

On the Road towards Transnational Parties in Europe: Why and How the European People's Party Was Founded

By Steven Van Hecke



The European People's Party (EPP) did not appear out of the blue in 1976: its foundation and initial development were the combined result of various internal and external factors. Explaining why and how the EPP was founded should therefore make explicit reference to these factors. This is precisely what this article is about. First, we will analyse the wider framework in which transnational parties were founded. Second, we will focus on the main points of the foundation of the EPP within this framework. Finally, we will examine the way in which these particularities have determined the further development of the EPP.

Christian Democratic cooperation...

The EPP is built on the 'foundations' of ways of cooperation that have long existed among Christian Democrats in Western Europe. The first institutionalised cooperation, although very weak, dates back to the early twentieth century. The *Secrétariat international des partis démocratiques d'inspiration chrétienne* (1925–39) had its seat in Paris and, because of French concerns, did not explicitly refer to the term 'Christian Democracy'. The *Secrétariat* was meant to be a 'union' or *internationale*—modelled on that of the socialists—but was in fact nothing more than a *bureau de contact*. It was certainly not an example of transnational cooperation, the international activity of national political parties being limited to bilateral diplomacy. It was not so much parties that the *Secrétariat* depended heavily on as it was Christian Democratic politicians. Those from the Benelux, France, Germany and Italy

were among its most active participants. The *Nouvelles Équipes Internationales* (1948–65) was founded after the Second World War, based on the contacts of certain leaders of re-established Christian Democratic parties. From the outset there was controversy about the nature of the organisation (about how much integration there should be) and its name (whether it should be called 'Christian Democratic'). Cooperation was limited to the organisation of forums, in which senior Christian Democrats from different Western European countries discussed the future of Europe. Representatives were grouped in national *équipes* that represented one or more parties from one country. Its most important political role lay in bringing together French and German Christian Democrats. In this way, it contributed to the integration of the German Federal Republic in Western Europe.¹

Gradually the role of the *Équipes* was taken over by the group of Christian Democrats in the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (from 1952) and the European Parliament of the European Community (from 1958). Formally, the Christian Democratic Group was established on 23 June 1953. Due to the loss of power of French Christian Democrats, who had to this point instigated Christian Democratic cooperation, the *Équipes* renamed itself the 'European Union of Christian Democrats' (EUCD, 1965). German and Italian Christian Democrats dominated the organisation's doings, something they had not done in the *Équipes*. The EUCD's confederal structure generated the exchange of strategies and communications as well as the writing of a common Christian Democratic doctrine.

¹ We refer to the talks of the 'Geneva Circle'. See Michael Gehler, "Begegnungsort des Kalten Krieges. Der 'Genfer Kreis' und die geheimen Absprachen westeuropäischer Christdemokraten (1947-1955)", in Michael Gehler (ed.), *Christdemokratie in Europa im 20. Jahrhundert*, 2001, pp. 642–694.

...and European integration

In the mid-1970s the situation changed profoundly. The prospect of direct election to the European Parliament by universal suffrage—decided by the Hague Summit in December 1969 and fixed for 1978 by the Paris Summit of December 1974 (but later delayed to 1979)—marked a new era in the history of Christian Democratic cooperation. For the first time, the establishment of a federation of Christian Democratic parties was being considered.² It was widely expected that, thanks to the direct election of the Parliament, European party politics would soon prevail over national party politics. For instance, it was believed that ‘European parties’ that still had to be established would play a dominant role in the European Parliament election campaign. Furthermore, leading academics and politicians openly predicted that these ‘European parties’ would herald a new and decisive phase in the democratisation of the European integration process. Further integration of like-minded parties now seemed essential, given their potential role in European politics.

For the Christian Democrats of those days, two other factors were crucial. First, the accession of the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland in 1973 led to a relative decrease in the power of the Christian Democratic Group. As British and Danish Conservatives established their own group in the European Parliament, it was only the Irish *Fine Gael* that joined the Christian Democrats. Moreover, when, in 1975, Labour finally delegated its MEPs to Strasbourg and consequently joined the Socialist Group, the Christian Democratic Group lost its relative majority for the first time in the history of the European Parliament. Licking its wounds, the EUCD debated the idea of establishing a ‘Democratic Centre’ that would bring together Christian Democrats and Conservatives in order to break the Socialist

majority. Christian Democrats from the Benelux and Italy did not support this idea, while parties from outside the EC felt discriminated against by parties inside the EUCD, as the organisation geared itself more and more to the agenda of the Community in general and the Parliamentary Christian Democratic Group in particular. Second, the establishment of transnational Socialist and Liberal parties put pressure on the efforts of the Christian Democrats. In 1974 the ‘Confederation of Socialist Parties in the European Community’ had been created from the Liaison Bureau (established by the Socialist International in 1957) to further cooperation between EC parties.

The Liberal International decided in 1972 to examine ways of deepening cooperation between parties in the EC. In 1976 the ‘Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties in the European Community’ was formally founded; but in contrast to its Socialist counterpart, it was independent of the Liberal International. It is therefore no coincidence that, immediately after the Socialists and the Liberals decided to found ‘European parties’, Group Chairman and EUCD Vice President Hans-August Lückner urged the national parties to make the arrangements necessary to establish a similar organisation at EC level.³ The marked delay in doing this, due to internal disputes about *inter alia* the role of the EUCD, would paradoxically encourage greater efforts, so that the Socialists and Liberals fell victim to the dialectics of progress. It is worth noting that the Conservative parties undertook no initiatives to establish an organisation that would bring them closer to each other within the framework of the EC.

Founding a new party

The first steps in the process that led to the establishment of the EPP were taken in the ‘Political Committee of Christian Democratic Parties from Member States of the EC’. This was

² The first, albeit implicit, reference to the foundation of a Europe-wide Christian Democratic party dates back to 1971. See *ACDP IX-007-001, Protokoll der Ständigen Konferenz (Christdemokraten) der Sechs am 26. Mai 1971 in Rom*. The Italian MEP Giuseppe Bartolomei pleads for “einem Bewusstwerden der politischen Parteien..., die sich dann auf europäischer Ebene zusammenschliessen würden”. According to Papini, the term ‘European party’ was for the first time mentioned in 1972. See Roberto Papini, *The Christian Democratic International*, 1997, p. 148.

³ *ACDP IX-007-001, [Vertraulich] Notiz über die Anpassung der Strukturen der christlich-demokratischen Parteien an die politische Entwicklung der Europäischen Gemeinschaften zur Europäischen Union – Brüssel, den 2. April 1975*.

a body of the EUCD that had been founded to accommodate the wishes of the non-EC member parties that formal EUCD procedures should not be entirely dominated by EC matters. This *structure d'accueil* represented eleven parties from seven EC Member States: the Belgian CVP and PSC; the Dutch ARP, CHU and KVP; the CSV from Luxembourg; the German CDU and CSU; the Italian *Democrazia Cristiana*; the French CDS and the Irish *Fine Gael*. Sustainable cooperation in the form of party political organisation was, for the first time, officially set as an objective at the meeting of 2 February 1973. Despite the intention to establish working groups, most of the attention was initially paid to drafting a common political programme. It was only later that a twin track approach was chosen: simultaneously founding a new organisation and writing a programme for the future.⁴

This new approach was utilised in September 1975 when an ad hoc working group called the 'European party' was established within the Political Committee. Hans-August Lücker and Wilfried Martens, then president of the CVP, became *rapporteurs*.⁵ Between November 1975 and January 1976, several meetings of the working group took place to discuss the statutes of the future European party of Christian Democrats. The draft statutes were presented to the Political Committee during its meeting of 20 February in Paris. Approval was reached at the meeting of 29 April 1976, resulting in the formal establishment of the 'European People's Party—Federation of Christian Democratic Parties from the European Community'. The official inauguration took place in Luxembourg on 8 July 1976, in a meeting of the Political Bureau of the EUCD during which Belgian Prime Minister Leo Tindemans was elected president. The first EPP meeting on 19 July 1976 unanimously adopted the party's statutes and internal rules

and elected the vice presidents.⁶ During the first congress, held in Brussels on 6 and 7 March 1978, the political programme was adopted, and the Frenchman Jean Seitlinger was elected as secretary-general. One week later, on 14 March, the Christian Democratic Group in the European Parliament decided to add to its name 'Group of the European People's Party'. In 1979 the two parts of the name were switched, resulting in 'Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)'.

The quick succession of meetings in which the EPP was founded concealed fundamental disagreement about the organisation's name and membership, which arose before the party's formal establishment and continued thereafter. These two issues of name and membership concerned, in fact, a single basic question: whether or not the 'European party' would be open to non-Christian Democratic parties. The Germans were in favour of this sort of openness. At any price, they wanted to prevent the European Parliament from being dominated by the Socialists. Due to their absence in the United Kingdom and Denmark, Christian Democrats were numerically too weak to counterbalance the Socialists and should therefore enter into an alliance with Conservatives and Liberals. Christian Democrats from the Benelux, France and Italy, however, were opposed to this idea. They supported a 'grand coalition' with Socialist forces, something they were familiar with and appreciated from their experience at national level.

The role played by Lücker and Martens was crucial in solving the problems of the EPP's foundation. As a member of the Bavarian CSU, Lücker supported a broad alliance of Christian Democrats and Conservatives in principle, but personal convictions led him to give priority to collaboration among Christian Democrats. Unlike

⁴ ACDP IX-007-001, *Kommuniqué – Sitzung des Politischen Komitees der Christlich-Demokratischen Parteien der Europäischen Gemeinschaften – Brüssel, 2. Februar 1973.*

⁵ ACDP IX-007-001: *Procès-verbal de la réunion du Comité politique des partis démocrates-chrétiens des pays membres des Communautés européennes – Luxembourg, le 26 septembre 1975.*

⁶ ACDP IX-007-052: *Procès-verbal de la réunion du Bureau politique le 8 juillet 1976 à Luxembourg.*

many of his fellow countrymen, he had learnt during his European activities to understand and respect the feelings of the various Christian Democratic parties. The Flemish Christian Democrat Martens, on the other hand, had no connection with the anti-Socialist discourse of the CDU/CSU. He attached value to Christian Democratic ideology, while at the same time realizing that, by definition, a future European party could not exclude collaboration with non-Christian Democratic parties. If they did so, the Christian Democrats would not count for much in an ever deeper and wider Europe. From the outset, both *rapporteurs* had acknowledged the opposing views on the foundation of a European party of Christian Democrats. By taking this into account, they prevented a split and finally contributed to a compromise that was acceptable for all parties.

What's in a name?

Whereas a consensus was easily reached on the party's statutes, during its meeting on 20–21 February 1976, the Political Committee could not agree on the party's name. The European Party working group suggested different alternatives but never reached an agreement.⁷ The eleventh-hour proposal 'European People's Party' did not help to settle the matter.⁸ The question whether to include the term 'Christian Democracy' along with 'European People's Party' remained open. The issue of what the party should be called was not without importance as it showed the profile the party wanted to have. Those supporting the entry of the British and Danish Conservatives tried to prevent the use of the term 'Christian Democracy' whereas the opponents of their entry considered this reference to be a guarantee of the Christian Democratic character of their European cooperation. In September 1975, Lückner had established a separate body to deal with this issue. However, the 'Democratic Centre' working group was unable to contribute to a settlement.

After much debate and with time pressing, the Committee finally reached a compromise—getting there had been an odyssey. The term 'people's party' was chosen both to accommodate the German wish for openness and to make reference to the Christian Democratic party names in many countries (it was thought that the term 'Christian' would evoke papist and clerical associations in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia). As *Volksparteien*, the CDU and CSU are open to Liberals and Conservatives; however, for historical reasons, their party names paradoxically refer explicitly and exclusively to 'Christian Democracy'. The main Christian Democratic parties from the Benelux—the CVP, KVP and CSV—also use the appellation 'people's party'. The same applies to the immediate predecessors of the CDS in France and the *Democrazia Cristiana* in Italy. At the same time, and as part of the compromise, a reference to the term 'Christian Democracy' was kept in the second part of the party's name: 'Federation of Christian Democratic Parties in the EC'. It was a hollow victory, however, since this part of the name was rarely used. Moreover, since the 1990s the name 'European People's Party' has facilitated—not to say made possible—the enlargement of the party through the inclusion of like-minded parties. One could even argue that it is only since its rapprochement with Conservative and Liberal forces that the EPP has—finally—become a true 'people's party'. The party's name has in every way contributed to its success in terms of membership.

With or without the Conservatives?

The issue of membership in the new European party was also of great importance in the early days. The central question of the debate was whether membership in the EPP should be restricted to parties from EC countries or be open to parties in non-EC Member States. In other words: was it possible for non-Christian Democratic parties to ally themselves formally with the EPP? The

⁷ Different names circulated. See *ACDP IX-007-009: Parti populaire européen, Démocratie chrétienne européenne, Parti populaire démocrate-chrétien européen, Parti populaire (chrétien) social européen, Parti social européen pour le progrès*.

⁸ *ACDP IX-007-001, Procès-verbal de la réunion du Comité politique des partis démocrates-chrétiens des pays membres de la Communauté européenne du 20 et 21 février 1976 à Paris*.

argument was decided in favour of those who pleaded for restricting membership. Unlike the issue of what to call the party, an agreement had already been reached within the European Party working group, particularly in connection with the party's statutes. What was then Article 4 stated that only parties from EC Member States could join the EPP. At the same time, the internal rules provided for 'associated membership' and 'observer status'.⁹ However, at its meeting on 28 October 1976, the Political Bureau decided that no party was eligible to become an associate member or permanent observer.

As a result, Austrian and Swiss Christian Democrats—who had long participated in the EUCD but, because their countries had not joined the EC, were not part of the European inner circle—felt once again excluded. Wishing to be closer to the EPP, they asked in a common memorandum of 23 December 1976 for an amendment of the statutes, a review of the decisions taken by the Political Bureau and a formal procedure for cooperation between the EUCD and the EPP. Although the EPP was founded in the city where the EUCD had its seat, no official link existed between the two organisations. Austrian and Swiss Christian Democrats therefore warned of separation and division between the various international organisations. Their requests, however, were not granted. The opponents of 'open membership' stuck to their guns. As this issue was settled relatively easily, and before an agreement had been reached on the party name, there is little reason to think that the 'solutions' for both problems—despite some striking similarities—were part of one overall compromise.

The issue of drafting a common political programme was much less a subject of fierce debate than the party name and membership questions had been. Among the founding parties of the EPP, there was a broad consensus about social and economic policies and the direction

the European integration process should take. Lücker and Martens, who were also the *rapporteurs* for the 'Programme' working group, could rely on the various Christian Democratic programmes that had just come into being: the *Manifesto of Christian Democrats in Europe* and the *Political Programme of the World Union of Christian Democrats* (both had been approved by the Political Bureau of the EUCD, the first in Paris on 2 February 1976 and the second in Rome on 6 July 1976). Furthermore, support for the synthesis and comparison of the national manifestos was given by both the *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* and CEPESS, the study centre of the Flemish Christian Democrats. As no other party federation managed to present a common electoral platform, the programme proved to be the most successful achievement of the foundation of the EPP. In view of the campaign for the direct election of the European Parliament, the political programme of the EPP was entitled *Together for a Europe of Free People*.

The fruit of initial discord

Notwithstanding the outcome of the foundation of the EPP, the German Christian Democrats looked for ways to remain in contact with Conservative parties. At first they tried to achieve this within the EUCD and the EPP by breathing new life into the idea of a 'Democratic Centre'. A working group that had been founded for this purpose met in December 1977 and April 1978 under the leadership of the German Kai-Uwe von Hassel, president of the EUCD. This working group proposed the establishment of a kind of platform on which all non-Socialist and anti-collectivist Centre parties from Europe could cooperate. But the idea did not bear fruit. Opposition within the EPP was too widespread. Believing that things were not moving forward, the Germans started to explore new ways to institutionalise their contacts with Conservative parties. In their resistance to the 'confinement' of the EPP, the German Christian Democrats

⁹ *ACDP IX-007-009, Ad-boc-Gruppe 'Statut'. Entwurf für das Statut einer europäischen Partei – Brüssel, den 16. Dezember 1975.*

found allies, particularly the Austrian and Swiss Christian Democrats who regarded themselves as being excluded from the new party federation. The party leaders had already met in 1975 at *Schloß Klessheim* near Salzburg to establish a broad alliance of European centre-right parties outside the EPP. Parallel with the process that led to the foundation of the EPP, the Germans presented drafts of statutes and manifestos to friendly parties. The *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* contributed by comparing party manifestos and putting protagonists in contact with one another. A special working group drew up a new organisational structure in the course of 1976.

Due to the diversity among the parties involved—anti-Socialism was de facto the only idea that bound them together—many obstacles had to be cleared away, with the result that the official foundation had to be delayed several times. It was really only the determination of the CDU/CSU that kept things going. That they took these initiatives towards non-EC or non-Christian Democratic parties did not mean that there were no attempts to accommodate the sensibilities of their Christian Democratic friends. In turn, this led to irritation among those parties that had no affiliation with Christian Democracy. In this regard, it should be noted that the Germans weakened the structure of the new organisation—which was originally very close to that of the EPP—in an attempt to reach a compromise with critics inside the EPP.

On 24 April 1978, the 'European Democratic Union' (EDU)—an "association [not a party or party federation] of Christian Democratic, Conservative and non-collectivist parties"—was founded in Klessheim by, among others, CDU president Helmut Kohl; Margaret Thatcher, leader of the British Conservatives; and Jacques Chirac, president of the neo-Gaullist RPR. The establishment of the EDU was a major setback for the Christian Democratic parties in the Benelux, France and Italy. Their idea of

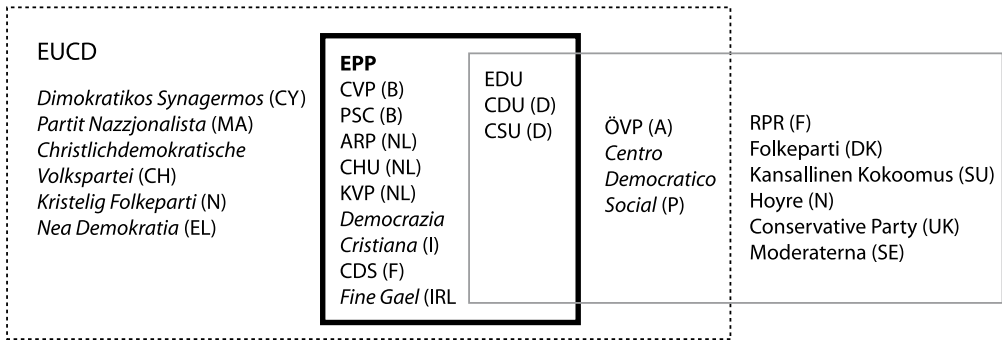
European cooperation solely among Christian Democrats had not prevailed. The timing of the setting up of the EDU—only one month after the successful first EPP congress—was seen as a provocation.¹⁰ However, by fiercely opposing the 'opening up' of the EPP, they had contributed to precisely what they had wanted to avoid: cooperation with non-Christian Democratic parties that might lead to a weakening of the ideal and the creation of a European federation. Through the foundation of the EDU, it now became redundant for the EPP to engage in a formal dialogue with Conservative parties inside and outside the EC. On a whole, mutual distrust dominated the relations between the CDU/CSU and the other EPP member parties, something that seriously hampered the first years of the newly founded 'European Party'.

Whither Christian Democratic cooperation in Europe?

With the foundation of the EDU, the deadlock was complete. The first victim was the EUCD: it became an empty shell since its most important member parties were also members of either the EPP or the EDU (see figure). To ease at least the strained relations between the EUCD and the EPP, the two general secretariats fused in 1983 and a single secretary general was appointed, the German Thomas Jansen. At the level of party organisations, particularly those involving both the EPP and the EDU, a long period of 'armed peace' started. The new organisation and bodies of the EPP were consolidated, but the relationship with the EUCD remained unclear. It was only through practical activities and personal contacts that a common sense of belonging to one party federation emerged. In this respect, the Christian Democratic integration process that made a new start in 1975 continued slowly but steadily. This was not changed fundamentally by the development of the European Parliament immediately after 1979 and the entry of new member parties in the 1980s.

¹⁰ *ACDP IX-007-052, Procès-verbal de la réunion jointe des Bureaux politiques de l'UEDC et du PPE le 6 juin 1978 à Berlin.*

Figure: Member parties of the EUCD, EPP and EDU (1978)



On the one hand, the EPP was founded on a tradition of Christian Democratic cooperation that had long existed; on the other hand, it constituted a split: through the establishment of a party federation, the path of mere cooperation was left behind. Instead, the EPP chose the course of the integration and politicisation of European politics, a development that it both shaped and was shaped by. As already mentioned, its foundation cannot be understood without making reference to the external stimuli: the 1973 enlargement, the direct election of the European Parliament and the establishment of Socialist and Liberal party federations. The EPP was founded within this particular framework, and the latter left its imprint on the party's original characteristics, including the choices that were made regarding the party name and membership. In other words, the EPP reflected the opportunity structure of the time and the place in which it was founded. At the same time, the opportunity structure constituted the agenda of the party's initial phase of development, which can be described as consolidation, if not stagnation. The latter, however, was also due to the fact that national parties fought the first direct elections of the European Parliament with national candidates campaigning on national issues. And after the elections, many 'European' politicians left the Parliament and returned to their domestic arena. European party federations were unable to play any significant role in this process. If any groups can be said to have set

the tone, it was those in the European Parliament and not the party federations.

It was only in the 1990s—with worsening electoral results of Christian Democratic parties, the introduction of the 'party article' in the Treaty of Maastricht, a more powerful European Parliament and new waves of enlargement—that a new opportunity structure of internal and external stimuli was created. Overall, it led to what one could call the 'rebirth' of transnational party federations, particularly the EPP, in comparison with both the national member parties and the parliamentary groups. As a result, a relatively stable 'European party political system' emerged. The EPP's rapprochement towards Conservative and Liberal parties brought it face-to-face with old sources of conflict: the party name and membership issues. Old controversies also resurfaced in connection with the inefficient co-existence of three party organisations: the EUCD, EPP and EDU. The final settlement of these issues contributed heavily to the EPP's current status as the largest European party.

Steven Van Hecke is a post-doctoral assistant at the Department of Political Science at the University of Antwerp.