★ GERMANY

Julie Hamann

Being European in A Renationalising Europe

BUILDING BRIDGES PAPER SERIES March 2016

Highlights

- ★ The times when the German population met the EU with almost unconditional and passive support might be over, but it is still convinced that any step backwards would entrain even bigger damages for Germany's stability, peace and wealth.
- ★ Germany remains committed to a high degree of European integration, but the overall arrangement has to adapt to a post-crises Europe, taking into consideration the lessons learned from the still ongoing economic crisis, the rise of populist parties, the refugee crisis, and the Ukraine crisis and the stand-off with Russia.
- ★ The EU's legitimacy in Germany does not require specific new policies. First, it requires effective solutions to pressing problems – something the EU seems to be failing to do. Second, it requires national leaders, which identify challenges as challenges for the whole community and who accept a common approach to face them.

Building Bridges project

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available here.

Building Bridges

About the authors

Julie Hamann is program officer in the Franco-German relations program of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). Her areas of focus are Franco-German relations generally, German and French foreign policy, and labour unions and social movements in France. She manages the Franco-German Future Dialogue.

About Building Bridges

Called "Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union", the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others' from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges.

This project is supported by the Europe for Citizens programme of the European Union.

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?

Although Germany successfully overcame the economic and financial crisis of 2008-2009 and now benefits from its good economic performance, it is no less concerned by the political consequences of the crisis that has been shattering Europe since 2009. Even though conflict and divergence have always been part of the European project, several factors give rise to the supposition that the outcome of this crisis will be crucial for the future development of the European Union, or, put simply, for "more" or "less" Europe. The risk of disintegration is becoming concrete with the possibilities of either a "Brexit" or a "Grexit", eurosceptic parties and movements on the rise in a large number of Member States, and the instability in Europe's neighbourhood, which also affects the cohesion inside Europe. In addition, the EU runs the risk of losing international standing by being more and more divided, politically and economically.

In the course of these multiple crises, Germany finds itself at the very front of the European political stage.

Germany's place in the European Union and its willingness to engage in further integration is regarded as a matter of course to such a degree that the question above is rarely subject to debate. European integration has always been one of the pillars of Germany's post-war politics and is an integral part of German politics across different German governments.[1] One of the EU's core principles – no more war between European nations – corresponds to the guiding values of Germany's post-war identity. Multilateralism and European integration henceforth constituted the fundament on which a new German foreign policy was built. The importance of the Franco-German reconciliation and their common engagement in the creation of the EU as a "peace project" goes far beyond pure symbolism and cannot be overestimated. However, impassioned pleas by German politicians have become scarce in recent years, so much so that they now seem old-fashioned. The fact that war between European countries as a consequence of aggressive nationalism seems hardly imaginable today speaks volumes about the success of the EU and its steady enlargement. However, the more abstract this European guiding principle becomes, the more a rather rational approach to the EU prevails, asking: Of what use is the EU to me? This question was formulated more and more loudly in Germany during the Eurozone crisis and willingly taken up by eurosceptic currents, such as the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland; Alternative for Germany*).

For Germany – as for its neighbours – the motivation for European integration was twofold: For one thing, the political stability emanating from the EU, and for the other, the promise of growing economic prosperity, which would benefit the whole continent. Germans still emphasise both meanings of the EU as a political and economic union. However, their weight did slightly change during recent years, which is not so surprising given its dominant importance throughout the economic crisis. Not only do surveys among the population reveal this growing prevalence of economic motivations over political ones,[2] but so does political and public discourse, which partly fuels populist fears of Germany being Europe's "paymaster". Why are those fears so popular in Germany, which came off pretty clearly throughout the crisis? In order to better understand this, it is worth taking a look back at the introduction of the monetary union: Despite the unanimity in German support for the EU, the most divided they have been concerned the introduction of the Euro. The Deutschmark was an important and

almost emotional symbol for economic stability and the Federal Republic's economic upswing after the war. To cover the risk of giving it up, Germany demanded strict rules for monetary union, which was henceforth constructed following Germany's currency system. It is thus easy for Germans to blame certain countries for not following those rules and for the consequences of the current crisis in the Eurozone. This simplistic reasoning, however, contributes to the fear of experiencing economic damage through the introduction of the Euro.

Nevertheless, the robust perception of the EU's political and idealistic side can be understood when one considers the fact that only a very small number of Germans favour an exit from the Euro, even though a majority perceive its introduction as a failure. The times when the German population met the EU with almost unconditional and passive support might be over, but it is still convinced that any step backwards would entrain even bigger damages for Germany's stability, peace and wealth.

Do you think that the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?

Given the fact that Germany perceives the European Union rather as a reality than as a project, the short answer to this question would be: no. One of the inherent elements of a political project in democratic societies is a well-defined objective which is steadily negotiated in an open debate. Until very recently, this debate hardly took place in Germany, neither among the political class, nor in public discourse. Two main reasons can be identified to explain this lack of debate on the European Union: First, the EU is so much part of German politics and society, that the (quiet) consensus on it rarely made open debates necessary. Second, during recent years, a pragmatic style of politics has been prevailing within the political landscape in Germany – a kind of pragmatism that is hostile to emotional deliberations on political projects.

The deepening of European integration represented until recently a common ground among all political divisions. Even those parties, which contain elements of Euroscepticism – the CDU's Bavarian sister-party CSU regularly raises concerns about the loss of sovereignty due to "Brussels"' regulations, and the left-wing party *Die Linke*, criticises the EU for being too neoliberal and undemocratic – support European integration in a general manner despite their doubts on its concrete nature. Even Germany's new right-wing party AfD claims officially its attachment to the European Union, albeit refusing further competences for "Brussels bureaucrats". Hence, it has seemed rather unattractive to choose the European Union as a topic for campaigns and political programmes, since it would not help demarcate any differences from the other parties. The parties' positions on Europe have instead concentrated on precise topics rather than on the EU as a project. Unlike in France, where the referendum on a European constitution made a real debate about different visions of Europe necessary, or the United Kingdom, where the possibility of leaving the Union naturally creates a debate about Britain's idea on Europe, German parties never had to conquer their voters with their vision of Europe. Ironically, the topic of Europe is almost absent in campaigns for the European elections – even in 2014 when German President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz was the lead candidate for the socialist group to become the next president of the European Commission.[3] However, the political landscape is about to change as a result of the rise of the AfD and it remains to be seen what influence its

eurosceptic orientation will have in view of the upcoming elections in 2017.

Beside this absence of tactical interest in talking about Europe, it might not be an exaggeration to take into account a specific political style marking Germany during recent decades. Chancellor Merkel's pragmatic approach to politics fits perfectly into this development: Having overcome the tumultuous decades after the German reunification, having attained once more a certain level of international recognition and having benefitted from a comprehensive labour market reform, there seems to be little appetite in Germany for a debate on European visions.

However, the Eurozone crisis also laid bare the discrepancies in competing visions for Europe, which were previously hidden under the supposed unity. A new debate about Europe is thus about to emerge. Three developments made it even more imperative for the political elite to tackle the topic of Europe. The first one is also the most visible: the Eurozone crisis, especially the intense struggle regarding the Greek bailout talks. Nothing less than the most basic European principles, such as solidarity and compromise, have to be discussed. European principles are also at stake when it comes to the second development: The Ukrainian crisis, the threat of religious fundamentalism and the enormous influx of people into Europe seeking refuge from war and poverty, raise questions about what values the EU stands for. Finally, Germany is experiencing the rise of a new party that appears to have found its place within the political landscape following several electoral successes in the European elections and the regional elections. The AfD was founded by a group of economists, including former members of the CDU, who criticised the German government's Eurozone policies and demanded a return to the Deutschmark. It quickly attracted a heterogeneous group of supporters who were united in their disappointment with the German political establishment.[4] In May 2015, the internally divided party split up, the majority opting for a more right-wing, eurosceptic and populist orientation. Since those new voices are unlikely to disappear, the established parties have to develop a strategy to cope with this new constellation. Defining their attitude towards the European Union will be an essential part of it.

Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?

The reasons why Germany has – together with France – always been a driving force of European integration remain no less valid today than at the beginning. Germany's political stability and economic wealth still depend on the well-being of its neighbours – no German government has ever questioned this logic and no future government is likely to do so, even if the understandings of integration vary along the classic divide between intergovernmental and community methods of governance.[5] For a country such as Germany, selling more than 50% of its exports to other EU countries, a strong degree of European integration is indispensable. The unwritten rule of European integration "never one step back" marked German EU policies to such an important degree that any discussion about a possible disintegration boils up rapidly. The reactions to Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble's suggestion of a possible "Grexit" during the Greek bailout talks in July 2015 illustrate this quite well: Even though he was not the only politician in favour of this option, speaking out loudly heaped scandal on the CDU's coalition partner SPD, whose chairman

not only had to rapidly distance himself, but also experienced criticism from within his party.[6] Nevertheless, the "ever closer union" is increasingly subjected to controversies and the ruling parties have to figure out their positions on European integration once again – even more so now given that new parties, such as the AfD, have put it at the top of their agenda.

The question of the degree of integration implies another important one: What role does Germany, as the biggest Member State in terms of demography and economy, want to take? The discussion about (German) leadership emerged more and more vividly throughout the crisis. Between those claiming the necessity of German leadership of the European Union through the crisis, and critics accusing Germany of a return to hegemonic behaviour, Germany's political elite has found itself in a contradictory situation.[7] Furthermore, the country's political strength emanated more from its partners' weakness than from its own will to take a leading role: The equilibrium of the Franco-German tandem is increasingly distorted, due to France's struggling economy and President Hollande's weakness, notably at the beginning of his term. At the same time, Cameron's UK – usually balancing Germany's traditional absence in foreign policy – was barely visible during the Ukrainian crisis and withdrew even more from European politics.

The question about European leadership is in line with a general redefinition of Germany's political identity: The discussion about the need to assume more or less international responsibility has been a constant companion since reunification and reached its peak during the Munich Security Conference in 2014, when Federal President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen almost simultaneously declared Germany's responsibility to play a bigger role in world politics. Steinmeier's "Review 2014" about the future German foreign policy and the new White Paper on Defense announced by von der Leyen for 2016 underline this course. The challenge for Germany will now be to lead without alienating its partners. The German population remains traditionally doubtful on this topic. However, the refugee crisis led to a greater awareness of the direct consequences of war and conflicts on Germany, illustrated by a growing support for more German engagement in foreign policy.[8] Germany's engagement in Syria, responding to France's call for solidarity after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, illustrates the efforts to be perceived as a reliable partner even in military matters. However, the participation in the military campaign against the so-called "Islamic State" in Syria is highly controversial and only a slight majority of Germans approve of it. Whether Germany succeeds in changing its political culture in regard to security policy highly depends on the outcome of this latest military action.

A high degree of European integration in economic and political terms is indisputably part of Germany's principles. The German post-war identity is intransigently defined as a European identity, so much so that a change of course is barely thinkable. However, Germany's role in the European Union and the EU's institutional arrangement both have to be redefined in light of a post-crisis Europe.

According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?

The degree of identification with Europe is already very high in Germany, and it is clearly above average compared to other EU countries.

These results remain relatively robust against political events and hardly changed during recent years. This is not surprising, as Germans underwent a profound questioning of "German identity" after World War II, resulting in a strong orientation towards Europe and the European Union as a political project.

However, it would be too short-sighted to take the degree of identification with the EU as an indicator for a strong sense of a common public sphere. As in other Member States, the Eurozone crisis unleashed a re-nationalisation of public political debates. This relapse into one-dimensional explanations for complex events is accompanied by a recourse to clichés. They range from blatant caricatures such as the "lazy Greek" to more subtle, albeit no less false simplifications such as the supposed divide between the protestant north, practicing austerity, and the catholic south, unable to respect budgetary limits. By offering these simple mechanisms to distinguish oneself from "the other", this kind of public discourse discharges the political elite from the responsibility to aim at a compromise instead of pushing through national interests. The temptation to fall back on these comfortable images is all the more dangerous when even renowned journalists and political analysts succumb to it. These debates around national narratives run contrary to the consolidation of a common European public sphere and underestimate the capacity of European citizens to bear the complexity of current policy issues.

Despite a certain recurrence to national discourses among the German political elite and the media, the Eurozone crisis also initiated a lot of new channels of exchange between European citizens; a huge part of them via blogs and social networks on the internet. In a way, the struggles on the EU's future also led to a politicisation, which has the potential to strengthen the European public sphere in the future. However, there is a risk that this debate remains a debate among an elite for whom support of the EU is part of its socialisation. In order to include citizens within a European public sphere, the priority is to render the debate as broad as possible.

Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?

Research on the legitimacy of political systems has established three distinct sources: Input legitimacy refers to the possibilities of citizen representation and participation.[9] The Lisbon Treaty established important institutional changes by strengthening the role of the European Parliament and by the introduction of top candidates for the President of the European Commission. However, it is not yet clear, what this new democratic legitimation means for the interpretation of the President's role: President Juncker sees his position as a political one – an interpretation that meets the resistance of several Member States, especially Germany. Whether or not the institutional changes of the Lisbon Treaty will make the EU more legitimate, still essentially depends on the Member States' will to do so.

The notion of throughput legitimacy is used to describe the degree of transparency and accountability of the EU and its decision making process. Given the enormous effort to make information available on different platforms, the EU suffers more from its complexity than from a lack of transparency. Nevertheless, the EU's degree of transparency suffered considerable damage following the creation of institutional arrangements, such as the Troika. Its lack of accountability contributed

considerably to the loss of trust in the European institutions to act as a neutral mediator.

The most visible source of legitimacy is the output in terms of decision-making. Citizen's judge the EU, as any other political system, by its capacity to provide effective policies. Yet, many citizens have growing doubts about this: The management of the still ongoing Eurozone crisis did great damage to confidence in the EU; huge deficiencies in the European migration policy become apparent day by day; and the highly controversial negotiations on TTIP makes a growing number of Europeans doubt the responsiveness to citizens' concerns. The EU has to demonstrate in a credible way that it is still capable and willing of providing the institutions that are necessary to represent *and* to overcome national interests. This is only possible if the focus shifts again from exclusively national perspectives to a common perception of problems. In regard to Germany, it can prove its leadership by being more responsive to different views and perspectives. The Franco-German tandem still is – in spite of its imbalances – a useful vehicle constructed to translate divergences into a common direction, even if this kind of compromise proves to be more and more difficult to reach. For example, the failure to establish a truly common European approach to the asylum and the refugee crisis during the summer of 2015 did not only weaken the EU as political actor, but also risks harming public support for the European Union. The lack of political will among the national governments clearly makes any efforts from the European Commission, and President Juncker, futile.

The European Union does not really need new institutional arrangements in order to render it more legitimate in the eyes of its citizens. However, it needs more national politicians willing to identify challenges as challenges for the whole community and who accept a common approach to face them. This means giving up the retreat to purely national discourses.

1. Thomas Banchoff, "German Identity and European Integration", *European Journal of International Relations*, September 1999, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 259-289.
2. Thomas Petersen, *Ein veränderter Blick auf Europa?*, Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 14 May 2014, http://www.ifd-allensbach.de/.
3.Till Schwarze and Lisa Caspari, "Deutsche Parteien verstecken Europa", *Die Zeit*, 16 April 2014, http://www.zeit.de/.
4. Robert Grimm, "The Rise of the German Eurosceptic party Alternative für Deutschland, between ordoliberal critique and popular anxiety", *International Political Science Review*, 2015, Vol 36. No. 3, pp. 264-278.
5. Traditionally, Germany is seen as an advocate of the community method, whereas France for instance rather represents an intergovernmental approach to the EU. However, the German government – in particular during the Eurozone crisis – gave more and more preference to intergovernmental politics.
6. Stefan Wagstyl, "Germany's Wolfgang Schäuble puts Grexit back on the agenda", *Financial Times,* 16 July 2015, http://www.ft.com/.
7. See for example "The reluctant hegemon", *The Economist*, 15 June 2013, http://www.economist.com/ or Anton Troianovski, "Greek Crisis Shows How Germany's Power Polarizes Europe", *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 July 2015, http://www.wsj.com/.
8. See the evolution between two surveys conducted by the Körber Stiftung in May 2014 and in October 2015. The surveys are available on the Stiftung's website: http://www.koerber-stiftung.de/.
9. Vivien Schmidt, "Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union revisited: Input, Output and Throughput", *KFG Working Paper*, No. 21, November 2010, http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/kfgeu/.