

Germany's Image Suffers during the Euro Crisis (March 27, 2013)

Abstract

During the Euro crisis the image of the “ugly Germany” reappeared in many European countries. The renationalization of the discourse left the German government in a difficult position as it also had to respond to domestic policy demands in handling the crisis.

Source

Germany's image, Merkel's contribution

For the Spanish television journalist Jordi Évole, Angela Merkel is behaving like a dominatrix: she is whipping the countries of the euro zone who are misbehaving. It is a drastic picture that Évole paints. He first used it last fall. At that time, the Spaniards took to the streets against their government's austerity measures; they were protesting against the reform of the labor market following the German model and against tax hikes. Today, following the bailout of Cyprus, the dominatrix image is more topical than ever.

This even though all euro states together agreed on the bailout package for Cyprus. And by all accounts, it was not even Angela Merkel, but the Cypriot leader Nikos Anastasiades himself, who, during the failed first attempt at a bailout, pushed through the move to also burden the small savers. But that did not interest the demonstrators in Nikosia very much. Their anger was directed against the German Chancellor, who is once again being depicted on banners with a Hitler moustache and a swastika. “Merkel, you are stealing our savings,” they chanted in the streets.

Even serious media like to resort to Nazi comparisons in the euro debate ever since Greek papers depicted Angela Merkel as a Nazi woman a year ago. It was only a few days ago that the Spanish professor of economics Juan Torres López wrote in the daily *El País*: “Like Hitler, Angela Merkel has declared war on the rest of the continent, this time to secure economic living space.” By now the text can no longer be found online.

The dilemma of the Germans

For the German government, this is a dilemma which can hardly be resolved: at home, the voters criticized the Chancellor for a long time for eventually agreeing to every bailout package in spite of initial resistance. Abroad, by contrast, she is seen as the Iron Lady who is ruling Europe with far too heavy a hand. Many Germans believe that the federal government is risking too much tax money for risky bailout measures. In the crisis countries, meanwhile, many think that Germany should be helping much more generously – after all, during good times its exporters had also profited from the debt-financed consumption in the South. What the two fronts have lost sight of is that both austerity and help are necessary, and that the real issue should be finding the right balance between the two.

Through its crisis policies, Germany is presently destroying the good reputation it had justifiably attained after the Second World War, says Rafael Poch, Berlin correspondent of the Spanish paper *La Vanguardia*. He had already brought this up with Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle years ago: “He looked at me as though I had said something completely crazy.”

The emergence of harsh conflicts in times of crisis may be unavoidable in an alliance of sovereign states

like the European Union. In the final analysis, says Rafael Poch, Germany is not doing anything that the others would not also do. "In the EU, everyone is only thinking of himself, so is Germany." But it is the country with the strongest economy that "is holding the whole thing together," which is why it also has to assume more responsibility than the others. In the end, though, Germany, too, is following only its own interests.

The Duisburg political scientist Karl-Rudolf Korte thinks this is logical. "Our government is not elected abroad. Especially in a year of Bundestag elections, the picture that foreign countries have of the Germans is therefore less important to it." Especially since national stereotypes, like the picture of the tough Germans, are not easy to change. "That takes a long time," says Korte, "or it takes a major collective event like the soccer World Cup a few years ago."

"The big guy doesn't always have to show that he is big."

Has the federal government thus done everything right? Was it an inevitable consequence of the crisis policy that the picture other countries have of Germans would get steadily worse? Korte believes that Merkel certainly has room to maneuver.

For example, she could look for partners among the smaller member states. According to Korte, former Chancellor Helmut Kohl used to do that very skillfully. "In negotiations, Kohl would always approach the representatives of the small state first and sit next to them. That could be a starting point," says Korte. "Sharing power to gain trust is a wise option especially for large states." Germany must not ignore its effect on others, he says. "We depend on how others see us."

Elmar Brok has a similar view. Germany, says the CDU member of the European Parliament and chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, must ally itself more strongly with those who advocate similar goals: "Actually, the Benelux countries, Finland, and others, all the way to the EU Commission, should assert themselves more strongly as leaders." So far, however, they often hid behind Germany, whose negotiators all too often charge ahead. A mistake, believes Brok: "The big guy must not always show that he is big." In other words: the federal government could definitely act differently from the way it is acting right now.

The member of the European Parliament calls for a better explanation of the crisis policy for the citizens and a more differentiated debate about it. "We can't have everyone always telling only half the story in their country." In Greece or Cyprus, it has to become clear what Germany and other countries contributed to the bailout measures and what the domestic political constraints are. However, Brok says it must also be stated even more clearly in Germany what considerable efforts the crisis countries themselves are making.

It's about mutual respect

Of course, Brok also says that Germany must not just give away its aid. "But we must not be haughty and reproach the crisis countries. We must simply show objectively what the situation is," says Brok. "No side should contend that it has to do everything alone, while the others are doing nothing."

But what is the best way to convey a crisis policy? The political scientist Korte believes that the plain numbers hardly help. "The orders of magnitude that we are dealing with in the rescue packages for the crisis countries can no longer be grasped by the citizens. It makes little sense to argue only with the numbers or to ask experts." It would be much more important to have a symbolic communications strategy, says Korte. "It's also about the pictures that reach the public in the crisis." Especially Angela Merkel has a keen sense of this, Korte says. The Chancellor, who always comes across as sober, would thus certainly have the potential to come across well in Europe. Except, she is not using that strength.

An intensive travel diplomacy could help to bring the EU partners closer together again, says Korte. "Angela Merkel could then also publicly document private meetings with the other heads of government."

Ultimately, it is probably a matter of publicly showing one another the appropriate respect - whether through restraint, as Brok demands, cooperation in negotiations, or symbolic meetings. In any case, Korte believes that the Chancellor would be exactly the right politician for this, contrary to her dominatrix image. "Her biography has earned her a good reputation among the other heads of government. Nobody embodies as authentically as she does that crises and drastic changes can also strengthen one's profile and contain many new opportunities". But Angela Merkel would have to play that card in a more targeted way.

Source: Carsten Luther and Alexandra Endres, "Deutschlands Image, Merkels Beitrag," *Die Zeit Online*, March 27, 2013, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2013-03/deutschland-image-europa>

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