

The EU Eastern Partnership program in the discourse of “Progressive alliance of Socialists and Democrats” political group of the European Parliament

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ԵՄ Արևելյան գործընկերության ծրագիրը Եվրախորհրդարանի «Սոցիալիստների և դեմոկրատների առաջադիմական դաշինք» քաղաքական խմբակցության դիսկուրսում *Մխիթարյան Սոնա Մ.*

*Երևանի պետական համալսարան, Միջազգային հարաբերությունների ֆակուլտետ,
Քաղաքական գործընթացների և ինստիտուտների ամբիոնի հայցորդ (Երևան, ՀՀ)
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Ամփոփագիր. Եվրոպական սոցիալիստների կուսակցությունն ամենահին և ամենամեծ համաեվրոպական կուսակցություններից է: Կուսակցությունը Եվրոպական խորհրդարանում ձևավորում է «Սոցիալիստների և դեմոկրատների առաջադիմական դաշինք» քաղաքական խմբակցությունը: Որպես Եվրոպական միության քաղաքական համակարգի կարևոր բաղադրիչ՝ այն ոչ միայն կարևոր գործունեություն է ծավալում ԵՄ անդամ երկրներում, այլ նաև Արևելյան գործընկերության (ԱԳ) տարածաշրջանում: Հնդվածի նպատակն է քննել ԱԳ ծրագրի շուրջ վերոնշյալ խմբակցության դիսկուրսի առանձնահատկությունները: Չնայած որ այն հաճախ անդրադարձել է ԱԳ ծրագրի զարգացման տարբեր ասպեկտներին և ծրագրի անդամ երկրներում տեղի ունեցող քաղաքական զարգացումներին, այնուամենայնիվ, ԱԳ ծրագիրը խմբակցության արտաքին քաղաքական օրակարգում առաջնային չի համարվել: Սոցիալիստների և դեմոկրատների առաջադիմական դաշինքը հաճախ հանդես է եկել ծրագրի շուրջ հայտարարություններով, որոնք պայմանավորված են եղել ինչպես տարածաշրջանի աշխարհաքաղաքական իրողություններով, այնպես էլ քաղաքական խմբի գաղափարախոսական օրակարգով: Ի տարբերություն մյուս անդամ երկրների՝ կուսակցության դիսկուրսում համեմատաբար նվազ անդրադարձ է արվել Հայաստանին: Կուսակցությունն ու քաղաքական խումբը ծրագիրը դիտարկել են ինչպես ԵՄ հարևանության քաղաքականության, ԵՄ անվտանգության և կայունության, այնպես էլ ԵՄ-Ռուսաստան հարաբերությունների շրջանակում:

Հանգուցաբառեր՝ համաեվրոպական կուսակցություն, Եվրոպական սոցիալիստների կուսակցություն, Սոցիալիստների և դեմոկրատների առաջադիմական դաշինք, Արևելյան գործընկերություն, Եվրոպական խորհրդարան, քաղաքական դիսկուրս:

Инициатива ЕС «Восточное партнерство» в дискурсе политической фракции «Прогрессивный альянс социалистов и демократов» Европарламента

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Аннотация. Партия европейских социалистов – одна из старейших и крупнейших общеевропейских партий. Партия формирует фракцию «Прогрессивный альянс социалистов и демократов» в Европейском парламенте. Являясь ключевым компонентом политической системы Европейского Союза, партия действует не только в государствах-членах ЕС, но и в регионе Восточного партнерства (ВП).

Целью данной статьи является рассмотрение специфики политического дискурса фракции о программе ВП. Хотя фракция часто упоминала различные аспекты развития программы Восточного партнерства и политические события в странах-членах ВП в своем дискурсе, программа ВП в целом не была приоритетом в повестке внешней политики фракции. Прогрессивный альянс социалистов и демократов неоднократно делал заявления о программе ВП, которые были обусловлены геополитическими реалиями региона, а также идеологической повесткой политической группы. В отличие от других государств-членов ВП, в дискурсе партии относительно мало упоминалась Армения. Партия и политическая группа рассматривали программу ВП в контексте политики соседства ЕС, безопасности и стабильности ЕС, а также отношений между ЕС и Россией.

Ключевые слова: общеевропейская политическая партия, Прогрессивный альянс социалистов и демократов, Европарламент, Восточное партнерство, политический дискурс.

Introduction - The Party of European Socialists was founded in 1992 when the Maastricht Treaty recognized the important role of pan-European parties in the EU political system. The political and ideological foundations of the party were established earlier, in particular by the Socialist International and the Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Communities. During the formation and development period of the pan-European party (1992-2007), the members of the party - the European socialist, social-democratic and labor parties, were already represented in the governments of several European countries, unanimously accepting the European integration process and the priority of the economic aspect, despite some political differences present among them [1, p.11]. The Progressive Alliance of the Socialists: Democrats (S&D) is the political group of the PES in the European parliament and has a significant role in shaping the foreign policy of the European Union (EU).

The Pan-European Party managed to establish political cooperation with various political parties of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, contributing to the development of European political culture in the region. The party as well as the S&D political group have shown great interest in the development of the Eastern Partnership initiative since its beginning in 2009.

Methodology – In order to examine the discourse of the above-mentioned political group on the Eastern Partnership initiative, we have sorted out declarations and announcements, statements and press releases of the political group, their annual reports, interviews, speeches of the group members made at the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly and Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament since May 2009 until December 2021. We paid special attention to the group's political positions on foreign policy and international issues as well as their electoral manifestos for European Parliament elections. Later, a content analysis was applied to categorize discursive elements related to the EaP initiative and EaP member states, particularly the Republic of Armenia. The frequency of the occurrence of the EaP initiative in the political group's discourse was taken into consideration. A conceptual-thematic analysis of the above-mentioned discursive elements was realized categorizing the elements as positive, negative or neutral concepts according to the political-ideological position of the political group.

Analysis – We considered it expedient to pay particular attention to the election manifestos and announcements of the European Socialist Party in the framework of the European Parliament elections of 2009, 2014, 2019. We believe that the election

manifestos have presented the internal political and foreign policy priorities of the party as well as the S&D group. In contrast to the electoral manifesto of the European People's Party published in the same year, we already notice the use of the term "Eastern Partnership" in the PES's 2009 election program [2, p. 25]. The reference to the program is quite brief, it is viewed in the framework of the stability of the EU's neighboring countries and EU enlargement process. In general, there is minimal reference to the EaP program in the election manifestos of the party, but at the same time the PES emphasizes:

We will support the Eastern Partnership as an important instrument to bring countries closer to EU and will promote strong relations with the Mediterranean region [3, p. 6].

Already during the pre-Vilnius summit period, we detect the interest of the S&D political group towards some domestic political developments of the EaP countries. During the above-mentioned period, concepts such as "European values", "political stability", "reform process" are frequently found in the discourse of the political group. At the same time, the analysis shows that the discourse of the PES, as well as the S&D political group, reflect ideological positions and priorities such as social justice, labor rights, the need to create jobs, equality, etc. For example, we see those concepts in the speech of Libor Rouček, S&D vice-president for foreign policy and enlargement on the elections in Georgia:

Rouček also welcomed the positive early signs of cooperation between the new government and the president, but called on both sides to sustain and deepen it to ensure political stability and to pursue broad-based reforms including measures to tackle social inequality and bolster workers' and social rights [4].

The foreign policy priorities expressed by the S&D when addressing other regions like Western Balkans were also found in their discourse on the EaP initiative. In particular, the concepts used in the foreign policy discourse of the political group refer to the promotion of mutually beneficial trade cooperation which according to the S&D, should be aimed at ensuring stability, peace and economic development.

The analysis demonstrates that the S&D political group, during its activities in the European Parliament, has several times put forward resolutions that have addressed in detail the domestic political situation of the EaP member states, especially the implementation of the reforms under the EaP program. The resolutions stress the importance of the individual member states for the EU, call on relevant EU institutions to deepen relations with EaP member states, but at the same

time point to the obvious shortcomings in the implementation of reforms in those countries. The following example is an extract from the resolution on Ukraine presented by the members of the S&D political group in the European Parliament in 2010.

The European Parliament stresses that Ukraine has strong historical, cultural and economic links to the European Union and that is one of the Union's key partners in its Eastern neighborhood, exerting an important influence on the security, stability and prosperity of the whole continent [5].

In the same document, the group also addresses the shortcomings of the reform implementation process.

Whereas, since the Orange Revolution, Ukraine has regrettably lost more than five years in properly addressing its major constitutional and institutional deficits, especially in solving the conflicts of competence between the President and Prime Minister; whereas, as a consequence, important reform projects in the public, economic and social sectors have been delayed, inconsistently implemented or not completed at all [6].

The political group in the initial phase of the EaP program have been actively involved not only in paying attention to the implementation of reforms in the member states, but also in addressing the human rights situation in those countries, the latter is especially evident in the case of Belarus. In its discourse on Belarus, the group has repeatedly raised the issue of political prisoners. For example, S&D requested to review the EU policy towards Belarus stating that:

The S&D group believes in engagement and dialogue with Belarus, but the release of political prisoners remains a necessary condition for the improvement of EU-Belarus relations [7].

Thus, the analysis of the discourse of the political group shows that although during the period prior to the EaP Vilnius summit they were sending positive signals to the EaP member countries, at the same time they were not constrained in pointing out not only the weak sides of the EaP initiative, but also the shortcomings in the reforms processes undertaken by the EaP member countries.

Although the European People's Party (EPP) remains the most desirable pan-European party for political partnerships in the Eastern Partnership region, the PES has also been a demanded partner outside the EU. Frequently, the EaP political parties that are members of various pan-European parties are political rivals in their countries. Due to this fact, some political crises in EaP member states put pan-European parties in a difficult position when pan-European parties, while supporting their EaP partner parties, worsen their relations with other

pan-European parties and their political groups in the European Parliament. For example, the internal political crisis in Ukraine over Timoshenko's arrest in 2012, became a confrontation issue between the above-mentioned pan-European political parties. With Timoshenko's "Batkivschyna" party being a member of the EPP, and Yanukovich's "Party of Regions" having signed a cooperation agreement with the S&D group, the two biggest political groups in the European Parliament found themselves politically associated with the two conflicting parties in Ukraine. The EPP was unconditionally supporting Timoshenko and asking for her immediate release, meanwhile, the S&D was pointing at her past wrongdoings [8]. As we can see, the cooperation between the pan-European political parties and parties of the EaP region has an influence on the discourse of the parties as well as their correspondent political groups on the EaP initiative and the internal developments of the EaP member countries. This phenomenon is noticeable not only during the initial period of the EaP initiative, but also during its further development. For example, when the Georgian opposition leader Nika Melia was arrested, the S&D political group called on both Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition to re-engage in dialogue, to actively reduce political tensions and for political actors to reach a peaceful consensus to avoid jeopardizing the country's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic cooperation. When addressing this case Sven Miksor, S&D MEP and the European Parliament's rapporteur on Georgia, said:

I disapprove of the arrest of opposition leader Nika Melia, which further raises further political tensions. The legitimate aspirations of the Georgian people for democracy and prosperity, as well as the country's stability and Euro-Atlantic future, cannot be taken hostage for any party political interests [9].

As in the case of the other pan-European parties and the respective political groups in the European Parliament, the interests towards the Eastern Partnership initiative is intensified ahead of the EaP summits. For example, before the Vilnius Summit, the S&D groups calls on the Commission "to work on practical measures which can facilitate trade between the EU and its eastern partners and bring benefits to both sides, particularly in light of increased Russian pressure [10]". The emphasis on the practical approach in the group's discourse continues both immediately after the Vilnius Summit and in parallel with the development of the EaP program. For example, during the discussion in the European Parliament following the Vilnius summit, MEP Libor Rouček, on behalf of the S&D, stated that he did not consider the summit to be a failure, but particularly emphasized:

What we have to do now is to look at how we can help Moldovans, Georgians, Ukrainians and others in a concrete way. For instance, how we can speed up projects connecting the EU with those countries in terms of energy, so that there is energy security and these countries are not left to the mercy of their big Eastern neighbor. Visa facilitation and the visa-free regime is another aspect we should be looking at. We should also have as many contacts as possible with members of civil society, which is another way we should be going [11].

Ahead of the EaP Riga summit the members of the S&D political group: *“stressed the importance of an even closer relationship with the Eastern partnership countries on the basis of shared values, commitment to the principles democracy, rule of law, and the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms. While recognising and welcoming the progress achieved so far, they underlined the need to be more ambitious and creative in establishing the immediate priorities of the partnership and the way forward [12]”.*

The group's discourse on the EaP program reflects certain aspects of the EU's institutional discourse, especially when addressing the conflicts in the EaP region. The issues of territorial integrity of Ukraine and Georgia are particularly emphasized in its discourse. This peculiarity of the discourse is also evident in the speeches of the S&D deputies in the European Parliament, which is natural, as the European Parliament is one of the important elements of the EU system, where MEPs have the opportunity not only to cooperate but also to receive information, compliment and interconnect with other elements and policymakers of the EU political system. Thus, the agenda and discourse of the pan-European parties and parliamentary groups are closely interlinked with the positions and agendas of other institutions of the EU political system.

The study shows that the party often refers to the Eastern Partnership program in the context of EU-Russia relations and EU's security and stability. The PES's and S&D's discourse on the EaP program often refers to Russia as a destabilizing actor in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood region, simultaneously the discourse on EaP includes the group's own vision for improving relations with Russia and building a new EU-Russia strategy. Although there are some similarities between the views on Russia's role in the EPP's and S&D's discourse on the EaP, some slight differences are also present, for example, we can single out a section of the S&D's statement “S&Ds: the Eastern Partnership is still in process, but it has the potential to become a success story” made by Knut Fleckenstein MEP and S&D spokesperson for foreign affairs:

At the same time, attention should be drawn to the neighbours of our neighbours. We reiterate that the Eastern Partnership is not directed against anyone. It is a project of co-operation, peace and joint prosperity. Benefits shouldn't be achieved for the sake of the European Union but for the benefit of the citizens of each partnership country. Moreover, dialogue needs to be maintained with Russia which is involved in many regional conflicts of our common neighborhood [13].

After the outbreak of the Covid-19, the group's discourse on the Eastern partnership initiative was mainly focused on the socio-economic recovery of the region as well as the reform agenda of the EaP initiative. In general, the issue of the reforms is one of the central ones. The other issues emphasized in the discourse are the results and benefits of the initiative for the citizens of the EaP countries.

Before referring to Armenia within the framework of the group's EaP discourse, it is necessary to briefly touch upon the cooperation between the PES and the Armenian parties. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) became observer member of the PES in 2015. The parties outside of the EU cannot have another status within pan-European political parties [14]. In 2016 S&D Group and ARF Parliamentary Faction signed a memorandum of understanding in Strasbourg. The president of the S&D described the signing of the memorandum as the expression of the group's political will and the drive to continue establishing closer links with sister parties from countries in the EU's neighborhood as well as the strengthening of ARF's position during the upcoming elections [15].

As in the case of the other EaP partner parties in the region, the S&D emphasized the ideological aspect of the cooperation and the importance to develop anti-discrimination legislation and anti-corruption policy and other political and foreign policy aspects. In this regard, S&D vice-chair of the foreign affairs, neighborhood and enlargement policy, Knut Fleckenstein said:

Armenia deserves to benefit from both its membership of the Eurasian Economic Union and the closest relations with the European Union. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation has its place within the European social-democratic family. We expect the Armenian Revolutionary Federation to commit and to push for – from within the government- a truly independent anti-corruption agency to be set up, with sufficient authority to rigorously investigate corruption crimes [16].

The political support of the PES and the S&D is not only prevalent in the case of the Armenian parties, but is applicable to all the partner parties of the PES and S&D in the Eastern Partnership region. Although, at the same time, it is noticeable that in

the framework of inter-party cooperation, references to the parties of the other EaP members other than ARF are more frequent in the discourse of the PES and the S&D.

Within the framework of the EaP program, the discourse of the S&D group on Armenia is mostly related to the reforms, rule of law, EU-Armenia cooperation agreements. Its discourse contains ideological elements, but in general, can be described as pragmatic. As for the group's discourse on the Armenian genocide, we notice that it goes in parallel with the topic of the Armenian-Turkish reconciliation. The members of the S&D political groups have called on Turkey to come to terms with its past as well as to ratify and implement 2009 Zurich protocols [17].

In the framework of its discourse on the EaP, the party and the political group have classified the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict as one of the frozen conflicts of the EaP region. The importance of the peaceful settlement of the NK conflict was emphasized and the activities of the OSCE Minsk group as well as the responsibility of the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders to reach a peaceful agreement were paid particular attention. For example, Kristian Vigenin on behalf of the S&D group during the debate on the situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh in the European Parliament in 2011 stated:

However, I want to stress that the basic responsibility for resolving the conflict lies with the leaders of both countries. Let us be clear: we cannot accept either the infinite delay to negotiations or the threats of a rapid military solution. We call for restraint and a responsible attitude. The leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan must think carefully about how history will remember them: as people who brought lasting peace and prosperity to the South Caucasus, or as presidents who led their people to death and suffering. The Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament expressed its satisfaction that the revised European Neighbourhood Policy mentions explicitly the so-called 'frozen conflicts'. We expect this policy to encourage deliberate cooperation not only between the relevant countries and Brussels, but between the countries themselves as well. Support for confidence-building measures must be a particular priority as far as Azerbaijan and Armenia are concerned [18].

Like other pan-European parties and political groups in the European Parliament, the PES and the S&D called for the de-escalation of the situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh during the 2020 second Nagorno-Karabakh war, but didn't explicitly mention the aggressor side of the conflict. However, in comparison to other parties and political groups,

the S&D pointed out at the external actors involved in the conflict.

War is never a solution! We urge Armenia and Azerbaijan to immediately stop hostilities and return to negotiation table without preconditions. Russia and Turkey must stay out of the conflict [19].

The group's discourse on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict also includes practical suggestions, such as the EU involvement in the OSCE Minsk Group, the cessation of arms sales to the conflicting parties [20], the exclusion of confrontational rhetoric, and so on.

In regards to the internal political processes taking place in Armenia, the political group have referred to the two events: the reform process in the framework of the EaP initiative and the Armenian Velvet Revolution. The latter was assessed positively by the S&D group and its peaceful nature was particularly emphasized. The S&D press release stated:

The S&D Group praises the people of Armenia for the peaceful transition of power and expresses its support for their aspirations to build a prosperous and democratic country.

S&D vice-president for foreign affairs, Victor Boştinaru, said:

The peaceful handover of power after four weeks of nonviolent protests is a sign of hope. All political forces showed responsibility, as the people of Armenia conducted their protests in a determined but yet peaceful manner. The protests led mostly by the young generation, bears testimony to the aspirations of the Armenian people for a better future in a free and open society, both politically and economically [20].

Conclusion – We can conclude that the S&D group's discourse on the EaP initiative was mainly positive, although some aspects as the implementation of the reforms and the political transformations of the EaP member countries were assessed negatively or in a neutral way in accordance with the political agenda and the priority issues of the S&D. The EaP initiative was more prevalent in the discourse of the S&D rather than the discourse of the PES. The latter can be explained by the fact that the political group receives relatively strong levers at the level of EU political decisions and an appropriate platform (European Parliament) for expressing its position that the party. We can state that the group's discourse on EaP reflects its differentiated position on the EaP member countries. The discourse is centered on specific EaP countries such as Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. This evidence on one hand indicates that the group's agenda is aligned with the EU's institutional agenda and on the hand, the points out at the strong cooperation of the group with the parties and

political factions of the above-mentioned EaP member states. In case of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia the concept of the Europeanization is constantly reiterated in the group's discourse. While describing the foreign policy choices and socio-political developments taking place in those countries in the framework of the EaP initiative, the S&D has frequently emphasized the concepts of "European future", "European way", "European aspirations". Similar discursive elements were used by the group during the EU enlargement.

The EaP was mainly viewed by the S&D in the context of EU-Russia relations and EU's stability and security framework. In parallel with the development of the program, the group referred to Russia's destabilizing role in the region in its discourse on the EaP initiative. However, we can state that the group's discourse on the EaP is both pragmatic and ideological. The S&D's discourse emphasizes the agenda of economic and political reforms, and there are certain ideological elements such as "labor rights", "environmental issues", "equal rights", "social welfare", etc.

As for the perception of the EaP program in the framework of EU-Russia relations, the political group's discourse largely includes EU institutional approaches. At the same time, its own approaches are also noticeable in the discourse, mainly the need to reform EU-Russia relations and the inevitability of Russia's role in the EaP region. The latter was more evident in the discourse on Armenia, emphasizing both Russia's destabilizing role in the EaP region and Russia's potential cooperation with some EaP member states. Although the Socialists have been critical of Russia's foreign policy in the EaP region, this criticism has been relatively less pronounced in comparison to the EPP political group.

Within the framework of the EaP program, the S&D group did not show much interest in Armenia, but there are few instances in regards to the Armenian socio-political realities that have been addressed in its discourse. The S&D group referred to the Armenian Velvet Revolution in its discourse as a positive phenomenon, but in the further development of the discourse, the same pragmatic position towards Armenia continued as it was before the revolution. Regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the political group stressed the role of the OSCE Minsk Group and the need for a peaceful settlement of the conflict, but the statements of the S&D group during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war did not explicitly mention the aggressor side of the conflict. The group's appeals are addressed to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the political group's discourse on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict refers to the

interference of external forces, particularly Russia and Turkey. Such statements can be frequently found in the speeches of the group members. Another important point that is emphasized in the S&D's discourse on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the responsibility of the conflicting parties to dialogue with each other and to achieve a peaceful settlement of the conflict without outside interference. Although the political group has frequently referred in its discourse to the importance to find a solution to the conflict, the EU involvement has not been particularly emphasized. The group also referred to the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, giving importance to Turkey's recognition of the genocide on the one hand, and the establishment of dialogue and reconciliation between the two countries on the other.

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