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Facts & Findings

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

# In descent?

## Status and perspectives of Europe's Christian democratic parties

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- From the 1980s onwards, the Christian democratic parties, once Europe's dominant political force, began to decline. While some parties came down rather steeply, others went through a succession of ups and downs.
- However, Christian democratic parties are still widely spread. They exist in 25 European countries. When this study was concluded, they formed part of the government in twelve of these countries, and in five, they furnished the head of the government.
- Contrary to the general trend in this family of parties, some Christian democratic parties were able to effect a recovery, albeit to a widely varying extent.
- The climbers were successful because they laid greater stress on subjects like internal security and migration control, liberal positions, new candidates, and personalised campaigns. On the other hand, concentrating on the imagination of groups holding conservative values is of no avail because the groups that once formed faithful reservoirs of Christian democratic voters are now dying out.
- Having several wings and using these to mobilise different milieus is helpful to a Christian democratic party. Especially in times of growing societal pluralisation, this is crucial for a party to remain successful or become successful again.

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## 1. Introduction

During the first twenty-five to thirty years after the end of the Second World War, Christian democratic parties formed the political force that clearly dominated in numerous West European countries. They still do in some of them, albeit at different levels. During the high phase of Christian democracy in Europe, the union of CDU and CSU, led by Konrad Adenauer, won an absolute majority of votes and parliamentary mandates in the German elections of 1957, while in other countries, Christian democratic parties closely approximated similar results (Altermatt 2013: 229). Belgium, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Austria, and the Netherlands developed into strongholds of European Christian democracy. In those countries, Christian democrats headed national governments simultaneously and for similar lengths of time, exerting a controlling influence on the politics of their countries as well as on the process of European integration (Grabow 2012a: 28).

As democratic bulwarks against Communism the Christian democratic parties leaned on stable links to their supporting milieus, pursuing a policy which aimed at economic growth, prosperity, social security[1] the reconciliation of divergent societal interests, the arbitration of conflicts, firm ties to the West, and European integration (Frey 2009: Chap. 2, Liedhegener and Oppelland 2012: 101 ff.). In Germany as well as in the Netherlands some time later, the Christian democratic parties successfully bridged rifts between denominations and established themselves as cross-denominational people's parties (cf. Lappenküper 2001: 386 ff., Lucardie 2012). Because of their election results, their political successes, and the social structure of their membership, the name 'people's party' applied equally to the Christian democratic parties in the countries mentioned above (cf. Pelinka 2001: 539 f.).

At the time when Christian democracy flourished in Europe, Christian democratic parties were founded or became much more significant in Scandinavia as well[2]. Unlike the other European countries, however, which were either Catholic in character or denominationally mixed, Christian Democratic Party foundations in Scandinavia were not initiated by a liberal secular state and its representatives on the one hand and a politically active and (generally) Catholic laity on the other (cf. Kalyvas 1996, Grabow et al. 2010: 14 ff.). Rather, it expressed the moral indignation of particularly religious Protestants at a liberalisation of society which was too extensive in their view (Madeley 2004: 218 f., Liedhegener and Oppelland 212:103). Scandinavia's Christian democrats regarded themselves as guardians of Christian values in questions of societal policy, ethics, education, and social and, later on, health policy (Svåsand 1994: 180). Abortion, marriage, and the prohibition and/or reglementation of alcohol consumption were subjects particularly dear to their heart. Scandinavia's Christian democrats have always been regarded as more religious and morally rigid than their sister parties in the heart of Europe. Contrary to what some of their names suggest, they never became people's parties, occupying instead (as some of them do to this day) niches in their

party systems in the single or lower two-digit percentage range as the most conservative part of the bourgeois camp in terms of morals and values. In Germany, the Benelux countries, Italy, Switzerland, and Austria, the Christian democrats themselves played the part of the conservatives within party systems whose conflict patterns had evolved historically, while the Christian democratic parties of Scandinavia, having been founded relatively late, remained wedged in between much older and stronger conservative parties, agrarian centre parties, and liberals (Steffen 2006: 67 ff.). However, their niche position did not render them irrelevant in any way. Again and again, they were in demand as majority providers for conservative or liberal-conservative governments, and not least because of their good local roots and their highly active local members, they were able to influence political decisions in their respective countries. Doubtlessly the most successful of them all was the Norwegian Christian People's Party (KRF) which, besides being the oldest Christian democratic party in Scandinavia is the only one to provide two prime ministers of the country, Lars Korvald (1972-1973) and Kjell Magne Bondevik (1997-2000 and 2001-2005).

After the mid-1980s, the Christian democrats of Western Europe entered into a decline.

From the mid-1980s, the Christian democrats of Western Europe, hitherto spoiled by success, entered into a decline that was relatively steep in some cases and a series of ups and downs in others (cf. Grabow 2012a: 37-44). Europe's Christian democrats struggled against social transformation, persistent secularisation in all walks of life, shrinking numbers of loyal voters, the loss of communism as a mobilising and consolidating enemy, new competitors, and home-made problems. One all-time low was reached without doubt when Democrazia Cristiana to a large extent caused the collapse of the Italian party system in the early 1990s, during which one of the hitherto most powerful and influential Christian democratic parties in Europe, the DC, disappeared from the scene and could not be replaced by any of its successors (Trautmann and Ullrich 2003: 573 f., Zohlnhöfer 2006: 284 ff., Frey 2009: 89 ff.).

In addition, none of the numerous Christian democratic parties that emerged in the transition countries of the former eastern bloc was able to halt the structural weakening of the European Christian democracy. It is true that some of the parties that were founded after 1990 did quite well in elections and reached positions of executive responsibility for a time, as did the Democratic and Christian Union in the Slovak Republic (SDKÚ) or the civic platform in Poland (PO). However, with the exception of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) most of these parties have disappeared or shrunk materially by now.

Some observers believe that the time of Christian democracy is past.

In view of the increasing age of its followers and the consequent shrinking of its traditional supporter milieus, the spread of secularisation, fluctuating election turnouts that generally tend to decline and the fact that the freedom for exercising political and economic control on a national basis has shrunk markedly compared to the heyday of the people's parties, not only the Christian democratic ones, some observers say that the decline of Christian democracy is unstoppable (e.g. van Keersbergen 1999: 370). Others even think that the age of Christian democracy is past (Conway 2003: 43). That this is not exactly correct emerges if we look at the European Parliament, where the European People's Party, materially supported by Christian democrats, has been the largest party without interruption for twenty years. Not even the marked losses sustained in the European elections of 2019 could do anything to change that. On the national plane, too, Christian democratic parties play a part that is important in some cases. Tim Frey's judgment, published in his study of Western European Christian democrats, is suitably laconic: to him, they are 'parties entirely like others … (they) win and lose voters' (Frey 2009: 163, 159).

Still, most Christian democratic parties follow a downward trend, whereas some of them move violently up and down from one election to the next (cf. Figure 2). But not all of them are losing; some cases are positive. This study aims to investigate the reasons for these fluctuations.

Why is it that some Christian democrats are winning while most of the others are losing? Is there something that the climbers could teach the other parties? And is their rise sustained, and could it become a role model? What potentials are left to Christian democracy in Europe? These are the questions around which this study revolves. Next to evaluations of literature and products of the press, it is based on eleven expert interviews of about 90 minutes' duration which the author conducted between September 2018 and January 2019 with representatives of Christian democratic parties, scientists, journalists, and expatriate employees of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, partly on the spot and partly in Berlin, on the Christian democratic parties in Austria, Croatia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden[3].

Yet they are not all losing.

## 2. The present situation of the Christian democratic parties of Europe

For Europe's Christian democrats, there are four pieces of news at the moment, two good and two not so good. The first good one is that Christian democrats still are a relevant a political force in Europe. Christian democratic parties currently exist in 25 European countries, and some countries even have more than one[4]. It is, therefore, still appropriate to say that Christian democratic parties are fairly widespread in Europe.

Christian democrats still are a relevant political force.

**Table 1**
Christian democratic parties in Europe (status: May 2019)

| Country | Party/ parties | Last election results[a] | Position in the national party system and in the political system |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Austria** | ÖVP | 31.5 | -- (1.)[b] |
| **Belgium**[c] | CD&V<br>CDH | 8.9<br>3.7 | -- (4.)<br>-- (11.) |
| **Croatia** | HDZ (+ HDS)<br>HSS | 36.3[d]<br>3[e] | Senior (1.)[d]<br>Opposition (4.)[e] |
| **Cyprus** | DISY | 30.7 | Senior (1.) |
| **Czech Republic** | KDU-ČSL | 5.8 | Opposition (7.) |
| **Denmark** | KD | / | Extra-parliamentary opposition |
| **Estonia** | Isamaa | 11.4 | Junior (4.) |
| **Finland** | KD | 3.9 | Opposition (8.) |
| **Germany** | CDU/CSU[f] | 32.9 | Senior (1.) |
| **Greece** | ND | 28.1 | Opposition (2.) |
| **Hungary** | KDNP | 3.9[g] | Junior |
| **Ireland** | FG | 25.5 | One-party/minority government (1.) |
| **Italy** | UDC-NCI<br>CP<br>SVP | 1.3<br>0.5<br>0.4 | Opposition (8.)<br>Opposition (9.)<br>Opposition (10.) |
| **Liechtenstein** | VU | 33.7 | Junior (2.) |
| **Lithuania** | TS-LKD | 21.7 | Opposition (1.)[g] |
| **Luxembourg** | CSV | 28.3 | Opposition (1.) |

| Country | Party/ parties | Last election results[a] | Position in the national party system and in the political system |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Netherlands** | CDA | 12.4 | Junior (3.) |
| **Norway** | KRF | 4.2 | Junior (7.) |
| **Poland** | PO<br>PSL | 24.1<br>5.1 | Opposition (2.)<br>Opposition (5.) |
| **Portugal** | CDS-PP | 11.7[h] | Opposition (3.)h |
| **San Marino** | PDCS | 24.5 | Opposition (1.) |
| **Sweden** | KD | 6.3 | Opposition (6.) |
| **Switzerland** | CVP | 11.6 | Government member[j] (4.) |
| **Slovak Republic** | KDH | 4.9 | Extra-parliamentary opposition |
| **Slovenia** | NSI<br>SLS | 7.1<br>2.6 | Opposition (6.)<br>Extra-parliamentary opposition |

a Parliamentary elections, national level, period between 2015 and 2019, depending on national election dates and the length of legislative periods in the country concerned, figures are percentages.

b Since the vote of no confidence against the federal government led by Sebastian Kurz on 27 May 2019, Austria has been led by a caretaker government. Before, the ÖVP had been ruling as the country's strongest party in a coalition with the FPÖ. The coalition broke up after eighteen months on 22 Mai 2019.

c The position of the Belgian Christian Democrats has been undecided since the parliamentary elections of May 26, 2019. In the preceding legislative period, the CD&V as Belgium's third strongest party had been the junior partner in a coalition government, while the CDH, the eighth strongest party, was in opposition.

d Since 2015, the HDZ has been forming a 'Patriotic Coalition' together with the Christian democratic party HDS and the socio-liberal HSLS, with the HDZ representing the biggest party by far in this election alliance. Of the 61 seats in the Croatian parliament, the two small parties hold one each. In those rare cases when they appeared on their own, neither the HDS nor the HSLS won any mandates.

e The Christian democratic Farmers' Party HSS rarely contested an election on its own. In the last parliamentary elections of 2016 it formed part of an election alliance led by the socialist party. The HSS contributed five mandates to the alliance. When it last appeared on its own in 2011, the HSS won three percent and one seat.

f In this case, CDU and CSU together count as 'the Union' (cf. note 6).

g When it last contested an election on its own in 2002. Since 2006, the KDNP has been campaigning in an election alliance with the national-conservative FIDESZ, most recently contributing 16 of the total of 133 seats held by the two parties.

h By vote share and number of seats (2.).

i When it last contested an election on its own in 2011. Since2015, the CDS-PP has been in an election alliance with the liberal conservative party, more than three times its size.

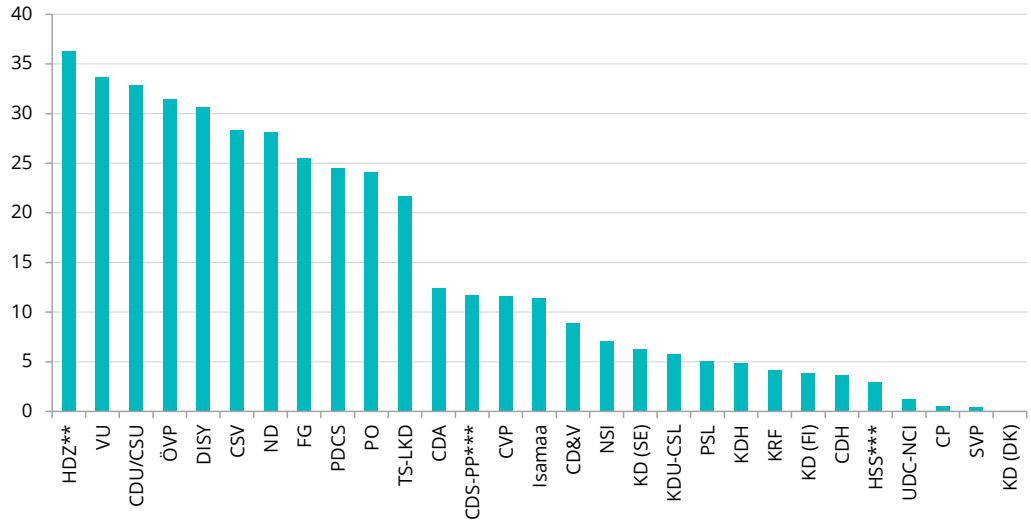
j In Switzerland, parties are entitled to be represented, in proportion to their election returns, on the federal government, the Federal Council, which consists of seven legally equal members. Until 2003, the CVP was entitled to two seats. After that, it lost one seat to the Swiss People's Party, which has had two representatives on the Federal Council since that time.

Junior: junior partner in a coalition government; Senior: senior partner/party of the head of government.

Sources: compiled by the author from Nordsieck (2018, 2019), De Standaard (2019).

The second piece of good news is that when this study was concluded[5], twelve of the 32 Christian democratic parties covered[6] were participating in the governments of their respective countries, with five of them furnishing the head of government: CDU/CSU, ÖVP, Fine Gael, the Democratic Assembly of Cyprus, and the Democratic Union of Croatia (cf. Table 1).

**Figure 1**
Current strength of Europe's Christian democrats*




* in percent of the votes.

** with minor alliance partners, cf. Table 1.

*** when the party last entered an election alone in 2011.

Sources: compiled by the author from Nordsieck (2018, 2019), De Standaard (2019).

Recent losses notwithstanding, the German Union parties still belong to the top group in the European Christian democracy.

At present, the strongest party is the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), although it reached its latest share in the vote of 36.3 percent only through an alliance with two considerably smaller parties, the liberal HSLS and the Christian democratic HDS. Reaching election results of more than 30 percent, the strongest 'lone fighters' among the Christian democratic parties currently include the Patriotic Union of Liechtenstein (last result: 33.7 percent), the German Union parties with 32,9, the ÖVP, which reached 31.5 percent in the elections to the National Council in October 2017, and the Cypriot Christian Democrats at 30.7 percent. Although many supporters and observers may have regarded the performance of the Union parties at the last election as a defeat, and CDU and CSU alike had their problems with the outcome for more than a year, it is a fact that the German Christian democrats as a union still belong to the leading group of the party family.

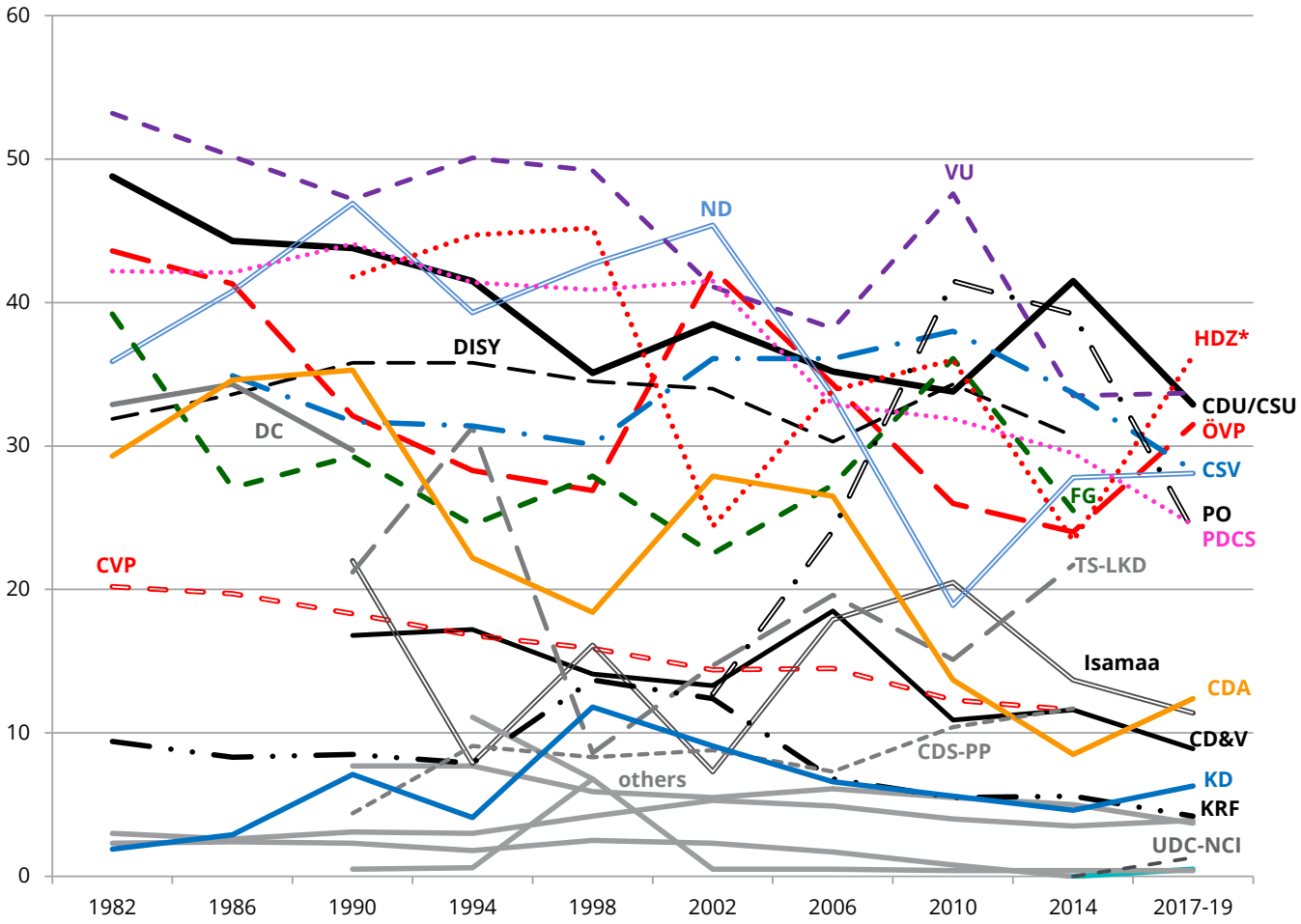
In the range between 25 and 30 percent we find the Christian Social People's Party of Luxembourg which slipped to 28.3 percent in the parliamentary elections of October 2018, the Greek Nea Dimokratia which, having found its feet again after its crash to 18.9 percent in 2012, has now settled at a level markedly lower than before the national debt crisis for which it was partly responsible, and the Irish Fine Gael which last reached 25.5 percent. The Christian Democratic Party of San Marino, the Polish Civic Platform, and the Lithuanian Homeland Union (TS-LKD) currently range between 20 and 25 percent.

Recently, four Christian democratic parties reached election results above ten percent: the Dutch Christian Democratic Appeal, the Portuguese People's Party, the Christian-democratic People's Party of Switzerland, and the Estonian Patriotic Party (Isamaa). However, the Portuguese Christian democrats have been in an alliance with the liberal party since 2015, which is why they do not run campaigns of their own. All the others, and this is the first piece of bad news for the Christian democratic party family[7] next to the current election results of former 40-plus giants[8] like the CDU/CSU, the Patriotic Union of Liechtenstein, and the Polish Civic Platform, range below ten percent at present. A recent newcomer to this group is the

Flemish Christian democrats who have lost nearly three percentage points compared to the previous election and now range in single figures.

This stocktaking is still somewhat static, for it only shows the current strength of the Christian democratic parties but not its development over time. The second piece of bad news for Europe's Christian democrats is illustrated by Figure 2. Save for a few exceptions, the entire family of European Christian democrats is losing altitude. Only seven parties, namely the Croatian HDZ, the ÖVP, the Lithuanian Homeland Union, the Christian Democratic Appeal, the Swedish Christian Democrats, the Slovenian NSI, and a party named 'We In Italy', have been growing again recently. However, this upward trend was preceded in some cases by heavy losses and years of hardship (ÖVP, CDA and, to a lesser extent, HDZ), or else its extent was small or hardly measurable in one case. Moreover, a one-time increase is nothing more than a one-time increase and in no way constitutes evidence of recovery or a return to former dominance. But it does catch the eye during a negative trend for the party family as a whole.

**Figure 2**
Election results of Christian democratic parties over time




Source: author's own compilation from Nordsieck (2018); * cf. legend of Figure 1.

If we collate the snapshots from Table 1 and Figure 1 with the election results over time, Europe's Christian democrats may be broken down as follows: one the one hand, there are those parties that still may be called 'big', currently reaching shares of 30 percent and

more in the vote. This holds true for the Croatian HDZ, the Patriotic Union of Liechtenstein, the German Union parties, the ÖVP, and the Cypriot Christian Democrats. Then, there are 'medium-sized' (20 to 30 percent), 'small' (above ten percent), and 'very small' Christian democratic parties. On the other hand, there are – at least in the short run, i.e. between the last election and the one before – the climbers, constant parties with fluctuations of less than one percent in the period under consideration, and there are the losers. Table 2 shows the distribution of the Christian democratic parties among these groups.

**Table 2**
Christian democratic parties in dynamic view

| | **Big parties** current share in the vote of more than 30 percent | **Medium parties** current share in the vote of between 20 and 30 percent | **Small parties** share in the vote of more than ten percent | **Very small parties** share in the vote below ten percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Climbers** | ÖVP, HDZ | TS-LKD | CDA | KD (SE), NSI, UDC-NCI |
| **Constants** | VU | ND | | HSS, HDS |
| **Losers** | CDU/CSU, DISY | CSV, PDSC, FG, PO | CVP, Isamaa | KRF, KD (FI), CD&V, CDH, KD (DK), KDU-CSL, PSL, KDH, SLS |

Only the ÖVP and the HDZ are well situated at the moment. Whether or not the HDZ belongs to the Christian democratic family of parties may be a matter of dispute, and the same holds true for its ranking as the currently most successful party in the Christian democratic spectrum. To counter these objections, it might be said that the HDZ has close ties with the country's Catholic Church and its Catholic voters, and that the positions it defends in socio-political issues (distribution of roles in the family, definition of marriage, attitude towards homosexuality etc.) would never have raised any doubts elsewhere about its membership in the Christian democratic camp. The HDZ also symbolises Catholic emancipation as part of Croatia's struggle for independence from the Greater Serbian and therefore Serbian-orthodox dominance in multi-religious ex-Yugoslavia on the one hand and, on the other hand, against Islam in what used to be Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Kosovo. The objection that the HDZ owes its present strength to its election alliance with the socio-liberal (HSLS) and the Christian democratic party (HDS) may be met by saying that the HDZ is the biggest partner in this alliance by far, contributing 59 seats to the total of 61 held by this 'patriotic coalition'. Consequently, the HDZ would be Croatia's strongest party even if it were alone. The reason why it is mentioned expressly at this point is that of all the Christian democratic parties in Europe, it is the one whose actions show most clearly what makes these parties strong and successful.

Categorising the Union parties as 'big losers' does not mean that CDU and CSU sustained the biggest losses among the European Christian democrats. Others have been hit harder, including the Polish Civic Platform, the Irish Fine Gael, and Liechtenstein's Patriotic Union (cf. Figure 2). This category includes parties that suffered losses in the last elections but remained big nevertheless, i.e. above 30 percent. This applies to the Christian Democrats of Cyprus and the German Union parties that still are the strongest political force despite their painful losses at the last elections to the German Bundestag (Grabow and Pokorny 2018, Oppelland 2018).

Theorising about the 'end of Christian democracy in Europe' is certainly as premature as it is to talk about the unstoppable decline of all Christian democratic parties. At all events, there still are Christian democrats in most European countries, and they still – or again – look pretty good in some.

The theory of the 'end of Christian democracy' is premature.

This diagnosis, though positive at first sight, appears in a different light if we look at the development of the Christian democratic parties over time. For most Christian democrats, the trend points downward. While it is true, as we have seen, that there are indeed climbers among the Christian democrats, their rise does not last very long, to begin with, and moreover, only two of them are genuine heavyweights. The other five parties that recently have begun to rise again are medium-sized to very small.

Moreover, the loser group is noticeably bigger than that of the climbers. Christian democratic parties of all sizes have been losing, although the biggest group is that of the small parties and the losers. This does nothing to make the situation of Europe's Christian democrats less alarming.

The group of the losers is bigger than that of the climbers.

These days, talking of election successes as big as they used to be appears highly ambitious. Christian democrats now act under socio-political conditions that radically differ from those of ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. Because of the end of Communism, the advance of globalisation, the integration of Europe, the increasing digitalisation of the world, and the growing significance of the issue of environmental and climate protection, they are subject to completely different constraints from earlier generations of Christian democratic parties. Under such conditions, it cannot be taken for granted that Christian democratic parties, which in many countries have been part of the traditional scene of the local political system, should be able to hold their own completely unchanged or even rise higher. Rather, it is remarkable that there should be parties still capable of uniting about one third of the electorate under their leadership. The reasons why there should be some that are capable of rising again will be considered more closely after a brief survey of the causes of the Christian democratic decline in recent years.

## 3. Reasons for losses

The Christian democratic parties have never been accessories of the churches in politics. Relations between the two sides were by no means free from tension (Kalyas 1996: Chap. 2 and 4, Uertz 2004: 41). At the same time, Christians furnished the crucial milieu supporting the Christian democratic parties. In preponderantly Catholic or denominationally mixed countries, this applies particularly to Christians of the Catholic faith, whereas Protestants spread to other parties as well (e.g. Rudzio 2011: 160, Vatter 2014: 139) or, as was the case in the Netherlands until 1980, either had parties of their own or founded them again later on (e.g. Lucardie 2011: 78 f.).

This reservoir of voters has been shrinking steadily for years. Whereas up to 90 percent of the European population still belonged to a particular denomination in the 1950s and 1960s, between 70 and 20 percent of Europeans, depending on the wording of the question, either rate themselves as religious or are regarded as practicing Christians these days (Voerman 2011: 10 f., Smith 2018, Strack 2018)[9]. As religiosity declined in society, the supply of and demand for political contents that could be derived from the Christian faith declined as well. Table 3 shows that it was mainly the Christian democrats of western Europe who – in a manner of speaking – lost the race to the liberal zeitgeist in those socio-political fields where they had based their positions on Christian reasoning. Peter Schreiner, a religious teacher of Münster, once said that while religious education still existed it had been tending for years towards non-denominational approaches (2016). In the same vein, we have been observing

The European Christian democrats have lost the race against the liberal zeitgeist.

a constant liberalisation in other political fields in the other fields of politics, especially in the Benelux countries and in Scandinavia.

**Table 3**
Regulations regarding (former) core issues of Christian democracy

| | Political field | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Country | Religious education[a] | Same-sex marriage[b] | Right of Adoption[c] | Abortion (legal time limits)[d] | Assisted suicide[e] | PID[f] |
| Austria | B | yes | yes | yes | illegal | yes |
| Belgium | C* | yes | yes | yes | permitted | yes |
| Croatia | B | registered partnerships permitted | no | yes | legally moot | no regulation |
| Denmark | C | yes | yes | yes | no | yes |
| Germany | varies from state to state between B and D | yes | yes | yes | conditionally possible | yes |
| Luxembourg | D | yes | yes | yes | permitted | no regulation |
| Netherlands | C | yes | yes | yes | permitted | yes |
| Norway | C (D) | yes | yes | yes | illegal | yes |
| Poland | B (A) | no | no | ** | illegal | no regulation |
| Sweden | C (D) | yes | yes | yes | permitted | yes |
| Switzerland | varies between B and C from Canton to Canton | registered partnerships permitted | no | yes | permitted | yes |

[a] A: Christian teachings of the majority religion as a compulsory subject, taught by theologians at state schools
B: Christian teachings as a compulsory elective subject at public schools in co-operation between the state and the churches
C: Interdenominational religious education as a compulsory elective subject
D: Ethics, civic education, or social education as a compulsory elective subject
* Replaced by civic education in French-speaking classes in 2016. In the rest of the country, pupils may choose between Catholic, Orthodox, Islamic, Jewish, and Protestant religion or 'non-denominational ethics', meaning that religious education constitutes a compulsory elective subject (CNA 2016)

[b] Legal and completely on par with 'classical' marriages?

[c] Possible without restrictions?

[d] Legal, illegal?
** Poland permits abortion only where rape is involved or there is a medical indication. A 'conscience clause' enables doctors also to refuse an abortion if it contravenes their own value or religious convictions. Nor are they obliged to refer the patient to another doctor in such a case (BZpB 2016).

[e] Admissible/Not admissible?

[f] Admissible/Not admissible?

Source: author's compilation drawn from Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (2016), CNA (2016), Filipovic (2011), Luzerner Zeitung (2018), NZZ (2017), Schreiner (2016), Süddeutsche Zeitung (2018).

The traditional voter reservoirs of the European Christian democrats have shrunk massively.

Just like denominational ties have been dwindling continuously for years (cf. Neu 2017:55), ties to political parties have been diminishing across Europe (Janotta 2012: 70 f., Gabriel 2013: 336, Vatter 2014: 136 ff.). The swift spread of secularisation is not the only reason for this, because other parties which were formerly able to rely on the support of once-stable ties to certain social milieus have also been affected by such dealignments, the European social democrats foremost among them (e.g. Callaghan 2000: Chap. 8 and 209 f.). However, Christian democrats are hit particularly hard by social and technological changes and the related transformation of values and attitudes among the population. Thus, the support they received in rural areas and among farmers always used to be greater than average. Progressing urbanisation, the swift transformation of family-operated small-time farms into industrialised large-scale farming operations together with the secularisation processes sketched out above have caused the traditional voter and supporter pools of the European Christian democrats to shrink massively. At the same time, parties aiming to protect nature and the environment on the one hand together with others that are sceptical towards immigration on the other hand raised the number of competitors from the 1980s onwards, at first in Scandinavia and later also in the rest of Europe. Thus, Christian democrats were compelled to fight not only against shrinking numbers of traditional voters but also against new competitors. Moreover, not all Christian democratic parties to balance losses on one side with equal gains in other segments of the voter 'markets'. They lost in every direction. It is true that they still had the rural areas to fall back on, but the number of voters living there was often too small to compensate losses. The consequence was that the decline of the Christian democratic parties in Europe was spreading.

Next to these structural reasons and the possibly irreversible social changes, day-to-day political decisions on the one hand and simple attrition and exhaustion on the other may explain the condition of many Christian democratic parties.

The core competences of the Christian democrats doubtless lie in the field of economic and social policy. Educational policy, too, once used to be regarded as a Christian democratic domain which, however, was always pledged to and in some cases even powered European integration and collaboration. Particularly in those countries where Christian democrats doubled as conservatives, as for instance in Belgium, Germany, and Austria, they also were the parties that argued most clearly in favour of internal security and the maintenance of the public order. Moreover, they were perceived as parties attached to their respective home region that did not shy away from fostering national or regional symbols and traditions without appearing provincial or even nationalist.

In view of the deficits prevailing in the integration of immigrants and their descendants, solidifying parallel societies, and other social problems relating to migration which had become increasingly evident since the beginning of the 1990s, having been caused not only but also by Christian democrats, their aura as parties of law and order received its first dents, particularly whenever Christian democrats occupied key positions in the executive. Further dents followed, for example in the financial and state-indebtedness crisis of 2009-2014 and later during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, when existing rules were suspended within the EU as well as on the national plane to cope with the emergency. The anxieties thus engendered among parts of the population were lumped together with ancient prejudices against immigration and the European Union and skilfully exploited by nationalist and right-wing populist parties. Quite a number of Christian democrats were unable to find convincing answers to this challenge, despite all warnings and suggestions (cf. Grabow 2012b: 47, Grabow and Hartleb 2013: 407 f.). In content and strategy, they remained trapped between multilateral political approaches, humanitarian responsibility, and their avowals of Europe on the one hand and on the other by the concern that the populists

might be legitimised ex post by corrections in the course of their European and migration policy. Thus it came to pass that Christian democrats in Germany and the Benelux countries had to share their image as guardians of public order and safety and as parties closely associated with their home region with nationalist and right-wing populist parties or even lost it to them altogether. The latter have also infiltrated the voter reservoirs of the Christian democrats, not entirely but partially, to which the Christian democrats reacted hesitantly and with uncertain success for a long time (Fislage, Grabow and Heinze 2018).

Christian democrats have found no convincing answers to populism.

If we were to ask CDA representatives and other experts, for example, about the biggest mistakes made by the party in recent years, we will always be referred to the decision it made in the autumn of 2010 to enter into a minority coalition with the right-wing liberal WD which allowed itself to be tolerated by the implacable enemy of Islam and the EU, Geert Wilders. This decision has left deep scars in the CDA and caused it to lose a great deal of sympathy. On two subsequent elections, it was practically cut in half, ending up with a share of 8.5 percent in the vote (Lucardie 2011: 83, Voerman 2011:16). However, as mentioned above, the CDA recently recovered somewhat, climbing to a share of 12.4 percent in the latest parliamentary elections. At the same time, not only observers but also leading representatives of the CDA itself believe that this almost fully exhausts its present potential.

Other parties, such as the ÖVP and the Luxembourgian CSV, had become complacent and immobile in the eyes of their voters after their long-lasting participation in the government, and as a firm part of the so-called political establishment, they had become a butt of dissatisfaction from part of their electorate. While the ÖVP was able to struggle free of a looming downward vortex in the summer of 2017 thanks to a brilliant mobilisation campaign after the chairmanship had changed to the later Federal Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, the CSV refused to recognise the seriousness of the situation in 2013, instead regarding its opposition role merely as a kind of once-only 'accident' (Hilgert 2015), not as an inducement for a makeover after the example of the 'new people's party' ÖVP.

In central eastern and south-eastern Europe, Christian democrats were pushed aside by national-conservative or national-clerical parties.

These are the framework conditions, only touched upon briefly here, under which Europe's Christian democrats are operating today. For explicitly Christian democratic positions, these conditions are not favourable in the Benelux states, Scandinavia, and Germany, and they apply only fragmentally in Austria and Switzerland (cf. Table 3). They appear most favourable in central eastern and south-eastern Europe, where the Catholic Church plays an important part in political transformations, nation-building, and the formation of national identities, and where sometimes very close links have evolved between some parties and the church. The problem prevailing in the central eastern and south-eastern European countries was and still is, however, that the Christian democratic parties have been pushed aside by powerful national-conservative or national-clerical parties (Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland) or that several Christian democratic parties evolved in one and the same country and are now fighting over the voters (next to the aforementioned countries, these include e.g. Croatia and Slovenia). Thus, the situation of Christian democratic parties is not unproblematic even in central eastern and south-eastern Europe.

Despite all the difficulties that have only been sketched out briefly here, some Christian democratic parties have been able to increase their following recently. As we have seen, this increase happens at various levels (cf. Figure 2), but it does indicate that Christian democratic parties are not inescapably condemned to decline.

## 4. Reasons for current successes

A feature that is common to all Christian democratic parties is that they may rely on a variety of strengths and strategic advantages, independently of their concrete election performance. First among these are strong local roots, local political structures that still work efficiently, connections with numerous local policy transactors and their lobbies, a still-high number of local political mandates and holders of office, a membership which is older than the average but comparatively faithful and active, unusual strength in the rural areas, a party youth organisation that is generally comparatively active, a comparatively large bandwidth of issues and programmes, an eminently favourable position close to the middle of each party system at those levels that are above local politics, government experience, coalition potential, and an almost legendary penchant for pragmatism.

Christian democrats have strong points ...

It is true that these strengths do not necessarily constitute the causes for the recent successes of Christian democratic parties, for they are confronted by numerous weaknesses and problems, and there are some of these strengths where trends point in a rather unfavourable direction. In other words: these are cases where Christian democrats feed upon their (dwindling) substance. Even so, current successes and even more so the fact that Christian democratic parties have been around and have enjoyed their importance for such a long time are based on organisational, strategic, and content-related foundations that were laid a long time ago and still exert their influence today. Thus, for example, despite the occasionally grave upheavals within the ÖVP after Sebastian Kurz became its president, 'the new people's party' is still very well organised and connected locally. Of the country's 2,200 communities, the ÖVP furnishes the mayor in about 1,500, emphasising its reputation for being 'Austria's mayoral party' (Halper 2011: 10). Mutatis mutandis this also applies to most of the other Christian democratic parties which in addition feature most of the strengths (and weaknesses) summarised below.

... and weaknesses

**Table 4**
Strengths and weaknesses of Christian democratic parties, challenges and trends

| Strengths | Weaknesses/challenges | Relevant trends |
|---|---|---|
| local ties | | declining slowly but steadily |
| numerous local mandates | | declining |
| strong in rural areas | | declining because of urbanisation, societal (and value) changes, and industrialisation of farming |
| close links to numerous societal and interest groups (industry, SMEs, agriculture, church) | | continuing |
| value-based policies | | continuing |
| wide range of themes and programme items* | | indeterminate |
| active party youth | | continuing |

| Strengths | Weaknesses/challenges | Relevant trends |
|---|---|---|
| government experience | | continuing |
| coalition potential | | continuing |
| pragmatism | | continuing |
| probity, professionalism | | continuing |
| position at the centre of the political competition sphere | contested and partially occupied by rural centre parties, conservatives, and/or liberals, especially in Scandinavia and the Netherlands | controversial within the party even in very successful circumstances (e.g. Germany) |
| | declining membership figures | continuing |
| | senescence/recruitment problems in the party and the electorate | continuing |
| | shrinking traditional voter milieus | increasing |
| | representation and mobilisation weakness in urban areas | increasing |
| | weakness in reaching out to and mobilising voters with a migration background | continuing |
| | being tired of/sceptical towards Europe | indeterminate |
| | new competitors | increasing |
| | links to pressure groups of which some have no promising future (e.g. automobile, agrarian industry, conventional agriculture) | continuing |
| | value-based policy: potential conflicts between value conservatives and pragmatists | continuing |

* Does not apply to the Scandinavian Christian democrats

Source: author's own compilation from field research and Grabow (2016).

Then again, Christian democrats do not necessarily need to win elections in order to retain their relevance. Their mostly favourable position in the competitive environment of their respective countries and their pronounced political pragmatism also provide them with a high coalition potential. Thus, Christian democrats are now – or were a short while ago – junior partners in coalition governments in Belgium, Estonia, Liechtenstein, and the Netherlands, despite their weak and – save for the CDA – deteriorating election performance. In Norway, this happened early in 2019, after the KRF had first tolerated a minority government composed of the liberal conservatives (Høre), the liberals (Venstre), and the national conservative and in part populistic forces (FRP) and then joined the coalition, having been lured by the wooing of the conservative prime minister Erna Solberg. However, there was a high price to pay for that, because during the discussions about government participation the 'hard core' of the KRF, highly principled in any case, seceded to found a new party, De Kristne (The Christians). The KRF, which had won a mere 4.2 percent in the last parliamentary elections, was further weakened by this secession, although it is now allowed to take a seat on the cabinet table.

In Sweden, too, the conservatives wooed until mid-January 2019 the rising but still very small Christian democrats and their share in a coalition of the civil block parties, which traditionally includes liberals and the centre party in addition to the conservatives and the Christian democrats. In January 2019, however, the two first-named parties veered away from this decades-old constellation after months of negotiations. Since then, they have been tolerating a red-green minority government.

Christian democrats are able to win even today ...

The climbers, primarily the two big ones, the Croatian HDZ and 'The New People's Party' in Austria, but also, to a certain extent, the Lithuanian Homeland Union (TS-LKD), do not owe their gains and the greater importance resulting from them to emphasising Christian democratic positions. Apart from the fact that Sebastian Kurz, the chairman of the ÖVP and later Federal Chancellor, settled upon himself all decision-making functions within the party, converting the people's party with its once widely varied organisation into a 'one-man firm' as far as political orientation and the selection of personnel are concerned, the ÖVP did not enter the elections to the National Council of 2017 with a single demand indicative of a Christian democratic spirit. The foreground was occupied by cuts in social benefits, especially those for asylum seekers and other immigrants, improvements in the protection of Europe's external borders, strengthening internal security through more surveillance and more police, tax cuts, cutting down on government spending, and reducing public indebtedness (Kurier 2017). This reflects an almost spotlessly pure liberal-conservative approach, not one that follows Christian articles of faith[10].

... but without emphasising unmistakably Christian democratic positions.

The Christian Democratic Appeal, too displays Christian democratic positions only in the margin at best. This at least partially recovered party, classified as an example of a 'small riser' for the purposes of this study, focusses on positions based on economic liberalism, social responsibility, and conservative values, applied in this instance to migration control, greater internal security, and national identity (CDA no date: 24 ff.). That we are at all dealing with the programme of a Christian democratic party appears from positions in which the CDA advocates freedom of choice between private and public care of re-school children and avows the value of the family, besides regarding itself as 'morally obliged' to mediate international conflicts or eliminate the causes of migration in the countries of origin. In the latter case, however, they do point out that whenever refugees from zones of crisis are adopted temporarily this should always be done with an eye on their return (ibid. 39 f., 54 f.). While it is not genuinely Christian democratic in the classical sense, the CDA's demand to introduce a general compulsory service for younger people is in harmony with other Christian democratic parties.

In family policy as well as in social policy, the Swedish Christian democrats traditionally stand for classical positions derived from Christian articles of faith. A the same time, the fact that an increase from 4.6 to 6.3 percent spared them the need of leaving the Reichstag is ascribed to other factors than an emphasis on Christian values, including their ability to exhaust their potentials in the rural regions of northern and southern Sweden (Bauer and Gläser 2018) and the popularity of their youthful, committed, and very media-wise Ebba Busch Thor. Not least among the reasons quoted by observers for the fact that the Swedish Christian democrats were able to limp across the four-percent hurdle is a certain amount of pity because it was thought that for their constant faithfulness to the civic block they should not be left quite empty-handed.

The HDZ is strong because it has wings and uses them.

The currently most successful party in the Christian democratic spectrum of Europe is the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) (Strohmaier 2004: 111 f.). Founded in Zagreb as early as 1989, i.e. before the disintegration of Yugoslavia by the later prime minister of Croatia, Franjo Tudjman, the HDZ amalgamated from the start two fundamental ideological currents, one conservative, the other liberal. Both may be further subdivided into a national-conser-

vative and a value-conservative wing, the latter closely linked to the Catholic Church. The liberal current may be split into an economically liberal and a cosmopolitan wing that is polyglot and friendly towards the EU and appeals to young and well-trained Croats even in urban regions. Depending on which fundamental current happened to be prevalent, the orientation of the HDZ both under Tudjman and during the foundation of the state, which was accompanied by a civil war, was national(ist)-conservative. Under his successor once removed, Ivo Sanader, it was more liberal, although the latter discredited the liberal wing for a while through corruption scandals. Still later, it turned national-conservative again under the former head of the Croatian secret service, Tomislav Karamarko. One of the reasons for the marked recovery of the HDZ after 2015 is that its new chairman, Andrej Plenkovic, the current prime minister of Croatia, allowed a degree of freedom to both currents and their respective wings. Thus Plenkovic, a former diplomat, is himself a representative of the liberal-polyglot wing, while President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic is a representative of the conservative camp, although she suspended her membership in the party while in office. If we consider on top of this the ubiquitous presence of the HDZ together with its faithful membership in rural regions, we may conclude that the party made full use of its wings, and in doing so, it exhausted all its potentials.

This example shows how useful internal wings can be to a (people's) party if they are employed skilfully. Nothing can be more harmful than to suppress an existing wing or internal conflicts about which of the approaches represented by specific wings is the right one. Parties which aim to represent a wide share of the population and direct the affairs of their country as a controlling political force necessarily have to cover a wide range of subjects. This can be done only through internal wings and currents that provide a home for each of the different socio-political interests within the party.

Regarding the various debates about wings among the German Christian democrats, the author should like to remind readers at this juncture of a study about the federal structure of the CDU which very clearly demonstrates that the party's dominance in the German party system is partly due to the bandwidth of subjects covered by its regional associations (Schmid 1990: Chap. III). Thus, the CDU was once known in Hamburg as a Protestant, upper-middle-class, liberal, worldly, and mercantile party, in Lower Saxony and Rhineland-Palatinate as down-to-earth, rural, and conservative, as a value-conservative party promoting internal security in Hessen, as Catholic value-conservative and competent in matters of economy and technology in Baden-Württemberg, and as labour-friendly in North Rhine-Westphalia. For many years, this diversity was an important element in the success of the CDU. Even today, it must be seen as a prerequisite of success for a party that aims to remain capable of gaining a majority. United by shared objectives and values, such as democracy, the rule of law, basic rights, social market economy, and a national and European identity, its programme must be as diverse as the society it purposes to represent and lead as a people's party.

## 5. Summary and outlook

As a family of parties, Europe's Christian democrats are no longer doing so well. Some family members have lost some of their former strength, and some are even struggling to survive. More recently, Christian democratic successes have happened at widely differing levels: in the middle one-digit and the lower two-digit range, the 30-percent-plus-X range, or anywhere in between. At the same time, upswings again and again were preceded by painful losses, as for instance in Greece, Croatia, Lithuania, Austria, and the Netherlands, or else the decline was sustained, as in the case of the Swedish Christian democrats. Apart from a remarkable temporary recovery of the German Union parties in 2013 and gains for the parties mentioned above, the curve of the election results of the other Christian democrats in Europe pointed in one direction only – downhill (cf. Figure 2).

However, Christian democratic parties are still widely spread. They exist in 25 European countries. At the end of January 2019, they formed part of the government in twelve of these countries, and in five, they furnished the head of the government. We still have a long way to go before we can say that Europe's Christian democrats are done for.

The climbers hardly owe their success to classical Christian-democratic programmes.

If, however, we take a closer look at those parties which in recent years recovered some public approval and political importance, we notice that the climbers hardly owe any of their status improvements to an emphasis on Christian democratic positions. First and foremost, their success was based on

- greater emphasis on conservative viewpoints that also focus on national identity and symbolism as well as on the internal security of their respective countries, mostly coupled with demands for restrictions and greater control of migration (ÖVP, TS-LKD, CDA),
- liberal positions (ÖVP, HDZ) or
- a balanced mix of value conservatism, security, national interests, liberalism, and Christian values (HDZ, KD) and, not least,
- a dynamic campaign with a new top candidate who rekindled an interest in or even a temporary enthusiasm for politics in broad segments of the population (mainly the ÖVP and also the Swedish KD, minus a few elements).

How little attention is paid to avowed Christian democrats within their own party as well as in society as a whole emerges clearly from the examples of the Lithuanian Homeland Union within which the marginalised Christian democrats are ridiculed as 'Taliban' by the dominant conservatives or the Norwegian Christian democrats, from which a group of politically active Christians split although the KRF is still regarded as the one party in the C-family which is guided most by Christian values.

There are enough subjects for Christian democratic parties to address.

Thus, it appears that emphasising positions and value-related issues that may be derived from the Christian faith or focussing on the imagination of value-conservative core voters inescapably leads to results in the lower two-digit or even the middle one-digit range, simply because the groups which at one time formed faithful Christian democratic voter reservoirs are slowly dying out (cf. e.g. Sinus 2018). Christian democratic parties may follow the same path, or they may offer a policy that covers a wide range of subjects which will save them from marginalisation. Subjects with which Christian democrats will be able to score in the future still are available in large numbers, be they related to a social policy that accepts reality, i.e. a steadily growing variety of life models to be interwoven cleverly (cf. Schneider, Sulak, and Panova

2019), in the field of affordable high-quality care, to climate protection within an economic policy which, though ecologically guided, still obeys the principles of market economy and secure prosperity, be it in the field of internal order, where very different action options are open to and expected of Christian democrats, especially where no other conservative forces exist, or be it simply playing the part of the pragmatic problem-solver. Further issues exist in the field of European policy, where there is always a demand for such a problem-solver, and where it is nothing less than the historic task of Christian democratic parties as the strongest forces driving European integration to tell the citizens which should be the objective that the community should set a course for now, after nearly 62 years of institutionalised European collaboration.

It would be superfluous to continue enumerating possible subjects at this point (cf. inter alia Grabow 2012a: 35 f.). Christian democrats could and should submit political offers to all voters and milieus which do not mainly rely on more and more redistribution by the state and aim to promote the safety and continued development of their environment while respecting the rules of democracy, no matter whether, in the view of the voters, this concerns the region, the nation, or the European Union. The ability to cover such a bandwidth of contents constitutes one of the traditional strengths of the Christian democratic parties, and there is no reason to disregard it in the future.

However, such strategic agility is by no means common to all Christian democratic parties. In addition, those in Scandinavia which traditionally let themselves be guided to a much greater extent by Christian articles of faith are 'wedged in' between conservative, liberal, and agrarian parties (cf. Madeley 2004: 222) which crowd the competitive space in the middle and to the right of it, thus reducing the development options of the Christian democrats as well as other parties. The establishment of right-wing populist parties did not improve the strategic position of Scandinavia's Christian democrats (cf. Heinze 2017). However, these restrictions apply not only in the far north. Christian democrats in Belgium, particularly in Flanders, in the Netherlands and in Switzerland move in similarly tight spaces. Yet this is not necessarily a drawback or even a 'death sentence' for the Scandinavian, Flemish, Dutch, or Swiss Christian democrats because, being small niche parties, they will continue to have coalition potential which they do exploit in practice (s.a., cf. Table 1).

Christian democrats having more strategic options and greater political ambitions should make use of the entire bandwidth of the political spectrum so as to remain attractive – or become attractive again – to a voting public with less permanent social and political convictions that is individualised, interested in more varied subjects, more critical, and basically more sceptical. Parties with internal wings enjoy a distinct advantage, but these wings should be used to the benefit of the party and the country.

Parties that have wings must make use of them.

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1 On the conceptual foundations of Christian democratic social policy see for example van Keersbergen (1995), Grabow (2010: 7 f.).

2 The Christian Democratic Party of Finland was founded in 1958, that of Sweden in 1964, and the Danish party in 1970 (Madeley 2004: 218). While the Norwegian Christian democrats were actually founded in 1933, their expansion across the nation began only after 1945 (ibid., 224, Svasand 1994: 180), with the KRF fluctuating around the ten-percent-mark for decades. In 1997 the KRF reached its best result so far with 13.7 percent of the vote share. Three times it furnished the prime minister of Norway.

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4 On the typology of Christian democratic parties and the features distinguishing them from others cf. Frey (2009: 48 ff.).

5 The study was finished on January 25, 2019. For later publication the text and the figures were updated until June 4, 2019.

6 Figures in this study are based on data provided by the EPP (undated) and Nordsieck (2018) as well as on estimates of KAS colleagues in the field offices and home-based desk officers. In this instance, the German Union parties count as one, although they are in fact two independent parties. Counting them as one is legitimised by the fact that they never compete against each other in elections. In comparative party research, competition is regarded as crucial for counting parties singly or together (Liphart 1999: 69 ff., Niedermayer 2018: 286, Note 3).

7 On the subject of party families in general, cf. e.g. Höhne (2012) and on the Christian democratic family of parties cf. e.g. Liedhegener and Oppelland (2012).

8 The term 'giant' decidedly does not refer to the size of the country, the party in question, or its importance in European politics, but only to its former successes in elections and its resultant significance in its own political system.

9 Top ranks in Europe are occupied by Poland and Italy, where 85 and 75 percent of the population are practicing Catholics, respectively. In Italy, they are shared out among all parties, not least because of the scandalous disintegration of the DC, many Catholics in Poland incline towards the national-conservative Law and Justice party (Wysocka 2013: 3011 ff.). The countries with the lowest proportions of practicing Christians in Europe include the Czech Republic and the Netherlands at about 25 percent, the Scandinavian countries at ca. 20 percent, and Estonia at about 15 percent of practicing Christians (Smith 2018).

10 For more details about the political situation in Austria before the elections to the National Council of October 2017 and the campaign of the ÖVP under Sebastian Kurz cf. e.g. Fislage, Grabow and Heinze (2018: 36 f.), Sommer (2018) and Köstinger (2018).

## Imprint

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