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Why Merkel Must Go



Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany speaking in Brussels last week.
Credit: Geert Vanden Wijngaert/Associated Press

HAMBURG, Germany — For many years, those of us who are critical admirers of the European Union have warned that [it was on a bad path](#).

Europe's immigration and refugee policies could be astonishingly generous, but its [integration and assimilation efforts](#) were generally [desultory or reactive](#). European leaders have long talked a good game about the importance of "sustainable development," but what they mainly sustained were decades of low growth and [high unemployment](#). Grandiose declarations of Europe's independence on the world stage corresponded with [growing strategic vulnerability](#) to Russia and the Middle East and deepening military dependence on Washington. The European Commission, conceived as an agent of economic liberalization, became a byword for [regulatory overreach](#) and [technocratic micromanagement](#).

And there was persistent disdain for democracy. In 2005 voters in France and the Netherlands decisively rejected a proposed Constitution for Europe. Undeterred, European leaders repackaged the Constitution in the form of the Lisbon Treaty. In 2008, Irish voters rejected the treaty. Still undeterred, European leaders [finagled a revote](#). The Irish agreed the following year.

All of this stirred popular resentments to which mandarins in Brussels and the political class in Berlin, Paris, London and other capitals were either blind or dismissive. Someday, a historian may take a close look at their complacency. With a nod to a previous era of blindness, the book could be titled "The Sleepwalkers." Then came the debt crunch. And the refugee crisis. And the terrorist massacre at the Bataclan theater. And Brexit.

Now Europe's crisis has finally reached Germany, even as the objective state of affairs remains remarkably placid. Growth is sluggish, but unemployment is at a record low. Refugees are **no longer arriving in droves**, and the ones who are here are **finding jobs**. In May, Interior Minister Horst Seehofer — the same Seehofer who lately threatened to bring down the government — presented the latest crime statistics. Among **the highlights**: “Steepest decline in crime in 25 years”; “20 percent fewer burglaries in Germany”; “dramatic decrease in youth-related violence.”

But Germany has been infected with the temper of the times. The proximate cause is a bitter dispute over asylum laws between Seehofer, who leads Bavaria's conservative Christian Social Union, and Chancellor Angela Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union, which is the C.S.U.'s more centrist sister party outside Bavaria.

That dispute was at least temporarily resolved this week when Merkel agreed to establish “transit centers” along Germany's borders for so-called secondary migrants, who have already received asylum elsewhere in the E.U. but are seeking to enter Germany. That will most likely require setting up border controls and checkpoints, meaning an end to the borderless Continent that is the most visible expression of European unity.

The deeper cause of the crisis, however, is that the C.S.U., which has dominated Bavarian politics for decades, is threatened by the growing popularity of Alternative for Germany, or AfD, the bigoted nativist party that is now the country's third largest. That's in part because the C.D.U. has dragged its Bavarian sister too far to the left, creating an opportunity for the AfD among traditional conservative voters.

But mostly it's because Merkel created the conditions that gave the enemies of the European ideal their opening. She refused to cap the number of asylum seekers Germany would take and then pleaded with other European countries to take them. That almost certainly gave Brexiteers the political imagery they needed to carry the vote a year later. The AfD was a minor Euroskeptic party before the refugee crisis gave it a rallying cry. The xenophobes of Austria's Freedom Party, Italy's Northern League and Sweden's Democrats have all profited politically from Merkel's decision.

Generosity is a virtue, but unlimited generosity is a fast route to bankruptcy. Humanitarianism is commendable, but not when you're demanding that others share the burdens and expense. A very liberal immigration policy is wise, but helter-skelter migration isn't. Knowing how to set broad but clear limits is one of the essentials of conservative governance. Merkel's failure is that she ceased to be conservative.

Admirers still speak of Merkel as if she is Europe's last lion, the only leader with the vision and capacity to save the E.U. There is much that is admirable about the chancellor, but as things now stand she is likelier to be remembered as the E.U.'s unwitting destroyer.

The longer she's in office, the more the forces of reaction will gain strength. And isn't 13 years in office more than enough?

There is still time for the E.U. to be saved. Europe needs a real security policy, backed by credible military power and less dependence on Russian energy. It needs to regulate migration strictly outside its borders so that it can remain open within them. It needs robust economic growth and much lower rates of unemployment, not paeans to the virtues of sustainability and work-life balance. And it needs institutions in Brussels that aren't mere regulatory busybodies trying to punish member states for being economically competitive.

What's the alternative? A passage from Norman Davies's magisterial history of Europe suggests the darker possibilities:

"Inter-war politics were dominated by the recurrent spectacle of democracies falling prey to dictatorship." He continued: "It cannot be attributed to any simple cause, save the inability of Western Powers to defend the regimes which they had inspired. The dictators came in all shapes and sizes — communists, fascists, radicals and reactionaries, left-wing authoritarians (like Pilsudski), right-wing militarists (like Franco), monarchs, anti-monarchists, even a cleric like Father Tiso in Slovakia. The only thing they shared was the conviction that Western democracy was not for them."

The stakes are too high for a muddler like Merkel to stick around.