

What Can Czech and Slovak Social Democratic Parties Expect From Progressive Rebranding?

A Demand-Side Perspective Through the Clustering of WVS/EVS Respondents

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Abstract

In recent years, the left of the political spectrum in the Czech and Slovak party systems has undergone significant changes. The main anti-establishment party in Czechia, ANO, has shifted its economic programme to incorporate more interventionist policies, while the main social-democratic party in Slovakia, Smer-SD, has progressively adopted more conservative social positions. These trends have coincided with a decline in voter support for the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and Smer-SD in Slovakia, seemingly supporting the dealignment theory generally used to explain the decline of centre-left parties in Western Europe.

Building on these premises, this article explores the first two layers of Mair's conceptualisation of a political cleavage (social groups and their defining values) to assess the potential gains or losses that social democratic parties in the two countries might experience if they rebranded to emphasise left-liberal stances. This strategy has been observed to have benefited other social democratic parties in Western and Central Europe. By clustering value survey respondents along left-wing and progressive social values and by analysing these clusters' members using logistic regression, the study suggests that while shifting to the left may attract new socio-demographic groups, adopting liberal left values might, for both parties, be electorally harmful in the short term.

Keywords: cleavage theory; centre-left crisis; party rebranding; party dealignment

DOI: 10.5817/PC2024-3-242

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This publication was written at Masaryk University with the support of a Specific University Research Grant provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic.

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1. Introduction

While what constitutes the political left and right might be country-dependent (Aspelund, Lindeman & Verkasalo, 2013; Jahn, 2023), a decline in votes for parties traditionally associated with the social democratic party family has become a general trend in Europe (Horn, 2021; Polacko, 2022). As early as 2017, Manwaring and Kennedy, described the bleak electoral situation of these parties in their book, *Why the Left Loses: The Decline of the Centre-Left in Comparative Perspective*.

Between 2007 and 2017, most centre-left parties in Western Europe experienced their worst electoral defeat since the Second World War. That was the fate of the French Socialist Party (PS) in 2007, the German SPD in 2009, the Swedish Social-Democratic Party in 2010, the Dutch Worker's Party (PvdA) in 2017 and the British Labour Party in the same year. In Greece, the once-dominant PASOK almost disappeared after the 2015 Greek elections. The Italian Democratic Party (PD) and the Spanish PSOE seemed to fare better than the rest, though Manwaring and Kennedy (2017) noted that throughout the 2010s, some of the PD's and PSOE's traditional voters switched to new populist¹ alternatives: the Five Star Movement and Podemos, respectively.

In the period between the publication of '*Why the Left Loses*' and the writing of this article, some of the parties mentioned above have seen their fortunes deteriorate even further. For example, the French Socialist Party polled below 2% in the 2022 presidential election (Durovic, 2022) and the SPD in Germany recorded its worst electoral performance since reunification in the most recent European elections (Nicholson, 2024).

Several theories have been proposed to explain the phenomenon. Some theorists take a supply-side perspective, pointing to the emergence of new populist right-wing parties that, despite situating themselves on the opposite side of the political spectrum, have targeted part of the social-democrat historical voter base more effectively (Halikiopoulou, 2018; 2019) or have identified in social democratic parties the culprit of their own downfall, explicitly mentioning their shift towards the centre of the political arena as a potential explanation of their recent electoral defeats (Horn, 2021; Merz, 2022; Mudde, 2016; Polacko, 2022).

Suppose this second interpretation involving a dealignment between voter preferences and party policies is correct. If so, it is not surprising that some established centre-left parties have embarked on a process of rebranding following their poor electoral performance. As I will show, this process has, in many instances, involved re-adopting more interventionist macroeconomic policies in their manifestos while at the same time integrating peripheral values such as environmentalism or social liberalism.²

For instance, the Spanish PSOE moved progressively to the left under the leadership of Pedro Sanchez, and now the threat posed by Podemos seems to have been mostly diffused (Oleart, 2023). Similarly, since its most recent primary, the

Italian Democratic Party has adopted a more left-wing and environmentally friendly platform (Bordandini et al., 2024; Minaldi, 2023). In France, where the leadership role of the left camp fell to Melenchon, the more moderate left Socialist Party (PS) recovered some of its voters after strengthening its links with other progressive forces such as the Communist Party, the Greens and Melenchon's radical left France Unbound (Fieschi, 2024). Even after the snap elections in 2024, the PS maintained its alliance with the Green-Left coalition rather than helping Macron establish a centrist pole with the Republicans, a move that could be evidence of commitment to a more left-wing re-orientation. Similarly, in the Netherlands, the PvdA returned to prominence after allying with the even more socially progressive GroenLinks party (Lehmann et al., 2024; Otjes & De Jonge, 2024).

Outside Western Europe, in Poland and Lithuania the main centre-left parties attempt to move towards greater values liberalisation and more left-leaning economic policies. After defeat in the 2016 parliamentary elections, the cadres of the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (LSDP) used the primary to direct the party towards new policy platforms and attract younger and more progressive voters. However, this rebranding was unsuccessful and led to a split within the party (Gudžinskas, 2020). There was a more positive outcome for a similar party in Poland. After a decade of political irrelevance for social democratic parties, in 2018 the new socially progressive Spring shifted the balance of the Polish party system to the left. The more institutionalised Democratic Left Alliance then opted for an alliance with this new actor, a cooperation that led, in 2019, to the formation of the relatively successful New Left (Rydliński, 2023).

Not all the centre-left parties that successfully avoided decline renewed their commitment to left-wing politics or liberalised their views. For instance, despite a reduction in votes compared to the previous general election, the British Labour Party successfully formed a government in 2024 after considerably moderating its platform (Acemoglu, 2024). Moreover, not all social democratic parties lost votes while moving to the centre. For example, the Swedish Social Democratic Party experienced an electoral downfall after shifting its manifesto to the left, economically, and towards more progressive values, socially (Lehmann et al., 2024). Finally, these correlations do not necessarily indicate a causal relationship.

Despite these exceptions and fair criticism, dealignment as a general explanation for a universal phenomenon still enjoys broad support from scholars. As I make clear in the next section, observers have already adopted this interpretation to explain instances of centre-left crisis in both Western and Central-Eastern Europe (CEE). I aim to contribute to this body of research by providing a more up-to-date analysis of the connection between voter demands and party supply in CEE, examining in particular the situation of the left in Czechia and Slovakia. The subjects of study are the two countries' major social democratic parties, ČSSD in Czechia and SMER-sociálna demokracia (Smer-SD) and Hlas-SD in Slovakia. After examining whether their electoral and ideological trajectories have followed

the general trends of their party family, I consider whether rebranding the parties with more left-wing and liberal policy positions would find favour with their core electorate. In other words, my objective was to address these research questions:

RQ 1: Do the socio-cultural features of Czechia suggest that adopting more liberal social values and more left-wing policies would benefit the ČSSD?

RQ2: Do the socio-cultural features of Slovakia justify an even more radical shift towards left-wing and progressive values by Hlas-SD?

RQ3: Do the socio-cultural features of Czechia suggest that adopting more liberal social values and more left-wing policies would benefit Smer-SD?

To answer these questions, the paper is divided into five sections. Section 2 comprises a literature review, in which I summarise current research findings on the decline of centre-left parties in Central and Eastern Europe and, following some of the recommendations made by fellow scholars, propose cleavage theory as a framework for examining the two case studies. In section 3, the main dimensions of the study are conceptualised, and their operationalisation is illustrated.

Section 4 is divided into five subsections and covers the three-layered conceptualisation of a political cleavage. The subsections 4.2 and 4.3 deal with the value level of a political cleavage by clustering data collected by the World Values Survey. Samples from the two countries were divided according to their left-wing values, liberalism, and attitudes towards migrants and foreigners. 4.4 instead covers the polities' main socio-demographics and professions to see whether there might be a correlation between attitudes towards the previously observed values and belonging to certain social categories. Finally, in subsection 4.5 the political parties are brought into the picture. The relationship between socio-demographics and partisan support is analysed, thus closing the circle and showing how party rebranding could affect those social groups making up the parties' support base.

2. Theoretical Framework

In her 2024 book *When Left Moves Right: The Decline of the Left and the Rise of the Populist Right in Postcommunist Europe* Maria Snegovaya brings the Central and Eastern European context into the fold of the aforementioned general theory of dealignment. On one side she argues that anti-incumbent sentiment, corruption and the post-communist legacy might all have contributed to some of the defeats of left-wing parties in the region. Nonetheless, a regional focus on left-wing party policies and class voting show how a dealignment between social democratic

parties and their traditional voters took place. When the issue of immigration became acute, populist nationalist parties exploited this disaffection, a pattern also seen in the West.

Skrzypek and Bíró-Nagy (2023), in *The Social Democratic Parties in the Visegrád Countries*, find that a critical element behind the downfall of social-democratic parties was when they embraced the Third-Way ideology, blurring the demarcation lines between left and right.

The work of Snegoyava halted in the mid-2010s. In contrast, Zvada (2023) and Šarađín and Eichler (2023) cover the most recent national elections in Czechia and Slovakia and go so far as to predict potential paths to a brighter future for the centre-left. Zvada recommends that the centre-left parties in Slovakia embrace left-liberal values. Šarađín and Eichler suggest that the ČSSD ally with other minor parties representing the various strands of the left, a strategy that proved quite successful for Spring in Poland. These recommendations were made based on the empirical outcomes observed elsewhere; in this paper, I take a more theoretical approach.

As Cotta et al. (2008) argue, political demand and supply can be considered two sides of the same coin. Parties can influence people's demand by increasing the saliency of specific issues through discourse or by revisiting old demands (Mols & Yetten, 2020). This argument is supported by findings from recent experimental studies (Grewenig et al., 2020; Slothus, 2015). Some theoretical propositions on political parties have been developed with a specific focus on the interaction between the two sides. The explanation for new party entry for instance considers both dimensions.

One of the core tenets of this argument is that the growing divergence between voters and party platforms widens the entry space for new parties (Hug, 2001; Tavits, 2006; Van De Wardt & Otjes, 2022; Zons, 2015). Tavits (2006) posits that political actors would be willing to establish a new party when the benefits of doing so outweighed the costs. This may occur when support for existing parties is not yet crystallised or when the power wielded by MPs is significantly high. This political opportunity structure suggests that greater mismatch between demand and supply makes party entry more likely. It is argued that, in reforming its platform, a party might be motivated and constrained by factors similar to those influencing party entry, such as a disjunction between demand and supply. Works in the literature identify political parties as vote-maximising actors (although for different goals) with the agency to implement internal reforms coherently and rationally (Harmel & Janda, 1994), which agrees with the depiction of political parties by the entry theory.

It is acknowledged in the literature that established parties face constraints, such as the conservative nature of institutions, which might raise the cost of internal reform higher than those paid by younger instead of new parties (Harmel & Janda, 1994; Panebianco, 1988). However, endogenous shock, such as electoral loss, can rouse a party from its homeostatic tendencies (Harmel & Janda, 1994; Velden et al., 2018).

Matthias Avina (2023) has developed a framework to explain why parties might change and to categorise these changes schematically. According to his conceptualisation, party rebranding can be either policy-related, the type of rebranding I refer to in this paper, or feature-related. In the former, the party changes its position on specific issues (left-right, liberal-conservative, pro-EU-Eurosceptic) or their saliency in its rhetoric.

While Avina (2023) finds that policy rebranding has neither a positive nor negative electoral effect when considered in a vacuum, bringing attention to the demand side might provide some extra information on the electoral impact of party rebranding.

Cleavage theory, a demand-side theory, posits that changing policy platforms can prompt voters to forsake a party if it no longer serves to reify their identities (Avina, 2023). The assumption is that political parties, as rational actors and vote maximisers, are more likely to rebrand if the number of voters they would gain is greater than the number who would abandon them. It should be noted, however, that this is not an iron-clad law. If it were, the phenomenon of dealignment would invariably yield positive outcomes, yet the experience of Western social democratic parties suggests that this is not always the case. Other factors, such as normative and political pressure from international actors, for instance, the EU or international financial institutions, also play a role in policy switches by parties (Snegovaya, 2024; Stokes, 2021). However, for the purpose of identifying hypothetical potential electoral developments, these external pressures are not considered, and priority is given instead to voters and their value preferences. Mair's interpretation of Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) theory of political cleavages will guide my analysis of potential social democratic supporters (Zuckerman, 1992). Bartolini and Mair's understanding was developed with a strict definition of what a cleavage entails. In short, it requires the cleavage to have a tripartite structure, in which a social group (second layer) is characterised by specific values (first layer) and beliefs that help in the process of in-group identification. Such a social group must then develop or support a political organisation (third layer), usually a party, to take these values to the political sphere and translate them into policies. It is not proposed that every group-party channel is a synonym for cleavage nor that party alignment at the two other levels is same as electoral success. However, I chose this theoretical framework for its conceptual clarity and the importance it reserves for the societal and value spheres, making it a perfect heuristic tool for examining politics from a demand-side perspective.

To sum up, political parties tend to be conservative institutions. However, the social-democratic parties that are the subject of this research have experienced an effective exogenous push to escape this homeostasis: electoral loss. As vote-maximising and, to a certain degree, rational actors, these parties now have an opportunity for policy rebranding.

3. Methodology and Operationalisation of Dimensions

The literature yields no consensus on a definition of the political ‘left’, though several works show how ‘left’ and ‘right’ are interpreted differently in different countries, suggesting that comparative research having these dimensions as an important subject cannot rely solely on a self-positioning proxy (Bauer et al., 2017; Noël et al., 2021; Zuell & Scholz, 2019). As the current paper involves comparison between Czechia and Slovakia, I determined to use a universalistic definition rather than a country-based one.

What substantial meaning of the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ should inform such a definition?³ In political philosophy, there have been several proposals for the ultimate criterion on which this traditional dichotomy should be built: religiosity, social progressivism, individualism, authoritarianism and others. (Rosas & Ferreira, 2013).⁴ For the purposes of this research, I have used the minimal definition proposed by Bobbio (1996), which Jahn (2010; 2023) defines as the ‘ideological core’ of the left. According to Bobbio, a left-wing framing of reality recognises the existence of societal and natural inequalities in our polities. For those on the left, these inequalities cannot be explained entirely by individual responsibilities or actions, and it is a moral imperative to address them through collective action.⁵

The best way to tackle these inequalities varies significantly between left-wing discourses, and this is where adjacent and peripheral values come into play (Jahn, 2023). Some of the most recurrent peripheral left values are state intervention, welfare provision, environmentalism and workers’ internationalism. In this frame, the traditional economic dyad state intervention-market economy as a proxy for left-right, traditionally employed in social science research, can be accepted as a primary, although contingent, expression of the substantive ideological core.

Table 1:
Universalistic conceptualisation of ‘Left Values’

Left-wing (Bobbio, 1996; Wallerstein, 2004; Keman, 2013; Jahn, 2010; 2023)	The state as a positive force to address societal inequalities
	Inequalities in society can and should be addressed
	Individual actions do not fully explain societal inequalities
	Inequalities exist nationally between social groups and globally between states

Source: The author

Moving from concept to operationalisation, I used data from the World Values Survey and European Values Study to operationalise the attitudes of Czech and Slovak respondents to the core ideology of the left and some of its most established peripheral values. The choice of items was partially dictated by their presence across waves (2018-2022) and the two countries.

Jahn's (2010; 2023) operationalisation of Bobbio's minimal definition is based on items dealing with people's and parties' attitudes to a command economy, nationalisation, and state regulation of the market. The logical conclusion reached by Jahn, that Bobbio's conceptualisation links the left to the endorsement of a command economy, remains open to debate. However, to consider this interpretation and the state's relevance in the social democratic tradition, one item related to economic nationalisation was included: item Q107, which deals specifically with the preference for public companies over private businesses. An extra item that captures the self-positioning on the left-right political axis was added to control the possibility that respondents might subscribe to some sort of welfare chauvinism.

Table 2A:
Operationalisation of the 'Left Values' dimension

Dimension	Constituent elements	Item
Left-wing values (minimal definition) (Bobbio, 1996; Keman 2013; Jahn, 2010; 2023)	Economic nationalisation	Q107: The number of private businesses should be increased vs the number of public companies
	Inequalities in society can and should be addressed	Q241: Higher taxes to subsidise the poor are an integral part of democracy Q106: Incomes in the country should be made less equal as an incentive
Left-wing values (personal definition)		Q240: Self-positioning on the left-right political spectrum

Source: The author

The items were all recoded on a three-point scale, where the highest score (2) was labelled 'Left-wing', the intermediate (1) 'Centre', and the lowest (0) 'Right-wing'.

Table 2B:
Operationalisation of the 'Left Values' Concept

Dimension	Constituent elements	Items	Recoded scores
Left-wing values	The state is a positive force for addressing societal inequalities	Q107	Right-wing: 1-4 → 0 Centre: 5-6 → 1 Left-wing: 7-10 → 2
	Inequalities in society can and should be addressed	Q241 Q106	Right-wing: 7-10 → 0 Centre: 5-6 → 1 Left-wing: 1-4 → 2
		Q240	Right-wing: 7-10 → 0 Centre: 5-6 → 1 Left-wing: 1-4 → 2

Source: The author

A clustering analysis was then conducted to divide the respondents according to their scores on these four items. The Elbow method was used to determine the best way to divide the survey respondents into clusters. Two-step clustering was conducted after the final number of clusters was input according to the Elbow results. Discretion was used insofar as the resulting clustering defected regarding ratio size or Silhouette values. For instance, if the quality of clustering was below the standard threshold of $X > 3$ ratio size or the $X < 0.5$ Silhouette score, the final number of clusters was increased or decreased by 1 to fit those criteria properly.

The same process was then used for multiculturalism and liberal values. The WVS has been used quite successfully several times to operationalise the Liberal-Authoritarian scale as conceptualised by Adorno. However, in the present work, liberal values are not interpreted as the respondents' attitudes towards authority or liberal democracy. Instead, I refer to liberal values as progressive attitudes on issues such as abortion and homosexuality. This reductionist idea of making liberalism coincide with more tolerant attitudes to individual self-expression and moral choices appears quite frequently in the literature of public opinion studies (Adamczyk, 2013; Eueker & Froese, 2019; Zhang & Brym, 2019; Studlar & Burns, 2015). Some studies also include items that relate to environmental attitudes and multicultural attitudes within a broader cultural dimension alongside liberal progressive values (Ford & Jennings, 2020; Hooghe et al., 2002; Kenny & Langsæther, 2023). However, given the impact that discourse on immigration has on the politics of the two countries under study and the lack of items capturing environmental attitudes across waves, I decided to engage multiculturalism as a separate construct and to drop environmentalism.⁶

Table 3:
Operationalisation of the 'Liberal Values' concept

Dimension	Item*	Recoded scores
Liberal values	Q182: Is homosexuality always justifiable? Q184: Is abortion always justifiable? Q185: Is divorce always justifiable? Q186: Is casual sex always justifiable?	Conservative: 1-4 Neutral: 5-6 Liberal: 7-10
* 1 Never justifiable - 10 Always justifiable		

Source: The author

The items used to construct the concept of 'Multiculturalism' were chosen according to their appearance in other public opinion research on multiculturalism or xenophobia (Ariely, 2012; Joshanloo, 2024; Shin & Dovidio, 2017; Tausch, 2016). Furthermore, this item selection covers all the survey questions about immigrants or foreigners. The only exception is an item stating that, in times of job scarcity, precedence should be given to job seekers of the country's main

nationality. Since virtually all the respondents from the two countries agree with the above statement, it would have been impossible to construct a cluster of more than a few people with exclusively multicultural views.

The reader should remember that even respondents grouped within the Multicultural cluster are still likely to hold discriminatory views regarding access to the job market.

Table 4:
Operationalisation of the 'Multiculturalism' concept

Dimension	Items	Recoded scores
Multicultural values	G052: Evaluate the impact of immigrants on the development of your country *	1-2: Illiberal 3: Missing value 4-5: Multicultural
	A124: Uncomfortable having as neighbours: immigrants**	1: Illiberal 0: Multicultural
	G007: Trust: people of another nationality***	1-2: Illiberal 3-4: Multicultural
*1 Very Negative - 5 Very Positive **1 Yes - 0 No ***1 No Trust - 4 Lot of Trust		

Source: The author

4. Analysis

4.1 An Introduction to the Czech and Slovak Party Systems

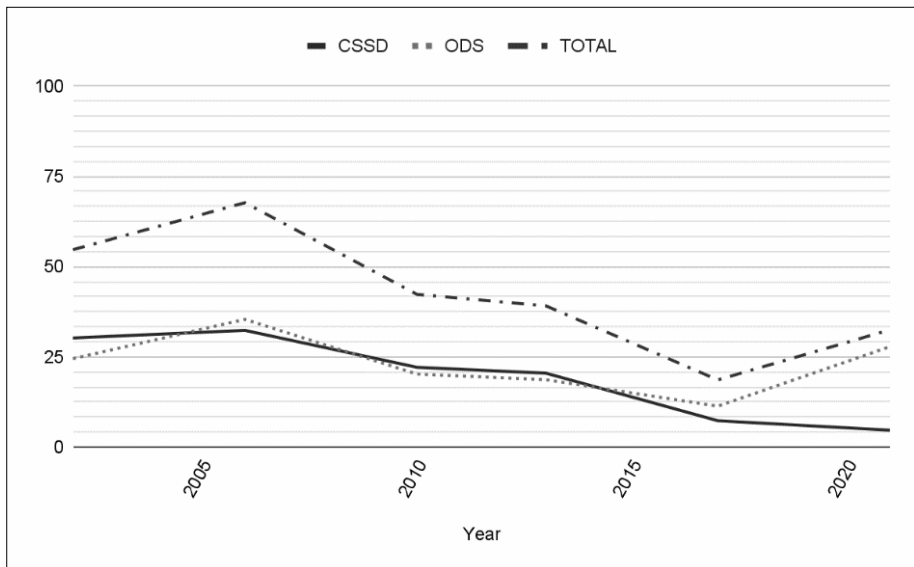
The Czech party system was formed around the traditional left-right economic cleavage (Gethin, Toledano & Pickety, 2020) and was, until the early 2010s, one of the most stable in the CEE region. Until then, centre-right and centre-left parties would attract, on average, more than 80% of the votes, with around half usually equally divided between the social-democratic ČSSD and the conservative ODS (Figure 1).

The first cracks in this political configuration appeared at the 2010 elections (Hanley, 2011). The right-wing fragmented because of the emergence of a new conservative party, TOP 09. At the same time, the populist Public Affairs emerged and won 44 seats in its first general election. The crisis of the party system was exacerbated in 2012 by the arrival of ANO 2011, an anti-establishment populist party that went on to come second in the 2013 elections, partly thanks to a cor-

ruption scandal involving top ODS figures (Havlík, 2014). In those elections, the centre-left ČSSD still got most votes, but in the worst result for a winning party since 1990 (Havlík, 2014). The following decade was characterised by further ČSSD decline.

Traditional left-wing parties have not been able to re-establish themselves. After the 2021 elections, neither ČSSD nor the successor to the communist party, KSČM, passed the threshold and so were left with no seats in the national parliament.

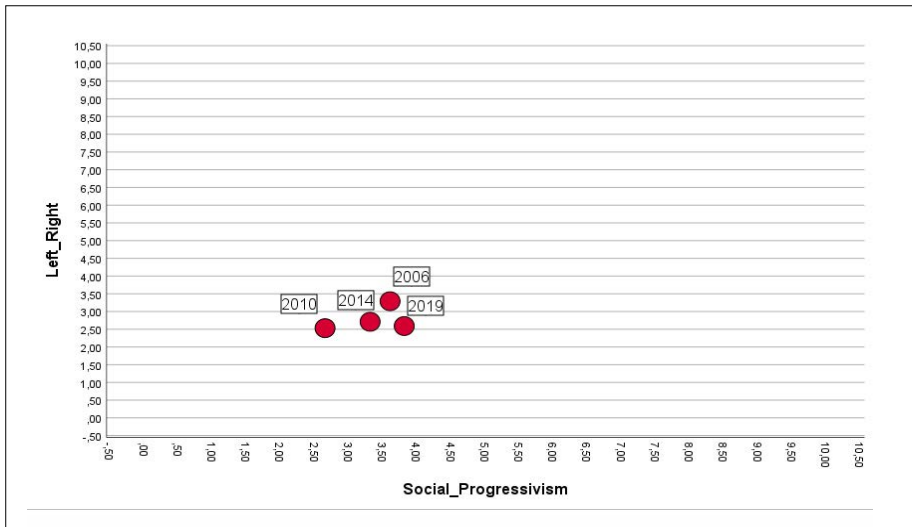
Figure 1:
Share of votes of the main centre-left and centre-right parties in Czechia



Source: IFES Election Guide

Figure 1 shows that ČSSD followed the trend of progressive electoral decline of social democratic parties that occurred across Europe after the 2008 financial crisis. But is there any evidence that this decline was caused by the party gravitating too much towards the centre of the political spectrum? Figure 2 shows movement on the left-right economic and conservatism-progressivism axes by ČSSD over the years, as recorded by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey.

Figure 2:
 ČSSD diachronic shift on left-right and conservatism-progressivism axes



Source: Chapel Hill Survey, 2002-2019

In Figure 2, higher values on the X and Y axes indicate more conservative and pro-free market positions, respectively. ČSSD does not seem to have abandoned its left-wing socio-economic platform, despite a shift between 2006 and 2010 towards more liberal economic positions. Such a shift was not very pronounced, and the situation stabilised soon after. Since the main hypothesised explanation does not apply to Czechia, the causes of the decline in electoral support for ČSSD must be sought elsewhere. The rise of ANO 2011 and its programmatic movement towards the economic left (Hájek et al., 2017; Lysek et al., 2021; Saxonberg & Heinisch, 2024) and the conflicting attitudes around EU integration as a critical issue cross-cutting the left-right economic divide (Buben & Kouba, 2023; Havlík & Voda, 2018; Kovář, 2023;) are both factors used to explain the downfall of ČSSD. Moreover, the most recent elections saw a growing political division based on attitudes towards ANO's leader, Andrej Babiš, with the currently governing coalition united by a general anti-Babiš sentiment rather than around shared ideology (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022; Buben & Kouba, 2023).

In this context of new salient issue, a commitment to its original social democratic ideals may not be enough to keep ČSSD relevant. Perhaps a rebranding incorporating new peripheral values like multiculturalism, social progressivism and environmentalism could still be decisive.

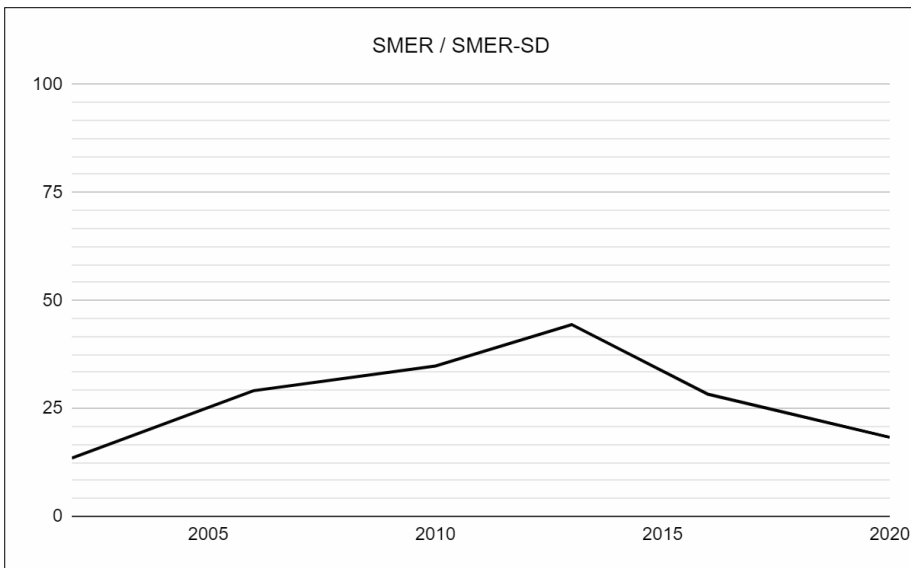
As is true of many other social-democratic parties in Europe, ČSSD includes a small faction pushing for party renewal towards those issues (Šaradín & Eichler, 2023). The analysis that follows will shed some light on whether a victory of

the liberal-left faction within the ČSSD might make the party more successful electorally.

In Slovakia, the party system has never achieved stability comparable with that in neighbouring Czechia and the situation remains complex.

While Robert Fico and his party, Smer-SD, have occupied a hegemonic role on the left of the political spectrum for most of the country's contemporary history, centre-right conservative parties have mostly failed to institutionalise. The KDH Christian-democrats have perhaps been the most successful example of party institutionalisation. Thanks to an established social base, they are one of the most enduring parties in the Slovak political scene (Rybář & Spáč, 2020). However, unlike the Czech ODS, KDH has never managed to attract more than 20% of voters, sharing the ideological camp with more ephemeral entrepreneurial parties and celebrity-based electoral vehicles.

Figure 3:
Share of votes of the main centre-left party in Slovakia

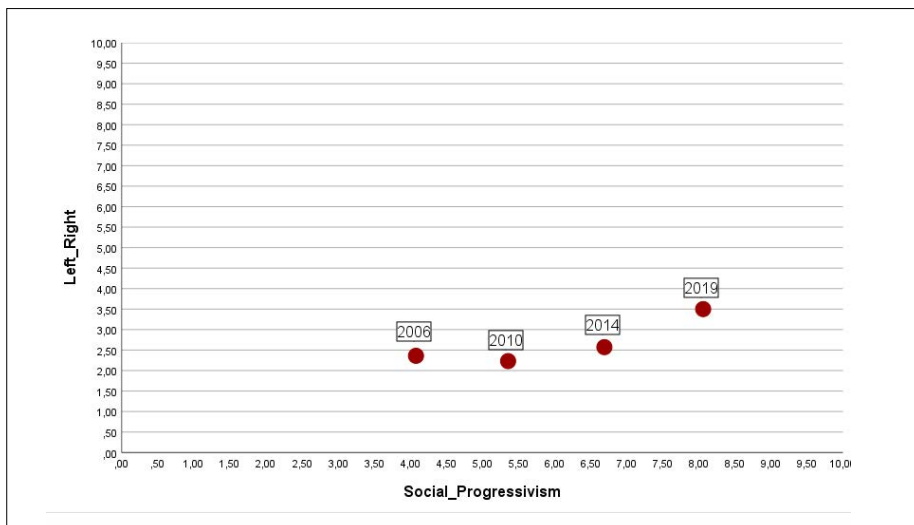


Source: IFES Election Guide

The party systems of the two countries do have some similarities. For instance, Smer-SD's electoral misfortunes began around the same time as the ČSSD collapse in the early 2010s. Coincidentally, those were also the years in which the party moved towards more conservative and right-wing social and economic positions (Figure 4). The Chapel Hill Survey and the literature both explain that shift to the centre as the same as the one that characterised the other centre-left parties in Europe. Authors have noted that, for the 2016 election, Smer-SD cam-

paingning predominantly, if not exclusively, on a nationalistic and anti-refugee platform (Stojarová, 2016; Walter, 2019). This led its traditional social base to vote for parties that had always had anti-immigration as their main priority (Stojarová, 2016; Walter, 2019). The corruption scandals linked to the party leader, Fico, were instead identified as more idiosyncratic causes of the decline in Smer-SD's popularity between 2016 and 2019. In turn, Smer-SD's misfortune boosted the performance of entrepreneurial parties running on anti-corruption platforms (Haughton et al., 2022; Marušiak, 2017; Zvada, 2023). The interplay between all these factors eventually led to Smer-SD being ousted from government in 2020.

Figure 4:
Smer-SD diachronic shift on left-right and conservatism-progressivism axes



Source: Chapel Hill Survey, 2002-2019

As in the majority of Western countries, the shift towards a more economically centrist position and the increased saliency of the immigration issue in the party's manifesto gave space for a new party to emerge, Hlas-SD, which also claimed to represent social democracy. However, Hlas-SD never embraced the environmentalist and socially progressive values characterising other rebranded social-democratic parties in Western and Eastern Europe (Zvada, 2023). Instead, it opted to differentiate itself from Smer-SD mainly by providing a more institutional and technocratic leadership style, in contrast to Fico's increasingly populist and radical approach (Učeň, 2023). This study provides evidence as to whether this choice could have been an electoral liability.

4.2 First Layer in Slovakia: Liberal Values, Multiculturalism and Left-Wing Attitudes

As is standard procedure when examining the validity of theoretical concepts, a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted to test whether a latent 'left-wing' variable, based on Bobbio's minimal definition, could be identified in respondents' answers in surveys on the four items: Welfare (Q241), Public (Q107), Equality (Q106) and Self-Identification (Q240).

In the 2018 wave of surveys conducted in Slovakia, the models did not produce acceptable values according to the chi-square test of model fit (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) or RMSEA (Rutkowski & Svetina, 2017). A better fit was produced by the model of 2022. However, in neither wave did the items composing the model load the latent variable with scores higher than the generally accepted threshold of 0.4 (Kim et al., 2016).⁷

Similar results characterised the items chosen to construct the latent variable of multiculturalism. While the model fit perfectly in 2018 and 2022, the factor loading was below the threshold. Only liberalism passed both the model fits (although with RMSEA in 2022 it was slightly above the very conservative threshold of 0.05) and single factor loading.

The weak CFA results indicate that scoring highly on the proxy items does not necessarily imply correspondence with the theoretical concept of 'left-wing' and 'multiculturalism'. Nonetheless, clustering was still conducted. It was still possible that grouping respondents based on their attitudes on the selected dimensions would still lead to significantly different and generally homogenous groups.

Some clusters resulting from the two-step clustering procedures were re-named. For instance, the cluster comprising only respondents exhibiting 'left-wing' as the majoritarian response on the four items was labelled 'Left'. The same procedure was applied for 'Multicultural' and 'Liberal'. However, in some of the clusters, a minority of their components still expressed 'Centre' or 'Right-wing' tendencies on some of the items, explaining the difference in homogeneity levels reported in Tables 5, 6, and 7. When no cluster was characterised by most respondents having the highest scores on all items, then the analysis was dropped for that concept (Liberal values / Multiculturalism / Left-wing attitudes). For instance, the 'Multicultural' cluster in Slovakia in 2018 was not operationalised since people with purely multicultural attitudes were minorities in at least one of the items of each cluster.

Table 5:
Cluster size and composition in Slovakia

Country	Slovakia 2018			Slovakia 2022		
	Left	Liberal	Multicult.	Left	Liberal	Multicult.
Cluster						
Size %	14.40%	24.40%	x	13.80%	25.80%	10.30%
Size N.	206	350	x	166	310	124
Homogen.	71.70%	78.30%	x	81.10%	81.10%	85.20%
Weighted	10.32%	19.10%	x	11.19%	20.92%	8.77%

Source: The author

As shown in Table 5, respondents grouped within the Left cluster were a minority of the total surveyed population, with roughly only 1 out of 10 respondents. Its size remained stable from 2018 to 2022, showing no significant value shift in Left attitudes. The number of people in the Liberal cluster, roughly double those in the Left, also remained unchanged between waves.

The following step involved observing how much overlap there was between the clusters. Each respondent was labelled '1' on a dummy variable 'D. Left' if they belonged to the 'Left' cluster and '0' if they belonged to any other cluster. The same was done for the other two models. The 'D. Left' and 'D. Liberal' variables were then aggregated, and respondents scoring '2' were grouped into a new variable called 'Left-Liberals'. The final number of people in this latter group was just a few dozen, composing between 2.5% and 3.5% of the original sample. This showed that committed left-wing individuals characterised by a progressive outlook on social values barely existed in the country. The number of respondents belonging to the 'Left-Multicultural' cluster was even lower.

Table 6:
Overlap cluster size in Slovakia

Country	Slovakia 2018		Slovakia 2022	
	Left-Lib	Left-Multi	Left-Lib	Left-Multi
Cluster				
Size %	4.50%	x	3.20%	0.80%
Size N.	64	x	38	10
Homogen.	75.00 %	x	81.10%	83.15%
Weighted	3.37%	x	2.59%	0.66%

Source: The author

Subsequently, a more lax and thus broader definition of liberal individuals was considered, labelling as a Liberal cluster all those that did not show a majority of respondents expressing illiberal attitudes in either of the four items rather than considering only those in which the majority of respondents expressed liberal attitudes. The results show that of the 14.4% of respondents in the Left cluster in 2018, 3.2% expressed mixed views on social values, and 4.5% had progressive views. The remaining half had some conservative views on abortion, homosexuality, divorce or sexual freedom, or on more than one of these issues. The situation did not change in 2022, with half of Left-clustered respondents being characterised by conservative views.

Table 7:
Overlap-cluster size in Slovakia

Country	Slovakia 2018		Slovakia 2022	
	Left-Broad Lib	Left-Broad Multi	Left-Broad Lib	Left-Broad Multi
Cluster				
Size %	7.70%	x	6.30%	3.10%
Size N.	110	x	75	37
Homogen.	69.94%	x	74.20%	92.60%
Weighted	5.39%	x	4.67%	2.87%
Overlap with Moderate	3.20%	x	3.10%	2.03%
Overlap with Liberal	4.50%	x	3.20%	0.80%

Source: The author

For a final assessment on whether people in the Liberal, Left, or Multicultural clusters were significantly likely also to overlap, a Chi-Square test was performed between the models' nominal clusters. None of the results was statistically significant, thus underlining the fact that being among the most socially progressive does not necessarily translate to being among the most accepting of foreigners or those with the most left-wing views.

4.3 First Layer in Czechia: Liber-al Values, Multiculturalism and Left-Wing Attitudes

The outcomes of the CFAs on the Czech values surveys were similar to those obtained for Slovakia; in other words, they were too weak to pass the conventional threshold. So, the conclusion we can draw from the CFAs are the same as those inferred for Slovakia.

The 'Left' clusters of 2018 and 2022 were smaller relative to the total sample sizes and generally less homogenous than their Slovak counterpart. On the other hand, the 'Liberal' and 'Multicultural' ones were considerably larger. As in Slovakia, cluster size was not significantly transformed in the four-year interval between the two surveys.

Table 8:
Cluster side and composition in Czechia

Country	Czechia 2018			Czechia 2022		
	Left	Liberal	Multicult.	Left	Liberal	Multicult.
Clusters						
Size %	9.50%	35.50%	19.70%	10.60%	34.10%	25.90%
Size N.	167	544	273	127	409	311
Homogen.	67.30%	82.70%	87.00%	65.95%	94.00%	68.11%
Weighted	6.39%	29.30%	17.13%	6.90%	32.05%	17.64%

Country	Czechia 2018		Czechia 2022	
	Left-Lib	Left-Multi	Left-Lib	Left-Multi
Clusters				
Size %	1.00%	2.30%	2.90%	2.80 %
Size N.	19	42	35	33
Homogen.	75.00 %	68.50%	80.00 %	67.00 %
Weighted	0.75%	1.60%	2.32%	2.22%

Source: The author

Probably due to the size of the 'Left' cluster, the groups originating from the intersection between the 'Left' and 'Liberal' and between the 'Left' and 'Multicultural' clusters were extremely small, representing lower percentages of the total population than even the Slovak ones (Table 7).

The analysis of the intersection between the 'Left' cluster and the other two, considering their broader dimensions, shows that even in Czechia, most of the 'Left' cluster members are within the 'Non-Liberal' clusters. Therefore, individuals with left-wing attitudes are less likely to be grouped in the 'Broad Multi' or 'Broad Liberal' clusters.

Table 9:
Overlap-cluster size in Czechia^a

Country	Czechia 2018		Czechia 2022	
	Left-Broad Lib	Left-Broad Multi ^a	Left-Broad Lib	Left-Broad Multi
Cluster				
Size %	2.80%	2.30%	5.00%	4.80%
Size N.	53	42	60	58
Homogen.	76.69%	68.50%	82.75%	84.08%
Weighted	2.15%	1.60%	4.12%	4.03%
Overlap with Moderate	1.70%	2.30%	2.10%	2.80%
Overlap with Liberal	1.00%	2.30%	2.90%	2.00%

Source: The author

4.4 Second layer: The Socio-Demographic Base

Analysis of the 'Value' dimension showed how, in both Czechia and Slovakia, people with left-wing tendencies were in the minority and were less likely to have progressive views on social values. This suggests that political parties that embrace more left-wing and progressive policies might not find fertile ground in either country. Suppose, however, that there were an overlap between the first and second layers of a political cleavage. In this case, its adoption by a political party may be more accessible, thus reducing the costs associated with party renewal.

Binary logistic regressions were used to test the linkage of the two dimensions, values and social groups.¹⁰ The dependent variable used was whether or not the respondent belonged to the 'Left', 'Liberal', 'Multicultural', 'Left-broad-liberal' or 'Left-broad-multicultural' cluster, while the main socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents were used as independent variables, as listed in Table 10.

Table 10:
Socio-demographic independent variables

WVS/EVS item	Dimension	Label	Scale (recoded)
X003R	Age cohort	Age recoded (sic intervals)	No recoding
Q288R/ X047E	Income	Income level (recoded in deciles)	No recoding
Q289/F025 + Q173/F034	Religion	Religious denomination (Dummy atheist/Catholic) + religious person	0: Atheist 1: Non-religious 2: Religious + no denomination 3: Catholic + non religious 4: Catholic + religious
Q275/ X025A_01	Education	Highest education level [ISCED 2011]	No recoding
H_URBRURAL	Rural	Urban-rural	No recoding
Q250/ E235	Abstract Dem Sup	How important is having a democratic political system	No recoding

Source: The author

Another series of logistic regressions had the respondent's profession as the independent variable.^{11 12} For some years, most literature embraced the idea that contemporary social heterogeneity had blurred the association between class and party affiliation. However, some studies indicate that this was probably a country-dependent phenomenon, which could have had more to do with parties' platforms than the blurring of class lines (Evans & Tilley, 2012; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014). Moreover, the emergence of populist radical right parties has shown that a class perspective on party politics can still provide some valuable insight (Kurer, 2020; Oesch, 2008; Simon & Steve, 2016). My goal was to test whether belonging to the working class in Czechia or Slovakia is still associated with a higher likelihood of supporting either ČSSD or Smer-SD. Previous attempts have found little support for this thesis in Czechia (Havlík & Voda, 2018), but found the existence of labour-based preference for Smer-SD in Slovakia in the early 2010s (Spáč, 2012).

Table 11:
Professional group independent variables

Category	Profession	WVS (Rec. Dummy) Q281	EVS item (Rec. Dummy) X035
Manager	Bank manager, government official, union leader etc.	2→1 Other→0	03-10→1 Other→0
Professional / technician	Professor, lab technician, artist etc.	1→1 Other→0	20-39→1 Other→0
Urban worker / service	Secretary, office manager, salesperson, store clerk etc.	3/4/5→1 Other→0	40-59→1 Other→0
Trades worker	Electrician, metalworker etc.	6/7→1 Other→0	70-89→1 Other→0
Unskilled	Cleaner, factory worker, porter etc.	8/9→1 Other→0	90-99→1 Other→0

Source: The author

Table 12:
Value-clusters Slovakia

Items	Left	Liberal	Multi	Left-Lib	Left-Multi
Age 2018	0.299***	-0.188***	x	0.080	0.073
Age 2022	0.061	-0.153	-0.233*	-0.008	0.199
Income 2018	0.049	0.016	x	-0.009*	-0.179
Income 2022	-0.291***	-0.098	-0.127	-0.284***	-0.062
Religion 2018	0.246*	-0.377***	x	0.335	0.520
Religion 2022	0	-0.386***	-0.053	0.040	0.196
Education 2018	0.006	0.273*	x	0.133	0.357
Education 2022	-0.156	0.040	0.051	-0.119	-0.164
Rural 2018	x	x	x	x	x
Rural 2022	-0.293	-0.039	-0.308	-0.183	0.263
Dem. 2018	0.092	0.022	x	0.198*	0.294
Dem. 2022	0.002	0.058	0.257***	X	x ¹³

* p<0.50 ** p<0.10 *** p<0.01

Source: The author

There is no constant significant predictor across the two survey waves for the Czech 'Left' cluster (Table 12). In 2018, older respondents were more likely to be present within the cluster, while in 2022, income appears to be a more robust

and more significant indicator, with lower income being positively associated with in-group clustering.

If we cluster the respondents based on their attitude to social values, religion negatively and significantly correlates with membership in the 'Liberal' cluster in both 2018 and 2022. The last significant variable is income, which is negatively correlated with inclusion in the 'Left-Liberal (Broad)' cluster; this suggests that lower-income individuals are more likely to share non-conservative values and still maintain an egalitarian view of the state and democracy. A respondent's profession, as categorised in the present study, is also not correlated with specific cluster membership (Table 13). The only exception was unskilled workers in the 2022 World Values Survey, who were significantly less likely to be within the 'Liberal' cluster.

Table 13:
Profession clusters Slovakia

Item	Left	Liberal	Multi	Left-Lib	Left-Multi ¹⁴
Manager 2018	0.499	0.220	X	-0.302	1.526
Manager 2022	0.118	-0.511	0.134	0.201	X
Professional 2018	0.322	0.176	X	0.395	1.121
Professional 2022	0.021	-0.031	-0.146	0.492	X
Service 2018	0.291	0.071	X	0.582	1.344
Service 2022	0.121	-0.449	-0.513	0.403	X
Trade 2018	0.448	-0.306	X	0.410	1.147
Trade 2022	0.426	-0.552	-0.607	0.732	X
Unskilled 2018	-0.166	-0.524	X	-0.002	0.288
Unskilled 2022	0.385	-1.119***	-1.043	1.208	X
* p<0.50 ** p<0.10 *** p<0.01					

Source: The author

Table 14:
Values-clusters Czechia 2018¹⁵

Item	Left	Liberal	Multi	Left-Lib	Left-Multi
Age 2018	0.255***	-0.327***	X	0.071	0.017
Age 2022	-0.019	-0.177***	-0.151***	-0.015	-0.041
Income 2018	-0.066	-0.011	X	-0.062	0.010
Income 2022	-0.237***	-0.053	-0.002	-0.275***	-0.344***
Religion 2018	-0.016	-0.228***	X	-0.232	0.231
Religion 2022	0.217***	-0.254***	0.123	0.087	0.150
Education 2018	-0.209*	0.128*	X	-0.190	-0.217
Education 2022	-0.178*	0.098*	0.001	-0.052	-0.002
Rural 2018	X	X	X	X	-0.010
Rural 2022	-0.174	-0.247	-0.596***	0.056	-0.452
Dem 2018	-0.002	-0.004	X	-0.025	-0.010
Dem 2022	-0.052	0.127***	0.054	X	X

* p<0.50 ** p<0.10 *** p<0.01

Source: The author

Many similarities can be found between Czechia's results (Table 14) and the outcomes of regressions conducted on the Slovak sample. In the Slovak data, age was the main predictor of inclusion in the 'Left' cluster in 2018, but was replaced by income in 2022. Belonging to a religious denomination (Catholic) significantly correlated with being in the 'Left' cluster. Religion was instead negatively correlated with the 'Liberal' cluster in both 2018 and 2022, mirroring the results for Czechia. Although age was also negatively correlated with inclusion in the 'Multicultural' cluster, the third logistic model's most significant result was the 'Rural' variable, which, was negatively and significantly correlated with inclusion. Quantitative studies conducted in other countries have also shown that urban dwellers exhibit, on average, a more multicultural mindset (Huijsmans et al., 2021; Schoene, 2019); my research shows that Czechia can be included in this widespread trend. As in Slovakia, income negatively correlates with inclusion in the 'Left-Liberal (Broad)' cluster, but only in 2022.

In Czechia, both trades/factory and unskilled workers were more likely to hold illiberal views, but unlike in Slovakia, this relationship holds for 2018 but not in 2022 (Table 15). As far as the other professions are concerned, there does not seem to be any significant link between occupation and cluster values.

Table 15:
Profession clusters Czechia 2018

Item	Left	Liberal	Multi	Left-Lib	Left-Multi
Manager 2018	0.238	-0.837	X	1.406	0.802
Manager 2022	-1.092	0.26	-0.401	0.658	-0.163
Professional 2018	-0.004	-0.441	X	0.413	0.211
Professional 2022	-0.576	0.346	-0.376	0.397	-0.345
Service 2018	0.097	-0.258	X	1.169	0.767
Service 2022	-0.141	-0.034	-0.474	0.483	0.115
Trade 2018	0.447	-0.778***	X	1.361	1.020
Trade 2022	0.627	-0.286	-0.653	1.631	0.616
Unskilled 2018	0.412	-1.035***	X	0.511	0.811
Unskilled 2022	1.195*	-0.411	-0.442	2.079	1.072

* p<0.50 ** p<0.10 *** p<0.01

Source: The author

4.5 Third layer: The Political/Organisational Dimension

The socio-economic groups associated with the clusters in the previous section are now confronted with those associated with preferences for the social democratic parties under observation (ČSSD, Smer-SD, Hlas-SD), and in the Czech case also alongside those of ČSSD main competitors (ANO 2011 and Pirates). The comparison was made to assess whether a party's rebranding to encompass liberal or left-wing principles could have a negative impact on its existing support. To this end, a new series of binomial logistic regressions was carried out.

Table 16:
Results Czechia 2018 and 2022

Item	ANO 2018	ANO 2022	ČSSD 2018	ČSSD 2022	KSČM 2018	Pirates 2022 ¹⁶
Age	0.240***	0.280	0.363***	0.330	0.384***	-0.641***
Income	0.023	0.001	0.067	-0.105	-0.065	0.031
Religion	-0.040	-0.032	-0.131	-0.022	-0.249***	-0.106
Education	-0.208***	-0.013	0.025	-0.014	-0.39*	-0.077
Rural	X	0.095	X	-0.083	X	0.388
Dem	-0.019	-0.052	-0.024	-0.084	-0.154***	0.163*
* p<0.50 ** p<0.10 *** p<0.01						

Source: The author

Age was a variable significantly correlated with being a supporter of ANO 2011, KSČM and ČSSD. This indicates that the three parties compete for the same age group despite their different ideological profiles (centre, left, centre-left). As seen in the previous section, age is negatively correlated with the 'Liberal' cluster, showing that if ČSSD were to adopt progressive values in its messaging it might harm its electability in the short term. However, promoting egalitarian policies might gain the support of people in the lower-income deciles without antagonising the party's existing social base. Thus, taking a more radical-left position might be a less costly strategy.

Education was negatively associated with the 'Left' cluster. Still, the loss of formally more educated people should not impact the existing power base of the party nor favour one of its main competitors, ANO 2011, since highly educated voters tend not to support the populist party either (Table 16).

Table 17:
Results Czechia 2018 and 2022

Item	ANO 2018	ANO 2022	ČSSD 2018	ČSSD 2022	KSČM 2018	Pirates 2022
Manager	0.101	1.897***	0.422	0.693	-0.011	-1.261
Professional	0.409	1.472*	0.632	0.734	-0.118	-1.092
Service	0.560*	1.856***	0.604	1.283	-0.090	-0.775
Trade	0.571*	2.081***	0.552	1.467	0.554	-1.306***
Unskilled	0.303	1.516*	0.868*	1.579	0.631	-1.101*
* p<0.50 ** p<0.10 *** p<0.01						

Source: The author

Unlike with clusters, profession was generally correlated with support for a particular party (Table 17). However, it is harder to draw conclusions about class support from the results of logistic regressions. Voting for ANO 2011 in 2018 was significantly associated with working in trade or service. This finding aligns with Heinisch and Saxonberg (2021), who employed the same methodology to explore the link between professions, values and populist support in Czechia in the results of the 2016 elections. The researchers included an extra category, 'Self Employed', which was also found to be correlated, showing even more heterogeneous support for the populist-centrist party. The logistic regression results for 2022 indicate that in that year ANO 2011 drew support from respondents of all job types, while there was not a specific category of reference for ČSSD, which lost the correlation with unskilled workers it enjoyed in 2018.

Table 18:
Results Slovakia 2018 and 2022

Item	Smer-SD 2018	Smer-SD 2022	Hlas-SD 2022
Age	0.399***	0.368***	0.237***
Income	0.082	-0.015	0.114
Religion	0.185	0.221	-0.050
Education	-0.311***	-0.061	-0.077
Rural	X	0.311	0.381
Dem	0.063	-0.022	0.006

* p<0.50 ** p<0.10 *** p<0.01

Source: The author.

As in the case of ČSSD in Czechia, in Slovakia, supporters of the two parties under observation tended to be older (Table 18). Older cohorts are associated with more conservative-illiberal views (Table 12). A more ideological emphasis on left-wing values might gain the support of Catholics and low-income households. Still, even in this case, embracing progressive values would inevitably lose the support of these new potential sources of voters on top of those elderly people who are now part of the electoral base of the two parties.

Table 19:
Results Slovakia 2018 and 2022

Item	Smer-SD 2018	Smer-SD 2022	Hlas-SD 2022
Manager	-0.164	2.067	1.171
Professional	0.293	1.637	1.230
Service	0.552*	1.615	1.567*
Trade	0.921***	1.832	1.715*
Unskilled	0.612	2.465*	1.099
* p<0.50 ** p<0.10 *** p<0.01			

Source: The author

5. Conclusion

My study began by examining whether the decline of centre-left parties in Czechia and Slovakia could be linked to a dealignment between these parties and their traditional voter base caused by their adoption of a more centrist view. This argument has been used to explain other instances of party decline, especially in Western Europe. From my results, the decline of Smer-SD appears to align with this theory; however, the fall of ČSSD in Czechia must be explained by different factors.

The research questions of my study were about whether Hlas-SD, Smer-SD, and ČSSD could benefit electorally from a rebranding that embrace more left-wing, and liberal stances. After all, such a strategy seemed to have worked for other European social-democratic parties (such as Levice, PSOE, FS, PVDA, and PD). I looked for an answer to these questions by focusing on the demand side for such a rebranding. Clusters of respondents from the World Values Survey were estimated, identifying those with positive attitudes to left-wing, multicultural, and progressive values. The first challenge for a Czech or Slovak party seeking to engage these groups of voters is their small size, with only about 10-15% of respondents in either country holding left-wing views. Additionally, the clusters do not overlap: for instance, in Czechia, although 25% of respondents support liberal and multicultural values, people holding left-wing views are usually found in the remaining 75% of the sample.

Analysing the social groups currently supporting centre-left parties and their value orientations, neither national context shows a significant link with any specific social class. Limited support comes from trades and service workers for Hlas-SD and unskilled workers for Smer-SD in Slovakia. Similarly, socio-demographic factors do not seem to play a significant role in support for ČSSD,

while Hlas-SD and Smer-SD appear more favoured by older voters in Slovakia. Although, at first glance, this might seem problematic for ČSSD, it also means that rebranding would be less costly since it would not alienate its voter base, as the party does not have a clearly defined one.

The findings suggest that ČSSD is at a crossroads: moving further left could attract religious and low-income voters. At the same time, a shift toward liberal social values would likely alienate religious and elderly voters but appeal to younger, educated people. A mix of both strategies could attract lower-income voters but fail to mobilise other demographic groups. In Slovakia, the potential for left-progressive rebranding is even more limited. Moving left could attract lower-income voters, but a shift toward liberal values would alienate religious and elderly voters, which constitute the core of their current base. As a result, adopting progressive values could alienate existing voters without evident gains.

Overall, it would appear that rebranding towards the left might benefit these social-democratic parties. Still, a progressive shift might be unnecessary or damaging, thus validating only a more restrictive interpretation of what a rebranding should entail. In other words, I found evidence to support the argument that re-alignment might be a valid strategy for struggling centre-left parties. Still, the benefits of progressive rebranding are context dependent.

However, this does not necessarily mean that Slovakia is destined to be served politically by only socially conservative left-wing parties or liberal third-way alternatives. First, demand-side studies cannot determine outcomes alone; political parties can also influence public opinion and preferences on the demand side (Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2020). Second, endogenous events can change the salience of issues and even affect societal values, and one such event might make a left-liberal shift more appealing to vote-maximising politicians (Akaliyski et al., 2024; Borghetto & Russo, 2018; Sipma & Berning, 2021; Traber et al., 2017).

Finally, there is a difference between the national decline of the left and how the left has been conceptualised in this study. It's possible that the clustering did not capture many people who identify as left-wing despite not prioritising economic redistribution or opposing private enterprises. This group might overlap more with the liberal cluster than has been observed here. In other words, a party campaigning on liberal values while emphasising what in the countries are generally perceived as left policies could still succeed. However, how 'left-wing' that party or those policies would then be is a matter of debate.

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Endnote:

- 1 Throughout this work "Populism" is used in its ideational definition (à la Mudde) rather than as a discursive articulation (à la Laclau).
- 2 The following sections present further insights into the concepts of 'social liberalism' and 'socially progressive values'. For the sake of clarity, these terms are presented in a simplified manner, aligned with a set of values, including pro-choice stances on abortion, the expansion of LGBT rights, sexual freedom, and divorce.
- 3 Some would rather treat Left and Right as 'flexible categories which mean roughly whatever a certain set of key actors or a statistically significant sample of a given population says that they mean' (White, 2011). While the jury is still out about which of the two scholarly traditions

is right, identifying the core essence of the dyad; would provide a more solid benchmark for the comparative goal of the present research.

- 4 For a summary of the different tenets proposed.
- 5 This idea of the 'Left' being associated with 'rectification' is further supported by the philosophical explorations of Lukes (2003) and Hirschman (1991) on the subject.
- 6 Exploratory factor analysis would also show that multicultural and environmental items do not load the same latent dimension as the items used here to capture liberal attitudes, further corroborating the choice of observing them as separate dimensions.
- 7 EFA and MSA tests were also conducted, confirming the negative results of the CFA.
- 8 Just as with Slovakia, Chi-square analysis showed that no correlations were found between different cluster members.
- 9 'Multicultural Cluster' and 'Broad Multicultural' are fully overlapping in 2018.
- 10 While OLS is also used for similar purposes, in works with similar research subjects, the two methods should provide very similar results (Pohlman & Leitner, 2003).
- 11 The idea of also adding students and the unemployed to the list had to be abandoned given the high collinearity between these two categories, and between students and urban/service workers.
- 12 While this model only takes into consideration the profession, future research could further refine this approach by combining profession with employment stability (long-term vs short-term contract, full vs part-time employment etc.), a research endeavour which has proved quite fruitful in the Southern European context (Corbetta & Colloca, 2013). Another direction in which this analysis could be led is subdividing the profession by sector of employment (Knutsen, 2005; Tepe, 2012).
- 13 Following the rule of 1 in 10, one variable was dropped to avoid overfitting the model.
- 14 Model overfitted in 2022: not enough observation within the intersectional cluster.
- 15 Everything was tested for collinearity.
- 16 Šaradín and Eichler argue that the more liberal part of the ČSSD traditional electorate shifted their support to the Pirate Party in the period 2018-2021.