

INTRODUCTION

The early 2010s populist waves took political pundits largely by surprise. The shock that populism managed to instil within contemporary democratic systems has sent shivers throughout both ideological and geographical space. To this day, populism still poses an existential challenge to the liberal democratic regimes that have consolidated themselves over the past 70 years since the end of the Second World War. The surprise results of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump are perhaps the highlights of how populism managed to take the mainstream political landscape by surprise. With the fall of communism, western liberal democracies had become so complacent that even after taking severe austerity measures in order to mitigate the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, they could not fully anticipate the socioeconomic effects that these measures would have on their citizens. Populism was treading on fertile ground.

Nonetheless, these conditions were not in and of themselves sufficient to prepare the political landscape for the re-emergence of populism during the first half of the 2010s. It was, in fact, another factor that led to the electoral success of populism. We are talking about the crisis of the Left.

In the post-2008 landscape, the European Left has grappled with a series of ideological challenges that have reshaped its identity and role within contemporary liberal democracies. This transformation is deeply rooted in the historical trajectory of the Left, especially in the aftermath of the Cold War era. The fall of communist regimes across Eastern Europe marked a pivotal moment, ushering in a period of significant political, economic, and social change. As these nations transitioned from centralized economies and autocratic governance to market-driven systems and democratic structures, the Left found itself at a crossroads. The ideological tenets that once anchored leftist movements were now being questioned, leading to introspection, debate, and, in many cases, ideological fragmentation.

This study delves into the intricate dynamics of this transformation, examining the factors that precipitated the decline, metamorphosis, and subsequent crisis of the Left in the post-communist context. The emphasis is on understanding how the Left's ideological shifts have mirrored, and at times influenced, broader changes

within democratic systems themselves. By correlating the historical processes of decline, transformation, and crisis, this research aims to shed light on the causal relationships that have shaped the current state of the European Left. In doing so, it offers insights into the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for leftist movements in a rapidly evolving political landscape.

A vast theoretical body of studies discusses the changes that the Left underwent over the past 30 years. Some talk about the decline of the Left, some talk about the internal ideological transformations, and others argue that the Left is in crisis. This study argues that all three approaches are correct and that they are part of a historical process that started with the fall of communism.

Central to this book is the assertion that the post-communist transformation of the European Left has precipitated its own ideological crisis. This transformation, while initially seen as an opportunity for rejuvenation, inadvertently exposed the Left to a myriad of challenges, both internal and external. The dissolution of the Eastern European Communist bloc not only reshaped geopolitical dynamics but also compelled the Left to redefine its identity in a world increasingly leaning towards neoliberalism and market-driven ideologies. As this research will demonstrate, the interplay between the Left's internal ideological shifts and the external pressures of a changing political landscape has culminated in the current state of crisis. This thesis seeks to unravel the complexities of this transformation, exploring the causal links and the broader implications for the future of leftist movements in Europe.

When talking about the crisis of the Left, is it essential for us to link the discussion with the leftist parties' electoral success? While it can certainly be helpful to see what sort of political support leftist ideas can gather in society, it is not a defining condition for determining whether the Left finds itself in a crisis or not. Since electoral success can ensure a higher degree of influence within the decision-making process, it is certainly an important component that we will study in order to measure how successful leftist parties have been throughout the last thirty years. However, given the fact that, since the fall of communism in 1989, leftist parties have competed within a neoliberal hegemonic framework, even if these parties were indeed successful in terms of electoral support, they have been far from successful in influencing the socio-economic development of their respective states.

Nevertheless, this support can vary according to external and internal factors. Different historical events or developments can influence political support for one

idea or another, and those ideas can change their internal structure along with those events or developments in order to maintain or increase support. While there are many types of left-wing ideologies, they all share specific core values that put them on the same ideological spectrum, as Bobbio argues. The most important thing when determining whether the left is in crisis or not is to see to what degree transformation influences specific core identity issues of the left, pushing it further and further away from its emancipatory principles and ultimately from its own identity. This transformation process puts the left in a position where it cannot say for sure anymore what those core values are and instead borrows the logic of the dominant ideology, namely capitalism. In other words, the decline of the left, accelerated after the fall of communism, has led to its transformation, putting the left in an identity crisis.

The main challenge for the left is that the current dominant framework is arguably neoliberal. Following Wallerstein's theory of the capitalist world economy, the left finds itself in opposition from the very start. Therefore, it constantly finds itself in a position where it has to contest the dominant framework and defend its vision. The historical challenges which the left has faced over the last 30 years, such as the end of the Cold War or the economic crisis of 2008, illustrate this defensive position. During the Cold War, the communist left and neoliberal right were on somewhat equal footing, competing for ideological hegemony. With the end of this era, however, this competition was lost for the left, and it saw itself in a desperate position to argue that leftist principles are still a plausible blueprint for societal organisation.

On the other hand, the economic crisis was not a contest between left and right, in as much as the neoliberal hegemony imposed a specific set of economic measures. The left could only contest these measures without any real impact. With these two examples in mind, this study considers the fall of communism to be the catalyst for the current electoral decline of the left, while the economic crisis of 2008 was a moment in which the left found itself in deep crisis. The study will expand on these two points in their respective chapters.

First of all, the decline is perhaps the most substantial part of the process through which the left is going, and it can be measured by looking at three separate variables, according to Kaare Strøm: policy, office, or votes. By 'policy' Strøm refers to the success a party has in influencing the public policy agenda directly according to its ideology, and 'office' relates to obtaining the maximum amount of

political power (both in government portfolios but also in coalition bargaining potential) and 'votes' refer to the practical electoral support a party registers during elections (Strøm, 1999).

Secondly, it is essential to clarify what the left was most commonly understood to be and what it looks like today. We will see that this transformation has indeed occurred throughout Europe, with varying degrees and effects. Perhaps the best starting point in understanding the transformations occurring within the left is Bobbio's definition of what the left is. He argues that, above all, the fundamental value that the left stands for is equality. Meanwhile, the right argues that inequality can be justified in some situations.

Nevertheless, the concept of equality in Bobbio's theory is more than that. In the introduction to the English version of Bobbio's book, Allan Cameron argues that there is "a close association between equality and the fundamental concept of justice", in that equality does not simply mean uniformity or conformity, but "treating like as like" (Bobbio, 1996). In defining the left, the theoretical-conceptual framework developed throughout the study, starting from Bobbio's work, will underline the changes that the left has gone through over the last 30 years. This framework will show why the liberty-equality distinction, which lays the foundation of the definition of left and right, is insufficient and overlaps, leading to further ideological confusion (such as the differences between the liberal right and liberal left). This study argues that a better instrument for defining the left-right cleavage is the emancipation-tradition dichotomy.

What does the left look like today, in contrast to its origins back in the late 18th century or early 19th century? If we look at the recent history of the left, we will notice two different trajectories. The first one refers to the so-called "third way" social democrats, who believe that capitalism and democracy can be reformed from their exploitative character, which makes this particular manifestation of the left the most centre-leaning. The second is that of the radical left parties. Both, however, do their best to salvage whatever they can in terms of electoral support. This analysis will be done across time, over the last 30 years, to observe the changes in positioning.

This transformation can be most evident when looking at how the former communist parties have changed across Europe with the fall of the Soviet Union. By combining the two methodological approaches of Bozoki & Ishiyama and March & Mudde, we can conclude that the communist successor parties throughout

Europe had four types of responses after 1989: (1) the 'leftist-retreat', (2) reformation, with its varying degrees from democratic socialism to social democracy, (3) the 'new-politics' approach, which is typical to Western Europe, and (4) the national-patriotic approach, found in Eastern Europe specifically. Here, the study will argue that, for the most part, left-wing parties have lost their commitment to systemic emancipatory change during this period of transformation.

After this transformation process, it quickly became apparent that in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008, the left found itself in crisis. However, what exactly is the crisis of the left?

In the post-communist context, the left ended up in a situation where it had no choice but to accept its fate in contemporary society, dominated by neoliberal hegemony for over 30 years. It seemed that, given this context, all that the left could do was to try to survive while straying further and further away from its core identity. Both the radical and the moderate left tried to survive and maintain their relevance and legitimacy by reforming their core values according to the hegemonic ideology. Instead of struggling for emancipation from the dominating social forces of capitalism, the left had relegated itself to finding the best way for people to live within the rules of the capitalist world. The final and most challenging part of this study's thesis will be a theoretical discussion about the implications these transformations hold for the identity of the left and whether or not the left can redeem its emancipatory self in these conditions.

The fall of communism is arguably the most critical event that has influenced the success of left-wing parties and ideologies. This historical event, which surprised even the most seasoned academics of that time, was seen as a tipping point in humankind's search for the best possible way to govern itself. Moreover, it ended the almost half-century-long ideological dispute between liberalism and communism, which also meant the delegitimization of traditional left-wing politics. Social democratic parties, which emphasized the so-called "Third Way", also recognised this aspect.

Chiocchetti points to the triple crisis of international communism, the Fordist social model, and neoliberalism as the cause for an undercurrent of anti-neoliberal 'field of forces', which, although were not necessarily part of the mainstream during the post-communist period, helped to keep the radical left alive just barely (Chiocchetti, 2016). The first two crises, as the study shall discuss, explain the rapid decline of left-wing politics in the late eighties and early nineties and a shift away from