

## Contemporary Far Left Parties in Europe: From Marxism to the Mainstream?

LUKE MARCH

### Defining the »Far Left«

*Far left parties* are those that define themselves as *to the left of*, and not merely *on the left of* social democracy, which they see as insufficiently left-wing or even as not left-wing at all. There are two main subtypes. First, *radical left parties*, which want »root and branch« systemic change of capitalism. Radical left parties accept democracy (verbally at least), although they combine this with (often vaguely defined) aspirations towards direct democracy and/or local participatory democracy, including incorporating the rights of the excluded and marginalized (for example, the unemployed and migrant workers) in the political system. Their anti-capitalism no longer involves a planned economy but opposition to »neo-liberal« globalized capitalism, broadly associated with the so-called »Washington consensus.« *Extreme left parties*, in contrast, have far greater hostility to liberal democracy, usually denounce all compromise with »bourgeois« political forces, including social democracy, emphasize extra-parliamentary struggle and define »anti-capitalism« far more strictly, usually regarding most market enterprise as anathema.

Compared with the international communist movement 30 years ago, the far left has undergone a process of profound de-radicalization. The extreme left is marginal in most places – except France, Portugal, and Greece – and this niche is occupied by the few parties that maintain a »revolutionary« self-identity, particularly parties of Trotskyist or Maoist extraction.

The far left can be further divided on the basis of its ideological and policy preferences into four major subgroups (see Table 1):

1. *Communists*. The »communists« are a broad group. Without Moscow's pressure, »orthodox« communism does not exist beyond a commitment to Marxism and the communist name and symbols. »Conservative« communists define themselves as Marxist-Leninist, maintain a relatively uncritical stance towards the Soviet heritage, organize their

parties through Leninist democratic centralism and still see the world through the Cold-War prism of »imperialism,« although even these parties often appeal to nationalism and populism. »Reform« communists, on the other hand, are more divergent and eclectic. They have discarded aspects of the Soviet model (for example, Leninism and democratic centralism), and have at least paid lip service to elements of the post-1968 »new left« agenda (feminism, environmentalism, grass-roots democracy, and so on).

2. *Democratic socialist parties* define themselves both in opposition to »totalitarian« communism and »neo-liberal« social democracy and fully espouse »new left« themes, advocating a non-dogmatic and often non-Marxist socialism which emphasizes themes of local participation and substantive democracy, and support for alternative lifestyles and ethnic minorities. The chief advocates of this position are the »Nordic Green Left« parties in Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, who articulate an »eco-socialist' position« that synthesizes economic and environmental critiques of capitalism.
3. *Populist socialist parties* have a democratic socialist ideological core overlaid with a stronger anti-elite, anti-establishment appeal, greater ideological eclecticism and emphasis on identity rather than class concerns (especially regionalism, nationalism or law-and-order issues). »Populism« is a controversial term often used synonymously with irresponsibility and demagoguery, but most accurately refers to a political ideology that »considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ›the pure people‹ versus ›the corrupt elite,‹ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* [general will] of the people.«<sup>1</sup> So, populist parties are those that tend to define themselves against all other »mainstream« or »establishment« political parties, and see themselves as the only principled defenders of the »ordinary person.«
4. *Social populist parties* have the closest resemblance to classical populist movements (for example in Latin America), with a dominant personalist leadership, weak organization and incoherent ideology, fusing left-wing and right-wing themes behind an anti-establishment appeal. Most of these parties (for example, the Serbian Socialist Party under Milošević or Slovakia's Smer [Direction]) are not recognized as »left-

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1. Mudde, Cas (2004): »The Populist Zeitgeist,« in: *Government & Opposition* 39 (3): 541–63.

wing« by the far left; many are either not consistently anti-capitalist or radical, or are merely temporary »flash parties« without long-lasting national representation, and so this article does not focus on them.

Table 1:

Main Far Left Subtypes in the EU and the European Economic Area

	<i>Radical left</i>	<i>Extreme left</i>
<i>Reform communist</i>	Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM), Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC), Party of Italian Communists (PdCI), Communist Party of Spain (PCE), Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL), French Communist Party (PCF)	
<i>Conservative communist</i>		Communist Party of Greece (KKE), Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), Socialist Party of Latvia (LSP)
<i>Democratic socialist</i>	Left Alliance/Finland (VAS), Left Party/Sweden (V), Socialist People's Party/Denmark (SF), Socialist Left Party/Norway (SV), Left-Green Movement/Iceland (VG), Left Bloc/Portugal (BE), Coalition of the Left, of Movements and Ecology/Greece (Synaspismós)	Red-Green Alliance 7 Denmark (EL)
<i>Populist socialist</i>	Socialist Party (Netherlands) (SP), Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), The Left (Germany), Sinn Féin (Ireland)	New Anti-Capitalist Party (France) (NPA) <sup>1</sup>
<i>Social populist</i>	Association of Slovak Workers (ZRS)	

Note 1: In process of formation since June 2008.

The above categories overlap: For example, since 1990 all far left parties have become more populist in terms of defining the »working class« ever more broadly to reach beyond the traditional blue-collar strata, and more nationalistic in terms of trying to present themselves as defending national workers rather than Moscow's foreign policy. Moreover, the contempo-

rary far left is markedly less ideological and more pragmatic than in the Soviet era. There has been a determined, and partially successful, attempt to overcome the internecine doctrinal disputes and historical grievances that have made the far left, on occasion, a laughing stock.

## Far Left Mutation after Communism

Six broad far left responses to the collapse of communism can be identified:

1. Many decided finally to renounce the »communist« label. For some – the Swedish Left Party-Communists, which became the Left Party, or the German SED – this was largely a question of renaming themselves and redefining themselves as non-communist radical left parties.

2. Many others – particularly the majority of former ruling parties in Eastern Europe – were transformed into fully-fledged social democratic parties. In Western Europe, the major example was the Italian PCI that evolved into the Democratic Party of the Left and, ultimately, today's Democratic Party.

3. Some Eastern European former communist parties took on an increasingly nationalist-populist tinge – such as the Serbian Socialist Party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, and the Social Democratic Party of Romania – although these parties have taken a social democratic orientation.

4. Many parties ceased to exist independently and re-emerged as parts of semi-permanent coalitions either of a democratic socialist orientation – such as the Spanish Communist Party which became the United Left – or as minor allies of social democratic parties (for example the Bulgarian Communist Party contesting elections alongside the Bulgarian Socialist Party).

5. Others dissolved themselves more completely into post-communist coalitions of various ideologies. For example, the Communist Party of the Netherlands re-emerged as part of the – non-radical – GroenLinks (GreenLeft) in 1989. Others formed so-called »broad left parties,« permanent coalitions of diverse radical and extreme left tendencies, for example the Portuguese Left Bloc.

6. Many parties maintained their former names and identity but sought to adapt slowly – for example, the communist parties of France and Greece – and the Dutch Socialist Party, a former Maoist Party founded in 1972 that had gradually discarded its doctrinal purity by the late 1980s.

The only far left response of those outlined above which has proved to be generally successful is the second. Ex-communist social democrats governed across Eastern Europe from the early 1990s, and in Italy for the first time in 1996–2001. However, even this strategy has not proved universally promising: For example, the post-communists in Slovakia and the former Yugoslavia have played second fiddle to dominant nationalist and populist forces.

Choosing a strategy which preserved elements of a radical identity and distinctiveness from social democracy was logical for many parties, since usually – except in Eastern Europe and Italy, where existing social democratic parties were weak – a social democratic transformation meant the self-dissolution of the party.

## Electoral Support

The electoral performance of the principal far left parties in the EU and European Economic Area (Table 2) presents a varied picture. In general, the communists have been the least successful – at best, preserving stable ratings far below 1980s support levels, at worst suffering the largest electoral falls – and their future is under question. Cyprus is the main exception, but AKEL's success is explicable due to nationally specific features such as a militant proletarian subculture and iron discipline combined with ideological moderation.<sup>2</sup> Democratic socialist parties – for example, in the Nordic countries – are generally stable, whereas the populist socialist parties (especially in the Netherlands and Germany) are the most dynamic, with support in the 2000s reaching all-time highs.

Who supports the far left? Three overlapping groups of supporters can be identified:

1. *The far left subculture*. At the core of far left groups are ideologically convinced supporters and activists, many of whom have long-term careers in far left parties, student left groups, trade unions, NGOs, and feminist/environmental groups. For example, the former leaders of the Dutch SP and Swedish V, Jan Marijnissen and Gudrun Schyman, were previously in Maoist parties. A declining but still important role among communist and formerly communist parties is played by the

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2. Dunphy, Richard and Tim Bale (2007): »Red Flag Still Flying? Explaining AKEL – Cyprus' Communist Anomaly,« in: *Party Politics* 13 (3): 287–304.

»red-belt,« where parties formerly provided »womb-to-tomb« local services. Far left voting remains higher than average in several such areas (for example, Corrèze in France and Setúbal in Portugal). Indeed, the PDS's core support vote in Eastern Germany during the 1990s was attributed to the party's ability to represent the so-called »socialist value culture,« that is, a left-paternalist orientation common to many ex-communist countries.<sup>3</sup>

2. *Disaffected centre-left voters.* About a quarter of the recent growth in far left support – for example, the German Left (Die Linke) in 2005, the Dutch SP in 2006, and the Danish SF in 2007 – has come from social democrat defections, the rest from liberal and Green parties or non-voters. Indeed, Green parties are a major source for far left votes, since their activists usually place themselves on the left, and the presence of successful Green parties (for example, in Finland, Sweden and indeed Western Germany) can hinder the far left's attempts to broaden its support.
3. *Protest voters.* The final element of far left support is simply political protest, particularly for those parties which pitch themselves as populist parties and/or vehemently oppose the EU. For instance, the jump in support for the Greek far left – and far right – in 2007 is attributed to widespread popular anger at the centre-right's incompetent handling of forest fires in summer 2007. However, the far right's ability to limit the far left's protest role is compounded because the far left and far right votes can overlap: The word »gaucho-lepeniste« was coined to describe French communist voters who defected to the far right. However, the far right draws as many, if not more, votes from the centre left, particularly those working-class voters experiencing a »modernization crisis« – that is the effect of post-industrial economies, the decline of the post-war »social democratic consensus« and globalization.<sup>4</sup>

In general, communists tend to have an older, more working class, more male and less educated electorate, except for very successful parties (for example, AKEL) or the most unorthodox (for example, PRC). This ageing and conservative electorate is increasingly damaging their viability. The democratic socialist parties tend to have a much more left-libertarian elec-

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3. Hough, Dan, Michael Koß, and Jonathan Olsen (2007): *The Left Party in Contemporary German Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

4. Coffe, Hilde (2008): »Social Democratic Parties as Buffers against the Extreme Right: The Case of Belgium,« in: *Contemporary Politics* 14 (2) (June): 179–85.

Table 2:  
 Significant Far Left Parties in Parliamentary Elections (European Economic Area), 1990–2008

<i>Country/Party</i>	<i>Average vote 1980–89</i>	<i>Average vote 1990–99</i>	<i>Average vote 2000–2008</i>	<i>Increase 1989–2008</i>	<i>Increase 1999–2008</i>	<i>Highest vote after 1989</i>	<i>Lowest vote after 1989</i>
Cyprus (AKEL)	30.1	31.8	32.9	2.7	1.1	34.7 (2001)	30.6 (1991)
Czech Republic (KSCM)	CP	12.1	15.7	n/a	3.6	18.5 (2002)	10.3 (1996)
Denmark (EL)	0.9 <sup>1</sup>	2.5	2.7	1.8	0.2	3.4 (2005)	1.7 (1990)
Denmark (SF)	12.6	7.7	8.5	-4.1	0.8	13.0 (2007)	6.0 (2005)
Finland (VAS)	13.5 <sup>2</sup>	10.7	9.3	-4.2	-1.4	11.2 (1995)	8.8 (2007)
France (PCF)	12.4	9.6	4.6	-7.8	-5.0	9.9 (1997)	4.3 (2007)
Germany (Left)	CP	4.0	6.4	n/a	2.4	8.7 (2005)	2.4 (1990)
Greece (KKE)	10.4	5.1	6.5	-3.9	1.4	8.2 (2007)	4.5 (1993)
Greece (Syn)	1.6	3.0	3.8	2.2	0.8	5.1 (1996)	2.9 (1993)
Iceland (VG)	15.4 <sup>3</sup>	12.6	11.6	-1.0	-3.8	14.4 (1991)	8.8 (2003)
Ireland (Sinn Féin)	1.4	2.1	6.7	5.3	4.6	6.9 (2007)	1.6 (1992)
Italy (PRC and PdCI)	28.2 <sup>4</sup>	7.1	6.0	-22.2	-0.9	8.6 (1996)	3.1* (2008)
Latvia (LSP)	CP	8.5*	16.8*	n/a	8.3	19.1* (2001)	5.6 (1995)
Netherlands (SP)	0.4	2.4	9.6	9.2	7.2	16.6 (2006)	1.3 (1994)
Norway (SV)	6.8	7.0	10.4	3.6	3.4	12.4 (2001)	6.0 (1997)

Country/Party	Average vote 1980-89	Average vote 1990-99	Average vote 2000-2008	Increase 1989-2008	Increase 1999-2008	Highest vote after 1989	Lowest vote after 1989
Portugal (PCP)	15.6*	8.8*	7.3*	-8.3	-1.5	9.0* (1999)	7.0* (2002)
Portugal (BE)	n/a	2.4	4.6	n/a	2.2	6.4 (2005)	2.4 (1999)
Slovakia (KSS)	CP	2.1	5.1	n/a	3	6.3 (2002)	0.8 (1992)
Slovakia (ZRS)	CP	4.4	0.6	n/a	-3.8	7.4 (1994)	0.6 (2002)
Spain (PCE)	5.9*	9.2*	4.8*	-1.1	-4.4	9.2* (1993/6)	3.8* (2008)
Sweden (V)	5.6	7.6	7.2	1.6	-0.4	12.0 (1998)	4.5 (1991)

Source: [www.parties-and-elections.de](http://www.parties-and-elections.de). »Significant« in this table is defined as obtaining at least 3 percent of the vote *and* gaining parliamentary seats in at least one election.

#### Key

\* signifies in coalition

CP signifies ruling Communist Party

1 Danish Communist Party (DKP)

2 Finnish People's Democratic League, SKDL (1987 SKDL + Democratic Alternative)

3 People's Alliance (AP) until 1995

4 Italian Communist Party (PCI)



torate akin to green parties, attracting younger, more white-collar and female supporters, with stronger support bases among student groups and the more educated, particularly in the public sector.

Far left party ties to trade unions and other civil society groups and NGOs are weak but strengthening. Communist and former communist parties still have strong links to trade union activists but »communist« trade unions as such no longer exist (except in Portugal). Far left parties are certainly becoming increasingly attractive to trade unions disaffected with social democratic parties, as is shown by the trade union presence in the German Left Party's predecessor, Labour and Social Justice – The Electoral Alternative (WASG). We should not expect the trade unions to disaffiliate from the main social democratic parties in the near future, since as governing parties these still make the best lobbying points for union interests. However, the more social democratic parties loosen their traditional ties to trade unions and the more far left parties participate in government, the more we might expect individual trade unionists to change affiliation.

Usually, far left parties have better links with a large number of NGOs, single-issue groups, and social movements, including long-standing pacifist and environmental groups. Ties have grown with the »anti-globalization« global justice movement, in particular since 2002 through the European Social Forum, a bi-annual festival of workshops, seminars and rallies for NGOs, civil society, and trade unions held across Europe (for instance, in Malmö, Sweden, in September 2008), to which most far left parties send delegations. The far left has shown an increasing propensity to participate in extra-parliamentary protests, for example in anti-G8 protests, campaigns against the Gulf War, and so on. However, far left links with the wider movement remain underdeveloped. Much of the movement does not regard itself as »left-wing« and indeed is strongly anarchist. Some major components – such as the French ATTAC movement – are relatively reformist and oriented towards lobbying the state rather than revolution. Moreover, the movement tends to regard party politics with suspicion and the ESF does not allow political parties in its organizing bodies; tensions have frequently emerged between parties and the wider movement. Whilst the global justice movement provides a strong extra-parliamentary mobilization potential for the far left, there is little prospect of it developing into a global left party.

We can identify several specific factors that aid the success of far left parties, in addition to the emergence of the »modernization crisis« and

the profusion of populism (the »populist Zeitgeist«) that have helped the rise of European anti-establishment parties since the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> In general, the socio-economic environment in each country plays a *background* role in the success of far left parties. They flourish in a wide variety of environments, and not always where we might expect them (for example, Poland has no significant far left party despite low satisfaction with democracy and high unemployment). They are successful in a wide range of electoral systems, except in the UK, where the majoritarian electoral system hinders all smaller and newer parties. *The optimum long-term factors for contemporary far left success are: a far left predecessor, high unemployment and protest sentiment, the absence of competitor protest parties, and a convergent party system*, although not all of these are needed for a strong far left party to flourish.

The most obvious connection is an historical one: Today successful far left parties generally exist where they were successful in the past (for example, in Cyprus and Finland). Even apparent exceptions prove the rule. For example, the Dutch Socialist Party entered the national parliament only in 1994, but it had already built up a local municipal and provincial presence through door-to-door campaigning and links with NGOs by the 1980s. Nevertheless, there has been no nationally significant far left party since 1989 in most of the rest of former Eastern Europe, except the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In many former communist regimes, the communist heritage is perceived profoundly negatively, and post-communist far left parties lack domestic legitimacy. Moreover, ex-communist social democratic parties monopolized links with trade unions and the formerly communist electorate, including significant numbers of activists who might otherwise have formed independent far left parties. The Czech exception – the KSCM has been one of Europe’s strongest – is partially explained by a strong domestic socialist tradition that continued during communist rule.

Although there seems to be a link between far left party success and high unemployment (for example, in Finland and France), this is not a direct connection, since left support has *grown* alongside declining unemployment in several countries (for example, Denmark and the Netherlands), and fallen despite rising employment in others (for example, Spain

5. For a more detailed analysis see, for example, Abedi, Amir (2004): *Anti-Political Establishment Parties: A Comparative Analysis*. London: Routledge; Mudde, Cas (2007): *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

in 2008, Czech Republic in 2005). However, far left parties do appear to flourish in countries with high protest sentiment (for example, in Germany and Greece, where, according to Eurobarometer data, the proportion of those who are dissatisfied with national democracy exceeds 40 percent). However, the far left has to share its protest role with the Greens and above all the far right, which often articulates anti-EU, anti-globalization, and anti-establishment issues better than the far left. It is indicative that only in three EU countries in which the far left party is successful does it have both a Green and a far right competitor (France, Latvia, and the Netherlands).

An important factor in producing protest parties is a »convergent party system,« referring to the convergence of the main political forces around the political center. Many analysts argue that such systems increase the propensity to mobilization around »anti-establishment« themes. The main features of such systems are (i) a lack of ideological polarization between the main political players (increasing policy consensus and multi-party coalitions, and above all »grand coalitions« between centre-left and centre-right), and (ii) »cartelization« (when key political actors monopolize party competition and exclude political challengers through controlling party funding and electoral rules). Convergent party systems appear to help anti-establishment parties in general, rather than the far left in particular. For example, Germany and the Netherlands are convergent party systems where the populist anti-establishment left is strong, but Austria (as the 2008 elections show), and indeed Belgium and Switzerland, are convergent political systems with a marginal far left but a strong populist far right.

Since the far and centre left have historically competed for a similar electorate, the »neo-liberalization« of social democracy since the early 1980s has provided a central issue of far left identity and mobilization. The more the centre left has appeared to abandon the mainstays of the social democratic welfare consensus, the more the far left has rushed to defend them. Far left parties make capital out of the alleged »betrayal« by social democrats of their traditional »socialist« ideas and constituencies. The populist socialist parties in particular allege that the social democrats and right-wing parties are near-identical »establishment« parties, representing a political class that has abandoned the »ordinary working person.« Far left parties increasingly openly appeal to disaffected social democrats. Most notably WASG was formed directly by Social Democrats disaffected with the »neo-liberal« direction of the red-green coalition, and

in particular by the Hartz IV/Agenda 2010 reforms, which were portrayed as an »anti-social« attack on workers' rights.

Furthermore, the most successful far left parties now rely decreasingly on abstract ideological doctrine, and try to encapsulate all radical left trends under umbrella opposition to neo-liberalism that makes little reference to Marxism or socialism. These parties claim to be »campaigning« parties, often focusing on specific current practical issues – for example, opposition to the EU working time directive – rather than the revolutionary future, and they adopt non-traditional ideological approaches, such as environmentalism, feminism, and populism. In the most effective, the role of leadership has also changed. Rather than the rather dour personalities of the traditional communist parties, many modern far left leaders are media-savvy performers who present a non-dogmatic but principled image, and are considered »charismatic« even by political opponents. For instance, Gudrun Schyman, the Swedish Left Party's leader 1993–2004 was popular for her openness regarding past alcohol problems, her feminism, and anti-communism.

Nevertheless, far left parties remain vulnerable to internal dissent. Like the Green parties in the 1980s, they are divided between Realos and Fundis, and their orientation towards grass-roots democracy increases the role of the latter. However, also like the Greens, the Realos have become dominant in the leaderships. Old doctrinal disputes have weakened but not disappeared, and many communist parties in particular tend to retain conservative and sectarian practices. Even ostensibly ex-communist parties are sometimes troubled by long-standing ideological and strategic disputes. Most notably, the leader of the Finnish VAS, Suvi-Anne Siimes, attributed her 2006 resignation to a pro-Soviet tendency within the party and its irreconcilable opposition to the EU and NATO.

## **Far Left Programs and Their Impact**

Over the past 15 years, far left parties have consolidated as an increasingly clear »party family« with a widely shared policy agenda. Concrete proposals include opposing or limiting privatization, supporting a 35-hour maximum working week without loss of pay, alongside greater rights of union recognition, and the extension of political democracy (for example, through increasing local government powers and the use of referenda). Internationally, far left parties support: controls on international trade

(including widespread support for the proposed Tobin tax on international financial transactions); nuclear disarmament and demilitarization as a principle of international relations; opposing NATO as a US-led military Cold-War institution; enhancing the role of organizations such as the OSCE and the UN, with an emphasis on peacekeeping; reform or abolition of the current international financial institutions (IMF and World Bank) to emphasize sustainable development and economic deregulation.

There are still strong divisions: the communists – particularly to the East – are less concerned with »libertarian issues,« such as lesbian and gay rights, drug decriminalization, and opposition to nuclear power. Attitudes to the EU still prove divisive: in general, far left parties pursue European cooperation in order to formulate common policies and campaigning strategies that further labor, women's, and environmental rights but oppose greater federalization (the development of a common foreign and defense policy and unhindered market competition and the loss of national economic levers). Accordingly, all significant far left parties opposed the Constitutional and Lisbon treaties on the grounds of (i) their neo-liberal emphasis, (ii) perceived political federalization, and (iii) the lack of democratic consultation involved, without necessarily disapproving of EU integration *per se*. However, there is little consensus beyond this and it is hard for the far left to move from a defensive to a more positive position. Several parties – for example, the Greek ΚΚΕ and the Swedish V – are profoundly opposed to further integration, others advocate non-accession (for example, the Norwegian SV), and still others (for example, the Finnish VAS and the Cypriot AKEL) are increasingly integrationist.

The biggest change in far left strategy since the Cold War is in its attitude to government participation. Whereas between 1947 and 1989 only the Finnish Communist Party was a regular participant in government, since 1989 there has been no example of a left party in advanced liberal democracy that has turned down a realistic offer to join a government coalition.<sup>6</sup> Radical left parties, although not extreme left parties, no longer view bourgeois parliaments as simply designed to »dupe« the working class. They have been increasingly open towards coalition government with social democrats and Greens (in Finland, France, and Italy) or at

6. Bale, Tim and Richard Dunphy (2007): »In from the Cold: Left Parties, Policy, Office and Votes in Advanced Liberal Democracies since 1989,« paper presented at a PSA workshop on radical left parties and government participation, on which some of this section relies.

least (as in Scandinavia, Portugal, and Spain) to ad hoc support for social democrat minority governments.

In general, participation in government has not been a happy experience for the far left. In most cases, the party has lost support after government participation, with the important exception of Cyprus, where despite a vote loss in 2006 AKEL leader Demitris Christofias was elected as president in 2008. The losses have been particularly severe where there have been alternative left or right protest parties for dissatisfied voters to defect to (for example, in Italy and France). In general, far left parties join coalitions in order to resist government neo-liberalism and to steer the governmental centre of gravity to the left, by making incremental advances for their own policy agenda and acting as the »left-wing conscience« of social democrats.

Government participation presents acute dilemmas for the far left. Some of their problems are common to small parties with few ministers – generally looking after social, welfare environmental, or women’s portfolios – in terms of demonstrating concrete benefits to their supporters, and to anti-establishment parties which have to combine a protest and a governing role. The far left choice is between a populist anti-establishment strategy guaranteeing medium-term electoral success and mobilizing discontent against the social democrats, but providing little policy influence and a pragmatic attitude to governmental compromise and partnership with the social democrats that may provide influence but risks de-radicalization.

In office, the far left can point to fairly modest reforms – incremental increases in welfare, and employment benefits, the dilution of privatization and marketization, some increase in governmental subsidies and regulation, but hardly a »radical« reformulation of neo-liberalism. Some successes – for example, the employment measures of the Jospin government – might have occurred without the far left. Even in the few cases where the far left has been the dominant party in government – as in Cyprus – it is difficult to demonstrate that government policy has been markedly different from that offered by a left-wing social democratic party.

Indeed, on some of the biggest questions – for example, joining the Euro zone, government participation in NATO operations, austerity measures – far left parties have been unable to turn the tide, and have had serious difficulties in placating their supporters. Where parties have tried to play an incoherent »double game« of government participation com-

bined with mobilization against government measures they dislike – especially in Italy in 2006–2008 – they have jeopardized party unity and often suffered serious losses in the following elections. Many far left parties now realize that such a »double game« is ultimately self-defeating, and it is necessary to accept the principle of compromises in government.

## Far Left Networks at European Level

After periods of considerable disintegration and disorientation up to the mid-1990s international consolidation has been increasing, especially through the EU institutions.

In particular, the European Parliamentary group, the Confederal Group of the United European Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) has since 1995 helped bridge the deep divisions that hindered European cooperation in the 1970s and 1980s. GUE/NGL entails only a loose form of cooperation (hence the term »confederal«). Nevertheless, it has become more representative and active over time: Its 2004–2009 party group represented 16 parties from 12 of the EU's 25 member states.

GUE/NGL has furthered the policy convergence of the radical left over support for a democratized EU that promotes labor protection, environmentalism, feminism, and minority rights, and has helped to soften most component parties' outright opposition to European integration. Nevertheless, it remains one of the least unified European parliamentary groups, and encompasses a wide spectrum of views, from the relatively moderate, pro-integrationist, anti-communist Finnish VAS to the extreme, anti-integrationist, fiercely nationalist and unapologetically communist Greek KKE. Although numerically stronger at the European level than the far right and Greens (who ally with regionalist parties in the European Parliament), the far left is relatively marginal to policy making within the EP. For instance in 2007 it had just one of 24 committee presidencies (International Trade). The weakness of far left parties in Europe's East meant that GUE/NGL's share of EP seats fell from 6.7 percent in 1999 to 5.2 percent in 2004.

The formation of the European Left Party (EL) in 2004 was a major step forward, when the far left joined the other major European party families in having a transnational party (TNP) to coordinate its European election manifestos and policy. By the beginning of 2008, EL boasted 19

member parties in 17 countries. EL intends to move from loose party coordination to a qualitatively new phase in transnational cooperation, bridging the lasting policy disagreements between different party traditions. Specifically, EL intends to accelerate coordination of a common manifesto in the run-up to the 2009 European Parliament elections, and afterwards to coordinate its efforts further.

So far EL is certainly consolidating, but remains relatively weak. As yet, it has not succeeded in encompassing all the most relevant actors within the European far left. For example, unlike many other TNPs the EP parliamentary group and party federation are not part of the same organization. Certainly, several of EL's leading components belong to the EP's GUE/NGL group. However, this group also includes a number of significant parties – for example, the Dutch SP – that have not joined EL. Moreover, several of EL's constituent parties – for example, the Czech Party of Democratic Socialism – are insignificant in their respective national party systems. Parties did not join for a variety of reasons: The Nordic Green left parties saw EL as too dominated by old-style communists and irrelevant micro-parties. Many of the most Eurosceptic parties – for example, the Dutch Socialists – were further troubled by EL's relative moderation and dependence on EU funding. Old debates had not entirely subsided: EL's condemnation of »undemocratic, Stalinist practices and crimes« was insufficient for some parties and too provocative for many communists. Although the Czech communists eventually joined as observers, the Greek and Portuguese communists did not.

Clearly, EL has quickly attained a level of integration and common purpose that the European far left has not possessed for decades. However, absentees deprive EL of some of the most significant parties, an absence hardly compensated by the adhesion of its smaller members. Whether EL can further deepen integrative tendencies among the far left, as well as widening its geographical reach across Europe, remains an open question.

## Conclusion

The European far left is here to stay. Although it has clear weaknesses (such as its under-representation in most of Eastern Europe) most EU countries confront a far left that has stabilized or expanded since 1989, and which has become the principal challenge to mainstream social dem-



ocratic parties. This far left is now a domestic phenomenon which does not rely on Soviet support. In several countries – for example, the Netherlands, Germany, and Cyprus – it is in the ascendant. As a European party family, the far left is increasingly confident, coordinated, and consolidated, and is as strong, if not stronger than the Greens and the extreme right. The most successful far left parties are those which have undergone significant internal ideological and strategic evolution, have overcome internal dogmatism, have pragmatic, charismatic leadership, and concentrate on practical campaigns in coordination with extra-parliamentary actors and the global justice movement. The weaker parties are those still dogged by past internecine disputes, with lingering opposition to governmental participation, and ageing, conservative activists (the communists above all, whose future, except in Cyprus and Moldova, is increasingly threatened).

Far left parties flourish in a broad variety of external circumstances, but are helped above all by economic discontent, protest sentiments, the absence of protest party competitors, and political systems in which the mainstream left and right converge. In the near future, the worsening socioeconomic situation in the EU is likely to increase the appeal of the far left (in particular the populists). Moreover, the European far left is likely to use the forthcoming EU elections and the ongoing discussion over the EU Constitutional/Lisbon Treaty to mobilize. If the Constitutional Treaty debate is handled in an »elitist« way – for example, it is perceived that Ireland is being forced to vote until it gets the right answer – this is likely to increase the temptation for the far left to mobilize on a more populist anti-establishment platform. Although there is little prospect that the far left will outflank social democrats in the medium term, since social democratic parties still possess far greater political and organizational capital, we might nevertheless expect continued recalibration of the balance in favor of the former.

The main »raison d'être« of the radical left parties is no longer revolution, but the preservation and enhancement of the traditional social democratic welfare consensus, albeit with a more environmental, feminist, Eurosceptic, and extra-parliamentary slant. Observers and policy-makers are therefore likely to understand the far left most appropriately if they renounce expectations that the radical left is either an obsolete Soviet »fossil« or a »threat« to contemporary democracy equivalent to the far right: One may doubt the practicality of a revived Keynesian agenda, but many of the themes of the far left's discourse refer to participation,

inclusion, and democratization of the political system rather than the reverse.

In the long term, the appeal of the far left cannot be separated from wider problems both in the EU and national political systems, and within contemporary social democracy. Its root causes are: anti-establishment sentiment, socio-economic distress, the perception that mainstream political actors are becoming increasingly technocratic and near-identical, and that citizens are defenseless before the forces of globalization. It will not be easy to develop concrete policies to address these sentiments, but it is certain that if politicians – and social democratic ones above all – do not begin to engage with them in a systematic way, then the far left will continue to flourish.