

The Left's Uneasy Comeback



As recently as two years ago, many analysts were ready to pronounce the Europe left as dead. At the time, center-right governments held sway over Europe.

Since then, there's been a leftward-leaning revival. Center-left movements in Croatia and Latvia made notable breakthroughs in 2011. In 2012, parliamentary elections in Slovakia, Romania, Serbia, Lithuania, Ukraine, as well as regional votes in Hungary and the Czech Republic, witnessed a reawakened left. According to polls, even the conservative government of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is on the ropes, notwithstanding a landslide victory in 2010.

Only in Poland and Bulgaria has the center-right maintained its strength, managing to minimize the consequences of the economic and social crisis that has savaged the euro zone. In Poland, the center-right is now under siege by the far right. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk's foremost adversary is no longer the Social Democratic Party but the conservative Law and Justice headed by former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski.

This begs the question whether the left's unexpected resurgence is physiological or just part of a fairly typical pattern of political rotation. Three factors come into play.

The first is the increasing interdepen-

dence of European policy; the second, the challenge the crisis poses to neo-liberal economic recipes (read the Washington-driven consensus); and the third a generational shift in leftist politics, a crucial element in the leadership dynamics of the post-Communist world. Despite social and cultural rifts, links between governing elites and European political "families" is a fact of life.

Prominent Europarliamentarians, including Socialists, Greens, Liberals and populists all side with their own at home (European Parliament President Martin Schulz, a German Social Democrat, traveled to Romania to back Social Democrat Victor Ponta). Similarly, political campaigns in major Western EU states tend to act as lightning rods for its "suburban" democracies. Eastern politicians often borrow Western slogans and marketing techniques for use at home, also adopting similar tax and social measures. The left's return to power in France had a predictable ripple effect.

There's no denying the downturn has marred the economic and social recipes introduced by free market economy. Twenty years after its launch, cure-all globalization is showing signs of wear and tear, a mixture of domestic crises, general stagnation, as well as the foreign debt crisis. The Socialist victory in France and the prospect of a leftward shift in Germany and Italy is feeding a temptation pull back from austerity and its menu of spending cuts and higher taxes.

The neo-liberal shortfall of the 1990s

has made the left see itself as a potential defender of the welfare state and a promoter of economic intervention, particularly in an effort to curb speculation. Though the left isn't alone in this mission, but it is increasingly burnishing its credentials.

In the "eastern suburbs" of the European Union, dissatisfaction is growing between what the public perceives as two worlds, one containing developed countries able to ensure and protect their own prosperity, the other, and increasingly larger side, riddled with pockets of severe depression. More affluent EU states have made no secret of seeing the weaker states exclusively as haven for quick-turnaround investment and a source of both cheap skilled and unskilled labor.

In countries such as Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Ukraine, governing elites have given up short and medium-term prospects of joining the EU, instead maneuvering among neighbor states and potential allies. In terms of diplomacy, the geopolitics of Cold War have made a comeback, with countries attempting to forge bilateral ties with the United States, and even more so with Vladimir Putin's ambitious Russia.

The generational factor is especially important in viewing Eastern Europe. Until recent years, most left-wing party leaders were in some way linked to Communist days. Some may not have been responsible, in personal terms, for any harm done in the authoritarian past, but their link to "old regime" days was undeniable.

A particular complex case was that of parties in Russian-speaking former Soviet republics, from the Baltic States to Moldova. Many stood for not just the continuation of linguistic interests (keeping Russian alive as the state language) but also felt back on Soviet-era memories by favoring 21st-century Russian interests, both in cultural and strategic terms. The organic link between the old regime and parties built on their ashes offered ample space to Western interlopers, faced with morally compromised officials who were easy to blackmailed and highly malleable. The situation, a residue of communism, slowed the development of a genuine political left tied to social democratic tradition.

But the gradual disappearance of Soviet-era heirs has changed the way the game is played. Many new Eastern European leftists reject the conniving myth of “technocratic governance,” which former Communist harped out to help paper over their lack of legitimacy in the post-1989 transition period. Most new-wave leftist politicians embrace Western European trends. They communicate in English and ensure they’re at ease with digital technology.

So, has Eastern Europe finally rediscovered a “real” left, one that the move between communism and free market capitalism pushed to the side? Not quite. Despite resurgence at the polls, the Eastern European left continues to suffer from an excess of heterogeneity. Notwithstanding the passage of 20 years, it remains cluttered with players. Ideological confusion endures and mars the leftist approach not a number of critical issues, including ethnicity, nationalism, and the vague idea of Europeanism. Some parties have been unable to dispel increasingly widespread popular “old regime” nostalgia, particularly among its

older electorate, much of it concentrated in rural areas.

Immigration has changed the face of some countries, with vote totals distorted as a result. Faced with an exodus of citizens, parties on all sides of the political spectrum are working hard to curry favor among pensioners, who represent a static portion of domestic populations. Much of the active portion is already abroad (up to a quarter of the total in some states) and can no longer influence politics at home.

But the most serious problem may be pinning down the meaning of “leftist politics,” an ambiguous task at best. Analyzing key recent economic measures taken by Eastern European governments demonstrates polarities that are unconnected to the left. These choices are best represented by moves taken by Poland’s Civic Platform and Hungary’s FIDESZ, both members of the European center-right.

Warsaw has chosen to modernize using a free-market, market-friendly approach, while Budapest has pressed to

re-nationalize the energy sector and augment national capital in the banking and telecommunications sectors, an interventionist strategy typical of the “classic” European left of the 1960s and 1970s.

This leaves the new left with the unenviable task of finding its place between these two extremes, one traditional inimical to its views, the other a kind of rightwing co-opting of traditional leftist methods. That means moving away from economics and focusing on social issues, where the most serious problem is emigration, not immigration; not abstract discrimination against the Roma population but domestic unwillingness to integrate them socially and professionally. The success of the new Eastern Europe left will depend the concrete response it offers to the growing crisis of confidence voters feel toward Europe as well as the increasingly wide rift between north-central Europe, anchored by Germany’s economic strength, and the continent’s southeast side, strangled by debt, low competitiveness, and poor social cohesion. ●



A. Pungovschi/AP/Gettyimages

Election day in Romania.