
Comparative analysis of the intra-party democracy of the largest right-centrist and conservative parties in Bulgaria and Germany

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Abstract

One of the main indicators defining the durability of political parties is their internal party life. For contemporary political dynamics, the state of party structures and organizations is a critical element that would outline the resilience of any party (Ignazi, 2018). This study aims to compare the internal democracy of the two largest and most influential right-centrist parties, professing conservative values in Bulgaria and Germany – Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria and the Christian Democratic Union, which are active members of the European People's Party in the European Parliament and representing its leadership. This will contribute to a deeper understanding first of the democratic processes within the two parties and second, of the functioning of political parties in the context of European political dynamics, especially the large parties – members and representatives of the leadership of the EPP, as defining the direction of the European Union.

Key words: conservative parties, right-centrist, European People's Party, internal party democracy, GERB, CDU.

Introduction

The political parties GERB and CDU are the largest right-centrist parties, espousing conservative values in Bulgaria and Germany. In the period 2009-2021, with few exceptions, both parties governed their countries independently and/or in coalition. The two parties are part of the largest faction in the European Parliament – the European People's Party, which has a strong representation of conservatives and Christian democrats. GERB and CDU have been in close political relations since before Bulgaria joined the European Union (an event that coincided with Germany's EU presidency in 2007). Their mutual relationship, political interaction, and collaboration create a premise for a comparative analysis of their party structures, through which analysis the mechanisms for political decision-making, including their similarities and differences, will be identified.

The Christian Democratic Union was founded in 1945 as a new people's party, consisting of Christian Catholics and Protestants, conservatives, liberals, and Christian socialists, who have set themselves the goal of building the future of Germany. (History, n.d.) The CDU is a German right-centrist political party that supports a free market economy, is conservative on social issues, and is a strong advocate for European integration (Christian Democratic Union, n.d.). Over the years of CDU governance, the West German state has created a tradition of conducting foreign policy and exerting influence worldwide through its foundations. During the Cold War, German foundations played a significant role in anti-communist influence operations in Eastern Europe. Some of the most influential and large foundations associated with the Christian Democratic Union – the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Hans Seidel Foundation, continue to exercise their political influence to this day, having their representations in many European countries. They are part of the mechanisms with which the CDU, as a party, imposes its political orientations, views, and decisions, including

supporting allied parties of Christian Democrats at the regional level (Burja, n.d.).

The political party “Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria” (GERB) was founded in 2006 at the initiative of then-Mayor of Sofia, Boyko Borisov. The party has never undergone a change in leadership and is the largest and most mass party in Bulgaria today (Standart, n.d.). GERB qualifies as a moderately conservative, populist, and centrist party, sensitive to nationalist ideas, but pro-European, open to all – a national party. It is a party focused on preserving established politico-economic relations. Political scientists and experts claim that GERB is a pro-European party due to its strong commitment to the German CDU (Todorov, 2017). Similar to them and the political life in Germany, GERB has established itself as a major political force, declaring a strong aspiration for stability and European integration.

The two largest right-centrist parties in Bulgaria and Germany maintain close ties, expressed in mutual support, regular meetings between them, statements of support in national and European elections, including being special guests at all their major party gatherings. Many Bulgarian and German media point to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU) as key factors for the political identity and success of GERB, highlighting the importance of their partnership (Traditionspartner, 2022). The German foundations Konrad Adenauer and Hans Seidel in Bulgaria are the biggest sponsors of GERB, pointing them out as a main partner on their official pages, and the cooperation between the parties extends to the European Parliament. The former vice-president of GERB has expressed gratitude to all mentioned political German structures for their help in building the party organization of the Bulgarian right-wing party. (Tsvetanov Met with the Head of the “Hans Seidel” Foundation Prof. Ursula Männle., n.d.). Gudrun Steinacker, a former deputy ambassador of Germany to Bulgaria during the founding of the GERB party, shares in an interview with the Macedonian edition of the German media Deutsche Welle, that German foundations and parties were key factors in the formation of the party. Her personal opinion is that Germany’s goal was to find a centrist force that would work for the rule of law in the country and Bulgaria’s European integration after joining the EU in 2007 (Andreev, 2022).

Methodology

The application and use of the first guide for quantitative measurement of intra-party democracy through deductive and standardized content analysis of the statutes of the two parties. The method is modeled on Benjamin von dem Berge’s work published in “Measuring Intra-Party Democracy. A Guide for the Content Analysis of Party Statutes with Examples from Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania”. The book presents tools for building a stable index of IPD (intra-party democracy) for each political party. Following the two main criteria for inclusiveness and decentralization of intra-party democracy, three main categories of intra-party democracy will theoretically be derived: member rights, organizational structure, and decision-making. Based on theoretical considerations, additional subcategories and individual positions are derived from these main categories and combined into a comprehensive coding scheme. A quantitative determination of the coded data and the calculation of a numerical measure for intra-party democracy will be applied. The number of questions included in the analysis does not match the number of methodological questions because some of them did not have a definitive answer for both parties.

Statistical Analysis

Within the scope of this study, a specialized survey instrument was applied to assess intra-party democracy within two selected political parties. The survey tool includes a series of questions assessed through ordinal scaling, allowing responses to take values from -1 to 1, where -1 corresponds to “NO”, 0 to “NOT CLEAR”, and 1 to “YES”. This scaling was chosen to reflect the different levels of democracy within party structures, with lower values (-1) associated with more totalitarian characteristics, and higher values (1) with democratic directions.

Data standardization was performed in accordance with the manual for studying internal democracy, taking into account that the preliminarily analyzed information is of ordinal type. For the analysis of the significance of the differences between the parties regarding intra-party democracy,

the non-parametric Mann-Whitney-U test was applied. This test was chosen due to the specificity of the ordinally scaled data and the absence of a premise for a normal distribution of data with a small number of observations. For a total number of questions exceeding 30 observations, Z-statistics were used to assess significance, as it is assumed that with a larger volume of data, the distribution of the test statistic approaches normal.

The study is aimed at tests with a two-tailed alternative hypothesis (two-tailed), with the significance level (α) set at 0.05. Thus, based on the results of the Mann-Whitney-U test, the probability of confirming or rejecting the null hypothesis (H0), which assumes there is no difference in the degree of intra-party democracy between GERB and SDS, is assessed. The alternative hypothesis (H1) indicates the existence of a difference between the parties.

For each segment, as well as for the total number of questions, the arithmetic mean has been calculated. After calculating the arithmetic mean, the difference between the weighted arithmetic means is calculated. For the calculation of the statistics from the Mann-Whitney-U test, an online statistical calculator at socstatistics.com was used.

Results

Table 1: Calculation results for the intra-party democracy of GERB and CDU

	GERB		CDU		Mean diff	Z-score	U-score	Alpha
	Mean*	N-Questions	Mean	N-Questions				
Total	0.045455	70	0.529412	70	0.483957	-3.09234		0.002
Segment 1	0.1	10	0.8	10	0.7		26.5	0.08186
Segment 2	0.6	20	0.65	20	0.05		191	0.8181
Segment 3	-0.27778	40	0.394737	40	0.672515	-2.95411		0.00318

* Under mean is understood arithmetic mean. N-Questions signifies the number of questions involved in the analysis. Mean diff is an abbreviation of mean difference and alpha designates the significance at a level of $\alpha < 0.05$. Segment 1 is a set of questions measuring party member rights. Segment 2 evaluates the organizational party structure. Segment 3 evaluates decision making in the selected parties.

After conducting the statistical analysis, the following is established:

GERB and CDU overall: The mean value for GERB is 0.0455, while for CDU, it is significantly higher – 0.5294. This suggests a higher degree of democracy in CDU compared to GERB. A Z-score of -3.09234 indicates that the difference between the two means is statistically significant, which is confirmed by a very low significance value of 0.002. This means there is a very small chance that the result is due to randomness.

Analysis by segments:

Segment 1: In this segment, the mean for GERB is 0.1, while for CDU, it is greater – 0.8. The significance is 0.08186, which is above the generally accepted value of 0.05, indicating that the difference may not be statistically significant in this segment.

Segment 2: The mean values for GERB and CDU are 0.6 and 0.65, respectively, with a very small difference of 0.05, reflected in the high significance value of 0.8181, showing that the difference in this segment is not statistically significant.

Segment 3: In this segment, GERB has a negative mean (-0.2778), while CDU has a positive mean (0.3947). The difference of 0.6725 and a Z-score of -2.95411 also indicate a significant statistical difference, supported by a significance of 0.00318, which is significantly below the threshold of 0.05.

The data from the study demonstrate a relative similarity in some segments, but a more in-depth comparison would highlight the similarities and differences in terms of intra-party democracy between GERB and CDU, focusing on specific areas crucial to party life – member rights, organizational structure, decision-making, and the procedures for their implementation. Examining these distinctions will contribute to a broader understanding of the effectiveness of party structures in making important political decisions.

Both parties mention the importance of the role of member rights, but their approaches and the rules they have established show differences. GERB and CDU detail the rights of their members in their statutes, emphasizing a well-established framework for their participation. It's important to note that members of the German right have the right to create their own intra-party factions, which are often oppositional. On the other hand, GERB does not provide this opportunity to its members, which highlights the first significant difference. CDU demonstrates the protection of minority rights, including provisions for their nomination as candidates and quotas for national or intra-party elections. In contrast, GERB does not mention anything about its minorities, aside from their existence. Both parties do not mention the possibility for their members to express dissenting opinions in the public or official space. The rights of members, their obligations, and opportunities within party structures are a fundamental element of intra-party democracy for any party – the absence of these fundamental elements in the GERB party proves fundamental differences with the CDU.

Regarding the organizational structure of the parties, which includes matters such as party congresses, internal party arbitration, responsibilities, and rights of the national leadership, it can be noted that there is almost complete similarity between the two parties, but with important clarifications in the differences. These differences are expressed in that GERB does not mention how often the party's national congress should convene. Reporting to the delegates by the leadership and gathering the entire party membership is a tradition not only for right-wing parties but also for left-wing parties in Europe. Secondly, GERB does not explicitly mention that the jurisdiction of the party court includes the party's executive body and the party chairperson. This questions not only internal justice but also the possibility of seeking accountability of the leadership by party members – something that is mandatory for right-wing parties that state democratic values as their foundation. Third, GERB lacks a party organ explicitly empowered to oversee the party's executive committee. These differences between GERB and CDU highlight the lack of transparency in the governance of the Bulgarian right and the need for a balance between the higher party organs that make the main political decisions and the democratic principles that should be fundamental in party structures to guarantee the participation of party members. It is important to emphasize that GERB has limited information about the responsibilities of its leadership. In contrast, CDU is much more detailed but does not mention in their statute that the national body is accountable to the party members and the party congress. Unlike GERB, who are again laconic regarding the rights and responsibilities of the chairperson, CDU detailedly describes what their party's leadership entails, allowing the party chairperson to expel members. This is extremely concerning regarding the freedom of members and their influence as subnational units on the higher party organs. This type of disciplinary punishment, taken by a unilateral decision, affects the authentic engagement of members and the pursuit of political accountability of the party chairperson, which is in stark contrast with democratic practices.

The democratic process in “Decision-making” is evaluated based on who selects candidates for various positions and what are the mechanisms of this selection. In this segment, there are several important nuances that must be highlighted and play a crucial role in shaping the overall image of the party statute and how democratic it is. The leadership bodies of the two right-wing parties have the right to emit (CDU) or appoint (GERB) members to be part of nomination committees for candidates, raising concerns about the democratization of internal party processes and influence in decision-making. In this segment, a significant centralization of power in the GERB party is observed again because the executive committee or the nomination committee, appointed by the party's governing body, is responsible for selecting candidates for parliamentary and presidential elections. Such decision-making mechanisms prove the lack of direct participation by party members and question their motivation for active participation in political processes. In contrast, the CDU has created a tradition where, before all national elections, several months of nomination procedures and selection of candidates for national elections – parliamentary and presidential – are organized, fully reflecting the democratic process within the party, which every party should practice, involving its members in decision-making and nominating political figures to the public. The national leadership party units of the CDU do not control the selection of candidates, unlike GERB, who explicitly mention that

candidates for national elections are entirely the responsibility of the governing body. The commonality between the two parties is that there is no direct participation of party members in the selection of the chair and the executive committee of the party. This affects not only the legitimacy of the party chair and executive committee but also the reflection of the general opinions and sentiments of the party members.

Regarding the “Procedures” segment, a lack of transparency is observed within both political parties, specifically in terms of presenting voting results, with the aim of justifying and legitimizing the vote. The absence of such accountability deprives members of the opportunity to be informed about all political decisions taken and candidacies selected, which questions the trust in internal party processes. Again, in both parties, there is an obligation for cooperation between sub-national units and national branches in the selection of leadership, with the only difference being that at CDU, the sub-national structures have the autonomy for independent selection, but with approval at the national level. This approach deprives the party structures (which are involved) of representation and continuity between the party members and the individual units. Again, with GERB, the lack of democratic principles is observed in the selection of candidates for public offices by sub-national units, as they are obliged to cooperate with the national branches. The national units of GERB entirely control the selection of sub-national candidates for public offices, which is a negative aspect for intra-party democracy. This questions not only the participation and equal opportunities of party members to be elected for public offices but also the quality of the preparation of those selected by the higher bodies. The statutes of both right-wing parties do not address programmatic issues related to manifestos and political programs, only CDU mentions that their manifesto must be voted on by the party Congress.

Conclusions

Summarizing this study, it can be highlighted that in the overall analysis and in segment 3, statistically significant differences in the degree of intra-party democracy between GERB and CDU were observed, with higher averages for CDU. In segment 1, although the means differ, the statistical significance is not low enough to confirm statistical significance, while in segment 2, no significant differences between the parties are observed. These results can be interpreted as an indication of different levels of democracy in the various segments surveyed, with CDU showing stronger democratic characteristics in most of the study.

GERB adheres to more centralized approaches in decision-making processes, which differ from CDU's systematic approach and the democratic models built within party structures. It should be noted that due to the differences in the political structures of Bulgaria and Germany, there are undoubtedly differences in the structures of the political parties. However, these differences should not directly affect the participation of party members and decision-making. The mechanisms of power distribution within the party remain more unclear in GERB, which, unlike CDU, has a sparse availability of party provisions, regulations, and limited information in the statutes. This leaves an impression of formal organizational structuring and symbolic participation in decision-making by party members. CDU demonstrates an approach that includes a more democratic right of participation for party members in elections and decision-making, as well as decentralization with respect to national and regional organizations. This discrepancy between the two right-wing parties, espousing conservative values, raises another question concerning the maturity of democratic processes and whether these differences mirror the comparison between the new EU member states and the other Western countries with established democratic traditions. In conclusion, the differences between the two parties can be attributed to GERB being a relatively new party in European politics, and its development and political evolution as a party organization are yet to be seen.

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