

Unified Germany’s Role in the European Union: Hegemon, Co-leader, or Mediator?

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ABSTRACT

Germany underwent major historical change since the end of World War II, joining the European Union and undergoing reunification. The major historical and political shifts defined Germany’s international leadership and cooperation. Modern political theorizations argue various perspectives on Germany’s developing leadership in the European Union since reunification. Arguments define Germany as a hegemon dominating the European leadership, as a co-leader cooperating with other major European countries, or as a mediator finding common agreements between the members of the European Union. The Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, and the annexation of Crimea exemplify three modern instances of crisis in Europe that define Germany’s contemporary leadership. Through the investigation of these modern challenges, this essay concludes that Germany’s leadership role combines the three common political theorizations, each reflecting critical elements.

Keywords: *German leadership, Hegemon, Germany, EU leadership, Eurozone crisis*

Introduction

The Wall separating East and West opened in Berlin on November 9th, 1989, allowing for the movement of people, and beginning the manifestation of a united Germany. The dream that had been deemed a fantasy for years during occupation and the Cold War finally came to fruition in 1990 as Germany reunited 45 years after the end of the Second World War. The international community became increasingly concerned with the reunification of Germany as history still starkly remembered the terrors of World War II and the Nazi regime. The former president of the German Central Bank, Hans Tietmeyer, reflected on Helmut Kohl’s attempt to ease the international concern through European integration. Tietmeyer stated, “When asked about the relationship between German reunification and the further advancement of European integration, Chancellor Kohl often invoked the metaphor ‘two sides of the same coin’ to illustrate the connection” (Tietmeyer 1990, 2). German reunification initially experienced great backlash from other European countries, as they saw the increased economic potential of a larger Germany leading to more influence in the European Council and later the European Union. In 1990, Tietmeyer questioned the role of Germany in a united Europe, expressing the international concern for reunification. The question of Germany’s role in Europe began before realistic plans for reunification ever emerged but became bona fide with increased European integration following the establishment of the unified German state.

The concern about German influences in Europe after the reunification illustrated only one of the many instances of questioning and examining the role of Germany. The further integration of the European Union since 1990, including the growth eastward and many crises the modern world faced, reignited the question of the German leadership role in Europe. In hopes of defining the unique role of Germany, academic arguments and resulting descriptive expressions established the discussion of: What is the leadership role of Germany in the European Union? Academics, politicians, and citizens developed this debate and introduced new perspectives. Co-leadership and

hegemony commonly describe the German role, including various adjectives altering the concepts slightly, demonstrated by the Economist’s argument of a “Reluctant Hegemon” (The Economist 2013). Naturally, more radical perspectives codeveloped, including the claim of Germany constructing a “Fourth Reich”. The German Leadership role, however, still remains undefined and heavily debated. This analysis of modern events in the European Union will seek to determine the leadership role of Germany, its development, and if the prevalent theory of hegemony holds true. The recent historical events of the Euro/Economic crisis, refugee crisis, and the annexation of Crimea, serve as case studies to determine the role of Germany in the European Union as they exemplify its economic influence, policy objectives, and international relations focus. Through an investigation of these case studies, the role of German leadership in the European Union exhibits elements of hegemonic behavior, complicated by historical pressures and differences in stakeholder perception.

Introduction to Theory and Literature Review

The literature surrounding the debate on the German role defines concepts of both hegemony and alternative perspectives. Defined as the power of a state to dominate a system through control of power resources, including both financial and human capital as well as military might, hegemony results in the perceived and accepted dominant stature of the state in the respective region or organization (Wood 2019, 98-99). In the context of Germany and Europe, the definition of hegemony includes a form of legitimacy stemming from both systemic and public acceptance (Szabo 2019, 110-111). The article *German Hegemony?* by Luke B. Wood investigates the regional hegemonic standing of Germany. In a similar article, titled *Germany: Hegemon or Free Rider?*, Stephen F. Szabo analyzes the German role in modern political turmoil, specifically in aspects of international relations and the rise of Euroscepticism (Szabo 2019, 109-115). Wood and Szabo both determined similar conclusions – that Germany is not a hegemon but inherently became a leader in the European Union. Wood argues that the extent of German power in Europe does not meet the necessary criteria to be considered a hegemon, and, moreover, the newfound power since the end of the Cold War established Germany as a leader in the European Union (Wood 2019, 106). Wood’s argument sharply resembles that of co-leadership, a more moderate argument detailing Germany as just a leader alongside the other nations of the European Union, specifically France (Wood 2019, 95). Szabo’s conclusion highlights a more concerning reality for Germany. They conclude that Germany did not quite qualify as a hegemonic power, but rather that the perspective of the other member countries may classify Germany as a hegemon in the near future (Wood 2019, 115). The warning Szabo presents cautioned of an abstract component of hegemony – public perspective, and the possible conclusion of German hegemony outside the realm of traditional power. The analysis of both articles develops a detailed definition of hegemony and emphasizes the stakeholders in the definition of a hegemon. An investigation of traditional power, popular perception, and alternative theories creates a premise for a review of the leadership role of Germany and an assessment of hegemony since reunification.

The German hegemon theory exhibits a singular viewpoint of the German role. In combination with the presented conclusion of co-leadership by Wood, the two authors comprise the more plausible end of the popular theories. The article “*The Fourth Reich is Here*” by Julian Pänke explores the more extreme theory, adopted by many populist parties, of the imperialist or dangerous Germany. The dangerous Germany perspective discussed by Pänke highlights an alternative viewpoint that develops the scope of this investigation to encompass further potential realities. Pänke discusses the historical past of Germany and the leadership conundrum faced

during times of European crisis (Pänke 2020, 55-56). Pänke’s argument historically analyzes developments in German international leadership beginning with the Nazi regime, followed by a discussion of changes in post-World War II era Germany. Germany’s extreme nationalist past prevented the establishment of European power, due to the social and political connotations of a powerful Germany. Pänke recommends Germany accept the leadership associated with its economic and political standing in the European Union and for the other member countries to embrace and enable the international guidance of Germany through co-leadership (Pänke 2020, 56). The argument of co-leadership presented by Pänke reflects similarities to Wood’s argument, though an analysis of the populist rhetoric explained by Pänke offers a more diverse perspective. The development of Pänke’s analysis offers similar criticism and evidence to that of Szabo, specifically focusing on the failure of Germany to consider the viewpoints of other European member states and acting in the name of the collective good of Europe (Pänke 2020, 57-63).

Following the discussion of the presumed German role in the European Union and Germany’s failures to acknowledge other perspectives, Pänke provides the case of three countries’ (Greece, Poland, and the United Kingdom) beliefs of German overreach and growing discontent toward Germany (Pänke 2020, 64-68). Pänke offers the following statistics demonstrating the view of citizens in the United Kingdom, Poland, and Greece concerning German involvement in the European Union: 46 percent of surveyed UK individuals and 54 percent of Polish individuals believe that Germany (specifically Berlin) had too much influence in European Union decision-making (Pänke 2020, 66 & 68). In Greece, the public opinion of both European Union and German officials fell dramatically (at least 35 percentage points each) between 2010 and 2016 (Pänke 2020, 64-65). The rise of both Euroscepticism and animosity toward German leadership demonstrates the difficulties facing Germany but also the vehement opposition to German leadership itself. Pänke argues that the origin of this opposition stems from the perception of what Germany’s role should be, and the resulting discrepancy contributes to the rise of nationalist-populist views (Pänke 2020, 69). The argument made by Pänke resembles components of both Wood and Szabo but most importantly expands on the importance of structural and popular opposition to hegemony. The populist rhetoric described in Pänke’s article contributes to the national perspectives on the possible German leadership role and actuality of German governance in the European Union.

Case Studies

Eurozone Crisis

Understanding the modern economic impact and influence Germany had in the Euro/economic crisis requires an examination of economic development since German reunification in 1990. When Germany reunified, the labor force expanded by 16 million individuals and total land increased by 43 percent (Silvia 2019, 74-94). The years directly following reunification resembled a rebuilding for Germany, and prices and unemployment, specifically in former East Germany, spiked (Silvia 2019, 76). In the article *A Silver Age?* by Stephen J. Silvia, a pendulum swing describes the change from the reality of the 1990s to the 2000s, seeing an improvement both in unemployment and in economic growth up until the 2008 and the global financial crisis. Silvia additionally analyzes the current account balance, measuring the net outcome of global trade, seeing a slow development during the integration and rebuilding of the united German state. Productivity, investment, compensation, and output only slightly improved as the German economy began to re-establish itself in the global market (Silvia 2019, 78-83). Following the period of rebuilding and rebirth of the globally competitive German market,

the financial crisis and subsequent Euro/Economic crisis thrust Germany into a European emergency in need of leadership.

Silvia describes the reaction to the 2008 financial crisis as a “remarkable economic performance,” highlighting German policy including emergency measures and a notable subsidized automobile program to spur demand. While Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell, the unemployment rate shrunk, and during the extraordinary period, Germany fared well in comparison to many other countries. The Euro-crisis or Eurozone crisis quickly followed, commencing in late 2010, after a growing imbalance in the movement and usage of capital in the Eurozone. The crisis impacted southern Europe (Greece, Portugal, and Spain) and Ireland the most. The economies of these countries had become unbalanced by excess German capital and unsuitable interest rates in addition to a unique set of economic circumstances (Silvia 2019, 85). In *Germany: Hegemon or Free Rider?* Szabo states, “It has acted as a hegemon primarily in economic policy areas, and most importantly in the Eurozone crisis,” arguing that the economic strength and stability of Germany contributed to its holding of power resources (Szabo 2019, 111). Germany blocked and stalled many reform projects in the Eurozone and ultimately cooperated minimally to resolve the crisis. In *German Hegemony?* Wood describes “the cooperative mechanisms successive German governments attempted to build were, in important ways, doomed projects including the failure of the European Union to create institutions by which future sovereign debt crises might be averted,” when describing the German response to the Eurozone crisis (Wood 2019, 100). The animosity and tension between the European Union members, coming from the Eurozone crisis, led to the popularity of far-right parties, specifically the Alternative for Germany Party (AfD) (Silvia 2019, 85). Pänke states, “The more assertive Germany acted—as, for example, during the Eurozone crisis—the more resistance Berlin faced and the more German leadership was perceived as illegitimate,” in “*The Fourth Reich is Here*” (Pänke 2020, 55). The quote highlights the unique situation Germany faced as the European Union looked for leadership from the developed economies while still needing to preserve the satisfaction of its own citizens. The Eurozone crisis created immense rifts in the European Union in terms of leadership and affected countries, and Greece specifically became incredibly dissatisfied with the leadership or lack thereof, from Germany.

Refugee Crisis

The migration crisis in 2015 marked another major crisis in German history. Immigration itself occurred a great deal after the reunification of Germany as many East Germans fled westward. The migration crisis, however, differed greatly as immigrants sought asylum in the German state due to the conflicts mainly in Syria, Albania, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Silvia 2019, 87). According to Silvia, Germany initially developed a euphoric “welcome culture” but backlash from the German population and groups like the AfD quickly occurred (Silvia 2019, 87). In addition to the backlash, the German state struggled to accommodate all the migrants; however, Silvia stated, “Merkel nonetheless refused to set a hard cap on the number of asylum seekers whom Germany would accept” (Silvia 2019, 87). The German response to the migration crisis hoped to create a European environment of acceptance toward refugees and encourage positive norms regarding immigration (Wood 2019, 100). Pänke analyzed the refugee policy similarly but cited a Greek editorial that criticized Germany for attempting to compensate for mistakes of the past. “The German response during the refugee crisis might indeed be an expression of that ‘pure idealism,’” acknowledged Pänke (Pänke 2020, 64). Historical factors contributed greatly to the German

response during the refugee crisis, both the recent history of reunification but also the atrocities which occurred during the second World War.

Germany attempted to retain the policy of no asylum limits but both internal pressures and lack of external European support for common immigration policies caused a shift of objective” (Silvia 2019, 87). Silvia stated, “Merkel subsequently negotiated an agreement on behalf of the European Union with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to keep the vast majority of refugees who entered Turkey in his country in exchange for up to 3 billion Euro in financial support each year.” The common European policy shattered the hopes of the German government, due to internal resistance towards increased refugees and a lack of support from some European Union members, specifically Hungary and Poland (Szabo 2019, 114-155 and Silvia, 2019, 87). Polish resistance to refugees and asylum policies formed from more populist rhetoric but also emerged at the same time as Poland demanded further German reparations for the impact of World War II (Pänke 2020, 65). Szabo argued that the response to the refugee crisis exemplifies an instance of Germany acting and bargaining in the name of Europe but acting on its own (Szabo 2019, 113). Additionally, Szabo claimed that the rift between Poland and Germany exemplified the questionable reliance and relationship of the two in the European Community (Szabo 2019, 115). The actions of Germany hoped to inspire the European community to act collectively in the good of humanity, but instead, the attempt became synonymous with the power dynamic in the European Union. The policy and cooperation, or lack thereof, contributed to the leadership effect discussed both by Pänke and Szabo and the varied expectations of German leadership by different European stakeholders.

Crimean Annexation¹

The annexation of Crimea from Ukraine by Russia in 2014 resembled another challenge for the European Union, and specifically Germany. The German foreign policy, specifically toward Russia and the former Soviet Union, historically resembled non-aggression but firmer agreements and postmodern arrangements (Koeth 2016, 102). The article *Leadership Revised* by Wolfgang Koeth examined the changes in German foreign policy and its leadership in the annexation of Crimea. The German-Russian relationship stemmed from reunification, and the relationship remained a combination of gratitude and resentment. The Russian perspective wildly differed as the loss of Germany and the ultimate collapse of the Soviet bloc resembled a defeat (Koeth 2016, 107). The election of Angela Merkel in 2005 created a new relationship, compared to the prior colloquial relationship between Putin and Schroeder (Koeth 2016, 108). The agreements and connections between Russia and the European Union complicated the reaction to Russian advancement, and their economic connections established a further barrier to action (Koeth 2016, 107-112). Prior to the annexation of Crimea, Russia experimented with other forms of aggression to discover the line of European reaction (Koeth 2016, 111-112). In the period before the annexation, a leadership vacuum opposing Russian aggression formed. The United States, under Barack Obama, believed in European conflict independence, and the European Union itself had no singular representation. The other major members of the European Union (the United Kingdom and France) prioritized domestic issues as opposed to the growing threat of Russia

¹ Given the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24th, 2022, the following analysis no longer reflects the leadership of Germany as an effective prevention and deterrent of further escalation. Rather, this analysis aims to highlight the reaction of Germany in relation to the European Union during the annexation of Crimea.

(Koeth 2016, 113). Koeth stated, “The annexation of Crimea had challenged German foreign policy in several regards. Germany is a strong supporter of a common EU foreign policy, since the EU, like Germany, has consistently favored norms and rules over intervention in international relations” (Koeth 2016, 113). The final straw for Merkel and Germany arrived with the shooting down of a passenger plane, and Koeth described how, “Merkel fully assumed the role the rest of Europe was expecting from her” (Koeth 2016, 113). Germany stepped into a leadership role due to an existing vacuum coupled with popular domestic support, but most importantly due to European Union expectations.

With Germany at the helm, the European Union imposed a common sanction policy toward Russia. Germany and France mediated a ceasefire agreement later in the conflict, hoping for a peaceful solution (Koeth 2016, 110). German leadership, therefore, demonstrated its leading competence to the rest of the European Union with the navigation of the annexation of Crimea. Koeth argued, “In all three crises, Germany found itself in the driver’s seat, first reluctantly, but with increased comfort. The Euro crisis exposed the objective need for strong leadership, and this leadership went to Berlin as a default solution” (Koeth 2016, 115). Szabo interpreted the German leadership in the annexation of Crimea not as a hegemon but rather as a supreme facilitator, applying sanctions and economic approaches to contain the crisis but not resolve it (Szabo 2019, 111). In addition, Szabo viewed the German leadership as a devolvement in the effectiveness of German leadership (Szabo 2019, 109). In comparison, Pänke viewed Berlin’s leadership as somewhat effective in unifying and executing successful sanctions (Pänke 2020, 59). The annexation of Crimea uniquely identified Germany’s involvement in European Union crisis leadership. The historical context surrounding its relationship with Russia and foreign policy allowed Germany to step into a leadership vacuum and be embraced by the European community.

Analysis

The case studies and literature review provided the theoretical concept and real-world evidence for the leadership of Germany in the European Union and the development of its role since Germany’s unification. Since reunification, Germany undoubtedly became a larger member of the European Union on both an economic scale and in leadership potential. The measured effectiveness of German leadership, based on the three cases, certainly paints a more negative picture. The inefficiencies and hegemonic behavior demonstrated in the Eurozone crisis created animosities that defined the following turbulent years. The hegemonic actions of Germany in the Eurozone crisis exhibited its economic power. In regional comparison, the scale cannot actually qualify Germany as a hegemon by definition; however, its behavior still abused its economic stability in a praxis relatively equivalent to hegemonic. The animosity between European member states generated unattainable expectations and furthered the rise of populist rhetoric, coupled with Euroscepticism. The rise of Euroscepticism, caused by the Eurozone crisis, in nations outside Germany such as Poland and Greece hindered European cooperation and tarnished their view of German leadership, as mentioned by Pänke. The growth of the AfD in Germany additionally built internal barriers to successful German leadership and initiatives in the European Union (Pänke 2020, 54).

The annexation of Crimea highlighted the best-received instance of German leadership in European conflicts. The more positive outcome hinged on two major factors – the European Union’s expectations and historical context. The historical context not only impacted the communication with Russia but allowed Germany to use its economic potential to achieve a

common European goal. The economic capability and strength of the German state, coupled with its previous foreign policies of reluctance toward harsh sanctioning, authorized it to create strong opposition to the Russian aggression toward Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. The expectations of the European Union clearly set a precedent for Germany to take charge of the collective response. The expectation for German leadership developed from both a power vacuum and a specialization to best address the issue. The communication and expectation of the European Union fostered an environment for well-received and relatively successful German leadership, without appearing hegemonic. Public perception, both internally and externally, depicts a clear image of cooperation, and the transfer of control to the best-suited director exhibits a lack of manipulative and hegemonic intent.

The refugee crisis exhibited the German desire to lead by example but also rectify historical mistakes. The divisiveness of the issue, in Germany but more importantly in the other previously mistreated European countries, halted the progress and success of the initiative. The opposition, developed by previous hegemonic behavior, froze the adoption of the initiative to welcome immigrants to a united Europe. Euroscepticism within Germany, primarily by far-right parties such as the AfD, created resistance to the national success of the asylum initiative. In addition, the challenge of perceived German action stemming from previous German leadership became doomed by the possibly well-intentioned ‘lead by example’ approach. The refugee crisis lacked the public support of the whole European Union but also lacked the expectation and specialization needed for successful German leadership. The historical shadow cast on German intentions contributed to the failure of the expected spreading of ‘welcome culture’. The apparent compensation for historical wrongdoing impacted the accomplishment of the German project – a possible indication of future leadership attempts. The refugee crisis highlights the importance of the perception of hegemonic behavior, specifically at the end refugee agreement with Turkey and the independent action of Germany relying on European adoption. Once again, the actions did not directly qualify as hegemonic; however, the public perception perceived Germany as forcing immigration policy on the entirety of the European Union. The refugee crisis highlights the importance of public perception of intention and the resistance of previously marginalized groups of German leadership.

Conclusion

After the reunification of Germany, Chancellor Helmut Kohl held a speech in 1996 about the importance of European integration in the 21st century. In Kohl’s introduction, he stated, “There is no reasonable alternative to an ever-closer bond between the peoples of Europe. We need to build the House of Europe. We all need a united Europe” (Kohl 1996, 1). Kohl’s call for a united front originated from a growing German economy and manifesting external threats to security, democracy, and European success. Since the unification of Germany and Kohl’s speech, the European Union developed into a more integrated institution, but more recently skepticism of the European Union grew exorbitantly. The German want for more integration, exemplified by Kohl’s speech after reunification, defined the original leadership of Germany: wanting to spread risk and grow the Union (Wood 2004, 77). The leadership of Germany expanded due to the growth of its economic might but also an increasing vacuum in other countries’ leadership in Europe (Koeth 2016, 113). The involvement of Germany in the leadership of the European Union undoubtedly escalated since its reunification.

The question of the identification of the role of Germany in the leadership of the European Union remains unclear and complicated. The case studies analyzing Germany’s leadership illustrate the lack of explicit rejection of the established theories of German hegemony, co-leadership, and manipulation. The arguments of Szabo, Wood, and Pänke all hold elements of truth after analyzing the Eurozone crisis, refugee crisis, and the annexation of Crimea. As often in modern theoretical and academic discussion, this analysis points to a combination of the three theories. The definition of hegemony as presented formerly cannot explicitly characterize Germany as a hegemon. In conclusion, the leadership of Germany expresses economic capability and isolating actions exhibiting hints of hegemony. The desire to rectify German’s historical failures and an unclear expectation of leadership from the European Union complicates an explicit conclusion, as the presence of internal and external opposition and growing public perception of German manipulation in Europe enforces the relevance of stakeholders in the discussion of international leadership. The warning Szabo presents about the growing perspective on German dominance, the co-leadership potential of Germany mentioned by Wood, and Pänke’s alert for the need for public support of German leadership all prove accurate (Szabo 2019, 115; Wood 2019, 95; Pänke 2020, 54-76).

However, the unclarity of the German leadership role raises concern for the future of the European Union. Donald Rumsfeld, the United States Defense Minister, presented a point of advice for European unity in 2003, which might provide some hope for the future after this conflicting analysis, “In those places where unity among the many EU members is visibly struggling, according to calculations, the entente between Berlin and Paris could point to a way out. That would really be a New Europe” (Rumsfeld 2003, 2). The question of Germany’s role became bona fide with increased European integration following the establishment of the unified German state. The analysis of recent historical events including the Eurozone crisis, refugee crisis, and the annexation of Crimea, serve as case studies to help explain the role of Germany in the European Union as it exemplifies its economic influence, policy objectives, and international relations focus. The role of Germany remains undetermined but the theories and warnings surrounding German leadership and hegemony remain.

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