

Angela Merkel, Reluctant Leader of the West, ‘Has Gotten the Taste for It’

di Steven Erlanger

Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany recoils from the idea that she is now, almost de facto, the leader of the Western world, the defender of trans-Atlantic alliances and multilateralism. But like it or not, she and the country she will [lead for a fourth term](#) have become global actors.

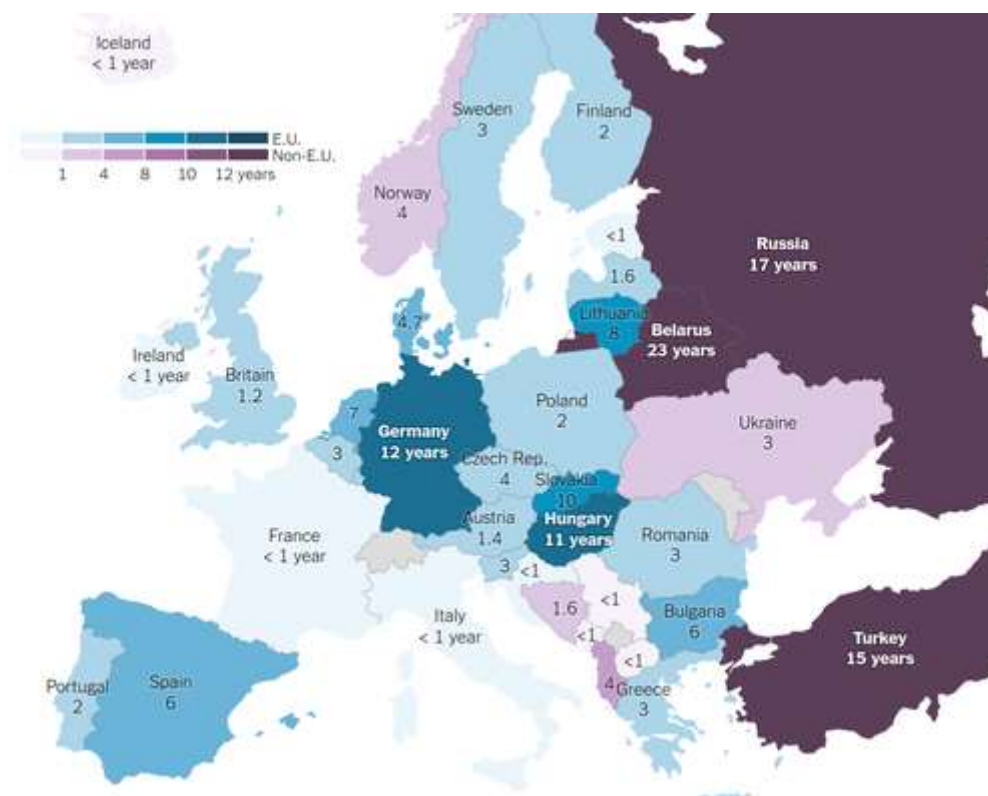
Germany may be a “reluctant hegemon,” but it is a hegemon nonetheless, the largest, richest and most important country in Europe, itself the richest region on the globe. It is often said that Germany is too big for Europe and too small for the world.

But with the presidency of Donald J. Trump and the newly aggressive and authoritarian leaders of Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Poland — and now a rearing of the far-right in Germany’s election on Sunday — Ms. Merkel has had leadership thrust upon her.

Despite her careful rhetoric about power, however, after 12 years in office “she’s gotten the taste for it,” said Stefan Kornelius, [her biographer](#) and a senior editor at the Süddeutsche Zeitung.

[How Angela Merkel’s Longevity Compares to 3 Decades of European Leadership](#)

[Angela Merkel won a fourth term as German chancellor. Her longevity in power has helped her cement her formidable position in Europe.](#)



She regularly jousts with President Trump over trade and climate, with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia over the annexation of Crimea and economic sanctions, and with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey over human rights and migration.

She has become a more outspoken defender of human rights, of sympathy toward refugees and of the need to reduce carbon emissions. As [she said in May](#), disappointed with Mr. Trump's ambivalent positions on NATO, Russia, climate change and trade, "the times in which we could rely fully on others — they are somewhat over."

Re-elected on Sunday, the pragmatic Ms. Merkel will not recoil from new responsibilities, analysts and experts suggested. Instead, she wants to use her standing to set the European Union on a more stable, viable course, making it and Germany a larger and perhaps more rational force in an increasingly rancorous world.

But first she will have the difficult task of cobbling together a new governing coalition, with the Social Democrats going into opposition, and that could take weeks. With support for both main parties dropping, and the far-right [Alternative for Germany](#) getting around 13 percent of the vote, she will need to patch together a government with the Free Democrats and the Greens, who rarely see eye to eye.

"She is a pillar of stability and certainty in a world navigating uncharted waters," said [Ivan Vejvoda](#), the director of the Europe project at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. "Merkel has reluctantly been thrust into the role of the West's most outspoken defender of the liberal democratic order, while at the same time engaging in realpolitik, seeking to resolve outstanding global challenges."

For someone who "has always disliked being singled out or put on a pedestal," Mr. Kornelius said, this is a major change.

But in the face of challenges from Mr. Trump, Mr. Putin and Mr. Erdogan, she has understood that "Germany is a middle power in the middle of everything, and she has to deal with these guys or neglect her duty to her people," said [Volker Perthes](#), the director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin.

Having grown up in East Germany, "she has learned in her biography that standing up for the rule of law and liberal values is worth it, and she's very sincere in that," Mr. Perthes said.

As she once told the right-wing Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban, in a rebuke of his harsh stance against refugees, ["I lived behind a fence long enough,"](#) adding: ["It is not something I wish to do again."](#)

But it is the future of Europe and the European Union, with all of its problems of currency, trade imbalances, sovereign debt, terrorism, migration, defense, demography, youth unemployment and slow but gradually improving growth that really preoccupies her.

Especially after the global financial meltdown in 2008, Ms. Merkel grew into a leadership role as the weight in Europe shifted. “After 2012 you could really feel it,” Mr. Kornelius said.

Ms. Merkel delayed, but finally made the controversial choice, against the advice of her powerful finance minister, [Wolfgang Schäuble](#), to keep Greece inside the common euro currency. “She prevented the euro from collapsing and probably the entire European Union from breaking apart,” Mr. Kornelius said.

She led the Western response to the Russian annexation of Crimea, has been a bulwark against far-right parties and populism, has pushed for aid to Syria and North Africa, has been forthright in defending the Paris agreement on climate change, has committed rich Germany to spend significantly more on European defense and has urged German and European participation in diplomatic efforts to end the crisis over North Korea.

“The new role is simply a reality,” said [Daniela Schwarzer](#), the director of the German Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin. “Germany is already in a leadership role. It’s most clear inside the E.U. since the eurozone crisis. But now it is implementing a normative approach to foreign policy” based on international agreements and the rule of law.

“As the United States under Trump pulls away from that role, Germany has a huge interest in maintaining both the European and global order,” she added.

But to do that Ms. Merkel will need to fix the yawning problems of the euro common currency — the lack of fiscal discipline among member states and also the lack of European institutional backstops — and do it in conjunction with the new French president, Emmanuel Macron.

She will also need to help modernize and reform the European Union so it can function with all its diversity and without Britain, which currently contributes 14 percent of the bloc’s budget. And she is committed to paying significantly more for collective defense.

There is no missionary zeal, but a deep sense of duty.

“If she thinks about legacy, it’s to finally get the eurozone right,” Mr. Kornelius said. “And she wants to move ahead with a more disparate Europe.”

That Europe must find a better arrangement with more authoritarian outliers like Mr. Orban in Hungary and Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the effective leader of Poland, who value their membership in the bloc but do not always share its values, and do not want the Brussels bureaucracy pushing them around.

“It all sounds dull, but she likes that — dullness is her middle name,” Mr. Kornelius said. “But it’s ambitious all the same, even if she moves step by step, as ever with her. But that suits Europe — you can’t revolutionize Europe. She sits and waits and lets everyone speak, and then she finds a compromise. That is her strength.”

In general, European leaders admit, Ms. Merkel, by virtue of Germany’s power and of her own longevity, has the deciding voice in Brussels. Even in the European bureaucracy, Germany has great sway; taking Europe as a fundamental national interest, senior officials are encouraged to take European jobs.

“‘Savior of the West’ both gives too much credit to Germany and puts too much weight on it,” Ms. Schwarzer said. “Germany still thinks of its foreign policy as predominantly European, within the E.U. or certainly with E.U. partners.

“Germany never wants to lead alone,” she added. “But she will stand up, even against allies, if she sees the principles of the international order undermined. That’s why the French elections were so important, why Brexit is so painful and why Poland and Hungary are so difficult.”

The German election campaign was complacent in a prosperous country, with little debate about the international challenges ahead.

But Ms. Merkel’s global role may only grow in the next few years, as Germany sees itself more and more as a “normal” country, restrained but not paralyzed by the Nazi past.

In Germany, Ms. Schwarzer said, “you see the impact of history, which is caution and the desire not to be alone.” Still, she said, “taking more responsibility and not being able to rely on allies and structures like the E.U., as we could in the last decade, is the new reality.”