

German leadership in the EU: «window of opportunity» and new challenges

Roman Shakhverdov

School of Governance and Politics, MGIMO University

Abstract: The article considers the role of Germany as one of the leader within the EU. The study looks at the factors that have contributed to the German domination in relations with European countries. Germany's presidency of the EU Council, recovery programme from the crisis caused by the pandemic and economic leadership has become visible signs of a new power configuration in Europe. However, the article stresses that in Germany's foreign policy area, a strong alliance with France is needed to ensure strategic leadership.

Key words: European Union, German diplomacy, international conflicts, EU Council.

Main body

Germany's leadership in the EU is a fragmented problem for analysis because of its different positions on external and internal issues. Germany is increasing its dominance within the EU and Europe as a whole, but also faces a number of objective limitations.

In recent years, as France has become more active, Germany has been losing its foreign policy primacy in the EU, focusing on internal European issues. The problems of migration, economic recession and the crisis, which was caused by the pandemic, have required Germany to show its will to resolve the problems and difficulties. Of course, the German authorities also paid attention to the processes taking place on the periphery of Europe, especially to the elections in Belarus, but it is issues within the EU that are of primary concern to Germany.

Speaking about leadership in the EU, it is necessary to identify a number of issues:

- 1) Germany's diplomatic and economic weight;
- 2) Role in the sanctions policy;
- 3) The importance of Germany in resolving international conflicts;

4) Germany's actions to restore the European economy after the pandemic crisis¹.

The four questions are closely linked to Germany's formal domination within the EU institutions, economic leadership and the informal importance of Germany, which is reflected both in the frequent consultations with German politicians and diplomats in most EU countries in the period of crises and in the general attention paid to Berlin's position. As part of this aspect, it is worth noting that Berlin's position largely reflects the EU's position as an organisation.

Germany's six-month presidency of the Council of the European Union ends in December this year. It is noteworthy that it was the tacit leader of the EU who had the honour of being one of the three countries developing a programme to counteract the pandemic and rebuild the affected European economy.

On 24 June the members of the Cabinet of Ministers adopted the programme for the German Presidency of the European Union. Heiko Maas used this moment to clearly express once again Germany's attitude towards European issues: «We can only emerge from the crisis together. This requires a lot of effort and difficult decisions from all of us. As part of its presidency of the EU Council, Germany intends to be a driving force and a moderator. Our task will be to build bridges and find solutions that will benefit all Europeans as a result». In the same speech, the German Foreign Minister also spoke about the key challenges at the heart of German European policy, namely migration, climate change and digitalisation².

The key document for analysing Germany's role so far is the programme for the German Presidency of the EU Council. The document focuses not only on the

¹ Together for Europe's recovery - Programme for Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union // URL:

<https://www.eu2020.de/blob/2360248/e0312c50f910931819ab67f630d15b2f/06-30-pdf-programm-en-data.pdf>

² Foreign Minister Maas on the Cabinet decision concerning the national programme for Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union// 24.06.2020 URL:

<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/maas-programme-german-eu-presidency/2356954>

economic and management mechanisms for economic recovery, but also on the values of a united Europe. It emphasises the importance of a common approach to solving economic problems by developing tools to support entrepreneurship, digitalisation and EU programmes.

Remarkable points of the programme are the need for security in the region, as well as its provision in the areas bordering the EU. This is an obvious and successful attempt by Germany to identify German and EU interests.

Germany's programme for the reconstruction of Europe has satisfied most European countries, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, Germany is the main domestic creditor for European countries, and secondly, Germany has considerable political potential to convince its partners of the right solutions, as it is Germany that acts as an arbitration player during the new phase of European integration and is ready to consolidate the positions of the various EU member states. The post-Lisbon period has allowed this «shadow factor» of diplomacy shaping the EU configuration, which is certainly in Germany's hands. Thirdly, the European countries weakened by the crisis are very attentive to the proposals of the most stable and strong European economy, which is also one of the main features of German diplomacy.

It is worth noting that it is wrong to talk about one-sided dependence of EU member states. Germany is certainly the dominant state in the organisation, as evidenced not only by the number of German politicians and diplomats in institutions and key positions³, such as Ursula von der Leyen. However, for an export-oriented Germany, European economic prosperity is a de facto domestic issue, as the intensification of the crisis in Southern Europe could destabilise not

³ Hanns W. Maull: Germany's Leadership in Europe: Finding Its New Role // Volume 3, Issue 1 (Regional Leadership and Multipolarity in the 21st Century), Feb. 2018, pp. 87-111. URL: <https://risingpowersproject.com/quarterly/germanys-leadership-in-europe-finding-its-new-role/>

only European relations but also the German economy itself⁴. This has mediated the focus of the main European economy (as of 2019, Germany accounts for around 22% of the total GDP of the EU member states) on financial issues⁵.

While EU internal affairs are subject to theoretic-methodological and factual analysis thanks to the transparent nature of the issues, there are a number of limitations to consider when it comes to Germany's foreign policy leadership⁶.

As stated at the beginning, Germany is overshadowed by the French leadership agenda in foreign affairs. This is due not only to the fact that France is a permanent member of the UNSC, but also to its colonial past and its significant presence in regions outside the EU. However, the era of the «asymmetrical alliance», which for a long time was the Paris-Berlin alliance, is a thing of the past. Today, Berlin and Paris are closely linked, both because of their limited military presence in the regions and because of their limited capacity to maintain an active foreign policy line.

The isolationism of the Trump, the Ukrainian crisis, the situation in Belarus and the crises in the Middle East have all mediated the need for unity of the French-German tandem in what has already been said to be a limited resource. Germany has skilfully used the international chaos to regain its role as a tactical power, but the strategic leadership in foreign affairs still does not belong to Berlin.

⁴ Басов Федор Алексеевич: Германия в Европейском союзе: от экономического локомотива к политическому лидерству // *Контурь глобальных трансформаций: политика, экономика, право*. 2017. №1. URL: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/germaniya-v-evropeyskom-soyuze-ot-ekonomicheskogo-lokomotiva-k-politicheskomu-liderstvu>.

⁵ Matthew Karnitschnig: What Merkel wants // 25.06.2020 URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/what-angela-merkel-germany-wants-eu-influence/>

⁶ Lisbeth Aggestam & Adrian Hyde-Price (2020) Learning to Lead? Germany and the Leadership Paradox in EU Foreign Policy, *German Politics*, 29:1, 8-24.//16.04.2019 URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09644008.2019.1601177>

To sum up, Germany's leadership, despite its objective limitations, is unquestionable. Germany is increasingly defending national and strategic interests in the EU and has significant resources to consolidate the European Union through both formal and informal management levers. The prospect of German strengthening in the European region is inextricably linked to the further development of economic potential and the strengthening of inter-state alliances, particularly with France.

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