

The Show Must Go On: Charismatic Authority in European Politics Post-2020

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Abstract: The article examines the concept of “charismatic authority”, formulated by Max Weber in “Economy and Society”, and analyzes the role of this phenomenon in European politics post-2020, based on the three criteria of charisma development outlined by William Friedland (1) a leader expresses novel ideas; 2) a leader faces risks; 3) people see the results of the leader’s activities), while also taking into account the personal factor and touching upon the concept of synthetic charisma. As a result of the analysis of four European countries (Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy), the article concludes by determining that the role of “charismatic authority” in European countries varies, with the common trend, however, being the absence of leaders who can meet all the aforementioned criteria.

Keywords: charismatic authority, leadership, Europe, establishment, synthetic charisma.

Introduction

Charisma, or, rather, “charismatic authority”, as it was formulated in “Economy and Society” by Max Weber, is required for legitimizing power and, as a result, pursuing a successful and efficient policy. The experts agree that charismatic authority is often summoned in the face of impending disaster and new challenges. Since 2020, for the last three years, Europe has been under a barrage of various threats both to those in power and to the citizens – starting with the COVID-19 pandemic that debilitated many

economies, exacerbated by a new wave of migration, an armed conflict in Ukraine and now, a new escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This continuous onslaught of challenges has amplified the voices of skeptics proclaiming the doom of political giants in Europe.

An American sociologist William H. Friedland attempted to expand on Weber's theory by making it more applicable in sociology. In order to highlight the importance of social context in which charisma develops, he outlined three main criteria:

- A leader expresses novel ideas;
- A leader faces risks;
- People see the results of the leader's activity¹.

However, some scholars believe that charisma also depends on the personal factor, which manifests differently in various countries, which is why it is also taken into account in this article.

Germany: A Study in Boring

From 2005 to 2021 – almost for the entirety of the 21st century so far – Germany, a heavyweight member state in the EU, was ruled by chancellor Angela Merkel, largely recognized as one of the most successful politicians in the world. Described by some as “unremarkable and dour”, she nevertheless managed to maintain a high approval rate throughout her term, astonishing critics, who struggled and failed to understand the appeal.

Since 2021 a new chancellor has been at the helm of Germany – an ex-Minister of Finance Olaf Scholz, who earned a nickname “Scholzomat” for the monotonous, almost robotic drone of his voice and who was called all manner of synonyms to the

¹ Friedland, William H. For a Sociological Concept of Charisma // Social Forces. 1964. Vol. 43, no. 1. Pp. 18–26. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2575961> (date of access: 26.11.2023)

word “boring” in the press. Despite this, Scholz’s quiet competence and effective handling of the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated his victory during the 2021 elections. According to William Friedland’s criteria of charisma development, a charismatic leader should express novel ideas and face risks. While there is no denying that the time when Olaf Scholz became chancellor forced him to deal with many dire situations – the aftermath of the pandemic, the Ukrainian crisis, a new wave of the refugee crisis and etc. – questions do arise as to whether the policies implemented by Scholz can be considered novel, since in both his decision-making process and in his public image he seems intent on continuing the legacy of Angela Merkel.

Are German citizens reacting positively to the assumed continuity? Results of a survey conducted on behalf of public broadcaster ZDF in August 2023² demonstrate that the answer to that question is a solid “no”, with over a half of the German population not satisfied with the chancellor's work for the first time since he took office in 2021. This means that efforts made by Scholz to drive the country forward, as the memory of his effective handling of the pandemic somewhat fades, were not received as favorably by the citizens, who are, after all, proponents of stability, not stagnation.

Another reason for such a high disapproval rate, however, can be found in Scholz’s likability – or, rather, the absence of it. Therein lies the difference between the current chancellor and Angela Merkel –Scholz lacks that certain *je ne sais quoi* that made Merkel command the room, that made people pay attention. Dr. Oliver Niebuhr, a professor in the University of Southern Denmark, analyzed Olaf Scholz’s public speaking³. He assessed various voice parameters such as speech rate, pause duration and pitch range (Acoustic Voice Profiling), determining Olaf Scholz’s result as 67.4 out of a 100. Skilled speakers, such as B. Obama have a result of 93 and higher – though, Germany’s average is usually 20-40, which still puts Scholz above many of his

² Majority of Germans unhappy with Scholz amid fight over spending – survey // Reuters – 2023 – URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/majority-germans-unhappy-with-scholz-amid-fight-over-spending-survey-2023-08-18/> (date of access: 26.11.2023)

³ Wie charismatisch ist Olaf Scholz? // Charismatischer.de – 2022 – URL: <https://charismatischer.de/lab/wie-charismatisch-ist-olaf-scholz> (date of access: 26.11.2023)

compatriots. Nevertheless, it is fair to assume that Scholz, unlike Merkel, has not yet earned himself a spot amongst the most revered European politicians of our time – with his public image shortcomings being among the main impeding forces.

As far as personal factor is concerned, it is important to reiterate that German citizens pay it no mind in most cases when choosing a new leader. For them, charisma is not a deciding factor – a person’s professional capabilities are. This assumption can be proved by returning to the elections of 2021 – where one of Olaf Scholz’s main opponents was Annalena Baerbock, an eccentric woman with a bold reform agenda and a lot of verve, so unlike typical German politicians. Her loss at the elections proves that, fundamentally, Germans love boring: boring, but competent.

The UK: Jocks and Nerds

Since the Brexit deal was finalized, the turbulence surrounding the post of the UK Prime Minister has not settled – a myriad of characters has occupied it, garnering strong attention, be it supportive or disdainful, from citizens and the world society both.

Since October 2022, the UK has had a new Prime Minister from the Conservative Party – Rishi Sunak.

As The Guardian writes, when Rishi Sunak became Prime Minister, expectations were at their lowest: “We had been led to believe that Rish! was a break with the past. A different type of prime minister than Boris Johnson and Liz Truss. Someone with little charisma – the Conservatives had had more than enough of personalities – but who could be trusted to have a basic level of competence⁴.” All the crises that engulfed Europe also reflected on the UK, requiring a steadier ruling hand than Boris Johnson and Liz Truss could offer, which is where Rishi Sunak stepped in.

⁴ Crace J. Rish! as prime minister makes 2017’s Maybot sound like advanced AI // The Guardian – 2023 – URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/jun/05/rish-as-prime-minister-makes-2017s-maybot-sound-like-advanced-ai> (date of access: 27.11.2023)

Constructing the image of a “tech bro multimillionaire”, who could empathize with the citizens, Sunak was expected to give the UK time to breathe and regain the balance lost, while at the same time dealing with the challenges that directly affect the people of the UK – namely, the abysmal fiscal situation provoked by Liz Truss’s tax cuts. Sunak managed to avert the looming threat of recession, although, the high level of inflation has proved to be harder to control. After dealing with the more immediate risks, Rishi Sunak changed course and sketched out long-term policy plans – a gesture, which was not taken to kindly by some of the citizens, more concerned with their nearest future, than with the legacy Sunak’s premiership would bring. The Guardian reports: “No one is happy. Nothing is working⁵.” According to YouGov, currently Sunak is disliked by 58% of the voters (with only 18% supporting his work), while 40% in total are of the opinion that he should resign⁶.

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the role that personal factor plays in the UK. Tom Harwood from GB News⁷ provides a curious classification that has its roots in the American high school. He theorizes that over the years, all British prime ministers can be divided into two main categories: “jocks” and “nerds”. According to this, British Prime Ministers have alternated between charismatic, even eccentric figures like Churchill, Thatcher and Johnson (“Jocks”) and quieter, less noticeable figures like Attlee, May and, now, Sunak (“Nerds”). This theory argues that “after the period of high drama, the citizens yearn for the virtues of quiet decency until they are ready for more excitement and risk”⁸. Therefore, the conclusion seems to be that British people value charisma in their leaders only on occasion – alternating between those likely to upend the established order and those likely to rebuild it afterwards.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rishi Sunak. Popularity & Fame // YouGov – 2023 – URL: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/explore/public_figure/Rishi_Sunak (date of access: 27.11.2023)

⁷ Herman D. Jocks and Nerds: how to predict Prime Ministers and Presidents // The Article. 2022. URL: <https://www.thearticle.com/jocks-and-nerds-how-to-predict-prime-ministers-and-presidents> (date of access: 28.11.2023)

⁸ Ibid.

French “RELOVEUTION”

Emmanuel Macron is currently holding his second presidency after re-election in 2022. Being the only political figure examined in this article who succeeded in winning the second term, Macron provides an example of a policymaker who has to manifest his charisma at length amidst the ever-changing socio-political landscape.

It cannot be said that Macron does not express novel ideas: after all, in 2017 he seized the highest office defying traditional French parties only a year after setting up his own. A proponent of renewal, he appealed more to the citizens who craved economic prosperity with his promises of annual GDP growth equal to 1,2%. However, during his second presidential campaign in 2022, Macron found it increasingly harder to find common ground with the French citizens – his promises of raising the legal retirement age by three years, as well as his controversial decision to avoid new coronavirus restrictions and unbalanced foreign policy sparked heated debates.

Perhaps, the only existential risk that put him, as a president, in a precarious position and wasn't incurred by the French themselves, was the pandemic. While pursuing a strategy of direct communication with the citizens and investing in healthcare were steps in a right direction, the potential of scoring more points was wasted. The core issue is that banking on European integration, which was (and, in many ways still is) a focal point in Macron's policy, does not lead to more supporters among ordinary French citizens – who, ultimately, are a crucial point in the process of developing and legitimizing a leader's charismatic authority.

He's quite young, always camera-ready and well-spoken: an infallible public image, which, undoubtedly, allowed him to win twice. However, after winning there is governing, and the outcomes of his political activity leave much to be desired. Ending the wealth tax and imposing a 30 percent flat tax on capital gains, disdain for healthcare, and a missed chance to take the helm as the leader of Europe, according to Politico, by a retarded reaction for the conflict in Ukraine – all these factors have tarnished the image of the new president, and have evidenced that currently in France personal factor is losing its value.

Italy: Spaghetti Politics

The appointment of Giorgia Meloni as Prime Minister in Italy in 2022 did not exactly come as a shock for European media – rather, there was a sense of begrudging understanding, since it is quite well known what desperate times call for. Nevertheless, currently Meloni might just be the most successful politician of the period in terms of charismatic authority.

A far-right politician, gaining the largest majority of the coalition government since 1994 – a victory, owed to her speaking out on the issues of national identity and interests, demographic decline and economic challenges, thus giving a voice to Italian citizens, who were tired of old parties with their infamous leaders. Giorgia Meloni's firm disapproval of COVID-19 restrictions and focus on public finance also played in her favor.

Italy's geographical position means it is under a greater strain than its main EU counterparts (France and Germany) as far as migration is concerned, not to mention the fact that other common European problems have a more profound effect on Italy's social, economic and political situation due to a lower level of government stability and higher ministerial turnover in the country, which means Meloni had to prove that she was not only amenable to compromises as she was battling with the left mainstream, but also that she was capable of carrying out the policies she outlined during the election campaign.

It is still too early to assess the result of her work, however, the fact that she managed to overcome the “fascist” moniker that loomed over her and her party at first already speaks volumes. Furthermore, the measures taken by her to stabilize the economy as well as the strengthening of the ties with the European Union (in contrast with her initial skepticism) have proven to be quite beneficial – as a result, the European Central Bank has paused its interest rate hikes and rating agencies have held off on downgrading government bonds. Of course, the migrant crisis is far from being settled,

however, even despite this setback her party keeps inspiring quite stable feedback in polls, compared to earlier governments.

Giorgia Meloni is the first female prime minister in Italy, an emotionally engaging speaker, whose popularity proves the relevance of personal factor in Italy. Citizens react favorably to intense speeches and grand promises – of course, as long as they see that these words are at least somewhat followed by actions. Ultimately, despite whether or not Meloni's government will be able to last long, the fact of the matter remains that Italians are partial to a powerful leader.

Synthetic Charisma

The concept of synthetic charisma was developed by R. Ling, who took the elements of charisma as described by Weber and juxtaposed them against the results of the 1983 Denver Mayoral Campaign, intending to prove that the image of charisma, seemingly attributed to political candidates, was constructed through the campaign organizations and, most importantly, the media. The resulting illusory, or synthetic charisma, was used by the two aforementioned institutions to pursue their respective goals – votes and profits.

This phenomenon is quite widespread and is of particular relevance regarding some of the leaders already discussed in this article – particularly, Emmanuel Macron.

One of the more widely-known examples of the implementation of synthetic charisma is the Emmanuel Macron photoshoot, originally thought to have occurred after the French president's phone call with Russian leader Vladimir Putin after the beginning of the Russian special military operation in Ukraine. The photos depict Macron, either sitting down with hands on his forehead or standing behind a chair with his shoulders hunched, scrunching his face in anguish and appearing deep in thought. These photographs were published with the intention of portraying Macron as a leader, passionate about the fates of ordinary Ukrainian citizens, devoted to designing an effective solution to a new European problem. The photoshoot quickly went viral, with

Macron immediately becoming an Internet “meme”. However, later the Reuters Fact Check team⁹ offered proof that the photos can all be traced to different dates, effectively undermining the effort Macron’s team was trying to put into constructing an appealing public image in reaction to one of the biggest events in the recent history of Europe.

Conclusion

The role of charismatic authority varies from country to country in Europe since the role that the personal factor plays in each of the four states examined in this article differs. Nevertheless, the common trend that can be outlined in all four aforementioned countries is the pointed absence of someone who is capable of meeting all 3 criteria defined by W. Friedland.

In Germany, the example of Olaf Scholz demonstrates the value of capability over charisma that is a distinct trait of the country’s political culture. Even so, the failure to adequately face the challenges and represent Germany on an international level alienates even those who do not believe charisma to be necessary. The example of the UK’s Rishi Sunak proves that the post of the PM isn’t inherently reserved for charismatic leaders, since the country opts for a pendulum system, adapting the requirements depending on the situation and paying attention to the personal factor in certain times. Personal factor contributed a lot to Macron’s victory in the presidential race and he had two further ways: to maintain charismatic authority by institutionalizing it through well-developed projects or to become a mainstream politician. The French president is aware that he’s going down the second path rapidly – thus, «synthetic charisma» is promoted. Among the politicians mentioned, Giorgia Meloni's charismatic leadership is the best sustained so far: she efficiently uses the scale of evocations to legitimize her mission of saving the country and seeks to

⁹ Tracing the dates of Emmanuel Macron's widely-shared portraits // Reuters – 2022 – URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL2N2VD21N/> (date of access: 28.11.2023)

institutionalize her charisma. However, missteps and debatable maneuvering tactics prevent her from gaining even more trust of Italians.

The core conclusion, therefore, lies in the fact that charismatic authority in Europe does face challenges despite the most suitable political environment for the birth of charismatics: incentives turn into perils and the absence of concrete steps towards prosperity outweighs the potential of personality. Whether or not there is a solution to the problem of charismatic authority in Europe, desperately required given the political discontent and the challenges ahead, remains to be seen.

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