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Say it with feeling

Germany is Europe's de facto leader. But it needs to change its style

Leadership can foster resentment. As Germany has taken a stronger role in responding to the crises gripping Europe, mistrust towards Berlin has increased. Germany's handling of the refugee and Eurozone crises has not met with universal approval, and some regard the country's unparalleled influence as part of the problem.

Germany shouldn't give in to calls to step away from the reigns. But it does need to change the way it leads, or risk a further erosion of confidence.

With the Brexit vote depriving the EU of one of its biggest players, and a question mark hanging over EU-US relations, many see Germany as the new standard bearer for liberal values and a rules-based world order. Indeed, Chancellor Angela Merkel has called on Europeans to take their fate into their own hands. But the weight of expectation presents difficulties for the German government.

Firstly, Germany's elevated role in Europe does not signify a genuine boost in Germany's power. It's the weakness of other nations that makes the Federal Republic appear so 'strong and stable' in comparison.

Secondly, it will become harder to balance the conflicting national interests of member states in an increasingly heterogeneous EU. While Greece welcomed Germany's approach to the refugee crisis, which involved member states sharing the burden of hosting new arrivals through a system of quotas, Poland and Hungary were highly critical. Conversely, Germany's consolidation policy during the Eurozone crisis attracted fierce criticism from southern Europe, but met with approval in the Netherlands and Finland.

"Autocratic and ruthless"

During the era of the Bonn Republic, the West German government

made the willing relinquishment of sovereignty in favour of European integration a guiding principle of its foreign policy. These days, however, Germany risks coming across as autocratic and ruthless. It has come close to abandoning the tried-and-tested strategy of finding genuine consensus with other European countries, rather than forcing through a reluctant agreement.

During the Eurozone and refugee crises, the federal German government faced accusations of pushing through its own agenda against the wishes of the other EU member states. It is clear that a growing number of national governments no longer believe Germany understands the problems facing Europe, much less can solve them.

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That said, Brexit means a greater role for Germany is inevitable. Even Poland's ruling Law and Justice party has softened its stance towards Berlin, despite some deeply rooted animosity. Greece can solve neither the debt crisis nor the refugee crisis without the support of the German government. And despite some philosophical differences, France and its new president Emmanuel Macron continue to view Germany as an irreplaceable partner.

After the German parliamentary elections in September, Germany and France will have to demonstrate that the couple franco-allemand can function as the engine of EU integration. Failure would ruin any hope of long-term EU reform. Currently, the two partners' policies and interests in Europe are incompatible. A successful collaboration would require France to place a great deal of trust in Germany's ability to lead and shape the future of Europe.

A scarred continent

Even if the Franco–German partnership could develop workable reform measures, that would still only represent one of the necessary preconditions for a European consensus. German leadership in Europe has already left some member states with deep scars. If Paris and Berlin focus too intently on getting the rusty tandem back on the road, discontent may grow among other member states and ultimately hamper an urgently needed consensus on reform.

Berlin must develop a new code of practice. It needs to communicate its intentions more effectively and involve its partners in decision-making, rather than present each new development as a fait accompli as it has

done during the refugee crisis. This will require the German government to enter comprehensive discussions on the EU's future and show a willingness to acknowledge the validity of other perspectives on Europe's problems. The German government is not the guardian of European rules nor is it the intermediary between European partners. Germany needs to recognise that the demands it makes are not neutral, but are shaped by national experience, traditions and attitudes. This would go some way to refute charges that Germany thinks itself morally superior, and has a "hidden agenda" for Europe.

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What is more, member states that share Germany's position – such as northern and East European governments during the Eurozone crisis – tend to stand in the background, appointing Germany as their unofficial spokesperson. This just adds to inner-European tensions. The German government should instead seek to establish European structures and agreements that do not force it so prominently into the foreground. Germany should actively offer partnerships with other EU countries and value those partners more highly – similar to the model of Franco–German collaboration that dealt with Russia during the Ukraine conflict.

To regain trust, Germany needs to improve its communication and cooperate more closely with its European partners. That means making more concessions on issues such as Eurozone integration and coordinated defence. The German government will have to make some genuine and painful compromises. Meanwhile it should emphasise to the German public that the costs incurred are a necessary investment for German prosperity, which is dependent on a stable Europe. The election campaign is chance to do exactly that.



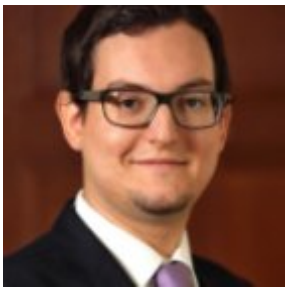
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