

The waning of Merkel - Part 2

Germany divided as Schengenland crumbles

by Michael Stürmer in Berlin

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In the midst of Germany's refugee riddle there is the chancellor, enigmatic as ever. Angela Merkel has often been described as a technocrat, the physicist turned political leader who wants to be fully in control everywhere and all the time. This is how, over the last 10 years, she gave the Germans the feeling of being safe in a sea of troubles. The voters received their daily dose of sleeping pills.

The general public thanked her by bestowing upon her the honorary rank of 'Mutti' (mother) of the nation. It sounded reassuring and petty bourgeois and described very well the underlying bargain: the chancellor practised wall-to-wall coalition politics, and the general public expressed its gratitude by giving her comfortable majorities. Although her combined Christian Democrat and Christian Social groupings never attained even close to 50% of the vote, Merkel had the chance to form coalitions at will. On top of her electoral success, she stole the shirts from the Social Democrats, successfully overtaking them on both the left and the right.

By pragmatically ticking off the political agenda case by case, Merkel saved the nation from intellectual or emotional overstretch. Whether on Putin's expansionism or the Arab spring, the US pivot to Asia or the rise of the red dragon over the Pacific: 'Don't worry at night' was the message from the chancellor's office. 'Keine Experimente!' (no experiments) – the time-honoured slogan from West Germany's first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer – was the formula uniting the nation and their leader.

But now, the refugee crisis, long in coming for more than four years, has taken on a strategic dimension and is threatening the political consensus inside Germany and throughout Europe. 'Charity fatigue' is spreading, creating tension among governments that normally have learnt to cope with each others' idiosyncrasies. A recent meeting of the 'Club of Three' (France, Germany and the UK) under the Chatham House rule revealed that the neighbours, from Switzerland to France and Britain, are beginning to worry about romantic German overdrive, the destruction of Europe's Schengenland of barrier-free borders, and the marginalisation of law, order and predictability. All of this was proudly put on show when the refugee crisis, mainly from Syria, turned into a tsunami of misery at the Munich main railway station.

To put the record straight, Merkel is no romantic. Her family background and her education are protestant, rational, calculating – with more than a little *froideur*. She displays from time to time traces of a healthy dry humour. But her abilities as a public speaker are limited. 'I feel your pain' – to quote that genius of empathy Bill Clinton – is not her style. But when the nation as a whole was moved to tears about the little boy washed up on the Aegean Sea, Merkel moved ahead of the curve by extending the hand of hospitality far further than many of her compatriots wished.

What is the German national interest? The late Peter von der Heydt, member of the Bundestag and head of the Delbrück private bank, used to give a brief answer: 'To eat well, to sleep peacefully, and never to be alone.' The EU and Nato were the answer. Never again a restless empire. Never again a German Sonderweg (special path). Adenauer reconstructed Germany's reputation and creditworthiness. Helmut Schmidt preached predictability at crunch time. Helmut Kohl coined the phrase *Bündnisfähigkeit* – meaning loyalty to both Europe and Atlanticism. When Merkel opened the gates and made speeches that were understood as a surrender to the refugee tides and a silent invitation to Europe's shores, the neighbours (transit territories for the meandering masses) were upset, and Germany was pretty much alone. A leader and no followers.

Schengenland, the concept of tight external borders and no internal borders, has ceased to exist. Worst of all, Merkel offers no long-term definition of what she means when she promises, time and again, 'We can manage'. The population at large displays a mix of doubt, concern and outright Angst. We can manage what? For how long? And at what price? The coalition is deeply split. Land (state) governments are pulling in different directions. Convincing leadership is in short supply.

For a while, the German *modus operandi* can continue; the country can afford the crisis mode. Yet in the long run – and that is what people fear, some more, some less – the crisis will overwhelm state and society, unless the government shows itself to be, once again, in control. In this unforgiving game, Madame Chancellor is the key player. The outcome will make her or mar her.

(This is part 2 of 'The waning of Merkel'. Part 1 appeared yesterday as an OMFIF Commentary. Read it [here](#)).

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