



Germany politics

Angela Merkel is indispensable but insufficient

There is no other European leader able to forge the deals that will keep the EU together

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There was something distinctly presidential about [Angela Merkel \(http://www.ft.com/topic/s/people/Angela_Merkel\)](http://www.ft.com/topic/s/people/Angela_Merkel)'s European travels last week. The German chancellor met 15 other EU leaders on a whistle-stop tour (<http://next.ft.com/content/b1d4edfc-6b7c-11e6-ae5b-a7cc5dd5a28c>) of the continent. It is the kind of speed-dating diplomacy that US presidents often undertake, as they build consensus and reassure allies.

Ms Merkel's emergence as the de facto leader of the EU is controversial. The Hungarians, Poles and Czechs are bitterly critical of her government's policy on refugees. The Greeks accuse the Merkel government of driving their economy into the ground. The French and the Italians bemoan Germany's insistence on austerity. Some Brits blame Ms Merkel for [Brexit \(http://www.ft.com/eu-referendum\)](http://www.ft.com/eu-referendum), arguing that she could have delivered a better

deal on migration. Meanwhile, in Brussels there are grumbles that the German chancellor has pushed the European Commission to one side.

Ms Merkel has undoubtedly made her share of mistakes, particularly over the refugee crisis. But there is no other European leader with the authority and patience to forge the deals that are necessary to keep the EU together. And some kind of leadership is badly needed because the union faces at least six acute and interconnected problems.

The first and newest is Brexit. The second is the euro. The third is refugees. The fourth is Russia. The fifth is the erosion of democratic values and practices in [Hungary and Poland \(http://next.ft.com/content/1b4179ba-4aa1-11e6-8d68-72e9211e86ab\)](http://next.ft.com/content/1b4179ba-4aa1-11e6-8d68-72e9211e86ab). And the sixth is the rise of the political extremes across Europe.

The chancellor appears minded to take Brexit slowly and carefully. For the moment, her position seems likely to prevail over early French demands to force the pace. But a long delay is also potentially problematic since it prolongs uncertainty and invites a backlash from hardliners in Britain and Brussels.

Perhaps the most sensitive stop on Ms Merkel's tour last week was Warsaw, where a nationalist and reactionary government stands accused of eroding the independence of the courts and the media. On his recent trip to Warsaw, Barack Obama saw fit to issue a public rebuke to the Polish government. Ms Merkel did not emulate the US president, but there is no doubt about the depth of concern in Berlin over Poland and Hungary.

FT View



(<http://next.ft.com/content/b1d4edfc-6b7c-11e6-ae5b-a7cc5dd5a28c>)

Merkel seeks consensus for an EU without Britain (<http://next.ft.com/content/b1d4edfc-6b7c-11e6-ae5b-a7cc5dd5a28c>)

A fraught political climate discourages grand plans for integration

The problem is that the EU is meant simultaneously to be a community of values and a mechanism for managing the relations between member states. If Germany exerts too much pressure on Poland and Hungary over internal political issues it may find that co-operation simply breaks down, making it all but impossible to find solutions to shared problems.

Germany's ability to forge a common EU approach to the migrant crisis is anyway massively complicated by the fact that the policies Ms Merkel adopted last summer are far more liberal than the union's norm. After accepting more than 1m refugees, Germany's effort to impose a modicum of burden sharing on its partner members has caused a bitter backlash in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, where Ms Merkel is widely accused of endangering Europe's security and culture. She was greeted by anti-refugee demonstrators in Prague last week.

This tension between Germany and the central Europeans supplements the divisions between Berlin and southern European nations, created by the euro crisis. The euro's problems could soon escalate, particularly if the International Monetary Fund decides, later this year, to end its participation in the [bailout of Greece \(http://next.ft.com/content/fof29e80-3166-11e6-bda0-04585c31b153\)](http://next.ft.com/content/fof29e80-3166-11e6-bda0-04585c31b153). That, in turn, could lead the Dutch and German parliaments to withdraw their support.

The EU has always been able to surmount the many crises it has faced because the national leaders who gather at union summits in Brussels are ultimately all committed to finding compromises that make the system work. But if nationalist or anti-EU leaders win power in enough European countries, then the spirit of co-operation on which the EU depends may evaporate — and with it the EU itself.

Brexit is the most serious example of this process at work. But the EU faces a further series of trials-by-populism over the coming months. In October, a far-right candidate is quite likely to win the presidency of Austria. Matteo Renzi, the Italian prime minister, may be forced from office around the same time, and all the likely alternatives in Italy are Eurosceptics. The challenges will keep coming in 2017, with national elections in the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and France, all of which are likely to see strong showings from Eurosceptic and far-right parties.

Even Germany is seeing the centre-ground of politics shrink as the problems of assimilating the migrants who arrived in the country last year become more evident.

Meanwhile, Berlin has just estimated that another 300,000 refugees may arrive in 2016. The result is a surge in support for the nationalist and Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany party (AfD), which is likely to do well in regional elections in the coming weeks.

Much of Ms Merkel's authority in Europe stems from her command of politics in Germany. A chancellor who is losing her magic touch at home will find it harder to act as the de facto leader of the continent.

Many European governments harbour resentment against Ms Merkel. But they will miss her ability to keep Europe together when she finally falls.

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