

A stylized world map composed of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red, primarily in the Western and Southern European regions.

Social Democratic European Election Programmes in Comparison

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1. Introduction

The starting point for the analysis of social democratic European election programmes from 2009 is the current debate on a declaration of principles by the Party of European Socialists (PES). The debate got under way after the resounding defeat of social democratic parties at the European elections in June 2009 in which, in particular, countries with social democratic traditions, such as Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom, suffered major losses. The social democratic group in the European Parliament shrank from 215 to 184 members.

Broadly speaking, social democratic parties ran traditional nationally-oriented campaigns in their respective countries. Although the PES had produced a manifesto for the European elections individual parties brought out their own election programmes, which were largely independent of one another. There was little evidence of a transnational election campaign.

The PES congress in Prague in December 2009 responded to the defeat at the European elections with a resolution to frame a vision of the progressive society of the twenty-first century. A process of reflection was instigated with a view to renewing policy from the ground up, in which member parties, their party leaderships, the socialist group in the European Parliament and PES activists took part. At the end of this process in 2013 a joint policy platform is to be adopted. After two years we are now at the halfway stage towards this ambitious goal. To date, the discussion has pretty much been going on in the background and has barely had an impact on the party political public. Even at the last PES Council meeting in December 2010 in Warsaw it played rather a subordinate role. Given the major, transnational challenges facing Eu-

rope at the moment a joint plan for European social democracy is more important than ever: only united can it live up to its formative claim.

The aim of the present analysis, therefore, is to contribute to the abovementioned debate. It compares the election programmes of social democratic parties from eight countries that can be considered representative from the standpoint of size, basic attitude towards Europe, time of entry to the EU and role of the national party (government or opposition). The programmes of the following parties were analysed:

- the Bălgarska Socialističeska Partija (Bulgarian Socialist Party, BSP);
- the Irish Labour Party (Labour IE);
- the British Labour Party (Labour UK);
- the Lëtzebuerger Sozialistesche Arbechterpartei (Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party, LSWP);
- the French Partie Socialiste (PS);
- the Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue (Social Democratic Party of Finland, SDP);
- the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany, SPD); and the
- the Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (Social Democratic Party of Austria, SPÖ).

On the basis of the positions and demands formulated by the parties with regard to five policy areas – Social Europe; economy and finance; the environment, agriculture

and energy; civil rights and migration; and the EU in the world – it was possible to identify what unites the parties and what divides them.

2. Similarities and Differences

What might be termed the »highest common denominator« of these social democratic parties is the demand for a Social Europe.¹ There is a broad consensus on demands aimed at an inclusive society: tackling poverty, social exclusion and discrimination; gender equality (particularly with regard to pay); and better reconciliation of work and family life are mentioned as important tasks in many social democratic programmes. The core consensus, however, consists of the demand for a Social Stability Pact that would lay down social and educational standards in the member states. The goal is to provide basic social protection for the citizens of Europe. In this regard parties also argue for more standardised regulations on work and employment: there is a broad consensus on the introduction of European minimum wages, strengthening workers' participation rights and reinforcing social dialogue at the European level (although there are national differences concerning the free movement of labour).

The last-mentioned demands make it clear that the formation of a Social Europe cannot be addressed separately from economic policy. The same goes for the environment and energy: many social democratic parties are not only convinced that the EU should lead the way when it comes to doing something about climate change, but that reducing CO₂ emissions by 30 per cent – by 2020 – and pursuing a sustainable common energy policy aimed, above all, at energy security also represents an opportunity to open up new economic sectors and create jobs. In other words, making the transition to an environmentally and socially sustainable form of economy. Nuclear power, however, is a bone of contention among social democratic parties (as are issues related to support for agriculture).

There is also agreement in other important economic and financial policy areas. This is particularly the case with regard to issues thrown up by or which became topical due to the financial and economic crisis. For example,

social democratic parties are virtually unanimous in their emphasis on the need to exert stricter control over the financial markets and to coordinate economic and financial policy more closely. However, the relevant demands are relatively vague: many social democratic parties agree that new or better instruments are required to improve the coordination of national and international financial market supervisory authorities. Most parties also wish to improve the transparency of banks and of financial and commercial enterprises and in particular to raise the capital adequacy ratios of the former. The rating agencies should also be more transparent.

There is considerable potential for conflict with regard to economic policy issues since they are often linked to specific demands, largely arising from national interests. Many parties, for example, advocate strengthening the Single Market – or the implementation of the Single Market freedoms – as well as tax harmonisation. In doing so, however, they explicitly assert national interests and wish to see their own low tax rates protected. Similarly, many parties demand the revision of public procurement legislation in order to be better able to promote innovative economic sectors and weaker regions. Their priorities tend to be cohesion and structural policy and the need to improve loan allocation to crisis-hit firms, often linking that to the demand that more attention be paid to their own countries. Differences are also discernible with regard to the restructuring of the EU budget, which many parties are calling for: while economically weaker countries advocate an increase in budgetary funds, economically stronger countries are primarily interested in conferring its own revenue sources on the EU (and at the same time in reducing national contributions).

With regard to civil rights and migration, however, there is considerable agreement: a broad majority of social democratic parties favour a general reinforcement of basic and civil rights, with the parties most in favour of deepening European integration developing the most specific proposals in this area. A similarly large majority favours the reinforcement of consumer rights, as well as more effort – especially financial – with regard to education. Most social democratic parties also agree that cooperation must be stepped up on immigration. In this regard, they are calling for, among other things, more cooperation between EU states on asylum policy and tackling illegal immigration. However, not all social democratic parties favour the establishment of the requisite

1. Demands are considered to be common ground if made by at least four of the eight parties.

common structures or institutions: a common European asylum system or a common border policy is favoured only by a minority.

Concerning the EU's role in the world significant differences between individual election programmes are immediately apparent. There is agreement concerning long-term, fundamental foreign policy issues: for example, most social democratic parties take the view that neighbourhood policy and the transatlantic partnership with the United States should be strengthened. Furthermore, the role of the United Nations should be extended, development aid increased and trade relations and the framework of competition should be made fairer. In addition, international cooperation in tackling crime should be enhanced.

In particular with regard to foreign, security and defence policy – in other words, at the heart of the EU's external action – there are fundamental and far-reaching differences, however. This is largely because social democratic parties differ widely and virulently on how much and what kind of Europe they want. Although all parties stress the importance of the EU as a power for peace – as well as the need for global disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons – the conclusions they draw from this range from individual states obstinately asserting their military neutrality to demands for stronger engagement in the conflict in Afghanistan under a UN mandate. Similarly, although all parties advocate a strong foreign policy role for the EU and a European defence policy their conceptions of what that means differ considerably: while some identify their national policy with European foreign policy or advocate a properly European defence structure, other nations regard the EU merely as a foreign policy instrument for their own purposes, alongside the UN and NATO.

Opinions also diverge, finally, on the issue of Turkey's accession to the EU. While EU enlargement to encompass such countries as Croatia, Macedonia and Serbia does not raise an eyebrow, Turkey's accession continues to be regarded by social democrats in Europe as extremely controversial. Although the EU is already engaged in negotiations with a view to accession the spread of social democratic opinion on this issue ranges from clear assent, through recommendation of open and unbiased negotiations, to demands for a referendum, based on

considerable scepticism concerning the economic, social and political consequences of accession for the EU.

3. Summary

Comparative analysis of the eight election programmes shows that the parties exhibit agreement in many policy areas. However, there are also differences, which themselves vary considerably. Although the notion that social democratic parties could ever agree on everything is clearly illusory and simply does not take account of the political, economic and cultural variety of both Europe and European social democracy, there are nevertheless ideas and demands that do form part of most social democratic election programmes and from which common projects can be derived.

This applies first and foremost to Europe's social integration. Many social democratic parties take the view that Europe should become more »social« and more inclusive; fundamental, civil and consumer rights should be extended; and democratic values, such as equal opportunities, freedom from discrimination and gender equality should be implemented comprehensively. In particular, the demand for a social stability pact to establish social and educational standards in the member states is aimed at this hitherto neglected domain. This also opens up the prospect of the further development of European integration in general, of a kind on which social democratic parties would be able to reach agreement. The notion of a stability pact should not be taken to imply that everything should be governed at the European level: it would entail agreement on a European coordination framework, not the standardisation of social security systems. It also concerns several other policy areas: because the social stability pact includes demands for European minimum wages and more workers' participation, it implies that economic integration will be promoted and that more account will be taken of employees' interests.

Pointing in a similar direction are common demands for the reining in of the financial markets, the closer coordination and reorientation of economic and financial policy and, in particular, the conclusion of a Green New Deal, to usher in the transition to socially and environmentally sustainable growth. Demands such as European minimum wages, tax harmonisation and improvements in procurement legislation and structural policy also indi-



cate that less competition and more convergence by the member states constitute a common goal of social democratic parties.

The investigation also shows that, as ever, the devil is in the detail. On key economic and financial policy issues, to the extent that fundamental aims and demands are made more specific, sometimes major differences are revealed, largely owing to national egoisms. Care must therefore be taken in the debate to ensure that these centrifugal forces do not overwhelm the common ground. This state of affairs has been dramatically escalated by the economic and financial crisis and the fundamental question of further development of European integration is being posed with increasing urgency. This situation can and should be used to promote a deepening – and a reorientation – of integration.

There are considerable differences in the area of foreign and security policy, which touch directly on how much Europe social democratic parties really want. However, the most recent attempts to reinforce European security and defence policy – such as the establishment of an EU headquarters for the purpose – give every reason for hope.

The debate now under way on a common basic programme can lend impetus to a constructive dialogue between social democratic parties concerning a common European policy vision and, at the same time, help in the proper evaluation and reduction of differences of opinion and in the development of joint projects. Another positive step is the incipient debate on a new progressive social democracy, also with regard to the development of a party-political public at the European level.

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