

End of the Merkel Era: Sic Transit Gloria Mundi

Shimon Stein | No. 1520 | October 3, 2021

The elections in Germany on September 26, 2021 brought to an end Angela Merkel's 16 consecutive years as Chancellor. Her approach to management of affairs of state and international issues was characterized by mastery of the facts, credibility, avoidance of statements or actions that could encourage extreme positions, and an effort to reach a broad consensus. At the same time, her policies lacked overall strategy and vision, and displayed unwillingness to take electoral risks. Thus Merkel will be remembered as one who managed crises, rather than as one who resolved them. On Israel, Chancellor Merkel will be remembered for her stress on responsibility for the security of Israel as an integral part of Germany's "reason of state" that is non-negotiable. Merkel's very positive image among the Israeli public (compared to Israel's problematic image among the German public) is partly explained by her avoidance of public criticism, apart from disapproval of settlement policy in the West Bank, which in her opinion does not help secure Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state.

The elections in Germany on September 26, 2021 brought to an end 16 consecutive years of Angela Merkel's term as Chancellor – and marked the first time a chancellor chose to end his/her term of office. Her decision to move to politics from the world of science and her subsequent meteoric rise did not result from a conscious decision but were due to circumstances – the end of the Cold War followed by the unification of Germany. When she was asked about this decision, she replied: "I don't believe that I would have become a politician in the context of West German politics. In that case I would have been a teacher or a translator. Many things happened so quickly and unexpectedly." As a Protestant, divorced (and remarried), childless woman from East Germany, the East did not see her as their representative, and the Western public did not take to her. But she managed to find a place in a Christian, conservative,

and male-dominated party and reach the summit. She owed her advance to Chancellor Kohl, who was her patron, and eventually she herself helped end his political career.

Her years in office were marked by a series of international, European, and internal German crises, including the financial crisis (2008), the euro crisis (2010), the Fukushima disaster, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine (2014), the waves of refugees from the Middle East and Africa to Europe (2015), Brexit, transatlantic tensions during the Trump administration, the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Her approach to management of affairs of state and international challenges, dubbed the “Merkel method,” can be defined as maximum mastery of the facts, enormous patience, credibility, avoidance of statements and actions that might help radicalize positions, and efforts to reach as broad a consensus as possible – even at the cost of a slow and exhausting decision making process. Her goal was to achieve practical compromises, which might not resolve a crisis but would contain it and render it tolerable. Other features of the method were the absence of an overall strategy and vision, measured moves, and apart from very few exceptions, avoidance of risks in the context of public support for her policy. Thus Merkel, whose policies were largely reactive rather than proactive, will be remembered as one who managed crises, not as one who resolved them. If so, what is her legacy?

The German context: Among Merkel’s most prominent achievements were the modernization and liberalization of her conservative party (for example, approval of same-sex marriages, the option for paternity leave, introduction of a minimum wage), which enhanced her accessibility to new audiences; the end of mandatory military service; and the hasty decision (inspired by the Fukushima disaster) to end the use of nuclear energy. Her tenure also saw economic prosperity, an impressive reduction in unemployment, and an increase in Germany’s importance in the

European and international fabric. A particularly controversial decision, widely criticized in Germany itself and in the European Union but which will also be remembered as a highly significant feature of her term of office, was the entry granted to hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Middle East and Africa (2015). However, Merkel avoided essential structural reforms needed to maintain Germany's achievements: the move to the digital era was stalled, essential educational reforms did not take place, infrastructures were not renovated, and there was insufficient action on the subject of climate change – inter alia, adapting the auto industry (so crucial for Germany's economy) to the technologies under development in the climate crisis era was delayed.

Likewise in the internal German arena, Merkel's period in office was characterized by the fragmentation of the political map, as shown by the drop in support for the national parties (the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats) and the rise of the small parties, including those of the populist right wing – Alternative for Germany (AFD), which "owes" its rise to the euro crisis and Merkel's refugee policy. The rise of the right and the growing strength of the radical right are a source of concern in the context of Germany's political stability. Antisemitism has increased, and has spread from the margins to the center of the political map, partly in response to the large numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers. As part of the effort to deal with this phenomenon, the German government appointed a commissioner for the fight against antisemitism, while allocating resources to the study of this subject. Merkel herself recognized the obligation to combat antisemitism, which she saw as a danger to the foundations of the democratic fabric in Germany.

The European context: While not defining a strategy for the process of integration in the EU, Merkel focused, before and after the UK's withdrawal, on preserving the framework of 27 member states – even at the price of willingness to compromise on basic values. This was shown by her conciliatory approach to Poland and Hungary. The euro crisis, against a background of the Greek debt, and the refugee crisis exposed the deep divisions within the EU, between north and south and between east and

west; Germany, as the leader of the EU, imposed its position, for example by making aid to Greece conditional on draconian reforms and in the lack of coordination with other member states about opening the gates of Germany to refugees. A significant turning point in Merkel's approach was her precedent-setting decision to allow joint raising of capital and repayment of debts, which paved the way for the passage of the EU economic recovery program designed to deal with the damage from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, disagreements between Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron over the response to internal and external challenges facing the EU were among the factors that weakened the EU's ability to position itself as an influential element in the Great Power competition.

The international arena: Managing relations with the United States, China, and Russia was a challenge for Merkel in the age of heightened Great Power competition. When she took office, Merkel inherited a system of murky relations between Germany (under Chancellor Schroeder) and the United States (under President George W. Bush), marked by Germany's refusal to join the campaign in Iraq. In fact Merkel, who recognized the importance of relations with the United States and the transatlantic partnership as essential anchors for the security of Germany and the European Union, did manage to improve relations with President Bush and later with President Obama, but the problems encountered during the Trump presidency placed a question mark over the principles and values on which relations were based. The credibility of the US as an ally was damaged, and Merkel believed that Germany (and the EU) should "take responsibility for their fate" (although this is far from being implemented). The efforts of President Biden to repair relations and restore trust, which was again damaged by American conduct over the withdrawal from Afghanistan, were intended to create an atmosphere that would enable Germany (and the EU) to discuss with the United States differences of opinion regarding trade and policy toward China, in an attempt to reach agreed solutions.

The centrality of the Chinese market for the German economy and its continued prosperity was the consideration that guided Merkel's policy vis-à-vis China. Contrary to the approach of the United States, which under the Biden administration continues to see China as a threat, Merkel sought a dialogue with the Chinese leadership, and alongside the competition, worked to increase cooperation with China. However, she failed to bring about an investment agreement between the EU and China, against the background of Chinese policy toward Hong Kong and its Uyghur minority and the issue of the South China Sea, and the consequent opposition to the agreement from the European Parliament.

During the Merkel era, German-Russian relations were marked by the management of a series of crises, from the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, to the murders of opponents of the regime on German soil and attacks on Putin's opponents, down to ongoing Russian efforts to undermine government institutions, such as the cyberattack on the Bundestag and the democratic order in general. Merkel's response to Russian aggression was the imposition of sanctions by Germany and the EU, while continuing the dialogue with Russia, which amounts to a German necessity in view of the historical and the geographic link between the two countries. Merkel's willingness to continue promoting the transportation of gas from Russia to Germany (Nord Stream 2) aroused criticized at home and within the EU and the US, for what was seen as damaging European interests by increasing dependence on Russian gas.

Germany and Israel: Merkel's very positive image among the Israeli public (unlike Israel's problematic image among the German public) can be explained not only by her contribution to strengthened relations, but also by her avoidance of public criticism of Israeli policy (despite her criticisms, mainly over settlements in the West Bank, which in her opinion do not help secure Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state) and her care to express her reservations only behind closed doors. At the same time, for example during Operation Guardian of the Walls, Merkel recognized Israel's need to defend itself, while also expressing the hope,

perhaps including implied criticism, that such moves would be proportionate. For Merkel, who learned about Israel and the history of the Jewish people at a late stage in her life, Germany's commitment to Israel was not an obligation but a considered decision.

Points worthy of note during her term: her decision to send a military/ naval force to the Lebanese coast during the Second Lebanese War (2006) at the request of then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert – a decision that broke the taboo whereby Germany, for fear of escalation, would not send a military force to the Israeli border; and the definition of German responsibility for the security of Israel as an integral part of Germany's "reason of state," while emphasizing that Israeli security was non-negotiable. This commitment, which was not expressed by any of her predecessors, was declared in 2007 at the UN General Assembly and again, a year later, in the Israeli Knesset, in the context of Iran's efforts to achieve nuclear capability and its threats to destroy Israel. Also noteworthy are the continuation of German assistance to reinforce Israel's deterrent capabilities, and the establishment of consultations between the governments – a symbolic move that reflected the unique nature of the relationship.

Time will tell whether Merkel should be remembered as a historic chancellor. But it is already possible to state that she will be remembered as one who managed numerous crises, and even if she was unable to resolve them, she used compromise to contain them. Her long term in office can be explained by the fact that she reflected the zeitgeist. Her voters identified with her; she projected credibility and the absence of pretension or arrogance. "You know me" was one of her election slogans. Apart from the refugee issue, Merkel avoided challenging the German public, and they for their part were comfortable with a status quo characterized by economic success. All this enabled Germany to deal with the economic and social problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, Merkel failed to prepare Germany for the multifaceted transformation it must undergo over the coming years and decades in order to maintain this prosperity.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen