

Towards Arezzo: a new Christian-democrat message

by Johannes de Jong, director Sallux

In his excellent reflection on some starting points for the discussion Professor Quagliariello asked several key questions and I take the liberty to focus on two of these questions.

He asked:

B. is there a political-cultural backwardness that the moderate, Christian, liberal area must overcome in order to try to become a protagonist again?

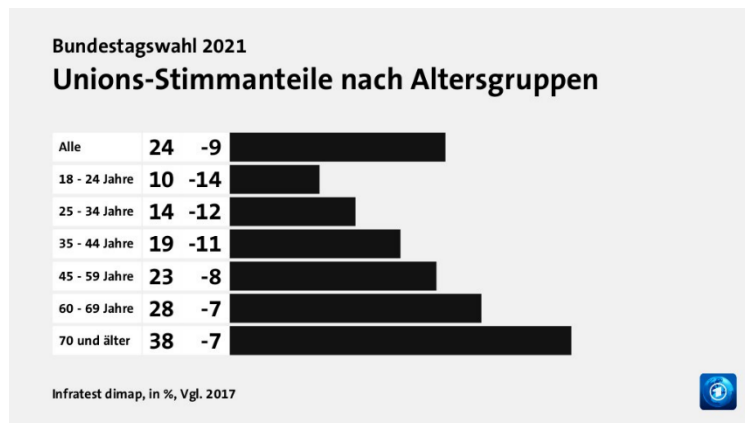
C. do traditional political families, which have a no less traditional projection at the European level, still have an ideal sense or are they merely contingent aggregations held together by vague sensitivities and more perceived conveniences?

When I tried to think about these two key questions, I ultimately asked myself the next question: 'Does the traditional centre-right want to be a protagonist for anyone or stand up for any identifiable cause?' This is not a question at this event only. It is a debate everywhere in Europe as far as I can see.

It is clear that the traditional centre-right is collapsing in Italy, France and The Netherlands as well as other countries. In Poland, Germany and Scandinavia it can hold for now but in most cases in a diminished position compared to previous decades. The electoral systems in Germany and Poland moreover are such that they are designed to keep new parties out of gaining political representation. In Germany in particular it leads to just fewer and fewer people voting at all. These non-voters clearly do not vote anymore for the CDU.

What tells this of how the centre-right is perceived by the voters in Europe? For them it seems to be a spectrum of parties that represents older voters who want to keep the status-quo as long as possible. In many cases this electorate voted for these parties their whole life. One can say that the traditional centre-right associated with the EPP 'suffers' from dependence on the older voters.

One clear example of this can be seen in the 2021 election in Germany:



One can see that where the CDU scores 38% under voters above 70, it decreases to less than 15% among voters below 34. While 18-24 old voters may likely switch later on, the fact that just 14% of the voters under 34 and less than 20% among voters under 44, shows that there is a systemic problem.

In The Netherlands the ‘Nationaal Kiezersonderzoek 2021’ (National Electoral research 2021) concluded that the average CDA voter (Dutch EPP party) is 63 years old (on par with the pensioners party)¹.

In the last EP elections in France, 14% of the electorate above 65 voted for LR and less than 7% among all other age groups². The EP elections in France give a better picture of the preferences as they are not distorted by enforced strategic voting in a first and second round. But the fact is that in other types of elections the same pattern can be seen in terms of age groups and party preference³.

The same pattern was clearly visible in the general election in Spain in 2019⁴.

As noted, this trend is a given in a number of (large) EU Member States but not in all and not in every election (the last general election in Sweden as a clear example⁵). However these exceptions are indeed exceptions and not the rule.

It may have been an electoral asset to have a reliable voters block but it becomes a challenge when younger voters massively do not vote for the centre-right. And

¹ <https://www.dpes.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/NKO-2021-Versplinterde-vertegenwoordiging-V5.pdf> (p.143)

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1085371/results-elections-european-parliamente-by-age-france/>

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1252955/vote-breakdown-second-round-regional-electionsfrance-age/>

⁴ <https://agendapublica.elpais.com/noticia/17343/clivajes-politicos-espana-edad-divide-mas-renta-educacion>

⁵ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1326492/voting-intentions-sweden-age/>

ultimately it leads to devastating electoral results as we have seen in a number of cases. This is becoming a systemic challenge for the EU where national governments are the main building block of the EU as ultimately the Council is and remains in charge of the direction of the EU. If national governments become dominated by right-wing populism or left-wing populism, it has significant impact on the EU. The trend of the centre-right becoming a collection of parties for pensioners has therefore immediate consequences for the EU.

Why is this such a dominant trend? Why is the centre-right failing to appeal to younger age groups and people of different economic backgrounds?

Why is that the case? Earlier I asked ‘Does the traditional centre-right want to be a protagonist for anyone or stand up for any identifiable cause?’ Maybe this question and the current composition of the centre-right electorate point to one and the same direction.

What does the centre-right stand for? At the EPP website I found an interesting lecture by David McAllister MEP titled ‘Towards a new Programme of Fundamental Principles of the German CDU’ which he presented in his capacities of Vice-President of both the EPP and the IDU⁶. It seems therefore written with a pan-European audience in mind and therefore fitting in this context as well.

When I read it, I genuinely can say that I found little to really disagree with. He clearly outlined the well-known principles of Christian-democracy and his general approach fitted with the Italian Christian-liberal approach as well as far as I could see. Many points of departure in his lecture were quite self-evident in their own right.

At the same time it seemed to me that there was a problem. A problem that seems to encapsulate and express the very heart of the crisis of the centre-right. Maybe the following sentence is the essence of that problem:

“We in the CDU combine seemingly contradictory things and divergences: social security and freedom of the market economy, responsibility for the community and the freedom of the individual, economy and ecology, promise of prosperity and climate neutrality, preservation of the German

⁶ <https://www.epp.eu/papers/towards-a-new-programme-of-fundamental-principles-of-the-german-cdu>

state in it democratic form, European integration and international involvement, love for the own country and openness to the world, shaping the homeland and commitment to the world, value orientation and realpolitik.”

Let me be clear that what I am stating is not a critique of David McAllister MEP in any particular way. He simply expressed the current core beliefs of the CDU and, to a degree, that of the EPP.

However the quoted sentences above seem to summarize two aspects of this lecture that are equally problematic if the centre-right wants to have future appeal.

First of all it seems as if the centre-right stands for everything. It does not make a real choice in a time in which many feel that ‘market economy’ is the opposite of ‘responsibility for the community’ as well as ‘social security’. In a time that many feel that prosperity and economy do not go together with ecology and climate neutrality, there seems to be no recognition of this tension.

Secondly and subsequently there seems to be almost a refusal to reflect on the problematic aspects of how the economy works in this day and age. It does not seem to really notice that the vested interests in markets have become problematic for the next generations. There is no recognition that the drive for short-term profit and the power of shareholders is squeezing both people and planet. There is no expression of the awareness that these vested interests are almost always overriding human rights, democracy and ecology.

At the same time these two problematic aspects do coincide with the vested interests of the better-off older voters who also do not feel the discrepancies noted above.

I remember a conversation I had in the Advanced School of Politics in Rome in 2018 with a young woman who had almost completely finalized her study for notary. However she experienced that she was not allowed access to be able to become a notary as the system (if I understood it correctly) had some mechanism that enabled control over who was and was not ‘allowed in’. Obviously, the older generations profited from

that arrangement but it was short-sighted if we consider the shortage of young people we now experience in many sectors.

If you don't see how problematic the current system is for the next generations you indeed do not take a stand that stands out but you try to keep things as they were as much as possible.

I asked 'Does the traditional centre-right want to be a protagonist for anyone or stand up for any identifiable cause?' and I suggested that this is connected to the current composition of the centre-right electorate. This seems indeed to be the case.

If you take this lecture and you look around in the traditional centre-right of Europe, there is little that suggests that so far the traditional centre-right is prepared to be a protagonist for the next generation as it seems to refuse to take a real and deep critical look at the current system and especially the vested interests driving it.

At the European level it seems indeed to be an aggregation of interests kept together by mere convenience for power-positions rather than by a bold and inspiring agenda.

Why should younger generations vote for parties who do not seem to share their concerns and in general present therefore a rather bland program of keeping things as they are?

Does it have to be this way? I don't think so but unless the centre-right is prepared to take a hard look at itself and what political instincts are driving it, it is bound for oblivion due to generational change.

At the moment there seems to be no real cause in the Centre-right, no fire, no anger over injustice, no fundamental critique of vested interests and therefore no outline of a real different approach to adjust the serious imbalances of our economy and global relations. It seems as if that is deemed to be a rather juvenile attitude that is left for 'leftist activism'. That also reflects an attitude of an 'arrived' mostly older segment of society that does not feel any of these troubling aspects of the status-quo.

That lack and even rejection of an inspiring cause and 'beating heart' is why younger generations do not feel that the traditional centre-right has anything to offer to them.

How to change this in such a way that the centre-right does not lose itself in leftist activism or populism?

As Sallux we have started a new series of publications of which some have been published this year and some are work in progress.

The core theme of these publications is that we aim for an inspired Christian-democracy that is not afraid to refer to Christ as its inspiration and has a zeal and beating heart in standing for a relational human dignity. Not as a bloodless and powerless obligatory phrase but as a driving principle that fundamentally critiques the current systems but does not get derailed in unfocused or divisive activism.

A relational understanding of human dignity does not allow that people or planet are squeezed for the sake of increasing short-term profits. A universal understanding of human dignity does not allow human rights to be ignored time and again in international relations as addressing them is so inconvenient.

A relational understanding of human dignity is also a bridge to the millions of people in Europe with a non-European background who are here to stay and vote. They often have this outlook that sees how our interests crush their families and peoples in their homelands. Do we reach out to them?

At the same time this relational understanding of human dignity rejects and makes redundant any notion that justice can only come if we subdivide all people in 'categories of oppression' as the woke movement does. This approach based on human dignity also rather changes things through cooperation than confrontation if that is possible but recognizes that this cannot become another method to keep vested interests in perpetual power. Conversation and cooperation where possible, correction and action where needed.

The European Christian Political Movement, of which Sallux is the political foundation, chose to take this relational understanding of human dignity as political essence of today's Christian-democracy and express this with the words: *Elevate. Empower. Engage.*

The mission of Christian-democracy is to be engaged in empowering people and elevate them to enjoy the human dignity that they already have. This is how we see following Christ in today's politics in Europe and in doing so reaching out to all in our society.

Christian-democracy has a future if it wants to have one. The question is if that is indeed the case.