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After Merkel: Can Germany Rescue Europe and Itself?

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When Angela Merkel announced recently that in December 2021 she would relinquish the leadership of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and not seek reelection as chancellor, the sense of relief in Berlin was almost palpable. Since the CDU's dismal performance in last year's federal elections, Germany's "Iron Lady" has sputtered from one political debacle to another—including the ouster of her most trusted ally, Volker Kauder, from the head of the CDU/CSU parliamentary bloc in late September and shocking losses in the Bavarian and Hesse state elections in late October.

In the short term, Merkel's demise will further destabilize German and broader European politics, which she has dominated since 2005. An acerbic succession battle over the CDU's future is already brewing, and its outcome may compel Merkel to resign before her planned departure in 2021. In the run-up to the May 2019 European Parliamentary elections, the CDU's grand coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD) may unravel, and the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)—which already has elected representatives in each of Germany's sixteen state legislatures—may garner more strength, particularly in the eastern parts of the country. This will further exacerbate the east–west divide in a nation that until recently thought of itself as irrevocably reunified.

Yet the end of the Merkel era also represents a rare opportunity for democratic rejuvenation. In the coming months and years, Berlin's battered but still dominant centrist political forces must strive to generate a cohesive and energizing organizing scheme for Germany and Europe or face further polarization, paralysis, and fragmentation. To overcome Europe's perilous vision vacuum, Berlin will have to transcend its reluctance to lead, which runs deeper than Merkel's penchant for tactical maneuvering and the avoidance of grand strategy. A new centripetal

momentum, built around the concept of liberal patriotism, represents the best hope for recovery and renewal for Germany and Europe. Such rejuvenation is also a key interest for the State of Israel—itsself a child of and an increasingly influential part of the embattled liberal international order—as well as for Jewish communities in Europe.

Europe's *Decas Horribilis*

The decade from 2008 to 2018 was Europe's *decas horribilis*—one defined by a cascading poly-crisis, which, within a frighteningly short period of time, brought a self-confident, even triumphant, European Union to the brink of cultural and political civil war.

The decade is not over yet, and the crisis is far from over. Despite some cause for cheer in the last two years—a measure of economic recovery; the convincing defeat of Marine Le Pen in the French presidential elections of May 2017; a modest rally in public opinion support for the EU in the aftermath of Brexit; and a substantial drop in terrorism—the Union is fragile, and the poly-crisis continues to mutate dangerously.

It began with a financial crash and a harsh recession that threatened to bankrupt several member states and unravel the euro currency area. Greece's virtual bankruptcy, and its ham-fisted bailout, exposed the fragility of the Eurozone; triggered painful austerity measures in southern Europe; heightened political tensions among member states; and undermined public trust in the European project.

Between 2008 and 2018, a series of EU foreign and security policy failures aggravated the situation. In the northeast, a by now fully autocratic and aggressive Russia mauled Georgia in 2008, waged a proxy war on the EU's doorstep, and in 2014 annexed Crimea in violation of the most basic principles of international law. To the southeast, an increasingly Islamist and authoritarian Turkey turned away from Europe. As hopes for an Arab Spring crashed and burned between 2011 and 2014, the "ring of friends" that Brussels has been generously funding for decades in North Africa and the Middle East descended into fifty shades of chaos. Talk of the EU leading the effort to stabilize Libya after the fall of Muammar Qadhafi in October 2011 never materialized. And when, in May 2018, Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the nuclear deal concluded in 2015 between Iran and the P5 + 1 [the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany], faith in Europe's ability to contribute decisively to the diplomatic resolution of a major international conundrum suffered a terrible blow.

An unprecedented influx of migrants, predominantly from majority Muslim countries, swept into the Schengen Area during 2015 and early 2016, unleashing

further acrimony within and among member states. More than 2.5 million migrants applied for asylum in the EU in 2015 and 2016, with 1.1 million arriving at Germany's doorstep alone. At the same time, Europe was convulsed by a series of jihadist terror attacks, wracking already frayed European nerves and casting doubt into the hearts of citizens about the Union's ability to provide basic security and stability. In the face of uncontrolled migration and terrorism, what was previously understood to be one of the EU's greatest strengths—freedom of movement—became a dangerous liability in the eyes of many European voters.

Then came Brexit, and then came Trump. Not surprisingly, the *decas horribilis* has left the EU wounded and frail. It has greatly reduced solidarity and trust within and among member states, undermining the cohesion of the very forces upon which the EU governance system depends for its basic functionality.

Support for mainstream political parties in France and Germany collapsed in 2017 and 2018. In France, Emmanuel Macron managed to win the presidency in May 2017 by a handsome 66 percent of the popular vote, but he did so on the back of “La République En Marche!”—a new party he founded barely a year earlier outside of France's mainstream political framework.

In Germany, Merkel struggled to form a reluctant coalition government in March 2018 after nearly five months of deadlock and after the AfD party had gained nearly 13 percent of the national vote to become Germany's largest opposition party.¹ It was the first time a far-right party had reached the Bundestag electoral threshold since the fall of the Third Reich. Over the summer, racist riots in the east German city of Chemnitz (Karl-Marx-Stadt in GDR times) highlighted the growing east–west divide. While the AfD has some supporters in the west, there are significantly more in the east, and some German analysts now believe levels of public support for the AfD in the east could be as high as 30 percent.

Also in March 2018, Italy—the EU's third-largest economy and one already saddled with dangerously high levels of debt—fell into the hands of an outlandish coalition composed of two erstwhile rival anti-establishment parties, the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the hard-right Northern League. The first promised its voters to “end poverty” by a massive increase in social spending, while the latter pledged to cut taxes. This exercise in financial alchemy, according to the 2019 budget plan published by the Italian government, would be achieved by tripling the national deficit while betting on an extraordinary growth spurt as austerity is ended. When on October 23 the EU Commission took the unprecedented step of demanding that Italy drastically revise its budget, the Northern League's leader, Matteo Salvini, dismissed this out of hand, accusing Brussels of attacking the Italian people.

Even Sweden, until recently a poster child of political consensus, saw the Sweden Democrats (SD), a previously obscure populist movement with neo-fascist roots,

capture nearly 18 percent of the national vote in September 2018. Dramatic successes for ethno-nationalist politicians and parties were also racked up in prosperous and serene Finland, Denmark, and The Netherlands.

But the fault lines that have emerged within Western European countries pale in comparison to the chasm that has opened up between them and some of the newer member states of Central and Eastern Europe. As Ivan Krastev observed recently:

Perhaps the most alarming development has been the change of heart in eastern Europe. Two of the region's poster children for postcommunist democratization, Hungary and Poland, have seen conservative populists win sweeping electoral victories while demonizing the political opposition, scapegoating minorities, and undermining liberal checks and balances. Other countries in the region, including the Czech Republic and Romania, seem poised to follow."²

After five years of an evolving "rule of law crisis," in late July 2018 the sense that the foundational values of the EU (as enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union) had been seriously compromised finally led the Commission to launch sanction proceedings against Poland. In mid-September the European Parliament voted to trigger similar sanctions against Hungary.³ National leaders in both Hungary and Poland dismissed the EU move as illegitimate—with Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Sijjártó calling the European Parliament's decision an act of "petty revenge" by "pro-immigration politicians"—and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker stating that he had "given up" on reasoning with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

This deep fissure is now at real risk of being entrenched at the very heart of the EU's supranational institutions. A fresh surge in support for anti-establishment and Eurosceptic parties in the May 2019 European Parliamentary elections threatens to embed a deeply anti-Brussels, illiberal bloc within the Parliament, potentially leading to EU-wide political gridlock. There are signs that this is a realistic scenario. In a Eurobarometer poll of 27,600 voters published in May 2018, 50 percent thought the EU was headed in the wrong direction (compared with 28 percent who said it was heading in the right direction); more than half said they had no interest in next year's European Parliamentary elections, while 63 percent of younger voters said they were looking for "new political parties and movements" to find better solutions for the EU.⁴ Any attempt to mobilize younger voters risks rallying them to anti-EU parties.

Vision Vacuum

Europe is now on the cusp of cultural and political civil war, because the visions that presently exist for the future of the EU are unattractive and irreconcilable,

and because there is as yet no unifying alternative vision that could provide a workable, new equilibrium. Things are falling apart for lack of a cohesive, energizing center—one that could only emerge with determined German leadership.

Broadly speaking, sharply divergent (and diverging) conceptions of what Europe should be have emerged between those who call for pushing forward with deeper supranational integration as a realization of the EU's mission—led by Macron—and those rallying around Orbán's self-consciously illiberal alternative of a "Christian Europe" composed of sovereign nation-states.

Macron's vision is a highly centralizing, expressly post-national, redistributive one—captured in his recent statement that "nationalism is a betrayal of patriotism" and the notion of "*une Europe qui protège*" [a Europe that protects]. Since his election in May 2017, Macron has made numerous proposals to press forward with supranational integration—advocating, among dozens of initiatives, the creation of a Eurozone budget and an EU-wide finance ministry; a joint military force and European intelligence agency; and a common asylum policy. But Macron—whose domestic approval ratings now stand at a dismal 19 percent—is unable to carry these ideas forward without support from other EU states. Indeed, French voters have grown weary of beleaguered presidents of *La République* proposing grand schemes for Europe as a means of rejuvenating their domestic political fortunes. Macron's predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, launched a "Union for the Mediterranean" in late 2008 only to see the initiative fizzle into irrelevance.

In sharp contrast, the Orbán camp calls for the recapturing of control by national governments on behalf of "the people." Underlying this concept of Europe is what Orbán calls "illiberal democracy," a response to the "undemocratic liberalism" of unaccountable EU technocrats.

In his rejection of liberalism, Orbán and his adherents align themselves more with Vladimir Putin's Russia than with the political community to which Hungary acceded when it joined the EU in 2004. At the same time, "Orbánism" reflects the very real, and in many respects entirely legitimate, concerns of a seemingly growing proportion of EU citizens, particularly over migration, terrorism, economic insecurity, social immobility, and identity. The causes they champion cannot be ignored, swept under the rug, or somehow spun away by recalcitrant Euro-elites unwilling or unable to grapple with the deep-seated fears and concerns of the electorate. The EU is still composed of electoral democracies, and as such, large segments of the public simply cannot be dismissed as sore losers of globalization standing in the path of an ever-closer union.

The implacable chasm of visions between "Macronism" and "Orbánism" is deepened by the absence of German leadership. Despite making several lofty speeches about the need for Europe to "take its destiny in its own hands," Merkel has failed

to either join Macron—thus neutralizing the traditional Franco-German engine of European integration—or to put forward an alternative German vision for the future of Europe. Still, the lack of such a vision for Europe cannot be adequately explained in terms of Merkel’s personality. Germany’s reluctance to lead is reflective of two deeper realities.

The first—the shallower of the two and in principle more fixable—is economic. If a “Merkel Doctrine” vis-à-vis Europe can be said to exist, it is captured in the Protestant ethic of a fiscally responsible Europe in which austerity trumps continental solidarity. After the Greek bailouts, and with an Italian debt crisis looming, an economic fault line is preventing Germany and other wealthy northern Eurozone members from buying into Macron’s redistributive ideas. The visions of Merkel’s Germany and Macron’s France are incompatible, because the rich and more fiscally conservative northern member states are increasingly unwilling to subsidize the poorer, more profligate southern ones. This summer, Merkel politely agreed to discuss Macron’s proposal for a Eurozone budget, but the initiative was killed when eight other Eurozone members—including Austria, Finland, and the Netherlands—rejected the idea.

The second driver of Germany’s reluctance to offer a much-needed new basis for European equilibrium is deeper and will be more difficult to overcome, because it pertains to Germany’s identity as a nation and to its place in Europe and the world.

For over six decades, European integration provided Germany with the perfect cover for avoiding, or at least submerging, “the German question.” Under the cozy blanket of that integration, embedded within a broader liberal international order, Germany flourished. It climbed out of moral bankruptcy, rehabilitated itself among the family of nations, consolidated its democracy, grew rich and influential—all without having to think about itself too much as a nation-state. But as the EU frays, and issues of hard power, sovereignty, national identity, and nationalism (liberal and illiberal) return with a vengeance—not only in Europe but throughout the world—Germany will be compelled to reopen “the German question.” Like a dreamer in the early morning, comfortable under a warm duvet, Germany is reluctant to awaken and be dragged into the cold world. And so, path dependence persists, and Germany’s leaders still believe they can do something very British: muddle through the crisis without a lot of introspection.

A Call to Liberal Patriotism

Muddling through will not do, because the repertoire of existing visions for Europe is too narrow, and those currently on offer—Macronism and Orbánism—are incongruous. It will also not work because the tectonic plates of world politics have shifted irrevocably. The EU now finds itself confronting an unstable and

increasingly hostile international environment that will make its core values—democracy, the rule of law, free movement, and multilateralism—more difficult to maintain in the absence of a new equilibrium built around an energizing and cohesive organizing principle: that of liberal patriotism.

Within the EU, liberal patriotism would make it an urgent priority to address the legitimate fears and insecurities of European electorates, restoring a sense of home, and also trust in the ability of centrist political forces to deliver. Its overarching goal would be to roll back Orbánism, reclaiming voters from extremist anti-liberal movements while dramatically increasing the democratic legitimacy of Union institutions. This will require a new willingness to embrace change on the part of elites, as well as new political alliances that cut across the traditional center-left and center-right divide. Most immediately, it would involve a credible commitment to stemming uncontrolled migration, integrating those migrants already in Europe in accordance with core Western values, and injecting a renewed sense of solidarity among those northern and southern member states still committed to the essential integrity of the Union.

Externally, liberal patriotism requires strengthening Europe's ability to provide for its own security, rejuvenate liberal international alliances, and adjust them for the future. In its political, economic, and normative DNA, the EU can be the EU only to the extent that it is embedded in a transatlantic, OECD, and broader global liberal order. The erosion of that order—which is far advanced, but not yet terminally so—means that the EU has an existential stake in its renewal, and in some respects reinvention. Unlike the United States, Canada, or Australia, Europe has not been geographically blessed with glorious isolation and does not have the luxury of living from sea to shining sea. And unlike in the post-World War II era, the US will not save Europe from itself or from external interventions. Liberal patriotism means that Europeans must once again acquire the will and ability to struggle for their home.

The State of Israel and the Jewish world more generally have a profound interest in the taming of polarization and the rejuvenation of centrist, moderate politics in Europe. Like the EU, Israel is both a child of and a contributor to the liberal international order. Preserving and rejuvenating the values and institutions of economic and political liberalism, under Western leadership, are therefore a core Israeli national interest. For Jewish communities in Europe, the stakes are arguably higher still. Eras of mass anxiety among the gentiles are notoriously dangerous for the Jews.

In the opening speech of the 50th Munich Security Conference in January 2014, German Federal President Joachim Gauck aptly observed that Germany's guilt for its Nazi past imposes upon it a unique responsibility to defend and promote a liberal future.⁵ Germany, which has been a primary beneficiary of European

integration and the open global order, is especially vulnerable to the fragmentation of the EU. Its credibility and influence are fundamentally dependent upon the preservation and renewal of the liberal order. There are moments in history, Gauck added, when cautious, small steps are insufficient to answer deep societal needs and when “he who fails to act bears responsibility too.”⁶ For Germany, this is such a moment.

Notes

- ¹ Michael Mertes, “The Autumn of Our Discontent: Germany Facing Populism,” *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, XII:1 (2018).
- ² Ivan Krastev, “Eastern Europe’s Illiberal Revolution: The Long Road to Democratic Decline,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2018), 49.
- ³ On the EU rule of law crisis see: Amichai Magen, “Cracks in the Foundations: Understanding the Great Rule of Law Debate in the EU,” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, LIV:4 (2016), 1050–61.
- ⁴ Eurobarometer, Survey 90 of the European Parliament, “Parlemeter 2018: Taking up the Challenge,” p. 35, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2018/parlemeter-2018/report/en-parlemeter-2018.pdf>.
- ⁵ Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck at the 50th Munich Security Conference, “Germany’s role in the world: Reflections on responsibility, norms, and alliances,” (January 31, 2014), <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/JoachimGauck/Reden/2014/140131-Munich-Security-Conference.html>.
- ⁶ Ibid.