Introduction

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Germany's role in Europe and the world is changing fundamentally. For about five decades West Germany's and reunited Germany's position was very much aligned with the European integration project.

Despite its hegemonic potential, Germany defined its role as a partner of the other EU member states. Within the EU framework and globally, it mostly acted jointly with European partners, particularly France. Although Germany's situation altered significantly after unification, it still refrained from exercising its increased power and was rather seeking the role of a "gentle giant."¹ This was largely the case despite some exceptions, such as the unilateral recognition of Croatian and Slovenian independence in the early 1990s, and criticism that Germany might tend to single-handed foreign policy—the "Alleingang."

Over the last decade, Germany's role has become more assertive—*volens volens*, as some observers would argue—during various crises. In the Eurozone crisis, Germany's economic power in combination with its pronounced stance in the debate on how to deal with the crisis made it a particularly significant and powerful actor.² During the Ukraine war, Germany took a leading role in negotiating the Minsk agreements, together with France and in coordination with Poland.³ The refugee crisis put Germany in a central role again, when it accepted, together with Austria and Sweden, a massive influx of refugees. It seems that Germany has increasingly been taking a prominent role on critical issues in European politics, and although it usually considers positions shared by others—within the EU framework or beyond—Germany is increasingly perceived as a strong and visibly leading regional power, in contrast to previous decades. Furthermore, the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president and Brexit have "fed into a growing sense of an international leadership vacuum" that Germany is "expected to fill."⁴

However, decision-making processes in the EU have become more cumbersome, and Germany's visible increase of influence has been met with different reactions. Germany's changing role in Europe was further evidenced in international images that are ambivalent and in flux. On the one hand, the BBC World Service poll indicates that Germany's contribution to the world is generally viewed positively,⁵ often linked to the domestic management of the Euro crisis and continued economic growth. German cultural diplomacy is perceived as important in promoting an image of the nation as open, self-critical, and culturally diverse. It has been repeatedly noted that the German approach to dealing with its double legacy of dictatorship is viewed around the world as exemplary, with German expertise in this area being actively sought by other post-conflict societies.⁶

On the other hand, Germany's role as a European "hegemon" and, in particular, its politics of austerity at the European level have seen a return to "old" tropes of Germany as an aggressor nation. Similarly, the positive view of Germany's use of "soft" power since World War II clashes with international frustration over a Germany that is an "unreliable" partner in the UN Security Council and an "unwilling" participant in international military interventions. Images of Germany at a popular level, where stereotypes and historical memory often play a significant role, may conflict or contrast with Germany as viewed by international elites, who focus on contemporary Germany's political position on the global stage.

However, these impressions are just snapshots. We miss an overall picture of how Germany's changing role in Europe is perceived by elites and populations of other countries. But do such external perceptions matter? And if so, why? What can be learned by looking at how a nation is understood by actors and in contexts beyond its borders? This cross-disciplinary research project moves the focus of study from German understandings of self to views of Germany from abroad. Images of self are inseparable from images of the "Other," and such constructions can have real impact on policy elaboration and formation. In a world that is increasingly interconnected—economically, politically, and culturally—scholars in diverse disciplines have turned their attention to look beyond the nation and consider the ways in which national politics, culture, and society define, but are also defined by, inter- or transnational relations. In this "transcultural turn," the nation cannot be considered in isolation; rather, it is understood as part of a network of discursive and material interactions. Indeed, the very concepts of "inside" and "outside" warrant fresh interrogation in the context of a world of "networks," "in-groups," "clubs," and "unions." Therefore, the very boundaries between "domestic" and "foreign" are becoming blurred and reconstituted.

While Germany's change toward a more assertive stance in European and international politics has been widely discussed,⁷ a systematic engagement with other countries' perceptions of Germany, which often vary tremendously, is missing. This special issue investigates different national perceptions of Germany—oscillating between the poles of German “popularity” and “restored hegemony”—to map expectations and contestations of others that have an impact on how Germany can and is responding to crises. Each contribution analyzes how Germany is perceived in the respective country. The empirical ground for each article is an analysis of newspaper articles, standardized opinion surveys, and speeches of politicians. Using similar sources provides a coherent comparative analysis, although the method of analysis varies according to resources and their accessibility. The analyses shows that recent developments and historical traits shape the evaluation of Germany and its role in European and foreign politics. Moreover, national debates about Germany mirror the country's own political situation and national identity. Thus, this issue is both an analysis of perspectives on Germany and a comparative analysis of the respective country's national self-understandings as developed in debates about Germany.

The six articles collected here continue a cross-disciplinary conversation that merged two independent research projects within a global network of Centers for German and European Studies funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD): the two-year research project “(Not) Made in Germany? Imagining Germany from the Outside (2015–2016)” at the Institute for German Studies, University of Birmingham; and a panel on “Germany's New Role in Europe: Perspectives from Outside,” at the April 2016 Conference by the Council of European Studies in Philadelphia, organized by the Willy Brandt Center for German and European Studies at the University of Wrocław. Both projects benefited immensely from the productive tensions and processes of self-reflection regarding readings and explorations of Germany from the “outside,” or as an “insider” from the “outside,” or as an “outsider” from the “inside.”

This special issue opens with two articles specifically exploring perceptions of Germany's handling of the Euro crisis. The sovereign debt crisis initiated an intense academic debate about Berlin's “move to center stage” in the EU.⁸ Here, Charlotte Galpin investigates Irish perceptions based on findings from qualitative analysis of political speeches and newspaper articles. Showing how perceptions of Germany are filtered through discourses on Irish national identity, she argues that the Irish case demonstrates that Germany's past continues to shape the way in which its leadership in Europe is perceived from the outside. Her main concern is how our understandings

of “crisis” affect the perception of others and ultimately collective identities. On the opposite side of the continent, Jochen Roose, Moritz Sommer, and Maria Kousis explore another country that was severely hit by the sovereign debt crisis: Greece. The authors question prevalent readings that focus too much on Greek-German bilateral relations. Instead, they invite us to appreciate a multifaceted understanding, one that incorporates multiple actors on different levels of decision-making. Their findings show that—perhaps surprisingly—Greek actors predominantly focused on their own national government and other supra-national actors (EU, IMF) during the crisis, rather than Germany. As with Galpin’s findings, perceptions of Germany appear filtered through public debates of national identity.

A focal point of debates about Germany’s role in the world has been its supposed role as a new hegemon, pitting Berlin’s apparent “leadership avoidance complex” against an overtly assertive new role.⁹ This is a contemporary version of the familiar question of how to contain German power in Europe—the new old German question.¹⁰ Julian Pänke explores three peripheral perceptions of a “German plot” to rule Europe—in Greece, Poland, and the UK. He uses sociological role theory to address the “normalization” of German foreign policy and the implications for German leadership in Europe. His findings point at varying uses of images of Germany in all three countries. Furthermore, the article suggests a paradox: in order to provide leadership, Berlin has to assert itself more openly, yet this new assertiveness provokes resistance with references to Germany’s dark past. Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski and Maciej Olejnik depart from the conceptualization of Germany as a “reluctant hegemon,” similar to non-European powers such as Brazil, India, and South Africa, as evidenced by a lack of initiative, delays in decision-making, and flip-flopping in statements and decisions. The authors analyze Sejm debates among Polish parties between 2014 and 2017 and map out various framings of German hegemony. Their findings indicate a shared understanding across all parties in Poland, viewing Germany as an ambitious power actor and putting into question perceptions of Berlin as an erratic and flip-flopping reluctant power. Nevertheless, and in line with Pänke’s observations, readings of German benevolence vary considerably among political actors.

Perceptions of Germany are often mediated by responses to German history that reflect the country’s own national public debates about its identity and position in the world.¹¹ It is therefore particularly exciting to look at images of Germany in two non-European countries that are deeply entangled with Germany: Russia, which throughout history has constructed Berlin as a “significant Other,” and South Korea, which shares a history as a divided nation. Maren Rohe explores Russian perceptions of Germany as

European and/or as part of the West. Her findings are based on interviews conducted in 2016 with university students in Moscow about their perceptions of Germany. She argues that while Germany and Europe are presented as dominated by the West, the participants nevertheless narrate Germany dominantly as a close partner of Russia. Interestingly, despite recent tensions in the countries' bilateral relations, there seems to be stronger ideational undercurrents at work. Jin-Wook Shin and Boyeong Jeong investigate the role of transnational practices and "inter-civilizational" influences in the construction of culture and society. By analyzing editorials and opinion articles of major newspapers, the authors explore South Korean elites' engagement with Germany as a reform model for social market economy, consensus democracy, and successful national reunification. Their findings provide convincing evidence that different actors produced competing narratives and images of Germany depending on their own vision of their home country's economic and political future.

Notes

1. Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson, "Germany in the European Union: Gentle Giant or Emergent Leader?" *International Affairs* 72, no. 1 (1996): 9–32.
2. Simon Bulmer, "Germany and the Eurozone Crisis: Between Hegemony and Domestic Politics," *West European Politics* 37, no. 6 (2014): 1244–1263.
3. Wolfgang Koeth, "Leadership Revised: How Did the Ukraine Crisis and the Annexation of Crimea Affirm Germany's Leading Role in EU Foreign Policy?" *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 14, no. 1 (2016): 101–116; Ulrich Krotz and Richard Maher, "Europe's Crises and the EU's 'Big Three,'" *West European Politics* 39, no. 5 (2016): 1053–1072.
4. Kai Oppermann, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place? Navigating Domestic and International Expectations on German Foreign Policy," *German Politics* 28, no. 3 (2019): 482–498.
5. In the 2013 Country Ratings Poll for the BBC World Service, Germany was ranked as the most positively viewed nation in the world, with "diligent German diplomacy" (citing Stephen Evans) and Germany's growing economy being cited as reasons for its international popularity. See "BBC Poll: Germany Most Popular Country in the World," https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22624104?fb_ref=Default&fb_source=message.
6. See, for example, Andrew H. Beattie, "Learning from the Germans? History and Memory in German and European Projects of Integration," *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 4, no. 2 (2007): 1–22, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/portal.v4i2.483>; Andrew H. Beattie, "Orte des Terrors oder der 'stalinistischen Entnazifizierung'? Zeitgenössische britische Wahrnehmungen sowjetischer Speziallager in der SBZ," in *Views from Abroad: Die DDR aus britischer Perspektive*, ed. Peter Barker, Marc-Dietrich Ohse, and Dennis Tate (Bielefeld, 2007), 67–78; Helga A. Welsh, "Beyond the National: Pathways of Diffusion," in *Post-Communist*

- Transitional Justice: Lessons from 25 Years of Experience*, ed. Lavinia Stan and Nadya Nedelsky (New York, 2015), 167–187.
7. See Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Tamed Power: Germany in Europe* (Ithaca, 1997); Douglas Webber, ed., *New Europe, New Germany, Old Foreign Policy? German Foreign Policy Since Unification* (London, 2001); Henning Tewes, *Germany, Civilian Power and the New Europe: Enlarging Nato and the European Union* (Basingstoke, 2002); Beverly Crawford, *Power and German Foreign Policy: Embedded Hegemony in Europe* (Basingstoke, 2007); Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson, “Germany as the EU’s Reluctant Hegemon? Of Economic Strength and Political Constraints,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 20, no. 10 (2013): 1387–1405; Robert Kappel, “Global Power Shifts and Germany’s New Foreign Policy Agenda,” *Strategic Analysis* 38, no. 3 (2014): 341–352; Barbara Kunz, “Germany’s Unnecessary Hegemony: Berlin’s Seeking of ‘Tranquility, Profit and Power’ in the Absence of Systemic Constraints,” *Politics* 35, no. 2 (2015): 172–182; Jamie Gaskarth and Kai Oppermann, “Clashing Traditions: German Foreign Policy in a New Era,” *International Studies Perspectives* (4 October 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekz017>.
 8. See William E. Paterson, “The Reluctant Hegemon? Germany Moves Centre Stage in the European Union,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 49, no. S1 (2011): 57–75; Hans Kundnani, “Germany as a Geo-economic Power,” *Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2011): 31–45; David Art, “The German Rescue of the Eurozone: How Germany Is Getting the Europe It Always Wanted,” *Political Science Quarterly* 130, no. 2 (2015): 181–212; Isabelle Hertner and Alister Miskimmon, “Germany’s Strategic Narrative of the Eurozone Crisis,” *German Politics and Society* 33, no. 1–2 (2015): 42–57.
 9. See Paterson, “The Reluctant Hegemon?”; Kundnani, “Germany as a Geo-economic Power”; Gunther Hellmann, “Germany’s World: Power and Followership in a Crisis-Ridden Europe,” *Global Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2016): 3–20; more recently, Simon Bulmer, “Deutschland in der EU: Europas unverzichtbarer Hegemon?” *Integration* 42, no. 1 (2019): 3–20; Daniel Göler, “Die aktuelle Reformdebatte der GSVP aus Sicht der strategischen Kultur Deutschlands: Zwischen Kultur der Zurückhaltung und europäischem Gestaltungsanspruch,” *Integration* 42, no. 1 (2019): 21–36.
 10. Kundnani, “Germany as a Geo-economic Power”; recently, Robert Kagan, “The New German Question: What Happens When Europe Comes Apart?” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 3 (2019): 108–120.
 11. Katzenstein, *Tamed Power*; Sebastian Harnisch and Kerry Longhurst, “Understanding Germany: The Limits of ‘Normalization’ and the Prevalence of Strategic Culture,” in *German Culture, Politics, and Literature into the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Normalization*, ed. Stuart Taberner and Paul Cooke (Woodbridge, 2006), 49–61; Beverly Crawford, “The Normative Power of a Normal State: Power and Revolutionary Vision in Germany’s Post-Wall Foreign Policy,” *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 (2012): 38–58.