

Majority to lose, future to win? The CSU in Bavaria before the state elections of 2018

Between 25,000 and 50,000 people crowded in the streets of the Bavarian capital during the last weeks and protested under the slogan: "Stop agitating" against the migration politics of the Bavarian state government, which from their point of view is a right-wing populist-exclusionary policy. At the same time, for three years now, the party has been in an exhausting permanent clinch with its sister party CDU and its chairman, Chancellor Angela Merkel, about the right asylum and migration policy, which is more and more reminiscent of a long-term family feud rather than a short row between siblings. Accordingly tensed are the views of Europe's most successful Christian Democratic People's Party on the 14th of October this year, the date, on which it wants to defend its usual absolute majority in the Bavarian state parliament. Anyhow, this seems likely to be difficult with respect to recent polls, which put the party rather at 40% than at 50%. However, the reasons for this are not exclusively to be found in the party's migration policy and the party's situation is not as bad as it might seem on the first view, as the following essay will argue.

For the success of the party it has always been important to be anchored on four levels. The party drew its strength from a very high proportion of members, currently around 140,000 party supporters in Bavaria, which roughly corresponds to the number of members of the FDP and the Greens nationwide. With this basis, the party could easily achieve a strong anchorage at the local level. It is also extremely important for the CSU to hold the office of Bavarian Prime Minister and an overall majority of seats in the Bavarian Landtag in order to govern Germany's largest and economically strongest state independently and to build a federal counterweight in Munich to the capital city of Berlin. In addition, however, there is also the federal level as an area of action, where the CSU traditionally forms the largest parliamentary group in the Bundestag together with the CDU and strives for government responsibility with it. Departments mandated by the CSU regularly include finance, economics, home affairs, agriculture and infrastructure. The party tries to promote its profile in the field of business, internal security and regional development and to bind for them important professional groups such as farmers, civil servants, judges or self-employed and entrepreneurs close to the party. At European level too, the party seeks to represent Bavarian interests and, for example, focuses on its work in the European Parliament in the fields of business, home affairs and agriculture.

Basically, the CSU sees itself as a Christian social, conservative and economic-liberal center-right party with a focus on Bavaria. With a view to Bavaria, she advocates a balance between the districts of Old Bavaria, Franconia and Swabia, which is also reflected in the leadership of the party. For Franz Josef Strauss, the most influential politician of the party until his death in 1988, this meant true to his motto: "Conservatism is not the worship of the ashes, but the transmission of the flame", to create and preserve a modern and cosmopolitan, yet traditional Bavaria. Popularity, the emphasis on the Bavarian way of life and a certain degree of populism were basically instruments to bind the voter to the CSU and its Bavarian-style conservatism. "Laptop und Lederhosen", modernity and a sense of tradition in one, was the motto of Strauss' most important successor as Prime Minister, Edmund Stoiber, who continued his course during his tenure from 1993-2007. At the same time, however, the party is increasingly coming up against certain limits with this course. With the economic upswing more and more people came to Bavaria, which were not automatically connected to the country and rather disconcerted then attracted by the in core Catholic-Baroque CSU.

The party's old ties to church circles weakened and, above all, Turkish guest workers, people from East Germany, Russian Germans and, since the 1990s, increasingly Eastern Europeans, Arabs and Africans without a recognizable reference to Bavaria, increased the population within a few decades from around 10 million to nearly 13 million. For the CSU, therefore, limiting migration and increasing the birth rate in Bavaria itself was always important to hold onto power over the long term by emphasizing Bavaria's own path. On the other hand, too many people who could do anything about this path would increasingly challenge the party and its current governing style. On this point, as critics argue, the party is now closely resembling the social policies of the PiS and FIDESZ, although the CSU, like the ÖVP in Austria, has always held this position. It is therefore not possible to speak of a shift to the right of the CSU. Rather, the party remains at programmatic points of view from the 1980s and 1990s, while the CDU, for example, has moved away from them, anticipating that its voters would have done so as well. Accordingly, it was the decision of Angela Merkel in September 2015, which has put the CSU on high alert: open borders and unlimited plus uncontrolled migration were unacceptable for the CSU regarding its conservative core voters and the electoral structure of the party. Bavaria and Saxony here, despite 50 years of communism, differ significantly less than, for example, Rhinelanders and Bavarians. Accordingly, it was rather surprising that for three years the CSU largely supported the Chancellor's course, contrary to its innermost conviction in migration policy, and thus enabled the AfD in Bavaria to step up to the right of the CSU. In 2013, only two years before the 2015 decision, the AfD in Bayern renounced to take part in the state elections due to lack of prospects of success. In Hesse, however, she joined in 2013 as well as in 2018 to battle the ruling CDU.

Due to the focus on the recovery of middle-right voters, however, the migration issue for the CSU is doubly problematic: in addition to the competition from the right threatens the loss of the middle. As a Christian social party, it always integrated into the moderate center-left camp. Now, in this area, led by the two major Christian churches and their social organizations, significant losses to non-voters and possibly also to the Greens are possible, as the churches are distancing themselves from the party's migration limiting politics. Conversely, the party cannot move away from its previous line and just follow the churches and the CDU. To renounce a strong emphasis on the Bayerntum would question fundamentally the parties core values and the party's style of politics over of the last decades which the party is very proud of. Most party officials and members therefore do not seem willing to abandon this concept and are rather willing to endure the conflict with its sister party, hoping for the time after Angela Merkel to come. In addition, abandoning the old "Bavaria First" strategy then could easily mean the loss of independence: without its Bavarian rhetoric's, from an autonomous and successful party it could become not more than the 16th national association of the nationwide CDU. With regards to its roots and core voters, the party seems trapped according to the issue of migration but nevertheless also enjoys a lot of support amongst the long-established population. Therefore, being a modern conservative in the field of migration seems quite impossible those days even in Bavaria where this worked quite well over the last decades for the CSU. European and in particular German conservatives seem to have to decide where they stand: welcoming further migration or rather rejecting it. Or in the German case short: Following CDU-chairwoman Merkel or support CSU-chairman Seehofer. And conservatives seem to have to accept that they will likely loose some voters to other parties, whatever decision they will take, which makes single party governments more and more unlikely in the future, even in Bavaria.

Besides migration, there is another policy area, in which the party is currently reaching its limits, notably with this above-mentioned autochthonous core voters: the environment and agricultural policy. Here the old ties of the CSU to the farmers and above all their representation of interests continue to work well in Brussels as well as in Berlin, Munich and in the communities. At the same time, however, the problems continue to increase. The dying of the farms could not be slowed down, the number of agricultural enterprises in Bavaria is still decreasing. In addition, the existing farms are getting bigger and bigger and lose their typical Bavarian character, which the CSU wants to preserve. The switch to organic farming and the energy transition since 2011 offered a chance for innovation. In the former case, however, the CSU was too timid and mainly left the topic and farmers who were willing to switch to the Greens, while in the second case it was too generous with building permits. Many farmers moved from agriculture to the energy industry without having enough knowledge of the necessary technology. This initially ensured their continued existence, but at the same time led to the growth of monocultures and numerous environmental catastrophes due to incorrect operation of the biogas plants. This resulted in conflicts with environmentalists but also with groups traditionally close to the party, such as forest farmers, fishing clubs and hunters, who were in turn concerned about the persisted existence of the environment they needed to ensure their outcome.

Also the population and economic growth of Bavaria has negative aspects: the sprawl of the landscape. More inhabitants need more housing and jobs, and this is either created in the cities on the few green spaces or on the outskirts of the cities. No federal state is currently as generous with the land consumption as Bavaria. This was not a big problem several years ago as Bavaria had plenty of free space to offer but turns out to be more and more problematic for a party like the CSU, which likes to preserve the beauty of Bavaria, which includes nature, and once again offers the Greens a chance to attack the government.

Even in the Alpine regions affected by climate change, a stronghold of the CSU, the party has so far mainly supported the interests of hoteliers and ski lift operators at the expense of the environment. The party tended to allow the expansion of operations to accommodate more guests in shorter seasons and promote major events, rather than providing incentives to deal with the ever-increasing lack of snow and thus the loss of winter revenue through summer tourism or other restructuring measures. However, majority of voters of alpine towns like Garmisch-Partenkirchen or Ruhpolding were not satisfied with this political concept anymore and stopped Munich's Olympic candidature several times via referendum, again politically aligning with the Greens against the CSU.

A hopeless situation? Bavaria on Baden-Wuerttembergs path? Not necessarily. Around 40% is not the desired outcome for the party, but still the best individual result of a party currently measured in Germany. In addition, the good regional and broad social anchoring of the party allows a process of renewal, desired by the electorate, which already started. In the government reshuffle in spring 2018, the new Prime Minister Markus Söder could therefore draw from the full and form a politically attractive cabinet. The new Minister of Agriculture was the young MP Michaela Kaniber from Berchtesgaden, who should address farmers, women and, with respect to the Croat background of her parents, Central and Eastern European immigrants in Bavaria. In addition, there is the gynecologist Marion Kiechle as new Minister of Science, who should, with her expertise in the field of medical education and research, address academics. His former rival Ilse Aigner was also entrusted by Söder with an important department: her ministry bundles the important agendas for housing, building and traffic in a house that had previously been handed out. On the other hand, Söder managed to get rid of

troubled ministers such as Europe Minister Beate Merk, Education Minister Ludwig Spaenle and Environment Minister Ulrike Scharf and could also convince highly appreciated, longstanding ministers, but with few perspectives after 2018, such as Minister of Agriculture Helmut Brunner or Minister of Social Affairs, Emilia Müller, to finish their term as ordinary MPs and allow other politicians to take over their resorts to gain some more reputation and profile for the upcoming elections.

Another important point is, that on the credit side of the state government, also in comparison to other federal states, there is a very good balance sheet in the areas of state budget, internal security, digitization and technical innovation. Numerous difficult questions, for example in the field of education and infrastructure policy, have also been pacified in recent years. In addition, the inhabitants of Bavaria are above average happy with their state government, their living environment and their prospects, which does not necessarily indicate a strong will to change the government. Unlike in 2008, when a four-party coalition of SPD, FW, FDP and Greens threatened it, the CSU is likely to maintain a structural majority in the state parliament with as few as 40 percent, allowing it to block decision against their course as probably nobody wants to cooperate with the AfD. Too fragmented seems the opposition and too little realistic seems a deselection of the CSU. Thus, Markus Söder is on course to get away with a black eye on 14th of October: the party will very likely have to say goodbye to their absolute power. At the same time, he should be able to choose which of the then five other factions will help him to be reelected. The most likely scenario is a coalition with the Free Voters, which should focus on issues such as homeland security, education, rural development and agriculture. A coalition with the FDP should focus on the economy. Due to the migration policy, alliances with the Greens which, however, could be expected to lead to a more modern environmental policy or the SPD, which should focus on the area of housing and social issues, are highly unlikely. Even a merger with the AfD does not seem realistic. Anyway, to choose a partner allows the party to choose the main emphasis of Bavaria's future development after 2018 and to stay in power. It will not be the opposition to force the CSU into another Bavaria by adapting its electoral program after the elections, it will be the CSU actively to decide which way to go, which input to take from the opposition and which ministries to hand over to the smaller coalition partner as it happened in 2008 with the FDP. On the other hand, a minority government, tolerated by the opposition parties and changing majorities depending on the issue, would be possible as well and allow the CSU to keep all ministries in the state executive in the party's hands.

In conclusion, it can thus be said that the party has been under enormous pressure from the AfD on the migration issue since 2015. The Chancellor's left-wing course and open border policy for any kind of migrants does not really arrive at the CSU, which historically understands itself as a center-right party and does not want to change its positioning to the left. This increasingly leads to conflicts within the Union parties, which causes Germany's long-term power structure to totter, and vice versa, the party's ability to integrate itself into Bavaria's centrist voter segment suffers. In addition, there have been made errors in infrastructure and environmental policy, which favors the Greens as a left-liberal counterpart to the CSU, like those developments that could be observed in neighboring Baden-Wuerttemberg. On the other hand, the rise of the Greens now goes mainly on cost of the SPD, whereas the CSU loses mainly to AfD, FDP and FW. Accordingly, the CSU is threatened with the loss of the absolute majority in October, but not of power in Bavaria. Even after the elections, the CSU should remain the dominant party in Bavaria, but must continue the path of internal renewal.

The party must succeed in doing the splits to modernize in some way, not to lose the connection to the global developments, which greatly benefit Bavaria, but in other questions continue to integrate the existing conservative spectrum in Bavaria and reflect it politically, even if this continues to involve conflicts with churches, the media or even the current chancellor Angela Merkel and her CDU in main political topics such as migration, European Integration or regional cooperation with and relations to other countries in Bavaria's neighborhood like Czech Republic, Austria or Hungary.