The Crisis of Eurocommunism in the 1970s and 1980s

Adis Šaranović

Abstract: This article deals with the crises which the Communist parties of Western Europe were facing during the 1970s and 1980s. Their problems were huge; from crises of the political ideas inside of every single party to the ideological divergences with the leading Communist party of that time — the Communist party of the Soviet Union. These problems were common and linked to the so-called "Eurocommunism crisis." This article explains the term of Eurocommunism, analyzes the manner how the Communist parties of France, Italy and Spain addressed and resolved this crisis and which solutions they offered in that moment. The conclusion of the article summarizes a general overview of this issue which arises from case studies of the three Communist parties.

Keywords: Communism, Eurocommunism, crises, French Communist Party PCF, Italian communists, The Catalan Communist Party (PSUC), the Spanish CP

Introduction

The primary goal of this article is to focus on the main problems and solutions to these problems which the Western Communist parties tried to find to overcome the so-called Eurocommunist crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. Because of limited space, the paper will analyse only three characteristic cases, which the author finds the most interesting.

In this time period, (1970s and 1980s) the Communist parties in the Western part of the Old Continent began losing voters' support, which can be clearly seen from the election results. Therefore, the author will examine the following author's opinion that the *crisis was so immense that the Communist parties never completely recovered from the losses suffered during that period*. The crisis that engulfed the Communist parties of Western Europe was caused by several factors. The two key reasons for the crisis were economic changes and political-ideological changes, which will be seen in the paper. The whole essay has three main chapters, the first one will explain the term and meaning of "Eurocommunism," the second one will contain facts about singular cases and related analysis.

After the military interventions in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, and the constant rejection of some freedoms for East European citizens, such as the freedom of movement, it was clear that the ideology proclaimed by the East was not the same as it was being professed by Communist parties in the Western part of continent. The West Communist's move away from Moscow's ideological leadership and the acceptance that parliamentary democracy had no alternative for the Eurocommunist parties could not pass without any consequences. So, the Communist parties tried to find different solutions for the problems caused by the crises. The French Communist Party tried to make left coalitions, the Italian Communists moved forward and attempted left/right coalitions and the Spanish Communist Party adopted democratic values but all this with little or no result, which can be seen from the following text especially in the second chapter of the article.

There are many articles about the history of Communist parties in the West. Most of them concentrate on individual issues of a singular party during the 1970s and 1980s, but it was very hard to find a text which at the same time explains the Communist crisis and draws a more general connection with the individual parties. Some articles were written in the 1980s and were, very obviously, influenced by that time period, in particular texts from ex-Yugoslavia, whose authors used the opportunity to present the Yugoslav view on Socialism which was very different from the Soviet one. The most precise formulation on Eurocommunism was given by authors and texts, which were found on the www.jastor.org database. The main sources for this essay come from this database as well as from books by several authors who have written a lot about this period.

The final part of the paper offers a general conclusion with the unequivocal results of the presented text which confirms the given author's opinion in the introduction.

1 Eurocommunism

At the beginning of the 1970s the Communist parties in Western Europe were facing a problem caused mostly by their ideological connection with the Soviet Union. In that time period, Western public opinion began realising the very different face of the communist East.

In August 1968, the Warsaw Pact armies, led by the Soviet Union, invaded Czechoslovakia to halt "socialism with a human face." This event caused a lot of protests not only in Europe, but all around the world. But not only the democratic parties, but also the Communist parties from Western Europe absolutely and strongly rejected this act as a violation of international law and the idea of Communist togetherness. As they had previously seen the Soviet Union as a big model for themselves, the occupation of Czechoslovakia was a terrible shock to them. They were confronted with reality without preparation and had to radically change their perception of Soviet communism. The perspective of a peaceful and democratic communism, led them to the idea of what is referred to as Eurocommunism.

From now on, Western communists established a formal distance from the Soviet ideology. Some communist parties, during presentations or in political programmes, started to avoid words such as "the dictatorship of the proletariat." This was the case with the communist parties of Italy, France or Spain.²

Western Communist parties began to follow the so-called Eurocommunist line, which accepted the reality of parliamentary democracy instead of a revolutionary fight. The term "Eurocommunism," according to Deutschland Archive, was first used by Yugoslav journalist Frane Barbieri in the summer of 1975.³ In general, the Eurocommunist parties followed this trend to be more "western" and introduce social and political changes through democratic means. That explanation of Eurocommunism also was seen in Mandel's explanation. He says that Eurocommunism has a political reform tendency because of the Socialistic roots of the whole idea.⁴

2 The Crisis

The "real Socialism," which was leading in Eastern Europe, could no longer be acceptable for the working class in the West, where standards, rights and social protection were growing. For example, GDP in the 1970s in France was growing by 5.7 %, in Italy by 5.3 %, and in Spain by 4.1 %. The unemployment rate in Western countries was relatively low. In percentage terms it was 2.5 % in France, 5.4 % in Italy and 0.6 % in West Germany in the 1970s.⁵

Real Socialism from the East was not acceptable because it accepted a Stalinized type of Marxism-Leninism, which had little success in the East and defined itself as

the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Spanish Communist Party General Secretary Santiago Carrillo 1978 said.

"On the other hand, I am convinced that the dictatorship of the proletariat is not the way to succeed in establishing and consolidating the hegemony of the forces of the working people in the democratic countries of developed capitalism. In the first part of this essay, I have already tried to explain why I am convinced that in these latter countries socialism is not only the decisive broadening and development of democracy, the negation of any totalitarian conception of society, but that the way to reach it is along the democratic road, with all the consequences which this entails."

The Dictatorship of the proletariat turned into a mere dictatorship as it abandoned its ideals. "...Kardelj avoided suggesting that the West European communist parties should be regarded as "a special form of the dictatorship of the proletariat." On the contrary, Pribicevic wrote in his study that for the working class in Western countries "the dictatorship of the proletariat is simply a dictatorship."

2.1 Unsuccessful left coalition as an answer to the crisis

The popularity of left-oriented parties and ideologies after the Second World War did not miss France, where the Socialist party has a long tradition.

Georges Marchais became General Secretary of the PCF in 1970. The early 1970s saw the beginnings of the Eurocommunism trend and the French communist secretary during the 1970s and early 1980s tried to find solutions for party problems, losing ideological background and voter' support. The first steps were quickly taken. Already in July 1971, the Socialists and Communists agreed to negotiate a common program of government. It was at a time when the two parties shared a common view on social and economic issues but also a time when, first of all, Communists began needing alliances.⁸

One year later, in July 1972, the Communists signed a Common Programme with the Left Radicals, which later turned out to be an unhelpful move. While it was true that the left alliance increased their share of the vote, which was already evident in the March 1973 legislative elections, campaigns against the PCF focused on the broader problems of Communist ideology. This was not helped by the formal abandonment by the PCF of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in February 1976, which was just a small step towards the complete demise of the revolutionary aspect of working class ideas.⁹

After successes of the PS at the municipal elections of 1977, the Left Radicals and the PCF began lobbying the PS to continue with the Common Programme. The underlying idea was to update the programme, but large differences and the rising popularity of the PC led to a breakdown of the negotiations.¹⁰

"The assumption underlying the united Left Strategy had been that within the united Left the PCF would be the dominant force. This assumption must have been seriously questioned within the PCF leadership from the autumn of 1974, and finally abandoned in September 1977 when the PS resisted the PCF's pressure for a radical updating of the common programme. It was by then obvious that the programme as it stood was inapplicable to the economic circumstances of the late 1970s, and that the PS wanted to keep its hands free to revise the programme in a reformist direction once in office, while the PCF's role would be confined to delivering working-class support. The PCF leaders were not willing to play this role."

In the elections of 1978 to the European parliament and the Presidential elections, the Communists got less and less votes: the party was down from 20.6 % to 11 % at the European elections. The PS vote also fell, but it followed huge social and economic legislative reforms of the Socialist government, which included four Communist ministers (1981–2).

But voters support statistic shows different numbers than membership. It is clear that ideological support and "practical" support haven't followed each other.

"Between 1972 and 1978 the party claims to have increased its membership from 390,000 to 702,864 and between 1978 and 1981 from 702,864 to 710,000; but it also stated in 1986 that its membership had fallen to 600,000. If this latter figure were correct it would mean (given a vote of 2.6 million in 1986), that almost one in five Communist voters was a party member, a figure out of line with all other Western political parties." ¹²

From an economic point of view, the situation in France was better and better as compared to the others European countries. The working class was richer and more secure and the state had many mechanisms to protect labour forces community. The Communist party started to lose support from working class in new industries or industries with new technology. They kept support in heavy industry and small farming.¹³

The reasons why the Communists after WWII succeed disappeared in the 1970s, but the Communist movement as an idea has continued to exist. The PCF had influence on one quarter of voters despite the fact that the working class has become more middle class.¹⁴

2.2. Attempt of Left/Right coalition

Together with the French, the near coalition between the PC and the PCF, it looked like European communist had found their own way. Hundreds of thousands of Italians were members of Communist clubs or unions. It appeared good for the Italian Communists in the second half of the 1970s when, after the elections of

1978, the Italian Communist Party became a member of the governmental parliamentary majority.

But Italy became divided and turned to the right after the kidnapping of Moro¹⁵, and the Communist party survived its hardest period since WWII. During the next election the communists lost 5 % of votes, they went from 34 % to 29 %.

"In the big towns where Communist administrators took over after their spectacular local election victories in 1975, they are now in trouble. They have been unable to keep the promises made in opposition, partly owing to the debts which they inherited and the economic crisis affecting the whole country, but partly also to their own unwillingness to expose the inefficiency or dishonesty of their Christian Democrat predecessors, since these are still presented as potential allies." ¹⁶

Under the leadership of Enrico Berlinguer, the Central Committee of the Communist Party worked on its re-election, but inside the party a new opposition was born, led by Pietro Ingrao. That line refused re-election and made the crisis deeper. Ingrao had connections with the radical and leftist line of the Christian Democrats. The biggest problems were Berlinguer's refusal to break connection with Moscow or to radically change the Marxist ideology, although he was ready to accept a mixed economy, NATO and the European Community.¹⁷

The culmination of the crisis was a missed opportunity to join forces with The Socialist and make a huge Left Parliamentarian majority. Instead of an alliance a big polemic arose between them in the summer of 1978. Berlinguer was accused by other political opponents of conservatism and revolution view. He simple carried on with the personal program.

The Italian communists were more persistent than expected; the Communists recognized mistakes but did not leave the party.

"On many occasions the Italian Communists have said that they will not attempt to make an official, and still less, state ideology out of their own ideology, Marxism. In addition to the fact that ideological monolithism would be incompatible with the principles of a pluralistic system of socialism, the Eurocommunists say that this would be an enormous hindrance to social progress. More precisely, they claim that progress in society and in socialism implies an unrelenting battle of ideas and, in this context, a permanent confrontation of various ideological approaches." 18

2.3 Adoption of the democratic values

During the regime of Franco, the Communist Party was illegal in Spain. This did not change until 1977, very soon after the revolution took place. The Catalan Communist Party (PSUC), the strongest sector of the Spanish CP, had reaffirmed its commitment to Eurocommunism one year after temporarily dropping it as a result

of factional manoeuvres. Soon afterwards, the first general election after forty years was held in June 1977. With 9.4 % of the votes, the PCE became the third largest party in Spain.¹⁹

The communist party agreed on most of the reforms, calling for an atmosphere of political calm and maturity in order to make an agreement on a new constitution, which was ratified in a referendum held in December 1978. The CPE also accepted the fact Spain that wouldn't keep its Republican tradition and would turn into a Parliamentary Monarchy. The party even agreed that the main institutions of the Franco regime, such as the army, courts, and big companies would retain considerable influence in the new system, without undergoing necessary reforms.

In April 1978, the party agreed to drop the label "Marxist-Leninist" and described itself as Marxist, revolutionary and democratic. Also the party's internal democracy was much strengthened, at a lower level the old party cells were replaced by larger units whose meetings were open to the public.²⁰

The dropping of the Leninist label helped to compete with the Socialist Party (PSOE), because both these parties called themselves "Marxist parties."

"...a paradoxical effect of the political-ideological convergence of Communists and Socialists in post-Franco Spain may be increased competition, rather than less. However, whatever the political differences between them are, the PCE's 'Eurocommunist' commitment has ensured that such competition will be conducted under the constitutional rules of liberal democracy."²¹

Conclusion

The goal of this essay was to present problems and solutions which the Western Communist parties had during the 1970s and 1980s. After reading this paper it is very clear that author proved his hypothesis that the Communist parties had never completely recovered from their losses. The main argument is the basic election's statistic data but also measures which every single Communist party took to avoid problems.

Every country has specific moments and needs. The situation with the Communist parties in the West at this historical moment was the same or very common but every country had different characteristics. The crises were similar and they all tried to resolve similar problems. The battle for a better society was no longer a battle with reality but for more than just basic working rights. Eastern societies, in particular the working class in the East, had completely different problems and different needs. The differences between them were even more evident.

The crisis of Eurocommunism began inside the parties because members or leaderships had different views of the state. Many supporters did not want to depend on Moscow and follow Moscow's Marxism-Leninism as the universal "guiding light" for all on the way to Socialism.

By the end of the 1950s, there were more people in the West who believed in Communism than in the East, but the Western Communists had divided from Stalin's ideology²² and began more union movements than political parties which wanted to completely change the political system of the West. The reality of social-economic progress and the rising standards of living of the traditional Communist supporters changed the position and the role of the Communist parties. They have never regained the position which they had during the Soviet domination and some of them completely changed the ideological political view.²³

During the analysis it has been shown that the Western Communist parties have moved far away from the Eastern Communists, who had begun to represent a completely different world. This did not mean that those parties had given up on the basic idea of Socialism as their main goal, but they did begin to think about other ways of reaching that goal. Revolution as a method to achieve Socialism was no longer acceptable, and the parties realized that ideas should be implemented through Parliaments and Parliamentary Democracy.

Notes

- "...at that time, Eurocommunism was still seen as a viable political project, going beyond both Leninism and social democracy..." Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal (2001) Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics. Verso, pp. VII.
- Spieker, Manfred (1980) How the Eurocommunists Interpret Democracy. The Review of Politics, Vol. 42, Oct. 1980, No. 4, pp. 427.
- Also conformed in, Mortimer, Edward and Story, Jonathan. Della Torre, Paolo Filo (1979) Whatever Happened to 'Eurocommunism'?. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*. Vol. 55, Oct.,1979. No. 4. pp. 574.
- Mandel, Ernest (1979) From Stalinism to Eurocommunism: The Bitter Fruits of Socialism in One Country. London, NLB. pp. 223.
- ⁵ Laker, Volter (1999) *Istorija Evrope 1945–1992*. Beograd Clio. pp. 530–531.
- Santiago, Carrillo (1978) Eurocommunism and the State, Westport, Conn., Lawrence Hill & Co., 172 pp. Cloth, pp. 111.
- Stanković, Slobodan: Belgrade Encourages Eurocommunists' opposition to Moscow. pp. 46. Available at: http://files.osa.ceu.hu/holdings/300/8/3/text/86-2-156.shtml.
- The Time "What the Common Program means" HP-COM, Available at: http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,915966,00.html.

- Judt, Tony (1989) Marxism and the French Left, 1830–1981. Oxford Clarendon Press. pp. 338. Chronology, pp. 329.
- Britannica Academic Edition (2007) Available at: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/551687/Socialist-Party#ref=ref141843&tab=active-checked%2Citems-checked&title=Socialist%20Party%20--%20Britannica%20Online%20Encyclopedia.
- Mortimer, Edward, Story, Jonathan and Della Torre, Paolo Filo (1979) Whatever Happened to 'Eurocommunism'?, International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs). Vol. 55, Oct. No. 4. pp. 574–585.
- Bell, David and Cricddle, Byron (1989) The Decline of the French Communist Party. British Journal of Political Science, Vol. 19, No. 4. (Oct., 1989), pp. 515–536.
- "... classified as 'working class' in the French census moved up slightly from 33.8 per cent in 1954 to 37.7 per cent in 1975, but at the same time living standards improved beyond recognition. Yet a washing machine is a washing machine, and similar changes have not necessarily undermined support for left-wing (social democratic) parties in northern Europe, Spain or Portugal. There is no reason why rising standards of living and consumer goods in themselves should hasten the decline of the PCF; and these socioeconomic changes did not occur suddenly in 1981."
 Bell, D. Criddle, B: The Decline of the French Communist Party. pp. 521.
- This analysis is also confirmed in: Fernandez, Luis Ramiro (2003) The Crisis of Western Communist Parties: Reconsidering Social-Structural Explanations. Departamento de Ciencia Politica y Relaciones Internacionales, Facultad de Derecho, Universitat autonoma de Madrid, 2003. pp. 27–28.
- In 1978, Christian Democrat, Aldo Moro was kidnapped and murdered. He was the main person in negotiations between the Italian Communist Party and the Christian Democrats.
- ¹⁶ Mortimer, E. Story, J. Della Torre, P: Whatever Happened to 'Eurocommunism'?: c.b. pp. 575.
- Confirmed also in Britannica Academic Edition: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/62243/Enrico-B erlinguer#ref=ref17983&tab=active-checked%2Citems-checked&title=Enrico%20Berlinguer%20--%20Britannica%20Online%20Encyclopedia.
- ¹⁸ Stanković, S.: Belgrade Encourages Eurocommunists' opposition to Moscow: c.b., pp. 48.
- Devlin, Kevin (1981) Carrillo and the Catalans: Eurocommunists Counterattack. Available at: www.osa.ceu.hu/ files/holdings/300/8/3/text/140-8-195.shtml - 20k.
- Confirmed also in http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/129281/Communist-Party-of-Spain#tab=active-checked%2Citems-checked&title=Communist%20Party%20of%20Spain%20--%20Britannica%20On-line%20Encyclopedia.
- Pollack, Benny and Taylor, Jim (1983) The Transition to Democracy in Portugal and Spain. British Journal of Political Science, Vol. 13, Apr. 1983. No. 2. pp. 209–242. pp. 235.
- ²² "The end of terror shook up the entire international Communist system. Not that the system was threatened from the outside, for the West made no attempt to take advantage of the situation. What rocked Communism was the question of its two fundamental passions fear and belief..." Furet, François (1999) The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century. University of Chicago Press. pp. 596. pp. 446.
- 23 The Italian communist changed its name e.g and The Danish Communists changed to the Green party.

References

- Bell, David, Criddle, Byron (1989) 'The Decline of the French Communist Party'. *Cambridge University Press, British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 19, No. 4., pp. 515–536. Available at: links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0007-1234(198910)19%3A4%3C515%3ATDOTFC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-0 (Accessed on 7 March 2012).
- 'Communist Party of Spain (PCE) political party, Spain Spanish Partido Comunista de España'. Encyclopaedia Britannica. Available at: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/129281/Communist-Party-of-Spain#tab=active-checked%2Citems-checked&title=Communist%20Party%20of%20Spain%20--%20 Britannica%20Online%20Encyclopedia (Accessed on 7 March 2012).
- 'Democrats of the Left political party, Italy Italian Democratici di Sinistra (DS), formerly (1991–98) Democratic Party of the Left and (1921–91) Italian Communist Party Enrico Berlinguer Italian politician'. Encyclopaedia Britannica. Available at: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/62243/Enrico-Berlinguer#ref=ref17983 &tab=active-checked%2Citems-checked&title=Enrico%20Berlinguer%20--%20Britannica%20Online%20 Encyclopedia (Accessed on 7 March 2012).
- Devlin, Kevin (1981) 'Carrillo and the Catalans: Eurocommunists Counterattack'. Available at: www.osa.ceu.hu/files/holdings/300/8/3/text/140-8-195.shtml 20k. (Accessed on 7 March 2012).
- Fernandez, Luis Ramiro (2003) 'The Crisis of Western Communist Parties: Reconsidering Social-Structural Explanations'. Departamento de Ciencia Politica y Relaciones Internacionales, Facultad de Derecho, Universitat autonoma de Madrid. Available at: http://portal.uam.es/portal/page/portal/UAM_ORGANIZATIVO/Departamentos/CienciaPoliticaRelacionesInternacionales (Accessed on 7 March 2012).
- Furet, Francois (1999) *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century.* University of Chicago Press.
- Judt, Tony (1989) Marxism and the French Left, 1830-1981. Oxford Clarendon Press.
- Laclau, Ernesto. Mouffe, Chantal (2011) Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics.

 Verso.
- Mandel, Ernest (1979) From Stalinism to Eurocommunism: The Bitter Fruits of Socialism in One Country. London, NLB.
- Mortimer, Edward, Story, Jonathan and Della Torre, Paolo Filo (1979) 'Whatever Happened to 'Eurocommunism'?' *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*. Available at: links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0020-5850(197910)55%3A4%3C574%3AWHT'%3E2.0.CO%3B2-M (Accessed on 7 March 2012).
- Pollack, Benny. Taylor, Jim (1983) 'The Transition to Democracy in Portugal and Spain.' Cambridge University Press, British Journal of Political Science, Vol. 13, No. 2. pp. 209–242.
- Santiago, Carrillo (1978) 'Eurocommunism and the State', Westport, Conn., Lawrence Hill & Co., Available at: links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0032-3195(197921)94%3A1%3C152%3AEATS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-0 (Accessed on 7 March 2012).
- 'Socialist Party (PS) political party, France also called (1905–69) French Section of the Workers' International, French Parti Socialiste or Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO)'.

 Encyclopaedia Britannica. Available at: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/551687/Socialist-Party#ref=ref141843&tab=active-checked%2Citems-checked&title=Socialist%20Party%20--%20Britannica%20Online%20Encyclopedia (Accessed on 7 March 2012).

- Spieker, Manfred (1980) 'How the Eurocommunists Interpret Democracy.' *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 4, pp. 427–464.
- Stanković, Slobodan (2008) 'Belgrade Encourages Eurocommunists' opposition to Moscow.' Available at: http://files.osa.ceu.hu/holdings/300/8/3/text/86-2-156.shtml (Accessed on 7 March 2012).
- 'What the common program means'. The Time, March 06, 1978, Available at: http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,915966,00.html (Accessed on 7 March 2012).