

## **Christian Democracy in the 'New' Europe**

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The judgement one passes on the achievements of Christian Democracy (later- CD) in the so-called 'new' Europe over the last 15 years depends largely on the perspective one takes. I will speak here only of the 8 countries of Central and Eastern Europe (later - CEECs), joining the EU in a few days time, although one has to remember that the 'new' Europe stretches far beyond that and there is always enough of potential left for 'renewing' some more geographically ambiguous corners of the continent.

So, if one takes the mid-1980s as the starting point for analysis of CD in CEECs- that is the whole region under solid repressive Soviet regime and imposed one-party or severely restricted party system, the present day achievements are simply breathtaking: 60 politicians representing 24 parties from CEECs are already sitting with the EPP-ED Group in the EP as observers and a similar number is expected to join after the European elections in June 2004. They represent 40 percent of the total new arrivals from CEECs to the EP and thus do slightly better than the old-established Western European centre-right political party delegates, which represent only 37 percent of the total number of the MEPs. Thus, it seems that numerically at least both Europes are now equally democratic and equally Christian Democratic.

However, if we take the perspective of the early 1990s and the overabundant optimism both in CEECs and especially in Western Europe concerning development of CD parties in the region under massive transformation, the actual achievements of CD parties in CEECs are less than it was expected. The process of party institutional and ideological development was and sometimes still is super-complex and often difficult to understand for Western European counterparts. It has been very well illustrated by the continuously changing membership lists in translational political organisations, like the EPP, or earlier the EDU and the CDI.

Though the first governments in CEECs mostly consisted from CD and other centre-right parties and thus they contributed substantially to launching the reform process in their respective countries, from these times onwards on average CD parties in CEECs spent more time in opposition than in government. The weakness of CD party electoral performance was the major reason for the EPP's decision to offer membership to ideologically more diverse centre-right parties from the region with stronger electoral potential. As a consequence, on average a typical EPP member party from CEECs now looks more electorally promising. Their potential is varied from one country to the other, but taking the results of the last national elections, parties currently having observers in the EPP-ED Group scored on average around 18 percent and in some countries, like Hungary, it is over 40 percent. If, and here I

simplify things, we take only parties with explicit Christian Democratic reference in their name, the average score is only about 6.5 percent, Czech Republic achieving the best at 12.8 percent. So, the conclusion seems to be obvious: Christian Democracy is not exactly the current fashion in CEECs.

There is another major problem: centre-right parties in CEECs do not like being big. Presently, 60 observers from CEECs in the EPP-ED Group represent 24 national parties, that is on average only 2.5 observers per party, while the same number for Western European MEPs is on average 8 MEPs per party (232 MEPs and 29 national parties; that is, more than 3 times the new Europeans average).

So, overall, not all expectations and plans of the 1990s were realised and in certain cases massive strategic miscalculations and mistakes were made. As things stand now, in majority of CEECs it is not even in theory feasible for 'purely' CD parties to ever form governments on their own and in a number of countries - even play the role of the major coalition partner. However, they do have potential to play an important political role in coalition with other centre-right parties and that seems to be the current trend all over the 'new' Europe. That is, however, not unsimilar to political trends in Western Europe.

There is still the third perspective of looking at the process of CD development in CEECs - that it looking at it with a critical insight and comparative approach, which only time and intensive study of CEECs societies and parties do allow. 15 years seem to be a long and sufficient period for that, but comparative study of CD parties in CEECs is still a very nascent subject and huge amount of work still has to be done before any authoritative opinions can emerge. Thus, the views I share here are more opinions of one of these solitary soldiers launching occasional invasions into the field of CD study in CEECs and thus having formed only preliminary ideas of what might be hidden in that promising territory.

From the point of the comparative party studies, the relative failure of CD parties in CEECs has quite a few logical explanations: weak historical background in overall democratic party development in the region, weak civil society and almost complete lack of Christian socio-cultural strata, lack of Church support, absence of religious cleavage from the electoral arena, simultaneous structural political, economic and often nation-building processes, which in turn complicated and protracted party system development and consolidation. CD parties in CEECs did indeed start in a very difficult terrain in late 1980s or early 1990s.

If we look at the party models they initially chose, we would find all the ones existing in Western Europe (German type *Volkspartei* - that is CD, but also Conservative and Liberal party, Benelux type - more emphasis on specific CD ideology, former Italian DC type- close ties with Church strata and structures as well as Scandinavian CD type) and some 'new' experiments, as it is appropriate for the 'new' Europeans. Most of the CD parties in the region have over time mutated from one model to the other. In general, ideological, organisational

and electoral crises of the mid-1990s forced all CD parties either to 'reconstruct' or become extinct (which happened, for instance, with some CD parties in Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia). The reconstruction process took two major directions.

First, in order to sociologically widen their electoral appeal, CD parties either merged with peasant or national minority parties or manoeuvred towards more Liberal pole. Second, CD parties merged with or important CD factions developed within Conservative parties. This type - that is a Conservative party with reference to CD or CD factions/parties within large centre-right movements seems to be the predominant party type from CEECs currently in the EPP and likely to join the EPP-ED group after the European elections in June. As it has been already demonstrated, this is also the most electorally promising party type in CEECs. However, again this is not something that is not familiar to Western Europe.

A special word has to be said about the importance of the CD transnational party co-operation in Europe, which over years has acquired a character of a complex multi-level co-operation network (bilateral and multilateral) involving a number of political actors: transnational political party networks, like the EPP and the EPP-ED Group in the EP, the EDU and the EUCD (later incorporated into the EPP), the CDI, national political parties, political foundations, research institutes, etc. Transnational party co-operation has notably contributed to the democratisation processes in CEECs (that is especially true for the first elections) and the development of CD parties in the region, but also significantly affected the already existing networks and methods of transnational party co-operation in Western Europe. Methods and strategies for institutional multilateral CD party co-operation with parties from CEECs have developed over time and undergone three main stages: initially, non-institutional links with different political groups and parties from CEECs (the very beginning of 1990s), later, institutionalisation of links with emerging CD parties via the CDI, the EUCD and the EPP after the adaptation of the EPP statutes in 1997 allowing institutional links with parties from the EU applicant countries, and finally, institutionalisation of links with ideologically more diverse parties from CEECs with strong electoral potential and government record via the EPP and very soon - the EPP-ED Group. All in all, it is called an 'opening up' strategy.

One can say, that as a result of that, the EPP and eventually the EPP-ED Group will be the biggest political grouping in the EU, but with more diversified membership structure, more pragmatic rather than principled CD ideology, will experience limits to the degree of internal cohesiveness (the emergence of lowest common denominator phenomenon), dilute its federal approach and perhaps face serious problems of political identity. Actually, all this has already happened or is very likely to happen, however it is not the exclusive fault of the 'new' Europe. Most of these problems date long before the arrival of 'new' Europeans and were already discussed in detail in the previous presentation. However, it would be also not fair to say that CEECs will not bring their own specificity.

From the institutional point of view, the EPP has grown into massive political structure with 64 members, associate members and observers. As in all big institutions, factions and coalitions are inevitable. Of these 64 members, 19 (that is, one third) are parties from CEECs joining the EU in a few days time. Current observers from CEECs in the EU make roughly 36 percent of the current Western European MEP lot. According to European election predictions (see, for instance, Simon Hix and Michael March, *Predicting the Future. The Next European Parliament*, Burson-Marsteller Brussels, 2004), the Polish or Czech national delegations may hope to be the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> biggest national delegation in the EPP-ED Group, followed respectively by the Hungarians. This does not seem insignificant.

However, as it has been already demonstrated, the internal cohesiveness of national equipes is a problem and it is rather improbable that 'new' Europeans will make a solid new block within the EPP-ED Group, except perhaps while voting on some specific matters concerning CEECs. It is more likely that they will make alliances according to the long-established national political preferences and especially regional preferences. For instance, Lithuanians might be somehow ideologically different from Swedes or Finns, but they will find quite a lot in common when it comes to voting on the Baltic Sea Region.

From the policy point of view, there are likely to be a few novelties as well. Even provided that the new MEPs will naturally take some time to acquaint themselves with the nitty-gritty of the EP work, foreign policy might be the first field, which senses that wind is changing, both into far more eastward and at the same time far more westward direction. The neighbourhood policy of the EU will be very important to 'new' Europeans - read, the EU will have to look more carefully at what is going on eastwards and south-eastwards of its borders, but also the transatlantic relations. Western Europeans should not take it as an offence, but for a number of parties from CEECs in the EPP already, the centre of modernity in the current world is not on this continent. This is likely to cause less rifts in the EPP-ED Group than, for instance, in the PES, but for researchers at least it is going to be something interesting to look at.

It is also probable that certain elements amongst the new arrivals are going to be rather principled in professing their CD ideals. They are well versed not only in *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, but also in what the more recent encyclicals tell about how Catholic politicians have to behave in politics. The EPP-ED library should definitely get a stock of these books and recommend Western European Christian democrats to read them carefully in order to be prepared for 'high-level' Christian discussions. The debate about God's place in Europe might move from the preamble of the Constitution to more mundane debates of the house: family, educational and social policies. As they are likely to find some allies amongst Western Europeans, let's expect some interesting sparks going around.

However, having done some research on the nature and methods of party co-operation in Europe, I know that forces to conform are very strong and sometimes even structural. Thus,

overall it is not likely that 'new' Europeans will become an explicitly distinct breed of politicians. In all probability, they will conform, at least not worse than all the previous arrivals did, and CD in the 'new' Europe will gradually replicate itself according to the current models found in Western Europe. However, politics is the art of the possible and as an Eastern European and researcher I hope they would stir up some dust here and thus make lots of good for CD in all Europe.