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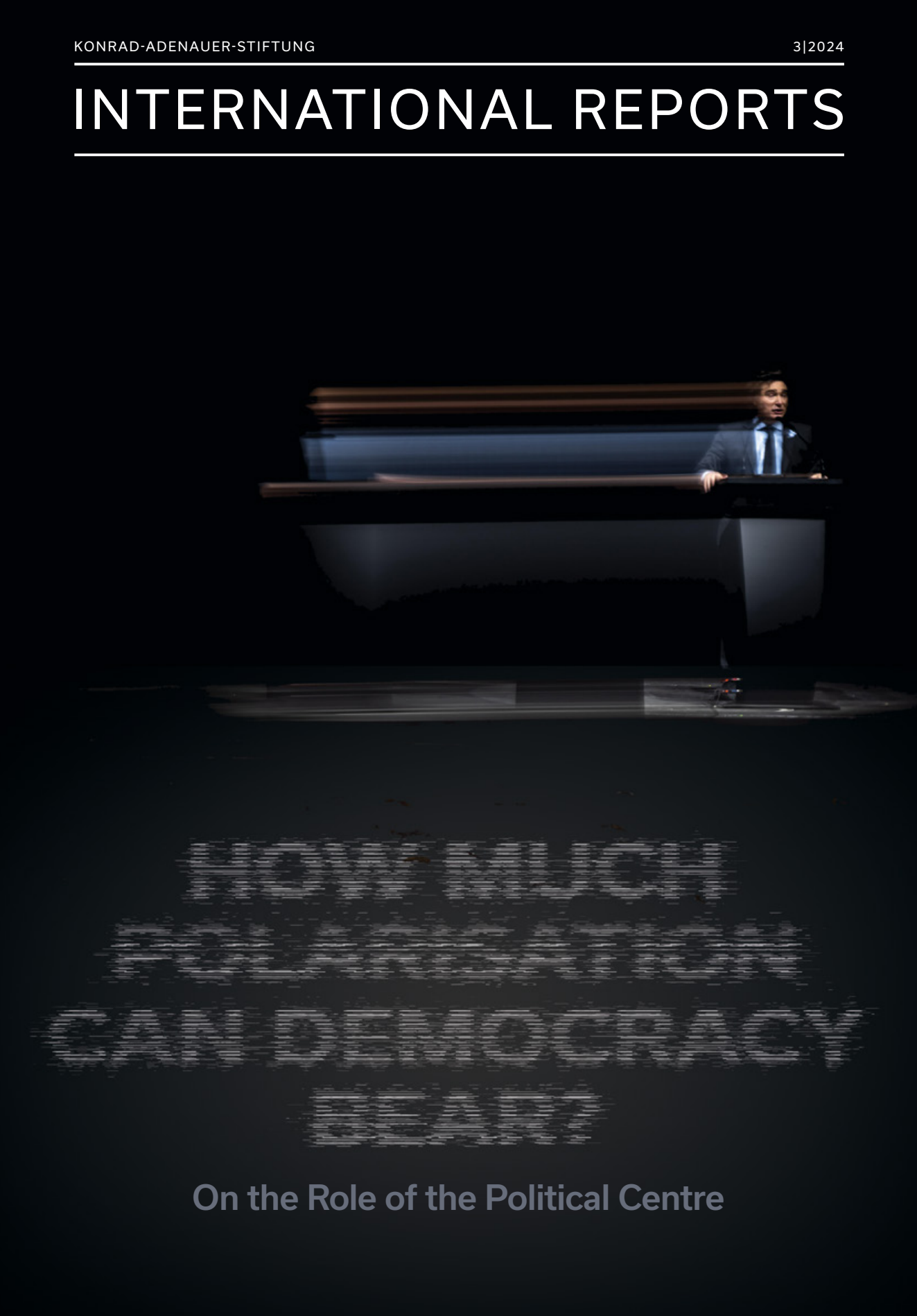
INTERNATIONAL REPORTS



On the Role of the Political Centre

INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

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Dear Readers,

"The crushed centre" – this was the headline of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung at the end of June in the context of the first round of the French parliamentary elections. It depicted a lilac-coloured Macaron whose filling groaned under the pressure of the surrounding pastry elements. That same day, the Economist wrote: "France's Centre Cannot Hold". In the background, the magazine showed the French national flag, the tricolour. But the centre stripe was missing.

The "centre" is booming this year, especially from an international perspective, if not in the form of good election results, then at least in the form of increased attention, which is generally fed by concerns about its supposed or actual erosion in many democracies around the world.

But what do we mean when we speak of the "political centre"? How can we define it? Who are its opponents? And what can be done to strengthen it? This issue of International Reports cannot provide exhaustive answers to these questions. What it does offer, though, are well-founded case studies, including from regional contexts that are less often highlighted in the German press.

These studies do not give rise to a uniform picture of what the "centre" constitutes, and that is hardly surprising. In India, for instance, different benchmarks apply to centrist politics and policies than in Chile, as the articles by Lewe Paul and Ashutosh Nagda, and by Olaf Jacob in this edition show. What is more: even within a specific country, the notions of what the extreme-right, the extreme-left and the centre mean, can significantly shift over time.

Nevertheless, common ground can be identified for the political present, that distinguishes centrist parties from the forces on the fringes of the political spectrum, at least in tendency. The centre leans towards integration, whereas the fringes tend towards division and often fuel this deliberately. Centrist parties and their personnel may have clear positions of their own, but they also know that compromises are needed in plural societies and are part of the normal democratic "business". Extreme political forces, on the other hand, often regard compromise as betrayal. They exaggerate social lines of conflict, identify enemy groups – "the elite", foreigners, minorities of all kinds. They call for the supposedly homogeneous will of the "true people" to be radically enforced.

Hardly any party today calls for the abolition of democracy. However, parties far from the centre – in their programmes and, once in government, in practice – have at least an ambivalent relationship towards liberal, constitutional democracy that protects minorities and the political opposition from the "tyranny of the majority".

Especially when we consider the question of where the threat to the democratic centre comes from, looking beyond Europe proves to be insightful. It is true that in many European countries, among them Germany, right-wing populism and extremism currently pose the greatest challenge to liberal democracy. But it is also true that in Latin America, for example, most of the "successful" attacks on democracy in the past quarter of a century came from the left.

In his article, Sebastian Grundberger highlights how moderate and radical left-wing players have organised themselves into an entire "pink galaxy" that systematically shields "their" autocrats in Latin America against international criticism, increasingly undermines the democratic left, and sees itself as a global

political ally to all countries that want to push back the power of Western states and the influence of liberal values internationally. In fact, many, though explicitly not all, parties from the left-wing and right-wing fringes in Latin America and Europe are united by a proximity to revisionist authoritarian states such as Russia and China.

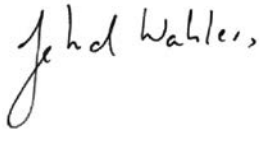
There are no simple answers to the question of what strengthens and what weakens the democratic centre in a country. For instance, rampant polarisation has been cited as an evil in many democracies for years. In fact, there are states such as Georgia, where – as analysed by Stephan Malerius in his article – polarisation between the political camps has reached a stage at which it prevents constructive debate on the country's actual problems and results in enormous dissatisfaction among the population. On the other hand, it is important for parties in the political centre to remain sufficiently distinguishable from one another, as Ludger Gruber and Martin Friedek illustrate in their article on Spain.

When people talk about the rise of the political fringes, they often complain about the role of new media, which are said to favour extreme opinions, brutalise discourse and give populist parties a boost. While this may be true, this observation should not obscure our view of one thing: the rise of populist parties is not just a "discourse effect", but is often also the result of a "performance deficit" on the part of centrist parties. There are actual problems that concern many citizens and to which the aforementioned parties have failed to provide convincing answers in the recent past. With a view to France, Anja Czymmeck and Nele Wissmann speak of a climate of pessimism and a worrying loss of trust in the established political forces. This is even more pronounced in Argentina, as Jana Lajsic illustrates in her text on the rise of the "anti-system candidate" Javier Milei. The observation can probably be applied, to varying degrees, to a number of other democracies.

It is not wrong to warn of the dangers posed by populists and extremists on both the right and left. However, after everything we have experienced in recent years, there is reason to doubt the broad impact of such warnings. This makes it all the more important for centrist parties to find workable solutions to the issues that people perceive as relevant to their lives. From a political science perspective, centrist parties should strengthen their output legitimacy instead of insisting on their higher input legitimacy. In everyday language, we would say that they should deliver, as opposed to spending more energy on presenting themselves as the better democrats, even if they actually are. It goes without saying that they cannot offer the same simplistic "solutions" as their populist opponents. However, the least that citizens can expect is that centrist parties do not ignore problems because they are not provided for in their political ideal.

I hope you find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,



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How Much Polarisation Can Democracy Bear?

On the Role of the Political Centre

Where has the centre gone? The rise of the political fringes not only in France, but in many democracies around the world, is also due to the fact that, from many citizens' point of view, moderate forces have failed to provide convincing solutions to important problems. Photo: © Amaury Cornu, Hans Lucas, picture alliance.

Photo: © Antonin Burat, Le Pictorium, dpa, picture alliance

under discussion

How Much Polarisation Can Democracy Bear?

“Many Voters See the Political Fringes as the Last Chance for Change”

A conversation with the France experts Anja Czymmeck and Nele Wissmann

In an interview with International Reports, France experts Anja Czymmeck and Nele Wissmann discuss the rise of the populists, the situation of the traditional parties and the country's lack of a culture of compromise.

International Reports (IR): *If you read texts about the political situation in France, you often come across the term polarisation. Strong fringes, weak centre – is this how France can be described, also in comparison to Germany?*

Anja Czymmeck: Firstly, it has to be said that a certain degree of polarisation is a central component of the French political system. The Fifth Republic, with its majority voting system, is simply structured that way. For a long time, there were two large blocs, the right and the left, which decided the elections between them. That has changed. There are now three similarly strong blocs in the National Assembly, none of which has an absolute majority. The recent government formation has shown that this makes things rather complicated, notably because France, as compared to Germany, does not have a culture of coalition and compromise. Traditionally, there is a strong focus on political poles.

Basically, it can be said that the division in France has increased in recent years. There is great dissatisfaction with politics, which increases the willingness to vote for extreme forces. The traditional parties, such as the Parti Socialiste and the Républicains, are increasingly being pushed aside, and the fringes are growing.

IR: *You mentioned the recent formation of the government. The backdrop to this was the result of the parliamentary election, which President Emmanuel Macron surprisingly called following the European election victory of Marine Le Pen's far-right Rassemblement National (RN). None of the electoral alliances were able to achieve an absolute majority, and the discussions regarding government formation proved correspondingly complex. Macron finally appointed former EU Commissioner Michel Barnier as Prime Minister, a politician from the centre-right party Les Républicains, which had achieved a result of around five per cent in the elections. Is this solution suitable for bridging political rifts?*

Czymmeck: Barnier is a renowned politician who represents a conservative course. Macron's decision in his favour was a pragmatic one. He wanted to avoid appointing someone to form a government who would immediately have been ousted by a vote of no confidence in parliament. This is why he rejected the left-wing alliance's proposal to appoint Lucie Castets, a top civil servant from the Paris administration.

However, this decision will not bridge the rifts. The left-wing bloc feels ignored, although its protagonists have shown no flexibility with regard to a possible compromise candidate. Even though they did not have a sufficient majority, they still insisted on their candidate.

The budget will now be the central issue for Barnier. He must submit a budget that receives a majority in parliament. To do this, he will probably need the Rassemblement National, which will gain a new position of power as a result. The question is how long this constellation will last. If Barnier does a good job, he may become too popular for the RN at some point.

Renowned politician: Former EU Commissioner Michel Barnier was appointed prime minister in France following this summer's parliamentary elections. Macron's decision in his favour was a pragmatic one – and one that infuriated the political left. Photo: © Sarah Meyssonnier, AP, picture alliance.

IR: *Talking about the left-wing forces: in the summer elections, they ran together in the 'New Popular Front' alliance, which was narrowly ahead in the end. This result was greeted with great relief by parts of the German public, despite the fact that the alliance also includes figures such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his La France Insoumise party, who are often categorised as belonging to the far left. How do you view that alliance?*

Czymmeck: First of all, it must be said that it was quite a surprise that this alliance came about before the parliamentary elections. Previously, the formation of such an alliance had failed because the moderate forces did not agree with the left-wing populists around Mélenchon, who were very radical in the National Assembly. It is a very unusual partnership. The Socialists, for instance, are pro-European and have traditionally proved to be a constructive force. They are now in an alliance with left-wing populists who give you the feeling that they are simply against everything. They are attacking the pension reform, which was only achieved with great difficulty. As far as the budget is concerned, they have some mad ideas about where they want to spend money. It rather makes one wonder how all this is to be financed.

The differences of opinion between the individual alliance partners in the field of foreign policy are particularly serious. The left-wing populists, for instance, hold difficult positions with regard to the Russian attack on Ukraine, the European Union, Israel and the war in the Middle East. In the context of the Russian war of aggression, La France Insoumise has positioned itself against decisive support for Ukraine, and presents itself as a 'peace party'. The party is deliberately promoting the image of the EU as a bureaucratic, undemocratic entity. In terms of economic policy, the party is calling for the abolition of the EU Stability Pact, while free trade agreements are also one of their red lines. The party is highly critical of Israel in the Middle East conflict, and MPs have repeatedly made anti-Semitic remarks. As far as the European Union or the war in Ukraine are concerned, there are definitely overlaps with the far right. The right-wing populists are also highly sceptical of the EU and NATO. What both extremes also have in common is a sceptical view of Germany. Both parties are very difficult for Franco-German relations, as they deliberately portray Germany as an enemy.

IR: *The left-wing alliance was ultimately able to win at least a relative majority in the parliamentary elections because in many constituencies, the other parties joined forces after the first round of voting against RN candidates who had reached the second round: an agreement often referred to as 'Republican Front'. How was this process discussed in the centre-right, given that in some cases it would have meant supporting far-left candidates? And is this procedure a sustainable response to the rise of the far right?*

Czymmeck: The Republican Front has prevented right-wing populists from coming to power since the RN, formerly the Front National, experienced a major upswing in France. However, this front is now clearly crumbling. While the left-wing populists claim to be part of this firewall, it is difficult for the centre-right camp to make election recommendations for a party like La France Insoumise in a second round of voting. For French voters, there are sometimes very complex situations when they want to vote against the right-wing populists, but the candidate of the New Popular Front is a representative of the Mélenchon party. The elections this summer have clearly shown that some reform of the electoral system is likely to be indispensable in France if voters are not to be completely alienated. President Emmanuel Macron announced the introduction of elements of proportional representation back in 2017. However, there has been no reform to date, precisely because there is a fear that the right-wing populists will then be even more strongly represented in parliament.

IR: *How do you explain the popularity of the political forces on the far left and far right?*

Czymmeck: I had already hinted at it: my impression is that a pessimistic mood currently prevails in France. Many French people have economic worries; they fear for their livelihoods. Purchasing power was a major issue in the election campaign. The issue of migration is also significant, although France is not as affected by irregular immigration as Germany. These are issues that drive the French into the arms of the extreme parties. In addition, many people in rural areas in particular feel left behind and not understood. Politicians are perceived as arrogant and aloof. The right-wing populists, in particular, are capitalising on these sentiments. For instance, they turned the European elections into a plebiscite on the seven years of the Macron government – a place to vent discontent.

Nele Wissmann: Macron is well aware of this discontent among the French. There were already riots and the yellow vest movement a few years ago. Macron tried to counteract this with new grassroots democratic instruments such as citizens' councils or consultations on topics such as climate change. However, one doesn't get the feeling that this was really effective, partly because Macron simply cancelled many of the citizens' proposals.

I have the impression that many voters see the political fringes as something like the last chance for change. Macron has also played a part in the situation. He disrupted the political landscape with his movement in such a way that there are currently hardly any moderate counter-offers. He also deliberately created the image of a duel between him and Le Pen. In other words: either my movement or the right wing populists. That is why the other parties have very little space, and the citizens have the feeling that this is the only offer available.

IR: *Let's look away from the political fringes. In Germany, the so-called political centre is a popular place that parties like to claim for themselves. What is it like in France? What role does the term "centre" play in political discourse?*

Wissmann: In France, the Socialists and the Républicains, or the latter's predecessor party UMP, represented the centre-left and centre-right as governing parties for a long time. The centre as a place of political practice therefore existed and still exists, although it is less common to refer to it openly. It is perhaps possible to name *one* party that explicitly links its identity with the political centre, and that sees itself as a centre party. This is the MoDem party, although it does not have many voters. A party like Les Républicains sees itself more on the right, the Socialist Party more on the left.

Important player: Marine Le Pen's right-wing populist Rassemblement National is the strongest single party in parliament. Photo: © Gonzalo Fuentes, Reuters, picture alliance.

Czymmeck: In 2017, when Macron was so successful with his movement and became president, quite a few people thought that he would create a kind of new centre party. After all, his movement saw itself as neither left nor right. However, it has to be said that Macron has now moved significantly to the right, if one wants to use these categories. That surprised many people.

IR: *Indeed, as you've noted, for many years, it was the centre-right Républicains, formerly under other names, and the centre-left Socialists who dominated France, and also catered to demand in the centre. That seems to be over. In the 2022 presidential election, the candidates of the two parties received just under five, and less than two per cent of the vote, respectively. Similarly, in the last parliamentary elections, they were far below their previous heights. Why is the situation so difficult for these once so influential parties?*

Wissmann: Many voters are disappointed and are looking for polarising parties. In addition, the right-wing populists around Le Pen have succeeded in almost completely dominating the discourse on topics such as migration and security. This is a huge problem for the Républicains in particular. The Socialists, in turn, are coming under pressure from populism on the left.

As a general rule, however, one should not forget that the French party system is much more volatile than that of Germany, for instance. The Républicains have not existed in their current form for that long either, and the predecessor party also covered a broad spectrum of conservative, Christian democratic and liberal tendencies. There is currently a lot of movement in the centre-right camp, from which completely new alliances could emerge.

IR: *Can the traditional parties do anything to improve their situation?*

Wissmann: Firstly, it is of course true that a party like the Républicains has indeed suffered major losses at the national level. However, it is interesting to note that the situation differs at both municipal and regional levels, where the Républicains are actually quite successful. This shows that regional roots are still important and are recognised by voters. Many would prefer to have established local structures as opposed to parties that operate more like start-ups. A party like the Républicains must focus on this.

Czymmeck: Of course, the situation is difficult for the traditional parties. Le Pen's RN is now the strongest single party in parliament. But as we have already discussed, there are reasons for this. If the new government led by Michel Barnier succeeds in implementing sensible policies and giving the country stability, something can come of it.

IR: *These were foreseeably the last elections with Emmanuel Macron as president. It is hard to predict what will become of his political movement without him. Is it even possible today to make a serious assessment of where France will be politically in five years' time?*

Czymmeck: You would need a crystal ball for that. The party system is in a state of flux. Unlike in Germany, in France a politician's affiliation to a party is much looser. Party changes are much more frequent. This makes predictions difficult. It will be interesting to see who will prevail at the head of Macron's Renaissance party. Overall, it is startling to see how divided the political landscape is.

The interview was conducted by Sören Soika and Fabian Wagener – translated from German.

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Photo: © David Canales, SOPA images, Sipa USA, picture alliance.

How Much Polarisation Can Democracy Bear?

Polarised, but Present

The Political Centre in Spain

Ludger Gruber / Martin Friedek

A uniform "political centre" or even a centrist party does not exist in Spain. The major parties clearly position themselves as centre-left or centre-right. Over the decades, this moderate degree of polarisation has not harmed Spanish democracy, and has in fact stabilised it. In recent years, however, polarisation has reached a point where it is eroding the country's democratic institutions. Some of the factors driving this development are heterogeneous social values, separatism – and, not least, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez.

There is no uniform "political centre" in Spain. In the last national elections in 2023, the two main parties, the centre-right PP (Partido Popular) and the centre-left PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español), which is drifting further to the left, each won more than 30 per cent of the vote and together achieved just under 65 per cent. On the face of it, the losses of the far-left and right-wing populist parties can also be seen as a stabilisation or even a strengthening of the political centre. However, none of the major parties in Spain clearly define themselves as centrist, but rather position themselves as centre-left or centre-right.

The term "political centre" is vague or open to interpretation. Extremist forces now claim that positions or attitudes that were deemed centrist 20 years ago are either "right" or "left" in order to combat them as part of their political tactics.[1] Historical experience and increasing polarisation in recent years explain the Spanish parties' reluctance to aim for the centre as a political category.

Spanish Centrist Parties Have Historically Failed

The centrist UCD (Unión del Centro Democrático) under the leadership of Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez played a key role in the transition phase from Franco's dictatorship to full democracy between 1975 and 1982. True to its name, it was a moderate, partly Christian social, partly social-liberal reform party that pursued centrist policies. It succeeded in becoming the strongest force in parliament in the first national elections in 1977, winning 165 of 350 seats as a centrist party. This position of strength enabled the UCD to forge groundbreaking compromises across the whole political spectrum from right to left. In this exceptional political situation, all parties set aside ideological differences where necessary in order to advance the transition. According to polls at that time, most Spaniards also positioned themselves in the centre.

Nevertheless, the UCD failed to establish its centrist concept over the long term. A variety of internal party currents tended to bring lines of social conflict into the party and government instead of projecting them onto political competitors. To a certain extent, the UCD became a victim of its own success. When it came to resolving systemic issues, it was able to mobilise more apolitical voters. But following the adoption of the democratic constitution in 1978, the importance of its centrist concept began to wane and conflictive, ideologically charged economic and socio-political issues came to the fore. In the 1982 national elections, the UCD gained only eleven seats. For the first time, the strengthened PSOE (202) and the Alianza Popular-PDP (107) divided the Congress of Deputies along centre-left/centre-right lines.

With the rise and fall of Ciudadanos, the second attempt in recent Spanish history to establish a (new) political grouping with a centrist concept has also failed. Originally social-liberal, the Citizens' Party (C's) was initially founded in 2006

as a regional, constitutionally loyal alternative to the Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC), which had increasingly moved closer to the Catalan separatists. Ciudadanos grew rapidly and seemed to be unstoppable, reaching its peak in 2017 with 36 out of 135 seats in the regional parliament of Catalonia (25.35 per cent) and with 57 out of 350 mandates in the national parliament in April 2019 (15.9 per cent). It looked as if it was on its way to becoming a liberal party in the centre between the then more conservative PP and the socialist PSOE.

After the failure of the Catalan separatists, C's quickly lost relevance. In a way, history was repeating itself: as the Catalan bid for independence faded into the background as a temporary political anomaly, the party found it increasingly difficult to communicate a consistent political direction. The downright contradictory positioning on the spectrum from liberal-conservative to social-liberal on the regional level as well as tactical coalition manoeuvres with both the PP and the PSOE, fostered the negative image of Ciudadanos as an uncertain, undefined and ultimately superfluous political player. Following a few years of agony, C's disappeared from all regional, national and European parliaments in elections held in 2023/2024.

It is worth contrasting these past developments with how the Spanish electorate positions itself on the political spectrum in terms of ideology. Today, just under a third of Spanish voters align

Fig. 1: How Spaniards Position Themselves in Terms of Political Ideology (Random Sample Taken from May 2004 to May 2024, in Per Cent)

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2"></th><th colspan="3">May 2004</th><th>May 2009</th><th>May 2014</th><th>May 2019</th><th colspan="4">May 2024</th></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td>Far-left</td><td>2.1</td><td rowspan="2">6.4</td><td rowspan="4">37.2</td><td rowspan="5">59.2</td><td rowspan="5">54.2</td><td rowspan="5">55.3</td><td rowspan="5">55.8</td><td rowspan="5">62.2</td><td rowspan="4">38.4</td><td rowspan="2">18.9</td><td>13.3</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>Far-left</td><td>4.3</td><td>5.6</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>Centre-left</td><td>15.1</td><td rowspan="2">30.8</td><td rowspan="2">19.5</td><td>10.8</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>Centre-left</td><td>15.7</td><td>8.7</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>Centre</td><td>21.4</td><td rowspan="2">29.3</td><td rowspan="2">29.3</td><td rowspan="2">31.8</td><td rowspan="2">31.8</td><td>23.8</td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td><td>Centre</td><td>7.9</td><td rowspan="5">17.0</td><td rowspan="5">22.0</td><td rowspan="5">17.6</td><td rowspan="5">21.7</td><td rowspan="5">31.1</td><td>8.0</td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td><td>Centre-right</td><td>5.0</td><td rowspan="2">7.9</td><td rowspan="4">9.1</td><td rowspan="4">23.1</td><td rowspan="2">13.6</td><td>7.4</td></tr>
<tr><td>8</td><td>Centre-right</td><td>2.9</td><td>6.2</td></tr>
<tr><td>9</td><td>Far-right</td><td>0.5</td><td rowspan="2">1.2</td><td rowspan="2">9.5</td><td>1.8</td></tr>
<tr><td>10</td><td>Far-right</td><td>0.7</td><td>7.7</td></tr>
<tr><td>—</td><td>Undetermined</td><td>10.9</td><td>10.9</td><td>10.9</td><td>10.9</td><td>11.6</td><td>13.6</td><td>7.7</td><td>1.7</td><td>1.7</td><td>1.7</td><td>1.7</td></tr>
<tr><td>—</td><td>No reply</td><td>13.5</td><td>13.5</td><td>13.5</td><td>13.5</td><td>12.3</td><td>13.6</td><td>4.8</td><td>5.1</td><td>5.1</td><td>5.1</td><td>5.1</td></tr>
</table>

In the original language, the CIS survey only refers to the values one as left-wing and ten as right-wing. For better understanding, an approximate ideological positioning was added to each value, which corresponds to the terminology used by the Fundación Alternativas, see Cordero García, Guillermo / Martín Cortés, Irene 2010: ¿Quiénes son y cómo votan los españoles "de izquierdas"?, in: https://ogy.de/tgx6 [3 Jul 2024]. Source: data based on Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) 2024: Barómetro de mayo 2024, Study No. 3457, May 2024, in: https://ogy.de/73o2 [3 Jul 2024] as well as the respective monthly barometers in comparison, CIS 2024: Barómetros, in: https://ogy.de/6z7n [3 Jul 2024].

themselves with the poltical centre in a narrow sense (31.8 per cent), as they did 20 years ago. 38.4 per cent of voters place themselves on the centre-left to far-left of the political spectrum, while 23.1 per cent position themselves on the centre-right to far-right. Overall, Spanish society therefore positions itself more to the left of the centre.

The number of people who categorise themselves as far-left has more than doubled in the past two decades. Similarly, the number of those who categorise themselves as far-right has also increased. From the additional finding that there are currently considerably fewer undecided voters, it can be concluded that Spanish society has become increasingly politicised (see figure 1).

At this point, it should be noted that the term far-right in Spain is not identical with the German definition of far-right. It should also be noted that many Spanish regionalist voters "automatically" perceive themselves as left-wing because the Spanish left – in contrast to many more unitary, centralist socialists in Europe – has positioned itself as a supporter of more extensive autonomy rights. The historical reasons for this lie in the opposition to the Francoist unitary state.

Courting the "Silent Majority"

In light of these figures, the two major parties, the PP and PSOE, are aware that they need to achieve two strategic aims. On the one hand, they need to fulfil their respective core electorates' desire for a clear ideological positioning, preventing the "all things to all people" approach that is typical of the centre ground. On the other hand, they have to appeal to the almost 32 per cent of voters who identify themselves as true centrists. There is talk of the "strategic centrality" or the "silent majority" of the rather apolitical citizenry that the PP and PSOE are striving to attract. In concrete terms, they have traditionally made a clear ideological left-right distinction in their election campaigns and day-to-day political rhetoric, but have tended to be moderate in actual government.

The PP illustrates just how complex and risky such a balancing act is. At the end of 2011, after winning an absolute majority in the parliamentary elections, it defined itself as a "reformist party of the centre". The PP's intended shift towards the centre at that time was accompanied by the emergence of the far-right Vox party, a de facto offshoot of the PP. The PP's worst performance in the national elections in November 2019 coincided with Vox reaching its peak by winning 52 out of 350 seats. This was a clear signal of protest by Vox voters, rejecting centrism and the perceived "dilution" of attitudes regarding loyalty to the constitution, the constitutional monarchy, patriotism, the family, and so on. In this case, the PP's shift towards the centre that began in 2011 was not a step towards gaining more votes, but instead paved the way for a political competitor that was, at least initially, its own offspring, namely Vox.[2]

In Spain, we have to speak of polarisation in the plural.

The PP's current party leader, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, is attempting to exploit "strategic centrality" by adopting a decidedly moderate stance and offering a conciliatory programme to very different milieus. After all, the results of the 2023 national elections highlighted how the PP cannot form a majority government solely by appealing to voters on the right of the centre. By appealing for centrality and moderation, Feijóo also seeks to improve a situation for which he justifiably holds the current left-wing government, and above all its leader Pedro Sánchez, largely responsible: the enormous polarisation of political culture. In this sense, Feijóo has described the PP as a "centre-right reform party" since 2023.

Manifestations of Polarisation

Both internal and external observers have noted a sharp increase in polarisation in Spain. As correct as this finding is, it seems necessary to

Right in the middle: Alberto Núñez Feijóo, leader of the People's Party (PP), takes a moderate stance and tries to appeal to different milieus. Photo: © Alberto Gardin, Zuma Press, picture alliance.

differentiate between constructive polarisation, which can in fact stabilise Spanish democracy, and authoritarian polarisation, which damages the political culture and even endangers the system. In Spain, it is more important than ever to speak of polarisation in the plural.

Polarisation through the Fragmentation of Parliament

In the early decades of young Spanish democracy, a stabilising two-party system emerged (*bipartidismo*). This did not mean that there were only two parties. On the contrary, the Spanish party system has always been characterised by a plurality of parties. Yet the PP and the PSOE were by far the largest political forces. They invariably provided the head of government, occasionally alternating, and had small partners at their side. There was no centre in the narrower sense – voters could choose between two clear alternatives. The partners were so small that the major parties were able to implement their core policies.

This alternating system of power distribution gave rise to the anti-system party Podemos in the wake of the 2008/2009 financial crisis, the liberal Ciudadanos after 2006 and the right-wing populist party Vox in 2013. The challengers Podemos and Ciudadanos came close to overtaking the two established parties PSOE

and PP in terms of parliamentary seats (*sorpasso*). In the 2016 elections, Podemos won 5.1 million votes, almost as many as the traditional labour party PSOE, which received 5.4 million votes, while Ciudadanos won only nine seats less than the PP in April 2019 (57 vs. 66 seats). The new parties' increased weight made the political system more unstable. Since 2015, there have been five new elections to the Congress of Deputies and the Senate, resulting in relatively fragile minority governments and a fragmented parliament with up to 19 different parties. In 2019, the PSOE and PP only received around 11.8 million votes in both elections – less than 50 per cent of the vote.

The territorial conflicts are exacerbating polarisation in Spain.

The nationalist regional parties have always been represented in parliament due to an electoral system that favours them, but due to the slim majority have disproportionately increased their ability to shape, or rather block policies. Political groups such as the far-left Basque EH Bildu, a successor organisation to Batasuna, the banned former political arm of the terrorist organisation ETA, have benefited from increasing "normalisation", or even upgrading, especially by Pedro Sánchez. At present, Sánchez's minority government is dependent on the successor organisation to Podemos, the Sumar electoral platform, as well as the four nationalist-separatist parties in the Basque Country and Catalonia. The latter can now enforce maximum regionalist demands such as the amnesty of convicted rebels, transfers of powers or financial relief at the expense of Spain as a whole.

These partial territorial conflicts are exacerbating polarisation in Spain. Any kind of coalition between the PSOE and PP is currently inconceivable. Existing barriers to the fringe parties are in many cases even less easy to overcome: Podemos, EH Bildu, Esquerra Republicana, CUP and the Galician Bloc reject any active cooperation with the PP as this could mean an irreparable loss of trust among their voters.

Pedro Sánchez ensures his political survival largely through polarisation. He has consistently rejected agreements with the moderate PP and favoured concluding agreements with extremists and separatists. In terms of rhetoric and content, his election campaigns basically came down to a dichotomous "us" versus "them". By "us", he meant all "progressive" forces, and thus all those who were not PP or Vox – regardless of their substantive positions. Under "them", he subsumes PP and Vox, which he basically describes in the same breath as the "right and far-right", against which his progressive majority must build a dam, even a "wall". Sánchez has thus defined half of Spaniards as being outside the democratic spectrum.

Polarisation Due to Differing Economic and Socio-political Ideas

In terms of economic policy, in Spain we also see the classic polarisation between the more statist left and the more liberal right. However, it is positive to note that, particularly in the autonomous regions, both the PP and the PSOE are pursuing less ideological and more pragmatic approaches.

Another, deeper layer of polarisation between the camps is likely to be a fundamentally different view of the world, society and family – something that is difficult to resolve through negotiation. The Sánchez government, and particularly its coalition partners Podemos and Sumar, adopted socio-political laws based on the conviction that institutions such as "the parties", "the family", "the church" and representative parliamentarianism are essentially undemocratic. In their opinion, "the system" oppresses disadvantaged collectives ("migrants", "women", and so on). The affected collectives must be emancipated from these "powers" through politics, which is to be achieved by prioritising social rights over individual civil rights.

Examples of this attitude are laws that allow minors to have an abortion or change their gender without their parents' consent. Parents are to be pushed ever further out of the education system. Parents are fighting back and criticising the fact that state authorities are increasingly transporting the ideology of Podemos, Sumar and the PSOE into the classroom.

From the PP's point of view, the left-wing government has in fact divided society.

From the left's perspective, all these measures advance the "progress" and "modernisation" of Spain. The PP is deeply opposed to such trends, believing that the left-wing government has in fact divided society. Contrary to the left's election campaign slogans, the PP does not want to return to the old way of doing things, but instead to tone down excessive responses, for example by promoting cooperative rather than confrontational feminism. In any case, social policy is another source of polarisation.

Polarisation as an Expression of a Divergent Understanding of Democracy

For years, political observers have noted an erosion in Spain's institutions. This includes an unprecedented politicisation of the judiciary, which found expression in long-standing conflicts over the appointment procedures at the Spanish Constitutional Court (Tribunal Constitucional) and the highest judicial authority, the General Council of the Judiciary (Consejo General del Poder Judicial, CGPJ), which were only recently resolved.

First and foremost, there are tangible political interests underpinning the blockade. Those holding the reins of the judiciary have greater power to implement political decisions. The PP accused the PSOE of undermining the separation of powers given that Sánchez systematically places political loyalists in top positions within public institutions in the judiciary and beyond. Conversely, the PSOE accused the PP of not recognising the new realities of power and wanting to preserve traditional power structures.

In June 2024, a highly controversial amnesty law came into force for ringleaders of the unconstitutional Catalan independence referendum of 1 October 2017 who are still being prosecuted or have already been convicted. Up until the national elections on 23 July 2023, Sánchez had always ruled out such a law because he deemed it unconstitutional. A clear majority of constitutional experts and judges still hold this view today.

Beyond all the legal implications, it is politically relevant that the judiciary is directly subjected to politics in several respects. It is, in fact, a deal: impunity in exchange for retaining power. Specifically, Sánchez secured the seven votes from the Catalan separatist Junts party required for his re-election by changing the law specifically for their leaders and in their favour.

Nevertheless, Sánchez dismissed the subsequent massive criticism of this undermining of the separation of powers and the principle of equality of all citizens before the law by large sections of society and many professional organisations with the argument that it was merely an alleged "fascist sphere (*fachosfera*) that wanted to overthrow his government".[3] The judiciary feels discredited. The intention of the PSOE and Junts to set up so-called control commissions in parliament to "scrutinise" court rulings contributes to this. Behind this plan is the accusation of "lawfare".[4]

Widespread critical reporting on corruption scandals in Sánchez's closest political and even family circle led to him targeting the media that criticised him. Sánchez announced "measures to preserve democracy". Consequently, this is seen as an attempt at intimidation and an attack on the freedom of the press. Unsurprisingly, these events are significantly contributing to the processes of polarisation. There is only for and against here, no moderating position.

These events and, above all, the way they are handled, reveal a drifting understanding of democracy. Sánchez and his closest supporters see themselves as progressive innovators of democracy, in which the will of the people must become directly effective. Its progress and exercise of will must not be hindered by traditional power structures in institutions that have always been supposedly dominated by the "right". It must be borne in mind that the PSOE has now governed at national level for a total of 27 years, while the PP has only been in power for 14.5 years, which means the Socialists have exerted far more influence on the configuration of the Spanish political and judicial system than the PP. However, Sánchez is now reversing this rhetorically because he does not have a clear majority. To put it bluntly, according to the left-wing narrative, democracy must be "democratised". Although numerous elections in 2023 and 2024 objectively caused the left-wing parties in particular to suffer severe electoral defeats, the election losers are postulating a "social majority", alluding to the mere sum of all political forces beyond the PP and Vox. This legitimises the complete exclusion of right-of-centre parties from political decision-making.

What Sánchez declares as an improvement to democracy is strongly criticised by his opponents; the latter view it as hugely damaging to Spain's representative democracy, which is

Very black and white: In Pedro Sánchez's political world view, the good guys – i. e. the left – and the bad guys – i. e. the right – are pitted against each other. This rhetoric is one of the reasons why polarisation in Spain has recently exceeded reasonable levels. Photo: © Daniel Ochoa de Olza, AP Photo, picture alliance.

based on the separation of powers. They see signs of a system-changing, creeping authoritarianism in the way the law is handled and in the attacks on the judiciary and the press. For the PP and Vox, the 1978 constitution represents the crowning achievement of the unifying transition from the Franco dictatorship to full democracy, and it must not be infringed upon under any circumstances.

Putin's ultra-nationalism holds a certain appeal for far-left, far-right and separatist movements in Spain.

This is giving rise to a new polarisation: representative democracy versus a "popular democracy" based on Latin American Bolivarian models such as Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. A worrying negative dynamic is underway that does not currently allow for a moderating centre.

Geopolitical Context of Polarisation

The polarisation in Spain, as in other EU countries and worldwide, is not determined by domestic policy issues alone. Russia, for example, is also trying to exert influence on Spain. Vladimir Putin's conservative and religious ultra-nationalism holds a certain appeal for far-left, far-right and separatist movements in Spain.

The far-left parties Sumar and Podemos have never officially condemned Stalinism, which claimed many millions of victims. Sumar and Podemos also show understanding for Putin's expansionist course towards the West as a supposed countermovement to NATO, which they reject. Both have been able to keep Spanish arms deliveries to Ukraine relatively low since 2022 thanks to their participation in the coalition.

Court hearings on the accusation of treason in the context of the unconstitutional referendum in Catalonia on 1 October 2017 are still ongoing. Among other things, Putin's support for the then regional president, Carles Puigdemont, via agents and media messages will be assessed.

The discourse of religious and nationalist patriotism is becoming increasingly appealing to the national conservative to right-wing populist Vox. Having recently cut its liberal wing, the national party leadership around Santiago Abascal is drifting ever further in the direction of an eastward-looking ultra-nationalism. This has been reflected in the European Parliament in its departure from the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) and its turn towards the identitarian "Patriots" around Viktor Orbán.

Russian troll farms on social media are feeding their polarising messages into all of the aforementioned voter sectors. Time and again, there are also rumours and investigations into alleged flows of Russian money to Russia-friendly fringe parties and media in Spain.

Polarisation and the Functionality of the Political System

The effects of the multiple polarisations are most visible at national level – to the point of blocking reforms. PP leader Feijóo had offered Pedro Sánchez several "state pacts" on territorial organisation, economic and social policy, Spain's foreign relations and so on. Yet, this will not happen as long as Sánchez benefits more from polarisation than from cooperation with the largest opposition party.

Due to its heterogeneity, the Sánchez government has no common political project beyond the empty formula *progresismo* (progress). For example, at NATO summits, Sánchez pledges the two per cent target to strengthen Europe's defence capabilities, whereas his coalition partner Sumar opposes this. The nationalist-separatist regional parties are demanding transfers of powers, debt relief and other financial benefits; against which even PSOE representatives from the other autonomous regions are levelling

criticism because they see it as unequal treatment. When it comes to economic and social policy, the left-wing and right-wing parties that support the government are worlds apart. A budget for 2024 could not be drawn up due to major differences and it remains uncertain whether there will be a new budget for 2025.

Constructive polarisation offers voters alternatives.

Spain's advantage lies in its distinctly federal, autonomous structure. This means that blockades at national level are compensated for by regional governments capable of taking action. Spain's public administration works well, too. Despite all the problems, the provincial cities have managed to drive innovation, digitalisation and industrial development. The country is very active in environmental policy, although there is no explicitly green party.

It is also worth recalling that the share of votes for the two major parties increased to just under 65 per cent in the most recent national elections. The extreme parties Sumar and Podemos on the left, and Vox on the right, have lost significant ground and now only account for one third of the votes of the major parties. The regional parties have lost voter support, too. Their excessive influence on politics is due to Sánchez's fragile situation and is therefore likely to be only temporary. All these facts stabilise Spain in the extended centre.

And not all polarisation is detrimental. Democracy thrives on the pluralism of concepts and opinions. Constructive polarisation offers voters alternatives. While strong opposition strengthens democracy, branding every rejection of government proposals as "polarisation" violates this vital element underpinning all parliamentarianism. Polarisation becomes dangerous, however, when it is so radical that it abandons the common understanding of democracy and the common constitutional basis.

More Cooperation, Less Division?

In Spain, there is no comparable drive towards the political centre as is the case in Germany. Due to their different historical experiences, people openly admit to being on the left or right. Nevertheless, the "right-wing" category in Spain is still a long way from extremist or even fascist thinking as they are defined in Germany; even if it is important to keep an eye on the extent to which Vox is becoming radicalised by its rapprochement with Viktor Orbán. The PSOE is (still) comparable to the German Social Democrats. The fact that the leader of the Communist Party can be deputy head of government can be explained by the lack of experience of a communist dictatorship in Spain.

The majority of the Spanish population would like their respective parties to adopt a clear position. In their view, no so-called "centre party" could provide such clarity, with too many "all things to all people" positions on key issues such as more or less state involvement in the economy and education, more or less national unity or more or less privacy in educational matters. Nevertheless, prior to elections, the major mainstream parties try to win majorities among the volatile groups of voters in the strategic centre who do not have a strong ideological commitment.

Clear positioning means a stronger polarisation of political culture, which is perceived by outside observers and Spaniards alike. To a certain extent, offering real alternatives stabilises Spanish democracy. However, we currently witness how Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez in particular is using polarisation as a mobilisation tool and a political survival strategy. The most visible sign of this is his adamant rejection of compromises with the largest (opposition) party in Spain today, the Partido Popular.

Conversely, there is hope that the current intensification of polarisation may be temporary. Once Pedro Sánchez is no longer head of government and PSOE leader, there could be a way back to greater moderation and cooperation

between the major parties and thus to the political centre. A comparative analysis of the election manifestos for the 2023 local, regional and national elections provides one reason for this optimistic outlook, with the surprising finding that the positions of the PP and the PSOE in particular are largely compatible when it comes to society's "real problems" – such as jobs, inflation, healthcare, education, justice, the environment and finances. The PP undeniably favours liberal solutions, especially in economic policy, while the PSOE prefers to rely on the guiding and active role of the state to correct the assumed "market failure". The PP emphasises strengthening the individual in social, family and education policy, whereas the PSOE focuses more on community institutions. Unlike the election programmes of Vox or Podemos, however, neither the PP nor the PSOE contain extreme, irreconcilable policy approaches. Coalitions or at least selective agreements (*pactos*) would be entirely possible.

The Spanish parties do not strive to occupy the centre ground. Nevertheless, Spain has succeeded in building a stable democracy with a distinctive structurally moderately polarising extended two-party system (*bipartidismo*). Almost contrary to the overall European trend, extreme forces on the left, right and separatist spectrum are losing support among the population in Spanish elections. It remains to be seen whether and what long-term consequences the negative polarisation induced by the Sánchez government will have for Spanish democracy.

– translated from German –

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1 Mueller, Jan-Werner 2021: Welche Bedeutung hat die politische Mitte noch?, Project Syndicate, 30 Nov 2021, in: https://ogy.de/86lo [11 Sep 2024].

2 The PP's poor performance in the 2015 and 2016 elections is not only due to its programmatic narrowing to an ideology-free centre, but also to the tough austerity and reform programmes' impact on the population. Following Mariano Rajoy's resignation, his successor Pablo Casado took over the party presidency in 2018 with the slogan of an "ideological PP without complexes", which, however, repeatedly led him into difficulties with Vox in terms of content and strategy, for example on the issue of abortion rights. As a result, the fragmentation of the centre-right camp reached its peak in the parliamentary elections of April 2019 (Ciudadanos, PP, Vox) and the PP achieved its worst result ever.

3 Onda Cero 2024: Pedro Sánchez cree que hay una "fachosfera" que busca "derrocar al Gobierno", 29 Jan 2024, in: https://ogy.de/pbnj [11 Sep 2024].

4 For years, Catalan supporters of independence have been claiming that the Spanish judicial system is being used as a political weapon against them in relation to their actions, many of which have been legally established as unconstitutional and/or punishable by law. What is new is that a prime minister such as Pedro Sánchez, who lacks a clear government majority, is now also using this argument against the Spanish judiciary, the political opposition and critical media. This is surprising given that prime ministers from the PSOE have governed Spain for over 27 years – almost twice as long as those from the PP. The PSOE is therefore the main political force that has decisively shaped the country's institutional structure. Suddenly adopting the role of victim therefore seems implausible.

Photo: © Georgisches Parlament via AP, picture alliance.

How Much Polarisation Can Democracy Bear?

Polarise and Rule!

Dysfunctionalities in the Georgian Political System

Stephan Malerius

Polarisation is one of the greatest defects of the young Georgian democracy. When Georgia applied to join the EU in March 2022, the country was given a European perspective along with twelve recommendations. The most important point: political de-polarisation.[1] However, the government and the opposition were unwilling to recognise the problem, let alone address it.

Elite Polarisation

It seemed like historic months in Tbilisi: first Georgia became an EU candidate country in December 2023, then in March 2024 the Georgian national football team qualified for the European Championships in Germany for the first time. As if they had foreseen it, the Berlin Philharmonic staged their European concert in Georgia in May. These events could have built bridges across the deep political rifts that have long divided the country. They could have afforded opportunities to start a fact-based discourse and to argue constructively about problems and solutions rather than about individuals and parties.

In fact, in spring 2024, political rhetoric became less aggressive, personal attacks ceased and the polemics in the political debate waned. Then there was a bizarre déjà vu: in April, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party reintroduced a "foreign agent law"[2] that had to be withdrawn last year following massive local and international protests. The rifts were now back, and were deeper than at any time since Georgia's independence in 1991. They also extended from the political to the social sphere. And the character of the polarisation changed, too. In parliament, the verbal debate was accompanied by violent clashes and protests on the streets were met with police violence and thug squads. The conflict over the foreign agent law is manifesting the polarisation in Georgia, plunging the entire country into an existential crisis, and it is not clear whether the parliamentary elections in October will end this crisis.

Typologically, polarisation in Georgia is also described as "affective elite polarisation", which entails "[e]motional opposition between political parties in a particular political system".[3] In fact, political polarisation is not necessarily based on ideological or social opposition. In highly polarised political environments such as Georgia, conflicts are often based on emotional rejection rather than ideological differences. A mentality or identity characterised by confrontation plays a major role here. In reality, this is expressed by the fact that political actors harbour positive feelings towards members of their own political party or group, while also developing strongly negative feelings towards members of other groups. This phenomenon leads to distinct personal or personalised enmities and reduces the willingness to compromise, let alone cooperate.

In fact, it is difficult to identify clear ideological differences between Georgian parties. Their programmes are usually only weakly developed, they lack profile as well as political identity. There are also no significant discussions about those things. A good example is the governing GD party, which still belonged to the European Socialist party family in spring 2023, but has since joined the right-wing populists of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz. The lack of programmatic differentiation between the parties is compensated for by the black or white rhetoric of their protagonists: one of the main causes of polarisation in the country. It is all about war vs. peace or Russia vs. Europe.

It is worth noting that the majority of voters do not want polemical confrontation, but rather a

culture of debate with a focus on the country's socio-economic problems (unemployment, infrastructure, healthcare) as well as constructive political competition, ideally even leading to coalition governments.[4] Two things can be deduced from this: political polarisation in Georgia is not necessarily based on social polarisation, and the political discourse is an elite discourse detached and very far removed from social reality.

Polarisation in Georgia predominantly takes place in the media and political space.

Another phenomenon that corroborates the finding of affective elite polarisation in Georgia is that the polarisation is not recognised as a systemic problem by the protagonists themselves, but is regarded as externally induced or as necessary. In a programmatic speech at one of the climaxes of disputes over the foreign agent law at the end of April 2024, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the informal decision-maker in Georgian politics, claimed "[r]adicalism, so-called polarization and periodic political upheavals, which have cost our country and its economy dearly over the years, were induced from outside in a completely artificial manner".[5] Nata Koridze, editor-in-chief of the independent and anti-government website Civil.ge, describes polarisation as a disease that Georgia must undergo in order to "recover democratically": "Where Georgia stands now, 'polarization' is synonymous with the ability to speak out against the deeds and words of the ruling majority and can no longer be assigned to the deficit of democratic culture. Polarization, expressed in protest against the proposals that would turn Georgia from the European path, quash human rights, and violate its Constitution, is comparable to a high fever that fights the deadly infection. This is a sign that the political organism is fighting, that it is alive."[6]

In his speech, Ivanishvili embeds the external polarisation in bizarre conspiracy theories and repeatedly refers to a "global war party" that is trying to control the country's destiny. This view is misguided, as the polarisation in Georgia can be localised quite clearly, and there are intelligent attempts to analyse the causes and factors influencing that polarisation. Koridze's description is primarily emotional and based on affective antagonism, in which polarisation becomes an instrument of political confrontation.

Shrinking Political-Media Space

Polarisation in Georgia predominantly takes place in two overlapping spaces, the media space and the political space. The actors of a radicalised discourse characterised by hate speech, personal attacks, denigrating accusations, rumours and slander are the leading politicians on both sides: that of the government and the opposition. In August 2022, the former leader of the largest opposition party called his political opponent a "party of stateless collaborationists".[7] At a press conference in mid-March 2023, the then leader of the ruling party spoke of a campaign "in the best tradition of liberal fascism" with regard to the protests that had (temporarily) brought down the foreign agent law.[8]

The multitude of similar examples prompted Freedom House to state in its 2020 Nations in Transit report: "Polarization and radicalization of politics and the media space have become a new normal in Georgian political life"[9]. This destructive discourse only works because it is taken up or even demanded by polarised and polarising media. The major television channels are primarily mouthpieces for their political clientele in a very narrow sense; this applies to the private and state TV channels that are partially or fully controlled by the government (TV Imedi, Post TV, Rustavi 2, Georgian Public Broadcaster) as well as to the private channels close to the opposition (TV Mtavari, TV Pirveli, TV Formula). In political talk shows, people do not argue with each other, but instead talk about each other. The media-political polarisation sometimes resembles a game of cat and mouse: "We invite them, but they don't come," say journalists from opposition broadcasters about

government politicians. "We would come, but they won't invite us," is what opposition politicians say about government channels.

This negative interaction between politics and the media has serious repercussions on the democratic system: "Political polarization erodes trust in public institutions, it damages political process, negatively affects economic development, distracts social development and relationships in society,"[10] according to an op-ed by ISET, the Institute of Policy at the International School of Economics of Tbilisi State University. This development corresponds with a political space that has been shrinking dramatically for years, in which a fact-based debate on pressing social, societal or sectoral issues (environment, education, health, culture) is largely absent. Everyone suffers from this, except the political elite.

An election winner in Georgia does not think of making compromises or even entering into coalitions.

In view of the perceived threat to Georgian democracy, ISET in 2023/2024 developed the "Media (de)Polarisation Index"[11] as an attempt to measure political polarisation through an analysis of media polarisation using machine learning tools. It examines factors that either increase or decrease polarisation in the country, such as the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, or Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – both events resulted in temporary political consolidation in the country. The index undoubtedly helps to enhance understanding of what causes polarisation in Georgia. However, the theory that polarisation can be reduced or even overcome by focusing on an undisputed consensus in society and among political and institutional actors, and that Georgia's European integration can form such a consensus,[12] must be questioned in view of the conflict over the foreign agent law, since this conflict is precisely about how the different

Bizarre déjà vu: In the spring of 2024, the Georgian government reintroduced a foreign agents law clearly influenced by the Kremlin, which it had been compelled to withdraw just a year earlier due to widespread street protests. Once again, many Georgians, as seen here in front of the Parliament, took to the streets to protest the "Russian law". Photo: © Irakli Gedenidze, Reuters, picture alliance.

actors imagine this integration (or whether they want it at all).

Zero-Sum Games

The current political-media polarisation in Georgia takes place in a party-political space dominated by the logic of a zero-sum game. An election winner does not think of making compromises or even entering into coalitions – instead, the election loser must disappear completely from politics by being marginalised or even criminalised. The political upheavals in Georgia in 1991, 2003/2004 and 2012 were eruptive; they resembled coups, revolutions and overthrows, which were the opposite of orderly transfers of power. Political opponents, such as President Saakashvili, who was voted

out of office in 2012, were forced into exile or imprisoned upon their return. This logic can be observed not only in the context of elections. The pattern of affective elite polarisation prevents or makes it extremely difficult for party alliances or other forms of political alliances to emerge.

No newly founded party has succeeded in converting initial popularity into sustained electoral success.

In addition to the typological description, the historical context enables understanding. There are attempts to trace the roots of the current political polarisation in Georgia back to developments during the late 1980s and early 1990s and to the divisions in the Georgian independence movement.[13] Stephen Jones, one of the leading Anglo-American experts on Georgia, names four factors that undermined the national movement towards the end of the Soviet Union:

1. personal conflicts in groups with very similar world views;
2. authoritarian tendencies within these groups, which were formed around powerful political leaders;
3. aggressive-revolutionary tactics in the political debate (a struggle for power without any rules);
4. a formation of parties initiated "from above", in which social interests and a bottom-up social lobby for certain political concerns played no role.[14]

Most of these factors are still valid today, and provide a foundation for a political landscape that has been deeply bipolar since 2012; leaving Georgia in a permanent state of crisis both in terms of party politics and institutions, and in terms of discourse. This, in turn, plunges the population into a deep apathy and demotivates them from being or becoming politically active over the long term. For more than twelve years, two major parties have dominated political life in Georgia: the currently ruling Georgian Dream party and the former ruling party, the United National Movements (UNM). Behind them are two iconic political figures: the third president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, and the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Both are the only decision-makers in their parties, without admitting this or having a mandate for this. Saakashvili has been in prison in Georgia since the end of 2021 for alleged abuse of power. Ivanishvili is actually a private individual who has only had a political post again since December 2023 as honorary chairman of his party, which, however, did no less then authorise him to appoint the prime minister. Both parties and the personalities behind them have appropriated the political space in Georgia in a way that is increasingly bizarre. In the last three parliamentary elections (2012, 2016, 2020), between 75 and 95 per cent of the votes went to GD and UNM, despite an overwhelming majority of Georgians actually wanting this toxic bipolarity to end. At the same time, they are holding the country hostage, for which political polarisation is an essential tool.

It is important to understand that, as antagonistic as they are towards each other, Ivanishvili and Saakashvili and their parties need each other and the conflict is vital for both of them. The demonisation of the UNM and Saakashvili and a reference to the authoritarian legacy towards the end of his second term, or – conversely – the labelling of Ivanishvili and GD as "Russians" or the "Russian Dream" are intended to mobilise voters and maintain or gain power. Another important feature of that system is: there must be no political alternatives.

Tertium Non Datur

In 2023, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, together with Georgian and Dutch partners, conducted a study[15] asking why Georgia has for many years been unable to break the party-political bipolarity between GD and UNM, despite a growing desire among voters for one or more alternative political forces.[16] Since 2016, there have been repeated attempts to found parties that have explicitly or implicitly tried to establish

themselves as a "third force". Some of these experiments started with important assets, such as prominent and popular leaders (The State for People), offices in the regions and parliamentary representation (European Georgia, a split-off of the UNM), financial resources (Lelo), or media support (Girchi). However, following a short phase of euphoria that rarely lasted longer than a few weeks, none of these projects succeeded in turning their initial popularity into sustained electoral success; even though the mood among the population would have provided a good breeding ground for this. The study, which is primarily based on secondary research and focus groups in the Georgian regions, cites several reasons as to why the newly founded parties failed, such as the lack of a clear ideological or political identity, weak addressing of socio-economic problems in the country, low transparency, poor communication with voters and a lack of internal party democracy.

"They [the parties] don't care about this issue at all. None of them has any interest in it. Once they reach power, they all become the same as those before them." "They [the parties] talk among themselves; they do not communicate with us, the voters." "What all [political parties] have in common is that they all lack reliability."[17] As devastating as the judgements from the focus groups about the Georgian parties are, they accurately portray their mistakes. The big questions, to which the study is also unable to provide any concrete answers, although it did attempt to formulate operational recommendations, are as follows: how can the identified

Leading from the background: Businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili (second from the left) is officially just the honorary chairman of his party, Georgian Dream. Yet, many consider him the de facto leader of the country. Photo: © Maksim Polyakov, Kommersant, Sipa USA, picture alliance.

errors be transformed into a positive agenda? What is needed to make a party-political project successful? And finally: how can the dysfunctionality of the party-political system in Georgia be remedied?

Russia – Controlled Destabilisation

The internal challenges facing the political system in Georgia are exacerbated by external factors that promote and deepen polarisation. A survey conducted in 2022 found that Georgians blame Russia (83 per cent) as well as politicians (87 per cent) and the media (82 per cent) for the polarisation in their country.[18] Once again, this can be clearly illustrated using the foreign agent law: at the beginning of April 2024, Georgian Dream was leading by a wide margin in all polls, the opposition was divided and fragmented, lacking charismatic leaders, and there was little confidence in being able to seriously challenge the ruling party in the parliamentary elections in October. The elections could have been a walk in the park for the government. Yet, the situation fundamentally changed with the resubmission of the law and the weeks of protests against it. Many people were alarmed, the elections were suddenly seen as a referendum on the future of the country, and the opposition was determined to win. If there was no domestic political need for the Georgian Dream to introduce the law, what was the main reason behind it? Many observers suspect that Russia intervened and that the Kremlin pressured the Georgian government to take this step, for which there are several indications: firstly, similar laws have been introduced in Abkhazia, Bosnia (Republika Srbska) and Kyrgyzstan over recent months.[19] Secondly, in addition to the foreign agent law, the government in Tbilisi followed suit with other political steps (adoption of an offshore law; announcement of constitutional amendments criminalising "LGBT propaganda"; increase in gold reserves) that Putin has taken in Russia in recent years. Thirdly, there are clear parallels with a similar scenario in Armenia in 2013: after the Armenian government had long negotiated an association agreement with the EU and was ready to sign it in November at an Eastern Partnership summit together with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, the then Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan was summoned to Moscow in September 2013, where Putin told him that Armenia did not have to sign an agreement with the EU, but rather join the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union; and this is precisely what happened. Similar to Armenia in 2013, Russia does not want Georgia to conduct accession negotiations with the EU beginning in 2025 and is trying to prevent this via the foreign agent law.

Russia uses polarisation to create dependencies and gain control.

While Russia was still operating blatantly and with open pressure towards Armenia eleven years ago, it now adopts a more subtle approach: compliant governments are dependent on Russia, mainly through corruption, and are then pressured into making decisions in the Kremlin's interests. Ivanishvili, the de facto decision-maker in Georgia, is an illustrious example of this: he made his fortune in Russia in the 1990s and fled to Georgia in the early 2000s when Putin began to consolidate his power over the oligarchs in Russia. Although many of them (Fridman, Abramovich, Vekselberg and others) tried to distance themselves from the Kremlin, they never managed to completely evade the instructions of Putin's regime. According to an analysis by the European Council on Foreign Relations, there is no evidence to suggest that this is any different in Ivanishvili's case.[20]

These governments, which are indirectly controlled by the Kremlin, and their actions polarise domestic politics, which in turn leads to political destabilisation, as in the case of the weeks of protests in Georgia. The domestic political weakening makes the government even more susceptible to Russian influence. This approach is described as "controlled destabilisation" and is deployed by Russia in many countries.

Polarisation, which leads to a dysfunctional political system, plays a key role here. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg: Russia uses a wide range of instruments in Georgia, including widespread disinformation, incitement of ethnic minorities and polarising narratives ("the West wants to drag Georgia into war"). While polarisation serves the Georgian parties domestically in order to gain or retain power, Russia uses it subversively to create dependencies and gain control. The developments in Georgia are a textbook example of this.

Georgian Charter

As a successor state to the Soviet Union and in the immediate neighbourhood of Russia, which occupies 20 per cent of Georgian territory, Georgia has weak and fragile democratic foundations. In light of the precarious situation ahead of the parliamentary elections on 26 October, Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili has launched an initiative she calls the "Georgian Charter". Zourabichvili was elected president in 2018 as the ruling party's candidate, but then turned her back on the Georgian Dream when its Eurosceptic agenda became apparent and took effect with the foreign agent law. With the "Georgian Charter", she proposes that the country be led by a government of experts for a limited period following the elections and with a focus on implementing the EU's recommendations, after which accession negotiations with Brussels could be opened and new elections held. The idea is that this transitional period will afford the country's political parties the opportunity to develop programmes and profiles and to position themselves in terms of personnel such that they can conduct a fact-based election campaign which is neither based on bold propaganda nor the manipulative use of administrative resources, but on fair party competition, and offers Georgian voters a choice of genuine political alternatives. The initiative, with support from all opposition parties, intends to bring Georgia back onto the European path and drive back Russian influence in the country. It would be a first major step towards de-polarisation and as such could sustainably strengthen the functionality of the political system and thus the democratic foundations of the country.

– translated from German –

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Rise, Fall and Repeat

The Story of Centrism in India

Lewe Paul / Ashutosh Nagda

There have been notable changes in India's political landscape over recent decades, with the rise of Hindu nationalism and social polarisation overshadowing long-standing centrist traditions and eroding important components of the "world's largest democracy". Will the results of the 2024 election be an opportunity to return to a more moderate approach?

Over the past decade, the rise of populism has been a dominant force in politics and political analysis across the globe. In an age of heightened polarisation aided by widespread use of social media, centrist politics have struggled to satisfy voters' demands and set the political agenda. India represents an important case for understanding this global phenomenon for two reasons. Firstly, India is relevant as the world's largest democracy and fifth-largest economy, a forward-looking country vying for a greater role in the geopolitical sphere. Secondly, and most importantly, is the ascendency of right-wing populism in the country, which has quietly grown alongside centrist politics but has overshadowed the latter in more recent times.

Since its independence in 1947, centrism has been a bedrock of India's polity. The plurality of Indian society, culture and politics has largely called for a centrist approach to the country's overall governance. Accommodation, appeasement, welfarism and emancipation have been key pillars of the country's centrist policy framework, while having also been key determinants of major electoral victories in India.

The victory of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the general elections of 2014, when Narendra Modi first became Prime Minister, changed the composition of centrist politics in the country. Modi's BJP borrows heavily from the centrist fabric and also imbues it with its distinct saffron hue of Hindu nationalism. The BJP presents itself as a platform catering to all Indians, whereas in all cultural and religious aspects the party is clearly biased towards the 80 per cent of Indians who belong to the Hindu majority. In general terms, Hindu nationalism promises the creation of a state that adheres to cultural and spiritual traditions of Hinduism. The stronger the polity subscribes to these principles, the more likely it will be that non-Hindu parts of the population become marginalised and disenfranchised.

Populism in the Indian context can take different forms, three of which are discussed in this article. The first is the idea of empowering underprivileged groups to defy a perceived social and political elite. The second denotes a polarising dynamic between different social and religious groups with the intention of creating a sentiment of "us-versus-them". The third is the promise of material benefits to certain population groups. The latter can be seen as one of the tipping points between centrism and populism: economic welfare programmes such as direct bank transfers of cash, construction of houses and household amenities, water connections and distribution of gas cylinders are a centrist staple of Indian politics because they benefit the mainstream of the Indian population. Having said that, such policy items can easily acquire a populist flavour when virtually all political parties try to outbid each other's campaign promises regarding economic welfare or single out certain groups for quick electoral gains.

India's multi-party system is as diverse as the country itself. In the general elections concluded on 4 June 2024, as many as 744 political parties contested for seats in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of parliament, of which over 30

had won at least one seat in the previous election of 2019. These include two pole-position parties – namely the Indian National Congress (INC or Congress for short) and the Bharatiya Janata Party – which, between them, have led most national governments since independence. Congress has its roots in India's struggle for independence and is closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi and the Nehru-Gandhi family. The BJP, for its part, has emerged from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh[1] (RSS), a group founded in 1925 that the United States Library of Congress describes as a "right-wing Hindu-nationalist, paramilitary, volunteer and allegedly militant organization".[2] Most other parties on the list of 30 are closely linked to one or two specific federal states of India, such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) in the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh; Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar; Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu; Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal among many others. These parties usually champion policies tailored to the local populations. Importantly, in an era of coalition politics it is regional parties that tip the scales at national level.

Steering Through the High Winds of Independence on a Centrist Course

The BJP is the strongest political force in India today. The image of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, often against a backdrop of the BJP's saffron colours and lotus symbol, is a ubiquitous feature of everyday life. And yet the Indian National Congress, the main opposition party to Modi's BJP, has the strongest claim to being the most influential party shaping India since its independence in 1947. Within this 77-year period, the INC has headed the central government for 54 years, featuring six Prime Ministers. The party was founded in 1885 and became strongly associated with Mahatma Gandhi and the struggle for independence. An integral part of this effort was the INC's ability to project inclusiveness to the different sections of Indian society. Even though most of its members hailed from the majority Hindu faith, it represented a wide range of religions, castes and economic classes. This big tent image was upheld after India achieved independence in 1947, and Congress decisively won the first national election of 1952. The clear overarching goal of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was to lead the new-born Republic of India out of poverty through "collective development": dams and steel plants were the temples of the new India, Nehru was quoted as saying.[3] From its earliest days, the Congress-led government of India embarked on a project that addressed every member of society.

The policy brand that Nehru stood for later became known as developmental nationalism.

The policy brand that Nehru stood for later became known as developmental nationalism. The population subscribed to the idea of jointly pursuing the goal of a self-determined, prosperous nation, which, over the course of Nehru's three terms as Prime Minister, created the notion of the INC as India's natural governing force. Congress not only adopted an inclusive policy agenda and broad outreach, it also emphasised the accommodation of different interests and the provision of welfare programmes to disadvantaged groups. As a centrist government, it clearly had to cater to the Hindu majority and burnish its own Hindu credentials, while also carefully heeding the concerns of religious minorities.

Balancing these interests earned Nehru the distinction of being seen as the architect of a secular Indian state. In India's federal system, some ambitious policies also had to be shelved to appease state governments. When Nehru aimed to establish Hindi as India's only national language, backlash from non-Hindi speaking states was so strong that the central government compromised and established English alongside Hindi as India's official language. During the first chapter of India's modern history, Congress embodied centrism and

successfully portrayed itself as the only party capable of aggregating and converging the various interests of India's pluralist society.

Under Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, Indian politics took a populist turn. During her first tenure as Prime Minister, from 1966 until 1977, she mobilised support through a left-leaning and at times socialist policy agenda, and relied on her personality to generate political appeal.[4] When faced with secessionist movements in Punjab and Kashmir during her second term in power from 1980 until 1984, she portrayed the Sikh and Muslim insurgents as threats to national integrity that only she as a defender of Hindu faith and her party could stand up to. Although this style of politics became known as unitary nationalism, some commentators argue that it was in this period that Indira Gandhi laid the groundwork for a securitised, anti-minority discourse and "us-versus-them" populism, which came to bear during the recent BJP-led governments.[5]

The rise of the BJP brought about a more sustained erosion of centrism.

No Longer the Sole National Party: the BJP Hones Its Ideological Edge to Rival Congress

The centrist profile of Congress became dented as it had to deal with mounting challenges from both within and outside. The rise of the BJP, however, brought about a more sustained erosion of centrism in India. The Hindu-nationalist party began in 1980 as a breakaway faction of the Janata Party.[6] However, the BJP's deeper roots lie in the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS, 1951

Two-time Prime Minister: Under Indira Gandhi, Indian politics took a populist turn. Some commentators argue that she laid the groundwork for a securitised, anti-minority discourse and "us-versus-them" populism that came to bear during the recent BJP-led governments.
Photo: © United Archives, picture alliance.

to 1977), then known as the political arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. This heritage is bound by the core ideology of nationalism, and specifically Hindu nationalism.

However, the ideology did not witness an ascent in the initial years of the BJP. The party started with a moderate approach[7] to project continuity from the Janata Party days. This

The winners? BJP supporters celebrate after the 2024 election, in which the party won the most votes. However, the result was much weaker than many expected and the BJP needs to rely on coalition partners with different ideological standpoints to run the government. Photo: © Pradeep Gaur, Sipa USA, SOPA Images, picture alliance.

attempt to build an alternate centrist platform resulted in massive electoral disappointment during its first national elections of 1984, after which the BJP steered towards hardline Hindu nationalism. The BJP found its calling with the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement[8] – a movement for the construction of a temple in honour of Lord Ram, a Hindu deity, on the disputed site of a mosque in the state of Uttar Pradesh. As momentum for the temple grew, so did the BJP's electoral fortunes in the subsequent national elections, transforming it into a formidable political force across the country.

The quota system became a defining theme in Indian politics at the turn of the 21st century.

Two noteworthy events took place alongside the temple movement: the liberalisation of the Indian economy (1991) and the adoption of the Mandal Commission report (1992) for the inclusion of socially and economically disadvantaged communities in public service and education by means of a quota system.[9] The advocacy of the quota system and its final implementation thwarted the BJP's temple politics as it empowered several regional parties with policy objectives centred on this system. This was especially the case in the Hindi heartland that comprises much of the country's north and is the BJP's main support base. When looking at the bigger picture, quotas were meant to serve a centrist purpose. Alongside their goal to facilitate positive social mobility, the policy inadvertently created new constituencies and became a defining theme in Indian politics at the turn of the 21st century. Quotas were designed to enable a range of marginalised groups – which, taken together, amount to a sizeable proportion of the population – to compete with the majority. While many viewed the quotas as an improvement, they also opened up a number of opportunities for populists to either challenge or defend the system's beneficiaries.

The 1990s became the decade of coalition politics in India. Regional parties punched

above their weight while the colossal entities of Congress and BJP failed to stand on their own. Whereas Congress was clearly in decline from its past stature in this decade, the BJP was in ascent but far from being dominant. The latter gained the upper hand from Congress in 1996, but needed alliance partners to form the government in 1996, 1998 and 1999. The BJP's dependency on alliance partners, most of whom rejected its Hindu majoritarian ideology, forced the party to revert to a more moderate stance. Having compromised on its ideological approach, it finally managed to lead a full-tenured government from 1999 to 2004. This decade not only curbed the BJP's Hindutva ascent, whose aim is a Hinduisation of the state and all its cultural and social aspects, but also symbolised how Indian politics can return to a centrist pattern.

Modi's public persona outshone virtually all other leaders in the BJP and across the country.

The era of coalition politics continued as Congress clawed its way back up to surpass the BJP and lead a government known as United Progressive Alliance (UPA) for two terms from 2004 to 2014. In this period, the BJP faced a structural and political decline. Its loss in two subsequent general elections of 2004 and 2009 pushed two of its flag-bearing leaders into semi-retirement. The resulting vacuum was filled by the BJP's then Chief Minister (CM) for the state of Gujarat, Narendra Modi.

The early years of Modi's tenure as CM were defined by the 2002 Gujarat riots between Hindus and Muslims. While the riots severely impacted his public image, he managed to climb the ranks of the BJP and the RSS due to a combination of tenacity and skilful political manoeuvring and went on to govern the state for twelve years. While the polarising brand of populism was one of Modi's key planks to get re-elected, he strongly intended to build his political profile around development and aspiration.

Modi's rise within the BJP and across the country was inversely proportional to the declining approval of the UPA government, especially in its second term (2009 to 2014). Financial scandals, domestic security concerns and widespread protests backed the government into a corner and gave rise to a collective call for change. In the midst of this, Modi came across as the right man at the right time as his Gujarat resume and public persona outshone virtually all other leaders in the BJP and across the country. Yet, Modi and the BJP were mindful that the rise in their fortunes was due to their pitch for development and overall aspiration, not their ideology. They therefore adopted an all-inclusive approach with a primary focus on the theme of developmental and aspirational India – not too far removed from Nehru's original ideas, but with the marked difference that, within this framework, the party's ideology of Hindu nationalism found its wings once again.

The BJP's Populist Playbook

In the decade leading up to 2024, the BJP's practice of populist politics can be viewed through three lenses: first, BJP's active targeting of the politically ascending marginal classes, which implies a challenge to a political elite perceived as dominated by Congress and which has lost touch with ordinary people. Second, an increasingly targeted take on welfarism designed to bank votes. Third, social and religious polarisation, with a clear fault line between Hindu and Muslim groups. Hindu nationalism can be understood as a superstructure in which various other policies take shape. It is fuelled by never-ending invocations of India's great ancient civilisation and contrasted with denouncements of eras when the country was subjugated by foreign invaders; in the BJP's understanding, this includes both the British colonisers and the Mughals, who were Muslim. Expressions of Hindu nationalism are intrinsically social

and cultural as its proponents create friction between Hindus and Muslims in all aspects of life from inter-religious marriages to food choices and religious practices. It reached a climax in January this year when construction of the long-promised temple in honour of Lord Ram was finally completed. The BJP intended the consecration of the temple to be a rallying cry for Hindus across the nation to back the BJP in the national election.

The BJP's support was traditionally sourced from richer, more urban middle-class and upper-caste populations. However, this base has never been enough to propel the BJP to form a government of its own. From 2014, the BJP has attempted to make inroads in India's marginalised and rural population. The marginalised population includes the non-upper caste and tribal population, whose regional strongholds and representational political parties have enabled them to gain strong political momentum since the 1990s. Their historical struggles against the dominant upper caste population almost virtually make them non-BJP voters. The BJP has attempted to tackle that aversion with the help of two specific tools – aspirational politics and Hindu nationalism. With the former, the focus lies on boosting the country's growth trajectory through developmental work and advancing individual growth through jobs.

The convergence of aspiration and welfarism is an attempt to blur the caste and class barriers.

This politics of national and individual aspiration has been combined with a heavy dose of welfarism – primarily a tool of centrist politics as welfare programmes address the whole population; however, one which can take on a populist guise when geared towards specific constituencies or amplified to the point of drowning out virtually anything else.

Welfarism is by no means new to India: job guarantee schemes, a focus on the supply of public goods, such as health and education, have all had plenty of airtime. Whereas under Modi and his BJP, welfarism has taken a novel turn. Their "New Welfarism"[10] entails the subsidised public provision of essential goods and services normally provided by the private sector, such as bank accounts, cooking gas, toilets, electricity, housing and more recently water and plain cash. Over the past decade, Modi's government has set up the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mechanism to funnel more than 300 billion euros of welfare payments to the population.[11] Still, New Welfarism does not guarantee political immortality to Modi and the BJP, as it has inspired enough political and social goodwill for it to be emulated by various other political parties across Indian states.

The convergence of aspiration and welfarism is a conscious attempt to blur the heavily entrenched caste and class barriers and promote the image of a larger Hindu family of voters. The ubiquitous backdrop of Hindu nationalism allows the BJP to hold on to their traditional voters from urban middle-class and upper-caste populations with relative ease. This section of the population does not call for an aspirational form of politics on day-to-day life matters, but rather seeks an overarching aspiration for Indians, the Indian nation and, not least, for Hindus at large. The BJP's consistent theme is quite simple: to empower the majority which, according to the party, has been disadvantaged for decades. It has targeted the opposition and especially Congress by portraying them as part of an elite system that has promoted "pseudo-secularism" in which it supposedly only favours minorities (Muslims) and neglects the country's religious majority: the Hindus.

As India Embarks on Modi 3.0, Will the Pendulum Swing Back to Centrism?

India has come a long way since its independence and much of its success was arguably built on a centrist policy agenda broadly based

on economic development. Under Modi's government, India has made significant economic advances, while also creating a more polarised social and political atmosphere.

The interplay between a centrist tradition on the one hand, and populist inroads on countless themes on the other, makes the Indian case both intriguing and challenging. The elements of caste, class, religion, languages and cultures have constituted the basic fabric of India since its inception. This will sustain a breeding ground for most populist tendencies of the Indian polity. The challenge lies in tackling the exclusionary nature that is an inherent feature of populism, and which has become more pronounced over the past decade. Populism, which in India polarises society based on religious identities, labels people as nationalist or anti-national, denies basic human rights to critics of the ruling elites, and has weakened the functioning of media, legislature and judiciary, needs to be kept in check so as to counter the risk of a permanent erosion of democratic mechanisms.

The results of the 2024 general elections could provide an opportunity for a return to centrism, as the BJP was humbled by a much lower mandate than it was aiming for. In its third consecutive term, it needs to rely on coalition partners with different ideological standpoints in order to run the government. Faced with this reality, a weakened BJP will probably no longer be able to steamroll policies through parliament and will strike a more conciliatory tone in its political messaging. Leaving a sharply polarised campaign behind, the opposition will use its newly gained strength in parliament to challenge the government on political substance.

The last decade has been defined by a mismatch between a successful centrist economic agenda and an exclusionary trajectory in the social, religious and cultural spheres. As the BJP and its coalition partners steer India into the next chapter of its impressive development story, much could be gained from a deeper assessment of the nation's overall social fabric. How best to balance out the needs and concerns of its various groups, rather than claim ideological supremacy for one, will be a central task for generations to come.

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How Much Polarisation Can Democracy Bear?

The Indispensable Centre

Political Parties and the Milei Government in Argentina

Jana Lajsic

After years of being under the radar, Argentine politics suddenly became a topic of interest with Javier Milei winning the presidency. The eccentric radical libertarian's uncompromising plans for reform and his outrage at the "political caste" received worldwide attention. In reality, he has had difficulties implementing his drastic measures without the established political players. The defeated centrist parties have been put to the test and pushed to decide whether and how they wish to cooperate with the Milei government.

Argentina: A Unique Experiment

At the end of 2022, Argentina led the headlines all over the world. The attention sparked by the World Cup victory faded quickly, however. One year later, when talk show economist and political nobody Javier Milei became president, attention to Argentine politics returned for the first time in years. Expectations were high: Milei was to dollarise the economy, reduce inflation, and disempower the "corrupt political caste". He won the run-off election by a staggering eleven points against the then Minister of Economy Sergio Massa of the Peronist Partido Justicialista (PJ).

In the year marking the 40th anniversary of their country's return to democracy, Argentinians elected a president whose unconventional style and sharp criticism of the political establishment have been enjoying unexpectedly high support. Since the return to democracy, Argentina has been shaped by established political players, so the victory of this radical libertarian came as a major surprise. Milei stands out not only for his political programme, but also for his eccentric ways.

He appeared on television for the first time in 2016, commenting on the economic situation and gaining prominence for his confrontational style and clamour. In a country whose population is three-quarters Catholic, he called the Pope a "representative of the evil one on earth" and an imbecile promoting communism.[1] From the outset, Milei staged himself as a rock star and appeared in large stadiums with his distinctive, scruffy hairstyle and a leather jacket, often with a chainsaw, the symbol of his intention to clear-cut all previous political habits. During the presidential election campaign, he also advocated extreme ideas such as liberalising organ trade and abolishing the central bank. An examination of the country's political and economic situation in the years before the election helps explain how such an unusual personality came to be the president of Argentina.

From TikTok Star to President

Milei's victory came as a surprise, but is by all means understandable given the country's situation. It came at a time when the monthly inflation rate amounted to 25.5 per cent and the annual inflation rate to 211.4 per cent.[2] In the election year, 41.7 per cent of the Argentine population were living in poverty.[3] Argentinians were dissatisfied with the government of left-wing Peronist Alberto Fernández, who in the final months of his presidency had entirely withdrawn from the public. Besides candidates from smaller parties, those standing for election were the ideologically flexible Peronist Sergio Massa, who was Minister of Economy at the time; Patricia Bullrich, former Minister of Security under Mauricio Macri (2015 to 2019) of the liberal economic wing of the centre-right Propuesta Republicana (PRO); and the self-proclaimed anarcho-capitalist Javier Milei, who had served less than two years as a national deputy for La Libertad Avanza (LLA), a party he founded in 2021.

The message of the results was clear: Argentinians opted for a radical break with traditional politics, hoping to solve their country's continuing crisis with the shock therapy of drastic austerity measures. The Milei victory was a nationwide phenomenon: he won in 21 of Argentina's 24 provinces. Milei is especially popular among young voters. He owes this to his social media presence – he now has more than two million followers on TikTok. His criticism of the "corrupt political caste" reflected the country's mood, and his ability to explain complex economic concepts in short TikTok videos made him attractive to an electorate that had difficulty understanding Argentina's decades-long economic misery. His clear position on combatting corruption and freeing the economy from the clutches of "parasites", the "political caste", and the many inefficient, unnecessary public officials mirrored a desire to return to the prosperity of the early 20th century, when Argentina was one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

No More "Usual Suspects"

The mood in 2023 was similar to that following the crisis of 2001, when "Que se vayan todos"

Picture of a recession foretold: During his presidential campaign, Javier Milei had already prepared Argentinians for severe economic cuts. Indeed, inflation has dropped significantly under his leadership, but the poverty rate initially rose to 55 per cent. The photo shows the free distribution of agricultural products in Buenos Aires.
Photo: © Igor Wagner, Sipa USA, picture alliance.

("They all must go") was a popular slogan aimed at politicians. Argentinians had had enough of the established elites, who had failed to deliver any notable results and had led the country to an even greater disaster. Argentina has been in economic decline for years. Its enormous debt of 44 billion US dollars makes it by far the largest debtor of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)[4]. The country has suffered from catastrophic economic governance exacerbated by years of excessive public spending; this was financed by money printed by the central bank, which fuelled inflation.

Argentinians sought a candidate without political entanglements and found someone they could identify with in the anti-systemic Javier Milei. One of his main concerns was cutting taxes and reducing public spending by means such as laying off civil servants, suspending public construction contracts and reducing transport and energy subsidies.

Milei's "chainsaw project" cannot be implemented without support from the political centre.

You Cannot Do It All Alone

Given Milei's scant representation in both houses of the National Congress and his poor results in provincial elections, ten months of government have shown that his "chainsaw project" for economic and governmental reform cannot be implemented without support from the political centre. The end of last year saw not only the presidential election, but also parliamentary elections in which a third of the Senate and half of the Chamber of Deputies were newly elected. These elections did not go Milei's way. His LLA won just 34 new seats of the 257 in the Chamber of Deputies, where it now holds a total of 38 seats, or about 15 per cent. The situation in the Senate is even worse, where it has only seven of 72 seats, or about ten per cent. Despite his efforts to distance himself from the political establishment, it has become clear that Milei's parliamentary weakness makes him more dependent than anyone else on support from established political forces if he is to deliver on his campaign promises. In Argentina, this means turning towards the various forces in the political centre, with the centre-right PRO emerging as a natural ally.

Argentina is a federal state with 24 provinces, none of which is led by a governor from Milei's party. The austerity measures and drastic cuts in transfer payments from the national government to the provinces have led to conflict with many governors. Since these governors are reliant on transfers from Buenos Aires, some of them have tried to put pressure on Milei. For example, Ignacio Torres, governor of Chubut, threatened to block gas and petrol deliveries.[5] In the first four months of 2024, total non-automatic transfer payments to provinces and municipalities fell by 89.5 per cent.[6] Here, too, Milei realised that he cannot solve the problems alone and has tried to find a way to garner governor support for a ten-point pact for Argentina's future. It was announced for the Argentinian national holiday, 25 May, but was not in place until 9 July 2024, and enjoyed the support of only 18 of the 24 governors.

In turn, the political centre in Argentina must consider to what extent it is willing to cooperate with a head of state such as Milei, whose presence has forced established parties to take a step back, reassess their programmes and objectives, and stop taking their voters for granted. Here, the success of a radical candidate has its positive side effects: it exerts pressure on the centrist parties to sharpen their profiles and reorganise.

Interim Evaluation of the Milei Presidency

Milei's ambitious yet unrealistic plans to impose his agenda by decree in a mature democracy like Argentina have failed. Aware of his weakness in parliament, Milei, like his predecessors, resorted to the instrument of presidential decree of necessity and urgency (DNU). A massive

decree intended to change, replace and abolish more than one hundred laws, has not been implemented in full yet. The Senate rejected it – for the first time since the measure was introduced in the constitutional reform of 1994 – yet it remains in force because it only loses its effectiveness if rejected by both houses of the National Assembly. However, due to the lack of full parliamentary support, its enactment has not made much progress.

Milei enjoyed more success when he abandoned his uncompromising stance towards his reform measures. Following months of consultation

and an initial defeat in the National Congress, his government reduced a proposed omnibus bill from 664 articles to about one third as many and was able to pass it. The bill gives Milei emergency powers, allowing him to legislate for one year in the areas of administration, economy, finances and energy. The reform proposal won by a narrow majority in the Senate, with Vice President Victoria Villarruel casting a decisive vote after the vote resulted in 36 in favour and 36 against.

In addition to this legislation, Milei has implemented other reform plans, including devaluing the Argentinian peso by 50 per cent, cutting state fuel subsidies and halving the number of ministries. Inflation has slowed considerably – to 4.2 per cent in May, the lowest level in two years. On the other hand, the Argentinian economy has shrunk, consumer spending fell sharply in the first three months of this year, and poverty rose to 55 per cent.[7] Milei's measures have hit pensioners especially hard, with pensions falling in value by about 30 per cent since the beginning of the year, adjusted for inflation.[8]

Milei's rhetoric is dominated by challenging the role of the state. During his campaign, he promised to govern without the "political caste" and to reduce state spending to an absolute minimum. From the very outset, he worked to shrink the state by reducing the number of civil servants, which had grown by 65 per cent under the Kirchner governments (2003 to 2015)[9] and by privatising state-owned companies.[10] In practice, however, there are inconsistencies. For instance, 90 per cent of Milei's election campaign was funded by the state[11], and he appears to have become aware that Argentina cannot be governed as a night-watchman state.

Despite economic difficulties, Milei has managed to maintain the support of the majority of Argentinians. Recent polls have returned an approval rating of 55.7 per cent, making him the most popular president in Latin America.[12] Given the current state of the economy, outsiders may find it difficult to understand why Milei enjoys high approval rates; however, many

Still in the orientation phase: The center-right PRO has been struggling to define its position towards President Javier Milei since his election victory. Party leader and former president Mauricio Macri (pictured) advocates partial cooperation with Milei. Photo: © Catriel Gallucci Bordoni, NurPhoto, picture alliance.

Argentinians view him as the only way out of the crisis. The radical austerity measures that Milei has now implemented had already been announced in the presidential campaign, during which Milei warned the population about the difficult times ahead. This makes him credible.[13] Furthermore, the alternatives are weak:[14] none of the opposition parties have presented a more attractive plan to improve the economic situation, nor do they have the strength to oppose the government in a unified way.

Argentina's Parties in Turmoil

The rise of Milei and his party has left its mark on the Argentine party system. Since the presidential election, the opposition parties have been picking up the pieces following their electoral defeat, revamping their content in a process marked by internal power struggles. The success of the libertarian candidate has hit the PRO especially hard, which was already experiencing an identity crisis even before the presidential elections. Since its founding, it has had little to no competition for the role of fundamental opposition to the governments of Néstor and of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, which governed Argentina from 2003 to 2015.

The political centre disagrees about whether and how to support the Milei experiment.

In opposition to the economically liberal policies of former president and fellow Peronist Carlos Menem (1989 to 1999), the Kirchners promoted left-wing populist measures such as foreign exchange controls, price caps and protectionist trade policy, leading to massive rises in state spending. The objective of PRO politician Mauricio Macri was to end the rampant corruption under the previous government, similar to what Milei hopes to do with his current policies. Macri won the 2015 presidential election and was the first non-Peronist president since the return to democracy to complete his term in office. Yet, his government from 2015 to 2019 was a disappointment for many. His Juntos por el Cambio ("Together for Change") coalition, including Unión Cívica Radical (UCR) and Coalición Cívica (CC), was unable to deliver the promised change and failed in its attempts at reform. With the rise of LLA, it does not suffice for PRO to simply stand against Kirchnerian policies and their proponents. Neither in 2019 nor in 2023 were the PRO's plans for change enough to convince Argentinians to entrust the party with the presidency again.

It is not just centre-right actors who are suffering an identity crisis, but also Peronists with their centre-left to left ideas (with a venture into neoliberalism in the 1990s under the Menem government).[15] They themselves recognise that a reinvention is necessary and urgent, as Malena Galmarini, wife of Peronist presidential candidate Sergio Massa, emphasised.[16] Even the powerful former President (2007 to 2015) and Vice President (2019 to 2023) Cristina Fernández de Kirchner has expressed the necessity of developing a new agenda for Peronism.[17] In the first six months of the Milei government, she made few public statements (one occasion when she did speak was on the anniversary of her husband Néstor Kirchner's first election victory). She argued that Argentinians have made unnecessary sacrifices and called Milei's government "anarcho-colonialist".[18] The internal power struggles between her son, Máximo Kirchner, Chairman of PJ in the Buenos Aires province, and Buenos Aires Governor, Axel Kicillof, for party leadership were carried out in public, underscoring Peronist weakness following the presidential elections. Kirchnerism, the left-wing populist branch of Peronism, is losing influence: polls show that Argentinians increasingly identify with centrist Peronism and less with Kirchnerism. However, this trend has not yet reached PJ leadership.[19]

The UCR, the oldest centrist party and PRO's coalition partner in Juntos por el Cambio, has also been affected by internal conflict in conjunction with the Milei government. UCR's Luis

Petri is criticised by many close to the party for accepting the post of Defence Minister under Milei. While the majority of PRO have decided to support the government project, there is greater division within the UCR.

Should the Political Centre Support the Milei Government?

Centrist politicians disagree about whether and how to support the Milei experiment. Such decisions first had to be made within PRO, which did not make it to the run-off election. While some, such as former President Mauricio Macri and former Minister of Security Patricia Bullrich, immediately supported Milei after their defeat in the first round, others, such as former Buenos Aires Chief of Government Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, clearly opposed such support.[20] This disagreement took on a new dimension when PRO's internal conflict over a possible merger with LLA became public.[21] The merger's primary supporter was Patricia Bullrich, who returned to her post as Minister of Security under Milei.[22] The Peronists must also decide whether to support Milei, especially concerning legislation in the National Congress.[23] What is more, there are more than 40 Peronists in the Milei government, including Chief of Cabinet Guillermo Francos.[24]

Many politicians who do not completely agree with Milei's programme are still in favour of legislative support for his objectives, as they agree that the economic system requires far-reaching reforms. This appears to have triggered an identity crisis, at least among some political actors. There is increasing discussion in centrist parties about whether politicians who support the government's basic course ought not leave their original parties and join the LLA. Argentina's party system is currently very fragile and could face massive upheaval. This is especially true of PRO, which has shown tendencies towards a merger with LLA. Yet the party should use Milei's victory as an opportunity to regroup and define its objectives and programme. Even if PRO agrees with parts of Milei's economic agenda, it does not need to accept that agenda unconditionally. Its task is to debate it and find common ground, both within the party and with the governing party. PRO has until the next midterms, when both houses will be up for re-election, to rethink its strategies and positions. That is one year away. The political centre should make its presence felt, especially under a radical, volatile government like Milei's, to ensure checks and balances.

Conclusion

Milei's success as presidential candidate has clearly created turmoil in the Argentine party system. Owing to its weak representation in both houses of the National Congress, the Milei government has been forced to abandon its radical reform plans and to seek compromises with other parties. What centrist parties have so far achieved is a discussion and a modification of those plans, since they do not unreservedly accept all of Milei's ideas. Milei has forced the centrist opposition parties, especially the centre-right PRO, to rethink their identity, consider dialogue with the president's party, and review their internal structures. For today's opposition parties, Milei's success has served as a positive incentive, with them having been stuck in a rut for years.

Argentina requires new solutions if it is to rise from the ashes of this chronic economic crisis. In this sense, Milei might be a breath of fresh air. However, his reform measures are affecting the finances and the social situation of Argentinians to whom opposition parties are also responsible. They can support reform implementation without changing their party identity or merging with LLA.

– translated from German –

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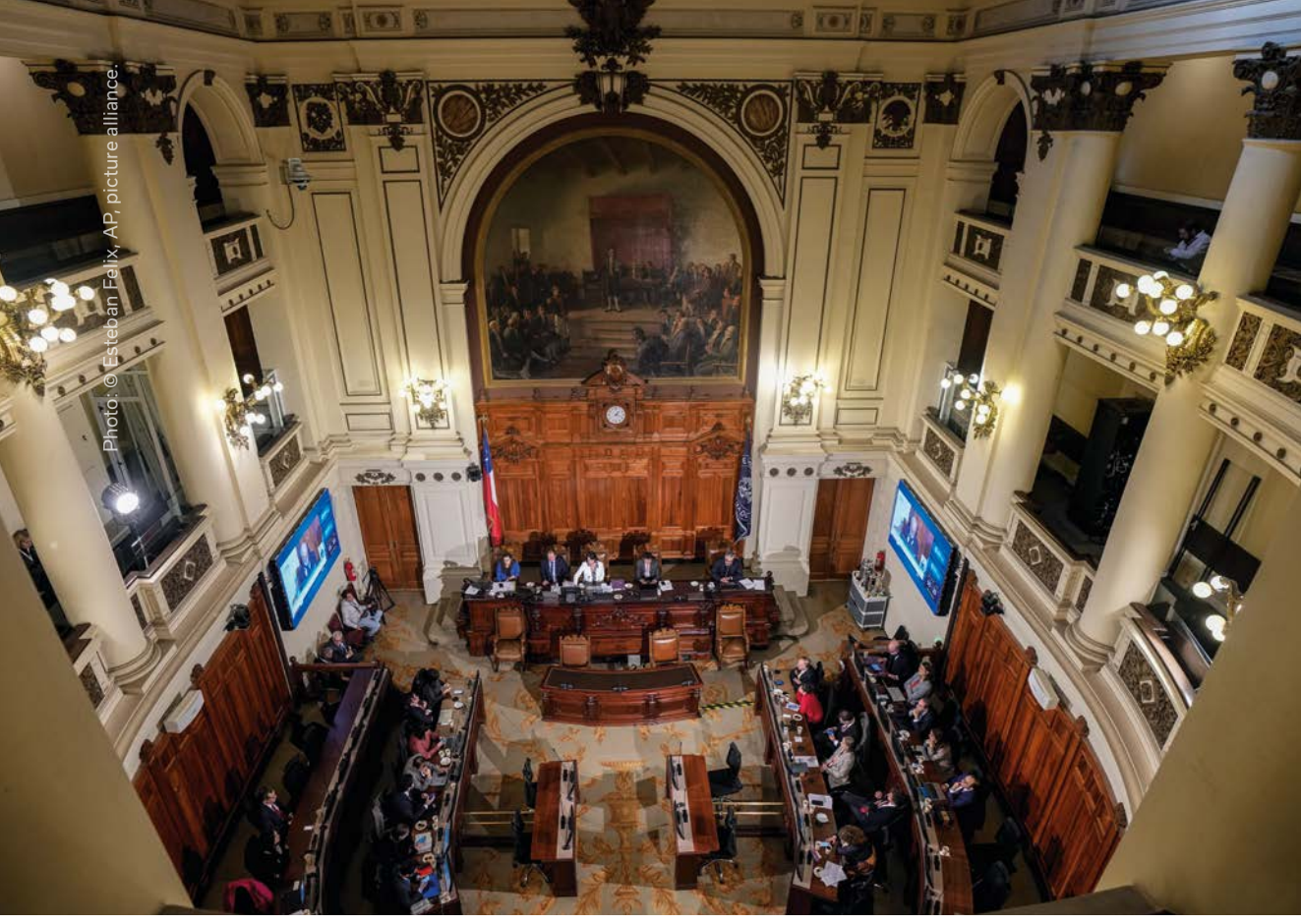

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How Much Polarisation Can Democracy Bear?

Crisis as an Opportunity

The Potential of Moderate Forces in Chile

Olaf Jacob

Chile has long been regarded as a model country in Latin America. However, social unrest, the decline in economic growth as well as the increase in organised crime and disenchantment with political parties have contributed to the political polarisation and fragmentation of society in recent years. With the Christian Democratic Party, a traditionally moderate player in the Chilean party system has also moved away from the centre towards the left. Who can fill this vacant space?

The Social Unrest of 2019 and the Role of the Traditional Centre Parties

Since returning to democracy in 1990, Chile has experienced almost 30 years of political stability, social peace and steady economic growth. Chile was considered a model country in the region. Between 1990 and 2019, it recorded average annual economic growth of just under five per cent[1], accompanied by comparatively low inflation of around three per cent per year since the end of the 1990s.[2] According to the World Bank, per capita income rose from around 2,500 US dollars (1990) to around 15,000 US dollars (2019)[3] during this period; amounting to a six-fold increase. This positive development was partly facilitated by liberal trade and economic policies that have encouraged the opening up of the country to foreign investment and trade. The country's infrastructure (ports, motorways, airports) has also been significantly expanded. These trade and economic policies were accompanied by social policies aimed at strengthening the middle class. The Gini coefficient for measuring inequality fell from 0.57 to 0.45 points[4] between 1990 and 2017, while the poverty rate fell from 40.0 to 8.6 per cent in the same period.[5]

In political terms, Chile enjoyed almost three decades of political stability. The binomial electoral system[6], used from 1989 to 2013 and which practically enabled the formation of a two-party system through electoral alliances, prevented an early fragmentation of the political landscape. The abolition of the binomial system from the 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections encouraged the formation of smaller parties, which in turn contributed to fragmentation from 2019 onwards. With the onset of social unrest in October 2019, the so-called *estallido social,* the political landscape in Chile changed radically and in a way that was unprecedented since the return to democracy. The nationwide, violent unrest was triggered by an increase in public transport fares. An estimated 1.2 million people took to the streets of the capital Santiago de Chile on 25 October 2019 to protest against the social policies of the liberal-conservative government under President Sebastián Piñera (Renovación Nacional). It was the largest political demonstration in Chile's history.[7] The protests were overshadowed by violent clashes. Several metro stations, ministries and a number of public and private buildings were heavily damaged. The UN Climate Change Conference (COP 25) and a planned APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit in Santiago had to be cancelled. The presidential palace La Moneda, the official residence of the Chilean president, was about to be violently taken over by communist and anarchist groups.

In this context, the large, traditional parties of the political centre, the social democratic Partido Socialista (PS) and the Christian democratic Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), reacted in an extremely ambivalent way. Despite the clashes having been formally criticised, there was no clear condemnation of the violence during the protests. The impression

was that the sometimes violent demonstrations were met with understanding and even covert sympathy by elected representatives of the traditional centre parties. The risk of destabilisation and the potential overthrow of the liberal-conservative government under President Piñera were accepted. This led to a first wave of resignations from the PDC. Party members and officials belonging to the conservative camp left the Christian Democratic Party.

The social unrest of 2019 was resolved when the entire political party landscape in Chile created the conditions for drafting a new constitution by a Constituent Assembly by consensus. The draft of the new constitution, presented in July 2022, contained radical, socialist and in some cases unrealistic elements, such as the abolition of the Senate, equal rights for the indigenous judiciary, the definition of Chile as a plurinational state, disproportionate rights for indigenous groups or even the recognition of animals as subjects in the constitution. The Christian Democratic Party supported the new draft constitution with remarkable vehemence. Numerous party members and officials who publicly opposed the draft were expelled from the party, culminating in a second, massive wave of resignations from the PDC in the last quarter of 2022. The draft constitution was rejected by a majority of Chileans in a plebiscite in September 2022.

Christian Democrats' Shift to the Left and the "New Centre"

The unanimous decision by the PDC party leadership to support the socialist-influenced draft constitution of 2022 marked the climax of the party's shift to the left, which had been in the making for many years. For many leaders, party members, incumbent MPs and senators as well as former high-ranking officials and members of the PDC, the unconditional approval of the draft constitution signalled the end of an era of political moderation and positioning as a "democratic centre party" since its founding in 1957. This resulted in party expulsions as well as voluntary and forced resignations of PDC members who belonged to the party's moderate wing. This development accelerated the party's gradual loss of importance that had been apparent since the early 2000s. While the PDC still achieved 26 per cent of the vote in the first democratic election following the military dictatorship in 1989 and was thus the strongest political force in the country, only 4.2 per cent of Chileans eligible to vote voted for the Christian Democratic Party in the 2021 parliamentary elections.[8] Several reasons played a central role in the debacle of what was the "most successful party in Chile's recent history".[9] One of the decisive factors was the shift to the left by increasingly strong groupings within the PDC since the 1990s. The associated distancing from moderate positions, internal party disputes, the party's identity crisis and the loss of proximity to the people acted as catalysts for the decline of the PDC.[10]

However, the decline of the Christian Democrats opened up opportunities for new political initiatives that aimed to establish a "new political centre" from the end of 2022. The first successful attempt was the creation of the political movement Amarillos por Chile. The founder of the movement is the poet and literature professor Cristián Warnken, who, in early 2022, warned in a public letter of the danger of a socialist-influenced "refoundation" of the Chilean state due to the socialist nature of the draft constitution of 2022. In April 2023, the movement was constituted as a registered political party. The founding declaration refers to the need for a strong political centre in the country. Amarillos por Chile should take on this role. It is still considered a small party, but one that is extremely competent when it comes to substantive issues. Its members and officials are considered experts and used to represent the political and intellectual elite of Christian democracy. The party's leaders include former Christian Democrat ministers of defence, the interior, labour, transport and education, for example, who have played a key role in Chile's modernisation since the end of the military dictatorship. The former director of the National Human Rights Institute and the former director of the Museum of Memory (of the victims of the military dictatorship) and Human Rights have also

adopted leading positions in the party. Although Amarillos por Chile has outstanding expertise in almost all areas of domestic, economic and social policy, it is accused of being out of touch with the everyday problems and challenges of Chileans. Amarillos por Chile is often perceived as a party of Chile's intellectual elite.

Alongside Amarillos por Chile, Demócratas is the second newly founded party of the "new political centre" in Chile born following the constitutional process. The party was founded on 2 November 2022 by former Christian Democrat senators Ximena Rincón and Matías Walker. It was officially enrolled in the party register at the end of July 2023. Rincón and Walker are considered to be knowledgeable and very experienced politicians. As Christian Democrat senators, they have shaped numerous discussions, including the debates on necessary pension

Burning barricades: Following an increase in public transportation fares, violent protests broke out in Chile in October 2019. Photo: © Jorge Silva, Reuters, picture alliance.

and healthcare reforms. Similar to Amarillos por Chile, Demócratas emerged as a reaction by leading Christian Democrats to the PDC's unconditional and institutional approval of the socialist-influenced draft constitution of 2022. Both senators had publicly articulated their disagreement with the party leadership and their rejection of the draft constitution. Rincón and Walker were subsequently brought before the PDC's Supreme Court (Tribunal Supremo), accused of trying to shift the PDC to the right. To avoid their expulsion from the party, Rincón, Walker and other leaders resigned from the party at the end of October 2022 and subsequently founded Demócratas.

Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas both claim to represent the political centre.

Just like Amarillos por Chile, Demócratas positions itself in the political centre and claims to represent the legacy of the successful Concertación, which governed the country from 1990 to 2010 as an alliance between Christian Democrats and Social Democrats following the military dictatorship. Unlike Amarillos por Chile, Demócratas has a significant presence in parliament. In addition to Rincón and Walker in the Senate, four representatives of the party are members of the House of Representatives, including three former Christian Democrats. In both chambers, the representatives of Demócratas often tip the scales when it comes to political decisions, as the majorities in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies are balanced. This gives Demócratas political visibility and a chance to exert political influence that Amarillos por Chile does not have in this form. Demócratas is also a party with a relatively broad base within all social strata of the country and has nationwide organisations. The party structure is vertical, with both party founders as chairman and deputy chairman. Amarillos por Chile, on the other hand, is attempting to strengthen horizontal party structures, often resulting in delays in urgent decisions.

Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas have many things in common: they occupy the same

political space and claim to represent the political centre. The background to their founding and development as a political force in Chile is comparable; their leaders were shaped by the ideals of Chilean Christian democracy. Both parties show clear parallels in their public statements and political positioning. What is different is the degree of political influence and voter perception. In this context, the question emerges as to why the two parties, which have complementary characteristics but hardly differ ideologically, do not merge. Political and personal ambitions as well as the conviction of both parties' political leadership that they should not lose their own identity, have so far prevented the parties from merging. At the very least, both parties adopted an electoral alliance on 7 April 2024 to jointly vote for candidates in view of the local and regional elections at the end of October 2024.[11]

Chileans generally lean towards the centre politically.

Experienced centrist politician: Ximena Rincón – pictured in 2016 as Minister of the Presidency – left the increasingly left-leaning Christian Democratic Party at the end of 2022, along with many other members. She became a co-founder of a new centrist party: Demócratas. Photo: © Presidency of Chile, epa, picture alliance.

Renovación Nacional:
The Reinvention of a Traditional Party

The Renovación Nacional (RN) party, founded in 1987 from the merger of three parties from the conservative camp, was long regarded as the bastion of rigid conservatism in Chile. In contrast to the Chilean Christian Democrats, the RN positioned itself in the 1988 referendum in favour of continuing the de facto government of Augusto Pinochet. Under the presidency of Sebastián Piñera and during his terms as president (2010 to 2014, 2018 to 2022), the party underwent a phase of modernisation. Renovación Nacional, like Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas, recognised the danger of introducing socialist elements in the draft constitution presented in 2022. This led to a rapprochement between the traditional party and the newly formed parties of the new political centre and joint votes in parliament.

As part of a dialogue programme in Germany organised by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, also attended by the party leaders of Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas, RN party chairman Rodrigo Galilea sent out a clear signal for political positioning in the centre of the spectrum. In an interview in Berlin with the daily newspaper La Tercera, Galilea emphasised that the trip to Germany represented a "before" and an "after" in relations between the Renovación Nacional, Demócratas and Amarillos por Chile parties. In his view, the parties involved are setting an example of moderation in politics and following the principles of Christian humanism. The trip was a step towards closer and deeper coordination between the centre parties.[12] Although Renovación Nacional will probably not take part in a possible merger of the Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas parties, the party has already turned towards the political centre, which means an electoral alliance cannot be ruled out in the near future.

Prospects for the New Political Centre in Chile

The renowned Chilean social scientist Sergio Micco has established that Chileans generally lean towards the centre politically. According to the Estudio de Opinión Política CEP 90 survey from the last quarter of 2023, 22 per cent of Chileans said that they would place themselves on the left-wing political spectrum. Fifteen per cent lean towards right-wing positions, while a clear majority of 37 per cent opt for the political centre. These results are consistent with a similar survey conducted in 2006. At that time, 23 per cent of Chileans identified with left-wing positions, 15 per cent with right-wing positions and 37 per cent with the political centre.[13] In Chile, extreme positions seem to gain in importance when society is unable to find a way out of political, economic and social crises. However, Chileans generally prefer moderate positions of the political centre.

Chile fundamentally differs from other countries in the region, where the party landscape has completely dissolved.

Chile experienced an extreme crisis following the social unrest in October 2019. This resulted in a polarisation of society that was reflected in the 2021 presidential run-off between right-wing populist candidate José Antonio Kast and the leader of the left-wing student movement Gabriel Boric. Although Chile is currently experiencing a difficult economic situation with low growth rates and a tense social situation due to an exponential rise in organised crime, the population does not perceive this situation as a threat to the continued existence of the rule of law. Although the democratic legal order in Chile is not in danger, unlike after the social unrest in 2019 and around the draft constitution of 2022, the current government has not made any significant progress in key areas such as security, migration and foreign policy or with regard to pension and healthcare reform. The positions and proposals of the current governing coalition and the parties of the new political centre differ in these

areas. In terms of foreign policy, for example, the governing coalition takes an ambivalent and unclear stance towards Israel. Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 was condemned, yet Israel's right to defend itself was repeatedly called into question. In contrast, the parties of the new political centre have clearly positioned themselves and expressed their support for the Israeli people. In security and migration policy, the parties of the new political centre have spoken out in favour of more restrictive measures with regard to illegal immigration and a tightening of the penal code and the penal system for serious crimes. The pension and healthcare reform announced by the governing coalition since taking office has not yet materialised. Reform proposals from the parties of the new political centre have so far received little attention. Given the incumbent government's passivity on key issues affecting Chilean society, there is a possibility that the new parties of the political centre will be strengthened and that traditional parties of the centre-right, such as Renovación Nacional, will further advance their positioning in the centre of the party spectrum.

Lasting Success?

In conclusion, it can be emphasised that there is a willingness among the population in Chile to favour the political centre as the strongest force. Despite the continuing fragmentation of society, surveys clearly indicate that voters in Chile generally lean towards the political centre. The state institutions and the weakened but still existing party system promote the formation and development of structured political parties. In this respect, Chile fundamentally differs from other countries within the region, where the party landscape has completely dissolved. The Chilean population has historically voted in favour of moderate centrist political views and supported moderate positions. New centrist parties, such as Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas, therefore have a good chance of successfully positioning themselves in the party political arena, provided they develop and present clear political concepts, party programmes and proposals. This will enable them to fill the vacuum recently created by the lack of a political centre. Chile provides a breeding ground for this, as in the wake of the social unrest of 2019 and the subsequent process in search of a new constitution, radical options from both the left and the right were ultimately rejected. Similarly, President Gabriel Boric, who advocated radical positions in the 2021 election campaign, had to moderate his political stance after being elected in alliance with the Chilean Communist Party. It remains to be seen whether the formation and development of new centrist political parties will be crowned with lasting success. The key factor is going to be the willingness of the new centrist parties' leaders to make compromises and to evaluate the possibility of a merger or close cooperation in the form of a political alliance. This, in turn, requires a willingness to set aside personal ambitions so as to achieve the goal of strengthening the political centre in Chile. Because without coalitions or alliances among themselves, the new parties of the political centre in Chile have very little prospect of establishing themselves permanently and successfully in the political system.

– translated from German –

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2 Own calculation based on data from the World Bank 2024: Inflation, consumer prices (annual %) – Chile, in: https://ogy.de/dy32 [1 Aug 2024].
3 Own calculation based on data from the World Bank 2024: GDP per capita (current US$) – Chile, in: https://ogy.de/8ori [1 Aug 2024].
4 Own calculation based on data from the World Bank 2024: Gini index – Chile, in: https://ogy.de/wshh [1 Aug 2024].
5 United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) 1990: La pobreza en Chile en 1990 (Poverty in Chile in 1990), p.1, in: https://ogy.de/zk5j [1 Aug 2024]; Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia (Ministry of Social Development and Family), Observatorio Social 2017: Resultados Pobreza Casen 2017, in: https://ogy.de/dftg [1 Aug 2024].
6 The binomial electoral system in Chile was a form of majority voting in which electoral lists with two candidates were drawn up in each constituency. The list with the most votes won the first seat in the constituency, while the second-placed list took the second seat. If a list received 50 per cent or more of the votes, both candidates from the same list were elected to parliament. This electoral system thus favoured the electoral victory of large political parties and coalitions, since it was difficult for smaller parties and independent candidates to gain enough votes. This led to a stable but limited representative political landscape. This system was replaced by a proportional-representative electoral system.
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11 Carvajal, Shelmmy 2024: Amarillos y Demócratas oficializan pacto electoral: buscan levantar "la mayor cantidad de candidaturas" en elecciones municipales (Amarillos and Democrats formalize electoral pact: they seek to raise "the largest number of candidates" in municipal elections), 7 Apr 2024, La Tercera, in: https://ogy.de/w5m1 [5 Aug 2024].
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13 Micco, Sergio 2024: Los partidos de centro en el marco del eje izquierda-derecha (The center parties in the left-right axis frame), unpublished manuscript.

Photo: © Fernando Bizerra Jr., epa, picture alliance

How Much Polarisation Can Democracy Bear?

The Pink Galaxy

How Left-wing Authoritarian Networks Are Infiltrating Latin America's Democracies and Damaging the Political Centre

Sebastian Grundberger

"Progressive" politicians from Latin America in lockstep with Kremlin nationalists, Chinese communists and representatives of the Iranian mullah regime: This unlikely alliance can be explained by the common rejection of "US imperialism", "neoliberalism" – and ultimately the liberal-democratic Western model of society. The authoritarian left in Latin America is increasingly operating as a transnational structure that explicitly recognises external authoritarian regimes as allies. Domestically, the actions of this "pink galaxy" in the countries of the region are leading to the erosion of the political centre and ultimately of democracy.

When the world learned about the death of Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny in February 2024, there was widespread agreement about who was to blame. The majority opinion was that Russia's Head of State Vladimir Putin should be held accountable. However, there was one particularly striking departure from this chorus: Brazil's President Lula da Silva. "Why judge lightly?" he asked, before going on to speculate: "If you judge now and then it turns out that someone other than him [Putin] ordered the murder, then you will have to apologise later."[1] Once he got going, the Brazilian head of state also expressed his unconventional view of international politics with regard to the Gaza conflict. According to Lula, the Israeli Head of State Benjamin Netanyahu is committing "genocide". The "war he is waging between a well-prepared army and women and children" is comparable to the time when "Hitler decided to kill the Jews".[2] This led to a Brazilian president having been declared persona non grata in Israel for the first time ever.

Lula's statements are no exception among Latin America's left-wing heads of state. Colombian President Gustavo Petro compared the situation in Gaza to the Nazi extermination camp in Auschwitz. When asked about possible arms deliveries to Ukraine, Petro replied: "Even if the weapons otherwise rot in Colombia, we will not give them to anyone to continue a war."[3] And while Mexico's former left-wing populist Head of State Andrés Manuel López Obrador was celebrated by his acolytes for his "pacifist stance" towards the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, his Foreign Minister Alicia Bárcena, former Director of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), criticised the West for supplying Ukraine with weapons.

The example of Lula in particular very clearly illustrates that although some left-wing Latin American heads of state act mostly in a pragmatic and democratic manner on the domestic front, they spread the narratives of authoritarian regimes and dictatorships internationally. In 1990, former trade union leader Lula and Cuban dictator Fidel Castro founded the Foro de São Paulo, an alliance of now 127 left-wing and far-left parties and political movements. They range from Lula's Brazilian Workers' Party and the established Socialist Party of Chile to the Communist Party of Cuba and the authoritarian state parties of Venezuela and Nicaragua.[4] Most recently, the Foro attracted attention by not having only been invited as an "election observer" to the presidential elections in Venezuela on 28 July, but also congratulating "comrade Nicolás Maduro" on his "re-election" as Venezuelan President, despite all international criticism.[5]

From the Pink Wave to the Pink Galaxy

The first heyday of the Foro de São Paulo went hand in hand with the so-called pink wave. This collective term was used to describe an increasing number of election victories by left-wing politicians in Latin America in the 2000s – from moderate left-wingers such as Michelle Bachelet in Chile or Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay to authoritarian regimes such as those of Rafael Correa in Ecuador or Evo Morales in Bolivia. The spectrum of the pink wave spanned from pale pink (social democratic) to deep red (left-wing autocratic). This is reflected in particular by the fact that Hugo Chávez's election victory in Venezuela in 1998 is also included in the pink wave. Just as the pink wave encompassed democratic and authoritarian forces, today there is a whole pink galaxy of organisations and associations in which democratically legitimised and left-wing authoritarian forces form an alliance. The constellations of the pink galaxy are dominated by their most authoritarian elements and serve dictatorships as a protective wall against international criticism.

The founding declaration of Progressive International is permeated by radical left-wing class struggle and liberation rhetoric.

In addition to the Foro de São Paulo, other major players form part of the authoritarian-democratic organisations grouped together in the pink galaxy. In July 2019, the Grupo de Puebla, now consisting of more than 60 left-wing political figures from the region, was founded as a "progressive" activist group. The group's key players include former Colombian President Ernesto Samper, former Ecuadorian Head of State Rafael Correa, former Bolivian President Evo Morales, former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and former Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.[6] In terms of content, the group advocates, among other things, a lenient approach towards the authoritarian regime in Venezuela.

Only a few months after the Grupo de Puebla, Progressive International was formed as a global platform of left-wing organisations. Its foundation followed an initiative by the Sanders Institute, which is associated with US Senator Bernie Sanders, and the Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM25) of the left-wing former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, who was banned from entering Germany in April 2024. It was for this reason that he was unable to travel to a Palestine congress in Berlin that was ultimately broken up by the police due to its anti-Semitic content. Under the leadership of the Spanish-speaking General Coordinator of Progressive International, David Adler, the organisation is showing enormous activism in Latin America, such as through declarations of solidarity with politicians such as Colombian President Gustavo Petro, who is under domestic political pressure. It mainly draws on the same circle of people and organisations as the Foro de São Paulo and the Grupo de Puebla. Progressive International's 25-point founding declaration is permeated by radical left-wing class struggle and liberation rhetoric. Sometimes they aspire to "eradicate capitalism everywhere", sometimes they see themselves as "peoples of the world rising up against the reactionary forces of authoritarian oligarchy."[7]

The Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (Latin American Council for Social Sciences, CLACSO), founded in 1957, plays an important role within the pink galaxy. With 883 member institutes, CLACSO is now the largest association of social science research centres in Latin America. The list of CLACSO members includes a number of renowned academic institutions in Latin America and associated research institutions all over the world, including Germany.[8] Far from the purely academic image that CLACSO presents, the organisation stands out at leadership level for its political activism. In November 2022, a CLACSO working group accused the "Bolivian right" of

"fascist and neo-Nazi violence".[9] In November 2019, another working group welcomed "the full-scale popular uprising that moves Chilean society [...] and which is expressed in the diverse forms of street struggle" against "the impacts of neoliberalism".[10] A third working group published a "Communiqué in defence of Venezuela against US aggression" in April 2020 and presented the Venezuelan model as a "counter-hegemonic alternative to transnational interests" that deserved support.[11] This all casts doubt on the goal of "promoting democratic participation and critical thinking" as set out in CLACSO's Declaration of Principles.[12]

Russian state media readily adopt narratives from left-wing authoritarian regimes in Latin America.

The four organisations described above – Foro de São Paulo, Grupo de Puebla, Progressive International and CLACSO – are united by their steadfast loyalty to the Cuban dictatorship, as are all the players in the pink galaxy. Havana, a favourite meeting place for these players, is a kind of socialist Vatican whose dogmas are not questioned by its left-wing authoritarian followers. For example, Progressive International praises the Cuban revolution as an "inspiration" for transforming the international system and sells stickers of Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara in the organisation's own online shop. CLACSO Director General Karina Batthyány not only posed smiling in a photo with dictator Miguel Díaz-Canel in Havana, but in January 2023 also went as far as announcing via Twitter/X during a visit to the CLACSO member institutes there, which had been brought into line by the regime: "We are united by open, critical and socially relevant scientific knowledge."[13] The Foro de São Paulo dedicated its political programme adopted in Managua (Nicaragua) in 2017 to "the example of revolutionary consistency of Commander Fidel Castro". And the Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez appeared as an acclaimed star guest at the Grupo de Puebla 2023 meeting.

Accordingly, the four organisations also share a deeply ambivalent attitude towards democracy. The Foro de São Paulo, for instance, calls in its basic programme for "a union of democratic forces to advance towards socialism".[14] Democracy is thus hierarchically subordinated to socialism or instrumentalised as a means to the end of achieving it. It also urges democracy to "necessarily deepen its popular, direct, participatory and communitarian character". The propaganda of the Chávez regime in Venezuela in particular used the term "direct and participatory democracy" as a substitute for representative democracy and as an element in the deconstruction of the Venezuelan state.

The Pink Galaxy and Its International Networks

In the final months of 2023, billboards in parts of Mexico began to light up neon green as part of a large-scale advertising campaign for Russia Today (RT). This massive wave of propaganda would have been impossible in Mexico City without the approval of the city government. This was led by Claudia Sheinbaum, who was elected President of Mexico on 2 June with an overwhelming majority and was often celebrated uncritically by the international press. During the election campaign, Russia Today reported exceptionally favourably on Claudia Sheinbaum. The election winner has been closely associated with the pink galaxy for years, most recently as the host of the Grupo de Puebla 2023 meeting. The Mexican ruling party MORENA is a member of the Foro de São Paulo, too. The congratulations from Caracas, Havana, Managua and Moscow on Ms. Sheinbaum's election were correspondingly euphoric.

RT's Spanish-language programme is not only highly successful as the most shared Spanish-language source on the war in Ukraine, but is also on hand virtually everywhere where left-wing authoritarian politicians need to be

Reliable shield for autocrats: Brazil's President Lula da Silva (in the front) has backed Latin America's left-wing dictators for decades, among them Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro. Photo: © Ueslei Marcelino, Reuters, picture alliance.

portrayed in a good light.[15] The Ecuadorian ex-president Rafael Correa, who plays a key role in all four of these organisations, hosts his own talk show on RT in which he interviews friends from the pink galaxy. Russian state media readily adopt narratives from left-wing authoritarian regimes in Latin America, culminating in the claim that Venezuela is "a living democracy". Conversely, media associated with the pink galaxy adopt Kremlin narratives. The Venezuelan television channel Telesur, for example, celebrated the "liberation" of Ukrainian cities by the Russian army.[16] The Chilean-Mexican online portal El Ciudadano, media partner at the Grupo de Puebla 2023 meeting, uncritically cited a "study" by the Russian state agency Sputnik, according to which 54 per cent of Europeans distrust media reporting in Europe on the conflict in Ukraine. This was seen as proof of the "obvious reality" regarding the lack of objectivity of the main Western media and their "manipulation of the facts".[17] Reports like this led the US State Department to identify El Ciudadano as a key player in an "ongoing, well-funded disinformation campaign" by the Kremlin in the region.[18]

In the academic field, CLACSO plays an important role in maintaining contacts with Moscow. In the midst of the war, the organisation held a Russia-Ibero-America dialogue in St. Petersburg together with the Sputnik agency, which in October 2023 was attended by the CLACSO leadership, all kinds of scientific Kremlin loyalists and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Rybakov. Atilio Borón, former CLACSO Executive Director and still closely associated with the

organisation, claims in newspaper columns that there can be "no doubt" that Russia is defending itself against NATO and US aggression in Ukraine.[19]

A Kremlin propaganda tool aimed directly at the political sphere was the international parliamentary conference "Russia-Latin America" opened by Vladimir Putin himself in the Russian State Duma from 29 September to 2 October 2023. Most participants were parliamentarians from member parties of the Foro de São Paulo. Panels with titles such as "A just multi-polar world: the role of parliamentary diplomacy" reflected the Kremlin ruler's narrative. Grupo de Puebla member Jorge Rodríguez, President of the Venezuelan National Assembly, expressed solidarity with Russia in the face of Western sanctions, and Nicaragua's special envoy for relations with Russia and dictator's son Laureano Ortega declared that a Russian victory over Ukraine would be tantamount to a victory of "light over darkness".[20]

In addition to Russia, the pink galaxy also looks favourably on China.

The communiqués of the players in the pink galaxy also express a proximity to the Putin narrative. The final declaration of the IXth meeting of the Grupo de Puebla 2023 included the following passage: "We call on Ukraine and Russia to conclude a temporary ceasefire and explore the possibility of peace." There is no mention of Russian aggression, but "NATO's interference and the escalation of geopolitical conflicts" were denounced.[21] Some members of the Grupo de Puebla emphatically praised Putin. Bolivia's former Head of State Evo Morales does this most clearly. He greeted his "brother" Putin on his 70th birthday via Twitter/X and declared: "The dignified, free and anti-imperialist peoples support you in your struggle against the armed interventionism of the US and NATO."[22]

In addition to Russia, the pink galaxy also looks favourably on China. For the Foro de São Paulo, the People's Republic is "a factor of stability and balance for the Latin American and Caribbean region, as reflected in the defence of the principles of international law, especially non-interference in the internal affairs of Latin American countries". China is also celebrated for its "political cooperation without preconditions".[23]

An important link between the Grupo de Puebla and China is the former Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. At the virtual meeting of the Grupo de Puebla in May 2020, he caused a furore with his call for the Latin American left to "restore a multilateral order" in dialogue with China. According to Spanish media reports, Zapatero is taking full advantage of his contacts in Beijing to cultivate relations between the Chinese Communist Party and the Grupo de Puebla. One outcome was the participation of a high-ranking Chinese delegation at the Grupo de Puebla meeting in Santa Marta (Colombia) in 2022.[24]

Just like the Grupo de Puebla, Progressive International not only supports China's call to abandon the US dollar as the international reserve currency, but has also been a member organisation of the so-called Qiao Collective since 2020. According to Progressive International, this is a "Chinese media collective in the diaspora that denounces US aggression against China and promotes socialism and internationalism". In the past, Qiao sharply criticised the democratic demonstrations in Hong Kong, for example.

CLACSO, too, has close links with China. Together with Chinese state actors and Latin American academic partners, the council acted as co-organiser of the VI. "Dialogue of Civilisations" between China and Latin America in Buenos Aires on 11 September 2023. On this occasion, a book on the history of China published by CLACSO in Spanish in cooperation with a Chinese state publishing house was also presented, whose introduction lauds the

"admirable transformation" undergone by China "under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party".[25]

Iran is finding particularly enthusiastic allies in the pink galaxy.

It is no coincidence that in Latin America, the Chinese Communist Party feels most comfortable working with autocratic state parties and party organisations that include them. The Chinese Communist Party and the state parties of Cuba and Nicaragua are remarkably similar in their understanding of unity between state and party. For years, the parties united in the Foro de São Paulo have been some of the most loyal participants in all Chinese "party co-operation" events. What is more, when it comes to China asserting its long-term power interests, authoritarian regimes are better suited than democracies, especially if China succeeds in retaining the former in the long run. In contrast to centrist parties that engage in critical dialogue with the Chinese Communist Party, it is due to such contacts that the pink galaxy uncritically spreads Chinese narratives and criticism of the West.

Iran is also increasingly trying to leave its footprint in Latin America and is finding particularly enthusiastic allies in the pink galaxy. This is reflected in intensive economic cooperation between Tehran and Havana or Caracas, for example. With HispanTV, the Iranian state also has a Spanish-language television channel that can be received in large swathes of Latin America.[26] Politicians from the pink galaxy regularly use HispanTV as a platform for propaganda. Until 2019, a popular programme for this was "Fort Apache", a talk show hosted by the left-wing former Spanish Deputy Prime Minister and current media entrepreneur Pablo Iglesias. In the context of the Gaza war, the Spanish-language Iranian foreign media are spreading the narrative of Israeli genocide and completely denying the Israeli state the right to exist. The channel thus stands for a mixture of anti-Israeli, anti-Western and left-wing narratives.

The players in the pink galaxy were also quick to side with Israel's opponents in the latest conflict. As early as 10 October 2023, Progressive International published a communiqué, also signed by numerous Latin American players, in which the terrorist attack by Hamas is played down as an "operation from the Gaza Strip on 7 October"[27]. Moreover, the Progressive International praised the leader of Hizbullah, Hassan Nasrallah, as "leader of the Lebanese resistence movement" and branded his elimination by Israel as "ruthless".[28] In addition to Progressive International, the Grupo de Puebla, the Foro de São Paulo and various CLACSO working groups also refer to Israel's actions as "genocide".

A Transnational Left-wing Authoritarian Structure

It is striking that the protagonists in the various organisations overlap. Many representatives of the Latin American left wing are connected to more than one network at the same time. Lula's Chief Foreign Policy Advisor, the former Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim, Ecuador's former Foreign Minister Guillaume Long and the communist Chilean MP Carol Kariola, the former Argentinian Head of State Alberto Fernández, the former Bolivian Vice President Álvaro García Linera, the Mexican Foreign Minister under President López Obrador and former CEPAL Director General Alicia Bárcena and the Cuban MP and dictator's daughter Mariela Castro, have close relationships with a number of the players described here.

The organisations themselves also overlap and cooperate on an ongoing basis. CLACSO is a member of Progressive International, for example. Both are working together on a research project that laments the existence of a "reactionary international" as a threat to democracy. The German Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung and the Spanish People's Party (PP), among others, are named as part of this network.[29] The Executive

Secretary of the Foro de São Paulo, Mónica Valente, a member of the Brazilian Workers' Party, also sits on the council of Progressive International while its Executive Director David Adler attends meetings of the Grupo de Puebla and CLACSO publishes books by the group. The Foro de São Paulo links to CLACSO on its homepage. At the end of June 2024, Foro de São Paulo, Progressive International and Grupo de Puebla came together in Honduras to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the alleged coup d'état against former Head of State Manuel Zelaya at the invitation of the left-wing government as part of a kind of pink galaxy "summit".[30] Ultimately, members of all these alliances like to invite players from Russia or China to their meetings and have themselves invited to these countries.

This overlap includes numerous other players. Institutions such as the Centro Estratégico Latinoamericano de Geopolítica (CELAG), the Escuela de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Globales (ELAG), the Internacional Feminista or the US-based Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) are also part of the pink galaxy. As these organisations, despite their different institutional structures, do not differ significantly either in terms of content or the group of people belonging to them, it makes sense to see them as part of a common international structure.

The pink galaxy and its European friends: For years, Spain's former Prime Minister Zapatero (fourth from left at the table) has been a key lobbyist for Latin American left-wing networks in Europe, their ambiguous relationship with democracy notwithstanding. Photo: © Matias Baglietto, Reuters, picture alliance.

Building on the traditional internationalism of the left, in many areas the pink galaxy functions according to the logic of a transnational left-wing authoritarian party. Firstly, its players share a sufficient ideological basis in their rejection of "US imperialism", "neoliberalism" and liberal democracy. Furthermore, the pink galaxy has formalised institutional communication channels, as described above. And thirdly, they are united by a corporate instinct for power. This is not only reflected in the support of allied candidates for any position on the international stage, but also in the fact that pink galaxy members are defended even when they have been convicted of criminal activities. Despite remaining silent on the persecution and imprisonment of Venezuelan or Cuban opposition figures, for example, the legal persecution of left-wing leaders is deplored as so-called lawfare.

The orthodox left has hijacked the term "progressive" and filled it with authoritarian content.

The term "democracy" is mainly used by the pink galaxy to lash out at its political rivals; well aware that the majority of Latin America's population, for all the signs of crisis, has a democratic orientation and a susceptibility to attacks on the democratic convictions of its political opponents. Through a permanent attack mode and the appeal to negative primary emotions such as fear, anger or frustration, the pink galaxy is often astonishingly successful in evading criticism of its own lack of democratic coherence.

The pink galaxy also succeeds in legitimising itself through European development funds, despite its obvious proximity to Russia, China and Iran. One example is the intensive cooperation between the Swedish state development agency SIDA and CLACSO. This has already given rise to a considerable body of literature which, financed with European taxpayers' money, denounces "neoliberalism" and "imperialism", criticises the alleged persecution of left-wing politicians and spreads narratives from Cuba or Venezuela.

The Erosion of the Political Centre

The enormous success of the pink galaxy within the Latin American left wing has also led to the moderate factions of the (social) democratic left finding it increasingly difficult to discursively assert themselves against it. One example from everyday politics is the refusal of Mario Bergara, a candidate for the Uruguayan Frente Amplio primaries who is considered a moderate, to publicly refer to Cuba as a "dictatorship".[31] The former Spanish government spokesperson and PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) minister, Isabel Rodríguez, refused to make such a statement, too.[32] It is also worth noting that the orthodox left has hijacked the term "progressive", which actually points to a modern left, and fills it with authoritarian content; far too often without encountering decisive resistance from the actual "progressive", moderate left.

The political scientist Miguel Martínez Meucci therefore accuses the social democratic left in Latin America of not only openly flirting with left-wing authoritarian regimes, but also cooperating with them.[33] This trend is not limited to Latin America. Apparently, European social democrats not only cultivate exchange with people from the pink galaxy, but they also view organisations such as the Grupo de Puebla as ideologically close cooperation partners. In this way, they themselves become part of the authoritarian protective wall. This pulls the rug from under the feet of Latin American social democrats, who distance themselves from authoritarian regimes due to fundamental democratic convictions.

The Spanish PSOE played a decisive role in the shift of European social democracy towards the orthodox left. It has not only pursued rapprochement, but also at least selective integration into

left-wing authoritarian networks since the time of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's government (2004 to 2011). Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's party regularly sends prominent representatives to the Grupo de Puebla. In June 2023, the social democratic S&D Group in the European Parliament organised a major event with the Grupo de Puebla, at which former Head of State Rafael Correa, who had been sentenced to eight years in prison for corruption in Ecuador, was allowed to complain about the alleged "lawfare" against him.[34]

For the leading authoritarian forces of the pink galaxy, politics adheres to a tribal logic – on the one side the good, the "revolutionaries", the "left-wing", the "anti-capitalists" or the "progressives"; on the other side the bad – i.e. the "neoliberals", "capitalists", "imperialists" or "right-wing". According to the principles of identity politics, which side you belong to becomes a dogmatic question of faith that does not allow for any shades of grey and is fatal for the moderate left and the political centre as a whole.

The Temptation of a Right-wing Authoritarian Reaction

The difficulty of countering authoritarian approaches from the political centre is also evident on the right side of the political spectrum. In response to left-wing internationalism, some on the right strive to establish joint networks between conservative and right-wing democratic forces, and right-wing authoritarian actors. This is vividly illustrated by the admiration that the authoritarian President of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, enjoys among large sections of the political right. The concept of Hungarian Head of State Viktor Orbán, who promises an "illiberal democracy", is also popular in Latin America, as demonstrated by the presence of the Latin American right at the European version of the US-based right-wing Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest. The Spanish right-wing party Vox was particularly skilled when it came to creating a high-profile counterweight to the authoritarian left with the Foro Madrid. Yet, instead of fighting the pink galaxy's left-wing identity politics from the democratic centre, the Foro Madrid is fighting it in part with right-wing identity politics. This is clear from the inflationary use of terms such as "totalitarian" or "communist" as well as in the often undifferentiated attitude towards populist right-wing leaders. Interestingly, also some actors of this right-wing network have positions friendly to Kremlin narratives.

Democracy is becoming a rhetorical figure that is hollowed out and reinterpreted.

The political centre therefore faces the challenge of clearly naming the activities and dangers of the pink galaxy and countering them with its own convincing narratives. At the same time, it must resist the temptation to trivialise populist representatives to the right of centre or even include them in its own ranks if they are not committed to democracy and the rule of law. One attempt to face these challenges is the Foro América Libre. This forum, held for the first time in 2023 with the support of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, brought together around 30 organisations from 25 countries in a joint action space of the centre or centre-right spectrum.[35] The huge media response bore testimony to the necessity of such an endeavour.

Conclusion: United Against Western-style Liberal Democracy

Even if, at first glance, the various players in the pink galaxy appear to have little in common with the dictatorships in Russia, China or even the Iranian theocracy, there are convergent geopolitical interests. First and foremost, this is opposition to "neoliberalism" and "US imperialism". Ultimately, however, the rejection of liberal democracy as such plays a role, too. According to the pink galaxy, the call for "non-interference

in internal affairs" and a "multilateral world order" is directly opposed to the liberal democratic model of the West and its universal claim. Democracy is becoming a rhetorical figure, hollowed out and reinterpreted in terms of content, and hierarchically subordinated as a means to other ends, primarily "socialism" and, above all, the preservation of one's own power. While left-wing governments have set the tone in Latin America in the two decades since the beginning of the pink wave, the approval ratings for democracy in Latin America have plummeted according to all surveys. There is certainly a causal link between the two phenomena.

The points of contact for Russia, China and Iran are evident. It is easy for them to tie in with the world view of the pink galaxy, to reinforce it with their media power, for example through RT or HispanTV, and to give it international visibility. The pink galaxy, on the one hand, and Russia, China and Iran, on the other, lend each other international legitimacy. Lucrative bilateral economic agreements with no claim to democratisation or respect for human rights make these alliances even more attractive for the different planets of the pink galaxy.

Alliances between international and Latin American authoritarian regimes have a long-standing tradition, for example in the close cooperation between the Soviet Union and Cuba. The political socialisation of some of the protagonists of today's pink galaxy, such as Lula da Silva, dates back to that time. Anti-Americanism and sympathy for authoritarian regimes are an integral part of his political DNA. His regional power base predominantly lies in the Foro de São Paulo, which he co-founded, and with his allies in the pink galaxy. Against this backdrop, Lula's misguided statements on current issues of international politics are no longer surprising.

There is an urgent need for democrats of all political stripes to recognise the danger that the pink galaxy poses to democracy as such and to counterbalance it from the political centre. The pink galaxy should by no means be trivialised as a phenomenon limited to Latin America. Instead, it poses a serious threat to the values-based and rules-based multilateral order as a whole. The pink galaxy's response to Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has clearly demonstrated this.

– translated from German –

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