



The Era of German Chancellor Angela Merkel: What Was and What Remains?

By Thomas Brey

Introduction

After the general election in Germany at the end of September, Angela Merkel will step down as Chancellor at the age of 67. She held this most important political office in Germany for almost exactly 16 years (2005-2021). She will thus equal the record of her former political mentor and Chancellor Helmut Kohl (1982-1998). In 2021, she was named “Most Powerful Woman in the World” by the US magazine

Forbes for the tenth time in a row. In 2015, the US magazine Time named her “Person of the Year” on its cover. Merkel has received the highest state honors from Italy to Peru, from Portugal to Israel. In 2011, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom - one of the two highest state decorations in the USA. The world’s honorary doctorates are legion.

Merkel had a picture-perfect professional career, although by today’s standards she became politically active for the first time relatively late,

at the age of 35. In the final phase of the GDR, she became involved in the opposition. As “Kohl’s girl” (“Kohls Mädchen”) she became Minister for Women’s Affairs as early as 1989, then Minister for the Environment (1994-1998), CDU General Secretary (1998-2000) and finally Party Chair (until 2018). She completed her studies in East Germany with a highly praised dissertation. When she became Chancellor in 2005, she was the first woman to hold the office and the first Chancellor from East Germany.

The Merkel Policy

The Neue Zürcher Zeitung, which is also respected in Germany, recently characterized Merkel as a “technocrat of power”. Visionary is not her thing. She can “at best administer, but not lead”. On the other hand, Merkel’s “reliable political style” is appreciated by her supporters as a trademark in times of erratic politicians like Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As a natural scientist, she possesses the ability to delve into complex problems and derive rational decisions from them. The chancellor often justified her decisions as “without alternative”. This adjective has meanwhile become a common word - sometimes, however, with an ironic connotation. The “Merkel rhombus” with thumb and index finger of both hands was meant to show calmness and serenity.

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Her supporters also praise Merkel’s “booting out of alpha males” in the CDU, such as her rival for the parliamentary group chair, Friedrich Merz, the Hessian Prime Minister Roland Koch, the top foreign policy expert Norbert Röttgen or the current Bundestag President Wolfgang Schäuble. As a result, German politics has become much more “female”. The prime example is the current President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who, with Merkel’s support, first made her career in Germany and now internationally.

The Merkel Problems

The upheavals in the political landscape took place during Merkel’s term in office. Merkel moved her conservative party more and more towards the center in terms of its program. Commentators spoke of a “social democratization of the Christian Democrats”. Conservative counterparts in the CDU criticized this as “arbitrariness of program”. Voters no longer knew what the party actually stood for. The CDU’s shift in the political spectrum paved the way for the rise of movements and even parties on the right-wing, often extreme fringe.

It began with the xenophobic demonstrations of Pegida in 2015 and ended in 2020/21 with the conspiracy theorists of Querdenker. The most visible part of this right-wing populist upsurge was the new Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which, for example, won up to 27.5 per cent of the vote in the state of Saxony in 2019. On a national level, the AfD achieved its best result to date in the last federal election in 2017 with 12.6 per cent.

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Merkel has often taken important decisions in the narrowest circle of advisors when broad parliamentary approval would have been necessary. Only after her decision was made did Merkel seek political legitimacy. As late as 2009, she praised general conscription in Germany as an “important link between society and the armed forces”. Just two years later, however, conscription came to an unexpected end. In autumn 2010, the government extended the lifetimes of nuclear power plants (AKW) in Germany. In June 2011, under the impression of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, the Merkel government made a radical turnaround within a few days and heralded the nuclear phase-out.

In the refugee crisis since 2015, the central decision on opening Germany’s borders was also taken by Merkel in the smallest of circles. Together with the then Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann, it was decided in September to first let in the refugees stuck in Budapest’s East Station. To date, 1.4 million have come to live in the Federal Republic. Merkel’s legendary phrase “We can do it” has been quoted and criticized thousands of times. The Chancellor has been accused by critics that her policy of open borders has not only attracted asylum seekers who have rightly sought protection in Germany under the Basic Law, but that many so-called economic refugees have also come in the hope of a better life in the West.

The Merkel reform backlog

Where does Germany stand at the end of the “Merkel era”? One of Germany’s top industrialists, Wolfgang Reitzle, the long-time head and current chairman of the supervisory board of gas producer Linde, gives the chancellor a damning report card: The situation is “shameful for a leading industrial country” and “after almost 16 years of Merkel, Germany is a case of reorganization in many areas”. With that, at least, he is not entirely wrong. The upheaval in the automotive sector - away from the combustion engine and towards electric drives - was really slept through in this

key German industry. State subsidies for the purchase of electric vehicles, the establishment of a network of charging stations and European battery production only started late. In these areas, US companies like Tesla or Chinese suppliers have often set the standards so far.

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In international comparison, Germany is still almost in the Stone Age when it comes to digitalization. Even the simplest mobile phone network has huge holes, fast broadband internet as a prerequisite for economic success among companies is scarce. In telecommunications, the key to digitalization, Germany is also lagging behind and cannot keep up with Chinese providers such as Huawei, for example, in the development of a 5G network. Not to mention national or at least European competition with the Big Five US giants Google (Alphabet), Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft (GAFAM).

Backlog in education systems reform is another point of criticism of the Merkel years, even though this area falls under the competence of the federal states because of the federal state structure. Nevertheless, the federal government could and should have invested billions in

reforming and expanding the education system as the key to a successful economic future much earlier than it did recently. In all Pisa studies, German pupils regularly end up in middle positions at best. The Corona epidemic with its compulsory homeschooling has just shown that German schools are totally inadequately prepared for modern forms of teaching - and this applies to students and teachers alike.

Bureaucratic bungling have also demonstrated German weaknesses in major construction projects. As one of the largest construction projects, the “Willy Brandt” airport in Berlin took an incredible 14 years to be inaugurated. Mismanagement, corruption and the overtaxing of politicians were responsible for this. The architecturally spectacular Elbe Philharmonic Hall in Hamburg cost an incredible 866 million euros to build, up from 77 million. The new railway station in Stuttgart (Stuttgart 21), still under construction, rose in price from an original 2.5 to well over four billion euros - and there is no end in sight. Its completion has been postponed from 2019 to now 2025. More than 560 demonstrations show that politicians have failed to win the approval of the citizens of the capital of Baden-Württemberg.

Central areas of life such as the health and pension systems face an uncertain future in Germany. Although Germany has one of the most expensive health care systems, its citizens

are no healthier than elsewhere in Europe. Demographic change is having an impact on pensions. Fewer and fewer working young people have to finance people of retirement age. Although the pension system is obviously heading for bankruptcy without fundamental reforms, politicians have dodged this sensitive issue for millions of their voters. At the moment, the increase of the retirement age from 65 to 67 is underway. Although this transition is far from complete, scientists are already bringing up the idea of retirement at 68.

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The Bundeswehr, too, often appears to be in need of rehabilitation. Critics now use the unflattering term “cucumber troop”. Internal analyses by the Bundeswehr think tank GIDS in June 2021 have shown how powerless the soldiers are in the event of an incident against combat drones. The operational readiness of the military technology is poor. According to data from the current year, only 76 per cent of the equipment is operational. Only 40 per cent of the helicopters can be used, only 54 per cent of the Puma infantry fighting vehicles and only 64 per cent of the combat and transport aircraft.

The international Merkel balance sheet

A few months before leaving office, the Chancellor formulated as her wish for the future: “The European Union must be a unity. Europe is still an alliance of values“. But this wish is quite at odds with reality. Poland and Hungary, in particular, are downright trampling on EU’s alliance of values. Both EU states control the media, bully the judiciary and are increasingly blocking a common EU foreign policy. Whether it’s about the Middle East conflict or the European relationship with China - Poland and Hungary prevent common strategies of the Union when it doesn’t suit their national goals. It is not only these two countries that are increasingly hostile to the EU headquarters in Brussels and the European Parliament. Most recently, Hungary’s right-wing nationalist head of government Viktor Orbán even demanded that the power of the EU Parliament be limited in favor of national parliaments. EU member states should be able to stop legislative processes in the EU representation if national areas of competence are violated. “The EU Parliament has proved to be a dead end in terms of criteria of European democracy,” Orbán claimed.

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The model of “illiberal democracy” pursued by Orbán and Poland is apparently so attractive that it is now also being increasingly pursued by the right-wing nationalist Slovenian head of government Janez Janša. He, too, is trying to get his country’s media under control, with Hungarian oligarchs in Orbán’s circle giving him financial support. How disastrous the polyphonic European foreign policy is can also be seen in the example of South East Europe. Although the EU is represented in the Balkans with billions of euros and an army of diplomats and experts, it has hardly been able to contribute anything to solving the many problems. Whether it is the dysfunctional state of Bosnia-Herzegovina or a settlement between Serbia and Kosovo. On the contrary. The positions of the contending parties and peoples have only become more entrenched over the decades. At the moment, Bulgaria is blocking the opening of EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia and the Netherlands is blocking Albania.

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driving force. Progress in the European unification project could only be achieved if these two large countries pulled together. But in the “Merkel era” this motor has stuttered. The experienced chancellor was particularly alienated from the young and dynamic Emmanuel Macron, who has been president of France for five years. The Merkel government put the brakes on his impetuous proposals to deepen the EU and the euro zone. The resulting estrangement between the two capitals was used by Macron to establish his own channels of communication, for example to Russia, analyses the public broadcaster ARD. A common European foreign policy looks different.

The post-Merkel policy

After failing with the current Defense Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer as her successor, Angela Merkel was nevertheless able to push through the Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia, Armin Laschet, as the candidate for Chancellor of her CDU together with its sister party in Bavaria CSU. Laschet is considered a loyal supporter of Merkel’s policies, so a continuation of her political line is likely. Like Merkel, Laschet is not considered a visionary who “burns” for new political goals. He has made a name for himself as an administrator of the current.

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After the Greens, with their candidate for chancellor Annalena Baerbock, achieved a surge in voter favour that at times pushed them ahead of the CDU into first place, the results of the regular polls have now settled down to this level: The CDU/CSU would get 25% of the vote in a referendum today, the Greens 19%, the SPD 18%, the FDP 12%, the AfD 11% and the Left 7%. If one believes the assurances of the top politicians that coalitions with the Left and the AfD are an absolute taboo, these government alliances result purely arithmetically: The CDU/CSU will provide the chancellor and has the choice of making the Social Democrats and the Greens junior partners. Probably, after a CDU/CSU election victory, the FDP will also enter the government, because Laschet has been leading exactly such a government in his state of North Rhine-Westphalia for years. In any case, with an election result close to the polls, the CDU/CSU would need two coalition partners. The SPD, however, is likely to view a CDU-led coalition with great skepticism. After all, it had already lost voters dramatically in grand coalitions with a CDU sign.

Conclusion

Merkel's extraordinarily long term in office was marked by a succession of equally extraordinary international crises, through which Germany came through reasonably unscathed under the Chancellor's leadership: the financial crisis following the collapse of Lehman Brothers from 2008, the euro crisis following Greece's threatened state bankruptcy 2010, via the refugee crisis from 2015 to the Corona pandemic since 2020. During this time, Merkel was adapting its key political and ideological positions throughout its terms as Chancellor: from compulsory military service, to the nuclear phase-out, to taking on common debts in the EU. In parallel, a huge reform backlog has built up in Germany, threatening the very core of its function as a major industrialized country. In foreign policy, too, standstill seems to be the motto more and more. The major crises on Europe's doorstep, such as in Ukraine, the new Cold War with Russia after the annexation of Crimea, remain even rudimentarily without a solution. Not to mention the open questions in South-Eastern Europe. The EU is becoming increasingly incapable of action due to its own inability to reform the principle of unanimity, the excessive Brussels bureaucracy and the systematic dismantling of European values by some member states. In terms of domestic

policy as well as foreign policy, Germany therefore needs a new start after the “Merkel era.”

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