

## COMMENTARY

# After Merkel: Where will Germany stand in Europe?



GERMANY ([HTTPS://EPC.EU/EN/SEARCH?TAG=233](https://epc.eu/en/search?tag=233)) / COMMENTARY

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***Whoever follows Angela Merkel in the German Chancellery will have big shoes to fill. Her successor must build on her strengths - her statesmanship and crisis management skills - while making up for her most significant weakness - the lack of a strategic and ambitious vision for Europe.***

## Angela Merkel, crisis manager-in-chief

Merkel came to power in 2005, making her one of the longest-serving chancellors in the history of the Federal Republic. Her time at the helm of Germany was shaped by multiple crises, starting with the global financial crisis (2007-08); the subsequent European sovereign debt crisis (2012-13); the European migration crisis (2015); the Brexit process (2016-20), which will continue to be on the EU's agenda; and finally, the COVID-19 crisis in 2020.

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Her pragmatic and calm leadership was an important asset for the EU in turbulent

times. She made a significant contribution in solving these crises thanks to her negotiation skills, international standing and long experience as a head of government. One thing is clear: Merkel's departure as chancellor will create a leadership vacuum that will be difficult to fill.

On the other hand, her leadership and policy responses over the past years have not always been as consensual as they might seem initially. Although she remains Germany's most popular politician, with approval ratings of nearly 70% (<https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-2697.pdf>), her government's policy responses have certainly contributed to growing social divides, especially on issues like the eurozone and migration crises.

Beyond Germany, her policy responses to the various crises have contributed to worsening divides between the EU27, to the point that they now hinder the Union's capacity to act. In Greece, she remains a loathed figure for the EU's austerity-driven reaction, led by her, to the euro crisis. This approach was also duly criticised in other European countries. She is portrayed in Poland and Hungary as the force to blame for the continent's slow 'decline', having become the 'go-to destination' for refugees and departed from its 'Christian roots'.

Merkel's government has certainly used its European leadership position efficiently to push through its core national interests – Germany would not have overcome the various crises so successfully otherwise. But her government also omitted to safeguard European cohesion and all member states' adherence to the rule of law.

## What should the next German government address?

The next chancellor not only has big shoes to fill but should also address the shortcomings in Germany's EU policy. Several EU policy issues require urgent strategic thinking and subsequent action, such as the COVID-19 recovery, the green and digital transitions, the rule of law, and migration and asylum policy. With many EU legislative packages on their way, the new government must be up to speed to help steer these initiatives, which are crucial for the EU's future. More concretely, the next government should take the following five steps.

### 1. Embed Germany's EU policy in a strategic agenda

The next government should develop what was missing throughout Merkel's chancellorship: a strategic vision for Europe. While Merkel's unabated leadership is praised by many in Europe, she is increasingly criticised for her lack of vision for the EU. ~~Merkel has perfected the art of 'waiting with your hand on the mouse' and taking last-minute decisions.~~ ~~Her motto is 'wait and see'.~~ ~~By the time public opinion becomes apparent,~~

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But this is not enough. While crisis management is an important skill, Germany's actions throughout Europe's crisis decade was not embedded in a broader strategy. German EU policy is mostly defined as 'muddling through' the crises. In some cases, such as the euro crisis or authoritarian regression in Hungary and Poland, Merkel's tactic of patience even deteriorated the situation. Her lack of strategic vision for the EU became obvious when Emmanuel Macron became French president. His ambitious EU reform agenda (<https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe>) was met with silence from Berlin (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Rebooting-Franco-German-cooperation~2e0540>). It was only with the COVID-19 recovery plan that the Franco-German engine seemed back on track.

Given the challenges ahead, the new government should not limit itself to pragmatic crisis management. It should embed its EU policy in a strategic agenda that goes beyond day-to-day politics, and increase its ambition by endorsing initiatives that foster European integration.

## 2. Europeanise German politics

At the national level, the next chancellor should 'Europeanise' domestic politics. European politics must become the permanent backdrop for any future domestic initiative. The new government should ensure that EU policy is a firm fixture of German political debates and, therefore, national policy.

Under Merkel, the EU barely featured in Germany's public debates (<https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2021-06/angela-merkel-wochenberichte-bundeskanzlerin-themen-deutschland-umfragen>). It is considered a foreign policy issue rather than a cross-sectoral topic. But given the high level of interdependence between EU countries, virtually all large-scale domestic decisions have a European dimension; no issue can be comprehensively tackled from a purely domestic view. German legislative initiatives should interlink more with the EU's policies, especially in climate change, digitalisation and taxation. Establishing coherence between the European political priorities and domestic policy goals must be one of the next German government's priorities.

The Chancellery will continue to play an important role in this context. In the last 16 years, Merkel and her closest allies and advisors usually took important decisions related to EU affairs. But instead of declaring EU affairs as *Chefsache*, the next head of government should assign the Chancellery a major coordinating role. In the end, adopting European affairs as the backdrop for all policy areas demands a high level of internal coordination between ministries – a demand the Chancellery could, and should,

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## 3. Build on internal EU experience accept & close

Neither of the candidates of the two leading parties – the Christian Democratic Union's (CDU) [Armin Laschet](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/More-of-the-same-but-different-Why-Laschet-should-reform-the-CDUs-E~3ab164) (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/More-of-the-same-but-different-Why-Laschet-should-reform-the-CDUs-E~3ab164>) and the Green's Annalena Baerbock – have any major experiences at the (European) Council level. And only the Social Democratic candidate, Olaf Scholz, has extensive ministerial experience. However, his party is polling behind the CDU and Greens. Whereas both the Conservative and Green candidates are passionate Europeans, they are not well-versed with the EU machinery and lack close personal contacts with other heads of state and government.

Establishing trusted relationships and gaining experiences in the EU takes time. The new government should rely on its civil servants and diplomats in key positions to resume the legislative work of the Council quickly. Their knowledge about the functioning of Brussels and its networks will be fundamental for the new government in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery, and in EU reform.

But still, this administrative experience will not make up for the Merkel-shaped gap in the European Council. The new chancellor will have to get a grip on European issues quickly to impact EU decision-making positively.

#### **4. Develop alliances with neighbours**

Paris should always be Berlin's first call when establishing contacts with other EU member states – it has been and remains Germany's trusted partner in the EU. Merkel's successor must not lose any time to renew the Franco-German bond that has been so crucial for European integration.

But the new government should not neglect to nurture close relationships with other EU governments, too. [Germany already benefits](https://ecfr.eu/special/eucoalitionexplorer/) (<https://ecfr.eu/special/eucoalitionexplorer/>) from large-scale networks of alliances within Europe and should continue to invest time and resources to maintain them. The next chancellor should signal swiftly to other EU leaders that they intend to continue close cooperation.

For instance, the new government could position Germany as a driving force in the Conference on the Future of Europe and its follow-up, joining President Macron's efforts to steer the process towards an ambitious and concrete outcome. It could also showcase its willingness to discuss a reform of Stability and Growth Pact rules, which France and other European countries are keen on scrapping post-COVID-19. This does not necessarily mean that Germany needs ~~x~~ to change its positions, but rather that it should be open to discussing sensitive agenda points.

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#### **5. Manage expectations**

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Expectations towards Germany differ depending on the member state. While the Netherlands and other Nordic countries defend positions similar to Germany on economic matters, Southern European countries, such as Greece, Italy or Spain, contest the 'frugal' position that has harmed their economies more vocally. On migration issues, Germany and Sweden oppose the Central and Eastern European states. As in the past, the next German chancellor and its government will have to manage the neighbours' diverse expectations. They should make compromises at the EU level, while never losing sight of the political compass that is its clear, strategic vision for Europe.

The next German chancellor and government will have a crucial role to play in the EU. While filling Merkel's shoes will be practically impossible, her successor will have to step up quickly to the impending challenges of a Union in permacrisis (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Europe-in-the-age-of-permacrisis~3c8a0c>). This election and changing of the guards in Berlin could also bring a welcomed wind of change to Germany's EU policy.

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*The European Policy Centre will contribute to the analysis of Germany's EU policy (<https://www.epc.eu/en/Projects/After-Merkel-A-power-vacuum-in-Europe-or-a-fresh-start~40ef0c>) at this pivotal moment in German politics, with a series of Commentaries running from July to December 2021. It will feature views from various European capitals on post-Merkel expectations.*

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