Redlessness

In Central Europe, social democracy is no longer just in crisis mode — but in the process of disappearing entirely

For a moment, the optimism was tangible at the Global Progressive Mobilisation Summit. Representatives of progressive forces from all over the world gathered in Barcelona to reaffirm their solidarity and strength. Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez invoked the common spirit of the social democratic family – social justice, democratic resilience, the path to a better future – and predicted the end of the global rise of right-wing populism: 'They're not shouting because they're winning — they're shouting because they know their time is running out.'

Yet however much the spotlight made the speakers on stage shine, it could not permanently dispel the shadows that are darkening the political landscape in large parts of Europe. Those who switch their attention from Barcelona to Central Europe are confronted with a completely different reality. There, social democracy is no longer only in crisis mode — in many places, it is in the process of disappearing entirely.

A clear trend

There are numerous examples of this. In the Czech Republic, the social democratic party SOCDEM, in its alliance with the former communists, failed to be elected to parliament for the second time in succession in October 2025. The continued existence of the party that emerged from its longstanding predecessor, the ČSSD, is on a knife edge. In Hungary, where the government of Viktor Orbán was voted out after 16 years at the helm in mid-April 2026, social democracy has collapsed entirely. The share of the vote of the social democratic party MSZP is barely measurable anymore. The left-wing liberal Democratic Coalition (DC), the strongest opposition force for many years, just about managed to obtain 1.1 per cent of the votes, thereby failing to enter parliament by a clear margin.

In Bulgaria, the trend is somewhat less dramatic in numerical terms, but hardly any less clear. The Bulgarian socialist party, once one of the country's leading political forces, barely played any discernible role in the

most recent elections following the creation of new alliances and will no longer be represented in parliament in the future. As a result, on the day following the end of the Mobilisation Summit in Barcelona, the third social democratic party disappeared from the parliamentary scene in the space of five months.

In the politically stable Slovenia, the Social Democrats recently managed about 6.7 per cent and six seats — enough to enter parliament but not sufficient for the previous governing coalition to continue in office.

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And further setbacks are already on the horizon. In Poland, Nowa Lewica is fighting for its political survival. Following a respectable political comeback in 2023, it failed to live up to expectations in the European Parliament elections and barely played any role in the presidential elections last year. Latterly, it was only able to address the concerns of a decidedly progressive section of the electorate in major cities. In Romania, meanwhile, the social democratic party PSD terminated its participation in the government in a murky manoeuvre. Whether this will prove to be a fresh start following the debacle at the last presidential elections or the next stage of the party's downfall remains to be seen.

Behind these examples lie dramatic cultural shifts. Social democratic parties, once among the mainstays of political systems, are not only losing their ability to shape the political agenda but risk disappearing en masse from the political map.

What makes this development so remarkable and difficult to summarise is its lack of uniformity. There are significant differences between the parties involved. In Poland, for example, social democracy has adopted a clearly more progressive programme than the more centrist positioning of the parties in the Czech Republic and Hungary — or indeed in Bulgaria, where it has adopted a decidedly conservative stance. The political systems, social divisions and electoral systems are also different. A simple, universal explanation is therefore barely an option, meaning that the development of a counter strategy is fraught with difficulties.

And yet two overarching trends can be identified.

First, signs of differing forms of right-wing social hegemony are present

in all countries. Depending on the context, these may be of a nationalist, right-wing populist nature, or else be related to social and identity politics or sovereignty. Common to all of them, however, is their ability to shape the political discourse. In the cut and thrust of election campaigns, questions of identity, migration and cultural self-assertion often retreat behind everyday bread-and-butter topics, but they form the social backdrop and dominate the social discourse. The social democratic parties react to this in different ways, but always defensively, and tend to seek out a niche rather than take up the battle for hegemony. They no longer set the agenda in any of these countries. There is a recognition, which extends beyond the region, that policy-based election campaigns are doomed to failure if the battle for social hegemony is lost.

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Second, social democratic parties are perceived to be part of the political establishment despite their increasing marginalisation. Their image as an establishment party has become an insurmountable burden. In many countries, the parties formed part of the government for years or even decades. The role played by the financial and economic crisis of 2008 was particularly influential, though not the sole defining factor. At the time, some social democratic parties were in government and are associated with the social hardship and societal consequences of this period. In times of social upheaval, social democratic parties face a greater problem than parties of other political persuasions. They are expected to provide protection against systemic shocks. If they are unable to do so, their credentials suffer more than those of other parties. This has resulted in a loss of trust that has accumulated over the years.

Against the backdrop of all these developments, the spirit of Barcelona almost appears to be a parallel reality. The summit was important. It strengthened networks, developed narratives and provided encouragement to the participants. To some extent, it remains, however, a space of self-affirmation and autosuggestion, while the key actors, with a few exceptions, increasingly feel the pressure in their own backyards.

This does not only apply to Central Europe. The social democracy crisis is a global phenomenon. Yet in Central Europe, it is currently particularly acute. And the concern is not entirely unfounded that some of these trends may foreshadow other developments elsewhere. But what

happens now?

Renewal and reinvention

First, nothing is inevitable in politics, and political spaces do not generally remain unoccupied. Depending on the context, the failure of social democratic parties in some countries does not necessarily mean that they are finished. Parties can reorient themselves, set themselves up differently and form suitable alliances in the face of social realities. In 2023, Poland demonstrated that progressive forces can gain in influence by modernisation, cross-party alliances and new formations.

Equally important is a renewed understanding of social dynamics. Particularly in fragmented public spheres, it is no longer sufficient to focus only on traditional or emerging social circles. Social democratic parties will need to choose the difficult path of seeking out and strengthening connections to the public at large if they do not wish to limit themselves to a niche existence in the long run.

There is a strong temptation to dismiss developments in Central Europe as merely local. Yet many of the underlying factors – a loss of trust, structural defensiveness, discursive and social shifts – are also visible in Western Europe. The resistance of societies throughout the world to the impact of globalisation and the question of the future of democratic nation states are shaking the policy-making foundations of the established parties. As a result, social democracy is confronted with a challenge on two fronts: it needs to reinvent itself without losing its identity — and it must do so in a political environment that leaves it with increasingly less room for manoeuvre.

Some of the key players in Barcelona have demonstrated that this is not a hopeless case. Even if, of course, the transferability of success stories is never fully guaranteed, it is worthwhile taking a look at Scandinavia, Spain and perhaps the Baltic countries for some examples.

The future of social democracy is still to play for. But this may not always be the case. If key players do not succeed in regaining social trust, forming alliances and reoccupying political spaces, the events in Central Europe may become reality elsewhere.



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