

opinión

EUROPA



69

may
2010

AN IRON CHANCELLOR FOR EUROPE

Carme Colomina

Research Fellow CIDOB

Deniz Devrim

Research Fellow – Europe

In recent weeks, German Chancellor Angela Merkel seems to have turned into Europe's new iron lady, allegedly fulfilling the prediction of her British predecessor Margaret Thatcher who believed that once reunified, Germany would lose its interest in the EU. Since reunification, German politicians consistently proved that this fear was misplaced; however, the current Chancellor's delayed reaction to the Greek crisis, the failure to make an early commitment and her stubbornness to bring the IMF into the rescue caused Europe-wide uproar and granted debt speculators extra time. On the other hand, some would argue that Germany's tough position has forced the Greeks to seriously commit themselves to painful and unpopular but necessary internal reforms, credible fiscal and financial control, and transparency.

But Europe's 'engine' has been threatening to push the brakes for some time. Angela Merkel's tough stance on the Greek debt crisis is not something fundamentally new; it is rather the most visible sign of a gradually changing perception on European integration in the EU's largest member state. Merkel's European priorities have shifted. France, always seen by German leaders as a crucial ally in the European project, is no longer the indispensable partner for progress. Furthermore, Germany is not on the front line when it comes to forward-looking debates and important challenges such as a common external energy policy, future European enlargement or the nature of the new institutional set-up.

The Greek crisis has sparked a debate in Germany in which the tabloid press is not the only voice of dissent. In an alarming trend, liberal and conservative politicians have begun to articulate ideas in a tone hitherto unknown in Germany's discourse. Instead of explaining to the electorate what is at stake and reminding what Germany has gained from the EU and the euro, politicians often left the debate to the media. The Bild Zeitung, the most popular mass newspaper, has run a series of banner titles, such as *Why should we pay for Greece's luxury pensions?*, *Greece – out of the EU! or Never again shall we be Europe's paymasters.*

A majority of Germans is opposed to any loan being granted to Greece. In full regional election campaign, Angela Merkel opted to raise the hard voice. She is the first Chancellor that has subordinated EU policy to domestic short-term public

opinion. Germany's late back-peddling and granting of the loan can only offer limited damage control. Weeks of giving the impression that Germany has begun to lose its traditional sense of solidarity with its European partners have weakened the international image of the Euro.

One notable voice of moderation amidst the crisis, the German Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble, urged Germans to speak with respect when referring to other EU member states, asserting that Germany owed the most positive part of its modern history to European integration. It is interesting to see that the Finance Minister, known for being a sober and unemotional politician, is more enthusiastic about the EU than the Chancellor, who, at this stage seems to have lost this significant characteristic of German political mentality: historical memory. It is also the Finance Minister who best explained that helping Greece is about stabilizing the euro and not about charity and therefore, is in Germany's best interest.

Germany's engagement with European unification has been long and intimate. Since the early 1950s, the country embraced the idea of European integration with an approach to national sovereignty that was different to the other large member countries. Germany's leaders, as well as its citizens, perceived the country as part of a supranational community. State identity for them was directly linked to European identity. Those who feared that a reunified Germany would emerge too strong and too nationalistic were proved wrong. Support for integration following reunification was a constant feature of Germany's EU policies.

It is not in Chancellor Merkel's nature to run headlong into a decision at the turn of events; she tends more to a 'wait and see' attitude, acting only when the most probable outcome of an issue has become apparent. While each German Chancellor has stood for something – Konrad Adenauer and Willy Brandt for eastern and western orientations respectively, Helmut Kohl for German unification and the EU and Gerhard Schröder for Germany's participation in international military actions – Merkel can be said to stand for the 'normalization' of Germany's attitude on European integration, meaning that sixty years after the end of the second World War, Germany has shed its unwavering commitment to the European project. And this is not something that Chancellor Merkel has taken up alone. This new attitude is becoming more and more apparent in German society. A good example is the June 2009 Constitutional Court ruling on the Lisbon Treaty which clearly reflects the national perspective and that – for the first time - erects barriers to European integration. The German Constitutional Court could again play an important role on the Greek bailout. The same group of professors that brought the Lisbon Treaty before the court in 2008 is arguing now that the financial support goes against the treaties.

Angela Merkel, like her predecessors, can find in the current crisis her own cause to stand up for in Europe, leading the voices against financial speculation and demanding financial market regulation be strengthened. She would surely find her French ally backing her. The EU is a political project in which solidarity is a fundamental principle. Europe's history has shown that those who insist on short-term national benefits loose in the long run. This is truer for Germany than for any other European country.