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Almost two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, on the occasion of the German federal elections in September 2009, the International Herald Tribune marked the electoral victory of the German right with the headline, ‘Is socialism dying?’ The German Social Democratic Party or the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) took 23% of the votes – its lowest poll since the Second World War – just months after the European elections registered a poor performance from left-wing candidates across the European Union (EU). As the article went on to observe, ‘Even in the midst of one of the greatest challenges to capitalism in 75 years, involving a breakdown of the financial system because of “irrational exuberance”, greed and the weakness of regulatory systems, European socialists and their leftist cousins have not found a compelling response, let alone taken advantage of the failures of the right.’

There is no doubt that across Europe the failure of the social democratic parties to present a ‘compelling response’ to the economic crisis has led to a wave of electoral setbacks. But this is not as true of these parties’ ‘leftist cousins’, which have in fact notched up some modest advances, continuing to make some electoral gains, intervening in mainstream politics and further developing along the left trajectory which so surprised commentators in the first decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Of course, the tally across Europe in the last ten years includes significant defeats as well as small advances; nevertheless, these experiences have generally led to a positive reappraisal of strategy and tactics rather than defeatism or dissolution. Thus the political current which emerged from the wreckage of the communist
movement in 1989 has shown itself to have considerable resilience. The German Left Party – Die Linke – is perhaps the most successful of the European left parties, and the International Herald Tribune, in remarking on the bad result of the SPD in the German federal election, might also have noted that Die Linke increased its number of seats in the Bundestag from 54 to 76, increasing its share of the vote by 3.2% to 11.9%, and consolidating its position as a party of the whole of Germany.

The emergence during the 1990s of electorally significant left parties, largely rooted in the communist tradition, confounded political observers and challenged the conventional wisdom that communism as a significant political current was dead. Despite expectations of the total demise of the communist movement, a number of West European communist parties, or sections thereof, survived crises and splits to evolve into viable new political forces which were able to occupy the political space to the left of social democracy. Their coherent articulation of opposition to the Maastricht Treaty, and their defence of living standards, government spending and the welfare state, ensured a credible level of parliamentary support – often up to 10% – in key countries, such as France, Spain, Italy and Germany. Internal reform and theoretical development led in many instances to the emergence of a new type of left politics – more open to different traditions, linking up with social movements, and developing and strengthening green, feminist, anti-racist and pacifist policies, as well as Marxist-based socialism. Later in the 1990s their identity evolved as part of the developing anti-capitalist, anti-globalisation movement. A key challenge confronting the most successful parties was their relationship with the larger social democratic parties to their right, with which they faced the question of coalition or cooperation. Looking back on two decades of left party development it is clear that this has remained the most significant challenge, and these parties have risen or fallen largely on the basis of the balance of their electoral and political relationships with social democracy. In the context of the current economic crisis and increasing protest in the face of government spending cuts, these parties could make significant political gains by articulating a popular social and economic alternative to the cuts agenda; it remains to be seen whether they will be able to rise to meet this political opportunity at a time when social democratic parties are failing to do so.
The political context

From the vantage point of the post-9/11 world, where ‘international terrorism’ has supplanted the ‘Soviet threat’ as the lowest common denominator fear factor and the increasingly globalised community faces new challenges such as climate change and cyber warfare, it is hard to fully comprehend the political significance of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union which followed just two years later. Yet those events radically and fundamentally reshaped world politics and economics and made possible everything that has happened since. The existence of the Soviet Union and its eventual conflict with the United States shaped most of the history of the twentieth century. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm put it:

With the significant exception of the years from 1933 to 1945, the international politics of the entire Short Twentieth Century since the October revolution can best be understood as a secular struggle by the forces of the old order against social revolution, believed to be embodied in, allied with, or dependent on the fortunes of the Soviet Union and international communism.²

In short, capitalism was seen to have won the historic contest between the two great twentieth-century systems – a view most popularly put by Francis Fukuyama, who declared that ‘the end of history’ had arrived, as the very process of historical change was supposedly now concluded with the victory of capitalism. Twenty years later this assertion seems hubristic but at the time it resonated with the triumphalism of the Western elites as they saw, at last, the securing of the goal of the post-Second World War open door policy. No longer were vast swathes of the world to be excluded from the free market because of their state socialist economic framework. Indeed, in the field of economics, the monetarism and neo-liberalism pioneered as government policy by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher seemed set to sweep all before them. As the 1990s progressed, country after country opened itself, not only to the free movement of goods but also to the free movement of capital, as globalisation extended from the field of trade to that of international capital flows. The main beneficiary was the United States of America, as the post-Second World
War direction of capital flows reversed and the world's savings flowed from the poorest countries in the world to the richest.

At the same time, inequalities between and within nations reached levels never before seen in world history. By a perverse twist of logic, reversing cause and effect, the social dislocation and political upheavals which resulted from the economic squeeze upon a continent such as Africa were taken by columnists in ‘serious’ British newspapers to argue that the end of colonialism might itself have been a mistake. Indeed, the early 1990s were rife with attempts to rehabilitate the idea of colonialist intervention. In January 1993, Hoover Institution fellow Angelo Codevilla wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that it was ‘time to rethink the Wisdom of Anti-Colonialism’, promoting colonialism ‘as the solution to the crisis then developing in the Balkans with the destruction of Yugoslavia’. Three months later, British historian Paul Johnson wrote an article in the *New York Times* entitled ‘Colonialism’s back – and not a moment too soon’. Praising the US invasion of Somalia in 1992, Johnson stated, ‘The basic problem is obvious but is never publicly admitted: some states are not yet fit to govern themselves. There is a moral issue here: The civilized world has a mission to go out to these desperate places and govern.’

On the military plane, while the Warsaw Pact dissolved, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) announced plans not only to expand into Eastern Europe, but also to develop an increasing ‘out-of-area’ orientation pioneered during the first Gulf War of 1991, explicitly presenting itself as a world police force, reminiscent of nineteenth-century colonialism. For the first time since its formation, the US-led military alliance launched offensive military operations on the continent of Europe – in the former Yugoslavia, first in Bosnia and then, with the illegal 1999 bombing campaign, against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The bombing began just days after the first wave of expansion had inducted Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland into NATO’s ranks. At its fiftieth anniversary summit in Washington, DC, on 24 April 1999, conducted during the onslaught on Yugoslavia, NATO took the historic decision to extend its sphere of military intervention. Two years later, in 2001, NATO began its decade-long war on Afghanistan.

But the collapse of the Soviet system also had unforeseen domestic policy consequences. In the sphere of social policy, Newt Gingrich, the leader of the Republicans in the US Congress, claimed that
extensive welfare provision and progressive taxation were artefacts of the Cold War. He argued that with the external ‘threat’ of communism banished, these internal concessions to the socialist threat should be dismantled. The EU’s 1991 Maastricht Treaty seemed to signal a similar move towards a more US-influenced model of social provision in Western Europe which the social democratic parties – generally responsible for the introduction of post-Second World War welfare states – were unable or unwilling to resist. In fact, the extent to which social democratic parties were affected by the political changes accompanying the fall of the Berlin Wall has been insufficiently appreciated.

In tandem with the view that communism was finished came the idea that socialism, as an economic, social and political perspective, which had informed – to one degree or another – the philosophy of the great majority of the European labour movement for more than a century, was also fatally damaged, and so, by association, was social democracy. What was remarkable was how rapidly this perspective was adopted by the social democratic parties themselves, as well as the speed with which they embraced the central tenets of the economic and social philosophy of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Tony Blair, the leader of the British Labour Party at that time, went further than most, implying that the very formation of the Labour Party at the turn of the twentieth century had been a mistake. He suggested that it had split Britain’s progressive liberal tradition and launched his ‘project’ of a return to nineteenth-century Gladstonian liberalism. Writers such as Anthony Giddens set out to provide a theoretical basis for such enterprises, declaring bluntly that socialism had been dissolved and as ‘Social Democracy was always linked to Socialism. What should its orientation be in a world where there are no alternatives to capitalism?’

Historian Donald Sassoon wrote extensively about the shift of European social democracy to the right, concluding that ‘everyone is, in some shape or other, openly or covertly, a signed-up member to the capitalist club’. Indeed, in 1999, writing about the convergence of European social democracy at a time when Lionel Jospin appeared to be on a far more radical trajectory than Tony Blair, he observed,

All social democratic parties now concede that there are limits to the expansion of public expenditure, and that the era
The flagship approach of social democracy, post-1989, was the Third Way of Blair and Gerhard Schroeder (Schröder), which argued that the market worked and just needed to be accompanied by a better redistribution of wealth. But this notion has collapsed as it has become clear that not only does the market not work but also that social democrats in power failed to sufficiently redistribute either to satisfy their traditional electorate or to win new voters. They have seemed unable to put forward, in a twenty-first century context, the type of vision of transformational social and economic justice – which was delivered in many respects via the welfare states – that won vast support for social democracy from the post-Second World War generation.

But what writers such as Giddens and Sassoon missed was the fact that the rightward movement of social democracy was part of a political and economic process which included the onslaughts on the living and working conditions of the working classes that were epitomised in Europe in the early 1990s by the Maastricht Treaty. Indeed, this post-1989 political process also had a significant impact on traditional West European conservative parties – the impact was by no means confined to the left. Far-right and neo-fascist parties had emerged in the EU in the 1980s, feeding on the anger and despair caused by mass unemployment and the undermining of social solidarity. This context helped generate the racism and xenophobia which bolstered far-right support, and during the 1990s these parties made further inroads into the voter bases of the conservatives. By the end of the decade, Gianfranco Fini’s ‘post-fascist’ National Alliance in Italy had stabilised its share of the vote in national elections at around 15%. In Austria, Jorg Haider’s Freedom Party regularly gained over 20% of the vote. In France, the National Front accelerated from 1,500 members in 1984 to 42,000 members before a split in 1998, but by 2002 it was sufficiently restored that its leader Jean-Marie Le Pen went on to contest the final round of the French presidential election against Jacques Chirac. So it was that in the decade after 1989, the far right – for the first time since the 1930s – established a mass political base in some major West European countries. The impact of this on
traditional conservative parties was in some cases to adopt their own
forms of racist rhetoric to head off the far-right competition, and in
others to consider following the example of Silvio Berlusconi in 1994,
whose Forza Italia party, with 21% of the vote, had entered a coaliti-
on government which included the far-right National Alliance with
13.5% of the vote.

Yet what those such as Giddens and Sassoon also failed to com-
prehend was that the rightward movement of social democracy was
leading to the entirely predictable result of opening up a consider-
able political space to its left – increased in size by the catastrophi-

c economic and social consequences of the post-1989 broadening and
deepening of the neo-liberal turn of the 1980s. This space was at least
partly filled by a number of left parties, most of which had originated
in a scarcely observed process of political renewal launched by the
left wings of what had been communist parties in 1989.

The catalyst for left recovery

Newt Gingrich was not alone in noting the relationship between
the existence of the Soviet Union and welfare systems in the
West – or ‘public paternalism’, as the Wall Street Journal described
it. The Japanese economist Makoto Itoh also commented on this
relationship:

In retrospect, global capitalism seemed to have been in a defensive
position since the Russian Revolution. Its territory was actually
much narrowed after the Second World War. East European coun-
tries, China, North Korea, Cuba, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Kampuchea
and Nicaragua, for instance, opted for a socialist regime. Within
capitalist countries, welfare policies, concessions to the demands
of trade unions, as well as the burden of defence expenditures were
regarded to be necessary costs to guard a free capitalist economic
system against revolutionary socialism.6

1989 put ‘global capitalism’ very much back on the offensive.
In Europe this resulted in very rapid progress towards the signing
of the Maastricht Treaty in February 1992, establishing a monetarist
framework for economic and monetary union. A strict limit was set
on the level of total public debt, at 60% of the gross domestic prod-
uct (GDP), and government budget deficits were limited to 3% of
GDP. To comply with these requirements would mean major public spending cuts in most EU states. The Treaty also ensured that key areas of economic policy were insulated from democratic accountability: the projected independent European Central Bank was given control of monetary policy in a framework which specified that price stability would take precedence over economic growth, employment and living standards. In effect, the Maastricht Treaty made Keynesian economic policies impossible, ruling out the traditional economic framework of West European social democracy.

In this context it was hardly surprising that the implementing governments found themselves on a major collision course with the labour movements of their respective countries. West European politics in the 1990s was dominated by the struggle for and against the consequences of the implementation of the Maastricht Treaty. The first crisis appeared rapidly and was actually an unforeseen spin-off of the events of 1989. Germany was the strongest economy in Europe at that time and the chief contributor to the EU budget. Its trade surplus subsidised the rest of the community, while its industry benefited from the relative exchange rate stability provided by the European monetary system. With German unification, this balance changed significantly. Indeed, the Maastricht Treaty provisions were set so rigidly because Germany had no intention of subsidising the weaker EU economies. So the European Monetary System collapsed in August 1993 because the rest of the EU could not, during the recession of the time, cope with the levels of interest rate that the German Bundesbank had set to attract the funds needed to soften the impact of unification upon East Germany. The deadline for the start of monetary union was put back from 1997 to 1999. In order to meet it, almost every EU government had already embarked on a programme of public spending cuts and labour market deregulation in a context where average EU unemployment was over 10%.

Major social democratic parties set about swingeing cuts. In June 1992, at a time when Italy was rocked with corruption scandals, the Socialist Party Prime Minister Giuliano Amato launched an austerity programme, cutting spending on health care and pensions, reducing local spending and controlling public sector pay. The Dutch Labour Party government launched a similar programme in the Netherlands, cutting subsidies for education, housing and public transport. The Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español;
PSOE) government of Felipe González introduced a plan to cut unemployment benefits at a time when Spain had the highest unemployment levels in Europe. During François Mitterrand’s presidency, the French Socialist Party government pursued the *franc fort* policy in the early 1990s. As the *New York Times* commented, ‘French Socialists took power 11 years ago, announcing sweeping nationalizations of industry and an economic program that put jobs first. But their revolution has been of a different kind. The promised policies were quickly discarded and President François Mitterrand adopted, instead, a plan to eliminate inflation and create a franc strong enough to be the equal of the German mark.’

Mitterrand linked the French and German currencies at an exchange rate which the French could not afford, in the process ensuring that unemployment never dropped below 10%. The government then went on to lose its support by trying to reduce the resulting deficit through public spending cuts. In the 1993 legislative elections Socialist Party support in the National Assembly slumped from 260 seats to 53.

The social and political consequences of the Maastricht-compliance spending cuts were dramatic. Trade unions launched the biggest wave of struggles seen in Europe since the period following May 1968. In May 1992, Germany was paralysed by a series of major strikes, starting with the public sector. A report in the *New York Times* indicated the extent of the action against Kohl’s cuts: ‘In a nation where order is a cardinal virtue and where social conflicts are usually avoided at all costs, the public employees’ strike was an unexpected jolt. Hundreds of thousands of union members participated, stalling trains and subways, closing clinics, kindergartens and Government offices and leaving garbage uncollected and mail undelivered.’ In Italy, on 12 November 1994, one and a half million people demonstrated in Rome against the government’s plans to cut welfare benefits and state pensions – a third of the marchers were pensioners. The French trade union protests, launched in November 1995, were the most spectacular of all. As conservative Prime Minister Alain Juppé unveiled his plans for massive government spending cuts a wave of general strikes and demonstrations commenced, lasting for more than three weeks. The scale of the protests – which brought the country’s transport infrastructure to a complete halt – and the accompanying social conflict, together with the developing
social movements against the government’s political and economic project which included attacks on women’s rights such as abortion, forced Juppé to abandon his proposals.

Political reaction to the consequences of Maastricht began to display a pattern. Mainstream conservative parties experienced major splits in their social bases, often losing out to far-right and anti-immigration parties. Social democratic parties that had implemented cuts suffered significant losses. Following the dramatic reverses experienced by the French Socialists in 1993, the Italian Socialist Party was obliterated in 1994 and the Spanish Socialists lost power in 1996. It was in this political context that the parties which had emerged out of the crisis of communism, to the left of social democracy, arrested their decline and began to advance. The Italian Party of Communist Refoundation (Partito della Rifondazione Comunista; PRC) increased its vote from 5.6% in 1992 to 6% in 1994 and to 8.6% in 1996. The German Party of Democratic Socialism (Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus; German PDS) increased its vote from 2.4% in 1990 to 4.4% in 1994 and to 5.1% in 1998 on an all-Germany basis, and to over 20% in parts of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). The United Left of Spain increased its vote from 4.7% in 1986 to 9.1% in 1989, to 9.6% in 1993 and to 10.5% in 1996.

Left realignment and the emergence of the new European left

While the new European left that emerged in the early 1990s could be simply described as a converging political current of communist parties, former communist parties and other parties to the left of social democracy, the emergence was also a complex process, embracing only one part of the communist movement. Out of the wreckage of 1989, it was possible to see three trajectories which communist parties or sections thereof variously followed. Firstly, there were those who chose the path to social democracy, exemplified by the majority grouping within the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano; PCI) and often favoured by those from a Eurocommunist tradition. Secondly, there were those who failed to recognise the new political situation, or whose response to it was to dig in and defend the old traditions. In reality these parties often became nostalgic
communist sects, living in the past, tied to a disappearing electorate and in irreversible decline. Thirdly, there were those that formed the new European left and had two particularly significant characteristics. Whether or not they retained the name communist, they certainly retained a commitment to Marxist politics, to an anti-capitalist perspective, taking account of the realities of European and world politics at the end of the twentieth century. Many also showed a considerable capacity for open political debate and renewal, drawing on and opening up to feminism, environmental and anti-racist politics. But most unusually, in many cases these parties either initiated or participated in a realignment of left forces, often working with organisations that would previously have been regarded as politically hostile. This included allying with or even merging with the electorally insignificant, but very active, new left organisations – often based on a Trotskyist political orientation – which had expanded dramatically after 1968. Such groups participated in Spain’s United Left, merging with the left wing of the PCI to found the PRC, were included in the electoral lists of Germany’s PDS and eventually joined its successor party, Die Linke, and were invited to participate in common actions and debates initiated by the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français; PCF).

Prior to 1989, such cooperation would have been inconceivable, but the defeat of the Soviet Union also had a significant impact on much of the mainly Trotskyist and other new left parties that had emerged from the 1968 radicalisation in Europe. Some of these drifted off to the right, but many, while being left critics of the Soviet Union, concluded that its overthrow by capitalism was a disaster and were prepared to work with communist parties and their successors in the post-Soviet world on the basis of an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist perspective. Disagreements about the Spanish Civil War seemed less pressing than the neo-liberal onslaught on the welfare state and the developing world. This approach was encapsulated by the German PDS Chair Lothar Bisky at the party’s Fourth Congress held in January 1995: ‘Together we want to tap and use the ideas of communists such as Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Nikolai Bukharin, the old Leon Trotsky or Antonio Gramsci. It is undisputed that we commemorate those communists who were persecuted and killed by the fascists. Yet it is also our duty to honour those who were killed by Stalin.’

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The first major manifestation of this left realignment which was to forge the new European left had occurred in Spain in the 1980s. The Communist Party of Spain (Partido Comunista de España; PCE) had been legalised in 1977, following the end of the Franco dictatorship, against which it had been the most effective and organised opposition force, winning undoubted prestige for its courage. But it was unable to translate this prestige into electoral support and had swung to the right under the leadership of Santiago Carrillo. He embraced the new liberal democracy in Spain and did not press for concessions to the labour movement, instead accepting the restoration of the monarchy and supporting restrictive trade union legislation. He espoused Eurocommunism, which caused splits within the party, many of whom considered his concessions to the bourgeoisie – in the form of cooperation with the conservative government of Adolfo Suárez – as treasonous. Under González, the PSOE, which received funding from the German SPD and the Socialist International during the 1970s, was initially able to position itself as a more radical and popular force, winning around three times as many votes as the PCE in general elections in 1977 and 1979. One of the oldest parties in Spain, PSOE was founded in 1879 as a party to represent industrial workers and had a strong radical and Marxist tradition within it. It was banned by Franco in 1939, persecuted during the dictatorship and legalised in 1977. Despite its radical credentials, however, its leader Felipe González, from the more reformist wing of the party, worked to break PSOE from its Marxist heritage and to orient it towards a more mainstream form of social democracy, supported by other West European parties. Despite opposition and division within the party, González was successful in this goal, and by the end of 1979, the party had broken with Marxism.

The disintegration of the right led to a PSOE victory in the 1982 elections; the party won with 46.1% of the vote, gaining an absolute majority in parliament. According to Donald Sassoon, PSOE was elected ‘to modernise the country, solve the economic problems and establish a welfare state’. With the PCE in crisis and winning only 4% of the vote, PSOE no longer ran the risk of being outflanked on its left and became one of the first socialist parties to embrace neo-liberalism. In government it prioritised reducing inflation which was paid for by a rise in unemployment from 17% in 1982 to 22% in 1986.
This early shift to the right of the Spanish socialists in government created the political space for a left to emerge which would oppose PSOE's anti-working class policies. After its electoral disaster in 1982, the significant political divisions which existed within the PCE were forced out into the open, particularly against the rightist line pursued by Carrillo in the late 1970s. There were two main groupings within the party that opposed him. The first was a straightforward right–left split in the political direction of the party over Eurocommunism and attitudes towards the Soviet Union. The second was based on the rejection of Carrillo's authoritarian style of leadership and comprised a group of renovadores (renovators) who agreed with his political orientation but wished to democratise the party. Opposed from all sides, Carrillo stood down in favour of Gerardo Iglesias. The PCE then went through a process of splits which subsequent developments in many West European communist parties would closely mirror. Carrillo left to form his own group, which became the Spanish Labour Party; he received virtually no popular support, and eventually joined PSOE in 1991. Thus Carrillo moved to the right, through Eurocommunism to social democracy, like the majority of the PCI with which he had close links in the 1970s. Carrillo made his position completely clear in September 1991, saying: ‘The Communist movement as such has completed its historical cycle and it makes no sense trying to prolong it.’

Two other organisations emerged out of the PCE crisis: to the left, a pro-Soviet split, the Communist Party of the Peoples of Spain (Partido Comunista de los Pueblos de España; PCPE) under the leadership of Ignacio Gallego, and to the right, the Progressive Federation (Federación Progresista; FP), a group of renovadores under the leadership of Ramon Tamames. As a result of these splits, the PCE was more politically homogeneous than before, but in urgent need of re-establishing its political role in Spanish society.

From 1984, the PCE advocated a process of convergence with other left forces, to fill the political space opened by the rightward move of PSOE, but the real opportunity to bring this about came as a result of PSOE's U-turn on NATO membership. Shortly before the 1986 general election the PCE put together a coalition called the United Left (Izquierda Unida; IU), born of a mass campaign during the first PSOE government on NATO membership. Before entering government, PSOE had opposed NATO membership and had promised a referendum on membership, changing its position when in government.
A broad committee, including communists, pacifists, feminists, human rights groups, Christians and the far left, with the exception of Carrillo’s group which refused to participate, coordinated a vigorous campaign, which in spite of media saturation and huge pressure for a ‘yes’ vote, actually won 43% of the vote – nearly seven million – against NATO. Criticism was levelled at the government’s phrasing of the referendum question, which asked, ‘Do you consider it advisable for Spain to remain in the Atlantic Alliance?’ followed by a number of provisos, including the lessening of US military presence in Spain.14

The term NATO was not used. One of the key leaders of PSOE at this time was of course Javier Solana, who went on to be Secretary General of NATO in 1995. It was this anti-NATO campaign which provided the basis for the founding of the IU in 1986. The main components of the IU were the PCE, the PCPE, the Socialist Action Party (Partido de Acción Socialista; PASOC) – left dissidents from PSOE, the Republican Left (Izquierda Republicana; IR) and some smaller left groupings, subsequently including members of the Trotskyist Fourth International. Although it initially made little advance on the PCE’s result of 1982, it was relaunched in February 1989 after which it more than doubled its votes in the general election of October 1989 with 9.1% of the vote. According to Gillespie, it ‘provided the major success story of the general election’.15 By the general election of 1996, its support had risen to 10.5%.

The IU was the forerunner of the new European left, its early development the result of the particular conditions in Spain following the demise of Franco’s dictatorship and the early collapse of the PCE as a result of the Eurocommunist policies of the late 1970s. The political composition of IU – left communists, left-social democrats and other left-wing groupings, including Trotskyists – became something of a pattern in the shaping of the new European left. One of the key examples of this pattern became evident in Italy, where the PCI had been a chief exponent, together with Carrillo, of Eurocommunism. But by November 1989, the PCI had moved through its Eurocommunist phase to the extent that its general secretary, Achille Occhetto, proposed that the PCI be dissolved and that a new ‘constituent phase’ be entered. This would lead to the foundation of a new party which ‘would not be Communist but “socialist”, “popular” (i.e. less class-oriented), “democratic” and “progressive”. It would be committed to
the realisation of a left-wing alternative and would hope to be not only an integral part of the European Left but also a full member of the Socialist International’.  

The ‘constituent phase’ was entered at the PCI’s Special Nineteenth Congress in March 1990, and at the Twentieth Congress in January 1991 the Democratic Party of the Left (the Italian PDS; Partito Democratico della Sinistra) was launched with the support of the majority of the delegates. This was accompanied, however, by the setting up of the Movement for the Refoundation of Communism (MRC), a grouping committed to the refounding of a communist party which attracted those from within the PCI who had opposed the move to social democracy. Adopting the name Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (Movement for Communist Refoundation; PRC) during 1991, PRC was also joined by Democrazia Proletaria (DP), a parliamentary party originating in the Italian new left of the late 1960s and early 1970s which had opposed the ‘historic compromise’ between the PCI and the Christian Democrats. This development added several thousand mainly young activists and working-class militants to the new party. By the end of 1991, PRC had a total membership in the region of 150,000. In the general election of 1992, PRC polled 5.6%, rising to 6% in 1994 and 8.6% in 1996.

Germany saw a unique development as the former ruling party of the GDR evolved to become a new left party across the whole of Germany, while the German Communist Party (Deutsche Kommunistische Partei; DKP) of the former West Germany – founded in 1968 after the original Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD) was banned in 1956 – remained a marginal and isolated force. Those from the former GDR who wished to remain loyal to the tradition of Honecker founded a new Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in 1989 which was ideologically closer to the DKP. The German Party of Democratic Socialism (the German PDS) was formed at an emergency congress in December 1989 as the direct organisational successor to the ruling Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands; SED). In the GDR elections of March 1990, the German PDS came third behind the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and SPD with 16.4% of the vote, demonstrating that it had maintained a solid base of support. In the local elections of 6 May 1990 in the East German Länder, the German PDS won more than 10,000 seats in regional, city and local assemblies. The emergency
congress in December 1989 adopted the definition of the SED–PDS as ‘a modern socialist party in the tradition of the German and international labour movement. It proclaims itself to be part of the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin and of the democratic, communist, socialist, social democratic, socialist and pacifist movement’. From its foundation, the German PDS ‘cast itself as a party which had purged itself of Stalinism but not of socialism’ and has continued to do so, throughout its subsequent iterations to today’s Die Linke. As its chairman Gregor Gysi observed: ‘We are not a communist party, but a party which includes communists’, drawing together different anti-capitalist left traditions. The German PDS also underwent profound changes in its internal structures and democratic procedures. Breaking with the rigid structures of the traditional communist parties, the PDS allowed the organisation of political platforms within the party, which included a social democratic platform, a Marxist forum, an Ecological Platform and – most actively – a Communist Platform, led by Sarah Wagenknecht. A young activist from Thuringia who went on to become a PDS MEP (Member of the European Parliament) and subsequently a Bundestag member for Die Linke, Wagenknecht did not run for the post of party vice-chair on the foundation of Die Linke as her perceived support for the GDR continued to be unacceptable to other party leaders. But Wagenknecht was politically dynamic and represented a clear current within the party. The Communist Platform effectively acted as an internal opposition to the majority left-socialist current – also described as the Gysi–Bisky majority, after party chair Gregor Gysi and party president, Lothar Bisky. Initially German PDS support was confined to the east, but gradually support in the west began to increase too, indicating that the PDS was not just a regional protest party, but had a distinct politics – a new left agenda to the left of the SPD – that could attract votes throughout Germany as social and economic conditions deteriorated. Standing on a platform, in 1994, of opposition to the Maastricht-instigated government spending cuts which led to the reduction in social benefits, attacks on free collective bargaining, mass unemployment and an increase in racism, the PDS won 4.4% of the vote across Germany. In the former GDR the German PDS vote was between 16% and 20% in the different Länder. The party also attracted votes on the basis of its open attitude towards its electoral list – its ‘open list’ policy – which included many non-PDS
members. Furthermore, the idea that the PDS was supported only by former bureaucrats and SED members was finally proved to be wrong. As Angela Klein observed, ‘Around 20 per cent of young first-time voters in the east voted PDS. Those over 60 in the east voted overwhelmingly for the conservatives, the CDU.’

In 1998, this increased to 5.1% and PDS support continued to grow during the following decade, particularly after its merger with the dissident social democratic Electoral Alternative for Work and Social Justice (Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit – Die Wahlalternative; WASG) to form Die Linke, which was subsequently joined by a number of West German leftist groups.

The PCF demonstrated a different political route to a similar political perspective. Having passed through a Eurocommunist phase in the 1970s and returned to a pro-Moscow orientation by the 1980s, its defining moment was perhaps the point at which it broke with the Soviet leadership. While the PCF had supported Gorbachev’s early initiatives, by the late 1980s it was distancing itself from the direction of the reforms and identifying more closely with the Portuguese and Cuban communist parties. The clear break came over the Gulf War in 1990, as it did for many parties, and helped to set the future direction of the PCF. Gorbachev supported the US operation in the Gulf, whereas the PCF was not prepared to back US imperialism. In its opposition to the war, the PCF worked in a committee – Appel des 75 – with a range of left forces, including Trotskyists, ecologists and anarchists. David S. Bell correctly observed that this would previously have been an unthinkable alliance for communists, but saw it as ‘another index of communist decline’.

In fact this was to indicate a new orientation of the PCF towards other left groups which was consolidated during the 1990s within the more open political practice and debate of the PCF. The departure of the PCF from democratic centralism as the organising principle of the party in 1993 was also an indication of the changes within the party which gave rise to freer debate and discussion. Its decision to structure its electoral lists for the 1999 Euro-elections with alternate male and female candidates and with the target of 50% non-party members was another indicator of this orientation.

But openness to other left groups was perhaps ultimately more successful on the theoretical and intellectual level than on the practical and grass-roots party level. In May 1998, the PCF hosted an
international symposium in Paris to commemorate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the *Communist Manifesto*. This event was held under the auspices of *Espaces Marx*, going under the slogan ‘Explorer, confronter, innover’, formerly the PCF’s Institut de Recherches Marxistes, but opened, under its new title, to wider left forces. The participation of the Trotskyist *Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire* (LCR) was notable within *Espaces Marx* and was also apparent at the Manifesto symposium, where Daniel Bensaïd, a leading LCR member, spoke in the final plenary. Working with the LCR, a post-1968 new left-type organisation was no doubt intended to draw back a section of the intelligentsia into the orbit of the PCF, having lost much of its support in that sector during the 1980s. Towards the end of the 2000s, the limits of such cooperation became clear, as the LCR dissolved itself into the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste, posed against the PCF and the new *Parti de Gauche*, with which the PCF works in the *Front de Gauche*. Nevertheless, in spite of some hostility between these organisations at the grass-roots level, and the failure to achieve the type of left unity so far secured by *Die Linke*, dialogue between these different political traditions continues within *Espaces Marx* and the European journal *Transform!* for which *Espaces Marx* has significant responsibility.

The next phase of the emerging realignment occurred as a result of the radicalisation of the Scandinavian left parties, through their increased opposition to the austerity programmes initiated in order to conform to the Maastricht criteria. As Scandinavian social democracy moved to the right and began to implement cuts in the highly advanced welfare systems of these countries, the left parties moved into the breach, clarified their position on the left and were able during the 1990s to increase their electoral standing on that basis. These parties had their origins in orthodox communist parties but had begun their transition to recognisable new left positions – particularly feminism and environmentalism – up to three decades before the collapse of state socialism in 1989, starting with Aksel Larsen’s split from the Danish Communist Party in 1959. Despite their previous ambivalence or even hostility towards many of the West European communist parties and their traditions, the new radicalisation brought them into a shared political framework with the parties mentioned above.
The changing shape of the East

The post-1989/1991 experience in Russia and the countries of Eastern Europe also ran counter to popular assumptions about the collapse of communism. In Russia, a small minority on the left of the former ruling Communist Party of the Soviet Union reinvented itself as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). It emerged as the largest party of opposition during the 1990s and remained so throughout the 2000s, with a substantial base of popular support. This trend of communist or former communist parties gaining unexpectedly large support was replicated in many other parts of the former Soviet Union, notably Ukraine, Moldova and – in a somewhat altered political form – Belarus. In Eastern Europe the pattern was rather different, as a number of the former ruling parties – notably in Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania – reformed themselves into social democratic parties. Having often failed spectacularly in the first post-1989 elections, they gained support very rapidly as the dire economic consequences of system change began to impact on the populations, and became parties of government. In other cases, notably the Czech Republic and the former GDR, the former ruling parties remained explicitly Marxist parties, but with a developing progressive agenda along the lines of those mentioned in Western Europe.

The revival of support for a communist successor party in Russia was not surprising when seen in the context of the social and economic consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the reintroduction of capitalism from the end of 1991. The economic reform which began formally in Russia with price liberalisation in January 1992 produced the greatest peacetime industrial collapse of any economy in history. Moreover, the role of Western institutions in formulating the key stages of the reform process was well understood in Russia and helped shape popular attitudes towards the West. This was reinforced by the backing of Western governments for President Boris Yeltsin, even when his tanks were storming Russia's elected parliament in October 1993. The tragic effects of the economic reforms on Russian society are well-documented, although not commonly appreciated in Western society. According to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Report in 1997:
The attempted ‘shock therapy’ reforms launched in January 1992 ushered in a period of economic decline of unprecedented proportions… Partial price liberalisation in January 1992 unleashed an inflationary process in which consumer and producer prices rose by over 2,500 per cent in less than a year. The resulting dislocation and fall in personal incomes were reinforced by the gradual reduction in subsidies for rent, transport, and other necessities of life.22

In a phenomenon characterised by the UNDP as ‘hyper-stagflation’, ‘GDP declined continuously every year since 1990, and it declined by 20 per cent in 1994… Industrial output declined 4.7 per cent in 1995, bringing the total fall to 53 per cent since 1989… National Income fell by over 40 per cent between 1991 and 1996.’23 The impact on living standards was devastating: ‘In the Soviet era it was generally recognised that 10 per cent of the population were living in poverty.’24 But by 1997 ‘the estimated number of people living below the poverty line has been variously estimated at around 90 per cent… or between 25–34 per cent on the basis of a much lower national poverty line of $50 [per month KH].’25 One of the reasons for this was that between 1990 and the end of 1994 the price index for paid services like housing, transport and domestic utilities rose by over 6,000%.

Indeed, the social and economic collapse resulting from the economic reform in the 1990s was so awful that it could not be conveyed by economic data alone. Huge hardship confronted the overwhelming majority of the population, including a significant decrease in life expectancy; an increase in heart, digestive and infectious diseases; the late or non-payment of wages and a dramatic increase in homelessness and unemployment. Expectations of high levels of foreign investment were not fulfilled. Indeed, between 1991 and 1998, the annual outflow of capital from Russia – much of it the illegal proceeds of the deeply criminalised privatisation process – far exceeded the total inflow of capital in the form of investment, foreign aid, International Monetary Fund (IMF) credits and other loans.

In the context of this disastrous social and economic decline, it was hardly surprising that support for the parties linked to the reformers most closely identified with the West, privatisation and shock therapy almost completely collapsed. Russia’s Choice, the party set
up by Yegor Gaidar, one of the architects of price liberalisation, for example, stood at 1% in a poll conducted by the National Public Opinion Centre, on 20–25 November 1998. Even right-wing politicians began to adopt a rhetoric of opposition to the free market and the West, in order to have any chance of securing election. The popular response to the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from March 1999 also consolidated anti-Western feeling, with 92% of the population opposed to the NATO aggression. In fact, there was no majority support either for Western-style capitalism or for the dismantling of the Soviet Union, even at the time when the process was initiated. As Kotz and Weir observed, ‘A referendum on preserving the Union won with 76.4 per cent of the vote only nine months before the Union was dismantled.’ Opinion polls in Russia showed that popular support for social security, egalitarianism and collectivist social and economic values remained far more extensive within society than even votes for the communist parties would suggest. As Peter Gowan pointed out, in 1996 polls showed that an absolute majority of the population thought that big industrial enterprises should be state-owned rather than privatised.

In November 1991, Yeltsin banned the Russian Communist Party and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) on Russian territory. After the eventual lifting of the ban by the Constitutional Court, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) was founded in February 1993 under the leadership of Gennady Zyuganov, a former member of the CPSU leadership who had been fiercely critical of glasnost and perestroika. Delegates at the founding Congress represented some 450,000 members of the local party organisations of the former Russian Communist Party who had decided to reconstitute themselves after the ban was lifted. During Yeltsin’s confrontations with the Russian parliament in 1993, the CPRF became increasingly influential, participating in the National Salvation Front, a communist–nationalist alliance which wanted to stop shock therapy, reconstitute the Soviet Union and stop making concessions to the West. This grouping commanded the support of around a third of the parliamentary deputies. In the parliamentary elections of December 1993, Yeltsin’s party faced a resounding defeat at the hands of the communist and nationalist opposition and an anti-neo-liberal majority – opposed to Yeltsin’s economic programme – was elected to parliament. But although Zyuganov
had succeeded in establishing the CPRF as the leading force on the left he had not yet managed to defeat the nationalists and secure communist leadership of the opposition. The extreme nationalist Liberal Democratic Party under the leadership of Vladimir Zhirinovsky took 23% of the vote, while the CPRF took 12% and its allies the Agrarians took 8%. By the parliamentary elections of December 1995, the CPRF had turned the tables on the extreme nationalists, due to its strong opposition to the government, its promotion of a patriotic alliance to save Russia and its backing for increasing trade union protest. The CPRF vote nearly doubled to 22%, Zhirinovsky's halved to 11% and the government party, Our Home is Russia, polled 10%. Nevertheless, the CPRF was subject to some criticism from other communist and left forces within Russia and internationally for the nationalist ideas which Zyuganov had entwined with his perspective of a patriotic alliance. For while the concept of a patriotic alliance enabled the CPRF to build a broad movement to oppose the dismantling of the Russian economy and society, the particular nationalist elements unnecessarily introduced into it also exposed some leaders of the CPRF to well-founded charges of Russian nationalism.

Perhaps the most significant moment for the CPRF in the 1990s came with the 1996 presidential election, which clearly demonstrated the extent to which Russian politics had become polarised, and the leading opposition role of the CPRF within that. In its second round, the election became a two-horse race between Yeltsin and Zyuganov and for a while it looked entirely possible that Zyuganov might win. As the presidential election approached, the financial system was on the verge of meltdown; as output collapsed, the government’s income collapsed, wages went unpaid and government borrowing sent interest rates sky-high – as much as 200% on six-month bonds. Major loans were extended to Yeltsin by the West to help him pay overdue wages and pensions before the election, and television coverage was saturated with films about the horrors of communism. Nevertheless, Zyuganov came within 3% of Yeltsin in the first round. The result of the second round was that Yeltsin was returned with almost 54% of the vote, while over 40% backed Zyuganov. Around 5% voted against both candidates.

The late 1990s saw the beginnings of a shift in Russian politics. The financial crunch came in the context of the Asian financial crisis, which made investors increasingly nervous about Russia. August
1998 saw forced devaluation of the rouble and default on Russia's domestic debt. The devaluation sent the prices of food and consumer goods imports, on which Russian cities now depended, up by 40%, slashing living standards. Virtually all private banks were technically bankrupt. A major political crisis erupted, as a result of which Yeltsin was forced to appoint Yevgeny Primakov – a former head of the foreign intelligence service – as prime minister, rather than his preferred choice, Viktor Chernomyrdin. Primakov's appointment was a choice favoured by the CPRF and an indication of the party's increased political strength. The Yeltsin regime was severely weakened as a result, and the new government began to take strong action to stem the financial crisis, to break with Yeltsin's pro-Westernism and to reorient foreign policy towards a new independence and assertiveness for Russia, including developing better relations with China. It was in this context that Vladimir Putin was to emerge as the champion of a stronger and more confident Russia on the resignation of Yeltsin on 31 December 1999. The rise of Putin presented a political challenge for the CPRF, as he effectively restored the standing of Russia in the international community while the economy strengthened as a result of strong economic management and rising oil prices. Nevertheless, the CPRF has maintained its position as the largest opposition party in Russia and has come second in every presidential election since the Soviet Union was dissolved.

By the mid-1990s, former communist parties had been returned to power in most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, to the great surprise of most Western observers. In 1993, the Polish successor party – the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SDRP) – had been elected to government, followed in 1994 by the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP). In 1996, Václav Klaus in the Czech Republic lost his parliamentary majority in a leftward shift by the voters and lost the government to the Social Democrats in 1998 – this was not a successor party but the restored pre-war Social Democratic Party; nevertheless it was indicative of a shift to the left. In the mid-years of the decade, the successor parties in Romania and Bulgaria also held governmental office. While this might have seemed a surprising development, the social and economic costs of the transition meant that the electorate turned against those parties most associated with the hardships of free-market economic reform. Most of the citizens of Eastern Europe entered the post-communist period with
the expectations of higher living standards and a consumer society, for the pledge implied in the much-vaunted ‘return to Europe’ was that Eastern living standards would be raised towards Western levels. They were rapidly – and brutally – disabused of this notion, however, and used their votes to register their disapproval. As Heinrich Makowski has pointed out, ‘So far there have been a few winners but many, many losers in the transition. And it’s the many losers who are deciding the election outcomes.’

Yet while the successor parties experienced significantly improved political fortunes as the decade wore on, they were in no sense a uniform political category, despite their common political origins. Three basic patterns could be identified, largely as a result of their political evolution prior to 1989, and these determined the types of programmes and policies that they embraced during the 1990s and subsequently.

In Hungary and Poland, the regime changes were the result of managed transitions where reform communists – favourable to the reintroduction of capitalism – attempted, through playing a major role in roundtable negotiations, to strengthen their popular support and emerge as newly viable leaders for the postcommunist period. The successors to the ruling parties in Hungary and Poland rapidly transformed themselves into West European-style social democratic parties and sought membership of the Socialist International. The social democratic space was, on the whole, vacant, for apart from the example of the Czech Social Democrats, attempts to re-establish former social democratic parties had little success, despite considerable support from the Socialist International. In the former GDR of course, the parties of the Federal Republic expanded their operations into the east. Social democracy had received most support in Eastern Europe in the inter-war period in Czechoslovakia, with some support also in Hungary and Poland, but there was not an extensive tradition to revive on a region-wide basis. Indeed, the fact that the social democratic parties of Hungary and Poland had merged with the ruling communist parties in the late 1940s meant that in 1989 they were not seen as an untainted left alternative. In fact, they did not pose themselves in that light – most of the social democratic parties in Eastern Europe merely stressed the anti-communist, pro-free-market line of their West European sister parties and this did not appeal to the socialist-oriented section of the electorate.
In contrast, in Czechoslovakia and the GDR, the ruling parties were not, in the late 1980s, evolving towards social democracy, and the successor parties – the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy; CPBM) and the German Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) – maintained an anti-capitalist position, while undergoing considerable political renewal. Both had mass social democratic parties to their right and both consolidated a respectable share of the vote. For the PDS this amounted to up to 20% or more in the East German Länder, and for the CPBM between 10% and 15% in the Czech lands. While the CPBM retained its communist label, it shared some political features with the new left parties in Western Europe. It embraced a more radical social agenda, including ecology, anti-racism and gender issues, and adopted a more open attitude to other left forces and the inclusion of non-party members on its electoral lists. The CPBM formed the largest opposition party to Klaus’s coalition in the first half of the 1990s and, although it maintained a stable level of electoral support – at 10.3% in 1996 and 11% in 1998 – it was overtaken by the re-established pre-war social democrats in 1996. Their share of the vote increased from 6.5% to 26.4% and then further in 1998, when it increased to 32.3%.

In Bulgaria and Romania, the removal of the pre-1989 communist leadership was largely the result of the actions of sections of the communist leaderships, who, while desiring reform of the political status quo, were not in favour of the introduction of capitalism. There were no significant opposition movements, and the successor parties, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and, effectively, the National Salvation Front and subsequently the Social Democratic Party of Romania, maintained positions in favour of a significant state sector and against the full introduction of a free-market economy.

In 1989–90, these successor parties faced multi-party competition in what are often described as the ‘founding’ elections of 1989–90 and in Central Europe saw crushing electoral defeat at the hands of the new, violently anti-communist – often dissident movement-based – electoral forces. The shock that was expressed by many Western observers in the mid-1990s, after the rapid electoral recovery of the SDRP in Poland in 1993 and the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP) in Hungary in 1994, was based on the assumption that these first elections established a pattern for the future. It would be more accurate to see the first round of elections as a plebiscite against
the regimes as they had existed, rather than as a rejection of all of the values of socialism – many of which, through redistributive economic and social policies, had improved people’s lives. The harsh social and economic conditions following 1989, including an increase in poverty and unemployment and a decline in living standards, saw voters turning to the former communist parties to alleviate the suffering of the transition period. As Frances Millard observed on Poland:

A general pessimism about the economy was accompanied by a growth of negative attitudes to the private sector, and especially privatization… From August, 1991, onwards there was a systematic fall in the numbers regarding privatization as beneficial to the Polish economy, with the exception of small firms and retail establishments. In mid-1992, 60 per cent again believed that large industrial enterprises should be exclusively state-owned.32

The electorates clearly expected the former communist parties to restore social stability and economic security, but they were to be sadly disappointed. In both Poland and Hungary, the new governments showed serious commitment to privatisation, huge public spending cuts, sweeping reforms of the welfare system and an eagerness to join the EU and NATO, justifying the description often used of ‘nomenklatura capitalism’. The former communists had seamlessly moved from state socialism to a Blairite version of ‘third way’ social democracy based on neo-liberal economics, rejecting a more traditional Keynesian model which would without doubt have been the preferred option of their supporters in the electorate. If anything, the former communists were more effective in implementing IMF-endorsed policies than their formally more right-wing predecessors had been because they did not have to contend with a nationalist lobby within their ranks. The conservative coalition government in Hungary of 1990–1994 had actually intended to retain long-term majority state ownership of many strategic companies, which the HSP subsequently proceeded to privatise.

The pace of privatisation and economic reform was different, however, further east in Europe. In Romania, the political dominance of Ion Iliescu and the Social Democratic Party of Romania (SDPR) until 1995 prevented a rapid transition to capitalism. In Bulgaria, the dominance of the BSP for most of the post-1989 period until 1996
similarly prevented rapid structural change. Peter Gowan argued that geopolitical factors were also significant in the slow pace of change in Bulgaria – the West European states did not seek to rapidly draw Bulgaria into their sphere of influence, while preoccupation with Yugoslavia led the United States to be more concerned with political stability than with economic reform. But this situation did not last. By the mid-1990s, both the BSP and the SDPR were under enormous pressure from Western financial institutions, and began to implement liberal economic policies, which greatly reduced their popularity at the polls and led the way for more pro-liberal coalitions to be elected. By the end of the 1990s, the key successors to the ruling parties in Central and Eastern Europe – with the exception of those of the GDR and the Czech Republic – had embraced social democracy, and whether willingly or not, had also accepted its third-way variant. They had all become members of the Socialist International and the Party of European Socialism and – with the exception of Poland – routinely alternated between government and opposition leadership.

There were also some political developments to the left of the successor parties in the 1990s, but these made relatively little impact on mainstream party politics. In Hungary these coalesced firstly around the Left Platform within the HSP and secondly around the Hungarian Left Alternative – an umbrella organisation drawing together a number of left groupings and individuals. This trend took its political framework from the traditions of the workers’ councils movement dating from 1956, and defined itself in 1988 not as a party but as ‘a social organization building a democratic society based on workers’ property, self-management and self-governmental organizations’. The third trend on the Hungarian left was defined through the other successor party of the former ruling Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (HSWP), which renamed itself the Hungarian Workers’ Party. While it had a large membership, it was unable to translate this into a significant numbers of votes, and was excluded from the Hungarian parliament by the 5% threshold. In Poland, the left opposition which emerged out of Solidarity as the Union of Labour polled 7.3% in the 1993 elections, but was subsequently split over its attitude towards supporting the presidential candidacy of Aleksander Kwaśniewski who had been Minister of Sport during the communist period. The Union of Labour lost further support during the general election of 1997 and the local elections of 1998.
During the 1990s it was clear that the former communist parties were the electoral choice of most left-oriented voters throughout Central and Eastern Europe, notwithstanding the implementation, by a number of them, of neo-liberal economic policies, including privatisation and cuts in the welfare system. The challenge for the subsequent decade was whether they would be able to retain sufficient popular support to be electable while failing to meet the social and economic security aspirations of the voters. The only electorally significant successor parties which continued to identify as Marxist or Marxist-originated were the PDS in Germany and the CPBM in the Czech Republic. Both were to play a significant role within the new European left into the new century.
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