



The future of the centre–right in Europe and the 7 Ds

European View
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Abstract

The party-political structure in Europe is in full transition, with a slow, but consistent strengthening of the right and extreme right on the continent. This poses important questions, not only about the political dividing lines that separate these spaces, but also about what constitutes the dividing line that sets the European People's Party apart from both. The key argument is that the European People's Party can be understood as the political space that defends European integration, the transatlantic partnership and the democratic order that was established after 1945, and is the political project for reconciliation in society, reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable through concepts such as the social market economy, subsidiarity, personalism and federalism. Sustainability across policy areas, reconciling the present and the future, is thus the necessary complement.

Keywords

EPP, Right, Extreme right, Sustainability, EU

Introduction

Does the party-political structure on the centre–right and right in Europe follow logic? And if the answer is yes, how could it be described more precisely? What are the hard content borders between political families that cannot be crossed?

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There are evidently different perspectives from which these questions can be answered. Mine is the perspective of a practitioner who has dealt with or at least closely observed these issues for more than 30 years: as president of the umbrella organisation of the European Young Christian Democrats and Conservatives in the early 1990s, as secretary general of the European People's Party (EPP), as secretary general of its parliamentary group in the European Parliament and then for more than a decade as secretary general of the European Parliament itself.

In the second half of the 1990s my prime responsibility as secretary general of the EPP was to establish the party for the first time in direct elections as the leading force in Europe. Through a policy of 'mergers and acquisitions', this aim was achieved in the European elections of 1999 and laid the foundations for the dominant position of the EPP in the EU for the next quarter of a century. This was an indispensable precondition for the successive presidencies of the European Commission held by José Manuel Durão Barroso, Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula Von der Leyen.

Political parties joined the EPP on the basis of its political programme as adopted in Athens in 1992 (Jansen and Van Hecke 2011, 283–317). They came from both the liberal and the conservative sides of the political spectrum and their respective European political organisations.

The Portuguese Social Democratic Party (Partido Social Democrata) as well as the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége) from Hungary left the Liberal International and its European branch and switched to the EPP. The Nordic conservatives and the French Rally for the Republic (Rassemblement pour la République) had long cooperated in the European Democrat Union before they fully integrated into the EPP and that Union was dissolved. Equally Forza Italia (Forward Italy) was also admitted to this enlarged EPP.

The EPP thus branched out in two directions at the same time and absorbed parts of both the liberal and the conservative families in Europe. Ultimately the party's development followed the model of German Christian Democracy, which had become established after the Second World War as a union of Catholics and Protestants and therefore needed to embrace both the Catholic Christian–Social and the Protestant conservative and liberal traditions.

This branching out also marked the departure from nominalism. It was no longer sufficient to have Christian or Catholic in the party's name to be admitted. Consequently a number of applicants from Central and Eastern Europe which had labelled themselves Christian or Catholic, such as the Polish Christian National Union (Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe), were rejected on the basis of their hostility to European integration.

This departure was a practical necessity. Lawmaking in the European Parliament requires the formulation of common positions, especially on European integration.

How did things work out in practice?

All the new partners integrated well in terms of parliamentary work. Liberal, Christian Democrat and Conservative did not prove to be fundamental dividing lines in daily practice, but useful complements in the widened EPP. Forza Italia even became the most loyal delegation in the group based on voting patterns. The enlargement strategy was vindicated, but the question of European integration did ultimately prove to be a hard demarcation line.

Both the British Conservatives and the Hungarian FIDESZ national leaderships turned increasingly against European integration. It is accurate to say that they were hostile more than sceptical. The British Conservatives left the parliamentary group in 2009, taking a nationalist turn as a prelude to the country leaving the EU after the referendum in 2016. Viktor Orbán's campaign of hatred against Jean-Claude Juncker and his cosying up to Vladimir Putin and Marine Le Pen made FIDESZ's relationship with the EPP untenable. Orbán's undermining of democratic checks and balances inside Hungary itself completed the picture.

The real dividing line, therefore, is not Conservative, Liberal or Christian Democrat, but European or nationalist.

The nationalist space divided

Within that nationalist space, the real dividing line has principally been between pro-American and pro-Putinist positions in the external dimension, as well as—largely linked—between constructive engagement with the EU or systematic opposition to it in the internal dimension. This has resulted in the creation of two separate political groups within the European Parliament.

The extreme right within that nationalist space can therefore be characterised as a double-system opposition: undermining both the transatlantic partnership and European integration. The political order established after 1945, with democracy, human rights, the rule of law, freedom of the press, pluralism, the transatlantic partnership and European integration as its key components, has more than proven its value. After more than 70 years, questioning this can no longer qualify as conservative. If a claim to conservatism can be made on the extreme right, then it is only in the sense of pre-Second World War concepts. That is, conservatism as authoritarianism and illiberalism.

It is a nationalism that promises to protect through closure, and is attractive to those left behind. It is how Donald Trump won his majority the first time around, by appealing to coal and steel workers. It is why Marine Le Pen is elected in the former Communist heartland of coal-mining northern France. And it is how Boris Johnson broke the 'red wall' of former Labour constituencies in industrialised northern England. It is Social Nationalism.

Is change possible?

Following the Russian aggression against Ukraine, this division in the nationalist space might be overcome and a larger bloc emerge. Putinism is no longer a viable option in civilised Europe.

But equally, the necessities of government can lead to moderation and learning and a more open attitude towards European integration. This is where the leading parties of both the Czech and the new Italian government seem to be heading. Thirty years after the collapse of Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana), the Italian political landscape is still in full transition with an undecided outcome.

Political parties have moved to the nationalist right as explained above. But the opposite is equally true, has happened and remains a possibility for the future. The successful transformation of the Popular Alliance (Alianza Popular) in the post-Franco era to the moderate and pro-European People's Party (Partido Popular) is the most striking example. José María Aznar restructured the Spanish political space by uniting his Conservative party with smaller Christian Democrat and Liberal formations. The full embrace of the post-1945 political order, including European integration, is the necessary precondition.

The stability of the EU's political system depends on the self-moderation of more radical political movements towards the centre, both on the left and the right, and such moves should therefore be encouraged and welcomed. Greece's Coalition of the Radical Left—Progressive Alliance (Syriza), which originated on the far left, did this during the financial crisis, accepting the need to conduct the necessary reforms to allow Greece to stay in the eurozone. Sinn Féin will have to do this as well, if it ever wants to govern Ireland.

In practice, the transformation to constructive player equally opens up the possibility of addressing legitimate questions more successfully. The importance of the external border of the Union and its protection, limits to migration and the lack of public services in rural areas are just some of them.

Why is acceptance of European integration so essential?

The European continent nowadays is structured by two principles and two principles only: empire in the east as the expression of Russian imperial and colonial ambitions, and the EU as a Union of citizens and states in the centre and the west, providing shelter and protection and a relationship based on the rule of law. It is no wonder that states such as Ukraine and Moldova are desperate to join the EU as a safe haven. And even those states that have never wanted or no longer want to be members still feel the need to enter into close contractual relationships with the EU.

Empire is not an attractive option for Russia's neighbours, because it is linked necessarily to violence and submission. The concept of empire is an attempt to reintroduce the

rules of the nineteenth century to our continent in the twenty-first century. For all Central and Eastern European countries, the EU is, in a very direct sense, the rescuer of the nation state and the precondition for its survival.

But beyond that, the EU provides all the 27 member states with mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution and functionalities that they cannot establish themselves. The EU is the necessary complement to the nation state, allowing it to thrive and prosper, as even the British have belatedly started to realise. Together we can defend our interests in a world that is becoming increasingly dangerous again.

The EU is our daily *modus vivendi* and *operandi*.

Can the EU protect?

If populist political forces are more correctly described as social nationalists that respond to requests for protection through closure, this raises the question of whether the EU can also protect, but in an open political system.

The recent history of crisis can also be understood as a process of giving the EU the necessary tools to protect. As a consequence of the financial crisis, the European Central Bank can now oversee the most important systemic banks across the member states. It successfully enlarged its toolkit to avoid deflationary pressures. Following the 2015 crisis of uncontrolled migration, the EU now has a European Border and Coast Guard and has managed to enter into well-functioning agreements with neighbouring states to better control migration flows. After the first six weeks of national governments trying to manage Covid-19 on their own, setting up border controls and export restrictions, the European Commission successfully took over and ensured that all member states, rich or poor, big or small, received equal access to the necessary materials, especially vaccinations. Furthermore, the NextGenerationEU programme has provided all member states, but especially those most affected by Covid-19, with the financial means to transform their economies (EU 2023). Russia's aggression against Ukraine has seen the EU taking a leadership role in supporting Ukraine and therefore protecting its Eastern member states, including implementing very severe sanctions, financing weapons and taking bold measures to revitalise the European defence industry. The EU is now undertaking to secure its access to the critical raw materials and technology needed to protect European industry. All of the above examples show that Europe is increasingly demonstrating that it can complement the liberalisation efforts of the internal market with the effective protection of its citizens.

What could the programmatic base of the modern EPP look like?

The enlarged EPP brings Christian Democrat, Conservative and Liberal political ideas together in an integrated political platform. The EPP fully embraces the liberal political

order as firmly established after 1945, including parliamentary democracy, pluralism, the rule of law and minority rights, as well as a general preference for the market over the state, and therefore it can never support illiberalism.

Modern conservatism continues to provide a number of eternal truths: not every reform is progress. There is the wisdom of many generations stored in the existing institutions. Revolutions and extremism have more often than not been recipes for violence, hardship, and the disrespect of human rights and life. Pragmatism and common sense are to be preferred over ideology.

The key conservative ambition is to preserve. Sustainability is the precondition for preservation. What is not sustainable violates justice among generations and endangers our common future. If conservatives want to preserve, sustainability is the way forward.

Christian Democracy is based in essence on a number of concepts for reconciliation of the seemingly irreconcilable in society: the social market economy, personalism, subsidiarity, federalism, the people's party and the party of the centre. Establishing a fair balance in society is the political vocation of Christian Democracy.

There is always a danger that societies give preference to the present over the future. But we have also experienced Communist regimes that destroyed the present in the name of a brilliant future that never came. Sustainability requires reconciling both, today and the future.

Sustainability therefore has to be the key ambition, uniting generations. Sustainability cuts across political domains, is visibly endangered today and needs to address the '7 Ds' as elaborated and published by the Martens Centre, along with 175 precise political proposals (Welle, Hefele et al. 2023). The 'D's are as follows:

- *Debt* sustainability ensures that we are not living at the expense of future generations.
- Our *defence* needs urgent upgrading and an increase in Europe's capacity to at least defend ourselves conventionally in order to guarantee our freedom and lives tomorrow.
- Achieving carbon neutrality through a process of *decarbonisation* while preserving energy security and competitiveness is critical.
- Fair burden sharing between the generations needs to balance out the changing *demography*.
- Our *democracy* is endangered by totalitarian regimes, executive overreach, and the control of traditional and new social media by the few, and it needs active strengthening.

- We need to more fully embrace the *digital* revolution if we want to remain competitive.
- The collapse of the Soviet Union made price the dominant paradigm. This has now been replaced by security considerations; thus we need to *de-risk globalisation*.

Max Weber taught us that politicians need passion (*Leidenschaft*) and balanced judgement (*Augenmaß*). Sustainability will therefore need to be implemented in a sustainable way (Weber 1926).

Conclusion

The EPP is a political project defined by European integration, transatlantic partnership and the defence of the democratic order established after 1945. The EPP brings together people's parties which aim to be the force of reconciliation in society and are underpinned by integrative concepts such as the social market economy, subsidiarity, personalism and federalism. These necessarily have to be complemented by the pursuit of sustainability across policy areas, thus reconciling the present and the future.

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