Understanding Germany: Why Berlin's policies reflect its role as the 'status quo power' in Europe

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Are European citizens now living, as the German sociologist Ulrich Beck once described, in a German Europe? **Peter Becker** *writes that while the actions of Germany throughout the Greek debt and migration crises have provoked diverse responses from commentators outside of the country, Germany's European policy has consistently been in line with its role as the dominant 'status quo power' in the European Union. He argues that Germany's decision to open its borders to refugees was neither the act of a benevolent hegemon, nor an example of German unilateralism, but rather an attempt to preserve the existing order in Europe.*

The reputation of German European policy changes with each crisis in Europe. The German refugee policy has been applauded in French, British and American newspapers, but only a few months earlier, the same media had condemned German policy during the negotiations on the third Greek bailout as divisive and heartless.

Last summer the "ugly German" was back and for Roger Cohen, columnist of the New York Times, the German question stood again on the political agenda. It was argued that Germany was once again following a unilateral path, or at least had experienced a unilateral moment. However, in December the same columnist could write of the "reasonable" Germans who had become a "can-do-nation" during the refugee crisis. And today correspondents from Paris or London report that this positive assessment has changed once again, with headshaking, reservations and doubts coming to the fore.

Clearly, perceptions and assessments of German politics can change quickly. But did German foreign and European policy also change? Certainly, German foreign policy has changed fundamentally and experienced a profound transformation in the last 25 years since German unification. Following 1989/90, Germany has frequently been viewed as a "hegemon", albeit a "reluctant" or "benign" one. However, this image of Germany as a capable and willing leader sits uneasily against the backdrop of events.

German foreign and European policy today follows other objectives and principles. Germany is the dominant status quo-power in the centre of Europe. This role is new for Germany. Throughout history, German foreign policy has always tried to change the European order – what was perceived as revisionist policy. Only in the short period of the two decades after 1870, unified as the German Empire under Bismarck's realpolitik, did Germany play the role of trying to stabilise the European order.

Today, Germany's European policy has returned to this role with the aim of consolidating and preserving the European order. The central foundation of this policy is to legitimise the existing order in Europe and foster the trust of Germany's neighbours and partners in a responsible, often restrained and always multilateral German policy. It is this legitimacy which lays the foundation for this new role as the central status quo power in the European Union.

Germany as Europe's 'status quo power'

Germany's European policy is often criticised, but not fundamentally rejected or thwarted. Germany has gradually found this new role as the preserver of a legitimate order, and has strengthened and expanded it. The preservation of a legitimate order does not exclude conflicts; however, in light of the country's aims, where stabilisation is the ultimate policy goal, the scope and objectives of conflict are limited. The dominant role of Germany in Europe is accepted by its neighbours and partners and by a majority of Europeans because the country is understood as the guardian of the status quo.

However, the crises of the last few years have constituted a challenge to the existing order. First it was Russia, which contested the status quo in Ukraine and did not stop short of a revision of existing territorial boundaries. Negotiations in Minsk attempted to preserve the leftovers of the existing order and to combine the policy of sanctions with talks and efforts to calm the situation. The aim here was to return at a later date to the status quo.

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Then, the Greek Syriza government questioned economic policy in the Eurozone, dominated as it was by Berlin's *Ordnungspolitik* and its principles of austerity. The fundamental rejection of these principles and the refusal of a policy of conditioned solidarity shook the foundations of German crisis management. German policy was geared toward protecting the remnants of the Maastricht settlement in the Eurozone. The threat of the Federal Minister of Finance, Wolfgang Schäuble, to exclude Greece from the Eurozone signalled to potential troublemakers the limits of German compromise. The message was that tough negotiations over bailouts and haggling over financial figures are possible, but challenging or changing the economic order will not be tolerated.

Finally, there is the issue of Brexit. In the case of the UK, it was not the threat of holding an in/out referendum which challenged the status quo, but rather David Cameron's statement that the EU needs wide-ranging reforms and has to change fundamentally – in particular, his questioning of the leitmotif of European integration. It was this attempt to change the legitimate order that was deemed to be unacceptable from a German perspective; the search for a compromise and a practical solution for the social policy consequences of free movement of labour in the internal market was not the problem. Modifying and adapting European policies is possible, the destruction and dismantling of a free trade area is not.

And finally, there is the refugee crisis and the critique of German unilateralism and a new *Sonderweg* (special path). The argument goes that it was Germany that formally ended the Dublin agreement in September last year with the decision to open its borders to refugees, thus challenging the Schengen system and the status quo. German refugee policy is typically criticised as being irrational and naïve, as well as for disregarding the existing legal framework. Now Germany is accused of attempting to impose its normative-humanitarian conclusion on its partners: of abandoning the existing order and its legitimacy and, as such, pursuing a revisionist policy. This argument is dangerous to the extent that it fosters a lack of understanding among its partners and potential mistrust.

But is this critique and are these accusations right? Is Berlin really following a unilaterist and revisionist path? Or is it possible to read German refugee policy differently and under the auspices of a 'status quo power'? The number of refugees had risen considerably long before the decision in September 2015 and the decision makers in Berlin feared the collapse of order in the states along the Balkan route. They saw a growing risk of chaos in a region with distinctive nationalist emotions and far from settled conflicts. And the conditions at Budapest's Keleti railway station last summer had demonstrated the consequences of blocking the stream of refugees.

Following this reading, Germany found itself forced and obliged to remove this migration pressure at least temporarily in order to protect the weak states from a test of their stability that they might not survive. Doubts about this stability and the administrative capacity of states to deal with such a stream of refugees were relevant not only in Greece, but along the whole Balkan route. Germany's policy was neither the selfless decision of a benevolent hegemon, nor an excessive act of German unilateralism, but rather an attempt to stabilise the structures and state

order in the Western Balkans so as to make a return to the status quo possible at a later date. The function of this policy was to win time for a stable and sustainable European solution to the crisis.

In principle, the preservation and stability of the legitimate order in Europe remains a continuum of German politics. The policy of the 'status quo power' in Europe has to be highly flexible, and it has to find answers to current challenges without undermining the existing order. In this sense German policy must strike a balance between stability and dynamism, while also displaying an appropriate level of vision in proposing solutions. It therefore avoids fixed targets and resists the understandable desire for clear solutions. Policies must always be modest and should continue to cultivate an ambitious incrementalism.

Protecting the existing order, however, should not be misunderstood as unilateralism or exceptionalism – or even as an act of paralysis when it appears to shut down other options for tackling a crisis. Instead, it is a policy of constant repair, stabilisation and renewal. The real challenge for German European policy today is to find the right balance between flexibility in its willingness to adapt existing European structures, while also consolidating the legitimate order it has helped to create in Europe.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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