

THE GERMAN SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY BETWEEN IDEALISTIC PRO-EUROPEANISM AND DOMESTIC IDEOLOGICAL PRIORITIES IN THE POST-REUNIFICATION GERMANY

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Research Article

Abstract

The main thrust of this article is to examine the evolution of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands - SPD)'s Europhile position since German reunification from a broader ideological perspective. To this end, this study rests on the field research that entails 16 semi-structured interviews with high-profile SPD political elites and archival research on key official party documents. Based on this analysis, the main argument of this study is that the SPD encountered a growing tension between idealistic and domestic views of European integration since 1990. Under the impact of the post-reunification domestic problems and Chancellor Schröder's assertive European policy line, the German Social Democrats' ideology-driven doubts about European integration increased at the expense of their idealistic pro-Europeanism. Over time, this tension led to the greater prominence of ideological pragmatism in the SPD's official European Union (EU) narrative, rendering Europe a politically and ideologically salient issue for the party.

Keywords: *European integration, Gerhard Schröder, German reunification, idealistic pro-Europeanism, Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands.*

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Birleşme Sonrası Almanya'da İdealist Avrupa Yanlılığı ile İç İdeolojik Öncelikler Arasında Alman Sosyal Demokrat Partisi

Öz

Bu makalenin temel amacı, Alman Sosyal Demokrat Partisi'nin Avrupa bütünleşmesi yanlısı tutumunun Alman birleşmesinden bu yana gelişimini geniş bir ideolojik perspektiften incelemektir. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, yüksek profilli SPD siyasi elitleriyle yapılmış 16 yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme ve önemli resmi parti belgeleri üzerine arşiv araştırmasını içeren bir saha araştırmasına dayanmaktadır. Bu analize dayanarak, bu çalışmanın temel savı, SPD'nin 1990'dan bu yana Avrupa bütünleşmesine ilişkin idealist ve iç kaynaklı görüşler arasında giderek artan bir gerilimle karşılaştığıdır. Ulusal birleşme sonrası iç meselelerin ve Şansölye Schröder'in iddialı Avrupa politikasının etkisi altında, Alman Sosyal Demokratları'nın Avrupa bütünleşmesine ilişkin ideoloji kaynaklı şüpheleri, idealist Avrupa yanlılığı pahasına artmıştır. Zamanla bu gerilim, SPD'nin resmi AB söyleminde ideolojik pragmatizmin daha fazla öne çıkmasına yol açarak Avrupa'ya parti için siyasi ve ideolojik açıdan önemli bir konu haline getirmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Avrupa bütünleşmesi, Gerhard Schröder, Alman birleşmesi, idealist Avrupa yanlılığı, Alman Sosyal Demokrat Partisi.*

Introduction

As prominent political actors in EU Member States, national political parties have always had a dynamic relationship with European integration. As the European project advanced rapidly from the mid-1980s onwards based on landmark initiatives such as the single market, economic and monetary union (EMU), and Eastern enlargement, its policy competences and domestic influence rose remarkably. In such a climate, political parties in the Member States felt more than necessary to readjust their attitudes towards the EU in the face of pressing internal and external challenges.

Marking a crucial case of the relationship between European integration and political parties, the SPD is often portrayed as a firm supporter of European integration. There is a growing body of literature on how the SPD's pro-European approach took shape in the post-1945 period. The SPD is generally seen as a 'traditionally pro-European integration party'¹, whose support for unifying the European continent goes back to as early as the

¹ William E. Paterson, "Political Parties and the Making of Foreign Policy - The Case of the Federal Republic." *Review of International Studies* 7, no. 4 (1981): 232.

1920s². After opposing it in the immediate aftermath of the war³, the SPD subsequently emerged as a firm supporter of European integration. This was cemented by the Social Democrat chancellors Willy Brandt's idealistic⁴ and Helmut Schmidt's relatively less enthusiastic⁵ support for the EEC.

² Christian Bailey, "Socialist Visions of European Unity in Germany: Ostpolitik since the 1920s?." *Contemporary European History* (2017): 251; William E. Paterson, *The SPD and European Integration*. Farnborough: Saxon House, 1974; William E. Paterson, "The German Social Democratic Party and European Integration in Emigration and Occupation." *European History Quarterly* 5 (1975a): 430; Heinrich Pothhoff and Susanne Miller, *The Social Democratic Party of Germany, 1848-2005*. Bonn: Dietz, 2006; Robert Rohrschneider and Stephen Whitefield. "Party Positions about European Integration in Germany: An Electoral Quandary?." *German Politics* 26, no. 1 (2017): 84; Jmes Sloam, *The European Policy of the German Social Democrats: Interpreting a Changing World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; Donald Sassoon, "German Social-Democracy Between a National Strategy and a European Dimension." *Il Politico* 54, no. 3 (1989): 426.

³ In the early post-war years, the SPD fiercely objected to several European initiatives, such as the European Coal and Steel Community and the abortive European Defence Community, under Kurt Schumacher's leadership. This was chiefly because of their potentially negative impact on deepening the division between the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). For further information, please see Bailey, "Socialist Visions of European Unity in Germany: Ostpolitik since the 1920s?"; Stefan Berger and Thomas Welskopp. "Social Democracy in Germany." In *The Cambridge History of Socialism*, vol. 2, edited by Marcel van der Linden, 60-61. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022; Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson. *The Federal Republic of Germany and the European Community*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1987; Helmut Wagner, "The Federal Republic of Germany's Foreign Policy Objectives." *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 17, no. 1 (1988): 57.

⁴ Klaus Larres, "Introduction: Uneasy Allies or Genuine Partners? Britain, Germany, and European Integration." In *Uneasy Allies: British-German Relations and European Integration since 1945*, edited by Klaus Larres, and Elizabeth Meehan. 13. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Richard Moeller, "The German Social Democrats." In *Political Parties and the European Union*, edited by John Gaffney, 38. London: Routledge, 1996.

⁵ Paul Friedrich, "The SPD and the Politics of Europe: From Willy Brandt to Helmut Schmidt." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 13, no. 4 (1975): 434-6; Larres, "Introduction: Uneasy Allies or Genuine Partners? Britain, Germany, and

Likewise, there are a number of accounts on the changing parameters of the SPD's post-Wall European policy. There exists a sort of scholarly consensus on the party's ongoing commitment to European integration after reunification. Yet these studies highlight various aspects of the increasing influence of pragmatism in the Social Democrats' pro-European stance, driven by the profound changes in the internal and external settings surrounding the reunified Germany⁶. Some commentaries highlight the party political dimension around the SPD's efforts to differentiate its pro-EU profile from that of the Christian Democrats. By doing so, the SPD sought to modify its European policy to project itself as a credible political alternative to the CDU. In addition, in the face of the growing scepticism towards the EU in domestic public opinion, the SPD struggled to respond to the electoral challenge posed by other Eurosceptic actors, such as Die Linke⁷. Second, a group of studies focus on the internal power struggle over setting the European policy within the SPD. In line with the party's identification with 'loosely coupled anarchy' from the late-1980s onwards⁸, the divisions between the (Schröder) government and the (Lafontaine-led) party headquarters, between the party centre and the SPD *Länder*⁹, and finally between the traditionalists and the *Neue Mitte* modernisers are argued to shift the party's European policy. Finally, the SPD's governmental status is seen as a significant factor prompting a more pragmatic approach towards the EU¹⁰. The 'generational

European Integration"; William E. Paterson, "Does Germany Still Have a European Vocation?." *German Politics* 19, no. 1 (2010): 43-4.

⁶ Adrian Hyde-Price and Charlie Jeffery. "Germany in the European Union: Constructing Normality." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 39, no. 4 (2001): 689; Charlie Jeffery and William E. Paterson. "Germany and European Integration: A Shifting of Tectonic Plates." *West European Politics* 26, no. 4 (2003): 63.

⁷ Andreas Wimmel and Erica E. Edwards. "The Return of 'Social Europe': Ideas and Positions of German Parties towards the Future of European Integration." *German Politics* 20, no. 2 (2011): 309.

⁸ Peter Lösche, "Lose verkoppelte Anarchie: Zur Aktuellen Situation von Volksparteien am Beispiel der SPD." *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 43/93, no. 22 (1993): 34.

⁹ Hyde-Price and Jeffery, "Germany in the European Union: Constructing Normality"; James Sloam, "Responsibility for Europe: The EU Policy of the German Social Democrats since Unification." *German Politics* 12, no. 1 (2003): 62.

¹⁰ Christoph Egle, "The SPD's Preferences on European Integration. Always a Step Behind?." In *Social Democracy and European Integration: The Politics of*

change' at the top of government following the 1998 federal elections¹¹ and the 'normalisation' of Germany's European policy¹² are stated to encourage Chancellor Schröder's political assertiveness vis-à-vis the EU. In contrast to the former SPD-led governments, the Schröder government was "prepared to punch above its weight" concerning its EU policy line¹³, as seen in the cases of the German budgetary contributions to the EU¹⁴ and Eastern enlargement¹⁵.

Preference Formation, edited by Dionyssis G. Dimitrakopoulos, 34-9. New York: Routledge, 2011; Sloam, "Responsibility for Europe: The EU Policy of the German Social Democrats since Unification," 60-2; James Sloam, *The European Policy of the German Social Democrats: Interpreting a Changing World*, 4-5. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

¹¹ Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson. "Germany and the European Union: From 'Tamed Power' to Normalized Power?." *International Affairs* 86, no. 5 (2010): 1072; Kenneth Dyson, "The Europeanization of German Governance." In *Developments in German Politics 3*, edited by Stephen Padgett, William E. Paterson, and Gordon Smith, 165. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; Simon Green, Dan Hough, and Alister Miskimmon. *The Politics of the New Germany*. 183. London: Routledge, 2011; Christiane Lemke, "Germany's EU Policy: The Domestic Discourse." *German Studies Review* 33, no. 3 (2010): 508; Thomas Poguntke, "Europeanization in a Consensual Environment? German Political Parties and the European Union." In *The Europeanization of National Political Parties: Power and Organizational Adaptation*, edited by Thomas Poguntke, Nicholas Aylott, Elisabeth Carter, Robert Ladrech, and Kurt Richard Luther. 102. London, New York: Routledge, 2007; Ruth Wittlinger, *German National Identity in the Twenty-First Century: A Different Republic After All?*. 95-6. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

¹² Amandine Crespy, "Germany." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*, edited by Jean-Michel de Waele, Fabien Escalona, and Mathieu Vieira, 178. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Hyde-Price and Jeffery, "Germany in the European Union: Constructing Normality"; Jeffery and Paterson, "Germany and European Integration: A Shifting of Tectonic Plates"; Sloam, *The European Policy of the German Social Democrats: Interpreting a Changing World*.

¹³ Poguntke, "Europeanization in a Consensual Environment? German Political Parties and the European Union," 101.

¹⁴ Crespy, "Germany"; Handl, Vladimir, and Charlie Jeffery. "Germany and Europe after Kohl: Between Social Democracy and Normalization?." *German Studies Review* 24, no. 1 (2001): 68.

¹⁵ Christiane Lemke and Helga A. Welsh. *Germany Today: Politics and Policies in a Changing World*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018.

Nevertheless, as a sign of Euro-pragmatism, the Schröder government adopted a more compromising stance on European integration over time¹⁶.

It is crucial to note that most of these studies acknowledge the tension between the SPD's principled commitment to European integration, on the one hand, and increased Euro-pragmatism drawing on Germany's material interests and post-reunification domestic problems, on the other. However, there are only a few studies on the SPD's evolving European preferences in the period following reunification from a broader ideological perspective. In an attempt to fill this gap in the literature, this study aims to examine the evolution of the SPD's pro-European attitude in the period 1990-2010 based on its ideological credentials. To examine the unfolding of this complex issue over two decades, semi-structured qualitative interviews and archival research were employed as the data-collection methods. In this respect, 16 high-profile political elites from the SPD serving in the top party, parliamentary, and governmental positions were interviewed by the author. In addition, selected physical and digital archives of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) on the SPD were examined. Finally, the reflexive thematic analysis method was used to analyse the collected data based on recurrent themes.

As such, the main argument of this article is that the SPD found itself in a persistent dilemma between idealistic and domestic considerations of European integration since 1990. For a long period of time, the SPD's Europhile position was overwhelmingly identified by idealistic or internationalist overtones in a non-ideological fashion. However, two key turning points, including German reunification in 1990 and Gerhard Schröder's taking over as chancellor in 1998, led to a remarkable change in the SPD's position on the EU. The party kept on supporting European integration, but its idealistic pro-Europeanism was increasingly challenged by its suspicious take on Europe because of the post-reunification domestic problems and the Schröder government's assertive EU policy line. This tension was marked by ideology-orientated criticisms against the EU (the debate on the single market by the early 1990s) and inconsistent official positions on certain European issues (during the Euro crisis in 2009). As a result, the weight of ideological pragmatism rose at the expense of idealistic

¹⁶ Simon Bulmer, Andreas Maurer, and William E. Paterson. "The European Policy-Making Machinery in the Berlin Republic: Hindrance or Handmaiden?." *German Politics* 10, no. 1 (2001): 202; Handl and Jeffery, "Germany and Europe after Kohl: Between Social Democracy and Normalization?"

(non-ideological) pro-Europeanism in the SPD's official European narrative, making Europe a politically and ideologically salient issue for the party.

The article is divided into five main parts. After initially elaborating on how the research was conducted, the second part examines the SPD's idealistic adherence to the European project prior to German reunification. Third, the SPD's growing doubts over European integration following national unification and the Schröder chancellorship (1998-2005) are analysed based on the party's greater emphasis on the domestic setting. In the fourth section, the reflections of the tension between these contending views of Europe within the SPD are scrutinised. Finally, the rising prominence of ideological pragmatism in the SPD's pro-European approach is examined as the major outcome of this tension.

I. Methodology

In order to examine the fluctuations in the SPD's pro-European approach since German reunification in relation to its ideological premises, this research rests on the party's direct experiences with the EU. Therefore, semi-structured interviews and archival research were used to collect qualitative data on this subject.

In the context of the semi-structured interviews, the research population was determined as the political elites from the SPD serving in the senior party, parliamentary and governmental positions deeply engaging with European integration during the period 1990-2010. Because this required interviewing adult human participants, this research was reviewed and approved by the University of Cambridge Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) Ethics Committee on 4th May 2021. After getting the Committee's approval, the purposive non-probability sampling method was used to select research participants depending on some non-random criteria, such as seniority, the level of involvement in key decision-making processes, and having insider information on the SPD's relations with the EU. As a result, 16 high-profile party elites from the SPD were identified as research participants. In line with ethical obligations, the informed consent of each participant was taken before the interviews, based on the Participant Consent Form, and the Participant Information Sheet and Privacy Notice. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all the interviews were conducted via an online platform (Zoom or Microsoft Teams), except one interview made via phone, between May and

December 2021. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted around 45 minutes-1 hour. Each interview was transcribed by de-identifying and anonymising the personal information of the participants as this was mainly requested by them. This is because the participants are high-profile SPD politicians serving in the highest echelons of the party, enabling them to have very sensitive information on the SPD's interactions with the EC/EU. Hence, during the semi-structured interviews, they gave rich and detailed answers to the author's questions, which they would not have done if their identities had been disclosed. This study methodologically aimed to collect data on their first-hand experiences in tracking changes in the SPD's post-1990 Europhile position, thus leading to the decision to keep their identities confidential.

For the archival research, the FES's unique *Archiv der sozialen Demokratie* (Archive of Social Democracy), which includes the Papers of the SPD Party Executive Committee (*Parteivorstand*), were covered. In addition, the FES Digital Library, containing the SPD's Basic Values Commission issue papers, party programmes, federal and European elections manifestos, and federal coalition protocols, was drawn on. These archives were used to gain contextual information on the defining moments and events in SPD's interactions with the EU in the post-1990 period. The documentary evidence collected from the archives was triangulated with the interview data, to counter potential threats to the trustworthiness and credibility of this study.

After applying the foregoing methods, the reflexive thematic analysis was used for analysing the data. As a qualitative data analysis method for identifying, analysing, interpreting, and reporting patterns of repeated meaning across data set¹⁷, the reflexive thematic analysis was picked to keep the richness of the insightful answers¹⁸ given by the research participants to better analyse the recent changes in the SPD's pro-Europeanism. In line with the general design of this research, an essentialist/realist method was adopted, with an inductive and latent orientation to coding.

¹⁷ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 79; Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun. "Thematic Analysis." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 3 (2017): 297-8.

¹⁸ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. "To Saturate or Not to Saturate? Questioning Data Saturation as a Useful Concept for Thematic Analysis and Sample-Size Rationales." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 13, no. 2 (2021c): 209.

In the light of these points, the reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken in six main stages, namely data familiarisation; systematic data coding; generating initial themes; reviewing themes; refining, defining, and naming themes, and reporting¹⁹. The first stage began when the semi-structured qualitative interviews with the SPD political elites were transcribed. Subsequently, the participants' responses were regrouped and initial notes were taken. In the second stage, depending on these familiarisation notes, the interview transcripts were read thoroughly to produce initial codes, capturing one interesting feature of the data. The third stage began with examining the produced codes and their related data extracts to sort them into candidate themes, representing multiple facets of the data around a 'central organising concept'²⁰. The fourth stage involved a two-level review process, whereby the candidate themes were reviewed both against their coded data extracts and the entire data set. In the fifth stage, the main themes and sub-themes were refined, defined, and named by explaining their specifics. The sixth stage saw the conclusion of the data analysis. This was undertaken by selecting vivid and compelling data extracts from the interview transcripts and the archival material and subjecting them to a final analysis in relation to their affiliated themes and the data set. These extracts served to illustrate the analytical narrative forged throughout the article.

The overall data analysis produced four overarching themes: the SPD's idealistic commitment to European integration in the pre-1990 period; the

¹⁹ Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology"; Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Can I Use TA? Should I Use TA? Should I Not Use TA? Comparing Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Other Pattern-Based Qualitative Analytic Approaches." *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 21, no. 1 (2021a): 39; Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 3 (2021b): 331.

²⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. "(Mis)Conceptualising Themes, Thematic Analysis, and Other Problems with Fugard and Potts' (2015) Sample-Size Tool for Thematic Analysis." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 19, no. 6 (2016): 740; Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589; Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, and Nicola Rance. "How to Use Thematic Analysis with Interview Data." In *The Counselling & Psychotherapy Research Handbook*, edited by Andreas Vossler, and Naomi Moller, 183-97. London: Sage, 2014.

SPD's suspicious take on Europe because of its domestic ideological priorities; the SPD encountering the tension between idealistic pro-Europeanism and actual domestic interests; and the pragmatic turn in the SPD's pro-Europeanism.

II. The SPD's Idealistic Commitment to European Integration before 1990

Except for a short period of opposition to European integration, the SPD's support for the European project was largely characterised by idealism during the Cold War. First, in its idealistic pro-Europeanism, the SPD hugely relied on history. Its commitment to integrating the European continent is generally traced back to the 1925 Heidelberg Programme, where the SPD demanded a 'United States of Europe'²¹. Even in an official party document published right before German reunification, it was argued that this goal was now attainable²². This insistence on federal Europe emerged as a distinctive feature of the SPD's idealistic commitment to European integration. Likewise, the party often highlighted the former SPD chancellors, Brandt and Schmidt's efforts in deepening integration:

Historic achievements for a better Europe are associated with the SPD chancellors: With the policy of reconciliation and détente, Willy Brandt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Helmut Schmidt was the creator of

²¹ Dimitri Almeida, *The Impact of European Integration on Political Parties: Beyond the Permissive Consensus*. London, New York: Routledge, 2012; Bailey, "Socialist Visions of European Unity in Germany: Ostpolitik since the 1920s?"; Egle, "The SPD's Preferences on European Integration. Always a Step Behind?," 40; Bernardini Giovanni and Gabriele D'Ottavio. "SPD and European Integration: From Scepticism to Pragmatism, from Pragmatism to Leadership, 1949-1979." In *European Parties and the European Integration Process, 1945-1992*, edited by Lucia Bonfreschi, Giovanni Orsina, and Antonio Varsori, 30. Brussels: Peter Lang, 2015; Paterson, "The German Social Democratic Party and European Integration in Emigration and Occupation"; Sassoon, "German Social-Democracy Between a National Strategy and a European Dimension".

²² 'Die Deutschen in Europa': Berliner Erklärung der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands ('The Germans in Europe': Berlin Declaration of the Social Democratic Party of Germany). Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Digital Library, 1989.

*the single currency system, a designer and a pioneer in the European Community. [...] We are proud of this tradition*²³.

These historical references to the SPD's past contributions to the European project promoted its image as the 'European party because of its history (SPD Interviewee 2)'. In an idealistic sense, this narrative centred on historical continuity in the SPD's adherence to European integration from the 1920s onwards. As stated in the 2007 Hamburg Programme, the SPD's idealism saw European integration as a peace project:

*A concept which seemed to be out of reach at that time has become reality: Europe's unification after two world wars has brought the most peaceful period in the history of our continent. War, exile, and famine have been overcome. The European Union is primarily a peace project; we want to expand it to become a functioning peace power*²⁴.

Here, it is likely to see the strong implications of German history, not least the bitter memories of the Second World War and the subsequent partition of the German territory into two rival states. In the harsh political atmosphere of the Cold War, the SPD put a large emphasis on unified Europe's constructive role in averting war. As a current SPD MEP asserts, 'there was a link between Europe and peace and no other party than the SPD could foster this development. (SPD Interviewee 14)'.

The second factor underlying the SPD's idealistic pro-Europeanism was the cross-party consensus over Europe. The (West) German party system has traditionally been distinguished by its strong support for European integration. Beyond this inter-party agreement, an exclusively bipartisan consensus was also established between the SPD and the CDU over Europe, as the two biggest *Volksparteien* (SPD Interviewee 7). The Social Democrats' participation from the late-1950s onwards strengthened the cross-party consensus over the European Economic Community (EEC) in West Germany. However, looking from the peculiar perspective of the SPD, this gradually eliminated ideological differences with other mainstream parties as to

²³ 'Europa eine neue Richtung geben': SPD Wahlprogramm für die Europawahl am 25.03.2014 ('Giving Europe a New Direction': SPD Election Program for the European elections on 25.03.2014. FES Digital Library, 2014.

²⁴ Hamburger Programm: Grundsatzprogramm der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Hamburg Programme: Basic Programme of the Social Democratic Party of Germany). Approved at the SPD Federal Party Conference in Hamburg on 28.10.2007. FES Digital Library, 2007.

supporting European integration. Like other parties, the SPD highlighted the historical importance of European integration as a peace project, albeit without making a discernible social democratic case for Europe. In particular, the bipartisan consensus between the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats functioned to disguise their ideology-related differences over Europe in an ‘obfuscating’ sense²⁵. As an integral part of the wide-ranging consensus between parties, the SPD thus had great difficulty in maintaining a distinct ideological profile as to Europe.

In what follows, there are two primary instances where the SPD’s idealistic pro-Europeanism can avowedly be observed: the Southern and Eastern enlargements. For instance, a former SPD federal minister highlights how the SPD’s collaboration with pro-democracy forces in the post-dictatorship countries, including Greece, Spain, and Portugal, facilitated their accession to the then EEC (SPD Interviewee 13). In a sense, the Southern enlargement of the 1980s is positioned as part of the history-oriented idealism underlying the SPD’s commitment to the European project. Likewise, the SPD’s willingness to see post-communist countries as part of the EU is believed to be a contributing factor to the Eastern enlargement in 2004 and 2007:

I think that the SPD was as well in favour of the EU enlargement into the new states located in the east of our territory. And reconciliation with Poland was Willy Brandt’s big historic achievement, so the SPD was fully supportive of it. (SPD Interviewee 5)

As stated by a former SPD federal managing director, Eastern enlargement was seen as a ‘central cause’ inside the party (SPD Interviewee 10). As implied in the quote above, the EU’s expansion to the east was particularly important for the Social Democrats because of the legacy of *Ostpolitik*. Launched by the then SPD chancellor Brandt and maintained by another SPD chancellor Schmidt, *Ostpolitik* came to be seen by the SPD as a grand initiative giving way to the accession of post-communist countries to the EU²⁶. Therefore, despite some criticisms directed by the Christian Democrats in opposition, the SPD in office tended to see this enlargement as

²⁵ Giovanni and D’Ottavio, “SPD and European Integration: From Scepticism to Pragmatism, from Pragmatism to Leadership, 1949-1979,” 44.

²⁶ ‘Für ein starkes und solidarisches Europa’: Europamanifest der SPD (‘For a Strong and Solidary Europe’: SPD 2004 European Manifesto). SPD European Delegates Conference. FES Digital Library, 2003.

a ‘window of opportunity (SPD Interviewee 3)’. This historic event was widely discussed inside the party around the themes of ‘historical correction’²⁷ and ‘return to Europe’²⁸. This also explains why Germany acted as the ‘advocate’ of the applicant Central and East European states during their accession to the EU (SPD Interviewee 4).

As it turned out, the SPD’s idealistic commitment to European integration, stimulated by an over-reliance on history and the cross-party consensus in West Germany, ultimately brought about “deideologisation” for the party. As with other West German parties, European unity was largely identified with ‘integration’ rather than ideological cleavages by the SPD during this period²⁹.

III. The SPD’s Rising Doubts Over Europe under the Impact of its Domestic Ideological Priorities After 1990

As a tendency emerging with German reunification in 1990 and strengthened by the Schröder chancellorship, the German Social Democrats accorded higher priority to domestic interests vis-à-vis the EU. Despite not reversing its strong Europhile position, these two developments led the SPD to adopt a relatively distanced approach towards European integration on ideological grounds.

As the first crucial turning point, German reunification produced a sea-change in the environment for the SPD’s EU policy-making, deeply influencing the party’s stance on European issues³⁰. Like other political actors in Germany, the SPD was confronted with a range of domestic problems

²⁷ Günter Verheugen, Die Erweiterung der Europäischen Union - Strategien für die Bewältigung der erweiterungsbedingten Herausforderungen (The Enlargement of the European Union - Strategies for Addressing the Challenges of Enlargement). Speech delivered at the event of the SPD parliamentary group “The Expansion of the European Union as a Domestic Political Task”. Berlin, 03.04.2001. FES Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, 2IPVWC000066.

²⁸ Detlev Albers and Hermann Schwengel. ‘Europäische Globalisierung und Sozialdemokratie’ (‘European Globalisation and Social Democracy’). SPD Basic Values Commission, 2000. FES Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, 2IPVWC000066.

²⁹ William E. Paterson, “Social Democratic Parties of the European Community.” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 13, no. 4 (1975b): 415-8.

³⁰ Sloam, “Responsibility for Europe: The EU Policy of the German Social Democrats since Unification”.

spurred by national unity, including high unemployment, low growth, and an unbridgeable gap between East and West Germany³¹. Relatedly, the Social Democrats faced an unexpected surge of Euroscepticism in the ‘Berlin Republic’, in stark contrast to the pre-1990 ‘Bonn Republic’, leading to the increased politicisation of European affairs³². These developments forced the party to moderate its unconditional support for European integration, with a larger emphasis on national interests.

Second, when Schröder took office as chancellor in 1998, German reunification was still at the top of the federal government’s agenda. Because ‘the establishment of “internal” unity in Germany was proving to be a more complicated task’ following “national” unity³³, the Schröder government still had to deal with several post-reunification issues. More importantly, belonging to a new generation of politicians not having a personal memory of the Weimar, Nazi, or Second World War periods, Schröder placed greater emphasis on Germany’s material interests in his interactions with the EU. In the post-war period, the West German governments had traditionally refrained from asserting national interests on the European plane. However, after German unity, there was a “new” Germany, as frequently emphasised by its new chancellor. In one of his landmark speeches, Schröder stated that it was quite normal for Germany to ‘stand up for its national interests just as Britain and France standing up for theirs’³⁴. Obviously, this reflected a renewed confidence in Germany’s attachment to the EU as a ‘normal European

³¹ Jeffery and Paterson, “Germany and European Integration: A Shifting of Tectonic Plates,” 67; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, “Party Positions about European Integration in Germany: An Electoral Quandary?,” 86.

³² Michael J. Baun, “The SPD and EMU: An End to Germany’s All-Party Consensus on European Integration?,” *German Politics and Society* 15, no. 3 (1997): 2-3; Wimmel and Edwards, “The Return of ‘Social Europe’: Ideas and Positions of German Parties towards the Future of European Integration,” 311.

³³ Ergebnisse der Arbeitsgruppe: Deutschland und Europäische Einigung, Teil Deutschland für den Zwischenbericht der Programmkommission der SPD (Results of the Working Group: Germany and European Unification, Germany Part, for the interim report of the Program Committee of the SPD), 24.09.2001. FES Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, 2IPVWC000054.

³⁴ Jeffery and Paterson, “Germany and European Integration: A Shifting of Tectonic Plates”; Sloam, “Responsibility for Europe: The EU Policy of the German Social Democrats since Unification”; Sloam, *The European Policy of the German Social Democrats: Interpreting a Changing World*.

country³⁵. These two factors prompted the Schröder government to espouse an assertive line in EU policy based on a cost-benefit analysis. As a manifestation of this attitude, Chancellor Schröder first took issue with high German contributions to the EU budget. At the very first EU summit he attended in Vienna in 1998, Schröder called for budgetary justice for Germany³⁶ with a sort of Thatcherite reaction. A current high-profile SPD European politician recalls the speech delivered by him at the SPD European Congress in *Saarbrücken* ahead of the 1999 European elections:

At a conference at the end of 1998, when we decided on the voting list and the manifesto, Schröder gave a speech, and from this speech one quote is very well remembered. And he said, 'Passt auf, dass sie nicht weiter unser Geld ausgeben', which can be translated into English as, 'Make sure that they do not keep spending our money'. This says a lot about Mr. Schröder's mindset (SPD Interviewee 7).

In an environment where his government dealt with domestic challenges arising from German reunification, Chancellor Schröder was openly critical of Germany's paymaster role in the EU. Needless to say, this manner was in stark contrast to his predecessor's well-known 'cheque-book diplomacy' in Europe. After the Kohl period, Schröder was challenging the *status quo* as regards Germany's financial contributions to the EU. As a result, like the former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher did at the 1984 Fontainebleau Summit, Schröder secured a certain amount of reduction in Germany's budgetary contributions at the 1999 Berlin European Summit.

Another instance of Schröder's assertiveness in EU policy is the issue of rearranging seats in the EU Council of Ministers. When the Schröder government raised this demand at the 2000 Nice European Council, this surprised other Member States, not least France. Once again, there was a sharp contrast between Schröder and Kohl. The former chancellor Kohl had assured Britain and France that a reunified Germany would never seek a change in the current constellation of the Community³⁷. However, Schröder could now

³⁵ 'Erneuerung und Zusammenhalt - Wir in Deutschland': SPD Regierungsprogramm 2002- 2006 ('Renewal and Cohesion - We in Germany': SPD 2002-2006 Government Program). FES Digital Library, 2002.

³⁶ Sloam, *The European Policy of the German Social Democrats: Interpreting a Changing World*.

³⁷ Marc Fisher, "Kohl Tries to Ease Allies' Fears." *The Washington Post*, March 13, 1990. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/03/13/kohl-tries-to-ease-allies-fears/f65b5f6f-4383-4737-b4bf-e1871e79e5b2/>.

argue that Germany must have more seats than France in the Council because of its larger population after 1990³⁸.

The third and final instance of this attitude is the Schröder government's decision about labour migration from the Central and Eastern European countries in 2004. Unlike the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Chancellor Schröder applied a 7-year transition period for labour mobility from the new accession countries before the EU's expansion to the east. As stated in the SPD's 2001 'Responsibility for Europe' paper, these measures were expected to provide a high level of protection 'against upheavals in the labour market', as well as enable the government to react quickly³⁹. Yet beyond its technical aspects, this decision was primarily conditioned by the SPD's predominant ideological tendency to protect German workers from external competition (SPD Interviewee 1). Despite its pro-Europeanism, the SPD's protectionism unexpectedly clashed with the EU's principles of free movement of labour and competitiveness. At the time, as recalled by a former SPD MEP, 'the trade unions, the normal people, and the Social Democratic members on the ground' demanded these transitional restrictions (SPD Interviewee 3). In particular, the Social Democrats from the former GDR strongly opposed labour migration from the east because of their ongoing economic problems following reunification⁴⁰. In a sense, as explained by the then EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Günter Verheugen, this issue accounted for a 'politico-psychological problem' standing as the most serious obstacle to enlargement in Germany⁴¹. Eastern enlargement of the EU was

³⁸ Bulmer and Paterson, "Germany and the European Union: From 'Tamed Power' to Normalized Power?," 1057.

³⁹ Leitantrag – Verantwortung für Europa. For the SPD Federal Party Conference, Nuremberg, 19-23.11.2001. FES Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, 2IPVWC000066.

⁴⁰ Dr. Joachim Ragnitz. Ostdeutsche Wirtschaft: Weiterhin Handlungsbedarf (East German Economy: Further Need for Action), Leibniz-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung Halle (IWH), 22.05.2001. FES Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, 2IPVWC000066; Zwischenbericht Europapolitik (Interim Report on European Policy), attached to the Letter from Beate Häupel to the members of Working Group on Germany and European Unification, 24.09.2001. FES Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, 2IPVWC000054.

⁴¹ In the very same speech, Verheugen declared his support for Chancellor Schröder's 'proposal to minimise risks through an intelligent, flexible transitional system' because serious disruptions that might be caused by migration inflows to national labour markets 'cannot be ruled out with sufficient certainty'. For further

treated as a central cause inside the SPD, but the social democratic concerns related to protecting German employees were too important to ignore. After all, despite becoming a *Volkspartei* since the 1959 Bad Godesberg Programme, the SPD was still seen as the chief protector of the working-class interests in the Federal Republic. As a result, the SPD's domestic ideological priorities outweighed idealistic considerations in terms of the SPD-Green government's ultimate decision.

In brief, Schröder's assertive EU policy depended on a cost-benefit analysis with a freer interpretation of national interests at the European level⁴². In turn, this further strengthened the SPD's doubtful stance on European integration that emerged after German reunification.

IV. The SPD Wavering Between Idealistic and Domestic Sentiments in Relation to the EU

Under the impact of the two key developments mentioned above, the dilemma between the SPD's idealistic pro-Europeanism and greater emphasis on the domestic setting grew further. The SPD's non-ideological, idealistic support for European integration was increasingly challenged by a rather suspicious take on Europe owing to its domestic ideological concerns. This hidden conflict between the two currents was marked by key SPD figures' ideology-orientated criticisms against the EU, as concerning the single market, and the party's adopting contradictory official positions on some European issues, as during the Euro crisis.

First, in the wake of German reunification, the SPD's European policy contained a number of criticisms against core European initiatives, not least

information, please see Verheugen, Günter. Die Erweiterung der Europäischen Union - Strategien für die Bewältigung der erweiterungsbedingten Herausforderungen. Speech delivered at the event of the SPD parliamentary group "The Expansion of the European Union as a Domestic Political Task". Berlin, 03.04.2001. FES Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, 2IPVWC000066.

⁴² Handl and Jeffery, "Germany and Europe after Kohl: Between Social Democracy and Normalization?," 68; Jeffery and Paterson, "Germany and European Integration: A Shifting of Tectonic Plates"; Paterson, William E. "Britain and the Berlin Republic: Between Ambivalence and Emulation." *German Politics* 10, no. 2 (2001): 215; Sloam, "Responsibility for Europe: The EU Policy of the German Social Democrats since Unification"; Wittlinger, *German National Identity in the Twenty-First Century: A Different Republic After All?*.

the single market project⁴³. The higher sensitivity to domestic issues, as well as the EU's expanding competences, alerted the German Social Democrats to the ideological nature of European integration. During this period, the SPD continued to support European integration, as well as monetary integration. However, the Christian Democrats' dominance over the European project from the onset (SPD Interviewee 5) and European institutions' market orientation simultaneously caused an ideological unease on the part of the SPD. Because of the prevalence of idealistic pro-Europeanism, these ideological reservations about European integration were long ignored. Nevertheless, the hidden conflict between the SPD's idealistic and domestic notions of European integration ultimately revived them.

It is against this backdrop that the relaunching of European integration on a neoliberal compromise by the mid-1980s emerged as a serious challenge for the SPD. In line with the ideological incompatibility thesis positioning European integration as a centre-right project⁴⁴, European integration started to be criticised inside the party for becoming 'a collaboration only of the rich, the capitalists, the company owners, and the business, and not of ordinary people (SPD Interviewee 6)'. In such a climate, several influential SPD *Länder* politicians, not least Oskar Lafontaine and Gerhard Schröder, directed criticisms against the EMU and the single currency⁴⁵. A former SPD leader recalls that the majority of the party saw single market as the 'single market of corporations' in those days (SPD Interviewee 12).

In terms of the negotiations on the Maastricht Treaty, the Social Democrats in opposition were particularly worried that Chancellor Kohl

⁴³ Baun, "The SPD and EMU: An End to Germany's All-Party Consensus on European Integration?"; Egle, "The SPD's Preferences on European Integration. Always a Step Behind?".

⁴⁴ Almeida, *The Impact of European Integration on Political Parties: Beyond the Permissive Consensus*; Bugaric, Bojan. "Europe Against the Left? On Legal Limits to Progressive Politics." LSE 'Europe in Question' Discussion Paper Series, Europe No. 61/2013. London: LSE, 2013; Dionyssi G. Dimitrakopoulos, *Social Democracy and European Integration: The Politics of Preference Formation*. London, New York: Routledge, 2011; George Ross, "European Center-Lefts and the Mazes of European Integration." In *What's Left of the Left: Democrats and Social Democrats in Challenging Times*, edited by James Cronin, George Ross, and James Shoch, 332. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2011.

⁴⁵ Sloam, "Responsibility for Europe: The EU Policy of the German Social Democrats since Unification".

placed more emphasis on the EMU to appease French President Francois Mitterrand's concerns related to German reunification (SPD Interviewee 5)⁴⁶. Together with the SPD *Länder* politicians, the then SPD leader, Hans-Jochen Vogel, also criticised the 'Europe 1992' project. According to a former SPD leader, Vogel aimed to highlight the salience of social measures as a counterweight to monetary integration:

I think Vogel sought to make the point that European monetary integration should be balanced with Social Europe or social integration of all EU countries. He tried to find something which was balanced and also a convincing message to the voters and the electorate that the SPD was not the one which was only in favour of economic integration and nothing else.
(SPD Interviewee 11)

In effect, Vogel made the case for a European Community (EC) that the SPD wanted to see as the 'Europe of social progress'⁴⁷. The SPD was making a broadly positive case for the EMU, but was also convinced that 'an EU without a social pillar will not work and will collapse (SPD Interviewee 4)'. Therefore, it was necessary to complement monetary union with counterbalancing social measures, such as in terms of employment⁴⁸. In this respect, European Commission President Jacques Delors' Social Europe agenda was given particular importance. As a social democratic party focusing on the 'social question (*Soziale Frage*)' (SPD Interviewee 15), the SPD saw Social Europe as a panacea for the potential wrongdoings of the European single market. This point is confirmed by several participants who define Social Europe as 'part of the "European DNA" of the German Social Democrats (SPD Interviewee 8)' or 'an expression of a specific element of identity of the Social Democratic Party (SPD Interviewee 16)'. Social Europe was entirely in line with the SPD's social democratic premises. As stated by a former SPD Europe minister, the Social Democrats thus maintained their

⁴⁶ Because of this dimension, the single currency is named by almost all the research participants as the price needed to be paid for a reunified Germany. According to this view, the monetary union and the euro were strategically used by Kohl to avert the fears of other European leaders, particularly Thatcher and Mitterrand.

⁴⁷ Robert Ladrech, "Social Democratic Parties and EC Integration: Transnational Party Responses to Europe 1992." *European Journal of Political Research* 24, no. 2 (1993): 203; Moeller, "The German Social Democrats," 41.

⁴⁸ Nickolas Reinhardt, "A Turning Point in the German EMU Debate: The Baden-Württemberg Regional Election of March 1996." *German Politics* 6, no. 1 (1997): 90.

emphasis on Social Europe when the Maastricht negotiations were underway⁴⁹:

I suppose there were nearly the same arguments during the debate about the Maastricht Treaty. First, an EC only for the economic area. Second, too much deregulation. Third, no social standards. Result: Providing advantages only for the enterprises; competition reduces the standards of workers. (SPD Interviewee 9)

However, as it turned out, the Maastricht Treaty did not give as much importance to Social Europe as the single market⁵⁰. With a particular emphasis on deregulation, flexibility, and competitiveness, the social dimension was pushed to the back seat⁵¹. Europe was proceeding in an ideological direction that the SPD did not approve. Therefore, as a reflection of the tension between idealistic and domestic perceptions of European integration, the SPD ended up adopting a ‘moderate Eurosceptic’ discourse in the post-Maastricht period⁵² despite supporting the creation of the single market in general. This also motivated the party to fight the 1996 Baden-Württemberg regional elections on an anti-euro platform⁵³. Amid the internal tension regarding

⁴⁹ Lemke, “Germany’s EU Policy: The Domestic Discourse,” 508; Sloam James, and Isabelle Hertner. “The Europeanization of Social Democracy: Politics without Policy and Policy without Politics.” In *The Future of European Social Democracy: Building the Good Society*, edited by Henning Meyer, and Jonathan Rutherford, 35. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

⁵⁰ Ladrech, “Social Democratic Parties and EC Integration: Transnational Party Responses to Europe 1992”; Sloam and Hertner, “The Europeanization of Social Democracy: Politics without Policy and Policy without Politics”.

⁵¹ ‘Zur tiefen Krise der Europäischen Union: Wo liegen die Ursachen, wer trägt die Verantwortung?’ (‘On the Deep Crisis of the European Union: What are the Causes, Who is Responsible?’). SPD Basic Values Commission. FES Digital Library, 2016.

⁵² Catherine E. De Vries, “Sleeping Giant: Fact or Fairytale? How European Integration Affects National Elections.” *European Union Politics* 8, no. 3 (2007): 373.

⁵³ Baun, “The SPD and EMU: An End to Germany’s All-Party Consensus on European Integration?”; Broughton, David and Neil Bentley. “The 1996 *Länder* Elections in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Schleswig-Holstein: The Ebbing of the Tides of March?.” *German Politics* 5, no. 3 (1996): 505; Egle, “The SPD’s Preferences on European Integration. Always a Step Behind?”; Reinhardt, “A Turning Point in the German EMU Debate: The Baden-Württemberg Regional Election of March 1996”.

European integration, the Social Democrats were wavering between supportive and critical opinions on the single market.

Second, this tension was marked by inconsistent official positions adopted by the SPD on some European issues. Amongst the most salient ones is the German involvement in military operations abroad, as raised by a former foreign policy speaker of the SPD *Bundestagsfraktion* (SPD Interviewee 16). More often than not, the Social Democrats remained undecided between taking part in joint EU military action and opposing military operations outside Germany. In effect, as a legacy of the Second World War, this was a dilemma for the SPD between the humanitarian goals of ‘Never again war!’ and ‘Never again Auschwitz!’. Nevertheless, as a former SPD leader states, ‘reality is a very tough teacher and specifically the German Social Democrats had to learn this lesson painfully between 1994 and 1998 (SPD Interviewee 11)’. In the face of the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, the SPD finally agreed to participating in the EU peacekeeping missions.

The most recent contradiction emerged during the Euro crisis in 2009. In general, the SPD rejected Greece’s removal from the Eurozone with idealistic motives. Yet, as explained by a former SPD MEP, this policy line did not prevent some leading SPD figures from criticising the financial aid granted to Greece:

During the Eurozone crisis in 2008-2009, I was quite furious against other SPD members in the Bundestag. We were in opposition. Our financial spokesman, Carsten Schneider, was attacking Merkel on every step about the money that was particularly going to Greece. However, we also had a policy of solidarity in the EU. Therefore, there was an ambiguous policy; but being in opposition, the SPD was attacking the government. Then, I told Schneider, ‘Look, I hear you on the TV, but I do not understand what you want to say. You are saying, “We give too much money to Greece.” But, on the other hand, we would not be in favour of kicking Greece out of the Eurozone, which Schäuble later tried. (SPD Interviewee 5)

The SPD was caught in the middle. On the one hand, because of the public backlash and domestic economic turmoil, the SPD criticised the CDU/CSU-FDP government for the financial aid provided to Greece. On the other hand, idealistic pro-Europeanism prompted the party to show solidarity with Greece. For instance, when the SPD was in grand coalition with the Christian Democrats before the 2009 federal election defeat, the then SPD

leader Sigmar Gabriel publicly declared his support for keeping Greece in the Eurozone at the expense of risking governmental unity (SPD Interviewee 3). Nevertheless, this ambiguous policy course did not help the SPD at all. As the party already had difficulties in defining its position during the Euro crisis, this dilemma between idealistic and domestic considerations put extra pressure on it.

V. The Ideologically Pragmatic Turn in the SPD's Pro-Europeanism

The long-running tension between the two contending notions of European integration led to an unexpected outcome: an ideologically pragmatic shift in the SPD's Europhile stance by the mid-1990s. In particular, from Schröder's chancellorship onwards, the Social Democrats experienced a pragmatic turn in their pro-Europeanism, leading to a rise in the political and ideological value of the EU for the party. This translates into that in their relations with the EU, the Social Democrats now attributed more importance to their actual political and ideological interests. Nevertheless, given its lasting influence inside the party, idealistic pro-Europeanism continued its existence alongside ideological pragmatism.

Based on the interview accounts, three different periods can be pinpointed to explain this pragmatic shift in the party's pro-Europeanism: Hans-Jochen Vogel (1987-1991), Gerhard Schröder (1999-2004) and Sigmar Gabriel (2009-2017) periods. For many participants, Vogel's approach to Europe was "old-style", shaped by the climate of West Germany during the Cold War (SPD Interviewee 6). The Vogel leadership's commitment to Europe was mainly rooted in the Federal Republic's constitution, that is, the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law) (SPD Interviewee 1). This so-called "bureaucratic" approach thus largely neglected the changing realities at the European level. To the extent that idealistic pro-Europeanism dominated the party's approach towards the EC, the SPD fell short of making an ideological case for Europe. As explained previously, this inevitably detached the party's support for European integration from its social democratic credentials⁵⁴.

This attitude changed radically with the Schröder leadership because of its pragmatic reappraisal of the SPD's pro-Europeanism. Despite his earlier reluctance about European integration, Schröder later grasped the salience of the European dimension. However, this recognition was largely to do with political and ideological interests, not idealism. For instance, as acknowledged

⁵⁴ Paterson, "Social Democratic Parties of the European Community," 416.

by a former European Parliament president, this pragmatism played a key role in the Schröder government's bringing transitional restrictions on the free movement of labour from Central and Eastern Europe in 2004 (SPD Interviewee 8). As discussed before, this decision primarily sought to alleviate domestic concerns. Yet the Schröder government also aimed to fulfil the obligations arising from Germany's EU membership by ultimately opening the doors to the migrant workforce from the new accession states. In this respect, this policy step served to respond to internal demands, as well as maintain the SPD's commitment to European integration.

Finally, as a politician from the *Seeheimer Kreis* (a "pragmatic", liberal grouping in the SPD), Sigmar Gabriel followed in the footsteps of Schröder. When Gabriel took over as the SPD leader in 2009, the EU was dealing with a wide range of problems, prompting the SPD to readjust its European policy. In an attempt to update his party's pro-EU position, Gabriel similarly avoided the purely idealistic style that characterised the SPD's European policy before (SPD Interviewee 14). Following the Euro crisis, many SPD figures criticised the insufficient attention drawn to the social dimension by the EU, but this did not stop the rising weight of pragmatism in the party's pro-Europeanism. In short, from Vogel through Schröder to Gabriel, the salience of ideological pragmatism markedly rose in the SPD's positive approach towards Europe.

This pragmatic shift automatically rendered Europe a politically salient subject for the SPD. Ironically, at the time the party's support for European integration was driven by idealism, the issue was hardly given attention:

I participated in many party congresses of the SPD. Indeed, Europe was hardly the first item on the agenda of party congresses. For a long time, it was not the 'Number 1' issue in the SPD party congresses. (SPD Interviewee 5)

These words by a former SPD *Kommission Europa* member reveal that the prevailing idealistic approach to Europe diminished the political salience of this issue for the SPD. To the extent that the party took its commitment to the European project for granted, Europe remained a politically insignificant issue. However, as a former SPD leader confirms, the importance of the European dimension gradually increased for the party from the late-1980s onwards (SPD Interviewee 12). Now, European integration was at the centre of programmatic debates, prompting the party to develop a more realistic EU

policy. In a 2001 party document, it was clearly stated that the ‘United States of Europe’ was no longer an official party policy because of the implausibility of dissolving nation-states⁵⁵. In a similar vein, although the SPD’s 1984 European⁵⁶, 1987⁵⁷ and 1990⁵⁸ federal election manifestos emphasised this objective as the ‘final destination’, there was no mention of it in the 1998 federal election manifesto. Instead, there was an emphasis on Germany’s assuming responsibility to be ‘a motor of European and international cooperation⁵⁹’. Instead of idealistic goals, the SPD prioritised its political and ideological interests vis-à-vis the EU.

Likewise, with the rising influence of pragmatism, the SPD increasingly treated European integration as an ideological asset. Therefore, the Social Democrats embarked on developing a distinct social democratic vision for the EU in recent decades⁶⁰. In the 1997 Hanover Congress, the then SPD Federal Managing Director Franz Müntefering declared that ‘Europe is the decisive project of social democratic policy (SPD Interviewee 12)’. This change of heart first revealed itself after taking office in 1998. The then SPD leader and new Finance Minister Oskar Lafontaine was willing to reshape the EU as an

⁵⁵ Bericht der Arbeitsgruppe: Europäische Einigung (Report of the SPD Working Group: European Integration), 2001. FES Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, 2IPVWC000054.

⁵⁶ SPD Europa-Wahlprogramm 1984: ‘Für ein starkes und solidarisches Europa’ (SPD European Election Program 1984: ‘For a Strong and Solidary Europe’). FES Digital Library, 1984.

⁵⁷ ‘Zukunft für alle - arbeiten für soziale Gerechtigkeit und Frieden’: SPD Regierungsprogramm 1987-1990 der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (‘Future for All - Working for Social Justice and Peace’: 1987-1990 Government Program of the Social Democratic Party of Germany). FES Digital Library, 1987.

⁵⁸ ‘Der Neue Weg: ökologisch, sozial, wirtschaftlich stark’ - Regierungsprogramm 1990-1994 (‘The New Way: Ecologically, Socially, Economically Strong’ – SPD Government program 1990-1994). FES Digital Library, 1990.

⁵⁹ ‘Arbeit, Innovation und Gerechtigkeit’: SPD-Programm für die Bundestagswahl 1998 (Work, Innovation and Justice: SPD Program for the 1998 Federal Election). FES Digital Library, 1998.

⁶⁰ William E. Paterson and James Sloam. “Is the Left Alright? The SPD and the Renewal of European Social Democracy.” *German Politics* 15, no. 3 (2006): 234; Sloam, *The European Policy of the German Social Democrats: Interpreting a Changing World*, 218.

answer to the encroachments of globalisation and Anglo-Saxon capitalism⁶¹, with an interventionist and dirigiste economic policy⁶². In what follows, Chancellor Schröder was keen to influence the ideological course of European integration via *Neue Mitte* (New Center). As a former SPD MP indicates, in collaboration with Blair's New Labour, *Neue Mitte* stood for comprehensive reform in the EU, as well as in Germany:

I think that with Schröder and Neue Mitte, it was a new approach and a new dynamic movement in cooperation with New Labour in the UK. [...] I think the real meaning of this New Labour-Neue Mitte cooperation was really to think in a European manner; to not only think and have a reform agenda at the national level but also to have a reform agenda at the European level. (SPD Interviewee 6)

A paper co-authored by Schröder and Blair, titled 'Europe: The Third Way/Die Neue Mitte', provided blueprints for these reform plans⁶³. Based on their shared commitment to deregulation, low taxes, and a minimalist state⁶⁴, Schröder and Blair stressed the necessity of restructuring the EU to boost competitiveness, innovation, and efficiency. In contrast to Lafontaine, this centrist reform agenda sought to frame the EU as an answer to globalisation⁶⁵, with a particular emphasis on 'giving globalisation a European face⁶⁶'. The ideological partnership between Schröder and Blair was ultimately shattered due to the Iraq War (SPD Interviewee 13). However, these EU-wide reform plans evidenced how the SPD developed an ideologically pragmatic approach to European integration in recent decades.

⁶¹ Sloam, *The European Policy of the German Social Democrats: Interpreting a Changing World*, 218.

⁶² Berger and Welskopp, "Social Democracy in Germany," 66.

⁶³ Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder. "Europe: The Third Way/Die Neue Mitte". Working Documents No. 2. Johannesburg: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) South Africa Office, 1998.

⁶⁴ Greg Chambers, *European Social Democracy in the 21st Century*. London: FES London Office. FES Digital Library, 2000.

⁶⁵ 'Erneuerung und Zusammenhalt - Wir in Deutschland': SPD Regierungsprogramm 2002-2006. FES Digital Library, 2002.

⁶⁶ Wolfgang Thierse, 'Der Globalisierung ein europäisches Gesicht geben' ('Giving Globalisation a European Face'). SPD Basic Values Commission. FES Digital Library, 2000; Bericht der Arbeitsgruppe: Europäische Einigung, 2001. FES Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, 2IPVWC000054.

Conclusion

Taken together, the SPD encountered a growing tension between idealistic and domestic conceptions of Europe since German reunification. The findings of this study demonstrate that as the SPD's domestic ideological priorities challenged its idealistic view of European integration, the party experienced fluctuations in its Europhile stance during this period.

On the one hand, prior to national unification, the SPD's support for European integration was mainly characterised by idealism. There emerged two principal factors underlying the SPD's idealistic commitment to the European cause, namely history and cross-party consensus over Europe. Frequent references to the party's historical role in deepening integration located European integration as a peace project for the party. In addition, the broader inter-party agreement over Europe in West Germany eroded the ideological differences the SPD had with other parties, not least with the CDU. Consequently, the SPD was unable to make a distinguishable social democratic case for Europe, bringing about 'deideologisation' regarding the handling of this issue by the party.

On the other hand, German reunification and the Schröder chancellorship encouraged the SPD's doubts about European integration under the impact of its domestic ideological priorities. Following national unification, the SPD was forced to deal with a range of domestic issues, as well as the rise of public Euroscepticism, prompting the party to moderate its pro-Europeanism. This tendency was strengthened by the Schröder government's assertive European policy line, stimulated by the post-reunification problems and the factor of generational change. In many instances, Chancellor Schröder's cost-benefit analysis dominated his interactions with the EU. In particular, his government's decision to introduce transitional restrictions on labour migration from Central and Eastern Europe was influenced by the SPD's inherent tendency to protect German workers from external competition.

Over time, the SPD was increasingly affected by this dilemma between idealistic pro-Europeanism and a domestically-driven doubtful stance on Europe. This was reflected by two main developments, namely the SPD's ideology-orientated criticisms against the EU and its adopting an ambiguous policy course on some European issues. In this respect, whilst prominent SPD figures, such as Lafontaine, Schröder and Vogel, openly criticised monetary integration in the early-1990s, the party adopted an inconsistent policy course during the Euro crisis in 2009.

By the mid-1990s, the long-running tension between the two tendencies resulted in a pragmatic shift in the SPD's 'actual existing pro-Europeanism'. From Vogel through Schröder to Gabriel, the Social Democrats' ideologically pragmatic concerns rose in prominence at the expense of their idealistic adherence to European integration. This automatically made Europe a politically and ideologically salient subject for the party, alongside a more realistic attitude towards the EU. In contrast to the previous decades, the Social Democrats now focused on Europe in programmatic debates, with the 'United States of Europe' no longer an official party policy. Ideologically, the SPD similarly embarked on developing a distinct ideological agenda for European integration. This was particularly observed in the attempts of the successive party leaders, Lafontaine and Schröder, to reshape the EU in line with their ideological agendas.

All in all, the SPD's pragmatic turn emerging as the major outcome of the tension between idealistic and domestic notions of Europe had a profound impact on its approach to the EU. Yet the final point to note is that although ideological pragmatism recently gained in importance, the SPD's idealistic pro-Europeanism did not entirely disappear. There is no doubt that the Social Democrats' unconditional support for European integration visibly changed to a conditional one in recent decades⁶⁷. However, the conviction that European integration acts as the guarantor of peace and stability in Europe (SPD Interviewee 4) still prevails within the SPD, signalling the ongoing tension between the two contending views of Europe.

Ethical Statement

Because this research required interviewing adult human participants, it was reviewed and approved by the University of Cambridge Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) Ethics Committee on 4th May 2021.

Thanks

The first version of this paper was presented at the International Conference of "Democracy, Rule of Law, and Protection of Human Rights in the European Union" held by the Jean Monnet Chair at the Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Georgia on 30th September 2023. I am grateful to the chair and participants of the panel for their constructive comments.

⁶⁷ Sloam, "Responsibility for Europe: The EU Policy of the German Social Democrats since Unification".

List of Interviewees

- SPD Interviewee 1, current adviser on the EU Affairs for the SPD *Bundestagsfraktion* (28.05.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 2, former SPD federal managing director (02.06.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 3, former SPD MEP (09.06.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 4, former SPD MEP (10.06.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 5, former SPD MEP and state minister (17.06.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 6, former SPD MP (18.06.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 7, current SPD MEP (18.06.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 8, former president of the European Parliament and SPD MEP (01.07.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 9, former SPD MP and Europe minister (07.07.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 10, former SPD federal managing director (07.07.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 11, former SPD leader, candidate for chancellor, federal minister, MP, and minister-president (09.07.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 12, former SPD leader, federal minister, MP, and minister-president (17.08.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 13, former SPD MP, MEP, federal minister, and deputy chair (10.09.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 14, current SPD MEP (20.09.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 15, former state secretary and vice-minister at the Federal Ministry of Finance (28.09.2021)
- SPD Interviewee 16, former SPD MP (01.12.2021)

Archives

- Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Archive of Social Democracy (*Archiv der sozialen Demokratie*)
- Papers of the SPD Party Executive Committee (*Parteiivorstand*)
- Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Digital Library
- SPD Basic Values Commission Issue Papers
 - SPD Party Programmes
 - SPD Federal Elections Manifestos

-SPD European Elections Manifestos

-SPD Federal Coalition Protocols

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