

Merkel's Power Shaken by Refugee Crisis

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Time magazine's "person of the year" in 2015, is facing her biggest political crisis as her welcoming of Mideast refugees has troubled and angered many Europeans, raising the possibility that Merkel's days as the Continent's undisputed leader may be numbered, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The online edition of Bloomberg News carried a lead story entitled "Merkel in Peril with Window to Tame EU's Refugee Crisis." It was a commendable effort to flag the possibility of political change at the top of Europe's leading country, a prospect that most mainstream U.S. and even European media still overlook.

In the article on Thursday, the writers took into account the direct challenge to Merkel's open borders' policy on refugees coming from the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Bavarian sister party of Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Bavarian Premier Horst Seehofer disparaged Merkel's failure to make the slightest concession to her detractors when she spoke to a CSU gathering in Wildbad Kreuth on Wednesday. He concluded, "We're looking at some difficult weeks and months ahead."

Bloomberg News also directed attention toward what it called "unprecedented pressure" from within Merkel's own faction, making reference to a letter signed by 50 CDU deputies calling for the government to tighten border security to counter the refugee influx. Previously, 56 deputies had made known their disapproval, bringing the number in her faction opposed to her refugee policy to one-third.

Yet, in the end, the article's authors do not believe Merkel's hold on power is genuinely imperiled, as the title tantalizingly suggests, because she has weathered other storms in her long tenure, because she has seen to it that there is no successor in line to take over should her colleagues in the party wish to dump her, and because the German economy is humming along, with enviably low unemployment and GDP continuing to grow.

The notion of Merkel facing a "closing window" of opportunity to solve the refugee crisis is presented by the authors as coming from the Dutch premier and other neighboring countries, and without reference to dynamics inside German politics.

Worse Than It Looks

While the argument in favor of the German Chancellor remaining in her post is

credible, it is not persuasive and in what follows I intend to raise several factors that the Bloomberg News team ignored.

These suggest that Merkel has finally laid the groundwork for her own political demise by uncharacteristic impulsiveness, by the failure of her intuitive faculties, and by her trademark stubbornness and doubling down in the face of opposition.

My reading of the German press, by which I mean leading dailies *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Bild*, over the last week turns up what I would call a step-by-step preparation of the German public for regime change. This is seen firstly in the derogatory adjectives being attached to Merkel and her refugee policy, including “brainless” (*kopflös*) and “idealistic.”

To be sure, “idealistic” would normally ring positive, but when applied to the Iron Chancellor it takes on an unequivocally negative connotation given her reputation among professionals for cynically manipulating the political levers to gain and keep power and her reliance on polls rather than “grand ideas” or even principles to guide her policy-making. I call her decision to welcome and embrace the flood of Syrian, Iraqi and other Middle Eastern refugees impulsive given its immediate context.

The summer of 2015 was a public relations disaster for Merkel, as viewed from many European countries. She was widely seen as the European leader calling the shots on what was undeniably the *rape of Greece*, a power play in which the Troika of European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund steamrolled the will of the Greek people as expressed in a referendum seeking relief from austerity. Instead, the Troika forced continued austerity on the supine and helpless nation.

This action contradicted the European Union’s founding principle of solidarity and it went down badly in the streets, heightening public skepticism about the E.U. project as a whole and anger toward Germany as the perceived E.U. hegemon.

Last summer was also the time when Merkel was on television giving a condescending and cold-hearted response to the plea of a German-speaking Palestinian girl to spare her family deportation, described by a headline in *The Guardian* on July 16 as follows: “Angela Merkel comforts sobbing refugee but says Germany can’t help everyone.”

Considering that within two months, the Chancellor became the public champion of receiving all self-declared Middle Eastern asylum seekers, it would be safe to assume that the decision was taken on the basis of her seemingly unflinching political intuition, without adequate consultation of polls, without due

consultations with her associates in the governing coalition, not to mention other Member States of the European Union.

And this one time when emotion won out over reason in her decision-making, Merkel turned out to be dead wrong in terms of the impact that the refugee crisis would have on the E.U.'s cohesion. Merkel's error was compounded by her mulishness.

A Destabilizing Flood

The mass movement of Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan and other refugees across E.U. borders on their way to Germany in late summer caused alarm initially in Greece, where they landed from Turkey in their overcrowded dinghies, and then caused alarm and desperate measures of control in the Balkan states as the refugees progressed on their journey.

Hungary was the first, most vociferous and quickest to act to seal its borders and reject the influx. Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic followed in succession. Austria remained open so long as the transit into Germany was effective. Meanwhile within Germany, in Bavaria, the country's main entry point, nerves were fraying. And neighboring E.U. countries to the north and west looked on with trepidation.

The shift from concern to outrage over the open-door policy was triggered by the shocking revelations of New Year's Eve chaos in Cologne, with robbery and sexual aggression perpetrated by a thousand or more North African and Middle Eastern youths grabbing world media attention after attempts by the local authorities to maintain a news blackout failed.

Both within Germany and in the neighboring states the mood began to turn against Merkel and against those elites who stood by her. Recent polls in The Netherlands, for example, showed that the refugee issue and its associated issue of Islam making claims in Christian Europe were wind to the sails of the far right, xenophobic movements. Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party, which had been in retreat a year ago, now could possibly win control of parliament on a platform of closing borders to refugees and exiting the European Union.

Though national elections in Holland are not scheduled before March 2017, there will be a referendum on ratification of the Ukraine Association Agreement with the E.U. on April 6. This is essentially an anti-immigrant referendum, since Ukraine is seen, with justification, as likely to send vast numbers of "visitors" to the E.U. if the association agreement goes through and is followed by waiver of visa requirements.

Poland already is host to over one million Ukrainians and its welcome mat has

been taken indoors. The flat refusal of Poland to participate in the distribution of refugees that Merkel wanted to orchestrate through the E.U. central institutions resonated in the German political class and precipitated the nasty German-Polish confrontation now being played out in the European Commission and the Parliament. This is one more serious crack in E.U. consensus brought on by Germany's egoistical policies.

Within Germany, initial polls right after New Year's showed a persistence of the humanitarian spirit and a slight uptick (2 percentage points) in Merkel's approval rating. But as the significance of the debacle before the *Hauptbahnhof* in Cologne and television reports of molestation of good German girls in parks by frisky Arabs circulated on television and in social media, popular support for the Chancellor's policies began to melt away.

The media conformism came unstuck. We have seen in the past week how rejection of anti-asylum-seekers comes not only from the far right, among the *Alternativ für Deutschland* (AfD) and *Pegida* parties, but also from the left. Indeed, the *FAZ* was quick to note the anti-refugee position recently taken by the standard-bearer of *Die Linke* in the Bundestag, Sahra Wagenknecht.

The loosening of minds and tongues in Germany by the vision of refugee waves on their shores will soon be measurable not only by public opinion polls but by the legislative elections in three of Germany's *Länder* in mid-March: Rhineland Westphalia, Baden Wurtemberg and Saxony.

The German newspapers speak of an erosion of Merkel's popular support. The latest poll conducted for *Bild* confirms a 2.5 percentage-point loss for the CDU-CSU in the last week, with a rating of 32.5 percent. Meanwhile the SPD (22.5 percent), AfD (12.5 percent) and Free Democrats (FDP 6.5 percent) are rising. I submit that the true "window of opportunity" for Merkel is to stem the flow of refugees or to appear to do that before the voters go to the ballot box.

All indications are that Merkel is counting on a deal with the Turks to pull her chestnuts out of the fire. That is the logic of her meeting on Friday with the Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. And yet, it is totally unrealistic to expect to see a tangible cut-off of the refugee flows now when the Turks were unable to deliver on similar promises made several months ago.

Ultimatums issued by German politicians both within and outside Merkel's party speaking of mid-March as the deadline for results are nothing more than a fig leaf for calls for her ouster.

While it is true that Merkel has cleared the field of worthy successors within her party, it must be recalled that the CDU-CSU are governing in a coalition

with the Socialists (SPD). If there is a serious setback for the CDU, if there is a marked advance of the non-coalition parties in mid-March, we may expect a *sauve qui peut* or run away if you can psychology to set in among all the political actors, in which case regime change in Berlin becomes a distinct possibility.

1. Doctorow is the European Coordinator, American Committee for East West Accord, Ltd. His latest book *Does Russia Have a Future?* (August 2015) is available in paperback and e-book from Amazon.com and affiliated websites. For donations to support the European activities of ACEWA, write to eastwestaccord@gmail.com. © Gilbert Doctorow, 2015
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