Leading by Default: Perspectives and Challenges for Germany in Its Reluctant EU Leadership Role.”

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language policy and adherence to language policy among the EU member states. The study found, for example, that 83 percent of companies surveyed consider language skills in recruiting, although over 70 percent of the same companies do not keep records of employee language skills. The study also points to region-specific shortages of language teachers and lack of opportunities to learn non-European languages.

Starting in 2012 and extending into 2013, the LRE project will hold over eighty workshops to discuss its research findings and to develop recommendations for policymakers. In March 2013, the project will present its recommendation to decision-makers in Brussels. Hopefully, this sharing of information from the cultural and educational realm with the political realm will be successful—and not too late. It is in times of crisis that, sadly, cultural and educational areas are the first to see cuts in funding and in positive political attention. Productively tackling the questions of language and strongly considering recommendations from the initiatives that best understand the impacts of and challenges to multilingualism in the EU is a vital entryway into a more realistic unfolding of a European identity. The Parliamentarium’s language tunnel, with its indistinguishable voices, is a confusing portal into a permanent exhibit, which by means of multimedia presentations, timelines, and interactive displays creates a deceivingly clear-cut narrative of European integration. It is a narrative that does yet not play out in reality and which will not play out without the help of language-learning initiatives.

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Leading by Default: Perspectives and Challenges for Germany in Its Reluctant EU Leadership Role

“Whom do you call when you want to speak to Europe? For France, press one; for Germany, press two; for Great Britain, press three. . . .” The economic crisis in eurozone countries has highlighted the problem of leadership within the EU. Inside and outside Europe, there are calls for Germany to take a stronger leadership role. At the same time, Germany—and Chancellor Angela Merkel—has come under harsh criticism, having been charged with an “economic occupation” in Ireland and Greece. Germany is the largest country and economy in the EU. Frankfurt is the location of the European Central Bank (ECB) and, on the continent, the financial center. Consensus has emerged among politicians and the media that without German leadership, the future of the European project is in question and the financial crises will remain unresolved. There are, however, equally valid reasons why Germany is reluctant to lead. The reluctance stems from, but is not limited to, underlying dissonance, fears, and apprehensions from both German citizens and other Europeans.

Although younger generations do not possess the memories of World War II and a Europe decimated by two world wars, there remains a reluctance to embrace German power. The projection of German power abroad is a hotly debated topic both within
and outside Germany. Although symbols of German patriotism have become somewhat acceptable in more recent years, public demonstrations of patriotism make some persons uncomfortable, due to the historic legacy of mass movements dating back to the nineteenth century and, more recently, to World War II. The historical memory raises questions regarding the use of German national symbols. Public displays of the German flag on cars, hats, and elsewhere, as well as the thousands of fans gathered at public broadcasts (Fanmeile) during the soccer championships, generate public debate regarding the appropriate expression of German patriotism. While Germans may be more comfortable with displaying their national symbols, others in the world are less so. Whereas in other countries mass gatherings raise no alarms, the sight of Germans gathered en masse, waving their flag, revives—for some—visions of Nuremberg party rallies. At the same time, the use of National Socialist symbols has been applied to Germany and its leadership abroad, with depictions of the chancellor in various forms of Nazi regalia. It is clear that the rest of Europe in some way perceives some threat from Germany. Beyond these considerations, there are other explanations for Germany and Merkel’s reluctance.

First, an oft-cited explanation for a lack of leadership is the German fear of inflation, the general rise in prices. Uncontrolled inflation during the Weimar Republic resulted in the severe devaluation of the German currency. It is not clear that this fear actually exists, particularly among the post–World War II generations. Some have even gone so far to assert that the current generations of citizens do not necessarily understand inflation, much less fear it.

Second, if Germany leads and Europe follows in adopting a German fiscal model, Europe may become more like a German Europe. (One could complete the sentence with: and less like a French Europe.) Some have observed that France already struggles with the shift of political power to Germany in part due to the financial crises. Whether this is true or not, the perception that Europe is becoming a German Europe would result in a disruption in the balance of power in Europe between France, Great Britain, and Germany.

Third, demands that Merkel (and therefore Germany) do something about the financial crises deny Merkel’s political reality at home. The sense is that, if Germany has already absorbed the massive costs of reunification, refugees from the Yugoslavian civil war, and migration from the former Soviet Union, other countries should be able to manage their internal finances more efficiently and pay their own bills. At the same time, there is little doubt Germany has benefited from the EU and the eurozone through trade within the EU and the common currency, which has made German exports outside the EU more affordable.

Merkel must walk a fine line, caught between what Parliament will agree to and demands from the EU. The debate regarding Euro bonds and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), as well as the fiscal pact negotiations, are examples of the difficulty
of her position. Merkel faced significant EU and international pressure to agree to Euro bonds, with the goal of issuing bonds from the ECB to increase cash reserves. Her political reality was that members of Parliament were not going to agree to that particular solution. Although Merkel held her position on Euro bonds, her concessions to the EU were sharply criticized in the Bundestag debates. Reports varied, with some praising her ability to withstand the Eurobond pressure, while others leveled harsh criticism for allowing bailout money to be funneled directly to banks.

Fourth, political leaders in the Bundestag have their own concerns regarding the exercise of leadership in the EU. Members of Parliament have raised questions over the number of transnational agreements Merkel has brought home. From the perspective of national politics, these agreements have two consequences. Domestically, the increase in the power of the executive at home through treaties has raised questions regarding the balance of power between the executive and Parliament. The problem at the EU with transnational treaties is that the agreements bypass EU institutions, further increasing tension between those institutions and contributing to the perception of a democratic deficit in EU governance.

Finally, it is important to note that Germany is one of 27 countries in the EU, yet potentially bears much of the financial support for the ESM. The ESM would create an organization responsible for collecting funds from EU member states. Those funds would then be available to help EU member states facing financial difficulties. Other countries are contributing to the ESM; however, it also appears that more countries may need to access those funds. As this occurs, the risk for Germany is the assumption of much of the financial responsibility for the ESM. Germany may have the largest economy in the Eurozone, but that economic power is already at risk and there are signs the German economy has begun to slow. The reality is that, although Germany may provide leadership, it cannot do so alone.

Europe and the rest of the world will have to reconcile the desire and demand that Germany lead with what Germany has been and what it has become. Is it reasonable to expect Germany to lead while judging German leadership and inappropriately linking it to symbols from its National Socialist past? Where does the accountability of the rest of Europe and the world begin, not only for their financial situation but also for their own historical legacies? Further study of Germany must examine how we perceive and treat Germany in all contexts. Germany’s importance to the world through its position in the EU requires close examination. The question Europe should ask before demanding German action and leadership is whether Europe will be comfortable with the overt exercise of German power.

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