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Are the Mainstream Parties in Europe, Germany and Austria crumbling?

Political Parties as Decisive Actors in Liberal Democracies

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Complaints about the decline of political parties are part of the everyday political wisdom of Western democracies. If this were indeed true, it would threaten the existence of parliamentary democracies. To this day, parties are its most important political actors. A closer look, however, shows that, despite all the dramatic changes in modern Western societies, the importance of political parties remains undiminished and that no convincing alternatives have yet developed that could take over central functions of parties, such as elite recruitment or program development. Nevertheless, the need for adaptation and modernisation of party organisations remains. The comparatively young European Political Parties play a unique role. As *party parties*, they sometimes differ significantly from national parties. However, they play a central role in strengthening democracy at the European level and in the democratisation of new member states.

Introduction

There are so-called "truths" in the daily political discussion and in the media that are considered certain by mere repetition but are rarely questioned or even empirically proven. Take the history of the decline and even the disappearance of political

parties in Europe. Outdated forms of communication, undemocratic internal decision-making processes, old-fashioned ideologies, and susceptibility to corruption. There is hardly any criticism of modern Western democracies that is not linked to political parties. Surprisingly, however, the political parties have not disappeared. They have remained the most important political actors in all democracies. Much acclaimed alternatives such as "movements" or other forms of "direct democracy" have not, at least so far, been able to replace these old-fashioned 19th-century institutions. And if we take a look outside the "enlarged West", the importance of political parties - or rather their lack of them - for the stability and functioning of states and societies is more than obvious.

Therefore, the astonishing fact of the resilience of parties deserves a closer and comparative look at the political and constitutional landscape of Europe in order to be able to assess its prospects and those of parliamentary democracies. After all, their survival depends to a large extent on the irreplaceable contributions of political parties to the functioning of liberal democracies, such as the development of coherent ideologies and the recruitment of political elites. On the other hand, the fundamental change in Western societies, driven by demographic and cultural changes, and a revolutionary changing media environment, requires a quantum leap for all political organisations, especially political parties. How have political parties in Europe reacted to this rapidly changing environment? Are there lessons learned from different European countries that others can adopt? How can the legitimacy of Western democratic systems be strengthened, and what is the specific contribution of political parties to this? And last but not least, what special role do European political parties play as relatively 'young' political actors?

Decline? Changes in the Austrian and German party systems since the end of the Cold War

Federal Republic of Germany

For the current German party system, the decisive upheavals were only to a lesser extent connected with the reunification and incorporation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) into the political and economic system of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) since 1990. Only minor changes had to be made to the constitutional framework of the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*). The established West German four-party system remained remarkably stable and was able to quickly expand its organisation into the territory of the "new states" (*Neue Länder*); projects of new East German parties failed. The transformation of the hitherto ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) into a left-wing party ("Die Linke") and its integration into the traditional German party system went surprisingly smoothly. In this way, the West German party system had also demonstrated its ability to integrate one-fifth of the German population peacefully. The real political turning points in Germany came at the end of the 1970s with the emergence of the "Greens" (*Die Grünen*); and with the establishment of the "Alternative for Germany (AfD)" (*Alternative für Deutschland*) in 2013. Its founding was essentially a reaction to the fact that the established three-party system (CDU/CSU, SPD and FDP) had neglected burning issues such as environmental and climate protection, the future of European integration or unsolved problems of mass immigration for too long and had not developed convincing answers in the eyes of the voters. Especially at the beginning, both parties saw themselves as "anti-system parties". The integration of the Greens into the "system" has largely been completed. For the AfD, this question remains open at present, as further radicalisation cannot be ruled out. It is also

unclear whether regional parties, such as the Free Voters (*Freie Wähler*) in Bavaria, will succeed on the national level, too. In the last two decades, there have also been several attempts to create entirely new types of parties, such as the largely marginalised Pirate Party (*Piratenpartei*). These new parties aimed to bridge the gap between party organisation, party officials, and the electorate by using modern means of communication such as ad hoc online elections to achieve more "direct democracy". But these parties were short-lived and failed to establish themselves as genuine innovative alternatives.

Nevertheless, there are, of course, massive changes within the German party system, some of which (a) affect all parties similarly, while some (b) apply only to a part of the party spectrum.

- a) The loss of members is the first thing that catches the eye in a longitudinal analysis of parties and is usually used as "the" indicator of their decline. After peaking in 1990, the number of party members of all relevant political parties has shrunk to less than half in 2021, with the losses mainly affecting centrist parties. An exception are the Greens, which have almost tripled their membership since 1990, while the AfD has doubled since 2013 (as of the end of 2023). A similar picture emerges in the age structure, with an average age of 56 years, although the Greens are also significantly younger at 48 years. More serious for the parties is their presence on the ground and "close to the people", which is distributed very differently from region to region. With the exception of the Left Party in the new federal states, the eastern German states account for only about 10 per cent of party members; in some regions and at the lowest level of the local branches, there is de facto no party organisation left – with dramatic consequences, e.g. for the recruitment of functionaries in the representative bodies and the political executive.

- b) With regard to the program, the "centrist" people's parties, such as the CDU/CSU and the SPD are facing the greatest challenges. The need for programmatic integration of increasingly divergent social groups - once the "innovative" aspect of the concept of people's parties - has led to a watering-down of their profile and made centrist parties interchangeable. Long-standing government participation and grand coalitions have further strengthened this trend. Under the reign of Chancellor Angela Merkel, the CDU/CSU parties have initiated an opening into urban, liberal milieus, leaving conservative and rural areas political homeless. Fundamental challenges and upheavals such as mass migration, the emission-neutral restructuring of industrial society, culture wars ("wokism" and "cancel culture"), as well as the alienation of many citizens from political institutions during the corona crisis have prepared the ground for the rise of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), while the left-wing spectrum has hardly been able to benefit from it so far. In addition, there are (again) broken identity conflicts between the old and new federal states, which is reflected in massive differences in voting behavior, where the AfD has now become the strongest political force in most eastern German regions. In Germany, on the other hand, rural-urban contrasts do not play a dominant role. With the end of fixed social milieus and organisational structures, previous "grand narratives" of Christian or Social Democratic provenance have also come to an end. So far, none of the established People's Party (or what is left of it) has succeeded in creating a new integrating ideology, for example, for sustainable transformation. On the other hand, European integration and transatlantic relations remain part of the German "*raison d'être*" of all parties, with the exception of parts of the AfD and the Left Party. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has further strengthened this consensus.

Austria

While the German party system still has a high capacity for integration and has so far at least been "centrist", the Austrian political system has undergone a serious transformation in the last two decades towards a "decentralised multi-party system" which distinguishes it from the German. Paradoxically, this development can also be interpreted as a counter-reaction to the high stability of the political camps and the Austrian power system in the post-war period. Despite all the party-political dynamics, there are currently no signs of a further fragmentation of the Austrian party landscape. Four out of five citizens have a high level of trust in the democratic system per se. With regard to parliament and the party system that supports it, the figures are only around 40 per cent. This is in line with the European average, but it is worrying because approval is still much lower, especially among the lower social strata. However, the Austrian party system has a number of features that clearly stand out from its large neighbour and sister parties, such as the CDU.

- a) The rise and fall of Sebastian Kurz has highlighted the potential for a radically new style of politics - unthinkable until now, at least in Germany's conservative-Christian Democratic spectrum. The far-reaching transformation of the ÖVP party structures and the strong focus on the person and the conduct of the election campaign are part of a political legacy that must also be taken into account as an option for conservative parties in the future.
- b) In view of the strength of the right-wing populist FPÖ, such structural features make it much more difficult for the ÖVP to redefine the content of Christian-conservative politics than in the relationship between the German Union parties and the AfD, where a rigorous "firewall" has (so far) been erected, at least at the national level. However, the dominant issues of migration and integration (especially among Muslim residents) will continue to have a massive impact on the conservative

camp. So far, the forces of moderate conservatism have succeeded in halting the shift in votes in favour of right-wing populist forces and strengthening the political centre.

- c) However, the ÖVP's impressive nationwide dominance in 2019 (with the exception of Vienna) is likely to come to an end in the foreseeable future due to the (re)rise of the FPÖ. To a certain extent, however, a pronounced rural-urban dichotomy still has a stabilising effect, which, in contrast to Germany, is a significant explanatory factor for Austrian voting behaviour and party preference.
- d) While support for the European Union and its strengthening is unanimous among the moderate political parties, a much more pronounced Euro-scepticism marks a significant difference from the extremely high approval ratings in Germany throughout Europe. This posed considerable difficulties for pro-European parties such as the ÖVP and the SPÖ in their communication and engagement beyond the country's borders. As the recent discussion about NATO membership has shown, the "neutrality" requirement acts as a stumbling block for further integration of the country into collective structures.
- e) Measured against the size of the population, the Austrian parties (with the exception of the Greens) still have an astonishing number of members. In principle, this provides a solid basis for political mobilisation. However, in contrast to the German Greens, the Austrian Greens have not yet been able to establish themselves as a decisive third force in terms of membership numbers and votes. The same applies to the Neos, which have strong similarities to the FDP in terms of political programmes but pursue a more pronounced social-integrative approach.
- f) The Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) continues to maintain its claim as an integrating "people's party" across regional, social and confessional boundaries. However, fundamental social changes, such as an ongoing process of secularisation, pose immense challenges for religiously bound, traditional voter

groups.

European Parties - Party-Political Stepchildren?

Interestingly, the European Political Parties are still in the shadow of public consciousness as well as in political science research when it comes to their contribution to the stability and vitality of European democracies. Interest in the European elections is indeed growing again, and the European Parliament has secured more influence from one legislative period to the next since the first direct elections in 1979. However, many European voters are still largely unaware of the role of European political parties more than 20 years after the Lisbon Treaties formally endorsed them.

After all, they lack some of the characteristics of national parties, especially membership of individual citizens, because they are still *party parties*. Nevertheless, they have become an integral part of Europe's party system, even if their function is different from that of their national counterparts in some aspects.

- a) Its main task is to promote communication, coordination and networking between the European level and the national parties. The European parties are not superior to national parties. They are "Federal associations" of national or regional parties, not only from member states of the European Union but also from those of the Council of Europe. Their most visible political influence is through the political groups in the European Parliament.
- b) The European parties also contribute to the programmatic coherence of their national member parties. However, the concept of people's parties has led to greater ideological diversity and makes it all the more important to have shared principles.
- c) Less known is how European political parties contribute to the

European Union's international efforts to promote democracy and human rights. In this respect, the European Parliament and its party families often act as a "watchdog" vis-à-vis the Member States.

- d) This function could be well observed over the last two decades towards the candidate countries of the European Union. There, the Western and Central European parties have had a significant influence on the ideological and programmatic orientation and political strategy of the still young member parties - and thus on the attitudes of the new citizens of the Union towards European integration as a whole. In this democratisation process, there was close coordination and support from the European umbrella organisations. Seeking accession to a European party has led to a more precise ideological orientation and organisational consolidation. This role of the European parties is sometimes overlooked in this context, as attention is often focused only on bilateral relations between the parties of the Member States.
- e) One can hardly underestimate the importance of political parties being embedded into a vibrant social environment. Here, however, the European parties have a massive structural disadvantage because there is no European public sphere (yet), and no front-line organisations exist on the ground.

Political dinosaurs? Or: how to proceed with political parties

What conclusions can be drawn from the developments in the party systems of Austria and Germany, as well as those of the European parties? Where do reforms need to start if the leading role of political parties in democratic systems is to be stabilised and strengthened?

National Parties

1. The constitutional framework and the funding systems for national political parties will remain largely unchanged in both countries. Even possible changes to electoral law and stricter conditions on party financing will not trigger any fundamental changes. Adjustments can only come from within the ranks of the parties if they want to save and restore their legitimacy as relevant political actors. However, this task cannot be achieved by the parties alone. To this end, they need to be better embedded in a network with other civil society organisations in order to create a more favourable and supportive environment. This is the only way to convince citizens about the indispensable and specific role of political parties in the functioning democratic system.
2. The hope of being able to replace declining membership numbers and reduced presence in the area with digital forms of communication has proven to be a mistake. Physical presence and face-to-face encounters with voters remain the key to political success and trust in the (party) political system as a whole. Parties are always successful when they are part of a broader social network, starting from the local level. After the loss of many traditional partners and networks, new forms of cooperation with the rest of civil society must be found. Further, the high number of non-voters still has to be addressed, as low participation in elections is one of the most severe problems of representative democracies.
3. Being embedded into society is closely linked to the degree of inner-party democracy. Opportunities for participation and participation are decisive for how attractive party membership is, especially for the younger generation and an increasingly diversified society, e.g. for people with a migration background. Till today, not all organisational and procedural possibilities have yet been exhausted, even within the existing statutes.
4. The ongoing communication revolution is constantly creating new conditions for inner-party structures and the public

discourse space. People's parties, heterogeneous in their social and regional composition, often reach limits in terms of staff and resources. While the central party organisations often still have sufficient resources and competencies, regional and local party branches still find it difficult to carry out professional media work, even though remarkable progress has been made in this area in recent years.

5. Regional specifics in terms of history, mentality, and socio-economic development still matter, e.g., in eastern Germany and parts of Austria. More emphasis on "voices" and the specific identity of these regions have to be seen as an essential part of a pluralist party identity on the national level and among the European sister parties.
6. The importance of programmes and ideological foundations is often underestimated, especially for mainstream parties. The former are not "nice-to-haves". Contrary to popular belief, the electorate is still interested in a values-based approach to politics and a vision of a future society. Conservative and Christian-democratic parties must once again become centres of debate when it comes to developing concepts for a future society, be it "grand narratives" such as the green transformation, the revolution in the world of work or demographic change. This debate must not be left to the more radical parties on the left and right but must once again become a source of legitimacy for political parties. Conservative parties, in particular, need to refocus on the diverse network of social organisations as a valuable source of ideas; here their left-wing political competitors are still much better at activating them.

European Parties

In recent years, not only many countries outside Europe but also some Member States of the European Union have experienced increasing restrictions and threats to democracy. Countering these developments means reforming those institutions and processes that embody democratic

representation, also on the European level. And here, the role of European political parties and the European Parliament is increasingly important. The core of the legislative power must be strengthened by giving the European Parliament (and thus the European parties) a decisive say in the nomination and election of the President of the EU Commission. This would give the European elections greater importance and contribute to a greater mobilisation of voters and the parties: a clear signal of the democratic legitimacy of European processes and decisions and against the accusation of a democratic deficit in the EU.

In this context, the European parties themselves face a number of challenges:

1. The exchange of knowledge between national parties and European parties is still weak. In particular, the larger member parties of the European People's Party, such as the ÖVP or the CDU/CSU, should do even more to promote exchange with the younger members of their European sister parties. Not only in times of the European election campaign is the support from the same party family a factor in (national) election success. In addition, the European parties contribute to a horizontal integration of the European Union and are thus an independent level of European integration beyond intergovernmental cooperation. However, the national member parties often lack knowledge of political processes at the EU level and the framework in which European parties act. There is a need to improve exchanges between European and national parties regarding joint programme development, recruitment, and communication strategies.
2. In the run-up to the next round of enlargement and deepening of the European Union, the legal framework for European political parties (and also for European political foundations) needs to be revised. This applies not only to more transparent processes but also to sufficient financial resources. The logos of the European parties should be placed next to the logos of

the national parties on the ballot papers in order to improve the visibility of the European parties and the EU dimension in the elections to the European Parliament.

3. European parties, especially those from the conservative spectrum, should work more closely with civil society to improve grassroots participation in EU decision-making in daily party life as a European civil society exists only in rudimentary form.
4. European parties should develop and maintain permanent forums for citizens in EU Member States (together with their national member parties) to facilitate debates on EU issues and improve citizens' understanding of EU policies. For example, public and private broadcasters in EU Member States could be encouraged to organise debates between the lead candidates and other candidates for the EP in order to raise awareness of the European elections.
5. European parties and their affiliated foundations should be encouraged and supported to significantly increase the exchange of young and female members of their affiliated parties. This would increase the knowledge and commitment of the future generation of political leaders to the cause of the European Union and its democratic legitimacy and identity.

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