

CONFERENCE REPORT

# Political fragmentation on the left ... ...alongside a global renaissance of right-wing populism

**MARIUS MÜLLER-HENNIG, SARAJEVO**

January 2018

- “The personal is very political”: while political fragmentation is usually explained with reference to programmatic or ideological disagreements, the personal dimension of such processes should also be taken into serious consideration.
- In terms of programmatic and ideological questions, left-wing fragmentation both within and between parties seems to come down, in many cases, to the question of socio-economic profile: should a pragmatic accommodation be sought with the contemporary neoliberal hegemony in order to attract more voters from society’s “middle” or is a return to more clear-cut criticism of the current capitalist market economy warranted, in order to sharpen the profile of the left? The cacophony of answers to this basic question is reflected in the fragmentation that we are witnessing.
- There are numerous ways to cope effectively with left-wing fragmentation. (Re-)unification is certainly one such option, but also the most challenging one. The rather unorthodox examples of the Frente Amplio in Uruguay and the current minority government in Portugal show, however, that thinking out of the box may indeed pay off.
- Regardless of the approach chosen, it is of crucial importance to build trust among the different actors over the medium to long term and to reaffirm joint political aims to cope with fragmentation effectively. There are no quick fixes, however, even if the objective incentives for unification may appear to be overwhelming. It is nevertheless of high importance to seize strategic windows of opportunity to initiate such a process and gain momentum.
- Additional important recommendations for left-wing parties came out of these discussions, which are elaborated further in the report:
  - clear agreements are key to overcoming fragmentation;
  - a fixation on polls and elections should be avoided;
  - it is important to keep ideologically committed members in the party;
  - bridges should be built between the different constituencies of the party/parties.

This report recapitulates a conference that was organized by FES Bosnia and Herzegovina office from 5.-6. July 2017 in Sarajevo.

# **Political fragmentation on the left ...** ...alongside a global renaissance of right-wing populism

CONFERENCE REPORT

International Conference: “Fragmented We Stand”  
Sarajevo, 5.–6. July 2017

MARIUS MÜLLER-HENNIG

**Content**

**1. Introduction and terminology. . . . . 6**

**2. Populism and anti-establishment – On the rise or already beyond their peak?. . . . . 6**

**3. The crises of social democracy – neoliberal dominance and left-wing confusion . . . . . 7**

**4. Different dimensions of fragmentation on the left . . . . . 7**

    I. Fragmentation between different left-wing political parties . . . . . 8

    II. Fragmentation within left-wing political parties . . . . . 8

    III. Fragmentation of the wider left-wing socio-political spectrum . . . . . 8

**5. Three examples of how to deal with fragmentation . . . . . 9**

    I. The minority government in Portugal . . . . . 9

    II. The establishment of the Partito Democratico in Italy . . . . . 10

    III. The emergence of the Frente Amplio in Uruguay . . . . . 11

    IV. What can be learned from these three examples? . . . . . 12

**6. Conclusions and practical steps for dealing with fragmentation . . . . . 13**

    I. Contested conclusions . . . . . 13

    II. Rather uncontroversial conclusions . . . . . 14

## 1. Introduction and terminology

In recent times, the political landscape in both established and transitioning democracies has experienced the emergence of a number of important trends. From a social democratic perspective, two of these trends have stirred substantial controversy and have been identified as critical causes for concern: (i) the fragmentation of the left-wing political spectrum and (ii) the increasing success of populist, often right-wing, anti-establishment parties or movements. These two trends were the starting point for an in-depth debate between political practitioners, experts and activists at a conference hosted by the FES office in Bosnia and Herzegovina in July 2017. In this report important insights and points of contention from this debate are highlighted. The report reflects solely the author's own, selective perception and interpretation of the arguments presented at this debate in Sarajevo<sup>1</sup>.

At the outset it is important, first, to clarify a few key terms that complicate the discussion. In the successor states of the former Yugoslavia (where most participants come from), the typical Western European left–right political spectrum is not directly applicable. Nevertheless, the “left–right” distinction is still frequently used in the region. Therefore, it is important for the reader to keep in mind that being politically to the “left” in this region mainly, if not exclusively, signifies strict opposition to ethno-nationalist political positions. Such ethno-nationalist positions are clearly equated with being “right-wing”. In the context of this report, however, the terms “left” and “left-wing” are used as they are in Western Europe, encompassing the communist, socialist, social democratic and socio-liberal political positions.

## 2. Populism and anti-establishment – On the rise or already beyond their peak?

The themes of populism and anti-establishment movements resonated strongly during this conference, including the so-called “Brexit” vote, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States of America and the rising support

for populist parties in recent elections in Austria, France and the Netherlands, among others. Although similar tendencies have appeared in most democracies, the impact and dimensions of the problem differ considerably. While in France and Austria the political centre has been traumatised, in other countries – in particular, the United Kingdom – the traditionally strong parties have, to a large extent, maintained their dominant position, despite populist competitors.

One conference participant pointed out that the term “populism” is rather vague, not least because it tends to be a label applied predominantly by established political parties to newly emerging competitors. This argument resonated with a number of participants, who suggested some useful differentiations. The most significant identified three distinct types of populist party:

- (i) left-wing populism, with a strong anti-globalization/anti-EU movement/course (most visible in Southern Europe);
- (ii) authoritarian populism within governments (most visible in Central Europe); and
- (iii) ascending right-wing populism (most visible in Western and Northern Europe).

When it comes to Southeast Europe, the second and third types of populism are particularly challenging for local social democratic parties. In these countries, it was argued, political party systems are not yet consolidated and a negative position towards ethno-nationalism is crucial and often the dominant element of self-identification as “on the left”. Attitudes on socio-economic policy, on the other hand, are more ambiguous among social democrats in the region. It was stressed that some right-wing populist parties have managed to attract significant support from traditional worker constituencies who have become disconnected from social democracy. The mixture of pro-worker populism and right-wing identity politics indeed turns out to be a major challenge for social democracy, and not just in Southeast Europe.

In addition to this differentiation, there was also a heated controversy on whether populism, as

<sup>1</sup> As the conference was held under Chatham House Rule, individual statements will not be attributed in this report.

such, is a problem or whether social democratic parties themselves need to pursue more populist strategies.

While right-wing populism was widely seen as a warning sign for democracies in general and for left-wing political parties in particular, assessments of its trajectories nevertheless vary. While some participants feared a continuous growth among right-wing populists, others cited the victory of Emanuel Macron in France, as well as the foreseeable downsides of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, as reasons why right-wing populism as a wide cross-country phenomenon might already be beyond its peak.

### 3. The crises of social democracy – neoliberal dominance and left-wing confusion

Starting with the phenomenon of the populist challenge (both left- and right-wing), the discussion soon turned towards the weaknesses of and challenges facing the established social democratic parties. It was not disputed that social democracy last flourished during a period in which capitalism was perceived as functioning well and on behalf of all parts of society. The changing dynamics of capitalism when it was gradually freed from the constraints of the ideological confrontation between West and East (the “Cold War”), however, have turned out to be a key challenge for social democracy. According to some participants, pragmatic reactions to neoliberal assaults on Western welfare states dominated for far too long. Social democracy was perceived as having struggled significantly to defend the accomplishments of the welfare state only in some places, and with limited success. In any case, the Yugoslav successor states had practically no room to manoeuvre in the course of their transitions from socialist to market economies.

From the discussion it became very clear that the left is divided on the future of capitalism. Disagreements run the gamut from those who want to call capitalism as such into question and those who do not. This is also reflected in the more

semantic debate about whether a resumption of positive references to the ideal of “socialism” is needed or whether the old categories – both socialism and social democracy – have become discredited and fail to attract widespread public support.

More generally, participants stressed that social democracy has often turned to the centre to stay in power. This controversy on whether social democracy needs to open up more towards the centre or whether it has already moved too far to the centre is an ongoing one. In Southeast Europe, the inclination to shift to the centre was seen as particularly problematic by some participants because, in some of these countries, the centre is already located rather to the right (in the sense of being nationalistic or identity politics-oriented). As such, looking for support among such centre-right voters risks alienating traditional left-wing voters. The picture became even murkier when it came to whether left-wing parties should also avoid government coalitions with centre-right parties, given that in some cases this may be the only practical way for them to participate in government in the short to medium term.

One specific challenge for social democracy in the former socialist countries of Southeast Europe is associated with its historical legacy. Most of the established, formal social democratic parties in this region are linked, in one way or another, to the socialist predecessor parties. In some cases, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, they are in fact their legal successor party. This legacy is an ambiguous one: on one hand, it provides a solid left identity component in the form of anti-fascism; on the other hand, it is also associated with periods of authoritarianism, repression and communism. Some participants argued that social democratic parties need finally to come to terms with both dimensions of their history, for example, by convening a commission for the purpose.

### 4. Different dimensions of fragmentation on the left

In addition to the above-listed political challenges confronting social democratic actors “from the

outside”, the main conference topic, “the fragmentation of the left” was discussed in detail. It became quickly evident that this fragmentation is multifaceted. Three different aspects of fragmentation were discussed:

- (i) fragmentation between different established and populist left-wing parties;
- (ii) fragmentation within left-wing political parties; and
- (iii) fragmentation of the wider left-wing political spectrum between political parties, formally organized civil society organizations and more loosely organized activists/movements.

#### I. Fragmentation between different left-wing political parties

This phenomenon was first addressed as part of the general fragmentation of established political party systems. In this sense, such occurrences do not affect only left-wing political parties. It was also emphasized that the risk and degree of fragmentation varies within the electoral system. The example of the United Kingdom, with its strict “first past the post” electoral system, was cited as a comparatively stable party system.

Apart from such structural aspects of the political system, on a more general level it was stressed from the outset that the personalities of leading politicians are often a significant factor in the fragmentation of political parties. It was argued that the “personal”, in this regard, is very “political”. However, it was also acknowledged that political actors are often not honest about these aspects of fragmentation. This is also seen as an indicator that political culture has not really progressed much.

A similar argument was made with regard to the fragmentation of left-wing political parties in general; specifically, the true reasons for fragmentation are frequently not discussed openly. Therefore, it is often difficult to explain the differences between parties on the same political spectrum, both within the parties themselves and in the electorate. A

reciprocal problem applies to processes of (re-)unification or alliances between parties. One question posed that may be difficult to answer in such circumstances is “why did you split in the first place, if you now want to reunite again”.

While the proposal to be more open and honest about the true reasons for fragmentation resonated widely among participants, one stressed that it is important not to be drawn too much into the discussion of “who is responsible for the fragmentation”. This seems fairly reasonable if one agrees with the above-referenced statement that “the personal is very political”. Indeed, participants repeatedly emphasized the crucial importance of (re-)building trust between left-wing parties, or rather their leadership. Developing such trust-building mechanisms was identified as crucial in order to cope with left-wing fragmentation.

#### II. Fragmentation within left-wing political parties

Whereas many participants saw fragmentation *between* different political parties on the left as paramount, the existence and acceptance of different factions *within* left-wing parties was discussed only briefly. On the other hand, it was regarded positively; social democratic parties should indeed tap into and embrace the potential of different political factions. Different factions within a political party would provide opportunities for future leadership generations to gain experience and develop a political profile. However, it was revealed that, to date, pluralism within left-wing parties has often been seen as a sign of weakness and disunity. While this interpretation seems to be particularly pronounced in the case of Southeast European states, it also exists among Western European political elites and commentators.

#### III. Fragmentation of the wider left-wing socio-political spectrum

Discussion of rifts in the wider left-wing socio-political spectrum between political parties, formal civil society organizations and more loosely organized activists and other potential supporters attracted perhaps the most attention during the conference. Social democratic parties were criticized for



a number of shortcomings in this regard. It was argued that traditional allies, such as the trade unions, have been alienated by social democratic parties in several instances. This relationship was sometimes interpreted as an attempt by parties to dominate and instrumentalize trade unions. A similar scenario is also feared in relation to other parts of civil society and activists: social democratic parties must be careful and appear supportive, without dominating or even attempting to orchestrate civil society movements and actors.

The relationship between progressive intellectuals, artists and academia, on one hand, and social democracy on the other, is seen as crucial by both sides, in particular in SEE: the frequent failure of social democrats to live up to their proclaimed high ideals and ambitious programmes once in government is perceived as especially precarious by intellectuals and academics. In some cases, these actors also find social democrats to be somewhat uninterested in their views and often ignorant of substantial and well-founded criticism. On the other hand, social democrats often complain about “abstract” intellectual criticism and a lack of intellectual support and engagement in the political arena.

## 5. Three examples of how to deal with fragmentation<sup>2</sup>

Fragmentation of the left-wing political scene is very country-specific and shows certain unique trajectories, as became clear in the course of the debate. Accordingly, it is highly unlikely that any template solution to the respective challenges can be identified. Nevertheless, during the conference, three models for coping productively with such fragmentation were discussed in detail: (i) the recent formation of a social democratic minority government in Portugal, supported by its left-wing competitors; (ii) the formation of the *Partito Democratico* (PD) in Italy; and (iii) the emergence of the *Frente Amplio* (FA) in Uruguay. The goal here was not to advocate the duplication of these three approaches, but to provide some food for thought

<sup>2</sup> The processes in each of the three cases was presented by one expert from each of these countries. The following paragraphs sum up the main points as perceived by the author of this report.

by reflecting on these practical experiences in an attempt to overcome left-wing fragmentation.

### I. The minority government in Portugal

The current government in Portugal was formed in November 2015 as a minority government of the Socialist Party (PS). The most important backdrop for this experiment can be found in the fallout of the financial crisis in 2008 and the EU-wide austerity measures demanded in its wake. A large portion of the Portuguese population experienced the effects of EU austerity recipes, some coming close to impoverishment. Social democracy was perceived as having continuously succumbed to (neoliberal) pressure. Previously, the socialist party had frequently cooperated with conservatives in the government instead of with their fellow left-wingers.<sup>3</sup>

To counter this historical pattern, it was argued that strong pressure was needed from civil society to get social democrats to work together with other left-wing forces, which, finally, facilitated the emergence of the current configuration: a social democratic minority government supported by two left-wing parties. Their cooperation is based on formal agreements with the social democrats. However, these parties stopped short of forming a coalition government. This unorthodox cooperation allowed the emergence of a social democratic government even though the conservatives surfaced as the strongest political force in the elections.

While this structure was described as a sort of “contraption” from the outset, the experience so far has been surprisingly positive in that the core aim of overcoming austerity measures and tackling (rising) inequality without hampering economic growth has been at least partially achieved. Since this specific political challenge presents itself in one form or another in a number of European countries, the Portuguese approach is of a particular symbolic relevance for the left.

As for the lessons learned from the Portuguese case, it was emphasized that what was crucial for

<sup>3</sup> One exception to this pattern, however, did not show up during the preceding government, when socialists opposed the austerity policies it pursued.

later success was that “the left recognized that they have more points of convergence than points of divergence” (whereas previously they had focused predominantly on what divided them). At the same time, the discussion of the Portuguese case also led the discussion to a wider perspective: it proved that it is possible to overcome the odds against left-wing cooperation in order to work for solidarity and to tackle inequalities within a society. However, taking the larger picture into account, sustainable progress in tackling inequalities more systematically needs to go beyond national borders and, for example, to limit competition between European states as well, particularly tax competition.

## II. The establishment of the *Partito Democratico* in Italy<sup>4</sup>

The second case study of how to cope with fragmentation concerns the establishment of the *Partito Democratico* (PD), which celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2017. It is probably the most prominent contemporary example of a merger between left and centre-left parties.

It was argued that this party merger depended on the specific historical background and external pressures. The contradictory success of left parties in the 2006 elections showed that the joint list of DS and DL gained around 11.93 million votes for the House of Representatives, whereas the separate DS and DL lists only won an aggregate of around 9.64 million votes in the elections to the Senate. The difference in electoral outcomes was thus nearly two million votes. Together with the subsequent heavy defeat in the 2007 in the local and administrative elections, this paved the way for the establishment of a joint party, the *Partito Democratico* (PD).

The organization of the PD also envisaged a new procedural mechanism for leadership selection in the form of a primary election,<sup>5</sup> which was unique

<sup>4</sup> The conference took place before the formation of the Free and Equal Party (LeU), the most recent split-off from the PD. Accordingly the information and analysis in this report do not reflect these latest developments.

<sup>5</sup> Primary elections were introduced at the local level in 1993 with regard to the selection of mayoral candidates in a few Italian cities and it was also used for the selection of the candidate for prime minister in 1995 by a center-left coalition.

in Europe. It provided for the direct election of the PD party leader by both the members of PD and the wider electorate. Combined with this leadership election, the candidate for prime minister was selected by the allied parties. The birth of a new party was achieved by this new mechanism, which was very important in merging the political parties and different political traditions.

Subsequently, the main challenge for PD proved to be a fruitful integration of two very different long-term traditions in Italian politics: a socialist and a Catholic tradition. This was complicated even further by stark differences between communist/post-communist, Catholic/post-Christian democrat, socialist, liberal and republican currents.

It was indicated that the result so far is a type of “inhomogeneous compound”:

- organizationally: as a merger of two different party models (“light” and “strong”)
- ideologically: as one party with three souls, namely:
  - an ethical soul based on the primacy of equality, concerned with ameliorating inequalities and care for the weaker parts of society;
  - a social-democratic soul, related to particular social groups, such as the working class, and control of the welfare state;
  - a liberal-democratic soul, focused on maintaining a balance between public intervention and free market policies.

Additionally, another three phases can be distinguished. Each phase is related to a particular secretary general, elected in primaries and exhibiting a different style of leadership. The first was associated with Walter Veltroni, who was described as having merged the ethical with the liberal-democratic soul of the party. He was followed by Pier Luigi Bersani, who was perceived as having merged the social-democratic and the ethical soul of the party. Finally, the leadership of Matteo Renzi



was associated with a clear focus on the party's liberal-democratic soul.

Furthermore, it was argued that the Italian case clearly illustrates the dangers that exist when a drift occurs among left-wing political parties as they struggle between the ethical and liberal-democratic souls of a progressive political culture. In the case of Italy this resulted in a joint party, but one that is torn between radicalism and reformism. An important lesson to be learned here is that establishing a constructive relationship between the radical and reformist parts of any left-wing party is crucial for its success. Such a constructive relationship, it was argued, requires a meaningful and in-depth political and cultural debate that includes left-wing voters, party members and the party leadership. Inherited values and positions need to be reconciled with changed economic and social conditions.

Further challenges that the example of the PD illustrate include the complications associated with a lack of party institutionalization and severe substantive divisions on labour and social policies. Something else that is clear from the Italian experience is that no one should expect the consolidation of a new party to occur quickly, especially if the party's constituent elements have significantly different traditions. The development of a new party identity and the process of merging formerly separate party identities and organizational structures should not be underestimated. The personal factor, it was said, was also important in case of the PD.<sup>6</sup> However, it was certainly not deemed to be the most important factor, even though in its ten years of existence this party has had five different leaders.

### III. The emergence of the *Frente Amplio* in Uruguay

The example of the *Frente Amplio* (FA) defies a lot of the standard categories resorted to in the

analysis of left-wing political parties. First it was claimed that, although the *Frente Amplio* is made up of a variety of political parties and other constitutive units (sectors), it is not merely a coalition of parties but a genuine programmatic political party. The unifying description of the FA was a "political force for change and social justice".

The political background was once again stressed as important for a sound understanding of the FA's emergence. After independence, Uruguay's political scene was long dominated by two parties: the conservative "Blanco" Party and the liberal "Colorado" Party. While a socialist party was established as early as 1910, left-wing parties in general long remained marginalized and repressed. It was only with the emergence of the popular movement in the 1960s and the foundation of the *Frente Amplio* in 1971 that a true alternative to the dominance of the *Blancos* and *Colorados* emerged. For a period after the military coup d'état in 1973 the *Frente Amplio* was declared illegal; it was re-established after the return to democracy in 1984.

The FA has a very complex structure and decision-making process. It consists of parties, individual members and groups, meaning that you can be a member of the FA without being a member of any of its constituent parties. At the centre of the overall construct lies a political agreement in the form of a constitutive declaration and a specific programme framework for each election. Today, nearly all relevant left-wing groups are part of the FA, but the potential for fragmentation poses a latent challenge.

Despite its complexity, the FA achieved electoral victories in 2004, 2009 and 2014, making political progress with reforms in labor, social and tax policies, the national health system and the formulation of a new rights agenda. The main political tensions appeared in the fields of economic policy and Uruguay's international involvement ("international insertion").

When it comes to lessons that can be learned from the *Frente Amplio*'s success, four aspects were highlighted:

<sup>6</sup> The degree to which the open primaries influenced this factor was not discussed at the conference but would certainly be an interesting question for further research. The view was that this method resulted in a sharp split between those who saw leadership selection as a strict prerogative of party members, on one hand, and those who also attributed high importance to the preferences of ordinary voters, on the other.

- (i) the FA was not formed merely as a coalition to win elections;
- (ii) after its first success, the FA did not evolve into a coalition to just stay in government;
- (iii) out of its original diversity, the FA generated a political project of its own that today is at the heart of its political unity;
- (iv) a set of common values have to be endorsed and asserted by every sector, otherwise it is not accepted by the FA.

Finally, in comparison with the experiences of the Italian *Partito Democratico*, it is noteworthy that the FA needed 20 years after its reestablishment in 1984 in order to achieve the electoral breakthrough that allowed it to form a government.

#### IV. What can be learned from these three examples?

The discussion of the three cases was very vibrant but due to time constraints, the complexities of the topic and the differing political framework conditions, no clear conclusion was reached during the conference. However, inspired by the presentations and subsequent discussions, the author came up with four potential conclusions/hypotheses on what can be learned from these examples (some of which may be worth researching in the future):

**(i) Think outside the box – there are different ways to cope with fragmentation:** The examples of Portugal and Uruguay show that it may pay off to think beyond standard models and to seriously consider unorthodox solutions. So far, the default position in Western Europe is that minority governments are unstable and incapable of initiating wide-ranging reforms. The example of Portugal, however, shows that this is not necessarily the case. The example of Uruguay furthermore invalidates the assumption that a unification of political parties requires that the constituent parties be dissolved. Finally, the variety of means for dealing effectively with fragmentation underlines the fact that, once again, pluralism and fragmentation

in themselves are not the problem. Of course, (re)unification is one way to cope with fragmentation, as the Italian example shows, but other examples may work just as well or even better, as Uruguay and Portugal show.

**(ii) Overcoming fragmentation is a long-term challenge:** In times when political parties rush from one campaign or election to another, as difficult as this may be to accept, overcoming fragmentation seems to take longer than the usual four- or five-year election term. Ten years after the unification of the PD in Italy, the party still struggles with different political traditions and cultures, as well as its procedures on electing its leadership and the lack of a clear politico-ideological profile (one party, three souls). Its early participation in government seems to have complicated its internal consolidation rather than help it. The FA in Uruguay only managed to come to power two decades after its re-establishment in 1984.<sup>7</sup> However, it then managed to keep it over three consecutive election cycles. In Portugal, cooperation between the left-wing parties was attempted more than four decades after the Carnation Revolution, something that was virtually unheard-of before 2015. Interestingly, this cooperation stopped short of a formal coalition and instead took the form of agreement-based support for a social democratic minority government.

**(iii) Overcoming fragmentation requires clear political agreements and shared aims:** It is necessary to have clear political agreements and a set of shared political aims. This proved to be important in the cases of the minority government in Portugal and the establishment of the *Frente Amplio* in Uruguay.

**(iv) Recognizing and seizing a window of opportunity is the key:** In all three cases, coping with fragmentation was associated with specific historical circumstances that allowed parties to overcome all the odds stacked against

<sup>7</sup> While not discussed in detail at the conference, the preceding electoral successes of the FA in the local elections in Montevideo from 1990 onwards might have been a crucial factor in the long-term patience and persistence at the national level.

unification or cooperation. While in Portugal the consequences of the financial crisis and the subsequent austerity policy were crucial, in Italy it was the clear message from the elections in 2006 that showed the potential of running jointly compared with competing for votes separately. However, the case of Italy might also show that better electoral prospects alone are not sufficient ground for a unified party to consolidate itself without having a joint policy and value basis to work with. In the case of *Frente Amplio*, finally, its formation was facilitated by the government's increasing repression.

## 6. Conclusions and practical steps for dealing with fragmentation

When it came to identifying and discussing practical steps on how to overcome fragmentation, there were some suggestions that were very controversial, whereas others appeared to be largely uncontroversial. In the following paragraphs the three most intensively contested conclusions will be presented first, followed by those that were rather uncontroversial.

### 1. Contested conclusions

The most intensively contested aspect (1) was certainly the question of whether social democracy should refocus on a more clear-cut left-wing socio-economic profile (distancing itself from third-way, pragmatist, neoliberal tendencies) or whether social democracy must continue its path towards the centre. Essentially, the first option (return to a more clear-cut left-wing, capitalist-critical profile) gained a bit more support among participants than the alternative. Participants claimed that social democracy has become too pragmatist – or some would say “opportunistic” – in accepting the rules of the capitalist game, which have turned more neoliberal in the past two and a half decades. Specifically for the region of Southeast Europe, this argument resonates well with a discussion that identified the approach of local social democrats – falling line with the third-way European social democratic mainstream and neoliberal economic policy

hegemony – as being at the core of these parties' contemporary problems.<sup>8</sup> The counter-argument stressed the increasingly problematic attitude of traditional working-class electorates (blue collar workers), who are tempted by populist arguments from right-wing actors. A mere return to the more populist left-wing demands would hardly win back the overall support from these constituencies. From this perspective, it was argued, social democrats would need to reach out to the wider range of middle class (white-collar workers), as well as socially marginalized groups, in order to form a cosmopolitan alliance for progress.

This debate overlapped with the discussion (2) on whether the left-wing legacy of the former Yugoslavian countries is a positive resource to turn to (mainly workers' self-management and socialism) or whether it is a problematic legacy that has to be dealt with in a very critical and reflective manner (due to authoritarian elites and repression of pluralism). This notion was also reflected in a discussion about the victory of capitalism in the contest with communism and the lack of the kind of ideological counterweight that helped to tame capitalism from 1945 until the 1990s. This gave further weight to the argument that social democracy should return to a more clear-cut ideological counter-position with regard to unrestrained capitalism.

Finally, there seemed to be at least some disagreement (3) on whether social democracy should try to re-establish a close coalition with trade unions and civil society or not. On one hand, the argument claimed that the waning support from civil society organizations and trade unions was highly problematic as right-wing parties seem to continue to enjoy a very strong (and rather uncritical) support from “their” civil society and societal support bases (such as religious communities). In that perspective, forming strong alliances with progressive civil society and trade unions was thought to be crucial. From a different angle, however, it was argued that social democracy should not try to artificially forge alliances by adding in heterogeneous stipulations

<sup>8</sup> For example see “infection 2” and “infection 5”, identified by Othon Anastasakis in April 2017: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/othon-anastasakis/five-infections-of-social-democratic-family-in-western-balkans>

of very different stakeholders, as this may result in a type of incoherent piecemeal programme. Such a scenario would result in a lack of credibility for social democracy. Furthermore, even if the values are shared and programmatic aims are compatible with the party programme, left-wing parties should still be careful and avoid giving the impression of trying to dominate civil society and trade unions. Such a perception might undermine their credibility as independent actors in some parts of society (which is the reason for seeking an alliance with them in the first place).

## II. Rather uncontroversial conclusions

In addition to the three contested conclusions, there was a wide range of conclusions that resonated with most participants.

The most fundamental conclusion was that social democracy needs to be prepared to put up a fight for its core political aims. While self-evident at first sight, the recent practice of “exploratory pragmatism” pursued by social democrats in a time of neoliberal hegemony was seen as a highly problematic pattern that may not be easy to overcome. The example used by one participant to illustrate this point in the debate was pension reform in the Netherlands: that was the point at which social democracy might have been expected to put up a fight and perhaps even risk exiting the government.

A wider set of conclusions covered the field of political culture within the left. It was plausibly argued that one should not shy away from having vibrant and controversial debates. The stipulated necessity of appearing “united” should not preclude the necessary internal debates. Such debates and clarifications are crucial for reaching the clear political and ideological positions called for repeatedly, given that “exploratory pragmatism” has not worked.

It was also argued that what is even more important for the credibility of left-wing parties is that they should not take policy positions merely to obtain majority support in the polls nor lie in order to win elections. Neither should they form alliances merely to win elections and join governments. The political aims of social democracy must always be

the ultimate *raison d'être* for its political tactics and strategies. From the author’s point of view, a number of similar arguments from the debate may be subsumed under the overall need to overcome the current “poll and election obsession”.

Furthermore, participants called on left-wing parties and their electorate to do more to avoid playing the “blame game”. Concerning the general topic of how to deal with fragmentation, the following conclusion was stressed: we should focus less on why fragmentation appears and who is responsible for it and instead focus more on how to deal with and overcome it.

At the same time, parties should not complain about the supposedly unfair criticism. It might be healthy, it was suggested, to accept the role of punch bag. Simultaneously, it was seen as particularly difficult once again to have to convince voters that they need to give left parties a second chance, if they have failed in government before, even after substantial internal reform or policy reorientation, as the case of the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates.

Finally, in regard to political culture, a relatively convincing argument was put forward that a clear ideological profile might help to attract wider support beyond social democracy’s traditional clientele. To achieve this goal, parties need to build bridges between different constituencies for progressive change from heterogeneous milieus.

Organizationally, it was stressed that social democratic parties need to take care not to lose ideologically motivated and convinced members who hold the basic party values in high esteem. A worrying trend was described, in which members of this kind often leave parties due to dissatisfaction with a supposed conformism and mainstream opportunism. They may perceive supposedly career-oriented and “professional” politicians as dominating party orientation and strategies, perhaps for the wrong reasons. While such a perspective may be distorted, parties need to make more effort to keep their ideologically motivated core members committed and active.

## About the author

**Marius Müller-Hennig** is Director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He is a political scientist and holds a MA from RWTH Aachen University.

## Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) | Office in Bosnia and Herzegovina  
Kupreška 20, 71 000 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Responsible:  
Marius Müller-Hennig, Director

Tel.: +387 33 722 010  
Fax: +387 33 613 505  
E-mail: [fes@fes.ba](mailto:fes@fes.ba)  
[www.fes.ba](http://www.fes.ba)

DTP: Filip Andronik  
Print: Amos Graf, Sarajevo  
Printing: 50 copies

The publication can be delivered upon request via e-mail:  
[fes@fes.ba](mailto:fes@fes.ba).

Attitudes, opinions and conclusions expressed in this publication do not necessarily express attitudes of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung does not vouch for the accuracy of the data stated in this publication.

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

---

CIP - Katalogizacija u publikaciji  
Nacionalna i univerzitetska biblioteka Bosne i Hercegovine,  
Sarajevo

329.14

MÜLLER-Hennig, Marius

Political fragmentation on the left - - alongside a global renaissance of right-wing populism : conference report / Marius Müller-Hennig. - Sarajevo : Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018. - 14 str. : graf. prikazi ; 30 cm

About the Author: str. [16]. - Bilješke uz tekst.

ISBN 978-9958-884-61-0  
I. Hennig, Marius Müller - Müller-Hennig, Marius  
COBISS.BH-ID 25040134