

# Europe's social democratic parties face a dilemma in how they react to increasing EU integration

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*To an outside observer, the Eurozone crisis and the public's dissatisfaction with austerity policies should be beneficial for Europe's social democratic parties. So why are so many currently consigned to opposition? Using an analysis of speechmaking across three of Europe's social democratic parties, **Isabelle Guinaudeau** argues that the process of European integration has been a cause of division. While some parties, such as the UK's Labour party have actively moved towards the political centre and embraced EU integration, others such as France's Parti Socialiste have been far less successful in depoliticising the European issue.*



The domestic consequences of European integration have never been as visible as during the Eurozone crisis, with budgets and austerity plans being decided in accordance with the European institutions. The institutionalisation of the EU and the delegation of growing powers notably affect the capacity of domestic political parties to implement their policies, and have signalled the emergence of EU-related political issues that are important to voters. These consequences may shed light on the crisis of European Social-Democratic and Socialist parties (SDPs) that are, for the moment, largely confined in opposition and have not seemed to benefit from citizens' increased demand for macro-economic intervention in the context of the crisis.

On the one hand, opening economies, the European competition policy and the monetary policy defined in the EU's Maastricht Treaty in 1992 put the traditional advocates of state interventionism, industrial policy, market regulation, redistribution and social protection under strong pressure. On the other, large parties tend to be divided over how to cope with this pressure. This politicisation benefits their more radical challengers, which are more united around EU-critical discourses, as in the case of UKIP in the UK or, to an even greater extent, parties of the radical left such as the German *Die Linke* or the French *Parti de Gauche*. Mainstream left parties face painful trade-offs given their commitment to European integration, their willingness to signal a coherence of their policy proposals with their ideological tradition, their incentives to respond to dissatisfied voters and their reluctance to politicise an issue that would benefit challenger parties.

Of course, to the extent that parties cannot be forced to react to EU-related transformations, get involved at the EU-level, or even adjust their proposals to European law, these trends may have only limited consequences if they are not perceived and emphasised by partisan actors. And SDPs face different circumstances and opportunities from country to country. For example, the reduction in political alternatives is more palpable in France, Germany or in Scandinavia than in the United



SPD poster, 1919 (Public Domain)

Kingdom, given the advanced stage of deregulation and liberalisation reached in the 1980s and the decision not to adopt the euro. The British Labour party even benefited from the country's adjustment to European social, environmental and health norms, notably after Tony Blair signed the [European Social Charter](#). It is thus particularly interesting to compare how Europeanisation is perceived and handled in different mainstream parties. With this question in mind, I have systematically analysed speeches held at the national conferences of the British Labour party, French *Parti Socialiste* and German *Sozial-demokratische Partei Deutschlands* between 1985 and 2009.

The deliberation of programmatic lines, with contributions from party members on a relatively broad basis, is a better reflection of the diversity of conceptions at work than can be brought to light by official documents. They show that after a period of enthusiasm following the re-launching of integration in the 1980s, the adaptive pressure stemming from the EU is evident within all three parties, specifically from the ratification of the Maastricht treaty. This text was seen, particularly within the left factions, to be too liberal, too modest with respect to workers' rights, too undemocratic and too important not to be adopted by referendum. In subsequent years, numerous speakers continued to regret the EU's inertia in the fields of unemployment and workers' rights and the pressures towards liberalisation, multiplying business relocations and restrictions on workers' rights. Fears were also expressed regarding the forthcoming Eastward enlargement, which was expected by some to dilute the European project into a free-trade area that might be subject to fiscal, social and ecological dumping.

However, all three parties have been divided over the appropriate response to these challenges. Their leaderships asserted their commitment to Europe and adopted a pragmatic pro-EU stance, based on the conviction that a social-democratic policy could no longer be implemented except at the European level. They also made calls for realism on the room to manoeuvre in intergovernmental negotiations, and on the shrinking domestic possibilities for left-wing macroeconomic policies, and the strategies of political competitors in European matters. Minority factions, on the other hand, have been less prone to political compromises in the name of European integration. Their representatives may also capitalise on EU contestation to challenge the party leadership, which usually reacts by depoliticising Europe and stigmatising these opponents as "populist", "demagogic", or "Eurosceptic".

This strategy proved successful in the SPD and in the Labour party, where the 1990s ended in a state of relative cohesion on European matters. For example, Tony Benn and Dennis Skinner, the two most leftist members of the Labour national committee, were marginalised after the rejection of their proposal for a referendum. The designation of John Smith at the head of the Labour party, the eviction of Tony Benn from the national committee and the withdrawal of Bryan Gould, leader of the Labour MPs hostile to the Maastricht Treaty, from the shadow ministry of trade and industry, reinforced the marginalisation of the left wing of the party and of arguments centred on European constraints. At the 1996 Labour conference, Europe was thus exclusively presented from the point of view of opportunities and this pro-European stance became a pillar of Labour's opposition strategy.

Constrained by stronger far left organisations articulating critiques of the EU, and by stronger pressure deriving from Europeanisation, the PS leadership was less successful than the SPD and the Labour party in depoliticising European integration. The hopes of rebalancing integration to the advantage of employment and social policies, raised by the seizure of power by SDPs in twelve out of the fifteen member states, rapidly shrunk given the modest results of the Amsterdam and Nice summits, and were overshadowed by critical discourses on EU-related constraints. More recently, French Socialists have experienced the most vivid controversies over the European Constitutional Treaty put to a referendum in May 2005. Supporters of the majority motion, led by the party leader François Hollande, expressed positive expectations about the treaty, while several factions considered that it failed to adequately address the "democratic deficit", firm relocations, and the liberalisation of public services, and appealed for opposition to any further steps toward European integration.

The growing visibility of the social implications of European integration and the electoral success of Eurosceptic parties in several member states could make it increasingly difficult to downplay the contestation of EU policies. Overcoming the Social-democratic "European dilemma" may require that they adjust their political project to the reality of open economies that are subject to common monetary and competition policies, or that they cooperate

efficiently in order to push for reforms of the European treaties and for the adoption of Social-Democratic policies at the European level.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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