind, while social democratic parties in the Baltic states have generally struggled to play a key role in their countries. In part this situation can be attributed to the lack of support from Europarties in the early days of their formation.

As a result, the PES has had to change its stance, accepting the necessity of working with former communist parties. This reflects the weaknesses of its original strategy, which had clearly failed to take account of the realities on the ground. In many cases it clearly did not automatically make sense to exclude former communists and seek to have nothing to do with them. But other problems with the initial strategies of the PES can be identified. In some cases, it agreed to admit parties too early, before their true identity had been secured, and this created problems.[37] As van Biezen argued, both the cleavage

Without Party Involvement: The Case of Lithuania', in Lewis and Mansfeldova, *The European Union and Party Politics*, pp. 107–27.

[35] See Herbert Kitschelt, Zdenka Mansfeldova, Radoslav Markowski and Gabor Toka, *Post-Communist Party Systems, Competition, Representation, and Inter-Party Cooperation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[36] Delwit, 'Electoral Developments in European Social Democracy'.

[37] Stephen Day, 'Die Osterweiterung der Europarteien Ambivalenzen eines Familienzuwachses', *Osteuropa*, 54: 5–6 (2004), pp. 223–36.

structure and therefore partisan identification were weaker in CEE states than in the majority of Western states.[38] This produced considerable electoral volatility, to which some social democratic parties responded by shifting their ideological focus. As a result, political labels could become meaningless but the status of PES member conferred legitimacy upon these parties and allowed them to distance themselves from any communist past, granting external legitimation.[39] These 'badges of legitimacy'[40] are also obvious in the EPP and are of course not limited to CEE states (Italy and Spain provide excellent examples) but the practice seems more pronounced there. Many of the parties from CEE learned to say the right things, but whether they had genuinely adopted those norms is another matter. Parties had the ambition to fit smoothly into the European associations, but there was not always evidence of ideological or behavioural change.[41] The situation was not helped by the fact that the PES was willing to choose and subsequently drop parties, not on the basis of their ideology, but rather on how powerful they were. 'Politics tended to prevail over ideological orientation and the larger parties happened to be more easily recognized as sister parties.'[42] Two good examples come from Slovakia and Romania.

In Slovakia, relations between the PES and the Direction-Social Democracy (SMER) have been complicated since the SMER was formed when Robert Fico left the Democratic Left Party (SDL) and founded his own party. This move confirmed the failure of the SDL's strategy of trying to integrate and unite the left of the political spectrum. SMER – whose EP observers had chosen to sit with the PES – was the only source of Slovak reinforcements for the PES.[43] Enyedi and Lewis note that SDL initially tried to block SMER's application to

[38] Ingrid van Biezen, 'On the Theory and Practice of Party Formation and Adaptation in New Democracies', *European Journal of Political Research*, 44 (2005), pp. 147–74.

[39] James Sloam, 'West European Social Democracy as a Model for Transfer', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 21: 1 (2005), pp. 67–83.

[40] Poguntke et al., 'The Europeanisation of National Party Organisations'.

[41] Enyedi and Lewis, 'The Impact of the European Union on Party Politics in Central and Eastern Europe'.

[42] Delsoldato, 'Eastern Enlargement by the European Union and Transnational Parties', p. 281.

[43] Karen Henderson, 'Slovak Political Parties and the EU: From Symbolic Politics to Policies', in Lewis and Mansfeldova, *The European Union and Party Politics in East Central Europe*, pp. 149–68.

the PES. But eventually, though the SDL had the 'European' pedigree, it lacked domestic electoral support, and opted for a 'political marriage' with SMER. It merged fully with SMER in 2005, which reinforced SMER's social democratic credential. However, after the 2006 election, Fico led the party away from a clear social democratic position by forming a government with two nationalist parties.[44]

Even in advance of this decision, SMER representatives acknowledged that, 'in the real politics, of course, we don't want to make coalitions with the communists, we don't want to make coalitions with nationalists, of course; for us it is better to make the coalition with standard parties'; but they were also prepared to acknowledge, 'there are very concrete conditions in which we are prepared to make coalitions with other parties'.[45] So SMER regarded the decision to form an alliance with the nationalists as a normal political decision.

However, in October 2006 the PES decided to suspend the SMER.[46] The key reason was because of the alliance with the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS). The decision was based upon Article 10.3 of the PES statutes, which allows for suspension if a party does not respect the statutes, while forming an alliance with a far-right party was deemed to be a contravention of Article 3.2 of the statutes, which states, 'the PES promotes the value of tolerance and specifically condemns racism and xenophobia'. Only the SMER and the Czech Social Democrats (ČSSD) opposed the suspension. This willingness and ability to sanction members was seen as an important institutional development for the PES. However, in February 2008 the PES presidency agreed by qualified majority to lift the suspension of the SMER,[47] after receiving a signed letter from Fico committing the government to respect minority rights – a way for the PES to save

[44] The two nationalist parties were the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). See Vladimir Handl and Vladimir Leška, 'Between Emulation and Adjustment: External Influences on Programmatic Change in the Slovak SDL', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 21: 1 (2005), pp. 105–22.

[45] Interview, Bratislava, 2005.

[46] PES, 'Resolution Adopted by the PES Presidency', Brussels, 12 October 2006, http://www.pes.org/downloads/PES_resolution_on_SMER_EN.pdf (accessed 28 August 2009), see http://www.euractiv.com/en/future-eu/slovak-party-suspended-pes/article-158775 (accessed 20 September 2010).

[47] SMER only regained provisional membership at this time.

face.[48] Only the Belgian and French parties were opposed to this reinstatement. This is despite the fact that the SNS remained part of the government coalition. This was seen as a major victory for the SMER; its website stated it was back 'where it always belonged' – in the social democratic family.

The situation in Romania is also interesting. The theme of belonging to the international structures of the left was used for internal political legitimation. The Romanian Party of Social Democracy (PDSR) emerged out of the National Salvation Front in 1993. The fact that the PDSR was not yet a member of the Socialist International in 2000, when it won the elections, was felt at the level of the party's leadership to be an important deficiency. This international recognition was made even more necessary by the fact that the main rival, the Democratic Party (PD), used to attack the PDSR constantly on the grounds of its 'not being a true social democratic party', and instead claiming the mantle of being 'the only authentic left party' for itself.[49]

After 2000 the international influence on the Romanian left became somewhat more visible at both doctrinal and organizational levels. In 2001, the PDSR absorbed a smaller social democratic grouping, the Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSDR), in part due to the PSDR's membership of the PES, and changed its name to the Social Democrats (PSD). The PSD's relations with the PES meant an acceleration of the democratization of a party structure that has inherited strong authoritarian and conservative influences from its electoral basis.[50] In May 2005 the PSD was granted provisional membership of the PES, which prompted the PD to announce in June 2005 its decision to give up its associate membership of the PES. Enyedi and Lewis argue that this decision was taken because the PSD was the bigger party, although the clear shift to the right on the part of the PD also contributed.

Pridham argues that Europarties played a key role in fostering democratic standards among CEE parties, especially since the Commission did not engage with political parties in the accession process. The examples from Slovakia and Romania question this

[48] Tim Haughton and Marek Rybář, 'A Tool in the Toolbox: Assessing the Impact of EU Membership on Party Politics in Slovakia', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 25: 4 (2009), pp. 540–63.

[49] Letter to the authors from senior PSD official, 2007.

[50] Ibid.

conclusion. Indeed, in relation to Romania, Gallagher argues that, 'the wrecking role of west European interests is evident, led (perhaps astonishingly) by the European socialist parties in the European parliament. The latter continue to back the PSD despite its lead role in sabotaging reforms designed to bring a corrupt oligarchy to account.'[51] Overall he argues that 'the story of Romania and the EU is an unedifying one of top figures in the European left allying with big business to take Romania in on a prospectus that benefits only a tiny handful of local elite figures and foreign investors while worsening local social conditions'. Even Pridham acknowledges that the Europarty 'activity involved mainly certain party elites and restricted groups of activists, so that its direct effects, while significant, could not be described as widespread'.[52]

The PES had clear ideas about preferred political partnerships, but these did not always correspond to the preferences of social democratic parties on the ground. The PES was also quite willing to drop smaller and therefore less influential parties, even if they had been members for a while, once it became clear who could claim to be the main social democratic party in a country. The fact that these larger parties were the communist successor parties was not an issue for the PES. Therefore it is clear that the PES did not shape the party system; it merely responded to the adapting situation with a clear focus on preserving its influence by if necessary choosing the communist successor party 'winners' rather than awaiting the emergence of smaller social democratic parties.

THE PES AND PROGRAMMATIC ADAPTATION

A further dimension of the attempted engagement by the PES was in relation to policy adaptation. There are two aspects worth considering. First, the PES wished to play a role in terms of general social and economic policy adoption and development, and, second, it was involved with policy towards the EU and integration. Initially, policy

[51] T. Gallagher, *The European Union and Romania: Consolidating Backwardness?* Open Europe, 26 September 2006, http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-europefuture/EU_romania_3943.jsp.

[52] Pridham, 'European Union Accession Dynamics and Democratization in Central and Eastern Europe', p. 387.

transfer was not high on the list of either the PES or the CEE parties.[53] Indeed, as Ágh has argued, the social democratic parties often lacked a vision of the future and clear programmatic profiles.[54] However, the programmes of the PES clearly acted as templates in some countries, and the PES sought to engender a West European social democratic vision.[55]

In Slovakia and Poland, there was some borrowing from the PES in the construction of early programmatic documents.[56] This also meant extending the policy portfolio of the parties. For example, in Romania 'affiliation to PES also meant adopting some themes which were not in the traditional portfolio of Romanian social democracy (the European social model, the environment problem, gender balance)'.[57] The conditions placed upon applicant parties were an incentive for programmatic adjustment.[58]

However, the extent to which these new values were embraced suggests only a shallow Europeanization. In part this is linked to the feeling that the process of enlargement was very one-sided and very much along the lines of 'if you want to be in then this is what you have to accept'.[59] This is borne out by the impressions of politicians in the CEE states. As one of them put it, 'it was never a question of whether we wanted it or not, because the rule of the game was that you had to accept it'. These parties were obliged to 'confront Europe as a matter of adaptation and not as a matter of creation'.[60] This contributed to some difficulties between the PES and CEE parties. For the CEE social democrats, demonstrating their own independence and capacity was an important part of trying to establish their electoral identity, so that being seen to be overly reliant on PES prescriptions in the policy sphere caused some problems. Although the CEE parties

[53] Sloam, 'West European Social Democracy as a Model for Transfer'.

[54] Attila Ágh, *The Europeanization of Social Democracy in East Central Europe*, Brussels, Europäische Politik, 2004.

[55] Piotr Buras, 'Polish Social Democracy, Policy Transfer and Programmatic Change', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 21: 1 (2005), pp. 84–104.

[56] Sloam, 'West European Social Democracy as a Model for Transfer'.

[57] Letter to the authors from senior PSD official, 2007.

[58] Vachudova, 'Tempered by the EU?'.

[59] Stephen Day, 'Assessing the Role and Significance of Transnational Political Parties within the European Union', executive summary, ESF Exploratory Workshop, 2002.

[60] Ibid.

appeared to embrace the PES programme, the fact that parties from these states have very different traditions and approaches is crucial. MEPs representing CEE states tend to be less libertarian and more traditional or authoritarian than their colleagues from Western Europe. We also see a similar issue of ideological dilution for the EPP, with the introduction of fewer federalist-minded parties from the CEE states and the ELDR who saw more economically liberal parties join from CEE states. Eastern–Western differences are important in accounting for internal divisions within the EP groups as enlargement has made them less cohesive.[61]

This was particularly true in terms of general differences of opinion about the nature of ideology. One criticism of the process of integrating the new parties into both the PES and the EPP was that 'there was little sense that newcomers would be asked "what is your definition of social-democracy/Christian-democracy?" '.[62] At one level, this was little more than an abstract issue, as the new member parties tended to regard the EU as being social democratic by definition. This is evident in comments from the Latvian and Estonian parties, both of whom asserted simply that 'the European Union is a social democratic project'.[63] But once you go beyond general notions of the nature of the EU to examine detailed policy preferences, the fact that the PES failed to engage in any significant policy discussion with its new members becomes significant.

It was salient precisely because many of the CEE social democratic parties brought a different perspective. They were strongly in favour of rapid growth and transformation, often only paying lip service to the idea of social cohesion. The PES was trying to absorb new actors 'which voice an unprecedented amount of difference' and whose 'representatives will defend positions of countries whose institutions, politics, mentalities and needs have a radically different history and connotation'.[64] As Day argues, 'despite the smiles, warm handshakes and "family" photo sessions, "identity dilution" is a problem that will

[61] Erik Voeten, 'Enlargement and the "Normal' European Parliament', in J. Thomassen (ed.), *The Legitimacy of the European Union after Enlargement*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 147–72.

[62] Day, 'Assessing the Role and Significance of Transnational Political Parties'.

[63] Interviews, 2007.

[64] Delsoldato, 'Eastern Enlargement by the European Union and Transnational Parties'.

have to be faced by the Europarties'.[65] This was a key problem for the EPP with the eastern enlargement offering allies to the British Conservative Party. The new rules on Europarties and their funding agreed in 2004[66] allowed the British Conservatives to form an anti-federalist bloc called the European Conservatives and Reformists Group, with Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS) and the Czech Civic Democrats (ODS). The access to money via Europarties is important, but it is clear that ideological and political concerns still take precedence.

Social democratic parties in the CEE states had a quite different perception of their preferred economic and social policies to that of many of their West European counterparts. Rather than seeking to 'come closer to the western model of social democracy',[67] they were quite prepared to accept a radical transformation, and were undertaking a rapid adjustment to market capitalism and embracing quite a neoliberal brand of economics. For them, support for EU membership was an intrinsic part of this transformation precisely because it reinforced the policy direction in which they were heading. Of course, this was in keeping with the views of some western social democratic leaders as well, who saw the EU as a means of 'binding leviathan'.[68]

Since becoming full members, some parties have been seeking to flex their muscles. For example, one party threatened to organize a referendum to say no to enlargement if its demands were not met.[69] Within the PES, the election of Poul Nyrup Rasmussen as PES president in 2004 can be attributed to the role of new members from CEE states. His opponent, Giuliano Amato, enjoyed the support of Germany's SPD, Britain's Labour Party, Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE) and Italy's Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) and Democratic Socialists (SDI). However, Rasmussen enjoyed the support of the

[65] Day, 'Assessing the Role and Significance of Transnational Political Parties'.

[66] Simon Lightfoot, 'The Consolidation of Europarties? The "Party Regulation" and the Development of Political Parties in the European Union', *Representation*, 42 (2006), pp. 303–14.

[67] Donald Sassoon, 'Fin-de-Siècle Socialism: The United, Modest Left', *New Left Review*, 227, 1998, pp. 88–124.

[68] Ken Dyson, 'The Franco-German Relationship and Economic and Monetary Union: Using Europe to "Bind Leviathan" ', *West European Politics,* 22 (1999), pp. 25–44.

[69] See Day, 'Assessing the Role and Significance of Transnational Political Parties'.

majority of new members, plus the French, Belgian, Portuguese and Nordic Socialists, and this was enough to swing the election in his favour and show that the new member parties were not afraid to stand up to the PES's big guns.

In terms of programmatic links, the PES has tried to become more involved in discussions of domestic policy issues and to promote policy cooperation in specific policy areas between the member parties. The problem for the PES has historically been the creation of policies in areas that may not traditionally be seen as social democratic.[70] The social Europe concept is perceived to be important. ' "Currently existing capitalism" in CEE has, in fact, an "inhuman face", hence one could even blame CEE social democrats for not taking the opportunity to "build" a better capitalism. It is particularly important that the PES has regularly emphasized the importance of "economic and social governance in the Union".'[71] However, even in areas of perceived agreement, ideological tensions often prevent anything more than lowest-common-denominator policies. While the inclusion of CEE states has not increased the ideological variation within the PES, it has helped strengthen the position of parties such as the British Labour Party.[72] As we have argued, many CEE parties state, 'in the areas which we want to support and we want to act in, these are much more close to the British model than the French one'. Indeed, it was said in one interview, 'we are more to the third way than to the traditional social democracy'. A SMER party member stated, 'I think that we are much closer to the British Labour Party, because I perceive the positions of Tony Blair and the British Labour Party as being right-ish tools in a left mood'.[73] In Hungary, the MSZSP noted that 'Hungarian people have an exceptionally positive attitude towards British policies, whilst we have more reservations as far as German and French ideas are concerned'.[74] Again, in the Lithuanian LSDP there is a strong attraction to the Third Way approach of the British Labour Party.[75]

[70] Simon Lightfoot, *Europeanizing Social Democracy? The Rise of the PES*, Oxford, Routledge, 2005.

[71] Ágh, *The Europeanization of Social Democracy in East Central Europe.*

[72] See Hanley, *Beyond the Nation State*, p. 77; Dan Hough, 'Third Ways or New Ways: Post Communist Left in Central Europe', *Political Quarterly,* 76: 2 (2005), pp. 253–63.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Interview, Budapest, 2005.

[75] Interview, Vilnius, 2007.

Nonetheless, there are some indications that social democratic parties in the CEE states are starting to develop a more appreciative view of the social protections and restrictions employed in the EU. An interesting example was provided by the Vaxholm[76] case, as it provided an indication of changing attitudes within the LSDSP. Although the Latvian press was united in its support for Laval and its opposition to the Swedish position, the LSDSP 'tried to say that Swedish trade unions are really fighting for the rights of Latvian workers too. Because of our company, they got as much money as Swedish companies would have done, but they paid workers salaries ten times lower than in Sweden.'[77] This provides a classic example of national positions being set aside in favour of a form of social democratic solidarity. However, the final court ruling suggests that social democratic parties still face serious challenges to their policies in the EU.

A second aspect of the attempted policy impact of the PES is in relation to attitudes towards the EU. This is less problematic because before accession it was already apparent that the majority of social democratic parties in CEE states were relatively Euro-enthusiastic.[78] Indeed, some CEE social democratic parties are very strongly in favour of EU membership. The Hungarian Socialist Party has been described as 'by birth, pro-European' and as one which has always had 'a very, very strong pro-European approach'.[79] One of the leading members of the SMER in Slovakia asserted, 'we have supported all integration steps for Slovakia into the European Union'.[80]

[76] In 2004, a Latvian construction company, Laval, won a bid to build a school in Vaxholm in Sweden. However, the Swedish construction trade union, Byggnads, sought to ensure that Laval abided by Swedish wage agreements. Initially, Laval refused to do so, insisting it was a Latvian company employing Latvian workers under Latvian terms and conditions. Consequently, Byggnads instigated a blockade of the worksite, and Laval responded by seeking a court ruling against the union. The case eventually came before the Court of Justice (C-341/05). Although an initial opinion in May 2007 came out in favour of the Swedish union, the final decision in December that year went largely in favour of the Latvian company. See John Gerrard, 'Vaxholm/Laval Case: Its Implications for Trade Unions', *Employee Relations*, 30: 5 (2008), pp. 473–8.

[77] Interview, Riga, 2007.

[78] Robert Rohrschneider and Stephen Whitefield, 'Political Parties, Public Opinion and European Integration in Post-Communist Countries: The State of the Art', *European Union Politics*, 7: 1 (2006), pp. 141–60.

[79] Interview, Budapest, 2005.

[80] Interview, Bratislava, 2005.

In Estonia, the SDE claimed to be 'the only party that was playing the pro-European card, while the rest were bringing a sceptical angle into the campaign', while their Latvian counterparts in the LSDSP note how 'our party has supported from the early 1990s all European projects'.[81]

In some cases, the supportive position of the social democrats contrasts sharply with the positions adopted by other parties. One of the criticisms that the Hungarian social democrats have of their right-wing opponents is that they 'were always gambling with the option of *not Europe*'.[82] But in other countries there is a very high degree of consensus on EU affairs. For example, in Slovakia, 'it's quite apolitical', and the parties there 'can always agree on quite pragmatic issues in this area of European affairs'; 'basically, really, 95 per cent is agreed'.[83]

However, this enthusiasm of social democrats frequently fails to translate into any more practical support. Partly, this is because Europe simply does not feature in political discourse in CEE states, save for very occasional and in very specific issues. For example, in Estonia, 'there are no debates whatsoever on basically anything that is related to the European Union'; 'there is a lack of European debate in Estonia, a real lack of a European debate'.[84] Similarly, in Hungary it has been noted that 'European questions are not at the top of the political agenda in the party. I would even say that they are around the bottom.'[85] A further example comes from the Czech Republic, where the ČSSD gained the reputation of being the most powerful 'pro-European' party during its four-year period of minority government, yet it largely neglected the European issue in its 2002 electoral programme.[86]

This situation arises because countries sought membership as a goal in itself, and did not have an agenda they wished to pursue post-accession. For example, in Estonia, 'before, we had two goals: integration into NATO and integration into the European Union.

[81] Interviews, Riga and Tallinn, 2007.

[82] Interview, Budapest, 2005.

[83] Interview, Bratislava, 2005.

[84] Interview, Riga, 2007.

[85] Interview, Budapest, 2005.

[86] Michael Baun, Jakob Dürr, Dan Marek and Pavel Šaradín, 'The Europeanization of Czech Politics: The Political Parties and the EU Referendum', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44: 2 (2006), pp. 249–80.

After that, nothing.'[87] But now that the CEE countries are inside the European Union, the acquiescence necessary to achieve membership is being replaced in some cases by greater assertiveness. This is particularly evident in Hungary, where 'people accepted the conditions of membership. However, they don't feel really comfortable with this membership.' For the Hungarian social democrats, membership is a means to an end: 'It's a tool, and it has always been a considered as a tool, nothing else, just a tool. For us, for the party, EU membership was to get this tool, not just arriving in paradise.'[88] The weakness of the PES in promoting a shared outlook is therefore evident.

Such attitudes can also be seen in relation to the debate about the European Constitutional Treaty. In Hungary, the view was, 'we want a constitution, but not this one. Of course, we have accepted it as a compromise. We are sorry that the others did not. But we are not crying for this present document. I think that everybody has to swallow the pill, sit down again, and find another solution for a European constitution.'[89] But other parties recognized the need for a constitution of some sort, and were prepared to accept this document as the best thing on offer. The view in Latvia was that 'the European constitution is necessary to protect small states and small nations and self-government from the pressures of national governments'.[90] And again, other parties were very much in favour of the document, such as SMER in Slovakia: 'We have supported the constitution. We thought that it was a very good compromise, and we still think that it's a good document, it's not a problem.'[91]

Thus, enlargement and the expansion of the social democratic family in the EU created particular challenges for the PES. There was perhaps an initial assumption that parties from the accession countries would be not only pro-EU but also grateful for the opportunity to join in. This was always an unrealistic view, but nonetheless Western European parties are still adapting to the changed parameters of political partnership. However, it would be inaccurate to argue that enlargement has weakened social democratic support for integration. The Hungarian party asserts that 'Euro-scepticism is something which has never prevailed in my party', and accepts that

[87] Interview, Tallinn, 2007.
[88] Interview, Budapest, 2005.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Interview, Riga, 2007.
[91] Interview, Bratislava, 2005.

'for us, the great interest is that Europe should work well'.[92] And the EU is still seen as a very important guarantor of democracy in the CEE states. The recent research on support for European integration in CEE states does not suggest a dramatic rise in Euroscepticism among left parties.[93] However, we have seen a decline of enthusiasm for the integration process among some PES members. As Vachudova argues, it appears that being freed from the constraints of conditionality has allowed social democratic parties to revert to policies that they see suiting national electoral circumstances best.[94]

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the evidence presented in this article, it is hard to conclude that the PES played a significant role in helping to construct social democracy in CEE. There is some evidence to suggest that the PES contributed to the framing of a broad social democratic identity in terms of values and abstract ideas,[95] and there is also evidence of a degree of organizational adaptation. However, on a number of issues – policy engagement, competitive influence and structural adaptation – the PES has not played a central role, either before or after the accession of CEE states. And this is despite the fact that there is probably a greater propensity for social democratic parties to develop shared ideas and practices than in many other party families. There is some evidence that the EPP played a more significant role in socializing CEE parties in the early stages, but the withdrawal of the Polish and Czech parties to form a new political party with the British Conservatives shows the weakness of this role. Evidence from the ELDR is even less convincing.[96]

[92] Interview, Budapest, 2005.

[93] Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak, 'Contemporary Euroscepticism in the Party Systems of the European Union Candidate States of Central and Eastern Europe', *European Journal of Political Research*, 43 (2004), pp. 1–27; Petr Kopecky and Cas Mudde, 'The Two Sides of Euroscepticism: Party Positions on European Integration in East Central Europe', *European Union Politics*, 3: 3 (2002), pp. 297–326.

[94] Vachudova, 'Tempered by the EU?'.

[95] Buras, 'Polish Social Democracy, Policy Transfer and Programmatic Change'.

[96] Camilla Sandström, 'The European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party: From Co-operation to Integration', in Delwit, Kulahci and Van Walle (eds), *The Europarties: Organisation and Influence*, pp. 157–84.

We also conclude that the perspective that argues that the long-term impact of party federations has been superficial – after an initially significant contribution to the foundation of parties in CEE – is also somewhat flawed. We agree that unlike previous enlargements where parties tended to look for external legitimacy from individual social democratic parties or federations in the run-up to accession, in 2004 parties looked to the documents of the PES.[97] This tends to support the conclusion of Poguntke et al., who argue that Europarties provide 'at the very least, a socialization effect' or 'at most, a feedback of best practices or ideas to national parties'.[98]

However, our analysis has shown that even in the early stages of the evolution of social democratic parties in the post-communist CEE states, the PES was quite a reluctant and hesitant participant in a number of areas. In terms of organizational linkages, the PES was initially slow to extend contacts into the CEE region. Once it did become more thoroughly involved, it struggled to help support social democratic parties. In part this was linked to limited PES resources, although the fact that the PES is an elite-dominated organization is also important. This has exacerbated the degree of disconnection between party elites and civil society and is helping to create new parties on the left, contributing to an impact in terms of patterns of competition. The weak civil society basis of many CEE parties is also contributing to a kind of 'democratic rollback' in many states, testifying to the fact that earlier expectations about convergence were too monodirectional, simplistic and teleological.

If we return to Haughton's framework, he suggests a low to medium benchmark with regard to the influence of Europarties since accession, albeit with two exceptions. This challenges the view developed by Enyedi and Lewis and is supported by our analysis. Our analysis therefore supports Haughton's conclusion, but refines it by identifying a low benchmark of 'very little evidence of any impact', even before accession. We argue that the main factor that restricts influence is that of domestic political constraints. This conclusion

[97] Interview, Brussels, 2006.

[98] Poguntke et al., 'The Europeanisation of National Party Organisations', pp. 748–9.

supports that offered by Goetz and Hix and of course is applicable across the EU and to both of the other Europarties.[99]

Overall, the role played by the PES in CEE has been superficial, and it has not contributed to deep programmatic or organizational change or to significantly altered patterns of domestic party competition. The superficial dimension should not be completely discounted – PES membership is still an attractive lure for social democratic parties in non-EU states. It is already clear that both the Democratic Party of Serbia and the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina hope to become associate members as soon as their countries have signed a stabilization and association agreement with the European Union. Further afield, both SI and PES membership are a clear goal for certain sections of the Socialist Party of the Ukraine and as a result new research is being published on Europarty influence over post-Soviet parties.[100]

It is therefore already evident that the PES will again be faced with the challenge of dealing with new member parties in applicant countries. If the federation is to learn the lessons of the enlargements of the 2000s, it will need to be prepared to engage with new parties as early as possible and in as open a manner as possible. To do this, it will need to overcome problems of both a practical and a political nature. It will need to address resource issues, it will have to be prepared to countenance disruption of its existing structures and it will also have to be prepared to disturb the interests and preferences of its existing members.

[99] Simon Hix and Klaus Goetz, *Europeanised Politics? European Integration and National Political Systems*, London, Routledge, 2000.

[100] Natalia Timus, 'Coming Closer to Europe: Transnational Cooperation between EPFs and Post-Soviet Parties', *GARNET Working Paper 72/09*, Warwick, 2009.