

Identifying Christian democratic elements in CDU politics

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September 2021

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Abstract: *There is a broad consensus that the CDU has been “the Christian democratic party” in the past seventy years. Several reasons are behind this convention which, in general, we do not question. Yet, building on the categorisation of Bale and Szczerbiak, we examine the government programme of the CDU/CSU for the 2021 elections in order to identify Christian democratic elements in CDU politics.*

Keywords: *Christian democracy, ideologies, party politics, Christian Democratic Union, German politics*

Introduction

Why has the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) been acknowledged as “the Christian democratic party” in the past seventy years? Is it because they are treated as Christian democratic by politicians, journalists, and political scientists? Is it because its name refers to it explicitly? Is it because it consistently and continuously represents Christian democratic politics? Or is it because we identify Christian democratic politics with the CDU automatically without questioning its validity? We believe that all of these factors above are underlying reasons. We do not intend to question the Christian democratic character of the CDU, yet we would like to test the presence of Christian democratic elements in CDU politics. In our [previous article](#)— in which we compared an “old” and a “new” government programme of the CDU – we have already treated government programmes as proper instruments of analysis. In this article, we follow this path by evaluating the government programme of the CDU/CSU for the 2021 elections, which is entitled *Das Programm für Stabilität und Erneuerung. Gemeinsam für ein Modernes Deutschland (Programme for Stability and Renewal. Together for a Modern Germany)*.¹ The “analytical lenses” we use - or in other words - the framework

that helps us to detect Christian democratic elements has also been introduced in one of our [previous articles](#). Trying to find answers to the question in their article, entitled *Why Is There No Christian Democracy in Poland – and Why Should We Care?*, Tim Bale and Aleks Szczerbiak highlighted five core elements of Christian democratic politics, namely, in short:

- (1) “The first characteristic of a Christian democratic party is a commitment to the idea of society as an organic whole...”
- (2) “Christian democrats are traditionally strong supporters of the family as the key means of achieving this societal equilibrium.”
- (3) “Christian democrats have normally supported some kind of ‘social capitalism’, best exemplified by the German ‘social market’ economy.”
- (4) “Christian Democrat foreign policy is underpinned by a strong emphasis on transnational, as well as domestic, reconciliation.”
- (5) “Christian Democratic parties’ programmes are explicitly rooted in and underpinned by religiosity.”²

These five aspects will be considered in our analysis, keeping in mind the related comments added by the authors in the methodological part of their article.^a Still, before the analysis, some additional comments should be made. First, as Bale and Szczerbiak highlight, these five aspects should “not be seen as a set of criteria that absolutely has to be fulfilled to the letter”.³ This statement is partly based on the idea that Christian democratic parties could be different in every nation. As a good guide, the authors point to Wittgenstein’s concept of “family resemblance”. Second, it is also argued that a political party should not be treated as Christian democratic if they clearly run against one of these aspects.

The second and third notes are related to the government programme we analyse. This analysis is a “targeted” one, meaning that it will only examine topics connected to these five aspects. This will lead us to omit themes significantly present in the – quite lengthy, 139 pages long – programme but unrelated to Christian democratic politics (for instance, digitalisation, transportation, coronavirus). Finally, it should also be declared that if a Christian democratic catchword such as solidarity or personalism is

^a For instance, the idea that the first characteristic is connected to the traditional values of “social personalism” and “solidarism” or that the second might lead Christian democrats to treat homosexuality or single parenthood as a threat.

mentioned (for instance, once) in the government programme, it does not mean that the related criterion is automatically fulfilled. Not empty slogans but serious dedications towards Christian democratic elements are searched. We believe that the repeated occurrence of a Christian democratic idea supported by the fact that specific policy plans are assigned to it, are proper indicators of presence.

Analysis

(1) “Commitment to the idea of society as an organic whole...”⁴

Treating society as an organic whole might be an unusual and cloudy idea. To understand this concept, Bale and Szczerbiak emphasise that in this regard, “the central goal of politics is to promote harmonious interaction and eliminate tensions between different social classes and individuals through negotiation and social accommodation.”⁵ In other words, everyone has the certainty of being part of a whole: young or old, rural or urban, employee or employer.⁶ What is striking is that the last sentence is not the authors’ conceptualisation but part of the government programme of the CDU.

The open society is an unshakable principle and fundamental value of the Union parties, just like social cohesion, which is elaborated on throughout the fourth chapter. The government programme adds that “individual freedom and collective responsibility are not opposites but are mutually dependent.”⁷ It would be too lengthy to enlist all the elements proposed as possible instruments for binding German society together, but probably the most emphasised are structured social partnership of employers and employees, volunteerism, cultural initiatives, support for the German language, integration, education, and sports. Though extremism (right-wing, left-wing, and Islamism) is aimed to be combated forcefully, the individuals who find themselves in an extremist environment should be helped by the state to leave it. Beyond these obvious manifestations of the commitment to the idea of society as an organic whole, it is also thought-provoking that although domestic and international threats (for instance, terrorism, extremism, coronavirus, Russia, Turkey, China) are named, there is neither a domestic nor an international force that would serve as an enemy image that could be utilised to forge social cohesion in Germany.

(2) “Strong supporters of the family as the key means of achieving this societal equilibrium”⁸

Just like the former government programme of the CDU/CSU for 2017-2021, the current one – beyond focusing on it numerous times elsewhere – dedicates a separate part, in this case, the sixth chapter on family issues. Germany wishes to be a country of opportunities and promises to support families and provide them time, security, financial leeway, schools, and daycare facilities. The bottom line here is the idea that a policy that consistently puts families at the centre is necessary, and family-friendliness is the hallmark of any Union-led federal government.⁹ The government programme suggests creating specific financial benefits for families (for instance, in tax reliefs and housing support), highlights the importance of education in detail, and would provide more free time for the families as non-material help. It also focuses on the hardships of the corona crisis and suggests solutions. What might be odd is that it also connects family policy to Christian democratic ideas when it writes that under these changing conditions, the policies should consider or be guided by the Christian image of man.

Yet, there is a question raised based on the assumption of Bale and Szczerbiak, namely that in some instances, Christian democratic social policy is accompanied by a rhetorical emphasis on conservative social and cultural values, which might even mean the lack of tolerance towards alternative lifestyles and the idea that single parenthood or homosexual relationship is a corrosive threat to the traditional family model and the community. First, Germany, or more specifically, the CDU/CSU, does not treat single parenthood as a threat but as a possible scenario where, for instance, financial support might be more necessary. Homosexual relationships can be a controversial topic in the case of Christian democracy. Similarly to the former government programme, the Union parties profess that everyone has the right and freedom to decide how to live. Therefore, in short, the elaboration of this specific dilemma is not included in the government programme (for instance, LGBTQ rights are not mentioned but not questioned either). We believe that this lack of explanation does not doubt that – based on the programme – CDU is a strong supporter of families.

(3) Supporters of “some kind of ‘social capitalism’, best exemplified by the German ‘social market’ economy.”¹⁰

The idea of the social market economy was initially represented by the CDU from the second half of the 1940s. Its main ambition was to construct an alternative economic model of the state-based planned and the free liberal interpretation of the economy. It can be viewed as a balance between two extremes with a particular focus on protecting private property and a market-based economy. At the same time, solidarity is shown, especially towards the poor. Another main characteristic Bale and Szczerbiak also mention is that it wishes to “prevent the development of an antagonistic relationship between capital and labour”.¹¹

First, the government programme repeatedly and explicitly highlights the importance of the social market economy. It underlines that it is a successful model which brought prosperity for Germany. Probably the most robust stance in this regard is articulated in the introduction, stating that Germany has rights, values and principles, such as “social market economy instead of social redistribution”.¹² As mentioned before, it would not be enough to treat the CDU as a supporter of the social market economy because that is what it claims itself to be. However, based on the substantive policy measures in the documents related to these questions, especially regarding the economy and social policy, there is no sign of changing perspectives. CDU is still a proponent of the market-based economy with special help for the SMEs; it is against wealth tax and aims to reach prosperity, or at least a decent standard of living – which includes financial status, health, education, etc. - for all in Germany, or even outside Germany.^b

^b It also mentions that it would like to promote social market economy in foreign relations related to Africa.

(4) “Foreign policy is underpinned by a strong emphasis on transnational, as well as domestic, reconciliation.”¹³

Foreign policy is rarely discussed in the first halves of the government programmes, while in this case, it is elaborated in the first place as a distinct substantive chapter. Nevertheless, in its content, there is not much surprise: Germany views itself as a strong nation that, with its democratic allies, has the responsibility to represent freedom, security, and human rights. For global problems, such as the coronavirus, climate change, or digital transformation, global answers should be given. This leads to the need for cooperation between nations (for instance, the USA, France, Israel, Poland), international organisations (NATO, United Nations, etc.), and larger regions (in the framework of EU with Pacific Asia, Latin America and Africa). According to the CDU/CSU government programme, Germany is devoted to protecting human rights, the rule of law, sustainable development, and fair trade. Countries treated as a threat to these values (such as China, Russia, and Turkey) are to be handled pragmatically. While specific controlling measures must be kept (for instance, sanctions against Russia for the annexation of Crimea), spheres of cooperation should be found.

The recipe is almost the same in the case of Europe: more Europe is needed, European cooperation and integration are necessary instead of nationalist isolationism. This is the only way to solve crises (economic or health) and prevent terrorist and cyber-attacks. The government programme also points to the history of building bridges between East and West, directly emphasising the role of Konrad Adenauer, Helmut Kohl, Angela Merkel, and other leading German figures in European unification. To confirm that these are not only sentimentalist momentums, the document also provides detailed plans in which spheres (for instance, finance, security, technology, and education) and instruments can connect Europe more. Although it is mentioned that social policy is an area of non-integration, it is not meant to alter the fact that the CDU is still a supporter of reconciliation in international politics.

(5) “Programmes are explicitly rooted in and underpinned by religiosity.”¹⁴

It is challenging to have – at least an approximately – sure knowledge about the religiosity of a programme. It is the case even if Christian democratic politics do not aim at the “re-Christianisation of society”, as Bale and Szczerbiak suggest, but instead, they include the application of general Christian principles and values in politics, that also “express a Christian vision of humankind and its destiny.”¹⁵ For instance, the former government programme of the CDU/CSU for 2017-2021 contained only a very few direct references to the Christian heritage. In light of this fact, it is strange that the current programme highlights the unique role of Christianity several times. Probably wishing to refer to the Christian idea of freedom, it professes a Christian view of humanity and social diversity instead of a prefabricated life plan for every individual.¹⁶

The Union parties also underline the significance of Christian views and directly refer to Christianity in the case of climate change and the protection of the environment (speaking about the integrity of creation), social policies, families, and foreign policies. It calls attention to the obligation to protect persecuted Christians, underlines the importance of Christian holidays and Sunday rest, and understands freedom of religion in a positive way – which is a crucial idea in Christian democracy – namely, that religion should have a public voice and enrich society. Although the programme writes about religion in a collective sense, Christianity is by far the most emphasised.

Conclusion

To sum it up, based on the analysis provided above, at least two crucial conclusions could be drawn. First, we believe that the categorisation of Bale and Szczerbiak gives a proper analytic instrument to find Christian democratic elements in politics. Second, the CDU/CSU government programme for 2021 contained Christian democratic elements in all five categories without serious counterexamples.

We are aware of some possible limitations of our analysis. For instance, it might be argued that government programmes are only political manifestos (or, in other words, empty promises) that are addressed to maximise electoral weight. Even if crucial

considerations^c are not taken into account, we believe that it should not lead us to ignore government programmes as proper subjects of analysis. Investigating government programmes might be just one of the many opportunities of analysing Christian democratic politics (beyond, for instance, researching speeches, legal or non-legal policy documents), but it is certainly a possible one. We also believe that examining other political parties with the same framework could contribute to our understanding of Christian democratic politics.

Bibliography

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¹ CDU/CSU: *Das Programm für Stabilität und Erneuerung. Gemeinsam für ein Modernes Deutschland*. 2021. <https://online.fliphtml5.com/kxyi/eyjg/#p=140> 139. pp.

² BALE, Tim – SZCZERBIAK, Aleks: Why Is There No Christian Democracy in Poland – and Why Should We Care. In: *Party Politics*, 14(4), 2008., pp. 481-482.

³ Ibid. p. 481.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ CDU/CSU: *Das Programm für Stabilität und Erneuerung. Gemeinsam für ein Modernes Deutschland*. 2021. <https://online.fliphtml5.com/kxyi/eyjg/#p=140> p. 5.

⁷ Ibid. p. 58.

⁸ BALE, Tim – SZCZERBIAK, Aleks: Why Is There No Christian Democracy in Poland – and Why Should We Care. In: *Party Politics*, 14(4), 2008., pp. 481-482.

⁹ CDU/CSU: *Das Programm für Stabilität und Erneuerung. Gemeinsam für ein Modernes Deutschland*. 2021. <https://online.fliphtml5.com/kxyi/eyjg/#p=140> p. 75.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 482.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² CDU/CSU: *Das Programm für Stabilität und Erneuerung. Gemeinsam für ein Modernes Deutschland*. 2021. <https://online.fliphtml5.com/kxyi/eyjg/#p=140> p. 4.

^c First, government programmes – especially compared to political speeches – are quite stable in a way that even if new ideas (for instance 5G technology) are added, as a result of the changing times. Longer perspectives regarding traditional party values and policy decisions are also included. Second, government programmes have many functions and gaining electoral weight is just one of them. It could also serve as a “check-list” for later accountability or be a professed state of positions in a coalition government. Third, the ambition to gain electoral weight, in itself, does not mean that the articulated statements are invalid or irrelevant; in fact, it might give the arguments a special significance that voters are behind them.

¹³ BALE, Tim – SZCZERBIAK, Aleks: Why Is There No Christian Democracy in Poland – and Why Should We Care. In: *Party Politics*, 14(4), 2008., p. 482.

¹⁴ BALE, Tim – SZCZERBIAK, Aleks: Why Is There No Christian Democracy in Poland – and Why Should We Care. In: *Party Politics*, 14(4), 2008., pp. 481-482.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 482.

¹⁶ CDU/CSU: Das Programm für Stabilität und Erneuerung. Gemeinsam für ein Modernes Deutschland. 2021. <https://online.fliphtml5.com/kxyi/eyjg/#p=140> p. 5.