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Christian democracy in Central and Eastern Europe I. – Introduction

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Abstract

Christian democracy is generally treated as a Western European phenomenon. From the end of the Second World War to the 1980s, it was mainly Western European countries, especially (Western) Germany, Italy, France, and the Benelux countries, where Christian democratic political parties flourished and could seriously impact politics. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Christian democratic movement had an opportunity to – building on its historical roots – spread in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries. This series of papers focuses on the recent history and the current status of Christian democracy in CEE countries. As an introduction, the first piece deals with a historical overview of the region from the transitions based on the scientific literature.

Keywords: Christian democracy, Christian politics, Central Eastern Europe, political parties

Introduction

Christian democracy is generally treated as a Western European phenomenon. It is not by accident. From the end of the Second World War to the 1980s, it was mainly Western European countries, especially (Western) Germany, Italy, France, and the Benelux countries, where Christian democratic political parties flourished and could seriously impact politics.[1] Although Christian democracy weakened at its "birthplace" in the past decades,[2] it still has an influential role in Western European politics (see the CDU/CSU in Germany or the European People's Party).

At first glance, the case regarding Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) seems substantially different.[3] The historical period in which Western European Christian democracy thrived was characterised by communist rule in most CEE countries. This "circumstance" resulted in the non-consolidation or – if already existent – the destruction of Christian democratic politics. The communists used uncountable political instruments, including the banning of Christian parties (whether democratic or non-democratic), Christian social organisations and the persecution of Christian politicians in order to eliminate Christianity from the social and political sphere. Obviously, this extended "hibernation" of Christian politics in most of the CEE countries was an utterly unnatural development in these nations' lives. Without denying the significance of the Christian democratic underground movements and the emigrants during the communist regimes (as specific sources refer to the idea that Christian democracy has contributed to the fall of the Iron Curtain[4]), significant renewal in politics could only occur in the 1990s.

It is uncontested that changes have occurred concerning Christian democracy in the last decades in the CEE region. Still, it is not easy to formulate clear conclusions for several reasons. First, there is a considerable variation between the electoral success of Christian democratic parties in these countries and their historical, cultural and religious backgrounds; for instance, while Poland might seem "suitable" for Christian democracy because of its religious background, the Czech Republic – due to the high ratio of irreligious voters – seems less keen to turn towards Christian politics.[5] Second, thirty years is already a considerably long period for identifying specific differences concerning the new Christian democratic parties in these

decades. Third, debates occurred between scholars (not to mention politicians and intellectuals) on the essence of Christian democracy, its influence and its relevance in the CEE region, which contributes to the lack of an uncontested picture of the current situation (for instance, which party should be considered Christian democratic). This paper will not be able to settle all these questions. Still, as an introduction to a series of papers dealing with the recent history and the status of Christian democracy in the CEE region, it will raise a few general arguments and dilemmas based on the relevant scholarly literature.

The resurgence

"After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Christian democratic parties made electoral strides in central and eastern Europe," argues André Munro in his article on Christian democracy in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. [6]

Indeed, in the democratic contest, the (re)emerging right, which included Christian democratic parties, had reached significant success. Adrian Karatnycky's article published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1998 – although generally focusing on Poland and the electoral success of the Christian Solidarity Electoral Action bloc in the 1997 Polish general election – enlisted a few of these achievements of the '90s in Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and Lithuania.[7] He summarises as:

> "Developments in Poland parallel a resurgence of Christian democracy in other Central and Eastern European countries with Catholic majorities or significant Catholic minorities. And a revitalized Christian democracy may have resonance farther west in Europe-at any rate, the pope hopes so."

Karatnycky is aware of the unique features of Polish Christian democratic politics ("The Polish Christian democrats have little desire to separate their politics and their religious beliefs"[8]) and the possible political challenges it might suggest (how to balance between fundamental Catholics and economic liberals). Still, he seems optimistic about renewing and spreading Christian democracy in Europe based on – above others – this Central Eastern European resurgence. He concludes:

> "The nature of the new Eastern European Christian democracy is not settled, but it appears to be moving in a centrist direction without surrendering the

> language of faith-based values. It promises to be an unusual hybrid, embodying the political moderation of postwar Western European Christian democratic movements while retaining a close link to Catholic doctrine on social and cultural issues. By appealing to tradition, Eastern European Christian democracy is creating a stable frame of reference for people who have experienced wrenching economic and political change. At the same time, Christian democracy is extinguishing the appeal of ultranationalist parties, which had drawn support from electorates suffering the anomie of social transformation."[9]

This reference aptly summarises the interpretation of not only the author – who, then, was the President of Freedom House[10] – but also the general optimism of the 1990s in the Western world that the new order, in this case, a Christian-based solution, which consolidates democracy, would bring economic and political welfare that could handle extremes (such as ultranationalism). Allan Carlson – mainly based on Karatnycky's article – shared this positive approach in his article *Europe and the Christian Democracy Movement: A Once and Future Hope?* published in 2007.[11] Nevertheless, he adds that the considerable problems concerning families (e.g. extremely low fertility rates) in post-communist Eastern Europe caused by communism and the "Western-styled social libertanism" invoke solutions (like The World Congress of Families as a facilitator of traditional family policies) which profess parallel ideas to Christian democratic principles. He concludes, "[i]f Eastern Europe – indeed, if Europe as a whole has any viable future, it lies along these Christian democratic lines."[12]

To sum up, in view of the 1990s, it is justified to argue about the re-emergence of Christian democracy in the CEE countries and put hope in its continued success. The (re)establishment of right-wing political parties, including Christian democratic political parties, the reappearance of Christian ideas in politics, the phenomenon that the political right is strengthening, and, in some cases, Christian democratic parties are present in government coalitions[13] was a significant novelty, especially compared to the communist era. However, in light of the more recent literature on the status of Christian democracy in the CEE region in the past two decades, this enthusiasm was partly in vain. Karatnycky wisely notes – and we should reflect on it

later – that the "nature of the new Eastern European Christian democracy is not settled."[14] Nevertheless, it seems that the success of the new Eastern European Christian democracy was not settled either.

What resurgence?

"*Why there is (almost) no Christian democracy in post-communist Europe*" sounds the title of Ann Grzymala-Busse's article in *Party Politics,* published in 2011.[15] Concerning post-communist Europe, the political scientist argues that

> "in contrast to Western Europe, there is little support for Christian Democratic (CD) political parties, as defined by their programmatic commitments. Even in the most religious of post-communist democracies, no CD party has claimed a plurality of the electorate."[16]

Furthermore, she adds, "in several post-communist countries, CD parties failed to arise at all: if we average the support for CD parties across all countries, post-communist Christian Democracy obtains less than a fifth of the West European support."[17] From 1990-2010, the average vote for CD parties in Western Europe was 16,6%. Meanwhile, in post-communist Europe, it was only 4,4% (where CD parties competed, it is 28,6% vs. 6,6%).[18] These statements not only raise the question of the weakness of the Christian democratic parties in the CEE region at the beginning of the 2010s (when the article was published) but also shed doubt on the hopes expressed previously since the electoral results are compared between 1990-2010. In other words, can we argue for any resurgence?

Based on the election data cited by Grzymala-Busse, it seems challenging. First, substantial differences exist since "there is a considerable range in average electoral support from 1990 to 2010, from 0.7 percent in Estonia to as high as 18.4 percent in Slovakia."[19] The more successful countries in this regard are Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Lithuania and (with qualifications) Macedonia. On the other hand, the countries with weaker legacies and no relative success are Romania, Poland, and Hungary.

Why does the legacy matter? Because certain kinds of legacies can best explain the initial successes. After convincingly refuting three conventional reasons for

describing the performance of Christian democratic parties (e.g. more religious voters lead to the success of Christian democracy), the scientist argues that those post-communist Christian democratic parties were more successful, which could build on the legacies of a solid Christian democratic party in the interwar period of the newly independent states.[20] Also these new parties "were perceived as more Democratic than Christian: specifically, where they had favourable historical reputations as state and nation-building parties rather than as agents of clericalism."[21]

In short, based on Grzymala-Busse's article, there was only a very limited resurgence and only in certain countries in the first two decades after the transition. Beyond the historical legacy as a possible facilitator of the rise of certain parties, the author emphasises that the historical context changed between the end of WWII (when the Western European Christian Democrats were successful) and the transitions of 1989 (when the Eastern Central European Christian Democrats could contest for political power). Furthermore, the public meaning and approach to the label "Christian Democrat" have also changed (it was not the only anti-communist centre option as previous, but somewhat more connected to religious politicisation), just like the attitude towards the idea that the Church should interfere in the questions of the public sphere. Some parties managed to adapt to this new situation, but "after the first two elections, the inter-war record faded as a source of party support," [22] and "Christian Democracy failed to take off as a widespread post-communist" political movement."[23]

Further relevant sources confirm rather than deny the validity of this statement. For instance, Kamil Marcinkiewicz and Ruth Dassonneville build on the assumption of „the (near) absence of Christian-Democratic parties—in the Western meaning of this concept—in most East-Central European countries."[24] Last but not least, two of the most acknowledged scholars of the field, Stathins N. Kalyvas and Kees Van Kersbergen, explained:

> "Significantly, we find no instances of parties in Central and Eastern Europe that come near the success of contemporary Christian democracy in, say, Germany or the Netherlands. Why? One relatively straightforward answer is

> that because this region includes Europe's most secularized countries, the electoral chances for any political party appealing to religion were dim from the outset."[25]

What Christian democracy? Which Christian democracy?

Though it would be advisable to rely on data and extend the period used by Grzymala-Busse until 2020 or 2024 to determine the success or failure of Christian democratic parties in the past decade (and the subsequent papers in this series will include empirical sources in this regard), the notion has come back into focus because of other political-ideological problems. The question is, what is Christian democracy? What is its essence?[26] Who represents Christian democracy? Which parties should be treated as Christian democratic parties?

The problem is twofold and interrelated. Based on our aforementioned articles, we can agree with Karatnycky that the "nature of the new Eastern European Christian democracy is not settled."[27] It was not settled at the end of the 1990s, but it is far from certain that – due to the significant political developments of the last few decades – it is settled now. Also, Grzymala-Busse argued in 2011 that "[p]ost-communist Christian democracy appears to be a different creature altogether from its West European eponymous parties."[28] We might also confidently assume that it is valid today. Therefore, the first issue is a profound historical question about the potential similarities and differences of Christian democracy in Western and Eastern Europe.

The second – which obscures and confuses the first problem as much as it raises its importance – is the debate on who is currently a "genuine" Christian democrat. This multidirectional debate with politicians, intellectuals, analysts, and scholars is complicated in itself. Nevertheless, the political developments in the past decade, namely the governance of the two Central Eastern European parties for whom the reference to Christianity is a constant element, the Polish PiS and the Hungarian Fidesz, together with the conflict between the European People's Party and the Fidesz, which ended with the latter leaving the former,[29] contributed to the reemergence of the aforementioned questions.

Also, it is in no way independent of measuring success, so it relates to the original question, namely, the current status of Christian democracy in the CEE region. For instance, if Fidesz is treated as a Christian democratic party (as Orbán calls its government continuously), the electoral share of Christian democratic parties would substantially increase in the CEE region. The case is that the overwhelming majority of political scientists in the field reject the idea that Fidesz is a Christian democratic party, or, at least, labels it mainly a right-wing populist formation.[30] It is not the purpose of this paper to decide on the question. Still, the subsequent articles discussing the recent history and the current status of Christian democracy in CEE countries one by one or regionally (depending on the depth of the related field) will also consider these dilemmas.

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Endnotes

[1] Christian democratic parties have also been successful in certain Latin American countries, such as Venezuela, El Salvador, and Chile. See André Munro, 'Christian Democracy', Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christian-democracy (2024, June 17); Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 'Christian Democracy: Principles and Policy Making. Handbook for the European and International Cooperation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung' (Sankt Augustin/Berlin: 2011), 20.
[2] See Paul Gottfried, 'The Rise and Fall of Christian Democracy in Europe', Orbis, 51/4 (2007), 711-723.
[3] Obviously, the term Central and Eastern Europe is contested in itself. In this series of articles, the OECD's Glossary of Statistical Terms term will be used, which includes Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; see OECD, 'OECD Glossary of Statistical Terms' (2008) https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-glossary-of-statistical-terms_9789264055087-en#page71.
[4] See, for instance, Piotr H. Kosicki - Sławomir Łukasiewicz (eds.), 'Christian Democracy Across the Iron Curtain' (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Michael Gehler – Piotr H. Kosicki – Helmuth Wohnout (eds.), 'Christian democracy and the Fall of Communism' (Leuven University Press: 2019)
[5] This seemingly logical assumption raised by many scientists is not necessarily supported by empirical evidence; see Anne Grzymala-Busse, 'Why there is (almost) no Christian democracy in post-communist Europe?' Party Politics, 19/2 (2011), 321.
[6] Munro, 'Christian Democracy'
[7] Adrian Karatnycky, 'Christian Democracy Resurgent: Raising the Banner of Faith in Eastern Europe', Foreign Affairs. 77/1 (1998), 13-18.
[8] Karatnycky, 'Christian Democracy Resurgent', 13.
[9] Karatnycky, 'Christian Democracy Resurgent', 18.
[10] It might be interesting to note that the same institution now denotes Poland as a free country but places it among countries where freedom has most dramatically failed in the past ten years, see Freedom House: Freedom in the World 2024 (Washington, 2024) https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/FIW_2024_DigitalBooklet.pdf
[11] Allan Carlson, 'Europe and the Christian Democracy Movement: A Once and Future Hope?', The Linacre Quarterly, 74/2 (2007), 94-110.
[12] Carlson, 'Europe and the Christian Democracy Movement', 106-107.
[13] Thus, the European People's Party was also keen to strengthen the link between the Christian democratic parties in the CEE countries and itself at the end of the 1990s, see David Hanley, 'Christian Democracy and the Paradoxes of Europeanization: Flexibility, Competition and Collusion', Party Politics, 8/4 (2002), 474.
[14] Karatnycky, 'Christian Democracy Resurgent', 18.
[15] Grzymala-Busse, 'Why there is...'
[16] Grzymala-Busse, 'Why there is...', 320.
[17] Grzymala-Busse, 'Why there is...', 320.
[18] Grzymala-Busse, 'Why there is...', 320.
[19] Grzymala-Busse, 'Why there is...', 320.
[20] Grzymala-Busse, 'Why there is...', 330.
[21] Grzymala-Busse, 'Why there is...', 320.
[22] Grzymala-Busse, 'Why there is...', 320.
[23] Grzymala-Busse, 'Why there is...', 320.
[24] Kamil Marcinkiewicz – Ruth Dassonneville, 'Do religious voters support populist radical right parties? Opposite effects in Western and Eastern Europe', *Party Politics*, 28/3 (2022), 5.
[25] Stathis N. Kalyvas – Kees Van Kersbergen, 'Christian Democracy', *Annual Review of Political Science,* 13 (2010), 183-209.
[26] The Danube Institute have dealt with this question in the following paper: Ádám Darabos, 'Identifying Christian democratic elements in politics', *Danube Institute* (2021), https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/identifying-christian-democratic-elements-in-politics.
[27] Karatnycky, 'Christian Democracy Resurgent', 18.
[28] Grzymala-Busse, 'Why there is...', 325.

[29] Deutsche Welle: 'Hungary: Viktor Orban's ruling Fidesz party quits European People's Party.' Deutsche Welle, 03. 18. 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/hungary-viktor-orbansruling-fidesz-party-quitseuropean-peoples-party/a-56919987

[30] See, for instance, Jan-Werner Müller, '„False Advertising": Christian Democracy or Illiberal Democracy:' Balkan Insight, 2020.02.03., https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/03/false-advertising-christian-democracy-orilliberal-democracy/; Zoltán Ádám – András Bozóki, 'State and faith: right-wing populism and nationalized religion in Hungary', Intersections. 2/1 (2016), 98–122.; Zoltán Ádám – András Bozóki: '„The god of Hungarians": religion and right-wing populism in Hungary', in Nadia Marzouki and Duncan McDonnell, eds.: Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion (London: Hurst & Company, 2016.), 129–237.; László Csaba (interviewed by Zoltán Farkas), ' „Az új magyar kereszténydemokrácia nem más, mint az illiberális demokrácia új csomagolása"', Mozgó Világ, 44/7-8 (2018), 54-66.; Kamil Marcinkiewicz – Ruth Dassonneville, 'Do religious voters support populist radical right parties? Opposite effects in Western and Eastern Europe', *Party Politics*, 28/3 (2022), 444-456.