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Historic day for Swiss Christian Democrats – Merger and Farewell to the “C”

The Assembly of Delegates of the CVP decides by a clear majority to rename the party “Die Mitte” (“The Centre”) and merge with the centrist party BDP

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The Swiss Christian Democrats of the CVP vote for change. At their Assembly of Delegates on 28 November (conducted in a decentralised fashion), the party took two historic decisions. Firstly, the delegates confirmed by a clear majority the vote of the party members in the October ballot and voted in favour of changing the party’s name to “Die Mitte – Freiheit, Solidarität und Verantwortung” (“The Centre – Freedom, Solidarity and Responsibility”). This cleared the way for the merger of the CVP with the smaller moderate party BDP. The merger will thus come into force on the 1st of January 2021.

Background

The discussion about the reference to Christianity in the party name is nothing new, but has occupied the party on a regular basis since the 1970s. The Christian Democratic People’s Party (CVP) has long been deeply rooted in the traditional Catholic cantons of Switzerland and in the Catholic-conservative milieu¹. Driven not least by secularization and the resulting continuous shrinking of its own potential voters, the CVP has tried for decades to win voters beyond this

Catholic milieu and the “home countries” by a wide variety of means. The success of these efforts was limited, however, and the party, with few exceptions, continues to have a difficult time with Protestants and even more so with the growing group of non-denominational voters². As a result, the proportion of voters fell slowly but steadily from over 23% in the 1980s to below 12% in the 2015 and 2019 elections. The CVP was indeed able to successfully limit the damage in the parliamentary elections a year ago. However, it wasn’t able to reverse the trend either. As well: due to the strong gains of the Greens, the CVP even found itself in only fifth place. This ranking may well have consequences in Switzerland, because the seven seats in the Federal Council, the Swiss executive, are usually distributed among the four largest parties according to the formula 2:2:2:1³. Although the CVP’s seat in the Federal Council wasn’t acutely endangered this time, it could be seriously threatened if the electoral trends observed in recent years continue. Accordingly, a reversal of the trend has become increasingly urgent and gave new impetus to the discussion about a name change.

However, the most serious – though not the only – reason for the name change was the prospect of a merger with the moderate small party BDP

¹ According to a [Selects Fors study](#) on the 2015 elections, the CVP won 24% of the vote among Catholic voters, 4% among Protestants and 3% among non-denominational voters (overall result: 11.6%)

² Interestingly enough, it was still called the Swiss Conservative People’s Party when it was founded in

1912 and was only renamed the Conservative Christian Social People’s Party in 1957, and the CVP in 1970

³ Two seats each for the conservative-eurosceptic SVP, the FDP and the Socialists (SP), one for the CVP

(Bourgeois Democratic Party, which for its part crashed from 4.1% to 2.5% in the parliamentary elections). This is a natural partner in terms of content and is much better anchored in some traditionally (rather) reformed cantons (above all Bern, Glarus, in parts of Aargau, in the Protestant areas of Graubünden, and to a lesser extent Zurich), where the CVP has been struggling. Moreover, both parties (together with members of the Protestant People's Party) already form a joint parliamentary group at national level. However, as a prerequisite for a merger, the BDP demands that the "C" in the party name be removed. On the 4th of September, the party presidium of CVP Switzerland announced a recommendation to change its name to "Die Mitte. Freiheit, Solidarität, Verantwortung" ("The Centre - Freedom, Solidarity, Responsibility"). A survey conducted by the opinion research institute gfs.Bern had shown that renouncing the C could increase potential votes by up to 20%. The new name, "Die Mitte", went down well with party members, but the reaction of potential new voters in the survey was rather lukewarm.

While the party leadership used pragmatic arguments in favour of the name change, prominent CVP representatives, above all the influential Council of States member Beat Rieder (Wallis/Valais), had spoken out against giving up the Christian reference in the party name.

Green light from the grass roots and discord in the run-up

In a ballot held for the first time in October 2020, the members of the CVP voted with 60.6% in favour of changing the name of their party and thus to abandon the "C" in the party name. The new name is "Die Mitte - Le Centre - Alleanza del Centro - Allianz dal Center" in the respective national languages. Around 27% of the 76,000 members took part in the first such vote in the party's history. The youth wing decided even more clearly (about 67%) to change its name.

Even though support for the old party name was remarkably strong among almost 40% of CVP members, the vote was a relief and confidence-booster among the party leadership. Nevertheless, there was some discord within the

party afterwards: for instance, some of the party representatives who were critical of the renaming doubted that the ballot had given the delegates a sufficient mandate to vote in favor of the name change. Reason: in the Assembly of Delegates, a 2/3 majority was required for such a step. However, the ballot had failed to achieve such a majority. Legally speaking, the members' vote had no binding effect on the delegates. The vote at the Assembly of Delegates on 28 November was therefore a litmus test for the party leadership: party president Gerhard Pfister had previously made it clear that there was no "Plan B" and linked the outcome of the vote to his political future as party president. Accordingly, a "No" vote by the Assembly of Delegates would have been tantamount to a political vote of no confidence in the party leadership and would have triggered a serious internal party crisis.

The result - a clear majority for the name change and merger

To the relief of the party leadership, however, the vote was ultimately remarkably clear-cut: at the decentralized Assembly of Delegates held at 13 different locations, almost 85% (325 of 383 delegates) were in favor of the name change. Delegates were even more clearly in favor of the merger with the BDP (336 votes to 25). Here, however, the hurdle was set even higher with a ¾ quorum of the delegates present. After the clear vote, party president Pfister was also combative: for 2027, i.e. the next but one parliamentary election, he called for a long-term target of 20% and thus a claim to regain the second seat in the Federal Council, which he lost in 2003.

The BDP, for its part, had already cleared the way for a merger of the two parties on 14 November in an Assembly of Delegates, also held on a decentralized basis, with only one abstention.

Further steps

The vote has cleared the last hurdle for a merger with the BDP - this step will now take effect on 1 January 2021. From now on, the party's full name will be "Die Mitte - Freiheit, Solidarität und Verantwortung". A new party programme will then

be drawn up – this shouldn't hold any fundamental surprises, but should be based on existing priorities and issues. In spring 2021, a new president of the merged party is to be elected.

Important: The mother party is leaving it up to its cantonal parties to decide over the next five years whether to retain the reference to the old party name and thus take, as appropriate, local circumstances into account. It is indeed to be expected that some cantonal sections will retain the "C" at least for the time being, including certainly the CVP in the Upper Valais – a deeply Catholic stronghold of the Christian Democrats and probably also in one or two cantons of Central Switzerland⁴. On the other hand, others – such as the Solothurn CVP – will follow the mother party without hesitation.

Legally, "Die Mitte" will not be a completely new party, despite the change of name. The merger with the BDP is to be carried out via an "absorption merger" by the CVP.

Significance, opportunities and risks

The CVP's move is historic in several respects. On the one hand, it is probably the party's most far-reaching attempt so far to reach new constituencies. A change of name and merger with another party is not an everyday occurrence, especially for Switzerland's party system, which is usually characterized by continuity and gradual change at the most. The coming years will show whether the party's calculations will pay off and whether the trend will be reversed in the election results.

The fact that "Die Mitte" will be able to strengthen its position by merging in larger cantons with many members of parliament, where the CVP either barely gets a foot in the door (Bern) or only plays a minor role (Zurich), speaks in favour of the step that has now been taken. In terms of content, the merger should keep frictional losses within narrow limits, and the CVP and BDP are quite familiar with each other through their joint parliamentary group work. The CVP and BDP usually agree on fundamental issues. Both parties

are also united by a pragmatic, consensus-oriented style (on Twitter, the BDP self-ironically advertises its slogan "Boring, but good."). The programmatic diversity of the new party will be no greater than the already great diversity in the previous CVP. Local animosities should be kept within limits (with the exception perhaps of Graubünden).

The party leadership can demonstrate very credibly that the less radical steps of change and reorientation have not yet borne the hoped-for fruit. If the new party does indeed lead to the strengthening and consolidation of the political centre, this would also be a win-win situation for Swiss politics, given the increasing polarisation between the right (SVP) and left (the up-and-coming Greens as well as the increasingly left-indicating Socialists) pole parties. If the merged party can actually exploit its voter potential and thus not only defend the Federal Council seat, but even lay claim to another one, this would certainly be a sensation and a considerable strengthening of moderate forces in Switzerland.

This step into the unknown is nevertheless associated with considerable risks. Basically, after the merger, the real work now begins – as Pfister and CVP Federal Councillor Viola Amherd also noted at the meeting. "Die Mitte" stands above all for pragmatism and the willingness and ability to compromise. However, this alone is not yet an effective programme. To show what "Die Mitte" stands for in terms of content and to formulate clear, edgy proposals will be a challenge for the party. After all, the "C" in the party name was also a label behind which representatives of very different socio-economic groups could gather. This symbolic parenthesis has now been dropped and will probably have to be compensated for by sharpening the content.

Critics also argue that the departure from the "C" in the party name is far too high a price to pay for a merger with a BDP which itself recently mobilised barely more than 2% of the vote and for which the question of survival is much more urgent than for the CVP. On the other hand, there is a risk of alienation among regular voters, for

⁴ In Ticino, the name PPD is Partito popolare democratico: the C was already missing

whom the Christian reference in the party name was a recognition feature.

Moreover, it is far from certain whether it will actually be possible to tap the existing voter reservoir of both parties alone. In the elections to the cantonal parliament of Aargau in October, the CVP was able to record slight gains (+0.7%). However, they weren't able to draw on the entire reservoir of votes from the no-longer-standing BDP (2016: 2.7%). It's therefore also possible that parts of the electorate will migrate to other parties after the merger.

A Swiss special case

In other Christian Democratic parties, too, especially in Western Europe, there are repeated discussions about the role of the "C" in their party names. Regardless of the success or failure of the coming years, however, the CVP's experience will be transferable to other countries only to a very limited extent, if at all.

The change of name is closely linked to the perhaps historically last chance to unite with the BDP and thus to a special constellation. The fact that regional sub-organisations of the party are free to decide whether they will also follow the renaming is probably also a Swiss peculiarity. The debate about Christianity in the party name is basically a very old one and had already taken place around 1970, when neither the extent of secularisation nor the slow but steady decline of the CVP in voter favour had become apparent. In addition, there are also examples of Christian Democratic (People's) parties in other European countries which – sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently – have successfully managed under different circumstances to win votes beyond their own ideological milieu, without giving up their C in the party name.

Swiss politics: no to the "Corporate Responsibility Initiative"

The CVP party leadership also scored a success in the referendums on 29 November: both the War

Business Initiative⁵ and the Corporate Responsibility Initiative (KVI) failed. The CVP had campaigned for both initiatives to be rejected. The aim of the KVI was to introduce far-reaching liability for the activities of Swiss companies abroad. This would have applied to the entire value chain and also to subsidiaries of Swiss companies. Prior to this, the major parties of the bourgeois camp (SVP, FDP, CVP), the business association *EconomieSuisse* and the Employers' Association had spoken out against the initiative.

Supporters of the initiative, which was already launched in 2015, included non-governmental organisations, trade unions, socialists and Greens, as well as the Green Liberals, the BDP (!), the Evangelical People's Party and the churches. The initiators argued that the initiative would lead to better compliance with human rights and environmental standards by Swiss companies – even in countries with a corrupt or powerless judiciary.

Opponents criticised that the initiative overstepped the mark, burdening Swiss companies with an infeasible monitoring task of legally independent suppliers and ultimately affecting Switzerland as a business location. The initiative would also deter partners in third countries and drive them into the arms of companies from countries that are completely indifferent to environmental or human rights standards. After a long and clear lead in opinion polls, supporters narrowly failed in the vote on 29 November: although a narrow majority of the total number of voters (50.7%) voted in favour of adoption, it failed to achieve the necessary "Ständemehr" (cantonal majority) (8.5: 14.5), i.e. those in favour won in only eight cantons and one "half-canton".

⁵ The initiative demanded that the National Bank, foundations and pension funds should no longer be allowed to finance companies that make more than five

percent of their turnover with war material (this would also apply to the purchase of investment packages containing shares in such companies)

Despite the rejection, the issue of sustainable supply chains is not off the table: a watered-down counter-proposal, which was largely influenced by the CVP, will now enter into force, which will focus on increased due diligence, transparency obligations and fines. The fact that the initiative was able to achieve a narrow majority throughout Switzerland is nevertheless a clear signal that compliance with human rights and environmental standards by companies is seen as an important issue by citizens far beyond the left political spectrum.

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