

Editorial

Dear readers,

Democracy needs the centre-right. That is a straightforward statement that may seem self-evident to some, and yet it is not quite as obvious as it appears. In recent years in Germany, the deliberately vague slogan of the “fight against the right” – *Kampf gegen rechts* – has often been used to cast political positions and actors beyond the left as broadly illegitimate, excluding them from what is considered the democratic mainstream. According to this worldview, any clearer distancing by a centre-right party from the centre-left is interpreted as a move towards the political fringes. The assumption is that such positioning ultimately benefits extremists, with the familiar argument being that voters will then simply choose “the original” instead.

In this issue of *International Reports*, we aim to put the German debate about the role of centre-right parties and the challenge posed by right-wing populism into the broader European and international context. What situation do Christian democratic and conservative parties face in other countries? Who is challenging them – and how are these parties responding to the challenge? Which strategies have worked, and which have not?

The panorama that emerges from the insights in this issue is a diverse one. However, one general statement can be made: Across most European countries – as in Germany – the challenge to the political centre is coming primarily from right-wing populist parties. In Latin America, as well, there has been a noticeable shift to the right in recent years, though Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are still governed by left-authoritarian regimes. In sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, Holger Dix and Henri Bohnet note in their article that left-wing parties often dominate despite an ideological environment that might appear favourable to centre-right politics. As the authors put it: “conservative values, left-wing politics”. The situation is different again in hybrid systems shaped by a powerful monarchical influence, such as in Morocco. Steven Höfner illustrates how the role of the centre-right has developed in this specific configuration.

One thing is clear: Lumping together all parties and political figures on the right of the spectrum is overly simplistic. In his article on

Europe, Sebastian Enskat reveals that there are not only obvious differences between the continent's centre-right parties – grouped within the European People's Party (EPP) – and their right-wing populist challengers, but also some significant differences both within and between the parliamentary groups to the right of the EPP in the European Parliament. Whether in their stance towards Russia and Ukraine, in their approach to the rule of law, or in their position on European integration, there are substantial distinctions between today's Fratelli d'Italia under Giorgia Meloni and parties such as the German AfD.

Henning Suhr paints a similarly nuanced picture of the Latin American right, which cannot simply be divided into traditional conservative parties and a so-called new right. Even within these newer forces, there are considerable differences. Tempting though it might be to place figures such as Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and Javier Milei in Argentina into the same right-wing populist category, that would not reflect reality. While the Central American leader seeks to concentrate the power of the state in his own hands, the South American leader aims to roll back state control – and he does not employ the anti-immigration rhetoric often associated with right-wing populists.

Intellectual honesty alone requires that we acknowledge such distinctions rather than gloss over them. At the same time, such insights have practical political implications for centre-right parties, which must decide when clear distancing is necessary or when some form of cooperation might be conceivable in order to advance their own policy goals, be they within individual countries or – in the European context – in the European Parliament.

However, the belief that the question of cooperation or exclusion alone determines how strong right-wing populist parties can become or how effectively centre-right forces can hold their ground against them is likely mistaken. One striking example here is the comparison between Germany and Austria. In Germany, the AfD has been consistently excluded from cooperation, while in Austria, the FPÖ has long been integrated into the political system. However, the result is the same: Both far-right parties are “more radical

and more successful than ever”, as Sebastian Enskat notes. The situation is particularly complicated when established centre-right parties find themselves in the position of a potential junior partner – a dilemma currently facing many moderately conservative parties in Latin America, for example. Early experiences in Argentina, for instance, have been sobering for the PRO party that once brought Mauricio Macri to the presidency. Thus far, cooperation has tended to strengthen Javier Milei’s party rather than the PRO itself.

The most effective strategy for centre-right parties is also the most obvious one: namely to focus on their own ideas and on their own solutions to the problems that matter to potential voters. Despite all the difficulties, parties such as Spain’s Partido Popular and Greece’s Nea Dimokratia have recently seen the positive results that such an approach can have. Developments in East Asia likewise indicate that a broad platform covering large parts of the political space to the right of centre does not automatically boost parties on the far right. South Korea’s political system may be highly polarised, as Henrik Braun explains in his article, yet no significant political force has emerged to the right of the People Power Party thus far. In Japan, by contrast, the Liberal Democratic Party has lost voters to newly founded far-right parties in recent years under centrist prime ministers, as Paul Linnarz notes. However, under Prime Minister Takaichi, the party achieved a historic victory in the recent lower-house elections with a clearly conservative platform.

Conversely, centre-right parties lose their strong position – or fail to ever come close to a majority in the first place – when their programmes and policies do not address the key social realities and pressing challenges facing their countries. In Europe, these challenges include economic developments and migration, while in Latin America, they often concern crime and domestic security. In South Africa, they include the structural inequalities rooted in apartheid, as highlighted by Gregor Jaecke and Christoph Wiedenroth in their article. If the centre-right fails to provide credible answers, right-wing populists gain ground, as in parts of Europe and Latin America, or the left remains dominant despite a weak record in government, as in South Africa.

It is not solely the task of centre-right parties to respond to the rise of populism on the far right, of course. The case of Romania – analysed by Stefan Hofmann and Mihai Marc – indicates that the social-democratic PSD is likewise losing large numbers of voters to right-wing populists. Nevertheless, Christian democratic and conservative parties bear a particular responsibility here both in dealing with the question of cooperation or distance towards actors on the right and – above all – in defining their own political positions. The international perspectives gathered in this issue suggest that these parties serve both themselves and democracy better not by dissolving into a vague, shapeless political centre, but by confidently presenting themselves as what democracy requires alongside parties of the left: strong centre-right parties.

I hope you find this report a stimulating read.

A handwritten signature in grey ink that reads "Caroline Kanter". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Caroline" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Kanter".

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