

After Merkel

Milan Jazbec¹

When Paul McCartney was coining lyrics for *Those Were the Days*, performed magnificently and with touchy romantic crescendo by Mary Hopkin, a young, bright and promising student in Templin was dreaming of cracking nuts from theoretic physics, when growing up. After moving with the family from her birthplace in Hamburg, West Germany, to Quitzow, East Germany, the profession (a pastorate position) of her father was the reason, she got to know what would occupy her adult life. This author, at the very same time, was listening to Mary Hopkin (and The Beatles, of course), reading comics and science fiction and dreaming of becoming a journalist (what he later did). But above all he was listening to stories endlessly told by his mother about her life during the WWII years in Germany, southern from Dresden. She was one of tens of thousands of Slovenes, expelled from home by the Nazi regime and enforced to work, although being in her early teens. The first out of the three visits with his mother to those places, in the summer of 1981, through the neutral Austria and socialist Czechoslovakia to communist East Germany, gave him the firsthand experience of the Eastern Bloc affairs, not to say about the Cold War spirit on the spot.

As this issue is coming out, Angela Merkel still has approximately a month and a half to go, but her formal era in office is finishing. This fact offers a rather privileged point of departure for portraying her phenomenon. Taking a policy holistic approach, we will have a look at the Chancellor from three main points of view: history, topics and style, while commenting, comparing and dwelling on all of them simultaneously.

The post WWII German political history knows eight Chancellors, half of them from the CDU/CSU and half of them from the Social Demo-

1 Dr. Milan Jazbec is professor of diplomacy at the NOVA University in Ljubljana, ambassador, poet and writer, employed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia, and editor of the international scientific journal *European Perspectives*.

cratic Party (SDP). They were in power 71,5 years all together, those from CDU/CSU 52 years and those from SDP 19,5 years.

Chronologically, the order of appearance looks like this:

1. Konrad Adenauer: 1949 - 1963 (1951-1955 also the first Minister of Foreign Affairs), CDU, 14 years (resigned at the age 87).
2. Ludwig Erhard: 1963 - 1966, CDU, (resigned), 3 years.
3. Kurt Kiesinger: 1966 - 1969, CDU, 3 years.
4. Willy Brandt: 1969 - 1974, SDP (the first SDP Chancellor since 1930), (resigned, when the Stasi agent was uncovered in his office), 4, 5 years (knelt in the Warsaw Ghetto at a visit in 1970, honoring victims), received Nobel Peace Prize in 1971.
5. Helmut Schmidt: 1974 - 1982, SDP, 8 years.
6. Helmut Kohl: 1982 - 1998, CDU/CSU, 16 years (the German reunification in 1990).
7. Gerhard Schröder: 1998 - 2005, SDP, 7 years.
8. Angela Merkel: 2005 - 2021, CDU/CSU, 16 years.

Three Chancellors stand out: Adenauer (14 years), Kohl and Merkel (both 16, the former a few weeks more). Adding to this the first one, the unification Chancellor Bismarck (19), it makes the big four.² Not only timewise, but also for the magnitude of tasks they were occupied with and for their ability to keep continuity in dealing with them. However, one could claim that the complexity of challenges was progressing through time, in particular because of the unprecedented advancement of the globalization proces that gained on structural intensity in the period after the end of the Cold War. This fact places Merkel on the most demanding position among her colleagues so far.

This brings us directly to point out the main topics Merkel was facing during her period, some of which have been manifested as global crises. Issues of global influence and importance that dominated the agenda during the previous decade and a half were: the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, global financial as well as depth crisis, the Arab Spring, avian flu, migration crisis, transatlantic relations, Brexit, C-19 pandemic, geopolitical turbulences (relations between the USA, the EU, Russia and China), the Iran nuclear programme, the North Korea missile issues, Syria and Afghanistan, environmental crisis, the switch to decarbonization, including commemorating some important anniversaries, like hundred years of the outbreak of the WWI, 75

² Bismarck was succeeded by Georg Leon von Caprivi (1890 - 1895), who had Slovene roots.

years from the founding of the UN, 80 years since the outbreak of the WWI, of the Ribbentrop – Molotov Pact, and of the Barbarossa operation, to name but few.

The heavy burden and responsibility of her role is perhaps clearly illustrated by the fact that she attended more than one hundred meetings of the EU Council during her term. Just by the way: there used to be two ordinary and two, perhaps three extraordinary meetings per year. During the financial crisis a decade ago there were four or even more meetings on average per month.

Her style has been marked by clear ethical code, understanding of welfare state (keeping the tradition of Germany being the first welfare state in modern world) as well as by her touch for social aspects of ordinary people. She knew, witnessed and exercised what power is. And also produced it on a magnitude. But she did not step over, what has ever since been the biggest, not only political temptation. If anybody, she made a step away from the Laswell's definition of politics that claims politics is who gets what when and how. She restrained from this and made the case. Even though not being from Oz (however Dorothea by mid name), she has been a political wizard.

A bit reluctant, careful and never running before or over her shadow the Chancellor she has been. With this goes the fact of her being the moral authority in times of making difficult decisions. Also she has always shared a strong, unquestionable belief in the rule of law. She kept on investing trust in this value with an outstanding, inspiring and remembered manner. And people also had a lot of trust in her. Well-deserved and well exercised. Her legacy consists of stability, reliability, human touch, thought over decision making as well as management capability and potentials. We've all witnessed this.

She also did what we did not happen to see in the recent political life in Europe: she did not actively take part in choosing her successor at the top party position. This is something of an unprecedented political approach.

With this she from one point of view manifested high ethical standard letting the party choose a person that is most trustworthy, reliable and promising. It will be the party that will have to live with the new leader primarily and much less, if at all, she in the retirement. And secondly,

with that she obviously did not want to extend her political and personal influence beyond what she thought would be necessary. And besides this, there has been no guarantee that her possible choice (had it been there) would also coincide with the party affiliation. So why to bring another stressful situation in the top party leadership, when there was a need to focus primarily on the next term, the next leader and the next period.

In addition, she proved what synergy on the top political level in domestic politics is: she favored and de facto installed Frank Walter Steinmeier, as her former foreign minister and Vice-Chancellor from the rival, but coalition Social Democratic Party, as the German President (since 2017). Their unspoken understanding is far more than could be imagined in relations on the ultimate level: their empathy and value along going that was put to test at many recent turbulent occasions is an example, sometimes bordering on telepathy. Also for this, Mr. Steinmeier is a top role model for the Head of a State in not only modern European frame.

All those parameters placed her in the very center and heart of global politics and geopolitics. There isn't a single characteristic of a great leader that she did not match with her best. This was, however, not always clearly visible and recognizable, but is getting progressively obvious with her forthcoming absence. Great leaders speak with their absence, this makes them visible. A certain vacuum, challenge and opportunity remain after her. Even more, one could claim there should always be a bit of luck in international politics. Angela Merkel produced this portion of luck on a high scale; and symbolism, leaving 150 years after Bismarck started.

As the only female German Chancellor (sworn in in 2005, after defeating her predecessor Schröder) and the youngest so far, she was also the only one ever that came from the East. Merkel rose in the East. Even more - one could say she is the last European leader with such personal experience. She shares a living memory from the former communist system that determined her country. This author believes that this heavily helped her understand politics, relations and life as well as contributed with the same magnitude to her leadership proficiency. What has been, to say so, luck for the whole Europe, since she could have easily got endlessly frustrated with that familiarity. A careful observer would name at least a politician or two of that nature in the current

continental arena. Merkel's outreach to migrants in the late summer of 2015 was a reflection of her human touch and understanding of people's suffering. She grew up to see what does that mean.

As a matter of fact and as we all know now, things turned the other way round for a promising young scientist. When this author was the last desk officer for German Democratic Republic, West Berlin and Switzerland in the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the then Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, discussing development in the country of the future Chancellor with its last Ambassador in Belgrade H. E. Mr. Eiff, the advancing researcher was already taken by the stream of political events, becoming the CDU deputy chairperson in 1991, showing her emerging skill. The rest has become history in the meantime. However, also she did not know and did not, could not, expect all this.

Prior to our closure, in the spirit of this journal, the issue of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, has to be brought on the paper. Merkel inherited the benefits of the 2004 dual enlargement and had to live with its not so pleasant consequences as well. Two years after her start, Bulgaria and Romania became members of the EU, with Croatia and Albania again two years later members of NATO and Croatia member of the EU four years later. Then the enlargement fatigue (an explanation far too simple, though, for the dynamics and complexity of the European integration process) broke out: no new EU members so far, with two new members of NATO: Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020. There are four EU candidate countries in the region: Montenegro and Serbia already negotiating, with Albania and North Macedonia still waiting to start the negotiation process, and two aspirant countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. No magician could forecast the development. But, the majority of the EU enlargements were with more newcomers than only one and it payed off. The referred six of them should also enter *en bloc*. It will pay off as well. Merkel's successor has been given something concrete to start with and be remembered for.

One should, at the end of a day, refer to the famous song of the Rolling Stones, released in 1973, when *Angie* was finishing high school in Templin, posing, not only in a manner of rhetoric, the question, "where will it lead us from here". Perhaps the new German Chancellor Mr. Scholz from SPD, who is her true and not only formal successor, since they are by value orientation quite close, would know the answer. In

any case, her departure means an end of the epoch. The prime time was hers.

From little baby brought to Quitzow in 1954, to a young employee at the Institute in East Berlin, with the PhD from quantum chemistry in 1986, to the Democratic Awakening Party spoke's person in 1990, to the Kohl's *Mädchen* soon afterwards and, finally, to the German's *Mutter* (or *Mutti* in the cute manner), she evolved above all to an everlasting Sphinx. Quite often with a smile on her face. And let us remember: Madame Merkel never was spending her time performing on twitter, but, instead, exercising exactly what politics is all about: doing things at her best for common good.

Discussing issues after Merkel means discussing Angela Merkel herself. Not enigmatic, as it might look like, but still not fully comprehended and understood in all aspects of her zoon politikon. And what a politician she has been. The modest daughter of the humble German pastor managed to achieve what an old Roman saying advices: leave the party at its best and you would keep it in the best memory. And - sic - she will also be remembered by her best.

Hence, let us conclude with fixing the statement that contemplating after Merkel in fact means contemplating her. Angela Merkel. Incomparable and great.