

# The Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSD) as Part of The European Socialist Family: Ideological and Organisational Influences (2004–2019)

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**Abstract:** *The importance of the ideologies in the current political landscape is often disputed or questioned. Some argue that most of the political forces moved towards the center in the last decades; they state that the catch-all model was embraced by former Conservative, Liberal, or Social democratic parties. Others consider that the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism erased the doctrinal boundaries that used to separate the Left from the Right. These discourses suggest that today's political confrontations are in fact pseudo-conflicts because they lack an ideological background. In the present article, we contribute to the realization of an overview of the current relevance of the political ideologies by focusing on aspects linked to the recent history of the European Left.*

*The relationship between the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Eastern European Social democratic parties was often characterized by difficulties. We observe the dynamics of the relationship between PES and the Romanian Social democrats, highlighting episodes filled with tension as well as moments of fruitful collaboration. Moreover, we discuss the messages of some relevant leaders in the European electoral campaigns, and we analyze the political profile of some Romanian Social democrats that occupied important positions in the European Parliament or the European Commission. The article also reflects on the impact had by the evolution of Social democracy on the development and the stability of the European Union. One of the main conclusions of our study is that the cultural and economic differences between the Western democratic Left and the Romanian Social democrats indicate that the relevance of the ideologies should not be underestimated.*

**Keywords:** *European politics, ideology, neoliberalism, political party, Social democracy.*

## I. Introduction

The first direct elections for the European Parliament were held in June 1979. The Socialist group obtained the most votes at the polls (27.6%), receiving 113 of the 410 parliamentary seats. The Christian Democrats were closely behind (26.1%, 107 seats).<sup>1</sup> In 1984, the Socialist victory was clearer. They obtained 30% of the votes (130 seats from 434), while the People's Party (Christian Democrats and Conservatives) obtained only 25.3% (110 seats).<sup>2</sup> In 1989, the difference between the two groups grew: 34.7% of the votes and 180 of the 518 seats (the Socialists) vs. 23.4% of the votes and 121 seats (the Christian Democrats).<sup>3</sup> In 1994, the tide began to slowly turn. The Socialists won the elections

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(34.9% of the votes and 198 seats from 567), but the Christian Democrats reduced the gap (27.7% and 157 seats).<sup>4</sup> In 1999, for the first time in 20 years, the Left (28.8% of the votes and 180 seats from 626) was defeated by the People's Party (37.2% and 233 seats).<sup>5</sup> The Socialists never managed to regain their predominant position. For example, in 2019 the European elections were won by the Christian Democrats (24.2% and 182 seats from 751), while the Socialists were once again in the second position (20.5% and 154 seats).<sup>6</sup>

At least two fundamental aspects for the European elections changed between the late 1970s and the 2000s. Firstly, the European Economic Community (and later the European Union) was gradually enlarged. In 1979 European elections were held in only 9 countries. In 2009 the European Union (EU) was formed by 27 countries, including 10 former Communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe. Secondly, the ideological identity of the Western Social democratic parties was significantly altered.

The Romanian political scientist Alexandra Ionescu stated in a paper published in 1999 that we witness a golden age of the political center: right-wing parties are being more open to accepting the state's involvement in the economic area, while left-wing parties are more willing to accommodate the requests of the business sector.<sup>7</sup> Other authors conclude that the Left is much more willing to abandon its former positions than the Right. For example, the Hungarian-American investor and philosopher George Soros argues in a book published in 1998 that the contemporary politics are driven by a neoliberal or market fundamentalist ideological hegemony.<sup>8</sup>

Soros' arguments are mirrored by the strategic path on which the Western democratic left engaged in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Inspired by Anthony Giddens' work<sup>9</sup>, the British Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair created what the former British Member of Parliament (MP) Denis MacShane considered a neoliberal project with a social face.<sup>10</sup> The *Third Way* philosophy of Giddens and Blair, which supported the removal of the Keynesian elements from the political practice of the democratic left, was also embraced, among others, by the German Social democratic chancellor Gerhard Schröder.<sup>11</sup>

In the present paper we try to map the ideological and organisational evolution of the European democratic left after 2004. What was the impact of the doctrinal transformation of Western Socialism on the Eastern European parties that had deep roots in the Communist decades? Were the cohesion and the credibility of the European Socialist family affected by its expansion towards the East? It is proper to conclude today that we are entering a post-ideological era?

Below we try to shape answers to these questions by analyzing the relationship between PES and the Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSD) in the period 2004-2019. Firstly, we present a brief historical background, necessary to comprehend the fundament of the partnership which is created at the beginning of the 2000s. After this section, we focus on three segments bordered by the European elections held in 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019. Here we present and analyze relevant information for our endeavour, information which paves the way for constructing the conclusions.

## **II. Historical background**

In 1957, the European Economic Community (EEC) was created by the Treaty of Rome. In the same year, the Liaison Bureau of Socialist Parties of the European Community was founded<sup>12</sup>. This structure was meant to facilitate the collaboration of the six countries' Socialist

groups from the European Parliament; the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) and the Belgian Socialist Paul Henri Spaak had an important role in its creation. In 1966 a group led by Henk Vredeling, a member of PvdA, proposed the transformation of the Bureau into a genuine political party, named the European Progressive Party.<sup>13</sup> This party was seen as a useful tool for transforming the EEC into a political federation. However, in 1969 this idea is abandoned. The Western European left was still influenced by a solid group that considered that European integration was not in the best interest of the working class.

The influence of this group is reduced in 1973, when three countries join the EEC: Ireland, Denmark, and the United Kingdom. In 1974 the Bureau is transformed into the Confederation of the Socialist Parties of the European Community. The Confederation encompassed 9 parties, and its first leader was Wilhelm Dröscher, a representative of the German Social democrats.<sup>14</sup> From an ideological point of view, its program was mainly Keynesian. The capitalist economic system was seen as feasible as long as the working class has a voice on the political stage. This idea was present in the Socialist discourse during the European elections campaign of 1979. On the other hand, the idea of creating a European political federation was mainly absent.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1980s the Confederation of the Socialist Parties is further enlarged when Greece, Spain, and Portugal join the EEC. Between 1985 and 1995 the leadership of the European Commission was held by the French Socialist Jacques Delors. In this interval, more precisely on February 7, 1992, the Treaty of Maastricht is signed. This treaty creates the EU, and also allows the foundation of a European party system, through article 138a.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, the Treaty of Maastricht also changes the fate of the European Socialist family. The Confederation of the Socialist Parties is transformed into the *Party of European Socialists (PES)*. Initially, a different name was proposed: the *European Socialist Party (ESP)*. However, this option was rejected because some Socialists considered that the EU represents a liberal version of capitalism, and others argued that the loss of national sovereignty is not desirable. The British Labour Party was one of the most skeptical groups regarding the project of speeding up European integration.<sup>17</sup>

In 1995 Austria, Sweden, and Finland join the EU. In the same year, at the second PES Congress, held in Barcelona, Spain, the European Socialists start to collaborate with six Eastern European Social democratic parties. In the next year, PES will hold a meeting in Budapest, Hungary, and in 1998 it will begin to collaborate with other parties from former Communist countries.<sup>18</sup> However, at this point there is no formal dialogue between PES and the main Romanian Social Democratic Party.

Romania started its transition towards democracy and market economy in December 1989, when a bloody revolution toppled the Communist dictatorship led by Nicolae Ceaușescu. The political power is taken over by a group led by Ion Iliescu, a former Communist dignitary who contested Ceaușescu's policies in the 1970s and the 1980s. This group becomes a political party in February 1990, named the *National Salvation Front (FSN)*. FSN won the parliamentary elections held in May 1990, and Ion Iliescu was elected president of Romania.

FSN labeled itself as a center-left, social democratic party.<sup>19</sup> In December 1991 Romania adopted a democratic constitution that was projected mainly by representatives of FSN. On the other hand, the Front acted several times in a manner that had few things in common with the Social democratic doctrine. The rule of law was unstable in the first years of the 1990s; the governmental control of the mass-media contributed to the creation of an uneven playing po-

litical field; political protests often degenerated in violent confrontations. Overall, between 1990 and 1995 Romania was more a hybrid regime than an authentic liberal democracy.<sup>20</sup> From an economic point of view, although Ion Iliescu advocated for a Keynesian economic approach, FSN's cabinets followed between 1990 and 1992 a strategy that is described by the Romanian economist Cornel Ban as *liberal neodevelopmentalism*.<sup>21</sup> This approach mirrored the evolution of Western Socialism at the beginning of the 1990s. In these years, the European democratic left was abandoning Keynesianism in favor of the centrist vision that will be theorized by Anthony Giddens.

In 1992 a group loyal to Ion Iliescu left FSN and formed a new political party, named the *Democratic National Salvation Front* (FDSN). In the fall of 1992, FDSN won the parliamentary elections, and Ion Iliescu was re-elected as president of Romania. Iliescu's party continued to claim that follows a Social democratic doctrinal path, reproducing the model of the Western European center-left parties.<sup>22</sup> In 1993, FDSN merged with three smaller parties and adopted a new name: the *Party of Social Democracy in Romania* (PDSR). From an economic point of view, PDSR's cabinet was closer to Keynesianism than FSN's cabinets. Cornel Ban considers that, under Ion Iliescu's informal leadership, PDSR implemented a strategy that can be labeled as *populist neodevelopmentalism*.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, between 1992 and 1996 FDSN/PDSR collaborated at the parliamentary level (and for a short period of time also at the governmental level) with radical right-wing parties. Naturally, this collaboration and the political violence used by supporters of FSN in 1990 and 1991 were obstacles in front of PDSR's desire to join the European Socialist family.

In 1993 PDSR requested to join PES, but this request was blocked by the British Labourists and the Swedish Social democrats.<sup>24</sup> The European Socialists considered that PDSR was a successor party of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR), given that many leaders of PDSR were former members of PCR; also, PES considered that PDSR's actions proved that the Communist past was not entirely left behind.<sup>25</sup> For example, there were concerns regarding not only the rule of law and the political violence but also the rights of the ethnic minorities.

In 1996 PDSR lost the parliamentary elections and Ion Iliescu lost the presidential elections. For the first time after the fall of the Communist regime, the positions of president and prime minister were held by right-wing politicians. However, the governmental coalition included two parties that claimed to be Social democratic. Firstly, there was the *Democratic Party* (PD), the organizational successor of FSN, led by former prime-minister Petre Roman. Secondly, there was the *Romanian Social Democratic Party* (PSDR), a party founded in 1990 by former members of the inter-war Romanian Social democratic movement. PSDR included members that were in exile during the Communist years. These members were present in international Socialist structures and facilitated the collaboration between PES and PSDR, PSDR being seen by the European Socialists as a historical Social democratic party<sup>26</sup>. PSDR's leaders also facilitated the debut of the dialogue between PES and PD. Although PD was the organizational successor of FSN, the European Socialists considered it a new party, given that Ion Iliescu's loyalists regrouped in 1992 in FDSN. In 1999 PD was accepted as an associate member of PES, at PES' Congress held in Milan, Italy.

In the meantime, PDSR was trying to improve its relationship with the Western Social democrats, under the leadership of Ion Iliescu and Adrian Năstase (a young law professor and diplomat who was a member of PCR before 1989). They were successful in creating a partnership with the German Social democrats<sup>27</sup>. In the parliamentary elections held in the fall of

2000, the Social democrats obtained a clear victory. Moreover, Ion Iliescu was elected once again as president of Romania.

The partnership between PD and PSDR ended before the elections held in 2000, and in June 2001 PSDR and PSDR merged under a new name: the Social Democratic Party (PSD). Automatically, PSD inherited PSDR's status as a PES partner. A party that had roots in the Communist regime now took over the historical heritage of the Romanian Social democracy.

Adrian Năstase was prime minister and president of PSD. From an ideological point of view, he moved the party towards the center, trying to reproduce the *Third Way* recipe articulated by Anthony Giddens. Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder represented political models for him. Obviously, he rejected Iliescu's more interventionist vision and had several conflicts with the president.<sup>28</sup>

PSD's transformation was viewed positively by the international Socialist structures. In October 2003 PSD was accepted as member of the Socialist International (SI).<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the Romanian social democrats were in 2004, an important year for the EU and Romania, members of IS and associate members of PES.

### III. PSD and PES: ideological and organizational influences (2004–2009)

In 2004 the EU accepted 10 new members: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. This enlargement was not particularly helpful for PES from an electoral point of view. The European elections held in May were won by the European People's Party (EPP). The Christian Democrats obtained 36.6% of the votes and 268 parliamentary seats from 732. The Socialists were in second place (27.3% and 200 seats).<sup>30</sup>

In the same year, Romania successfully concluded its negotiations for joining the EU. The last chapters of the negotiations were closed on 8 December, a few days before the second round of the presidential elections. PSD's candidate, Adrian Năstase, was not able to capitalize on this success in his favor. His public image was stained with corruption accusations, and his *Third Way* political philosophy produced economic growth without being able to resolve the main social issues that were affecting the population. Although PSD obtained the best result in the parliamentary elections, Adrian Năstase was defeated in the second round of the presidential elections by the president of PD, Traian Băsescu. A right-wing governmental coalition was formed under the leadership of Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, the president of the National Liberal Party (PNL).

The relationship between PSD and PES was not affected by this unexpected defeat. Therefore, PD took the surprising decision of leaving PES and joining EPP. The party informally led by Traian Băsescu abandoned Social democracy overnight and joined the European Christian Democratic family.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, PSD remained the only Romanian parliamentary Social democratic party.

Adrian Năstase renounced the position of president of PSD after he was defeated by Traian Băsescu. At the PSD Congress held in April 2005, two politicians run to replace him. The first one was Ion Iliescu. The 75 years old former Communist was not allowed by the Constitution to run once again in the presidential elections, so he tried to continue his political career as leader of PSD. He did not share Năstase's enthusiasm towards the *Third Way* project, favoring a Keynesian Social democratic approach. The second one was Mircea Geoană, a young

diplomat who was much closer to Năstase's position. Geoană won the elections<sup>32</sup>, and therefore PSD moved even closer to PES from an ideological perspective.

In 2005 Romania had for the first time the right to send observers from the national Parliament to the European Parliament. PSD chose for these positions MP's with impressive careers or with promising political starts. Titus Corlăţean, a 37 years old jurist, will occupy later ministerial positions in several Social democratic cabinets. Corina Creţu, a 38 years old former journalist and former adviser of Ion Iliescu, will become later European Commissioner. Alexandru Athanasiu, a 50 years old jurist, was a minister in several cabinets and acting prime minister in December 1999 as representative of PSDR. Adrian Severin, a 51 years old diplomat and academic, was Romania's foreign minister between 1996 and 1997 as representative of PD. Ioan Mircea Paşcu, a 56 years old academic, was Romania's defense minister between 2000 and 2004. We can observe that the Social democrats considered that the positions in the European Parliament are important; they used them as a reward for senior politicians and also as a ladder for younger ones.

In June 2005, PSD is accepted as a full member by PES, at the Council held in Vienna, Austria. This decision offered to the Romanian Social democrats the democratic legitimation that they sought from 1993. The ideological transformation of PSD started by Adrian Năstase was inspired by the European Socialists, and represented a solid foundation for the relationship between the two parties. Obviously, for PES it was also important that PSD was constantly obtaining good results in the internal elections.

In March 2007 the governmental coalition collapses after Tăriceanu dismisses PD's ministers.<sup>33</sup> The new minority cabinet led by Tăriceanu was supported in the Parliament by PSD. In the following month, the new parliamentary majority will suspend president Traian Băsescu. This political action was controversial and was thoroughly debated at the European level. The Romanian political scientist Vladimir Tismăneanu considers that this action represented a parliamentary putsch because it ignored a notice from the Constitutional Court<sup>34</sup>, although this notice was not compulsory. Several European Socialists will defend the legality of PSD's endeavor: Poul Nyrup Rasmussen (former Danish prime minister, president of PES), Martin Schulz (German Member of the European Parliament – MEP, future president of this institution), Marinus Wiersma (Dutch MEP, former vice-chairman of the PES group), Josep Borrell Fontelles (Spanish MEP, former president of the European Parliament, future vice-president of the European Commission), Anke Fuchs (German Social democrat, former vice-president of the German Parliament, president of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation) and Hannes Swoboda (Austrian MEP). This clear and unconditional support shows that PSD was completely accepted as part of the European Socialist family; at this point, the Romanian Social democrats were not a liability for PES, like the Social democrats from Slovakia, that were collaborating with a radical right-wing party.<sup>34</sup> Despite the international support, PSD's action failed, Traian Băsescu was reconfirmed by the voters as president of Romania on May 19.<sup>36</sup>

On January 1, 2007, Romania and Bulgaria officially join the EU. Therefore, on November 25, 2007, in Romania was organized for the first time an election for the European Parliament. PD obtained the best result: 28.81% of the votes and 13 seats from 35; PSD was in second place: 23.11% and 10 seats.<sup>37</sup> Titus Corlăţean, Adrian Severin, Ioan Mircea Paşcu and Corina Creţu were between the 10 PSD MEP's. Another MEP was Rovana Plumb, a 47 years old economist and future minister in several Social democratic cabinets.

At the parliamentary elections held in November 2008, PSD and PDL (the Democratic Liberal Party, successor of PD) obtained similar results: 33.1% vs. 32.4%. In an unexpected move, these parties decided to form a governing coalition under the leadership of PDL's president Emil Boc. The Social democrats accepted to maintain the flat tax rate and to impose only policies that are not opposed to a philosophy of fiscal discipline.<sup>38</sup> Although PSD and PDL were in different European parties, the doctrinal differences between them were not big. Under Geoană's leadership, PSD became more and more compatible with the *Third Way* model.<sup>39</sup> In 2008 PSD's president published a book<sup>40</sup> in which the introductory comments were written by Anthony Giddens. Giddens was present in Bucharest alongside Geoană when the book first appeared.

One of Geoană's collaborators, Vasile Dîncu, a representative of the group that helped Geoană defeat Iliescu in 2005, stated in 2008 that Social democracy must change its political, economic, and social strategies. According to him, the state's intervention is no longer proper for a different reality.<sup>41</sup> With a few months before the European elections of 2009, these kinds of ideas were dominating PSD and an important part of PES.

#### **IV. PSD and PES: ideological and organizational influences (2009–2014)**

In the electoral campaign of the 2009 European elections, PSD, as well as the other participant parties, focused more on internal issues than on European ones. These elections were seen more as a rehearsal of the presidential elections scheduled for the fall of 2009 than as an important moment for shaping Romania's role in a united Europe. Mircea Geoană was already decided to be PSD's candidate in the presidential elections. When president Traian Băsescu visited the Romanian armed troops stationed in Afghanistan during the campaign, Geoană, instead of opening a discussion about the involvement of the EU countries in the conflicts from Iraq and Afghanistan, criticized Băsescu's visit for being an improper action of support for PDL and resigned as a member of the Supreme Council of National Defence (CSAT).<sup>42</sup>

At the polls, PSD obtained a significantly better result than in November 2007: 31.07% of the votes and 11 seats from 33 available for Romania. Therefore, the Social democrats gained one seat in comparison with the previous legislature. PDL was in second place, with 29.71% and 10 seats.<sup>43</sup> Adrian Severin, Rovana Plumb, and Corina Crețu kept their seats in the European Parliament. On the list of the 11 PSD MEPs we can also find Daciana Sârbu and Viorica Dăncilă. Daciana Sârbu, a 32 years old legal counsellor, was the wife of Victor Ponta, a future president of PSD and prime minister. Viorica Dăncilă, a 46 years old engineer and former teacher, was also a future president of PSD and prime minister. We can observe once again that in PSD the position of MEP offers also the possibility of gaining additional influence at the national level.

In the entire EU, the elections were once again won by EPP: 36% of the votes and 265 seats from 736. PES was in second place: 25% and 184 seats.<sup>44</sup> PSD had the 5th largest national Social democratic group in the European Parliament. The first four places were occupied by the German Social democrats (23 seats), the Italian democrats (21 seats), the French Socialists (14 seats), and the British Labourists (13 seats). It is obvious that the Romanian group was important for PES. On the other hand, statistics showed that between 2007 and 2009 several times PSD's MEPs ignored the voting recommendations of the PES leadership prioritizing the inter-

ests of the Romanian national government.<sup>45</sup> The Romanian Social democrats had little enthusiasm for the idea of creating a European political federation.

On October 1, 2009, PSD's ministers resigned from the Boc cabinet, the PDL-PSD governing coalition collapsing after only 10 months of existence. Two months later, Mircea Geoană was defeated in the second round of the presidential elections by Traian Băsescu. After this defeat, Geoană's position as president of PSD was contested. At the party's Congress held in February 2010, Geoană was defeated by Victor Ponta, a 37 years old former prosecutor. Ponta was supported by an eclectic group that included Ion Iliescu, Adrian Năstase, and Vasile Dîncu.

From an ideological point of view, Ponta, who had Năstase as a political mentor, was in favor of the *Third Way* vision. He considered Tony Blair a role model and, just as Vasile Dîncu, argued that the stability of the business sector is at least as important as reducing social inequalities. In the beginning, Ponta had an excellent partnership with the leaders of PES; he was seen as the politician capable of completely severing PSD's ties with its Communist past.

The first tense moment in Ponta's partnership with the European Socialists appeared in 2011. In 2010, journalists from the British *The Sunday Times* approached over 50 MEPs, promising them hundreds of thousands of euros in exchange for supporting different amendments. Only three MEPs accepted this offer: the Austrian Ernst Strasser (EPP), the Slovenian Zoran Thaler (PES), and the Romanian Adrian Severin (PES). On March 20, 2011, *The Sunday Times* published the results of this investigation.<sup>46</sup> Ernst Strasser and Zoran Thaler argued that they were innocent, but they resigned almost immediately as MEPs<sup>47</sup>. On the other hand, Adrian Severin refused to resign.

Martin Schulz and Hannes Swoboda firmly condemned the behavior of the three MEPs, stating that any corruption act is intolerable in a Socialist party. On March 21, Martin Schulz had a meeting with Severin. After this meeting, Severin retired from the Socialist group, but he refused again to resign from the European Parliament.<sup>48</sup> His stubborn attitude affected PES' public image and endangered the stability of the PES-PSD partnership.

Shortly after the scandal erupted, Victor Ponta declared that Severin temporarily retired from the position of PSD's vice-president and that no other sanctions are needed: if he will be found guilty, he will leave the party, if not he will recover his position. Severin was also supported by the president of PSD Bucharest, Marian Vanghelie. However, on March 28 he resigned from the party. Marian Vanghelie was compelled by Victor Ponta to force this resignation, and expressed his solidarity with Severin.<sup>49</sup> Ponta took this decision after being in a permanent dialogue with Martin Schulz (at this time Schulz was the leader of the Socialist group in the European Parliament). Schulz welcomed this decision, praising the Romanian Social democrats for their integrity.<sup>50</sup> Obviously, this scandal shook the partnership between the European Socialists and the Romanian Social democrats, but in the end, Ponta's malleability stabilized the situation.

On the internal political stage, Ponta created in 2011 a political alliance with PNL, named *Uniunea Social Liberală* (USL). The main goal of this alliance was to remove Traian Băsescu's grip on political power (Băsescu was Romania's president and also controlled the Parliament and Emil Boc's cabinet). USL reflected PSD's ideological identity. By creating a partnership with a Liberal party, Ponta proved his loyalty towards the centrist approach promoted by Anthony Giddens.

In April 2012, USL managed to remove PDL's cabinet through a no-confidence vote in the Parliament. Ten days later, the 39 years old Ponta became Romania's prime minister. On July

6, 2012, the new parliamentary majority suspends once again president Traian Băsescu. We saw above that in 2007 PES supported PSD's endeavor. This time the situation will be different.

A few days before the vote to suspend Băsescu, USL replaced the People's Advocate (Ombudsman) and the presidents of the two chambers of Parliament. PNL's president, Crin Antonescu, became president of the Senate and interim president of Romania after Băsescu's suspension, while the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies was taken over by Valeriu Zgonea, a representative of PSD.<sup>51</sup> These moves definitely were in a gray area from a legal point of view, Băsescu's supporters once again labeling them as parts of a parliamentary putsch.<sup>52</sup> In 2007, the process of suspending the president stretched over a period of almost two months. In 2012 the process was over in four days. Moreover, the government tried to eliminate through an emergency decree the necessity of a quorum for validating the referendum regarding Băsescu's removal from office; however, the Constitutional Court blocked this decree.

Obviously, any statements that compare this situation with a coup are exaggerations. On the other hand, it is also clear that the leaders of USL forced the boundaries of the law a few times. PES' leaders were pressured by the EPP to condemn these acts. Some of them, including the president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, declared that USL endangers the rule of law and that maintaining the stability of the democratic regime is more important than the political battle against Băsescu. However, there were also important European Socialists, like Hannes Swoboda, that supported USL's endeavor.

At the polls, Băsescu survived once again because the quorum of 50% was not met.<sup>53</sup> This entire episode proved that the European Socialists can shape the decisions of the Romanian Social democrats when they conclude that these decisions affect their image. For PSD it was still important the democratic legitimacy offered by the Western European democratic left. Victor Ponta declared later that he chose to accept the Constitutional Court's decision regarding the quorum because of the discussions he had with European dignitaries.

Although defeated in July 2012 because of the quorum, USL obtained a clear victory at the parliamentary elections held in December 2012. Victor Ponta remained prime minister and continued to implement policies that respected the *Third Way* recipe. The partnership with PES continued to be stable. On the other hand, the internal political stability vanished in February 2014, when the alliance between PSD and PNL collapsed.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, the Social democrats entered the campaign for the European elections of 2014 as administrators of a chaotic environment.

## V. PSD and PES: ideological and organizational influences (2014–2019)

In the electoral campaign, national politics were much more important than European politics, in Romania as well as in the other European countries. In Romania once again the European elections were mainly a rehearsal for the presidential elections. The Social democrats used messages like "A strong Romania in Europe!" and "Proud to be Romanian!". They stated that the main goal is to impose MEPs that will defend Romania.<sup>55</sup> Victor Ponta used these messages to prepare his candidacy for president. Obviously, these messages were much closer to a conservative-nationalist position than to a Social democratic one. The focus was not on building a united Europe, but on offering Romania a strong position in a hostile environment.

At the polls, the electoral alliance led by PSD obtained a clear victory: 37.6% of the votes and 16 seats from 32 available. PNL was in second place (15% and 6 seats). After this defeat,

PNL decided to create an alliance with PDL. Eventually, the two parties merged; this evolution was facilitated by the fact that PNL left the European Liberal family and joined EPP.<sup>56</sup>

Corina Crețu, Daciana Sârbu, and Ioan Mircea Pașcu were reelected as MEPs. Another PSD MEP was Victor Negrescu, a future minister in two Social democratic cabinets. A few months later, Corina Crețu took over the position of European Commissioner for Regional Policy. At this point, PSD still opted to have accomplished politicians or rising stars as representatives in the European Parliament or the European Commission.

At the European level, the elections were won once again by EPP: 29.4% of the votes and 221 seats from 751 available. The Socialists were as usual in second place: 25.4% and 191 seats.<sup>57</sup> PSD had the 4th most large national center-left group in the European Parliament, remaining extremely important for PES' influence.

In Romania, Victor Ponta was defeated in the presidential elections held in November 2014 by PNL's candidate, Klaus Iohannis. In the following month, he lost the position of prime minister, as well as the leadership of PSD. He was replaced as president of the Social democrats by Liviu Dragnea, a 53 years old engineer and long-time politician. At first, he proved to be an excellent political strategist. He led PSD towards a categorical victory in the parliamentary elections held in December 2016 (45.48% of the votes). However, later his position was weakened by his desire to resolve his legal issues through legislative changes and by his intention to replicate the illiberal political model used by politicians like the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán or the Polish Conservative Jaroslaw Kaczynski. These issues created a powerful internal opposition, and also affected the relationship between PSD and PES.

Dragnea was unable to become prime minister because of a previous conviction. However, he persuaded the cabinet led by a member of his party, Sorin Grindeanu, to issue an emergency decree that eliminated the possibility of conviction in another legal matter that he was involved in. Hundreds of thousands protested against this decree, which was finally abandoned. Martin Schulz declared that if he would have lived in Romania, he would have participated in the protests.<sup>58</sup> The president of PES, the Bulgarian Sergey Stanishev, encouraged Grindeanu to reject the political path proposed by Dragnea.<sup>59</sup> Grindeanu and Victor Ponta contested Dragnea's authority, but their attempt failed, Grindeanu being removed from the position of prime minister after a no-confidence vote initiated by his party. He was replaced by Mihai Tudose. Tudose in his turn was accused by Dragnea of disloyalty and replaced in January 2018 with an MEP, Viorica Dăncilă.

This turmoil continued to produce effects at the European level. At the PES Congress held in Madrid, in February 2019, Dragnea's speech was booed by Ana Gomes, a Portuguese Socialist MEP.<sup>60</sup> The rift between PSD and PES deepened in April 2019, when the relationship between the two parts was frozen because of issues regarding the "...*commitment to the rule of law*".<sup>61</sup> The European Socialists threatened that PSD might be excluded from PES in June 2019. Although it was clear that PSD's electoral strength reduced the chances of such radical action, it was obvious that the Romanian Social democrats no longer had a pillar at the European level. Liviu Dragnea was the first leader in PSD's almost 30 years long history that was not interested in the democratic legitimacy offered by the European Socialists.

From an ideological point of view, there are several elements that prove that Dragnea preferred the right-wing populist model promoted by Orbán and Kaczynski.<sup>62</sup> For example, he even promoted absurd conspiracy theories, suggesting at one point that George Soros sent four assassins to kill him.<sup>63</sup> Beyond Dragnea's populist strategy, PSD's members sent mixed sig-

nals in the public sphere. On one hand, the finance minister, Eugen Teodorovici, had radical neoliberal policy proposals regarding healthcare and the minimum wage.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, the economist Cristian Socol argued in favor of a Keynesian developmentalist economic strategy.<sup>65</sup> The centrist path, inspired by the European Socialists and embraced by Năstase, Geoană, and Ponta, was no longer actual.

The electoral campaign for the European elections held in May 2019 represented the height of the tensions between PES and PSD. Dragnea constantly promoted populist and Nationalist messages. A video promoted by the Social democrats criticized Frans Timmermans, PES' candidate for the European Commission's presidency.<sup>66</sup> Regarding PSD's list, the level of professionalism plummeted in comparison with the previous elections. MEP positions were obtained by people with a poor political background, like Carmen Avram, Chris Terheș, Tudor Ciuhodaru, or Maria Grapini.

As we mentioned in the introduction, at the European level the 2019 elections were won by EPP. In Romania PSD (22.5% of the votes and 9 seats from 32 available) was defeated by PNL (27% and 10 seats). Notable is that, because of the turmoil produced by Dragnea, the turnout was high (51.07%) in comparison with the previous European elections (32.44% in 2014, 27.67% in 2009, 29.46% in 2007).<sup>67</sup> One day after the elections, Liviu Dragnea was convicted and imprisoned, allowing PSD, and its relationship with PES, to enter a new phase.

## VI. Conclusions

PSD's current leadership improved the party's partnership with PES. From an ideological point of view, it is still unclear if the Romanian Social democrats will choose a Keynesian or a centrist vision. Their lack of doctrinal coherence is characteristic also of their European counterparts.

Does this mean that ideologies are no longer relevant? Several episodes presented in this paper, like Băsescu's suspensions or the Severin corruption scandal, had no clear ideological background. On the other hand, ideology made its presence felt, beginning with the late 1990s, moving through Geoană's collaboration with Giddens, and arriving at Dragnea's feud with Timmermans and Schulz. Currently, the social and economic crisis fueled by the pandemic also proves that ideological solutions are required. Definitely, neoliberalism still has an important position in the political landscape, but its influence is not powerful enough to completely erase the doctrinal distinctions between different political forces.

It is obvious that some of the events presented in this study had a negative impact on the development and the stability of the European Union. During Băsescu's second suspension, or during the period when Dragnea controlled the Romanian government, many supporters of the Romanian Social democrats considered that Brussels' involvement in the Romanian political life is unrequired and toxic. From another point of view, Western observers considered that the questionable actions of the Romanian Social democrats prove that the European construction is unable to guarantee that all its members upheld the rule of law. These kinds of situations could be prevented if the European political federations would clarify their status and if they would be more homogenous from an ideological point of view.

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