

## Germany: No Longer Humbled, Even More Powerful

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### Abstract

The sensational return of German conservatism has marked an important era in European history. An era where Germany is going through an identity crisis but with all the caveats of an inexperienced hegemon. It remains the leader of the European project, a role significantly growing in scope and intensity. If anything, the recent elections have shown that while we have so far focused on a European Germany that we forgot that it is German first, the German people have not. There is no longer a silence about neither German exceptionalism nor its national pride. A certain segment of the population is breaking taboos and openly owning its "glorious" past. These developments beg the question- Is the German postwar transformation reversible and if so why now? Implications of such analysis are two fold- first they reinforce the notion that maximizing the power of a state's identity is inextricably linked to a particular moment. And second, great power crises are always viewed in the context of their position in the system under which they thrive. The German question therefore is an EU question and vice versa: The EU question is a German question. In order to understand where Germany may be heading, and the EU for that matter, it is important to look at decisions and choices that guided much of its transformation that culminated in its pacifist disposition and economic prosperity for much of the late 20th and early 21st century.

**Keywords:** German conservatism; German foreign policy; Economic relations; EU hegemon

### Identity Reversal

To understand German preferences in the early post war years is to understand German national identity. At a time where silence dominated German discourse, the shame and guilt were channeled toward developing new habits and seemingly a reinvented identity toward a more prosperous Europe [1]. For many Germans, this meant sacrificing moral responsibility at the allure of prosperity which would bring new memories with which the German nation would be identified. In many ways, this was the goal of early reformers who sought to reinvent their own perceptions not just abroad but at home as well. Many Germans applauded the Nuremberg trials which shifted blame or responsibility to a select few "crazies." Such narratives were politically exploited allowing for the creation of parties that more or less were similar in ideological spirit of transformation. Parties that threatened a return to the past were consumed into more dominant ones, making them disappear. The feats of Chancellor Adenauer after the 1949 and 1953 elections, when the right wing parties won 10% of the electorate vote, especially come to mind as such actions would not only set the tone for coalition building but also the entire German political system of today [2]. Chancellor Merkel's coalition between the Social Democrats (SPD) and Christian Democrats (CSU) who themselves have allied with some of the rightist parties reflects the long-standing tradition of coalition building. This has become a core dimension of the German political system and one that permeates in the midst of the current identity reevaluations.

It takes quite some time to conquer one's past and even longer to attempt to relive it. The former empires of the Near East, Russia and Turkey namely are redefining their nations in hopes of revisiting their former glories. Often the context through which we understand nation-states is defined by their historical experience. We simply

ascribe certain behaviors to habits and these habits are reinforced in our daily interactions. In order to break from them, a significant and dramatic shift in either domestic or international environment is required. Germany has remained insulated from outside pressures notwithstanding the current crises. The rise of populist parties in general has not amounted to a profound dismantling of the political system in Germany. There is enough flexibility to withstand the demands of such parties partly because of the previously mentioned coalitions that require compromise in order for the system to function. With that said it is likely that the trend will continue toward a more protectionist and nationalistic Germany but that this will not result in profound differences in the way German foreign policy is actualized. Even if the AfD (Alternative for Germany) is able to wield influence over the next chancellor, it will still have to contend with both the CDU, SPD and the fringe left. Comparisons of the 2017 parliamentary elections with those from 1930 are frequent in so much that they are nearly identical in explaining the polarity of the German political system. The fringe parties on the left and right make up a significant portion of the Bundestag so much so that without their inclusion in a coalition would signal the end of government by parliamentary majority. Indeed this is what happened in 1930 and subsequent elections in 1932 [3] where the left and right parties were so immovable in their positions and the center unable to form a working coalition with either that President von Hindenburg appointed Hitler as chancellor as a gesture of appeasing the nationalists. This scenario is unlikely to play out today because the strength of the ultra-conservative party of the past compared with the neo-conservatives of today is rooted in its historical memory of history owing something to Germany. The neoconservatives of today differ in that they represent a number of people who have become dissuaded with the existing parties. The appeal for them is not just therefore a preservation of a German identity but other factors such as job security, pensions, and quality of life. This is in part where the danger lies. If the AfD is able to broaden its appeal beyond the nationalist, it can have serious

ramifications that would seriously question the stability of the German political system. Fringe parties become mainstream when they are able to broaden their appeal and Germany must avoid this.

A united German identity, one that protects the country's ethnic and cultural homogeneity has always been a part of German social life. Even in the face of nationalist rhetoric, we often forget that the German nation remained German during other incursions on its homogeneity [4]. Therefore identity and culture explain very little in so much that their effects are contingent upon seizing the right moment. That moment has already come, the AfD has already over 100 members in the Bundestag and they will have influence going forward. The margins of society have had their moment, whether they can sustain it is another debate. If German internal politics come to be dominated by a nationalist vs. internationalist debate then this ceases to be a debate over who offers the better standards of living and economic prosperity. Challenges lie in strengthening economic relations with countries that are not a part of the EU. Germany has already developed special relations with Russia in order to protect its supply of natural gas and has worked with Turkey to promote economic cooperation in many sectors. Similarly German relationship with powerhouse China is also warming up with Merkel a frequent visitor to Beijing. The two countries agree on issues specifically related to how the U.S. has behaved since the election of Trump to the presidency. They see congruence in their efforts to strike back against U.S. protectionism however, are unnatural allies in terms of ideological and strategic underpinnings. Germany flexes its economic power when it has to because it is all Germany has.

### Germany's Power Rebranded

There used to be a time when threat of a powerful Germany guided its neighbors' policies against it. The postwar era is defined by the idea of subverting German power through various means one of which was significant institutional binding. The postwar system placed significant constraints on German power because constraining the one power responsible for two world wars was deemed necessary and responsible. A feeling resonated with many of its neighbors and international community as a whole was that German rebuilding be done carefully, preferably by those who know it best. Transformation of Germany in the post-war years has been the epitome of Euro-American success notwithstanding the often disruptive roles played by France and the UK. This culminated in a tradition that still applies today, one that Germany has embraced and come to rely on institutions that were originally designed to constrain it. Its economic might and rebound after the war is telling of the resilience that exists within the culture itself. German labor as well as companies returned to "business as usual" by the 1950s and were immediately one of the foremost exporters of Europe. This combined with a cultural disposition of saving over consuming has enabled Germans to live quite well relative to their war years and their neighbors. While the economic rebound has been quite impressive and its only source of power in the international system, German hostility to military power has lessened its commitments abroad. Indeed, the Germans lack a comprehensive security and defense strategy in the absence of NATO. NATO membership in 1955 shielded West Germany from its old foes and newfound allies but also reaffirmed to idea of community, a trend common among the political elite of the time. NATO provided the security guarantees that kept Germany focused on other matters, developing market and economic reforms, expanding the EU community and cultivating a pacifist identity.

### Generational Divide

Examining German postwar integration through the lens of its people and their identity formation is anything but novel. Indeed, historical memories of decision makers [5], collective memories [6], and institutions that bind are crucial features of German transformation; however, the circumstances under which they occurred are not repeatable. There is no longer a majority generation that has experienced the horrors of war at its door step nor is there a generation of youth willing to not explore its nations darkest moments. The re-release of "Mein Kampf" which spent nearly 9 months on the best-selling list is telling of this curiosity and enamor with old Germany. The new Germany is a global brand recognized for its exceptionalism and prosperous economics, a strength only enjoyed by a select few. The generation of now has endured its own unique challenges relative to that of their fathers and grandfathers. Some of these are unique to global transformation and some are unique to Germany itself. They're living in a highly accessible world, one that allows for new ideas to come from anywhere and cultivate themselves rather rapidly. In that same breath, the ideas of old are revived and fine-tuned. This privilege may not have existed for their parents.

Such access cannot be dangerous unless it is accompanied by various stimuli that evoke feelings of enmity. For many Germans, refugees and immigrants are not a new phenomenon, after all Germany has taken in many guest workers from various parts of the world and likewise many refugees needing a safe-haven. The most recent clash with these German norms came with the newest immigration crisis. The transforming power of language [7] has this time been used to incite negative perceptions of outgroups to the level of political mobilization. These dangerous lexicons have crept into the mainstream political discourse and provided episodes of serious disconnect between people and decision-makers. Chancellor Merkel's initial liberal policy on refugees and opening up of German borders for anyone fleeing violence and conflict backfired in so much that she had to walk back on many of her statements. Among the German public, there exist ideological constraints in accepting a once again humbled Germany. The feelings of exogenous threats and fear have much more easily manifested themselves rather than empathy and reflection. The German state does have a lot to lose in terms of the values its exports to the EU and beyond. A divided Germany would create a vacuum that can only be filled by other great powers. Europe has a shortage of great powers able to lead the way Germany does, and able to provide guidance the way America does.

### Powerful But Illegitimate

There is considerable debate within the EU's southern and central states about German dominance and weight in the EU. Austerity measures pushed by Germany in the wake of the financial crisis were not well received and were enforced too long. Similarly, its handling of the immigration issue has espoused new condemnation of its role in EU's agenda setting. Does Germany have the capacity to hold itself in check when it comes to the EU? The evidence suggests Germany continues as the most powerful state within the EU and therefore its de facto leader. There is no indication that other states are willing to succumb to its demands that easily either however. Recent spat between German and Italian foreign ministers over who should take in more refugees is exemplary of this. The Greeks have not forgotten their treatment at the hands of Germany during its debt crisis. Many have gone far-right, and as such have resulted in more nuanced critique of German power eluding to leaving certain provisions within the EU

altogether. There is great hostility to German privilege within the EU. Even among the various critiques, there is also strength in knowing that Germany is strong enough to withstand circumstances it is under. Yet the threat remains of it becoming too dependent on the others and independent of the system it creates. Germany needs the EU but is also capable of being a power on its own relative to others. An argument could be made that the current crisis stems back to a much earlier period of Germany's revival in the way that its institutions were set up. During the Cold war, West German defense spending was considerably higher than the post-Cold war period. In the early 1990's after unification, Germany took full advantage of security umbrella provided by U.S. and NATO by cutting its defense spending dramatically. The result has been a military structure that is unreflective of the German ability and security reality.

The internal political divide further hinders the hope for any significant increase in defense spending, although since 2015 Germany's defense spending has been increasing at insignificant slow rates. The reason being that the main coalition is split on the issue. Merkel's Christian Democrats favor an increase in spending but the Social Democrats fear a militant and imperial Germany once again hovering over Europe. There is no indication that either side is willing to make large concessions that would appease its fellow NATO members and EU community at large. Further polls suggest that the public themselves are split on the issue. In 2017, 32 percent of Germans wanted an increase in spending, 13 percent sought a decrease, while the majority of 51% thought the defense budget should stay where it is [8]. Even the most recent exogenous shocks in the system stemming from Russia's annexation of Crimea and its suspected involvement in several election processes across Europe, Germany remains without significant change in its security policies. An often cliché argument against German security policy is that it is a consumer of stability rather than its producer and have therefore been responsive and not preventative of crisis. Relying on an international regime for its security hinders its ability to gain the legitimacy of a full time hegemon among European states. Further, its legitimacy abroad is questioned by its pre-eminent status within the EU [9]. Germany is Europe's reluctant hegemon and is only able to wield its special powers when it wants to keep the EU community economically beneficial for itself.

### Germany's Problems Are EU Problems

Debates over austerity and immigration define many of the dyadic relationships between Germany and periphery EU member-states. Germany's reluctance to contribute the bare minimum of 2% of GDP to NATO's shared defense budget has strained relations with the US, albeit intensified in nature recently. While Brexit may have weakened everybody in the EU, some have gained in their relative position. One such gainer is Germany whose relative influence increases with a heavyweight like Great Britain no longer occupying a space for dissent. The uniqueness of the EU is the burden sharing of problems and their collective undertaking to reverse certain hurtful trends. Germany is never alone in that sense and therefore its strength comes from the EU. Now that right wing parties have taken foothold in many EU member states, further questioning of German hegemonic status is on the rise. Germany is in a precarious position because to act with impunity is to lose its audience abroad and to act with humility is to lose its audience at home. Still separating the German problem from the European problem is a mistake. Germany's place in the world cannot be

distinguished without reference to the wider context of European developments [10]. This is something that all parties in Germany will have to contend with if they even do go so far as to choose right wing nationalism. The trade surplus gained relative to its EU counterparts is tremendously advantageous [11] to the German economy, its Eurozone membership has propelled its export economy to new heights and disturbing such beneficial trends is unlikely by any German party.

### Conclusion

The new political wave is attempting to reverse an identity that has defined European politics for decades. To reverse the postwar reconstruction of Germany into what it is today, a global economic powerhouse and an EU hegemon, a significant reevaluation of German social life will have to go beyond the focus on national identity. The appeal for German citizens does involve aspects of such discourse as claims of a generational divide are not unfounded. Perhaps something does exist that can push the masses toward nation-state dilemmas. However, a trumping of the EU project and walking back on many German economic accomplishments in the context of the EU is unlikely. Economic trends are crucial to igniting rhetoric of identity and nationalism, and fundamental hurdles exist for any further expansion of such rhetoric in Germany. The depth of integration and dependence upon the rest of the EU ties Germany to them for the foreseeable future. It remains to be seen what comes out of the most parliamentary elections in Germany. A system meant to facilitate coalition building and compromise is not dead, and this is perhaps the most significant distinction between the times of now and the old. The question remains open if gridlock and government shut-down is possible given the hard-liner positions of new parties in Parliament.

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