

# **BEYOND MERKELISM: WHAT EUROPEANS EXPECT OF POST-ELECTION GERMANY**

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## **SUMMARY**

- A new poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations shows that EU citizens view Germany as a trustworthy, pro-European power.
- Angela Merkel's approach of searching for compromises between competing interests is a major source of Berlin's positive image. Pluralities in all countries polled would support her in a hypothetical election for president of Europe if her opponent was Emmanuel Macron.
- Merkel's rule has reduced neighbours' fear of German dominance. Most Europeans do not believe a German heading the European Commission is a bad thing. And significant numbers trust Berlin to lead the EU, especially on financial and economic issues and democracy and the rule of law.
- Paradoxically, to fulfil many Europeans' expectations, Berlin will need to revise the principles of Merkelism that created this trust.
- Germany will need to do this to successfully lead the EU in tackling the two greatest threats facing it: a weakening of the rule of law inside the EU, and a failure on the part of Europe to defend its interests in the world.

# Introduction

A few weeks ahead of the Bundestag election on 26 September, Germans are still struggling to imagine their country without Chancellor Angela Merkel. This may be to do with the profiles of the candidates or the low quality of the electoral campaign. But the personality of Merkel seems to provide an even better explanation for Germans' wariness about seeing someone else in the chancellor's seat. Merkel was a perfect symbol of the German zeitgeist at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Her policy style and decisions have reflected the significant changes happening in German society and politics in the last 16 years, as well as an overwhelming desire to maintain the status quo for as long as possible by avoiding revolutionary shifts. No wonder Germans will miss her.

Will other Europeans miss her too? European summits without the 'empress of Europe' will probably feel like Agatha Christie's detective stories without Miss Marple. What will Merkel's European legacy be, and how long will it last? She has often been accused of dividing the European Union, especially in the context of the eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, and Berlin's unwavering support for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. However, this is not what Europeans say when they think of the German chancellor. As demonstrated by a survey the European Council on Foreign Relations conducted in 12 EU member states, they have significant expectations of Germany and confidence in German leadership. The poll shows that, despite Merkel's often divisive policies, Europeans tend to see Berlin as an integrating force and a trustworthy, pro-European power. They regard Merkel as the EU's unifier – an image that she would no doubt embrace.

However, her successor should not be tempted to pursue a strategy of 'more of the same'. ECFR's data suggest that a mere continuation of Merkelism would not consolidate the good reputation Germany has acquired in European societies. This is the paradox of Merkel's legacy: Germany owes its success mostly to factors that are not sustainable and to circumstances that are now in the past. In other words, Berlin's actions in recent decades have raised expectations about Germany's potential to be the benevolent leader that a crisis-ridden EU needs so badly, struggling as it is to defend its values and find a place in a world of renewed great power competition. To fulfil this role, Berlin will have to reinvent itself. Most importantly, it will need to revise those principles of Merkelism that made Europeans place their hopes on Germany.

# Mission accomplished: Merkel's Germany as the great unifier

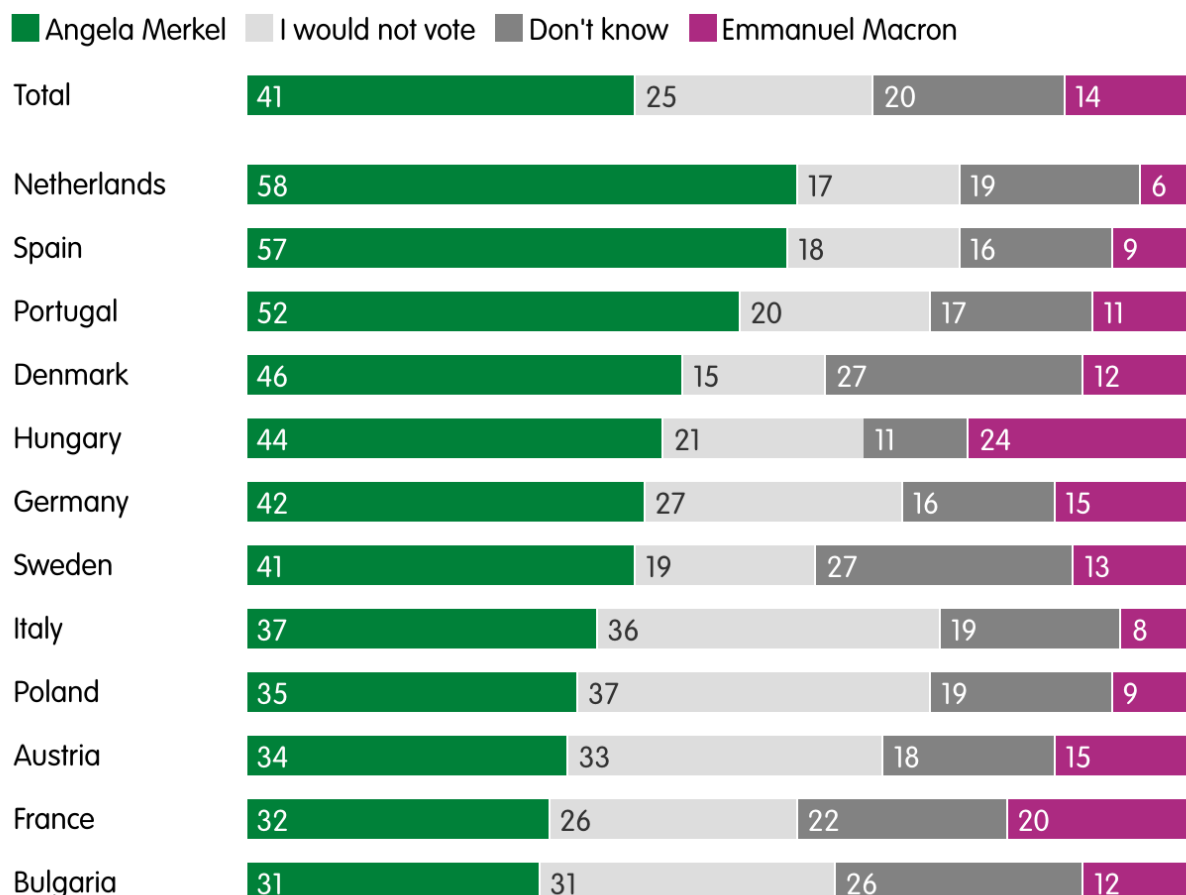
Throughout the Merkel years, the German government's mantra about its role in the EU was always 'keep the union together'. As the central power of Europe, Germany wanted to be seen as a force of moderation and conciliation, not as a hegemon. In view of the many centrifugal forces that have strengthened nationalist and Eurosceptic actors across the world, Germany's top priority has been to consolidate and preserve what had been achieved. This became particularly clear after the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Merkel's aim was to prevent the collapse of the EU's key political pillars and to strengthen it as a bulwark against the erosion of the liberal international order. Unlike French President Emmanuel Macron, however, Merkel did not push forward ambitious reform proposals. Instead, she advocated small, predictable steps to manage the many challenges the union faced. In other words, she tried to change just enough to maintain the status quo. Her priority was to make political moves as inclusive as possible, often settling for the lowest common denominator. She was convinced that there was no consensus in the EU for radical reforms or further integration, and that Macron's attempts to be more ambitious would only divide the union.

## Merkel for 'EU president'

EU citizens seem to favour Merkel's approach over Macron's. In response to ECFR's hypothetical question about who they would vote for as 'president of the EU' if Merkel and Macron were the only candidates, majorities in the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal said that they would choose the chancellor – as did pluralities in all other surveyed countries (including France). Taken together, 41 per cent of all respondents would vote for her, compared to only 14 per cent for Macron. This contest was not close in any of the surveyed countries – although support for Merkel varied across them (for instance, it was 27 percentage points higher in the Netherlands than in Bulgaria). With her technocratic leadership style, she appears to have won the trust of Europeans much more than Macron has with his visionary speeches. The fact that Merkel is so much more popular than Macron in not only the Netherlands and Spain but also Portugal and Denmark shows how much she can be an integrating force in different corners of the EU. The Nordic 'frugal' states and the countries of the EU's south often have diametrically opposed positions on many aspects of European policy, especially economic and financial matters. Since support for Merkel is high in both camps, she appears to have succeeded in conveying the message that she is committed to addressing the concerns of both of them,

positioning Germany as a unifying power.

**Pluralities in all polled countries, and majorities in the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal, would vote for Angela Merkel rather than Emmanuel Macron as Europe's president. In per cent.**



Excluding those who skipped the question. The question read: "If there was an election for the president of Europe and the only two candidates were Emmanuel Macron or Angela Merkel, who would you vote for?"

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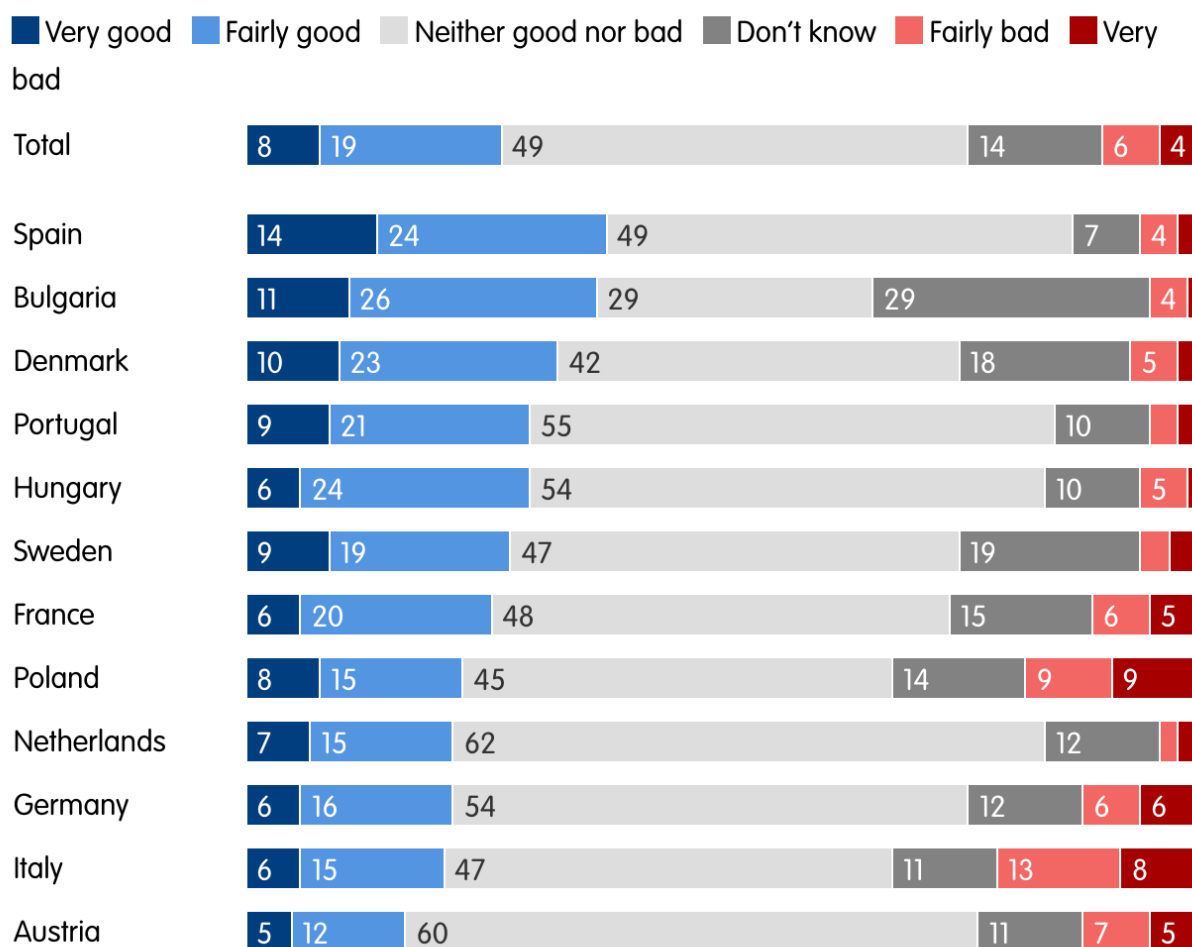
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## In Germany we trust

In retrospect, Merkel's greatest success in European policy is probably that she has placed Germany at the heart of an enlarged EU and significantly reduced its neighbours' fear of German dominance. The European public seem to be far less worried about a German power grab in EU institutions than elites in Brussels are. Today, only 10 per cent of respondents believe that a German president of the

European Commission is a bad thing, while 27 per cent even think that it is a good thing. Citizens in Italy (where 21 per cent say it is a bad thing but just as many – 21 per cent – say it is a good thing ) and Poland (where 18 per cent say it is bad) are the most critical national groupings. However, majorities or pluralities in all countries say that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s nationality makes no difference – which suggests that people do not see her as any kind of lobbyist for the German government.

### Most Europeans feel indifferent about the German nationality of the president of the European Commission. In per cent.



The question read: "To what extent do you think it is good or bad for Europe that the president of the European Commission is German?"

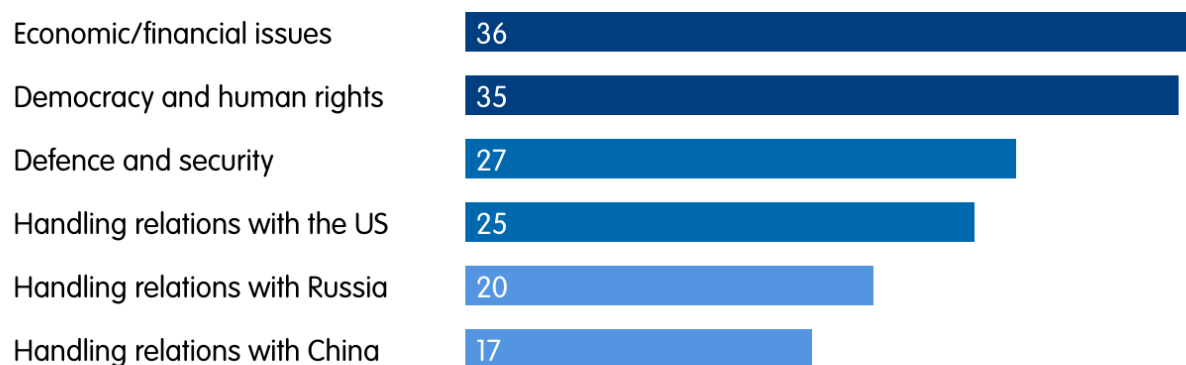
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Today’s Germany is a leading power in which many Europeans place their trust to defend their

interests on a range of issues. As ECFR's data show, the two policy areas in which this trust is most pronounced are economic and financial policy and the defence of democracy and human rights.

**Europeans trust Germany most on defending their economic interests and standing up for democracy and human rights.** In per cent.



Jointly for all 12 countries polled. Those who responded 'don't know' (26%) and 'none of these' (16%) are not represented in the graph. The question read: "Do you trust Germany to defend European interests if it plays a leadership role in each of the following areas? Please tick all the areas where you trust Germany."

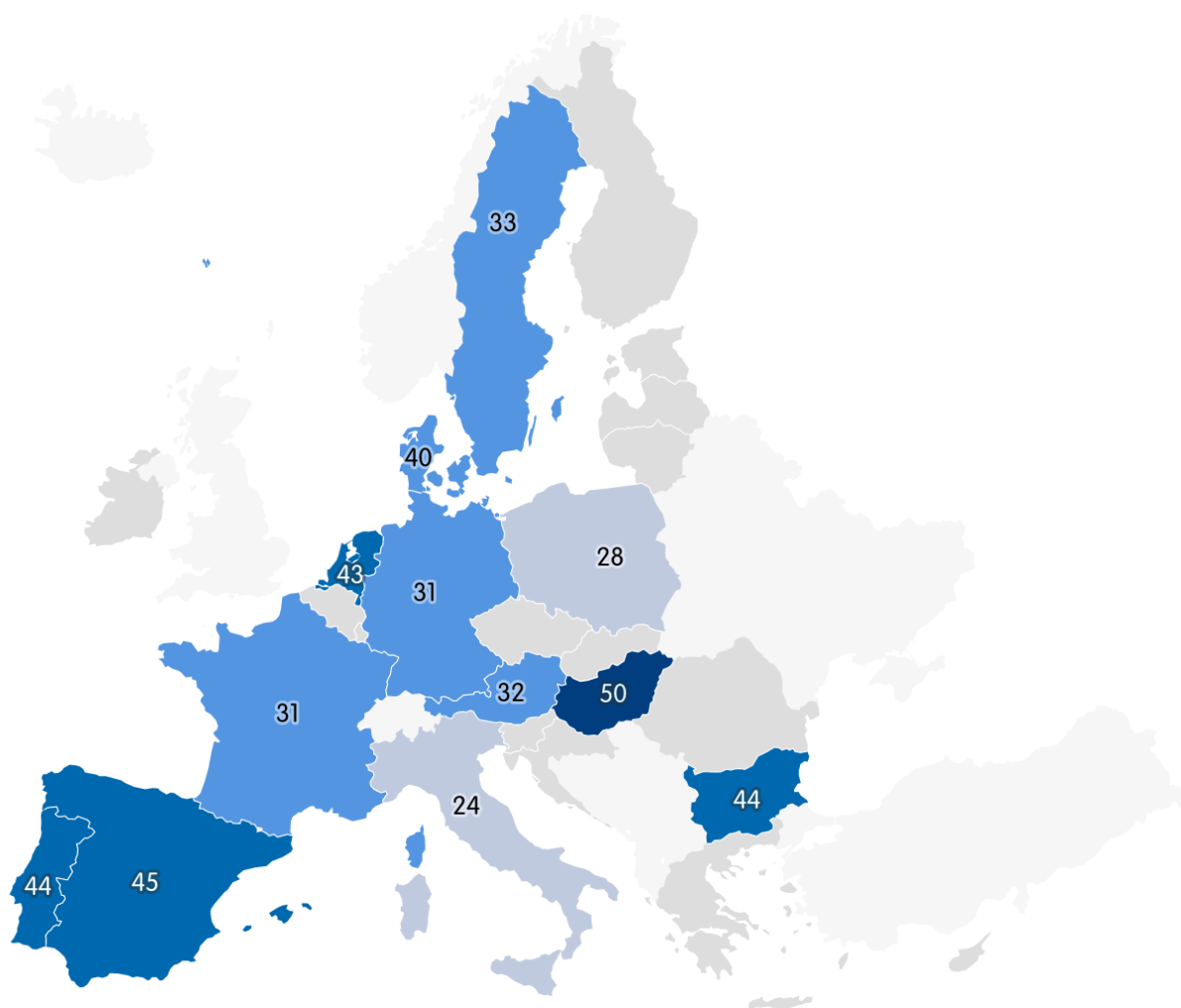
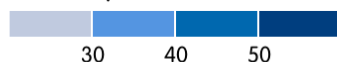
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In every surveyed country, economic and financial policy comes top or as a close second among areas in which respondents trust Germany to defend European interests. This finding seems paradoxical for two reasons. Firstly, the Merkel government's support for austerity during the eurozone crisis and obsession with public debt and Germany's huge trade surplus have drawn more criticism than any other policies. German economic policy was widely regarded as the EU's biggest problem, one that would ultimately lead to the EU's disintegration. Secondly, citizens of countries with diverse economic philosophies all see Germany as an advocate of European interests. These numbers were 50 per cent in Hungary (which is not a member of the eurozone), 45 per cent in Spain (whose government wants the EU to move towards a fiscal union), and 43 per cent in the Netherlands (the de facto leader of the frugal countries grouping). And while the figure is just 24 per cent in Italy, it was still the most popular option among those who expressed an opinion.

## Economic policy is the main area in which Europeans trust Germany to defend their interests. In per cent.

Trust in per cent



The question read: "Do you trust Germany to defend European interests if it plays a leadership role in each of the following areas? Please tick all the areas where you trust Germany." The graph shows the percentage share of those who selected "Economic/financial issues".

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This may also be partly the result of German policy during the coronavirus crisis, in which Berlin has tried to achieve the broadest possible consensus on the integration of the NextGenerationEU recovery plan into the EU budget, taking all member states' interests into account. Another reason could be

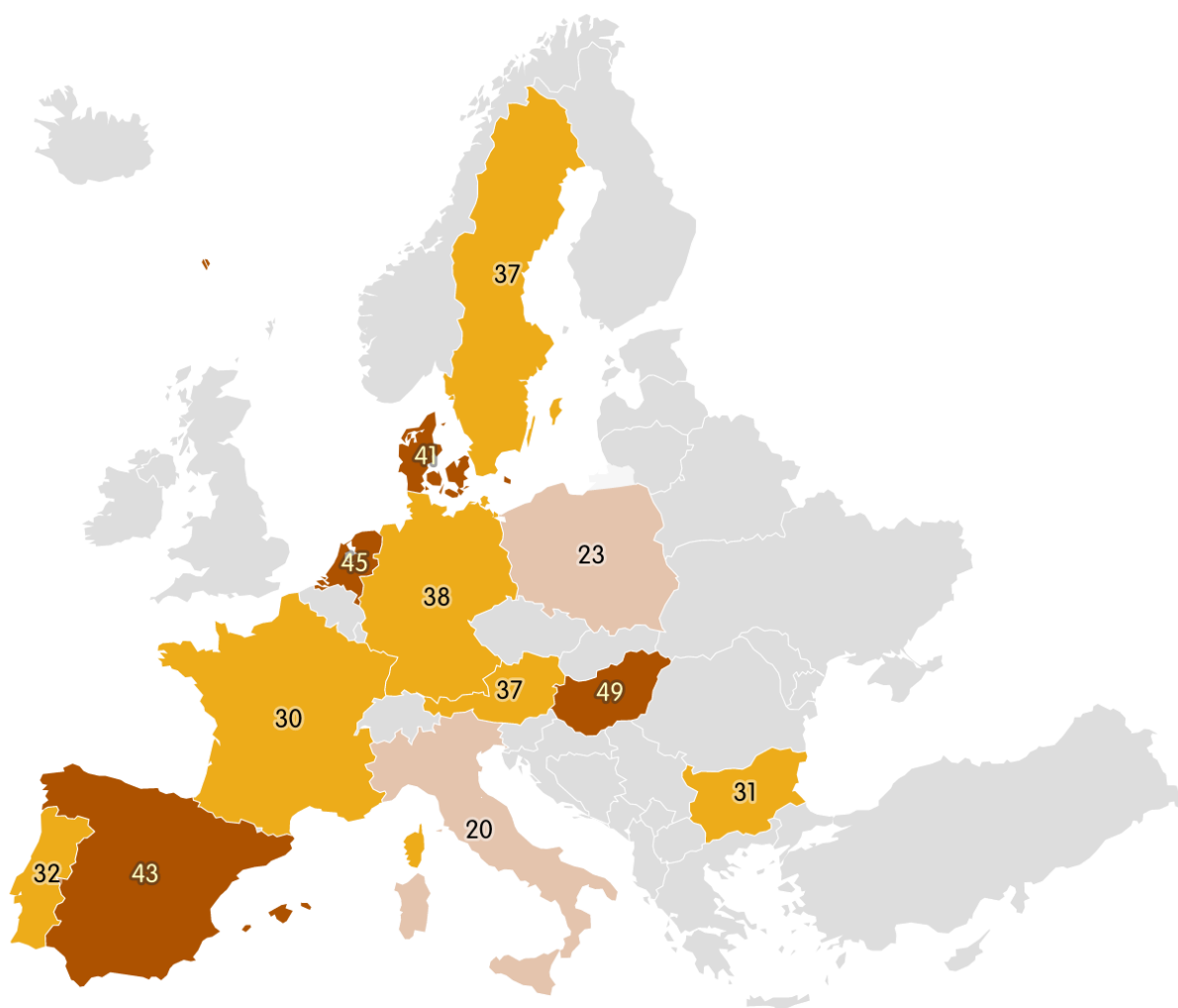
that Europe's citizens see Germany as an economic powerhouse that has weathered the numerous crises of the past decade much better than many other European countries – and, therefore, should serve as a role model for the EU. These considerations may weigh more on their perceptions of Berlin than any economic analysis that frames Germany's growth as coming largely at the expense of other EU member states.

The defence of democracy and human rights is the second policy area in which there is greatest confidence in Germany's role as a leader that acts in the European interest. Although Merkel has always resisted the attribution of 'leader of the free world', EU citizens see her as the leader of a free Europe. It seems reasonable to assume that this partly reflects many Europeans' appreciation of the stance that Merkel adopted during the migration crisis. They trust Germany to stand up for those values and principles that are of existential importance to Western democracy. This sentiment is evident across all countries in ECFR's survey, including Hungary (49 per cent) and Poland (23 per cent), whose governments are currently under an EU Article 7 sanctions procedure – which is designed to ascertain whether a member state is at risk of a "serious breach" of EU values. To be sure, supporters of the two countries' ruling parties drive their national averages down (just 11 per cent of Law and Justice's current supporters, and 28 per cent of Fidesz's current supporters, trust Germany to defend democracy – whereas the figures are much higher among supporters of the opposition).



## Europeans trust Germany to play a strong role in standing up for democratic values. In per cent.

Trust in per cent



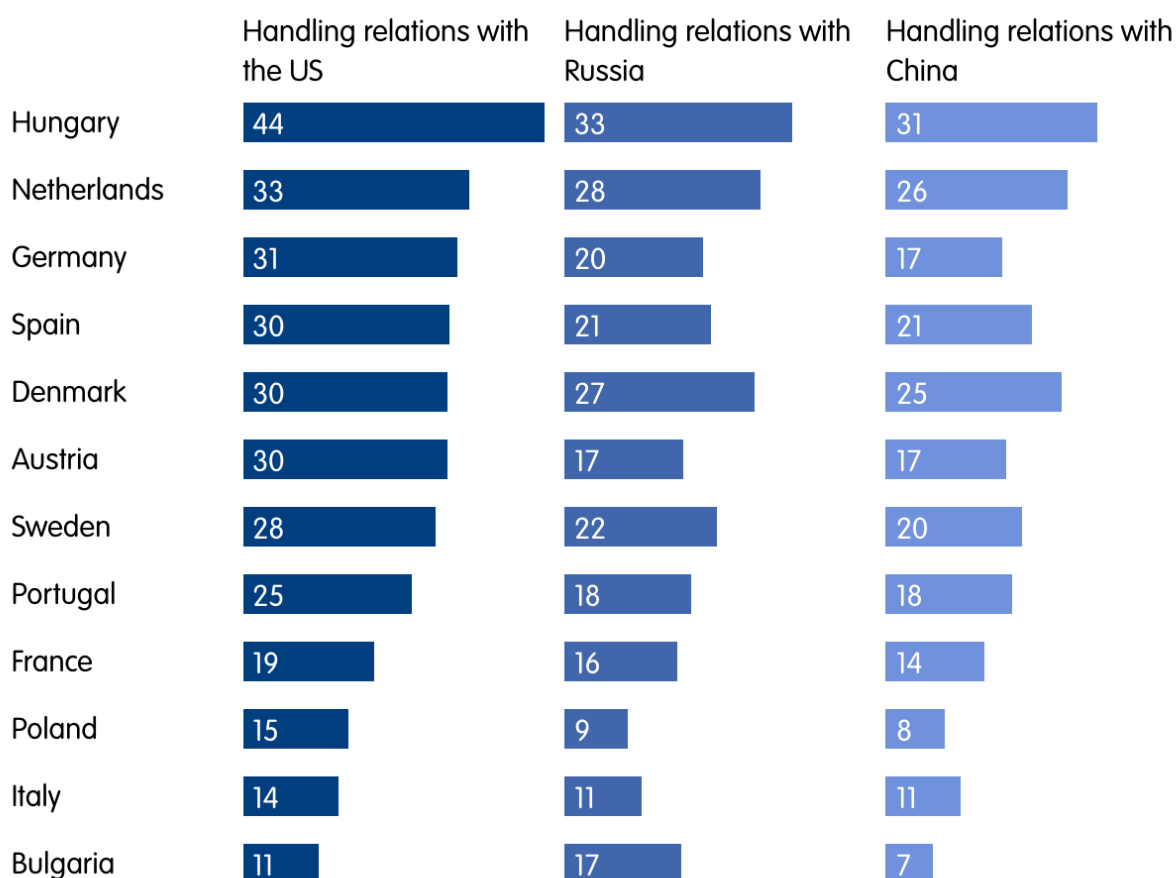
The question read: "Do you trust Germany to defend European interests if it plays a leadership role in each of the following areas? Please tick all the areas where you trust Germany." The map shows the percentage share of those who selected "Standing up for democracy and human rights".

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However, while Europeans' levels of trust in Germany to defend the European interest are relatively high on economic policy and the defence of democracy and human rights, they are comparatively low when it comes to dealing with the world's great powers. Berlin has the confidence of more than one-

third of EU citizens in handling economic issues and standing up for democratic values, but only 17 per cent of them believe that Germany can lead the bloc in its relations with China. In handling the EU's relations with Russia and the US, only one-fifth and one-quarter of Europeans trust Germany respectively. Europeans even have greater confidence in Germany on defence and security matters – which should reassure those in Berlin who argue that Germany cannot invest more in its military because this would worry its neighbours.

### Europeans have relatively low confidence in Germany's ability to handle EU relations with other great powers. In per cent.



The question read: "Do you trust Germany to defend European interests if it plays a leadership role in each of the following areas? Please tick all the areas where you trust Germany."

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These findings confirm that EU citizens do not necessarily trust Germany to lead the EU in their interests in a world of intensifying great power competition. When it comes to geopolitics, Berlin's

credibility is limited – especially in comparison to other policy areas.

This may not be surprising. Merkel's policy on China has often been largely informed by German national economic interests and not broader geopolitical considerations. One can hardly perceive the policy as having been 'Europeanised'. The chancellor established a common European front after the Russian annexation of Crimea (one of her key foreign policy accomplishments) but compromised her legacy with her unwavering support for Nord Stream 2. While the German government likes to present itself as a pioneer of a joint European foreign policy, its neighbours remain sceptical.

This corresponds with the belief among respondents in all surveyed countries (except for Hungary) that, had Merkel not been chancellor, there would have been more conflict in the world. But this does not mean that they regard her as a force for peace: pluralities everywhere believe that her chancellorship has made no difference to conflicts around the world. Europeans appear to see her as being not very 'geopolitical', suggesting that the diplomatic (and military) efforts of the German government have either gone unnoticed or been ineffective during the foreign policy crises of recent years.

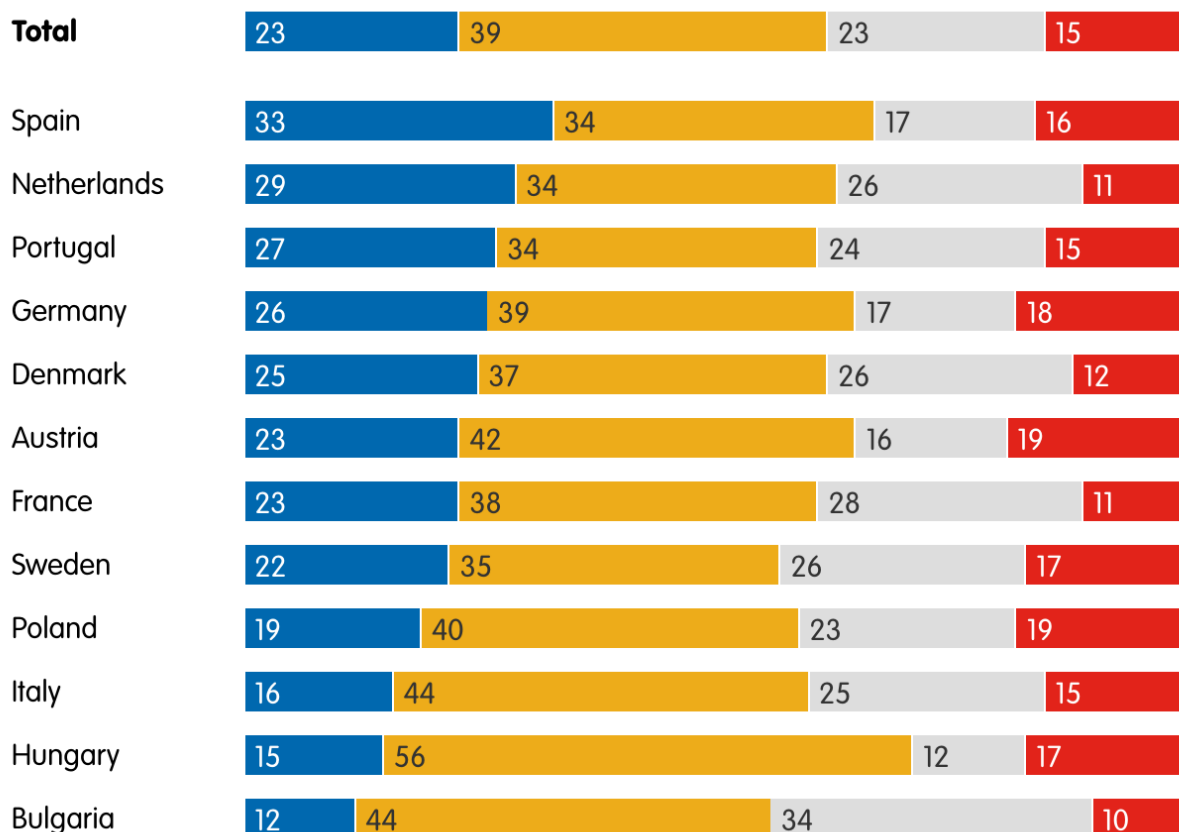
## Pluralities everywhere believe that Angela Merkel's chancellorship has made no difference to conflicts around the world. In per cent.

■ There would have been more conflict without Merkel

■ There would have been no difference

■ Don't know

■ There would have been less conflict without Merkel



The question read: "Do you think that there would have been more or less conflict in the world if Angela Merkel had not been chancellor of Germany during the last 15 years?"

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At the same time, however, Europeans see a need for the EU to become a more united and powerful international player. [A survey](#) that ECFR conducted in spring 2021 shows that Europeans are highly aware that, in an era of great power competition, they must rely more on themselves. Even with Joe Biden in the White House, there is still a widespread lack of confidence in the United States' ability to come back as the 'leader' of the West. The American withdrawal from Afghanistan has shown that

Biden is pursuing a foreign and security policy focused on narrowly defined national interests and no longer wants to see the US in the role of ‘world policeman’. Therefore, Europeans think it is necessary to cultivate strategic partnerships with various countries – including Russia, China, and Turkey – and to boost the EU’s global role. In seven out of 12 surveyed countries, a plurality of respondents said that the EU should react to the pandemic by developing a unified European policy on global threats and challenges.

One should recognise the implications of the relative lack of trust in Germany’s dealings with great powers. In future, it will become even more important for Germany to advocate a common European foreign policy and to credibly demonstrate that it engages with China, Russia, and the US primarily to protect European interests rather than just its own.

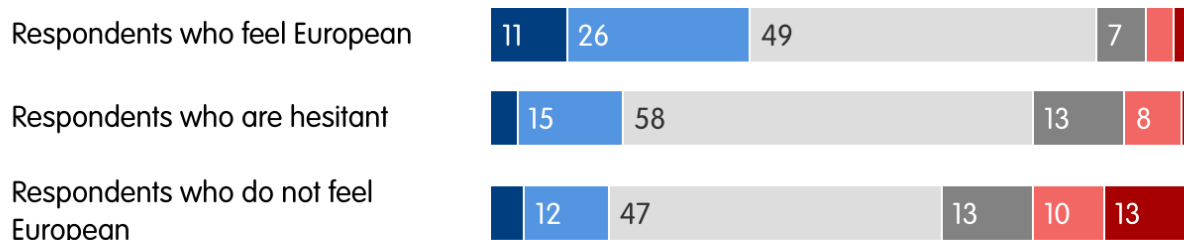
## Germany as an advocate for pro-EU voters

One clear finding of ECFR’s survey is that Europeans’ attitudes towards the EU and European values correlate with their perceptions of Germany. Those for whom being European is at least as important as their national identity tend to be more positive about Germany’s role. And they are also more likely to believe in the superiority of democracies over autocracies on a range of issues.

In all five countries in which ECFR asked about European identity – France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Sweden – those that said their European identity is at least as important to them as their nationality were much more likely than average to say that it is good that the president of the European Commission is German. Conversely, respondents that have less of an attachment to their European identity – who are often supporters of populist right-wing parties such as Law and Justice, the League, and the Alternative for Germany – are more likely to disapprove of the president of the European Commission being German.

## Those who feel European are more likely to say that it is good that the president of the European Commission is German. In per cent.

■ Very good 
 ■ Fairly good 
 ■ Neither good nor bad 
 ■ Don't know 
 ■ Fairly bad 
 ■ Very bad

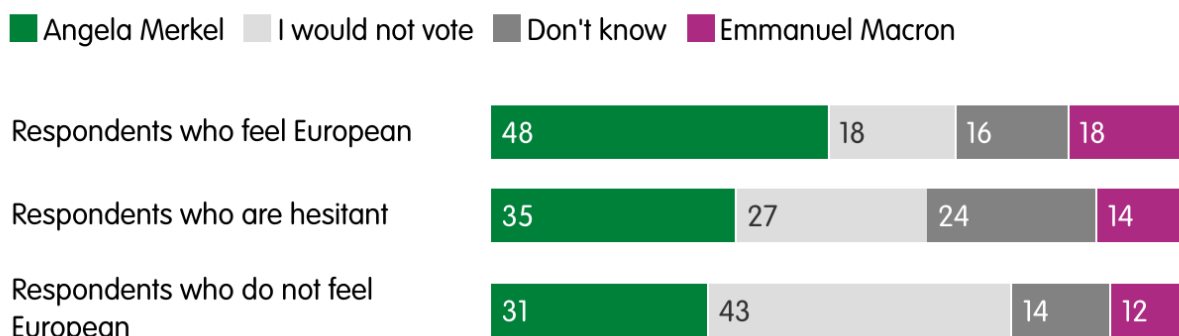


Data for five countries polled (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Sweden). The question read: "To what extent do you think it is good or bad for Europe that the president of the European Commission is German?" Respondents who 'feel European' refers to those who 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the following statement: "Being European is at least as important to me as being my nationality". Being 'hesitant' refers to those who 'neither agree nor disagree' with this statement. 'Do not feel European' refers to those who either 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree'.

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Merkel would have much stronger support for the presidency of Europe than Macron among respondents who feel European. Conversely, those who strongly disagree with the statement on European identity are more likely than average to say that they would not vote in an election for such a position.

## Respondents who feel European would be more likely to vote for Merkel as president of Europe than those who do not. In per cent.



Data for five polled countries (France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Sweden). Excludes those who skipped the question. The question read: "If there was an election for the president of Europe and the only two candidates were Emmanuel Macron or Angela Merkel, who would you vote for?". For the segmentation: respondents who feel European are those who 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the following statement: "Being European is at least as important to me as being my nationality". Being hesitant refers to those who 'neither agree nor disagree' with this statement. Respondents who do not feel European are those who either 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree'.

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Overall, respondents who feel a strong sense of European identity are more likely than average to appreciate German leadership on a range of issues – and much less likely to say they do not like it on any issue. The findings of ECFR's survey are particularly interesting for those who strongly agree that European identity is important: more than 40 per cent of them trust Germany on economic and financial policy, and on standing up for democracy and human rights. In addition, the survey shows that supporters of populist right parties are the least confident in Germany's leadership in both policy areas.

Those with a strong European identity are also more likely than other respondents to believe that there would be more conflict in the world if Merkel had not been chancellor (even if the predominant view among them is still that it makes no difference). And those with little sense of European identity are more likely than average to say that it would have made no difference.

In all, this suggests that respondents' views of Germany are closely related to their views of Europe. In other words, they view Berlin and its actions through a European prism.

# The murky future of Merkelism

Merkel has a fairly impressive record in meeting the expectations of EU citizens who are from various corners of Europe and have diverse interests. This is particularly clear against the background of criticism of Germany's policy across Europe in recent years. Under Merkel's leadership, Germany seems to have lived up to its self-defined goal of leading from the centre and keeping the EU together – at least in the eyes of a large share of Europeans. Merkel owes her reputation to a policy style based on skilful balancing between various interests, with the aim of finding compromises that satisfy all parties involved. Admittedly, she has at times achieved remarkable results through her perseverance – as seen in the establishment of the NextGenerationEU recovery fund and EU sanctions on Russia, neither of which would have come about without her mediation skills.

Merkelism has, as ECFR's survey shows, proved to be a good investment for Germany. Whatever the experience of Europe's ruling elites and the opinions of its pundits, Merkel's legacy will be one of having convinced EU citizens that Germany is a European power. This significant political capital of trust and recognition could provide the post-Merkel German leadership with a solid foundation to build on.

However, the policy of remaining neutral and avoiding tough solutions to Europe's predicaments does not seem to be a viable approach to the challenges ahead. The downside of wanting to bring everyone on board and to make EU cohesion an absolute priority is that it limits one's ability to act. Many of the most pressing challenges Europe faces are impossible to address with the Merkel method. Dealing with the pandemic, climate change, and growing geopolitical competition requires not only cosmetic changes but political support for more radical solutions. Merkelism is unlikely to outlive Merkel not because it is only her who can practise it but because the EU will need a more visionary and courageous Germany to strengthen its foundations and defend its place in the world. Many Europeans seem ready to accept this shift – and may even be waiting for Berlin to initiate it.

## A new European landscape

The main reason for the limited shelf-life of Merkelism is a change in the nature of European integration. With Merkel stepping down, it is becoming apparent that the effects of integration have changed in the past decade. Merkel has built her reputation as Europe's first crisis chancellor. The bloc has come under severe strain from disagreements between member states on the nature of fiscal and economic policy, asylum policy, the rule of law, and Brexit. The EU has been preoccupied with



internal problems – albeit with some important exceptions, such as the Trump presidency, as well as Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. And Merkel’s key mission was to bridge internal divides, reconcile divergent positions, and thereby protect the EU’s cohesion in the name of unity above all else. Indeed, her historic accomplishment is keeping the EU together in a decade in which many Europeans feared it would break apart.

However, if one looks at the EU and Europeans today, a troubling picture emerges of a continent divided by values and exposed to new threats. The compromises that Germany has come to embody, and that have become the pillars of Merkel’s policy, will be even harder to achieve in future. Most importantly, Merkel’s departure coincides with two major challenges for the European project – both of which have a different scope and nature to the crises the chancellor handled so skilfully. They will require a different strategy to Merkel’s.

The first challenge will be to stand up for EU values and principles no less than for the bloc’s unity. In the last few years, they have come under attack more than ever. And, as much as Europeans associate Merkel with the defence of Western values, her lack of engagement to prevent Europe’s rule of law crisis from getting out of control may have been the greatest failure of her Europe policy. Under her leadership, Germany was not at the forefront of efforts to protect democracy and the rule of law – to say the least. The rise of Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s autocratic system in Hungary would not have been possible without Berlin’s acquiescence.

Germany’s passivity on the issue stemmed from party loyalty (Fidesz was until 2020 a member of the European People’s Party, a grouping that includes Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union); German companies’ economic interests in Visegrad countries; and – perhaps most importantly – the Merkel doctrine’s emphasis on risk avoidance and fear of conflict. All this prevented Germany from acting before it was too late. Orban saw this strategy as a sign of weakness, and exploited it accordingly.

Berlin followed a similar line of *aussitzen* (sitting it out) on Poland. Merkel was instrumental in preventing the conflict over the independence of the Polish judiciary from escalating, in the vain hope of a compromise that could satisfy both sides. Germany’s historical sensitivities and its interest in keeping neighbouring Poland in the EU mainstream at any price also played a major role in this strategy. Germany’s effort to avoid escalation backfired. The crisis reached its peak in July 2021, when the Polish government opposed the right of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) to intervene in member states’ judicial systems if they lost their independence. To undermine this competence of the CJEU would be to risk the collapse of the EU’s legal order.

The breakdown of the EU’s fundamental values – around the supremacy of EU law, the role of the CJEU, judicial independence, and minority rights – could destroy the union, especially if it coincided

with the emergence of an authoritarian equilibrium backed by EU funds. Addressing this challenge will require a much more straightforward approach than the one pursued by Merkel. The goal of preserving EU unity will remain important. But, with autocrats pushing the conflict about the fundamentals of the European project to the extreme, there is no effective way to adopt Merkel's conflict-averse *sowohl-als-auch* (as well as) policy. A long-term strategy to defend both the unity of the EU and its core values will require a short-term, principled focus on the latter. If post-Merkel Germany wants to protect the European project – and, therefore, much of Merkel's legacy – it will have to openly lend political support to decisive action against those who attack the foundations of the union. The EU and its member states can only achieve this by abandoning Merkelism. The trust Europeans have in Germany when it comes to defending democracy gives the next federal government a mandate to do just that.

The second challenge post-Merkel Germany will face relates to the processes shaping the new agenda of the EU. Developments within the EU are no longer the primary influence on the direction of the union's politics. For a long time during the Merkel era, it seemed as if the EU had taken a geopolitical holiday from history. The EU saw like-minded partners emerging in every region of the world and expected that countries such as China and Russia would move closer to the West in the long run. But a free, secure, prosperous, and socially just Europe now faces massive threats from the outside – and is not prepared to confront them. The EU agenda is increasingly shaped by external problems and influences. The climate crisis has forced the EU to fundamentally rethink its economic and social agenda. This has resulted in the European Green Deal, which is designed to create a new socio-economic model based on the principle of climate neutrality. The United States' efforts to refocus its foreign policy away from Europe is forcing the EU to change its security policy and move towards more strategic sovereignty. The rise of China confronts the EU with the need to develop a coherent and measured response to what has become a systemic rival.

The key challenge for the EU in the next decade will be to defend and modernise its governance model in a world in which its role is likely to decrease. Merkel's approach of sitting on the fence will no longer be viable, especially in view of the conflict between the US and China, which increasingly dominates world affairs. Germany will be forced to establish a much stronger position for itself and the EU in this conflict. Therefore, in the coming years, German leadership in the EU will require more than maintaining the bloc's unity (even if this will remain a fundamental task for Berlin, not least in view of these external challenges). Germany's perceived weakness in great power relations is likely to become increasingly problematic – unless Berlin positions itself as a more trustworthy leader in dealing with actors such as China and Russia.

Germany will have to leave its comfort zone in areas in which it neither wanted to lead nor was trusted

to do so in the Merkel era. If post-Merkel Germany is to attain the image of a truly European power, it will need to provide its European partners with clear-cut ideas about the EU's role and positions in an increasingly competitive and crisis-shaken international environment. The new German government must demonstrate more clearly than before that it sees the relationship with China and Russia in the light of European and not primarily German interests. And it needs to lead the way towards a post-dependent Atlanticism that has a strong European angle.

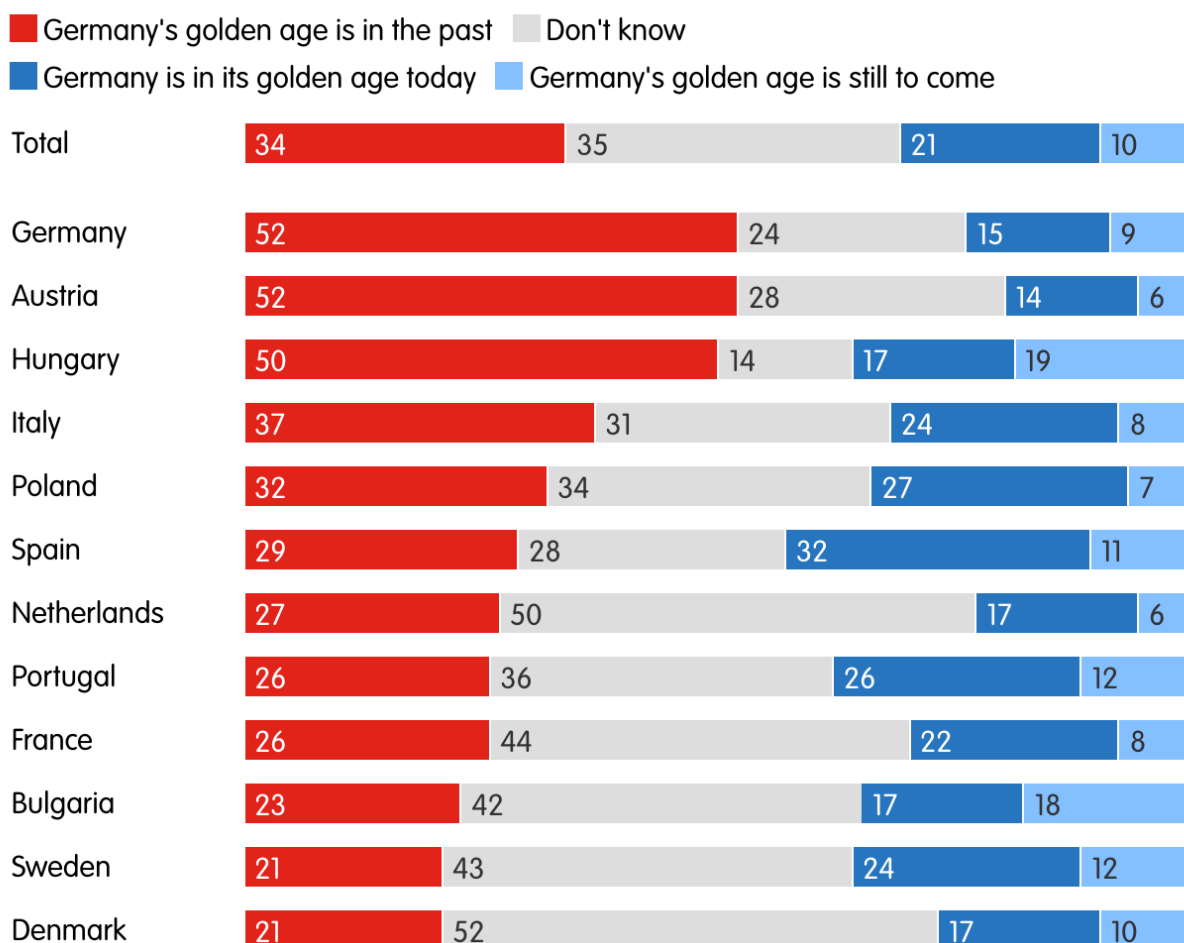
## Germany's fading star

Will Germany meet the challenges arising from this new political constellation? As discussed, Europeans have developed an appreciation for Germany's approach to, and role in, Europe. At the same time, though, they are far less optimistic when it comes to the future of the country. To put it bluntly, a plurality of EU citizens see Germany as a declining power. This may not be the best point of departure for post-Merkel Germany.

Across all 12 surveyed countries, 34 per cent of respondents believe that Germany's golden age is a thing of the past. Meanwhile, for 21 per cent of respondents, the Merkel era seems to mark the peak of Germany's prosperity – they agree with the statement that Germany is now living through its golden age. A mere 10 per cent of Europeans expect that Germany's golden age is still to come. This overall pattern applies in almost every surveyed country individually. Spain and Sweden are the only member states in which a plurality of respondents see Germany's present as more glorious than its past. Germany, Austria, and Hungary are the only ones in which a plurality or majority see Germany's past as more glorious than its present. And while "don't know" is the most common answer in seven surveyed countries, it is remarkable that two of Germany's neighbours – the Netherlands and Denmark – are those in which the highest proportion of people were unsure how to answer the question.

It is intriguing that a plurality of Europeans believe Germany's golden age is in the past but would choose Merkel as president of Europe over Macron. This suggests that it is not only in Germany but also in Europe more broadly that Merkel as a political figure is more popular than the results of her rule. Without Merkel, the foundations of Germany's leadership role in the EU will be significantly weaker – unless the new government implements a credible strategy that goes beyond Merkelism.

## Most Europeans - and a majority in Germany and Austria - see Germany as a declining power. In per cent.



The question read: "In your opinion, do you think Germany's golden age is past, present or still to come?"

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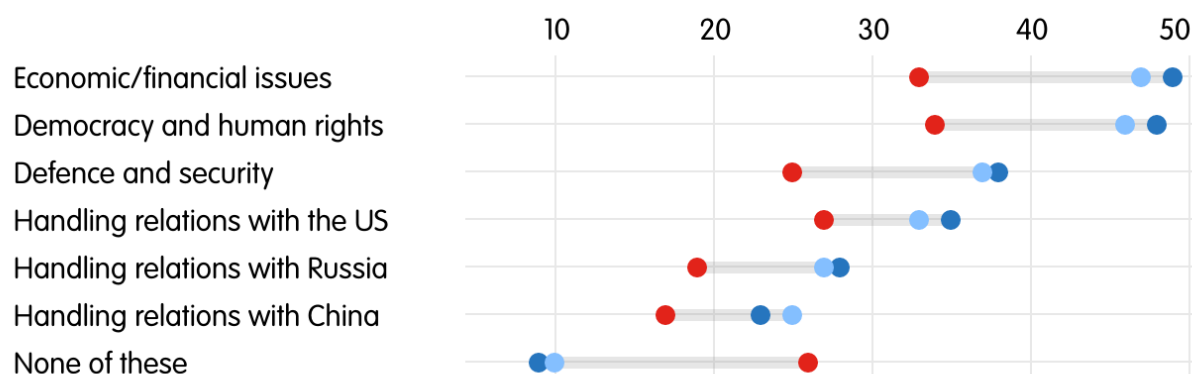
If many Europeans believe Germany's star is fading, this could undermine their trust in Berlin. Their positive attitudes towards Merkel's Germany seem to have had a lot to do with the country's stable economic growth and low unemployment in the last two decades despite challenging economic conditions in Europe. It seems that, unlike in the past, Germany's power and prosperity now contribute to its image as a reliable partner.

Judging by ECFR's data, Europeans who see Germany's golden age as being in the present or the future are more likely than others to trust Berlin's capacity to lead the EU on a range of issues. One

can see this as yet another sign of a remarkable achievement of the Merkel era: there appears to be no fear of a strong Germany.

## The more optimistic Europeans are about Germany's future, the more likely they are to trust Berlin's capacity to lead the EU. In per cent.

- Germany is in its golden age today
- Germany's golden age is in the past
- Germany's golden age is still to come



The responses to "Don't know" are not shown. Jointly for all 12 countries polled. The question read: "Do you trust Germany to defend European interests if it plays a leadership role in each of the following areas?"

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Accordingly, those who regard Germany's glory days as being in the past – and there are many of them (34 per cent) – tend to have less confidence in Berlin's leadership. For example, 26 per cent do not trust Germany to defend any of the European interests presented in the question.

This overall picture suggests that, should scepticism about Germany's prosperity become more widespread in Europe, Europeans may become less willing to see Berlin as a pillar of Europeanism. The covid-19 crisis has brought to light Germany's neglect of its infrastructure and lack of investment in digitalisation. In addition, the intensifying geopolitical conflict between the US and China poses enormous challenges for the German economy, which is heavily dependent on globalisation and exports. Growing scepticism about Germany's economy would erode trust in its ability to lead Europe, severely impeding its ability to do so.

## German pessimism

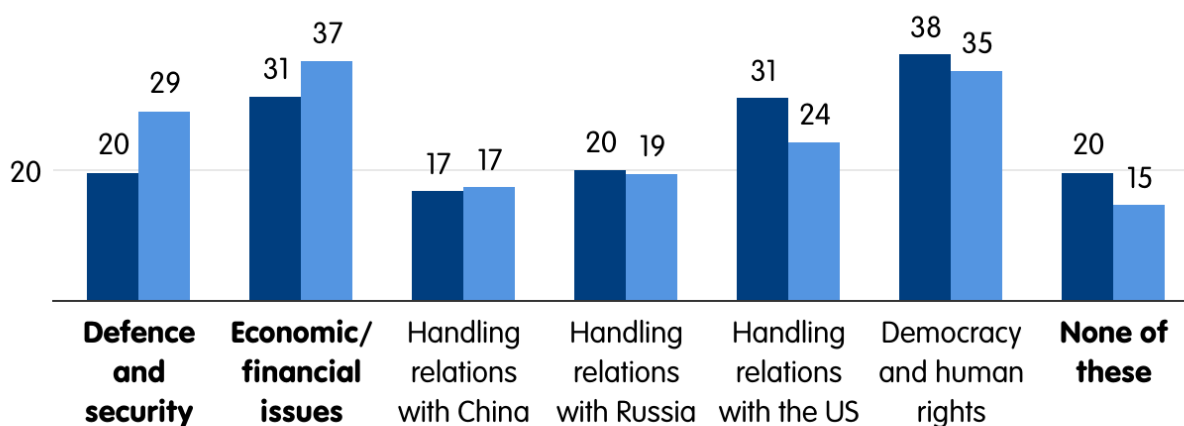
Whether Germany meets the expectations raised by the fairly successful Merkel era will largely depend on German citizens themselves. Europeans do not seem to be too afraid of a self-confident, powerful, and prosperous Germany, even if many of them are sceptical about the country's prospects. However, the relative success story of the Merkel years has not necessarily translated into a positive self-perception among Germans. Most of them do not see their country as the EU's leading power. And pessimism about Germany's future is even more widespread among Germans than other Europeans.

Fifty-two per cent of Germans believe that their country's golden age is in the past. They are by far the most pessimistic about its future among Europeans (aside from Austrians, who are equally pessimistic).

Germans do not seem to be emotionally prepared for the role of Europe's leading power either. Only when it comes to standing up for democracy and human rights do more than one-third (38 per cent) of Germans trust that their country can defend European interests. On economic and financial issues, as well as on security and defence, Germans have less trust in Berlin to provide European leadership than other Europeans do. While 29 per cent of other Europeans trust Germany to lead on defence and security, only 20 per cent of Germans do (the smallest proportion in any of the 12 surveyed countries). Similarly, 37 per cent of Europeans would be happy with Germany's leadership on economic and financial issues, but only 31 per cent of Germans would be (a smaller proportion than in any national grouping aside from Italians, Poles, and the French). Twenty per cent of Germans do not trust Germany to provide leadership on any of the issues covered by ECFR's survey (the third-largest proportion of any national grouping, after Poles and Austrians). Other Europeans are slightly less pessimistic: only 15 per cent do not trust Germany to defend European interests on any of the issues covered by the study.

## Germans have less confidence than other Europeans in Berlin's capacity to provide European leadership. In per cent.

■ Germans ■ All other respondents



The question read: "Do you trust Germany to defend European interests if it plays a leadership role in each of the following areas?" All respondents from the remaining 11 countries were treated equally to calculate the numbers for "All other respondents".

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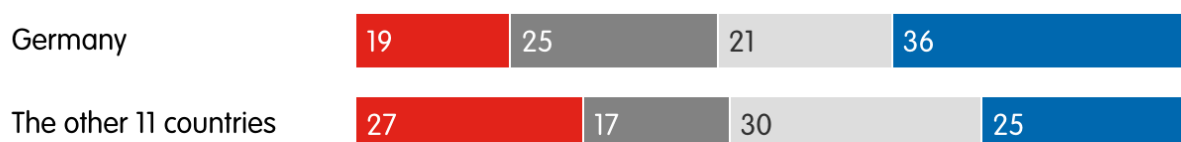
At the same time, Germans do not fear that they will fall back into nationalism. Only 19 per cent of them believe that there is such a risk – compared to 27 per cent in the other 11 surveyed countries. In turn, 36 per cent of Germans expect their country to become even more focused on helping other Europeans, significantly more than the 25 per cent of respondents in other surveyed countries. Therefore, Germans have a fairly positive image of their own intentions but do not seem to believe that their country's ability to provide leadership is a precondition for being reliable and supportive of other member states. In the post-Merkel era, this may not be the right conclusion. Germans may need to shake off their doubts about Germany's leadership, because other Europeans are counting on it to provide this.

## Germans are less concerned that Germany will become more nationalistic than other Europeans are. In per cent.

■ Germany will become more nationalistic

■ Neither ■ Don't know

■ Germany will become more focused on helping other Europeans



The question read: "Thinking about the role you expect Germany to play in Europe over the next decade, which of these statements, if either, do you tend to agree with more?" All respondents were treated equally to calculate the numbers for "the other 11 countries".

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## Conclusion: From EU unity to the defence of the European model

Germany will have to shoulder new responsibilities in the post-Merkel era. This shift is strongly related not just to the signal achievements of the outgoing chancellor but the fact that, under her leadership, the German government has the trust and support of most EU citizens who feel strongly attached to the European project. In their eyes, Germany seems to be a beacon of Western values, including democracy and the rule of law, as well as the EU's anchor in difficult times. They place their hopes on Germany to defend the European order. This makes Germany a European power par excellence.

However, bringing hope to the defenders of a liberal Europe is not only an opportunity. It also creates risks and challenges. To meet them, post-Merkel Germany will have to recalibrate its foreign and European policy strategy, leave its comfort zone, and go beyond Merkelism. The Merkel era has been marked by the need to keep the EU together under intensifying internal and external pressure. Merkel excelled at this task and rightly gained an appreciation for it across Europe. However, in the post-Merkel era, this will not be enough. Next to keeping the EU together, the goal of defending core



European values and interests should become the measure of a responsible EU leadership. In particular, Germany will need to lead the fight against the two most dangerous threats the EU will face in the coming years.

The first threat is that of a breakdown of the rule of law in the EU, one caused by the rising autocratic tendencies of some member states' governments. The European political landscape is increasingly defined by the 'democratic versus autocratic' and 'cosmopolitan versus nationalistic' divides. Merkel's Germany has been instrumental in either bridging these divides or, more often than not, avoiding them. While Europeans on one side of the divides appreciate Germany's leadership, those on the other side mistrust or oppose it. In other words, Merkel proved to be the EU's great unifier in geographical terms. Citizens of member states in all regions of Europe have similar assessments of Germany.

However, Germany may need to become a much more straightforward defender of the values and principles European society is based upon. The country may have to learn how to accept the price of becoming less amicable towards the autocratic nationalist side of the conflict. It is impossible to satisfy both sides. And attempting to do so would be detrimental to the European project.

The EU cannot survive without common standards of judicial independence, respect for the values enshrined in Articles 2 and 19 of the Treaty on European Union, or – crucially – the recognition of the CJEU as the ultimate arbiter of the interpretation of those principles. It is exactly these fundamental rules that have been under attack from populists and autocrats. Stepping aside in the faint hope of a compromise would result in a historic failure. No less importantly, disappointing EU citizens who identify with European values and oppose nationalism would also have disastrous consequences. The engagement and optimism of these citizens, who place their hopes on German leadership, is key to the EU's future in difficult times.

The second threat that would overmatch Merkelism is that of the EU's geopolitical marginalisation. For a long time, Germany's friends and partners have been calling on the country to play a greater international role. Merkel herself acknowledges that the times when the EU could fully rely on others are "somewhat over", and that Europeans need to do more to provide for their own security and defend their interests in the world. Germany is the crucial player here; it is now high time for it to finally up its game. In many ways, Merkelism (which often came with mercantilism) has only been possible because the US provided leadership of the Western bloc and the rules-based multilateral order seemed to be holding together. With the world entering what Mark Leonard calls the "age of unpeace", this is no longer the case. And Merkel's departure is a symbol of this historic shift in the Western alliance.

As ECFR's polling data show, Europeans are aware of this new reality and are concerned about Europe's diminishing role in the world. Even more importantly, they acknowledge that geopolitical competition now poses an existential threat to the European project. Germany must define a new response to these fears and expectations.

More often than not, Berlin will have to clearly position itself in defence of EU principles, international rules, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. It will need to find a way out of the cul-de-sac it manoeuvred itself into with the Nord Stream 2 saga, when it ignored geopolitics in the name of economics. And it will need to use its economic and political clout to work closely with the Biden administration on a joint transatlantic approach to China. This means that Germany will have to take sides even at the cost of the conflicts and tensions its decisions may create. The Merkel era created a solid foundation for this role by convincing the Europeans that Germany's power can be used in Europe's interests. It will be up to the next government in Berlin to redesign European and foreign policy in a way that will allow Germany to wield this power in future.

The key challenge for the post-Merkel leadership in Berlin will be to convince Germans that changing gears in European and foreign policy would be in both Europe's interests and their own. As one of these authors recently argued, German policymakers and politicians should talk less often about the fact that Germany has a special responsibility in Europe because of its history, size, and location. They should explain how the EU helps Germany increase its influence, enhance its prosperity, and protect the German public. The 'Munich consensus' – the conviction that Germany's international engagement ought to have come earlier, been more decisive, and had greater substance – may have shaped the foreign policy discourse of the last few years of the Merkel era. But there is now a need for a 'Berlin consensus' – which would combine a more principled stance on European values with the strategy and resources required to stand up for them in a new geopolitical environment. This would

be the best way to ensure that Merkel's legacy outlives Merkelism.

## Methodology

This paper is based on a public opinion poll in 12 EU countries that the European Council on Foreign Relations commissioned from Datapraxis and YouGov (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden), AnalitiQs (the Netherlands), Alpha (Bulgaria), and Szondaphone (Hungary). The survey was conducted in late May and early June 2021, with an overall sample of 16,267 respondents.

This was an online survey conducted in Austria (n = 1,014), Denmark (n = 1,015), France (n = 3,110), Germany (n = 3,001), Italy (n = 1,002), the Netherlands (n = 1,004), Poland (n = 1,060), Portugal (n = 1,000), Spain (n = 1,011), and Sweden (n = 1,047). In Bulgaria (n = 1,002), the survey was conducted online and through telephone interviews. In Hungary (n = 1,001), it was conducted using phone interviews only. The results are nationally representative of basic demographics and past votes in each country. YouGov used purposive active sampling for this poll.

The general margin of error is  $\pm 3$  per cent for a sample of 1,000 and  $\pm 2$  per cent for a sample of 3,000.

The exact dates of polling are: Austria (19-27 May), Bulgaria (28 May-6 June), Denmark (19-26 May), France (26 May-4 June), Germany (20-27 May), Hungary (27 May-7 June), Italy (25 May-4 June), the Netherlands (20-24 May), Poland (21 May-9 June), Portugal (20 May-2 June), Spain (2-7 June), and Sweden (25 May-1 June).

The segmentation into three groups of people who feel European, those who do not, and those who are hesitant, is based on whether they agree or disagree with the following sentence: “Being European is at least as important to me as being my nationality”. Respondents who feel European are those who “strongly agree” or “agree” with this statement. Respondents who are hesitant are those who “neither agree nor disagree” with this statement. Respondents who do not feel European are those who either “strongly disagree” or “disagree”. This question was asked only in five countries (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Sweden). The presented data exclude those who skipped the question.

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