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■ 75 years of the CDU

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The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) celebrated its 75th anniversary on June 26, 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the celebrations were subdued. Together with its sister party CSU, the CDU has become a fixture on the political landscape of the Federal Republic of Germany: from Adenauer to Merkel, no other German party has exerted bigger influence on the fates of its country. The most prominent achievements credited to the Christian democrats are to have strengthened democracy in Germany and the country's social market economy, and to have contributed to cooperation with the West, the reunification of Germany and European integration. What is more, the CDU is thought of as the party in power: for 51 out of 71 years of its existence, the CDU was in the government. 5 out of 8 German chancellors came from among the ranks of the CDU as did 6 out of 12 of the country's presidents. Christian Democratic parties have won 16 of the total of 19 Bundestag election. Is it therefore fair to proclaim the success of the Christian Democrats as being complete? Has the CDU not lost any of its appeal during its 75 years in existence? What are the challenges and problems that the CDU is facing in 2020? What future looms ahead for the party as it faces the challenges of the modern world and the choice of new leadership?

The Adenauer period

The CDU emerged in the wake of the defeat of the Third Reich, driven by the need to revive political life in occupied Germany. The early local structures of what would become the CDU sprung up independently of one another in several German cities (including Berlin, Cologne, and Frankfurt am Main) in June 1945. One of the first documents that the new party released was the CDU founding appeal announced on June 26, 1945 in Berlin, even though the name of the Christian Democratic Union was not adopted until December 1945 on the occasion of a regional leaders' convention in Bad Godesberg.

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The CDU invoked Christian values and gathered in its ranks Catholic and Protestant activists from former conservative and liberal parties, as well as representatives of Christian trade unions.

Thus, from its very inception, the new party gained appeal with the general public and had a strong integrative potential. The CDU staunchly supported the democratic process in the resurgent Germany and opted for a social market economy. In 1947, the CDU concluded a cooperation and coordination agreement with the Christian Social Union (CSU) of Bavaria, under which the two sister parties agreed to refrain from competing with each other (the CSU operates in Bavaria while the CDU covers other federal states). After the first Bundestag election of 1949, both parties formed a joint CDU/CSU faction in the Bundestag. It was not until 1950 (and the congress of Goslar) that the process of unifying the CDU was complete. At that time, Konrad Adenauer was elected the party's first leader (after which, on September 15, 1949, he went on to become the first Chancellor of West Germany). The fate of the CDU in the GDR was quite different.

The CDU was credited with Germany's accomplishments in the 1950s, which boosted the party's popularity contributing to its electoral success. Under the Konrad Adenauer administration, the West German economy was lifted from ruin. The 1950s were a time of an economic miracle (produced by, among others, Ludwig Erhard) as Germany began to form European communities, and as Adenauer pursued a policy of rapprochement with the West (Germany became a close ally of the United States while reconciling with de-Gaulle-led France). All this greatly strengthened the position of the CDU (and CSU) during this period. Until 1961, the Christian Democratic parties absorbed numerous smaller center and right-wing parties becoming a more heterogeneous organization. At the time, along with the CSU, the CDU became the first general people's party (Volkspartei) with appeal to a wide range of social groups. It was held together mainly by Chancellor Konrad Adenauer himself. During his term, the CDU was organizationally weak. It was an election committee of sorts serving the Chancellor, who ran it via the Chancellor's Office. Such merging of the office of chancellor with the position of party leader was an asset and a source of strength for the CDU during Adenauer's rule as well as under the subsequent chancellors Helmut Kohl and Angela Merkel. Despite the numerous accomplishments of the rule of the first chancellor, he failed to settle effectively with the National Socialist past. In fact, the so-called expellees were a strong influence on the CDU. Neither were Christian Democrats eager to recognize the border on the Odra and Nysa Łużycka rivers.

Konrad Adenauer served as Chancellor until October 1963 and continued to lead his party until March 1966. His immediate successor was Ludwig Erhard (Chancellor from 1963 to 1966, CDU leader from 1966 to 1967), followed by Kurt Georg Kiesinger (Chancellor from 1966 to 1969, CDU leader from 1967 to 1971). In the second half of the 1960s, the party faced economic trouble along with the weakening of ties with FDP-linked liberals. Kiesinger took the lead of the first grand coalition involving the CDU/CSU and the SPD. After the 1969 election, despite securing the greatest popular

support of all parties, the CDU was forced into opposition by the FDP's decision to form a coalition with the SPD.

The Kohl period

It was only the successors of Konrad Adenauer in the post of the CDU leader: Ludwig Erhard, Kurt Georg Kiesinger, Rainer Barzel (1971-1973), and especially Helmut Kohl (1973-1998), that resolved to reform the party's organization and renew the CDU. Between 1970 and 1980, the CDU managed to double its membership from 329,000 to 693,000. However, throughout the 1970s, the CDU remained in the opposition. The party failed to seize power in 1972 by means of a constructive vote of no confidence in Chancellor Willy Brandt (CDU/CSU's candidate Rainer Barzel lost the Bundestag vote under unclear circumstances). This cost the CDU and CSU a defeat to the Social Democrats in the snap election of 1972. This was the first election lost by the Christian Democratic parties and the first time the so-called structural asymmetry stacked in favor of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU's electoral potential exceeding that of the SPD) dissipated.

In 1973, the ambitious politician from Rhineland-Palatinate Helmut Kohl was elected president of the CDU. Kohl would lead the party for the following 25 years. In the 1970s, by strengthening the CDU, Kohl laid the groundwork for the party's return to power. An opportunity to do so arose in the fall of 1982 when the Helmut-Schmidt-led SPD-FDP government was disintegrating. The Liberals chose to abandon their coalition with the Social Democrats and join the Christian Democrats. This was achieved by means of a constructive vote of no confidence. This began a 16-year rule of the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition. At that time, a two-block system started to emerge in Germany: the black-and-yellow bourgeois bloc of the CDU/CSU-FDP was in power, while the SPD opposition inched ever closer to the Greens, which had been established in 1980. After several years of Kohl's rule, many CDU activists grew dissatisfied with the party's leadership. During the congress in Bremen in September 1989, the party's opposition centered around Heiner Geißler failed to seize power. The fall of the Berlin Wall opened up an opportunity for Kohl and the Christian Democrats to reunify the two German states. At the time, the CDU merged with (or actually absorbed) the East German CDU, the Democratic Breakthrough (DA) and the Democratic Peasant Party of Germany (DBD). The Christian Democrats clearly won the first post-reunification Bundestag election which allowed their coalition with the FDP to persist. However, the early enthusiasm over the unification faded quickly. Kohl's vision of prosperity with his promise of "blooming landscapes" became a massive disappointment for the inhabitants of former East Germany. It was with great difficulty that the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition managed to stay in power through the 1994 election. The CDU itself was stagnating: a heated debate broke out within the party over the party reform proposed by lower-level members. They demanded that fresh blood in general and women in particular be allowed into the leadership. The party's leaders nevertheless dragged their feet on any specific action. The federal government also became apathetic, its initiatives hampered in the Bundesrat by growing opposition. Although popular dissatisfaction with the rule of the "reunifica-

tion chancellor” continued to grow, no one in the party dared to block his bid for chancellorship in the lead-up to the 1998 election. While some party members proposed that Wolfgang Schäuble run for chancellor, Schäuble himself remained faithful to Kohl. The election resulted in a crushing defeat for the CDU, throwing him into the opposition for the following seven years. The election replaced the party’s leadership: Kohl resigned as party Leader (he became an honorary leader of the CDU), superseded by Schäuble, while Angela Merkel took the office of the party’s Secretary General.

The Merkel period

In December 1999, a secret-account scandal over the party’s illegal financing (unrecorded donations kept in the party’s secret accounts) rattled the CDU. The main culprit turned out to be Helmut Kohl. Wolfgang Schäuble, who shared some of the blame, was driven to resign from party leadership in February 2000. Meanwhile, Angela Merkel, who was not embroiled in the affair, published her famous article in the December 22, 1999 edition of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in which she unequivocally distanced herself from Kohl emphasizing the need to turn over a new leaf. The fact that she was the first high-ranking Christian Democratic politician to take such a stance lent credibility to her appeal all the while alienating many Christian Democratic members. At a congress in Essen in April 2000, Merkel was elected party leader for the first time. Her first order of business was to repair party finances damaged severely by the scandal. Her position was not very strong. In the 2002 Bundestag election, it was not her but rather CSU Leader and Bavarian Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber that became the Christian Democratic candidate for Chancellor. His choice was pushed through by Merkel’s rivals within party ranks. Despite opposition against her, Merkel was in the comfortable position of having an agreement with Stoiber that gave her an assurance of becoming the CDU/CSU Leader in the Bundestag instead of one of her main adversaries, Friedrich Merz.

In 2003-2005, the CDU opted for a liberal course in preparation for their assumption of power in its coalition with the FDP. In the snap election in 2005, Merkel became the CDU/CSU’s candidate for chancellor. While the Christian Democrats secured a narrow victory in that election, their coalition with the FDP would not guarantee them a majority. To resolve the problem, the CDU/CDU and the SPD formed a grand coalition while Angela Merkel became the head of government for the first time. The grand coalition resulted from a compromise between the two Volksparteien, much to the dismay of some supporters of both the SPD and the Christian Democrats (for the CDU/CSU, this coalition was a departure from their market-oriented program). This resulted in the loss of part of the liberal CDU/CSU electorate to the FDP. The next Bundestag election was held in 2009 after an electoral campaign that revolved around the financial crisis. The Christian Democratic parties suffered some setbacks but, thanks to a favorable distribution of seats, ended up having more seats in the Bundestag, which, with the extra advantage derived from the FDP’s electoral success, enabled the parties to form the long-awaited coalition of the CDU/CSU-FDP. As the economy declined further amidst the crisis, friction arose within the coalition

over tax policy, ways to bail out eurozone countries and the future of nuclear power (a pivot in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster). However, while the FDP-affiliated coalition partners turned out to be losing in the polls, the popularity of both the Christian Democrats and Chancellor Merkel continued to climb. In anticipation of the 2013 Bundestag election, the key concern for the Christian Democrats was to ensure that the campaign portrayed Germany as an island of stability (with a strong economy and falling unemployment) standing in stark contrast to the crisis-ridden eurozone economies of Southern Europe. All this enabled the CDU/CSU to garner 41.5% of the vote in what was their best electoral performance since 1990. Still, the political balance that emerged after the election (and the failure of talks with the Greens) forced the parties to form a large CDU/CSU-SPD coalition. In their coalition agreement, the Social Democrats pushed through, inter alia, a minimum wage and new dual citizenship laws amidst considerable resistance from the Christian Democrats. Neither side showed much enthusiasm for joining the coalition, although the first two years of Angela Merkel's third term in the government brought a number of positives and kept the ratings of the coalition parties stable.

During that time, the CDU reaped the benefits of the modernization that ensued under Merkel's rule. Much had changed in the party since the final years of the Kohl leadership. The party reformed its organizational structures and finances, rejuvenated its membership and allowed more women to sit on its governing bodies. It became more welcoming to immigrants and Muslims, and engaged in open debate on previously taboo issues such as same-sex marriage and prenatal testing. However, the Christian doctrine remained a mainstay of the Christian Democrats' program. Despite all these advances, a strong conservative opposition emerged within the party. Conservative critics of the chancellor also pointed to the threat posed by the arrival of a new political force: Alternative for Germany (AfD).

The migration crisis that broke out in the fall of 2015 and the federal government's policy on refugees contributed to weakening the CDU and CSU's approval ratings and to declines in Merkel's popularity. The party itself suffered from many tensions, as the divide between the supporters and opponents of the "open door" migrant policy ran right down the middle of the CDU. Some of the hitherto supporters of the Christian Democrats switched loyalties in favor of the anti-immigrant AfD, whose ratings were rising. The change of Merkel's stance on gay marriage sparked controversy among the CDU's conservative supporters. The Chancellor agreed to bring the matter to the Bundestag and allowed the party discipline within the CDU/CSU to be lifted for the June 2017 vote on the issue. All this meant a strengthening of the party's conservative opposition to Merkel organized within the framework of the Union of Values (WerteUnion).

Although the Christian Democrats beat all other parties in the 19th-term Bundestag election on September 24, 2017 (with 32.9% of the vote), their support slumped significantly from the previous election (down by 8.6 pp). Confronted possible failure in talks on the coalition of the CDU/CSU, the Greens and the FDP, the grand coalition of the CDU/CSU-SPD managed to re-form its government after a lengthy negotiation. The result was met with reluctance from many Social and Christian Democrats. From the beginning of its term, the grand coalition government was plagued by multiple

crises which undercut the ratings of both itself and its partner parties (in June 2019 alone, support for the CDU/CSU plunged by a staggering 24%). In September 2018, Merkel-supported candidate Volker Kauder lost to Ralph Brinkhaus in the Bundestag election of the CDU/CSU Leader. A month later, the CDU sustained significant losses in an election in Hessen. This made Merkel realize she was losing influence in party leadership and becoming a burden for the CDU. She therefore chose to abandon running for re-election as party Leader during the CDU congress in Hamburg (December 7-8, 2018) and for a chancellor nomination in the run-up to the following Bundestag election (2021). Merkel-supported Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer became the new CDU Leader, defeating by a narrow margin party-opposition-backed Friedrich Merz in the ensuing runoff. Kramp-Karrenbauer failed to resolve the main problems faced by the Christian Democrats. Although she managed to improve relations with her sister party CSU (led by Markus Söder), which had been weakened severely by the migration crisis, the Christian Democratic parties performed poorly in the European Parliament election securing a mere 28.9% of the vote (22.6% of which went to the CDU). Particularly disconcerting was meager support among the youngest voters (it was backed by a mere 13% of voters aged under 30). Kramp-Karrenbauer was largely responsible for the campaign's failure. Poor performance with young voters prompted the party's sudden about-face towards climate change prevention. Equally disappointing were the outcomes of state elections in Saxony, Brandenburg and, above all, Thuringia in the fall. A conflict over the election of the new prime minister of the Thuringian government that arose in February 2020 between the party headquarters and the CDU faction in the Thuringian Landtag revealed waning support for Kramp-Karrenbauer. In her response, the party leader announced her resignation on February 10 of the same year with her replacement to be elected on April 25, 2020. Three candidates stepped forward: North Rhine-Westphalian Prime Minister Armin Laschet (supported by part of the party's center and left wing), Friedrich Merz (supported by the majority of the conservative wing) and Norbert Röttgen.

The Covid-19 outbreak forced CDU leaders to cancel the extraordinary party congress scheduled for April and postpone the election of their new leader until the December Congress in Stuttgart. The pandemic impacted the current standing of the CDU significantly: the handling of the pandemic increased the popularity of Angela Merkel's government and the Christian Democratic parties themselves (the CDU/CSU rose in the polls to 40%), although the trend is unlikely to continue. The election campaign in support of candidates for the post of CDU Leader was suspended. As a result, media interest in the non-state candidates (Friedrich Merz and Norbert Röttgen) faded significantly. During the pandemic, the Bavarian prime minister and CSU Leader Markus Söder, who proved his competence in handling the crisis, saw a jump in popularity. Söder is increasingly considered to be a likely Christian Democratic candidate for chancellor, although he himself treats the matter with reserve.

Conclusions

Over its 75 years in existence, the CDU has become one of the most enduring pillars of German democracy. The contributions of the Christian Democrats to Germany's greatest achievements are unquestionable. On congratulating the CDU members during their anniversary, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier emphasized that: "It is unthinkable that the German society could have developed democracy in their country post 1945 and embraced freedom and other democratic values without the CDU."

Despite the scores of problems that beset them, the Christian Democrats remain Germany's strongest political force. One of the challenges they face is staffing problems, as manifested by dwindling membership (within 30 years from reunification, membership has nearly halved from approx. 789,000 in 1990 to ca. 408,000 in late 2019) and aging cadres. While the party continues to perform best with the oldest voters, the youngest age group has been its weakest. Christian Democrats are more popular in the provinces than they are in major cities. Despite these challenges, the Christian Democrats benefit from the SPD crisis and maintain their status as a people's party, even though the growing aspirations of the Greens in this area have grown apparent.

Another problem confronting the CDU is the lack of a clear program compared to its political rivals. The Christian Democrats have also been observed to respond slowly to change. In addition, the CDU tends to adopt the ideas of other parties and only rarely comes up with its own original solutions. As a party that aspires to appeal to the general public, the CDU has to cater to the expectations of different voter segments many of which are mutually exclusive. One of its major problems are the difficulties that lower-ranking members face in trying to get their ideas heard, as they are often stifled by the party's central bodies. Internally, the CDU continues to wrangle over ideological issues: some members blame party leaders for having relegated Christian values to the back burner, others accuse them of clinging to the conservative line on social issues (no LGBT representation) despite the party's overhaul.

One of the achievements of the Christian Democrats is that they have remained a key player on the German political scene. It is difficult to imagine the formation of a new government without the involvement of the CDU and CSU. A serious threat and challenge for the Christian Democrats is the AfD, which has become a significant competitor on the right. All the while, the Greens have the capacity to take over part of the Christian Democrats' electorate positioned in the center. In the coming months, the CDU is facing fundamental challenges. These concerns mainly the election of a new party leader and candidate for chancellor, as well as the development of a new program.

The views expressed in this publication belong solely to its authors.



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