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# 'The Fourth Reich is here'

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# 'The Fourth Reich is here'*: An exploration of populist depictions of the EU as German plot to take over Europe

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**Abstract**: The article explores German leadership in Europe – mirrored in national-populist media discourses in Britain, Greece and Poland to engage with populist ideas of European integration as a 'German plot to take over the continent'. Accusations of Brussels' institutions being modelled after German blueprints and therefore discrediting the EU as another attempt of German imperialism constrain Berlin's ability for effective and legitimate European leadership. By applying role theory, this article argues that these populist discourses should not be quickly dismissed as political folklore. Rather, it is suggested that such readings deserve more attention and therefore, the article asks: Why do these ideas and images resonate so well? The argument presents three supportive contexts of a German leadership paradox which – together with vivid WW II memories – lead to the persistence of populist discourses as a series of crises impact the EU: 1) Germany's Nazi past; 2) German nation-building partly resembling European integration processes; and 3) like the EU, Germany projects its interests in terms of normative power (or *Zivilmacht*), thereby constructing and recognising their respective selfs in 'civilising missions'. Again, the paper does not aim to strengthen such populist readings but instead advocates to adress them more openly.

* Simon Heffner, "The Fourth Reich is here – without a shot being fired", *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 May 2016, available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/15/the-fourth-reich-is-here---without-a-shot-being-fired/. Cp. Vittorio Feltri and Gennaro Sangiuliano, *Il Quarto Reich: Come la Germania ha sottomesso l'Europa* (Milan, 2014). For a history of the term and how it was embraced by nationalists and populists seeking to undermine the EU, see Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *The Fourth Reich: The Specter of Nazism from World War II to the Present* (Cambridge, 2019).

**About the author**: Julian Pänke is Lecturer in Politics, Liberal Arts & Natural Sciences at the University of Birmingham. He is particularly interested in the international relations of Europe. His research explores EU foreign policy, the impact of history on foreign policy making and currently how tensions between nation- and empire building shape a state's external behaviour. Julian studied history and political science at Freie Universität Berlin and obtained his PhD from the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt/Oder.

*"[W]hen leadership pops up in a German context, the 'Führer' is always close by"*
*(Gunther Hellmann, 2016)[1]*

**Introduction**

Europe has been hit by a series of crises over the last decade and many EU member states responded by calling for more assertive and effective German leadership to solve these crises which threaten to undermine "the very DNA" of the European project.[2] In the debates about leadership in Europe, it was emphasized that more then ever, Berlin's "constructive engagement with the European Union" is "a *necessary* condition for the EU to meet current challenges".[3] With the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008, a "window of opportunity" opened in which particularly Berlin appeared capable of steering the EU out of troubled waters. A trend towards more intergovernmental decision-making in Union affairs seemed to further enhance Germany's room of manoeuvre. Other potential candidates had gone missing. France had to tackle its economic stagnation and questions of internal security – after turning into the "sick man of Europe".[4] The UK opted for Brexit. The Southern European member states were massively hit by the Eurozone crisis. Whereas the Eastern member states found it hard to come to terms with the influx of refugees. Furthermore, all member states are facing different national-populist challenges,[5] merely Germany seemed largely immune, despite electoral successes of the AfD. Member state officials from East to West repeatedly demanded more leadership from Berlin. In 2011, Polish foreign minister Radek Sikorski famously declared that "I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity".[6] In 2015, Dutch foreign minister Bert Koenders declared that "the Netherlands must help Germany accept its leadership role in Europe, now of all times."[7]

The "window of opportunity" was widened as the US under the Obama administration seemed inclined to accept European autonomous capacities and favoured a strong EU voice in global politics – which became apparent during the Libyan war in 2011. Arguably, Trump's election in 2016 has intensified the need to build up the EU's ability to act autonomously. Furthermore, the rise of China paved the way towards a multipolar world in which the EU could play a more important role. Even the geopolitical struggle with Russia could have enabled the EU to gain a stronger position in international politics. However, the EU and Germany as its "facilitator in chief" did not really live up to these expectations. In fact, looking at the handling of the Eurozone, the refugee, and the Ukraine crisis we witnessed more of the usual 'muddling through' or worse still, a failure to unite the EU to face any of these three crises sufficiently. Thus, it is worth asking, why – if the circumstances were favourable – Germany was

unable to rally the member states around the European flag and provide more effective leadership?

A German leadership paradox was becoming apparent.[8] To create followership and provide leadership, Berlin would need to be more assertive. The more assertive Germany acted, as e.g. during the Eurozone crisis the more resistance did Berlin face and the more German leadership was perceived as illegitimate. This paradox does relate to a changing international context towards geopolitical power games and the rise of insurgent political parties;[9] both negatively impacting on the EU's – and Germany's – ability to utilise their main power source: norms. Nevertheless, that is not the whole story. This paper argues that role theory is particularly helpful to answer the research puzzle and help to explain Germany's challenge in providing effective and legitimate leadership in the last ten years.

German leadership is not merely challenged due to a changing context – away from post-modern "security cultures" which favour normative power towards more destructive understandings of power.[10] Three further contexts seriously weaken Berlin's capacity of effective and legitimate leadership: 1) the legacy of Nazi Germany which hinders Germany to impose itself more assertively. Germany post-WW II history adds further contexts which constrain Berlin's ability to gain followers and hint at Aggestam & Johannson's starting point that "leadership should be understood as a social role shaped in a process of interaction between leader and followers."[11] 2) Ideas of a "cultural fit" between Germany and the EU, which are based on similar regime-building experiences of federalisation and institutional similarities.[12] And 3) their projection of interests as "normative powers", running risk their efforts of liberal norm diffusion are perceived as paternalistic, similar to the "civilising missions" of 19th century imperial powers.[13] These contexts provide a canvas, which can be easily instrumentalised and manipulated by national-populist actors for gains in domestic power games and explain why populist media discourses depicting the EU as a German plot resonate so well. These dynamics constitute a German leadership paradox which is hard to overcome.

To develop my argument, the first section will introduce the analytical framework embedded in role theory and what has been identified as the "leadership paradox" in EU politics.[14] The second section will shed light on Germany's role conception, to explore two main strands of historical legacies: The Nazi past shaping Berlin's instinct to act multilaterally and without force whereas – and more originally – the radical re-invention post-1945 made way for some sort of post-modern normative power – negatively re-evoking perceptions of *am deutschen Wesen soll die Welt genesen'*. The third section will analyse national-populist discourses – as they are reflected in newspaper articles – in three EU member states which are representative of a particular periphery: Greece for the South, Poland for the East, and Great Britain as

opting-out. The article concludes that the challenges for German leadership are likely to remain and therefore Germany needs strong partner(s) prone to a more assertive style of leadership – most favourably France.

## Role Theory: Understanding German Leadership in Europe

To understand conditions of effective and legitimate German leadership this article applies sociological role theory. It explores the self-conception of Germany based on three contexts which invoke certain expectations of relevant external actors in other EU member states – Greece, Poland, and the UK. The analysis engages with national-populist discourses in four leading newspapers across the political spectrum in each of the three countries. Populist discourses flourish on processes of Othering and therefore, role theory is particular useful.

> [Role theory] focuses on the co-constitution of the 'self' (ego) and the 'other' (alter). Roles can be defined as 'social positions (as well as a socially recognized category of actors) that are constituted by ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organized group'.[15]
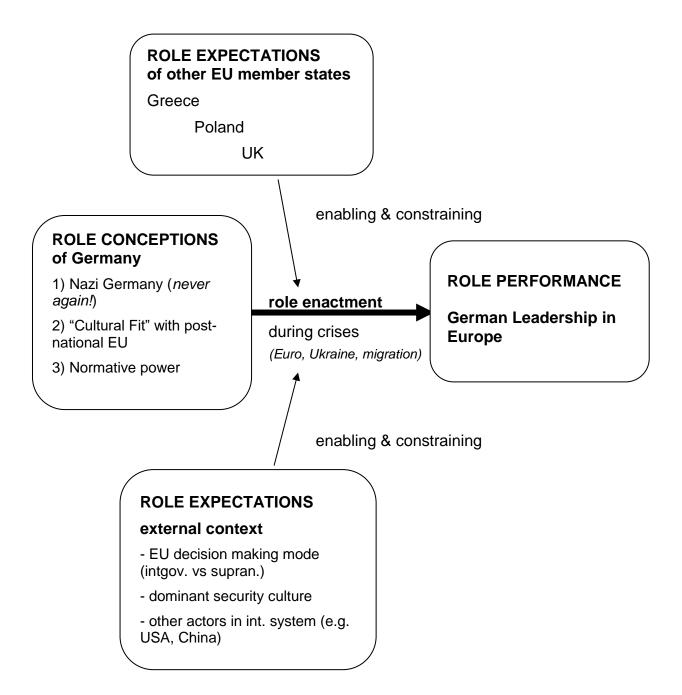
Populism is understood here as a thin ideology where society appears split into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, "the positively characterized 'virtuous people' versus the negatively connoted 'corrupt elite'".[16] Populist actors furthermore postulate the unrestricted sovereignty of the people. Therefore, populism builds on the three pillars of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and a claim for popular sovereignty.[17] Furthermore, the analysis gains insights from political statements of national politicians as well as public opinion surveys conducted between 2010 and 2016. These findings are complemented by secondary literature.

Role theory is a bridge-builder between agency and structure, between IR theories and domestic level explanations of foreign policy analysis. Aggestam & Johannson have recently applied role theory to European foreign policy and established a "European leadership paradox". Accordingly, EU foreign policies are complex and contested, mainly due to the leadership paradox which is "rooted in different ideas of what is legitimate and effective leadership".[18] This paradox can be stretched to the above mentioned German leadership paradox which is also challenged by tensions between assertiveness and legitimacy. This article borrows their understanding of leadership.

The authors define "leadership as a process entails four components: 1) a leader; 2) followers; 3) the activity of leadership (influencing and guiding); and 4) the leader's objectives in the outcome". Thus, Aggestam & Johannson adhere to a sociological perspective – emphasizing "leadership as a social role formed in interaction".[19] My main objective is to understand the possibilities for German leadership in a European context. Role conceptions and role expectations determine that process. Role conceptions "reveal how an actor interprets the prescriptive rules of the formal leadership functions and how leadership can be enacted".[20] Role expectations should

be read "as normative ideas about appropriate behaviour that other actors (alter) prescribe the role-holder (ego) to enact and thus closely related to leadership legitimacy".[21]

The role theoretical framework can be depicted in the following figure:[22]



German leadership in Europe has been widely discussed in the literature. Particularly in the last twenty years, since Gerhard Schröder became Chancellor and an increasing "normalisation" of German foreign policy has been observed.[23] Various adjectives have been ascribed to specify types of German hegemony: "inevitable", "unacknowledged" and/or "reluctant".[24] Hellmann notices that "for many non-German experts German hegemony seems to be clearly and overbearingly present today".[25] Thus, we need to

ask how Germany actually performed in the series of crises[26] that hit Europe over the last decade?

Hellmann has provided an analysis of 'German role performance' during three of these crises: Eurocrisis, refugee and Ukraine crisis. His findings suggest that during the Eurozone crisis Berlin's leadership has been in fact "limited". Still, "German decisionmakers had been far from passive in managing the crisis".[27] Based on domestic level explanations Bulmer & Joseph acknowledge some leverage during the economic crisis.[28] Outside Germany, German management was very much perceived as a dictate and what former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer described as "return of the ugly German".[29] Perhaps, in a rushed attempt to counter that perception, Merkel opened the doors to a swelling numbers of migrants during the refugee crisis. But with few exceptions – e.g. Sweden – Germany appeared isolated after its unilateral step, and faced increasing resistance from the Eastern member states – particularly Hungary and Poland. Only during the Ukraine crisis, Berlin's leadership appeared somewhat effective in unifying the EU in a sanction regime targeting Russia. Most likely, this was due to French involvement in the Minsk negotiations as a reminder of Franco-German partnership. Furthermore, the Ukraine crisis relates to security policy where decisions are taken by unanimity and German hegemonism therefore does not appear very threatening.

Thus, in all three circumstances we can observe shortcomings regarding effectiveness and perceived legitimacy of German leadership. Berlin did not appear as a proper hegemon in any instances of these crises. Indeed, various analysts have refused to grant "real" hegemonic status to Germany as Berlin continues to appear "not willing or capable" to show the necessary leadership prowess and instead displays a "leadership avoidance reflex".[30]

Towards the end of this section, I would like to briefly assess the 'wider external context' for German action. One could argue that the years between 2008 and 2014 provided a unique "window of opportunity" for German leadership. The US under President Obama being very supportive of a strong European Union. The other two members of the EU-3 – France and Britain – appeared removed from the picture. Global trends favoured "trading states".[31] But, the tectonic plates of global politics are shifting since Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Today, *Realpolitik* seems the best response to various geopolitical challenges – weakening the credibility of normative power. Brexit and Trump indicate the massive changes to the external context of German leadership. Nevertheless, German leadership appeared stronger recently, Möller & Janning write that "Germany is taking a greater role in European foreign policy".[32] Thus, despite a less favourable context German is assuming more leadership. Therefore, the main factors influencing German leadership might lie elsewhere.

The following argument strengthens the relevance of domestic level explanations of foreign policy analysis – as it highlights role conception and expectations. Domestic challenges to German leadership have been recently explored by Oppermann & Gaskarth, who analysed tensions between four traditions of thought – regionalism, pacifism, realism, and hegemonism – in the discourse of German foreign policymakers.[33] Indeed, the credibility and effectiveness of leadership rests as much on the propensity of the leader itself as well as the ability to generate followers. Importantly, political legitimacy is primarily granted by the 'ruled'.

**Role conception: Germany acting in "Europe's name"**

German leadership is often challenged as a (further) hegemonic attempt to dominate Europe. Why is German leadership somehow more susceptible to these kind of accusations than other EU member states? This article argues that this is not merely down to size, geopolitical location and economic dominance, but rather linked to three self-understandings. In a nutshell, Germany after World War II aligned its political fate with the European integration project to a larger extent than any other EU member. In the words of British historian Timothy Garton Ash, after 1945 Germany acts "in Europe's name".[34] Germany imagines itself as a European *Musterschüler* (apt pupil) or rather even, as the *Lehrmeister* (head teacher) due to its unique historical experiences and identity construction. German public opinion has been more stable and supportive of European integration in the last decades than in any other of the EU-15 states.[35]

First; WW II has obviously shaped German role conception. This painful past represents *the* significant vertical Other for Berlin's contemporary self-understanding of its potential role in Europe. The horrors of Auschwitz and the war became the founding moment and central reference point of German identity. Adenauer's firm Western integration and Brandt's *Ostpolitik* interpreted Europe as the only possibility to secure Germany's position and provide an answer to the German question. Two foreign policy objectives shaped German reasoning after 1945: A culture of military restraint and multilateralism. In clear demarcation from Nazi Germany, officials and the German public nevertheless overlook certain anti-liberal components of German ideas of Europe. The German journalist Rainer Hank has convincingly shown a rarely discussed continuity of Nazi discourses. In fact, Europe was a key term utilised by the Nazis, evoking a myth of equal rights, and of preserving Europe's cultural diversity against narrow minded nationalists.[36] "No wonder the Germans accepted the idea of Europe so readily after 1945", writes Hank: "they did not need to change their habits of thought greatly."[37] Future blueprints for a European order were much discussed in publications like *Junges Europa* and expressed by German diplomats during the 1940s. Germany holds a deeper skepticism towards the 'nation' as a shell of political formation processes than other EU member states.

Second; a certain "cultural fit" between Germany and the EU impacts Berlin's role conceptions. Similar to the European Union, Germany was built during an extended federalisation and institutionalisation process, from the end of the Napoleonic Wars until the end of WW II. Despite notions of a German *Kulturnation*, at the end of the 18th century merely vague ideas of 'Germaness' existed. It was through economic integration efforts, like the customs union of 1833 (*Deutscher Zollverein*) that the idea of a unified 'Germany' gained momentum. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Germans find it easier to identify at the same time as German and European in comparison with other nations in the EU;[38] as they have done in the past when they considered themselves first as Bavarian, Westphalian, Prussian and than German. But, the similarity of "ways of doing things"[39] goes even further. The political constitution of West Germany in 1949 based itself on ideas of 'cooperative federalism', a consensual approach and a deep scepticism towards participatory rights of the public (e.g. in referenda).[40] The rise of Hitler through democratic means installed a deep sense for the virtues of representative democracy and belief in technocratic, administrative elites. It is no surprise that the German *Bundestag* and the European Parliament – and politics more generally – follow similar lines by stressing committee work, an acceptance of decision-making behind close doors, consensus and harmonisation of interests. Thus, there is indeed a similarity of the political cultures of Germany and the European Union.

Third; like the EU, Germany projects its interests in terms of normative power (or *Zivilmacht*). This goes along with a reluctance to use military force and focus on economic power instead. In both cases, external behaviour is driven by normative guidelines how to conduct international politics and shape perceptions of 'normal' among its peers.[41] These widely shared liberal values of democracy and the rule of law are intended also to construct a precarious self-identity as a 'force for good' in the world. There is a conviction among EU and German officials that they act beyond the bickerings of narrow national concerns. Hellmann discusses this idea in terms of "shaping powers" which forms the core of a "strategy paper" which the German government adopted in 2012.[42] The ugly side of this post-national conviction is a certain sense of supranational superiority which risks to be perceived as imperial and as a new manifestation of a European "civilising mission". Even worse, just intended to cloak rational self-interests, as e.g. economic prosperity. This closeness between normative power approaches and imperialism has been discussed in the literature.[43]

Again, Germany seems to embrace its role as the *Lehrmeister* and a 'force for good' when it comes to Europe. This is reflected in Germany's management of all three crises which displayed, what Hellmann described as "tough love diplomacy".

> [A] particular parenting style [which combines] a warm and responsive approach to child rearing with consistent enforcement of rules and clear boundaries. Parents are assertive without being aggressive or restrictive and the aim of their disciplinary methods is to reason with and support their child rather than to be punitive.[44]

This "tough love" approach separates unruly Greek "schoolchildren" from German "parents" or "teachers".[45] While "the unruly child" Russia "which was not playing by the rules was sent a clear message of love deprivation along with a few hints of what was required to once again receive loving parental care and recognition."[46] This attitude is reminiscent of 19th century style imperial thinking, and is mirrored in titles of recent publications on Germany, such as Stephen Green's book "Reluctant *Meister*".[47]

Thus, could it be that accusations of Brussels' institutions being modelled after German blueprints and therefore discrediting the EU as another attempt of German imperialism have indeed at least three supportive contexts of German role conceptions? We cannot dismiss them easily as conspiracy theories, but should rather engage with them. The "cultural fit" between Germany and the EU becomes an empty canvas for eurosceptic national-populist actors in some EU member states. This exploitability is further enhanced since German foreign policy has indeed become more assertive and self-confident. Particularly Gerhard Schröder's chancellorship after 1998 'normalized' German external behavior. This is reflected in official statements, when German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier says that "Germany will seek to play an efficient role as Europe's 'chief facilitating officer'" and in think tank papers; acknowledging that a bigger leadership role "could cause resentment among other member states, eventually impairing Berlin's ability to lead."[48]

**Role expectations: Imagining Germany from the Outside**

The last section introduced three role conceptions which provide a canvas for other member states to challenge German leadership based on images of Nazi Germany, the institutional resemblance of Germany and EU as well as Berlin as some kind of "tough love" *Lehrmeister*. All three factors enable the political instrumentalisation of Germany and its alleged plot to take over Europe by populist eurosceptic elites in other member states of the EU. This central section will argue that political elites are manipulating perceptions of German leadership for their own political gains, e.g. winning elections in their respective countries. Imagining Germany as a hegemon from the outside, thus, becomes a "continuation of domestic politics by other means."[49]

This section engages in a media analysis of national-populist discourses about Germany in three peripheral – and rather eurosceptic – member states of the EU: Greece, Poland and the UK. All three countries trust EU institutions less than the average of the member states, all three have a particularly high share of citizens which solely identify with their respective nationality, and all three scored highest when asked if their countries would fare better outside of the EU.[50] Furthermore, the three states have in common vivid memories of WW II. Thus, we can assume that populist discourses about German domination of the EU should be stronger than in other member states. Each country reflects different faces of the crises that the European Union is experiencing and represents a particular periphery: Greece as a Southern

member state particularly hard hit by the Eurocrisis, Poland as an Eastern state strongly opposing Germany and the EU institutions in the refugee crisis, and the UK as increasingly opting-out of European integration in a resurgence of populism. Their citizens have a particular interest in the economic development of the Union and immigration.[51] Finally, all three are quite opinionated vis-à-vis the Ukraine crisis and how to respond to the Russian aggression.

The reviewed articles have been chosen firstly, by identifying four newspapers for each country: two quality press papers and two tabloid papers; with one rather on the right and the other on the left side of the political spectrum. Secondly, articles were chosen according to their accessibility via *Google* and the internet websites of the individual newspapers. Easy accessibility via *Google* suggests a wide distribution in the respective societies. The search used the following key words: 'Germany' plus 'Eurocrisis', 'Russia', 'migration crisis' and 'German hegemony'. Then the first 20 articles of the respective newspaper search engines were analysed. This sample was assumed to provide a good representation of journalism and opinion on the topic. Alltogether this represented up to 80 articles for each newspaper and created a sample of approximately 320 articles for Poland and the UK. The analysis of the Greek case study are based on findings of Rebecca Adler-Nissen.[52] The methodological approach was aligned for all three case studies. The analysis of media coverage is supported by elite statements of politicians between 2010 and 2016 and public opinion surveys.

### Greece: Images of German Hegemony in an EU-ropean Colony

Adler-Nissen's analysis included *Kathimerini* (centre-right) and *To Vima* (centre-left) as quality press newspapers, *Proto Thema* as tabloid newspaper and *Avgi* as left-wing organ of the Syriza party. During the Eurozone crisis, "populist discourses developed, leading to what some observers see as an emerging 'intra-European neo-racism' and neo-colonial politics, which discursively infantislises the periphery in Europe"[53] – in line with paternalistic attitudes of German and EU officials outlined above. After Chancellor Angela Merkel made a provocative statement about Greece being in need of permanent "supervision", she was depicted in Nazi-uniform at public protests in summer 2011. Greek commentators were insinuating that German strategies would drive the Eurozone countries towards some kind of "Model Deutschland writ large".[54] A sameness of Germany and the EU was clearly established. Adler-Nissen found the following labels attached to Germany: "Nazi oppressor and colonizer", "strict teacher" whereas Greece was presented as "naïve victim", "colonized and oppressed – and possible neo-Nazi resistant", "immature pupil" and "moral sinner".[55] These labels attach themselves to all three supportive contexts of German role conception: Nazi Germany, the exchangeability of Berlin and Brussels, and finally the German *Lehrmeister* attitude.

During public demonstrations across Greece, protesters were holding banners "saying 'Don't buy German products, resistance against fourth Reich' and the Greek unions have big banners saying *'Merkel Raus!'* (Merkel Out!)."[56] On the other hand, it is noticeable that the Greek image of Berlin as a colonizer is "ambiguous and contested".

> Greek editorials are keenly aware of the sense of shame and guilt that German leaders carry with them. *Kathimerini* reports that this means that, 'the country, plunged into its guilt, is trying with agony to prove that all her actions are necessitated out of pure idealism'. According to this reading, Germany necessarily tries to mask its dominance as a form of 'euro-nationalism'.[57]

This sensivity to German hesitations to appear assertive is a remarkable manifestation of the interaction between followership and the social role of leadership. The German response during the refugee crisis might indeed by an expression of that "pure idealism".

In public opinion, the popularity of the EU and Germany declined between 2010 and 2016. Greek people expressed deep-seated resentments towards the EU and Germany due to their advocacy of austerity. Since 2015, antipathy towards the EU has further increased as it has failed to formulate an effective response to the refugee crisis.[58] Furthermore, the share of the Greek population which "approved" of the EU's leadership fell from 60% to 23% while the figure for Germany's leadership declined from 55% to 19%.[59] The pessimistic outlook on the EU is further indicated as 44% of Greeks believe they face a better future outside the EU (compared to 25% in Germany), and merely 19% trust the EU Commission. In autumn 2015, negative opinions of the EU's image clearly outweighed positive opinions by 51% to 16%, and 55% of Greeks defined themselves primarily in terms of their nationality. Nevertheless, trust in EU institutions was still much higher than in national institutions.[60]

In conclusion, the media analysis suggests a pattern of labels relating to Germany role conception and leadership performance: "Germany trying to dominate Europe as it did during the Nazi regime, making Greece a victim or resistant to German occupation" and imperialism.[61] Greek images of German leadership appear essentially shaped by the socio-economic repercussions of the Eurozone crisis.

### Poland: Images of German Hegemony in a Rebel Country

The media analysis included *Rzeczpospolita* (centre-right) and *Gazeta Wyborcza* (centre-left) as quality newspapers, *Super Express* and *Fakt* as tabloid newspapers; particularly *Fakt* as mouthpiece of the national-conservative government of the Law and Justice (PiS) party, in power since the parliamentary election in autumn 2015. The analysis focussed on articles published since then.

Poland, the largest country of East Central Europe, has long been seen as "a poster child of post-communist transition", and contributing contructively to EU politics and having an "important say in European policies towards the east and Russia".[62] Warsaw

had furthermore fostered close relations with Berlin during the Civic Platform (PO) governments under Prime Ministers Donald Tusk and Ewa Kopacz between 2007 and 2015. The return to government by Jarosław Kaczyński's PiS signalled a renewal of their eurosceptic outlook fuelled by anti-German and anti-Russian sentiments which turned Poland into a self-styled rebel in the Union and the new government's controversial policies led effectively to its blacklisting by the EU.[63]

Poland is resisting a common refugee quota agreement in the EU, and re-engaged in demands for German reparations for the time of occupation in WW II. Foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski has stressed the idea of an EU "under the dictate of Berlin".[64] Many articles in *Fakt* are depicting the European Union as some kind of new liberal Soviet empire and emphasize Berlin's leading role in this new type of "occupation". Polish government officials are repeatedly cited to warn of Germany's "imperial ambitions". Waszczykowski was asked to explain Warsaw's hesitation to join the Eurozone, and referred to Greece as a "de facto colony", and pointed out that "we don't want to repeat this scenario."[65] Six articles in the *Gazeta Wyborcza* engaged with the Germany as hegemon debate, emphasizing – in an interesting parallel to findings in Greece – that Berlin does not really want to be in lead. Similarly, articles in *Rceczpospolita* remind the Germans of their responsibilities, but highlight the difficulty of present circumstances.

The populist discourse is framing Germany "as an enemy".[66] The magazine *Wprost* showed Angela Merkel as Hitler surrounded by her generals – all German EU officials, among them former president of the European Parliament Martin Schulz, and the EU Commissioner for Human Rights and the Budget, Günther Oettinger.[67] Populists denounce the EU as some kind of "communist German super-state", more controversial national Conservatives such as Stanisław Michalkiewicz go as far to say that EU is "simply just another name for a Fourth Reich", or as Rafał Brzeski revoking the idea of a transfer from Soviet to EU-ropean empire by stating: "we will simply be transformed into a Homo-Sovieticus or a Homo-Europeisis".[68]

In public opinion, Poland still appears as the most pro-EU-ropean of the three states analysed here. In autumn 2015, merely 37% of Poles imagined a better future outside the EU, and 34% trust the EU Commission. Positive opinions of the EU clearly outweighed negative opinions, with 47% Poland came third in the Union. Perhaps this is not very surprising as Poland became the biggest net beneficiary of EU funding.[69] Trust in European institutions is much higher than in national institutions.[70] The attitude of the Polish public towards Germany is particularly interesting. In spring 2017, Germany was perceived positively by 71% of respondents across the EU; in contrast to Greece (with 76% unfavourable views), while 69% of Poles have a favourable view of Germany (versus 21%) but still 54% are concerned that Berlin "has too much

influence when it comes to decision-making in the EU".[71] This ambiguity indicates that the present Polish PiS government might not be in sync with Polish society.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that 'rebellious' Poland is a prime example for the political instrumentalisation and manipulation of Berlin's role conception and performance by a populist party trying to gain leverage in national political contests. Polish images of Germany seems to depend very much on the governing party. During the Eurozone crisis, former PO foreign minister Sikorski still labelled Germany as "Europe's indispensable nation".

### *Great Britain: Images of German Hegemony on the Sidelines*

The media analysis incorporates *Daily Telegraph* (conservative) and *The Guardian* (centre-left) as quality newspapers, and *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* as tabloid newspapers. Great Britain has been famously described as an "akward partner"[72] and continuously stands on the sidelines of the European integration project, which culminated in the Leave vote in the Brexit referendum in June 2016. Ideas of a German domination of the Union and the exchangeability of EU and Germany is particularly strong in the UK, which is mirrored in its scholarly discourses. A last wave of this brand of "Germanophobic commentary" characterised British Euroscepticism in the early 1990s after German reunification.[73] In 1993, Andrei Markovits & Simon Reich remarked that "deutschmarks might go much further than panzers in extending German power".[74] In the recent debates, a reknown sociologist like Anthony Giddens wrote in 2014 that "Germany seems to have achieved by pacific means what it was unable to bring about through military conquest – the domination of Europe"[75], which is mildly echoed in historian Brendan Simms' reflections on the "German problem" of an imperial legacy.[76]

Regarding its handling of the Eurozone crisis, German leadership is depicted as "heartless, cold and disciplinarian". Greece is described as a "colony" of Europe and again falling under German "occupation", "[t]his time it was the Fourth Reich of the iron lady chancellor". Austerity measures are "imposed" by Berlin on the rest of Europe and Germany will want "Europe to get out of the crisis by being more German". References to the EU constantly present Merkel as the "Queen of Europe" and main decision-maker. A few articles in *The Guardian* lamented the continuous description of Berlin as some form of "evil German empire".[77] Particularly in reference to German normative power: "Prussian rigidity and self-righteousness, ethics became a tool of parochialism".[78] In the run-up towards the referendum in summer 2016, articles increasingly became hysterical, an article in *The Daily Telegraph* highlighting that "our nation's destiny being increasingly subject to the wishes of foreigners whom we don't elect. I am not talking about the amorphous idea of 'Brussels': I'm talking about Germany".[79] *The Telegraph* showed a number of MPs as "Brext Mutineers" and fellow MP Bill Cash referred to fellow Tories as "collaborateurs".[80] The historical parallel is

obvious. Gina Thomas asserts an obsession for military and colonial metaphors among Leave journalists, where Brexit is depicted as a righteous struggle for freedom by subjugated people, their comments oscillating between imperial free trade illusions and relishing in their perceived status as "vassal" of the EU (read Germany).[81]

This distorted picture is reflected in political discourses. Already in 1990, Cabinet Minister Nicholas Ridley – a close Thatcher ally – had to resign after he described the monetary union as "a German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe".[82] During the commeration of WW I in 2014, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson emphasized the German aggression as cause for the war.[83] Both politicians moved on and established direct links with the present – Boris Johnson went as far to warn that "while bureaucrats in Brussels are using 'different methods' from [Hitler], they share the aim of unifying Europe under one 'authority'" and "urging the British people to be 'the heroes of Europe' again."[84] More recently, former chief advisor of Theresa May, Nick Timothy highlighted the importance to understand "German Europe".[85]

In public opinion, the British are the most euroskeptic member state. 52% did vote in favour of leaving the EU in June 2016. In autumn 2015, only 28% of the British population trusted the EU institutions. Again, negative opinions of the EU's image outweighed positive opinions by 36% to 31%. 62% among the British defined themselves primarily in terms of their nationality – the highest share of all EU-28 states.[86] Similar to Poland, views of Germany are closely tied to perceptions of the EU as a whole. 87% of British which express a positive view of Brussels also look at Berlin favourably. 46% among the British believe Germany has too much influence in EU decision-making.[87]

In conclusion, British national-populist discourses of Germany and its leadership performance in the Union seem rather stable across time. They neither appear as closely linked to the governing party – as in Poland – nor do they originate as clearly from Berlin's leadership performance in a specific crisis situation – as in Greece. Rather, a pronounced Euroscepticism seems to support ideas of German hegemony.

**Conclusions**

This article has shown the particular challenge of national-populist discourses in three EU member states to German leadership in Europe. The Greek discourse appears tied to the painful experience of the Eurocrisis and its management by Berlin. The Polish discourse seems to depend very much on the political narratives of the dominant ruling party. The British discourse is rather independent and stable over time, and likely resulted from an established Euroscepticism. As leadership needs to be understood as a social role, all three populist discourses feed back into German role conceptions. The specific role conception of Germany as "reluctant" is therefore further enhanced by the perception of its leadership in EU member states. Additionally, all three populist

discourses tied in with the three contexts of Germany's role conception and re-established connotations of an exchangeability of Germany and the EU. This is dangerous for both, EU and German politics. Therefore, these populist depictions of the EU – as some kind of German plot to take over Europe – should not be simply denounced as political folklore, but do deserve our attention.

For German leadership aspirations, the populist contestation creates a paradoxical dilemma. If Germany acknowledges the particular danger of being perceived as post-national imperial power, then the only way forward seems to be less assertiveness; very much in line with its impulse as anti-thesis to its own Nazi past. But, the demand for German leadership is given and regularly expressed. There appears two ways to tackle this dilemma. First, Berlin could aim to become more assertive in intergovernmental policy areas (like CFSP) and less dominant in hybrid policy areas (like fiscal and migration policy) – this would actually suit Germany's propensity on coalition- and majority-building quite well. In fact, the German role in the Ukraine crisis was perceived much more positively than its handling of the Eurozone and refugee crisis. Second, and building on the other block of Berlin's 'success' vis-à-vis Russia: Berlin should seek close cooperation with Paris. Brexit looks to asymmetrically favour France with its more protectionist instincts and "its harmonisation agenda in social and economic policies". Without the UK, France appears strengthened vis-à-vis Germany in the EU's key political economy domains.[88] This rebalancing of French and German power within the EU could signal a return to a familiar pattern of leadership within a renewed European integration effort to overcome the crisis – and potentially resolve the German leadership paradox for now – Berlin and Paris would act in tandem again. Calls for strong German leadership would become quieter and spectres of German hegemony might appear less haunting.

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[1] Gunther Hellmann, "Germany's world: power and followership in a crisis-ridden Europe", *Global Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2016): 3-20, here 10.

[2] Jacques Rupnik in a conversation with Jolyon Howorth, "Bad Neighbourhoods – Europe's crisis and the challenges of its peripheries", Boston University, 24 March 2016, available at http://www.bu.edu/european/2016/04/07/event-highlights-europes-crisis-and-the-challenge-of-its-peripheries/.

[3] Hellmann, "Germany's world", 4. For recent discussions of German leadership in Europe see Eckhard Lübkemeier, "Führung ist wie Liebe. Warum Mit-Führung in Europa notwendig ist und wer sie leisten kann", *SWP-Studie* S 30 (November 2007); Sebastian Harnisch and Joachim Schild (eds.), *Deutsche Außenpolitik und internationale Führung. Ressourcen, Praktiken und Politiken in einer veränderten Europäischen Union* (Baden-Baden, 2014); Josef Janning and Almut Möller, "Leading from the Centre: Germany's New Role in Europe", *ECFR Policy Brief* (July 2016). A demand for German leadership is further supported by recent findings of the *ECFR Coalition Explorer* which identified Germany as "most contacted" partner of all EU member states, available at https://www.ecfr.eu/eucoalitionexplorer.

[4] In 2015, former French Prime Minister François Fillon referred to France as the "sick man of Europe" urging for economic reforms. See e.g. David Chazan, "France is the sick man of Europe, says former French prime minister François Fillon", *The Telegraph*, 12 July 2015, available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11734627/France-is-the-sick-man-of-Europe-says-former-French-prime-minister-Francois-Fillon.html.

[5] See e.g. Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (London, 2018); Jan Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat* (Oxford, 2018).

[6] Polish foreign minister Radosław Sikorski reminded Berlin of its special responsibility in overcoming the European debt crisis, "I fear German power less than German inaction", German Council on Foreign Relations, Berlin, 28 November 2011, available at https://dgap.org/en/node/20055.

[7] Dutch foreign minister Bert Koenders asked Germany to accept its leadership role in Europe, following the Brexit vote and Donald Trump's election as US President, see "A strong Germany is in the Netherlands' best interests", *Dutch News.nl*, 18 November 2016, available at http://www.dutchnews.nl/news/archives/2016/11/a-strong-germany-is-in-the-netherlands-best-interests-says-dutch-foreign-minister/.

[8] Cp. Lisbeth Aggestam and Markus Johansson, "The Leadership Paradox in EU Foreign Policy", *Journal for Common Market Studies* 55, no. 6 (2017): 1203-1220, here 1203 (abstract).

[9] See e.g. Catherine De Vries, *Euroscepticism and the future of European integration* (Oxford, 2018); Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia, 2017).

[10] On "security cultures" see e.g. Michael C. Williams, *Culture and Security: Symbolic Power and the Politics of International Security* (London/ New York, 2007); on different readings of power in an EU context see Felippo Andreatta and Lorenzo Zambernardi, "The European Union as a Power", in *International Relations and the European Union*, ed. Christopher Hill, Michael E. Smith and Sophie Vanhoonacker (Oxford, 2017), 73-97.

[11] Aggestam and Johansson, "The Leadership Paradox in EU Foreign Policy", here 1203 (abstract).

[12] On the concept of "cultural fit" within the Europeanization literature see e.g. Tanja Börzel and Diana Panke, "Introduction", in *European Union Politics*, ed. Michelle Cini (Oxford, 2011), 115-129; Johan P. Olsen, "The Many Faces of Europeanization", *Journal for Common Market Studies* (*JCMS*) 40, no. 5 (2002): 921-952.

[13] Ian Manners, "Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?", *JCMS* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235-258; Jan Zielonka, "Europe's new civilizing missions: the EU's normative power discourse", *Journal of Political Ideologies* 18, no. 1 (2013): 35-55.

[14] Aggestam and Johansson, "The Leadership Paradox".

[15] Sebastian Harnisch, "Role theory: operationalization of key concepts", in *Role theory in international relations: approaches and analyses*, ed. Sebstian Harnisch, Cornelia Frank and Hanns W. Maull (Abingdon, 2011), 7-35, here 8; Sebastian Harnisch, "Conceptualizing in the minefield: role theory and foreign policy learning, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8, no. 1 (2012): 47-69. Quoted in Nicole Koenig, "Between conflict management and role conflict: the EU in the Libyan crisis", *European Security* 23, no. 3 (2014): 250-269, here 251 f.

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[17] Ibid. For similar definitions of populism see e.g. Daniele Albertazzi and Sean Mueller, "Populism and Liberal Democracy: Populists in Government in Austria, Italy, Poland and Switzerland", *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 3 (2013): 343-371. Albertazzi has highlighted that any definition should refer to 'the people' conceptualised within an adversarial discourse of 'us' versus 'them'.

[18] Aggestam and Johansson, "The Leadership Paradox", 1205.

[19] Ibid., 1205-1207. Referring to Charles F. Parker and Christer Karlsson, "Leadership and International Cooperation", in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership*, ed. R.A.W Rhodes and Paul 't Hart (Oxford, 2014), 580-594.

[20] Ibid., 1209.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Figure of conceptual framework adapted from Lisbeth Aggestam, "Role theory and European foreign policy", in: *The European Union's roles in international politics: concepts and analysis*, ed. Ole Elgström and Michael C. Smith (London 2006), 11-29, here 26; Koenig, "Between conflict management and role conflict", 255.

[23] Rainer Baumann and Gunther Hellmann, "Germany and the use of military force: 'total war', the 'culture of restraint' and the quest for normality", *German Politics* 10, no. 1 (2001): 61-82; Beverly Crawford, "The normative power of a normal state", *German Politics and Society* 28, no. 2 (2010): 165-184; Hans Kundnani, "The Concept of 'Normality' in German Foreign Policy since Unification", *German Politics and Society* 30, no. 2 (2011): 38-58; Sebastian Harnisch and Kerry Longhurst, "Understanding Germany: The Limits Of 'Normalization' and the Prevalence of Strategic Culture", *German Culture, Politics, and Literature in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Stuart Taberner (Woodbridge, 2006), 49-61.

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[25] Hellmann, "Germany's world", 5 f.; see e.g. Crawford, "German power" and Paterson, "The reluctant hegemon".

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[33] Kai Oppermann and Jamie Gaskarth, "Clashing Traditions: German Foreign Policy in a New Era", *International Studies Perspectives* (2019): DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekz017.

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[38] Germany has the lowest share of people (29%) solely identifying themselves with the nation (along with Luxembourg). Across EU around 39% of the citizens solely identify with their own nation state: from 14% in Luxembourg to 62% in the UK; Standard *Eurobarometer 85*, Spring 2016 (July), 22 ("European Citizenship"), available at http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2130.

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[50] 19% of the Greeks, 28% of the British, and 34% of the Poles "tend to trust" the EU Commission (median in Eurozone is 35%). 62% of British, 55% of Greeks, and 39% of Poles identify solely with their nation state (versus 29% in Germany). 45% of British, 44% of Greeks, and 37% of Poles believe they "face future better outside EU" (versus 25% in Germany); Standard *Eurobarometer 85*, 75, 80 ("Public Opinion in the European Union"), 22 ("European Citizenship").

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[52] Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "'Nazi Germans' or 'Lazy Greeks'? Negotiating International Hierarchies in the Euro Crisis", in *Hierarchies in World Politics*, ed. Ayşe Zarakol (Cambridge, 2017), 198-218, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310772104_Are_We_'Nazi_Germans'_or_'Lazy_Greeks'_Negotiating_International_Hierarchies_in_the_Euro_Crisis as pre-published version.

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