

United but loser? The PES between party cohesion and electoral decline

Michail Schwartz

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The group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) represents in the European Parliament the socialist, the labour, the social democratic, and the progressive forces present in the 28 states belonging to the European Union. It pertains to the Party of European Socialists (PES), and is currently the second political force in Parliament, backed up by 195 MEPs (184 after the vote in 2009), coming from all the 28 member countries of the Union.

The name is only the latest in a long series (see Table 1) and owes its “complexity” to a compromise that has been reached close to the last European elections (June 2009). The choice changing its name was in fact a direct consequence of the entrance in the group of parties only in part related to the Socialist and Social Democratic tradition, including the Italian Democratic Party (PD), the Democratic Party of Cyprus (Edek), and the Party Latvian National Harmony (TSP). As these parties present in their internal components political areas proceeding from the centre (as catholic, liberal, or environmentalist) and being the representatives of these currents reluctant to adhere in a group labelled socialist, a compromise had to be found to make reference to the new enlarged and more heterogeneous nature of the group.

The history of the S&D Group begins well before the creation of the European Parliament and of the introduction of direct elections in 1979. Already a group of socialist parties belonging to the “six” founding countries had come to form, in September of 1952, inside the Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Initially, the socialist family found itself deeply

¹ This article was originally published in Italian on the CISE website. It appears in English for the first time in this book.

Table 1 - Denomination of the socialist group in 1953–2013

pre-1979	1979– 1984	1984– 1989	1989– 1993	1993– 1999	1999– 2004	2004– 2009	2009– 2013
	Socialist Group			Group of the European Socialist Party		Socialist Group	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats

Fonte: <http://www.europe-politique.eu>

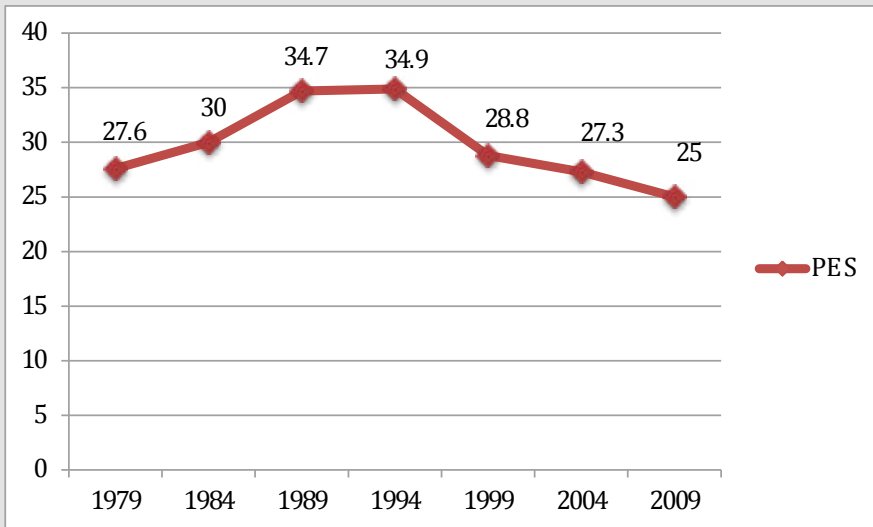
divided in the early stages in supporting of the process of European integration, counting among its ranks a number of opponents (such as the German SPD or the Italian PSI). It was thus created “an immediate division between those who considered European integration as essential to control markets and complete the creation of national welfare systems and those who thought it could only interfere with this goal” (Hix and Lord, 1997).

With the enlargement of the EU from six to nine states (1973), additional parties were added to the initial group, and in 1979—with the introduction of direct elections to the European Parliament—a proper parliamentary group was structured. To the parties belonging to the “six” were added also parties with a labour political root, such as the British Labour Party, as well as a Scandinavian one as the Danish Social Democratic Party. Election results were favourable to the socialist group that had won 27.6% of the votes, thus becoming the first group in terms of number of seats in the first European parliamentary assembly directly elected. However, the considerable heterogeneity of the group, together with the marked Euroscepticism of some of the new members as the British Labour Party and the Danish Social Democrats, greatly undermined the internal cohesion of the group, particularly on matters relating to the deepening of the European integration path (Ladrech, 2006).

In the next three elections (see Figure 1), the leadership of the socialists in the EP not only remained intact but also grew steadily, reaching its peak with the 1994 elections when the newly-created group of the Party of European Socialists obtained 34.9% of the vote (against the 27.7% won by the second parliamentary group, the European People’s Party).

Meanwhile, with the enlargement of the European Community (now European Union in 1992), first to 10 members—with the accession of Greece in 1981—and then to 12 members—with the entry of Spain and Portugal in 1986—the socialist group grew in its composition. In 1994, the social democratic parties of the new members Austria, Finland, and Sweden also joined.

Figure 1 – Electoral performance of the socialist group, (1979–2009)



Source: <http://www.europe-politique.eu>

A turning point in the history of the socialist group took place between the late 1980s and early 1990s. The dissolution of the two blocks at the international level and the creation in Europe of a Single Market (ESM) backed by a monetary union (EMU) pushed much of the socialist group leader to look for a redefinition of its political identity (Ladrech, 1996). This effort also brought with it an expansion of its internal composition with the entry, among others in October 1992, of the Italian PDS. The socialist group also contributed in a decisive way (pushed by the new Article 138a “about the parties” in the Maastricht Treaty) to the deconstruction of the old Confederation of the Socialist Parties of the European Community (CSPEC) and the creation, in November 1992, of the new Party of European Socialists (PES), in an attempt to unite the fragmented social democratic front and find new solutions to social challenges posed by the acceleration in the monetarist sense of the process of European integration.

The positive trend began with the first elections of 1979 came to an end in 1999. At that elections, the group of the Party of European Socialists suffered a decline of 6% and was outperformed by the group of the European People’s Party, which became (and still remains) the first party within the hemicycle of Strasbourg.

From this point onwards, the European Socialists experienced a period of steady decline, who led them in the fall of 2009 to obtain only 25% of the

vote (almost 10 points less than in the golden days of the early 1990s) and “the most meager representation in the European Parliament after the elections of 1979” (Hix, 2009).

Precisely because of this steady decline in the electoral support (marked by the enlargement to East, where the strongest parties were conservative or Christian-popular) and with the looming of the European elections of 2009, the socialist group has changed strategy, opening to new political forces proceeding from other experiences within the field of the left, in an attempt to close the gap with the predominant group of the European People. Obviously, the focus fell on the newly-formed Democratic Party, which at the time represented the second Italian party. From the entrance of the latter, as mentioned before, derives the name change in the “Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats”² as well as the change of the historic symbol of a rose surrounded by 12 stars. All this was not enough, though, to avoid a sharp loss for the socialists in 2009. The group lost in the vast majority of EU countries, and that led to a result well below their stronger adversary, the European People’s Party.

On the eve of the European elections in May, the socialist proposed as a candidate for the presidency of the European Commission the German Martin Schulz. Despite the merciless debacle of 2009, they can now rely on several prime ministers and heads of state (Matteo Renzi and François Hollande in particular) and a group in the European Parliament that despite being clearly in a minority condition is in good health. The 21 MEPs, elected by the PD in 2009, in fact helped the S&D Group count among its ranks at least one party for each member country, thus, registering a maximum level of “inclusiveness,” both “parliamentarian”³ and at the “party-level”⁴ (Calossi 2011, 165).

Inclusiveness is not the only factor that indicates the good state of health of the S&D group, though. Taking into account the indicators proposed by Calossi to measure the degree of institutionalization and strengthening of groups within the European Parliament, the S&D Group also presents a high degree of “persistence”⁵ and a high degree of “voting cohesion” (the highest between the various parliamentary groups (see Table 3).

² Initially, the name proposed was the “Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats” (PASD), but it was soon dismissed preferring the reported one.

³ With “inclusiveness,” it has to be intended the “number of EU countries that support the group with at least one deputy” (Calossi 2011, 165).

⁴ With “inclusivity at the party-level,” it has to be intended the number of countries in which national parties are linked to the group in the EP (*Ibid.*).

⁵ With “persistence,” it has to be intended the “time period of existence of the parliamentary group, computed in terms of EP legislative terms’ number” (*Ibid.*, 165).

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Table 2 - Parties members of the S&D Group in the 28 EU countries

Country	Party
Austria	Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ)
Belgium	Parti Socialiste (PS) Belgique Socialistische Partij Anders (SP.A)
Bulgaria	Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)
Croatia	Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske (SDP)
Cyprus	Eniea Dimokratiki Enosis Kyprou (EDEK)
Czech Republic	Česká Strana Sociální; Demokratická (ČSSD)
Denmark	Socialdemokraterne (SD)
Estonia	Sotsiaal demokraatlik Erakond (SDE)
Finland	Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue (SDP)
France	Parti Socialiste (PS)
Germany	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD)
Greece	Panellinio Sosialistikó Kínima (PA.SO.K)
Hungary	Magyar Szocialista Párt (MSZP)
Ireland	Labour Party
Italy	Partito Democratico (PD)
Latvia	Tautas Saskaņas Partija (TSP)
Lithuania	Lietuvos Socialdemokratų Partija (LSDP)
Luxembourg	Lëtzebuurger Sozialistesche Aarbechterpartei (LSAP)
Malta	Partit Laburista (PL)
Netherlands	Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA)
Poland	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (SLD) Unia Pracy (UP)
Portugal	Partido Socialista (PS)
Romania	Partidul Social Democrat (PSD)
Slovakia	Smer–sociálnademokracia, Smer (SD)
Slovenia	Socialni Demokrati (SD)
Spain	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (PSC)
Sweden	Arbetarepartiet-Socialdemokraterna (SAP)
United Kingdom	Labour Party

Source: <http://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/>

The bold font signals that the PM or the Head of the Executive is member of the party.

Table 3 – Vote cohesion in the first 18 months of the VII legislature

EPP	S&D	ALDE	G/EFA	ECR	EUL-NGL	EFD	NA
0.93	0.94	0.90	0.96	0.86	0.84	0.49	0.43

Source: Hix, Noury, and Roland (2013)

Table 4 – Degree of “party concentration”: A=takes into account the first party; B=takes into account the two biggest parties

	EPP	S&D	ALDE	G/EFA	ECR	EUL-NGL	EFD
MEPs	275	194	85	58	56	35	32
A	15.8	12.5	14.2	31.8	44.6	22.8	40.6
B	26.7	23.9	27.3	61.3	71.4	35.1	65.6

Personal elaborations of the author; source: <http://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu>

If we also consider the low “party concentration,”⁶ the lowest in both cases (A and B) within the Parliament (see Table 4), which is also a sign of a clear independence from the national parties, however, is still very strong and influential in the decision-making process of the Union.

That considered, it has to be observed that the socialists find themselves at a crossroads. The last elections saw them succumb in all the key states of the Union. The Labour Party and the French socialists have recorded the lowest vote shares, collecting respectively 16% and 17%. The Italian Democratic Party found itself nearly 10 percentage points below the PDL while in Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, and Ireland, the parties pertaining to the S&D Group were even third rank in their respective elections. Also, the losses in Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain should be considered. These results, combined with the almost ubiquitous presence of right-wing governments in EU countries, led the socialists to be in minority also in the other two main political institutions of the EU (Commission and Council). Thus, it will be interesting to observe to what extent the candidacy of Martin Schulz (single candidate, supported by

⁶ “Party concentration” refers to the “percentage of deputies in the EP group corresponding to the deputies in the biggest national party and the percentage of EP deputies corresponding to the two biggest national parties” (Calossi 2011, 165).

virtually the entire PSE) can stimulate the rise in the electoral support for the socialists. This is particularly important as this time, to be at stake for the first time in the history of the European Union, there will be a fully legitimized chair of president of the Commission.

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