

## The German Republic Turns Sixty: Second Spring or Time for the Old People's Home?

By Ulrike Guérot

- What changes has Germany experienced in the last sixty years?
- Has Germany lost patience with France?
- Can Germany use the economic crisis to its advantage to strengthen the European Union?

The Federal Republic of Germany turns sixty in 2009—and she has had a breathtaking life so far. Born out of the devastations of World War II, she worked hard to overcome the physical and psychological damages. She had a flourishing youth when she was around twenty, known in the history books as the “*Wirtschaftswunder*.” She showed modesty, obedience, and discretion in international relations; she was the master pupil of the U.S. and its “junior partner” on the European continent; she became a trustworthy NATO ally; and she accepted European integration and a strong Franco-German partnership as her “*Raison d’Etat*.” No German interest was not also a European interest. Germany poured money into the European system, was the defender of the European Parliament and the European Commission, and the lawyer of the smaller countries. And she was successful in these roles.

As the years went by, the smaller but sturdy German maid entered a sort of mid-life crisis. The atmosphere of conservatism, duty, and compliance over twenty years triggered some leftist shock-waves. The events in May 1968 and the subsequent decade of domestic terror strained the political system during the 1970s. But in essence, Germany stayed on course, and came out in the 1980s matured. Strong transatlantic ties and commitment to European integration were still the dominant paradigms of Germany’s foreign policy. By then, the economy was back on track, the icy relationship toward Russia and the former GDR was melting and becoming softer, and the political system had integrated many of the liberal, modern, and environmental aspects that had been brought up a decade ago.

By her fortieth birthday, Germany was rewarded for her political and economic discipline—a fabulous socio-economic balance through the philosophy of “*Soziale Marktwirtschaft*” (through a fine-tuned coalition system) and a very convincing horizontal and vertical power stratification (through the *Bund-Länder* cooperation) that together produced an astoundingly balanced and moderate policy system—with that which she had always dreamed of: Reunification! The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 was the crowning achievement of a policy that had steadily claimed that European integration and German unification were the two sides of the same coin—both pursued with the blessing of the United States. At age forty, Germany was a happy woman, at the height of her power and ambitions. And she delivered on European integration: shortly after reunification, she jumped into the “ever closer union” of the Maastricht treaty, including accepting a single currency, the euro. She continued to be America’s “best ally” in actively promoting the American geo-strategic agenda for the European continent, most importantly NATO and EU enlargement toward the east.

However, as often happens, tectonic shifts and fissures in a relationship can only be seen in retrospect. They come and grow slowly. Only twenty years after the Wall came down can we begin to see how much Germany has changed—while luring herself and most other countries into the thinking that she is still the same. She is not.

Domestically, some new features are increasingly visible. First, the political system

has lost its stability and its classical two-party coalition system. With this political instability, the support for European integration has eroded. The two traditional two “people’s parties” (*Volksparteien*), the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), today each make up only 35 percent (at most) of the electorate, which demonstrates the political fragmentation of the political system. After the Greens in the 1980s, the popular right-wing parties (the German People’s Union, DVU, and the National Democratic Party, NPD)—which are both politically popular in the eastern parts of Germany—have been added to the party system. The Left Party (*Die Linke*) emerged in the last decade, made essentially out of the former socialist party of the GDR, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). In short, Germany is becoming more difficult to govern. In addition, voting volatility is increasing and the consensus-driven electoral and party system that had formerly been an asset for the country’s aim for harmony is turning into a Maginot Line against change—let alone quick change or reform. The federal system, which is now comprised of sixteen instead of eleven *Länder*, often stalls domestic innovation as much as European decision-making. Like many old ladies, Germany, however, does not want to change her habits. She rather accepts that, for example, it will take ten years to pass a reform of the German language spelling (*Rechtschreibreform*) or to offer a coherent German opinion (rather than sixteen *Länder* opinions) in Brussels.

Second, the economic conditions have changed through globalization, an unhealthy demography, and the financial burden of reunification. Traveling through some eastern regions, one can see morbid villages of elderly people and no “flourishing landscapes,” as envisaged in 1989; or traveling to a classical suburban western German town, one sees that the public pools and libraries have been closed and the bus and post services cut due to both demographics and lack of funds. Surely, the Old Lady has lost much of her former vigor and, thus, her capacity to “finance” Europe—even before the financial crisis.

Finally, a whole generation born post-1989 has grown up, has voting rights, and has no clue about what mattered most to Germany for so long in terms of foreign policy and why; European integration, Franco-German cooperation, and transatlantic relations are dusty words in history books—replaced by Wikipedia-knowledge at best. For most German youngsters or twenty-somethings, the Americans and Russians are equally favorable (perhaps Obama will change this!); Europe is a given, not worth paying any attention to other than the prices of EasyJet flights; France clearly matters less than China or India; and NATO is a nearly unknown acronym. The impact of this on Germany’s foreign policy and its paradigms cannot be overestimated. With the loss of handed down historical memories and changing constituencies, Germany, in terms of foreign policy, has become an animal without instincts—other than being export champion and desiring a seat in the United Nations Security Council.

All three factors matter a lot for what Germany is doing on the foreign policy side, especially with respect to Europe. In essence, it gets ever more national. Many Germans seem to consider today that it is “pay-back” time. That Germany has the right to become “normal,” which often reads “national” within Europe. That it should not have to pay for European integration. Or that it can no longer be patient with France. Or that European integration simply does not function with twenty-seven member states and that, therefore, further enlargement should be stopped. If anything, Germany’s European policy today, at the very least, lacks vision or ambition for Europe with respect to both the level of political integration *and* the geo-strategic dimension it wants to achieve for Europe. After 1989, the former deepening-widening flow of the European Union was interrupted. Political union and

enlargement became a dichotomy and Germany has seemingly given up on both as a consequence. In short, the big German argument about Europe, especially the one that it should be supranational, has been lost somewhere in the picture and the formerly flamboyant German discourse on Europe died off in recent years. No more “community of destinies,” no more “common house of Europe,” no more “Europe is our identity.”

It is fair to say that old ladies will start to lose their vision, as is happening in Germany. Hence, the situation is more complex. In historical retrospect, European integration was always essentially done *for* and *by* Germany. Its biggest achievements, the single market and the euro, were essentially German projects. In exchange for securing its own economic interests, Germany not only agreed to be bound into the European system, but also to largely carry it. In other words, European integration was a form of sublimated German hegemony on the continent—to everyone’s benefit. In the twentieth century, the question for the European continent was whether there would be a German Europe—or a European Germany. Today’s situation is that Europe delivered on Germany, including reunification; the remaining—or newly open—question is whether unified Germany will deliver on the enlarged Europe! It is only Germany that can intellectually promote the synthesis between a political union and an enlarged Europe, because she was the only large European country that believed in the two in the first place. And Germany is, by her sheer weight and size, the most important country to bring back the political energy for the whole European system. Nothing will be done without Germany!

Thus, beyond lacking vision and energy, Germany is no longer in the European driving seat, because she no longer wants to drive. This, too, is a feature of old ladies. The Franco-German partnership is to a large extent part of this problem. The partnership stopped being a partnership for a variety of reasons and the changes were slow in the 1990s. However, in the 1990s, France and Germany increasingly clashed: on the euro and its making; on ESDP versus NATO; on enlargement and who pays for it. In Nice, they even clashed about their relative power bases within the EU voting system, when Germany argued for more weighted votes in the European Council during the negotiations of the Nice Treaty in 2000. After Nice, then, France and Germany agreed again on many things: they forged deals on agricultural policy in 2002; they opposed Bush in the Iraq War in 2003; and they both requested exemption from the 3 percent deficit rule of the European Stability and Growth Pact in 2005. In short, the partnership turned into a “train without passengers” that strongly defended common interests but which were not necessarily European ones. This sort of authoritarian-style leadership method failed—and luckily so. But it has not been replaced by something constructive ever since then. At best, France and Germany are today competing as if there are on two racing bicycles, and no longer on a tandem: they are competing on the promotion of *their* national interest or of *their* industries or of *their* energy companies; they are competing on “backyards” (France in the south through the Mediterranean Union; Germany in the east through the eastern dimension). They are competing on *their* influence within NATO and on who is the “must-go-first” country in Europe for the U.S. They are competing on who gets the juiciest deals for *their* military industries, when it comes to ESDP. And finally, they are competing on who can do and care the least for Europe!

Arguably, the Old Lady Germany has lost patience with her most important partner, France. Is Germany to blame? France obstructed enlargement for a decade; it did not reform its economy; it did not reduce its deficit (not even before the financial

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crisis); it voted against the European Constitution, because the political establishment did not care; in other words, it was sulking, because of the loss of its relative influence within the EU. The German Lady has a Prussian past and she cannot deal with unreliable partners, especially not in her older years. But, as with many old couples, neither can they separate. They are together in a European movie in which they are no longer the stars.

Likewise, the U.S. no longer strongly influences Europe as it did in the past, either individually or through NATO. None of the three birth-paradigms of the Federal Republic—to keep the U.S. in, the Russians out, and Germany down—remain valid. Today, the U.S. is both tired of Europe and competing with Europe; the Russians are a difficult but necessary partner; and Germany is grown up, but old and lost in Europe.

It would be Germany's noblesse for its older days to seize the financial crisis as an opportunity for the next big step of European integration and to pool all of its European wisdom together in order to promote—again, together with France—a strong, powerful, and united Europe of a new dimension (including a fully fledged energy union and fiscal federalism) that mediates in a newly configured triangular relationship between Europe's former "external federators": the U.S. and Russia. One positive and one negative, they both promote European integration; to make the EU a peer-partner of the U.S. and a strong truly international player of global scale and, thus, contribute to overcoming the many patterns of international relations of the last century which are no longer valid. But perhaps that's too much for the Old Lady!

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