

Europe's Hegemon? The Nature of German Power During Europe's Crisis Decade

Written by Alberto Cunha

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ALBERTO CUNHA, AUG 23 2021

The debate on the theme of German domination or “hegemony” in the European Union (EU) has proliferated in the last decade, be it in the academic world, but also in political circles and the mass media (in Europe and in the Anglo-Saxon world). The resulting literature mentions not only the existence of such a domination but focuses on characterizing some of the aspects of its functioning, whether its non-military nature or its “civil / normative” or “géo-economic” character. This debate became particularly pressing in the subsequent decade, which will be the period analyzed in this article. The trend towards leadership – or “hegemony”, depending on the source – of Germany within the EU would be maintained in the crises that followed the beginning of the so-called Euro crisis, namely the one caused by the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 (Daehnhardt, 2015) and the refugee crisis with its peak in 2015 (Meiritz, 2015).

The simple fact that such a question could be posed, of a German hegemony within an EU created after the horror of World War II (which originated in the first place given the unresolved “German Question” of a German hegemony in the center of Europe), justifies the importance of understanding what is happening in the Europe of the last decade, Merkel's Europe. The EU is by nature a “civil / normative power” where there is no need to use military means for an assertion of state power. That may have allowed Germany to transform its political, institutional, and structural power into what is possibly a form of regional hegemony; without the need, as in the past, to aim for territorial expansion or to have a prominent military force.

This article is not intended to be a chronological description of the EU crises of the last decade or a detailed enumeration of the different decisions of Merkel's government. Rather, the aim is to “step back” and reflect on how to classify the nature of Germany's power in these crises and therefore within the EU as a whole; namely, to reflect on the characterization of said power by various authors as being a hegemony, which, if it were a reality, would have important consequences for the process of European integration and its evolution. Part of this work means, albeit briefly, thinking about the concept of ‘hegemony’ in itself, something that is not always done carefully by those who use it: hegemony remains a highly contested and ambiguous concept, with different meanings depending on the context in which it is used and the academic school or political perspective of the author in question (Anderson, 2017). As such, hegemony is a term often used to describe Germany's pre-eminence in the EU, but it does not always satisfactorily explain why the German pre-eminence constitutes what can be qualified as a form of regional hegemony.

From Reunification to Merkel

When trying to understand the arc of European history from 1945 to the Merkel years, an obvious question regarding the potential German hegemony in Europe is: How did we get to this point? A reasonable start for an answer could simply be the economic and demographic size of Germany which, after its reunification in 1990, became the largest demographic and economic country in the EU, a status unlikely to change soon. While this is an important factor, it does not provide a sufficient explanation: in fact, the academic-political debate about Germany in the first decade after 1990 focused on the problems of the post-reunification country, culminating in its description as the “sick man of the euro” by *The Economist* (1999). This expression seemed to denote that Germany was not the dominant power in

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the EU or, that if it was, it remained temporarily unable to fully exercise such power/leadership due to its economic problems.

During the 1990s, the most attentive observer could observe a certain disconnect between some academics and the more conventional media: academics and political scientists, namely those belonging to the realist International Relations school, such as Mearsheimer, or geopolitical scholars such as Brzezinski or the German Mark Bassin, centered their analysis on Europe with references to the supposed predominance of Germany in the center of Europe and its potential to become the hegemonic power in Europe. Instead, the media (both inside and outside Germany) still focused on the perception of the crisis of the German socio-economic model and its supposed economic decline relative to the rest of Europe.

Prior to Merkel's government, which came to power in November 2005, another strand of literature focused on interpreting Germany as being a civilian power (*Zivilmacht*), deeply rooted in the post-World War II order. The origin of this concept comes from a "reflection (...) by François Duchêne on Europe in 1973" (Berenskoetter & Stritzel, 2019), and the concept was later adopted by academics such as Hanns Maull (2007, 2014, 2018). Authors working with this literature tend to consider Germany as a normative actor that has largely focused its foreign policy on values it considers non-negotiable, such as avoiding the use of military force, pacifism, a reflexive pro-regional integration attitude, a pro-Western orientation (inheritance from Konrad Adenauer's *Westbindung*) and a multilateral attitude in dealing with crises and disputes through international forums. According to scholars who sustain this line of argument, the regional role of reunified Germany would only be a continuation of the approach developed in post-1949 West Germany. Historically, Germany's reluctance to act as a regional leader because of its difficulties in overcoming its Nazi past has meant that it was a sleeping European giant – Gulliver, in Sebastian Harnisch's description (cit in Beasley, 2013) – who despite its size lacked the capacity to exercise political leadership in the EU when compared to countries like France or even the UK. Added to this argument of historical continuity was the reference to some of Germany's structural weaknesses: the high dependence on its exports, chronic low rates of public investment, in addition to being plagued by "mini-jobs" (temporary low-paid jobs) and increasingly ageing population; not forgetting Germany's relative military weakness in terms of manpower and equipment.

In the same vein and with a similar interpretation of German power, the concept of "domesticated power" developed by Peter Katzenstein should also be mentioned, which, in the description of Berenskoetter and Stritzel(2019), "highlights an intertwined, mutually constitutive relationship between German power and its institutional context in Europe". With a primary objective of ensuring the "institutionalization of power" in Europe to "rough the edges of power relations" (Katzenstein, 1997, 3), such a system would allow states to project their power in a "soft" (non-aggressive) way, and simultaneously being shaped by them (Katzenstein, 1997, 3-6). It seems clear that by accepting such premises it would be difficult to conceive of the existence of a hegemony or even German leadership, which would be in such a way – in the path of the liberal institutionalist school – submerged in the common European institutions and structures in such a way that it would not have autonomy to exercise leadership without being collectively, in the EU.

Germany during the Merkel years: the 'indispensable' EU member-state

At the turn of the century, Germany appeared to be no more of a leading state in the EU than France, its traditional partner and co-leader in the context of the so-called Franco-German axis. But this perception and the relatively benign (or reductive...) designations for German power in Europe would change during the early 21st century, and that's where the concept of hegemony resurfaced in the public debate about Germany. This was a return to a concept that had never been used since 1945 to describe any of the Western European powers, but only the United States, as the undisputed hegemon in the Western world. In the decade after 2009 and with the onset of the Euro crisis, the perceived growth in Germany's influence and power in the EU was a reality felt at the expense of all other EU member states and France in particular. Quoting a European official during the euro crisis, the situation became one in which "France needs Germany to disguise its weakness and Germany needs France to disguise its strength" (Economist, 2011). Thus, there were several politicians from European and non-European countries, including some with governmental responsibilities, establishing historical linkages with the first half of the 20th century to warn of the German resurgence in Europe.

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Despite having already been an important state in the EU, for example, in defining the rules of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) in the 1990s (Baun, 2006), Germany had until then exercised its power and leadership in the EU in the context of the Franco-German axis, even serving as a junior partner for the French on matters of foreign and security policy. The outbreak of the Euro crisis and the need for a joint response to ensure the very survival of the European integration project provided an opportunity for Germany and Chancellor Merkel's government to assert clear leadership in defining EU policies and its political evolution, whether in the areas of EMU or in the relationship with Russia, among others. Angela Merkel was considered the *de facto* leader of the European integration project, even though this political leadership is often opposed by other member states. Germany was thus now considered the 'indispensable' (Bulmer & Paterson, 2016, 1) member state of the EU, promoting its national interests while holding the EU together, by exercising its power in the EU during the multifaceted crises that plagued successively Europe in the years after 2009:

- The Euro crisis, which challenged the very existence of one of the main achievements of 70 years of European integration, the creation of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU);
- The crisis in Ukraine, starting in 2014, where, for the first time since World War II, there was a unilateral military intervention by one of the Great Powers in a European country – and coming in the sequence of the previous Georgia crisis of 2008;
- The Refugee crisis with its height in 2015/16 and which comprised Germany's decision to (temporarily) open its borders to the influx of refugees from the Middle East, while faced with the determined refusal of countries like Hungary to open its borders or allow for a revision of the rules of the Schengen Agreement and the Dublin Convention on the reception of migrants. This was a crisis that affected the daily political, social and economic reality of many people in Europe, including Germany itself, and may be at the very least partially responsible for events such as *Brexit* (2016) and the entry into the Bundestag of the Alternative for Germany (AfD, in its German acronym), an extreme right-wing political force, in 2017.

These successive crises severely affected the base of support for European integration in most Member States in different ways, but always with Germany as the lead state willing to provide solutions and promote its own solutions in common (as well as vetoing/blocking solutions it did not want implemented). It thus emerged as the "shaper" state of the EU's response to three of the most serious crises in existence and which allowed it to remain united, avoiding so far what Webber (2019) called the potential for a process of European disintegration which could unravel 70 years of European history.

In addition to the aforementioned crises, there was of course the British vote in favor of leaving the EU (Brexit), which is also having a profound effect on the EU. However, despite the efforts of several senior British officials, this was a crisis where the EU's response was clearly in the hands of its supranational institutions in Brussels (notably the Commission and its negotiating team led by Michel Barnier). In the other three crises, a certain power vacuum/political leadership in Brussels was, in fact, one of the big reasons why Germany had to – or chose to, according to the source – assert its own leadership, given the inability of the institutions supranational bodies to provide necessary solutions acceptable to most member states.

The concept of 'hegemony'

According to the Financial Times review of Bulmer and Paterson's 2018 work "there are two questions: has Germany become the hegemony of Europe and does German domestic politics inhibit it or help it to play that role?" (Barber, 2019). The work represents the culmination of more than a decade's reflection on what they termed Germany's "reluctant hegemony".

This article was written after a decade in which Germany was almost unanimously regarded as the most influential and powerful EU member state after the "triple crisis" of the EU, regardless of the source, whether from academic experts, European and global media, as well as from senior officials from the EU and other member states (see for example Kundnani, 2015; Matthijs, 2016; Paterson, 2011; Schweiger, 2015; Stelzenmüller, 2016). Such a consideration was made both with a positive connotation, typically full of approving references to the existence of a German "leadership", but also (and more and more often as the decade passed) with more negative connotations;

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with expressions such as “pay master” or, crucially for this article, “hegemony” (Bulmer & Paterson, 2015); with the latter concept employed with a negative connotation in the media and political actors, namely in countries that considered to be more negatively affected by German decisions and policies, such as Greece.

On the other hand, speaking of German “leadership” remains a concept with a much more positive connotation, even if it is not clear why these two concepts have a positive/negative dichotomy; or which are exactly the conceptual differences between the two. Thus, a certain ambiguity or imprecision about the nature of German predominance in the EU supports even some of the most reputable analyses on this topic, even in the reflections of specialists such as Bulmer and Paterson; and it is precisely on this ambiguity that this article intends to contribute. Such contribution would be useful at a theoretical level in the scope of International Relations (I.R.) and Political Science, with a more careful consideration of the concept of “hegemony”. Additionally, it is intended to be a contribution of empirical interest, seeking to critically review the debate – which has been academic, but also political – about the nature of German power within the EU during the Merkel years.

Before dealing more directly with Bulmer and Paterson's argument and the debate to which they contributed, some clarification seems necessary, however brief, on the concept of “hegemony” itself. This concept is fascinating and easily evokes an image in the reader, but it often remains not very precisely defined and without agreement about what it involves or means, whether in the academic world or outside it. This opinion about the concept of “hegemony” is shared with scholars who have studied its origins and meaning. For example, Perry Anderson's seminal book (2017) on the historical evolution of the concept “hegemony”, begins with the following statement: “Few terms are used so widely in the I.R literature. and political science, with so little agreement on its exact meaning, as ‘hegemony’”. The article by Berenskotter and Stritzel (2019, 10) can also be cited, who argued that despite the widespread use of the ‘label of hegemony’ both in academia and outside it, “in its benign and coercive connotation (...) it often remains conceptually somewhat superficial”.

Although there are limitations to its use, there is a basic meaning that explains its popularity as a concept. Hegemony is a term with a connotation derived from its origins in Ancient Greece as *hegemonia*. This is because its first known use was to describe the very specific relationship of dominance that Athens exercised over a group of allied city-states against the Persian empire. In this relationship of dominance, Athens would coordinate such armies against the external threat, but without imposing direct domination, which meant that the city-states maintained their autonomy and sovereignty, even if they were still somehow subordinate to Athens. As such, and still to this day, ‘hegemony’ generically signals a state of predominance or control of one group over others; in the state system, which is the relevant meaning in this debate, it would mean that hegemony refers to a state of predominance or control of one state (Germany) over other less powerful states (the other EU member states).

If hegemony has referred since ancient Greece to a predominance over others, it also implies a specific kind of predominance: as the historian Lentner (2005, 735) argued, it refers to any sort of “leadership of an alliance” rather than “domination by coercion”. Grote, a close associate of Stuart Mill, defined hegemony as referring to “leadership loosely based on agreement or consent”; in contrast to *Arkhe*, another word with Greek origins which refers to a “superior authority and coercive dignity of an empire”, eliciting only “acquiescence” and not “followers” – a followership which Hegemony typically implies.

This distinction between followers and reluctant acquiescence/consent remains essential to understanding what distinguishes “hegemony” from other, more coercive forms of domination. Considering the nature of the EU, which allows a country without impressive military resources (such as Germany) to assume a role of political dominance over other states and at the same time offers it to different member states (even if they are less powerful) equal voting rights in the European institutions, the attractiveness of the term “hegemony” to designate the German phenomenon in Europe is surely understandable.

The use of “hegemony” lied dormant for a long time after Ancient Greece, before experiencing a renaissance in 19th century Germany. This fact may be natural, given Germany's enduring fascination with Ancient Greece; but it is also interesting to note that some of the earliest modern reflections on “hegemony” came from German authors. Just like today, they often disagreed on what the term implied. German historians Mommsen and Droysen found the term very

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useful to describe Prussia's informal supremacy in the then German Confederation, referring to it as "hegemon"; as did Gervinus, a famous historian of the time, although he spoke of Prussia's pre-eminence in what is now Germany as a "coercive" form of hegemony. On the other hand, on its study of Ancient Greece by another historian, Hans Schaefer, hegemony was referred to as a type of "limited" power (Anderson, 2017, 3).

In the following century, a distinctly German historical perspective on hegemony emerged, with authors such as Cornelius Castoradis, Lars Hewel and especially Heinrich Triepel (1921). As Stritzel (2020, 4) mentioned, "Triepel conceptualizes hegemony as *bestimmender Einfluss* ('decisive influence') within closely linked groups of states"; it goes on to add that for Triepel, 'decisive influence' "is the result of a sustained process [over time], involving material and non-material factors", distinguishing hegemony from domination (*Herrschaft*) and portraying 'decisive influence' as conditional on successful persuasion processes, *Verständigung* (understanding/accommodation). That is, much of the power of the hegemonic state is based on its ability to be accepted by other states, which would become "followers" of the hegemonic power.

Such reflections on the meaning of hegemony put a strong emphasis on the need for the hegemon to be followed by the other states, which is somewhat ironic when considering the strong opposition elicited against the German government during the Euro crisis, in countries like Greece; or during the Refugee crisis, in countries like Hungary. On the other hand, they allow for a better understanding of the nature of the followership that Germany enjoyed among the countries of northern Europe during the Euro crisis, which were often more 'German' in their policies than the German government itself; and maybe even to refer to the relative unanimity of the EU over the German leadership in responding to the Russian annexation of Crimea.

In the academic and non-academic literature that mentions "hegemony" to describe the context of Germany within the EU, the most common theoretical approach on which such descriptions are based upon is Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST in its English acronym). Economist Charles Kindleberger (1981) is generally considered the pioneer of this theory, with a central statement that "a hegemonic leader is the state powerful enough to bear the necessary costs of cooperation and shape the rules of multilateral institutions"; but there is also an interpretation of the theory by I.R. scholars (see for example Gilpin, 1981; Gilpin, 1987; Keohane, 1980). Keohane exposes the central assertion of HST as one in which hegemonic power structures, dominated by a state, are more conducive to the development of strong international regimes, whose roles are relatively precise and well obeyed – which could be a possible description for the current system functioning of the EU and in particular the EMU with German as the dominant state.

According to the HST, the dominant state, in order to function as hegemony, would guarantee the availability of political and economic benefits for the entire system, the so-called 'public goods', which include "reduction of transaction costs, establishment of credible commitments, facilitation of collective action, creation of focal points and monitoring" (Reich & Lebow, 2014, 21). The provision of this hegemonic role would ensure the stability of all states in the system, even as the hegemonic state itself benefits from its predominance in the system, with a leadership out of self-interest and not altruism.

In the case of the Euro crisis, Germany supported and financed the creation of "public goods", albeit with a strong conditionality largely defined by German decision-makers. There was also a strong German imprint in new institutions such as the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), created during the height of the euro crisis with the objective of managing loans (obtained with the mandatory counterpart and 'supervised' by the ESM of carrying out "structural reforms") to member states that need it. The ESM has independence from supranational institutions such as the European Commission, which means that it has significant power and autonomy in crisis situations. It is no coincidence that this institution is led by a German economist, Klaus Regling, continuing a tradition of incorporating German economic thought into European institutions, considered by several authors as inspired by the thought of Ordoliberalism – which in southern European countries is often criticized as an "austerity" thought. This domain of German thought was not only present in the type of bailout approved during the euro crisis and in the creation of institutions such as the ESM (Feld et al, 2015; Nedergaard, 2013), but also in the creation of the whole system itself. The statutes of the European Central Bank (ECB), which were decided in the 1990s, bore according to the unanimity of observers a decisive German imprint which meant that the ECB central mandate is primarily anti-inflationary, in

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line with the German tradition, rather than one which also attributes priority to Economic Growth, such as the US Federal Bank Reserve, more in line with Keynesian thought.

Merkel's Germany as 'Reluctant hegemony' or 'semi-hegemony' during EU's crisis decade

Max Weber defined in 1921 power "as the ability to get what you want and control the behavior of others against opposition and obstacles". The three crises referred to above showed Germany's ability to use the EU to, as Weber put it rather crudely, "get what it wants" and "control the behavior of others". Thus, with a window of opportunity for Germany to hold a clear lead in defining EU policy over all other Member States (including France), it is clear why the analysis of what is happening with the German power in Europe and the mention of an eventual 'hegemony' seems more natural. What seems less natural is the existence of such a situation in a Union which was founded in part with the purpose of avoiding concerted power in a single state, particularly Germany, given its history in the first half of the 20th century (a memory that opponents of German power during the Euro crisis did not shy away from recalling).

About the nature of hegemony and the definition of Germany as a regional hegemonic power in the European Union, there has been great interest by I.R. academics, especially during the period covered by this article. The notion of Germany as the hegemony of the EU has gained significant traction among many scholars (such as Maull 2018; Schönberger 2012, 2013; Kundnani 2011, 2015; Paterson 2011; Bulmer & Paterson 2013, 2016; 2019). Furthermore, this is also a notion that has spread to mainstream media and non-scientific policy analyses. The work of Bulmer and Paterson was particularly influential, introducing the concept of Germany as a "reluctant hegemony", which was made mainstream by "The Economist"(2013) when referring to the leadership of Germany in largely defining the parameters of a solution to the crisis in some of the Southern European countries of the Eurozone. Bulmer and Paterson would continue to use the concept of "reluctant hegemony" to describe Germany's pre-eminence in the EU. On the same topic, other authors also participated in the debate, expanding or contesting the definition by Bulmer and Paterson (such as Jenning & Müller 2016; Kunz 2015; Matthijs 2016; Harnisch 2017; Crawford & Rezai 2017).

Implicit as a central statement in this literature is the idea that Germany (while maintaining its pro-European rhetoric) has transformed the very nature of the EU integration process, a union of equals which originally bore a strong French imprint, "using its financial and economic power (...) to promote its own national interests" (Bulmer & Paterson, 2010, 1057-1058). Another implicit statement addresses the nature of Germany's predominance in the EU: despite its alleged attachment to the European integration project, its hegemonic approach means that German national interests often prevail over its "Europeanism". In both cases, these authors use "hegemony" with a negative connotation in a critique of the excessive predominance of Germany, centered on two facets:

1. Germany's exaggerated influence on the EU institutions, which Crawford referred to in 2007 as an "Embedded hegemony", noting Germany's growing assertiveness in promoting national interests within the Brussels institutions. Varoufakis (2016) was one of the authors (one that was famously directly involved in the crisis) who sought to demonstrate this assertiveness in the specific context of the resolution of the euro crisis in Greece, both in relation to the German government and to the German power within the European institutions;
2. Germany's lack of attempt to involve other EU member states in the decision-making process and in particular during crisis decision-making. This was a prevalent charge even in relatively popular actions outside Germany, such as the (temporary, as it turned out) opening of German borders at the height of the refugee crisis. In this crisis, Germany unilaterally took the decision on the reception of refugees in 2015 without any prior vote in Brussels or even coordination with most other governments of the EU, even though this directly affected all other member states and arguably further pushed the Schengen system to the brink.

Many of the advanced concepts about German power sought to explain the combination of these two facets, which resulted in a broad body of definitions about Germany's role in Europe, from which three will be reviewed in this article: reluctant hegemony, semi-hegemony and geo-economic power.

The first two concepts seem to be somewhat linked, in keeping with the notion that Germany's hegemonic status is

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somehow 'incomplete' or semi-hegemonic, which is justified with several reasons: either because of Germany's 'reluctance' to be the hegemony of Europe, caused primarily by the impact of significant internal restrictions on the German public and political system (Bulmer & Paterson, 2018); but also, rather as an intentional approach of the Merkel's governments and German decision-makers in general (Matthijs, 2016).

As such, the idea that Germany constitutes an 'incomplete' type of hegemonic power is echoed in several contemporary analyzes of German power over the past decade. One of the examples of this thought was Hans Kundnani (2015) and his definition of Germany as a "semi-hegemony". Kundnani, and the other authors that use this definition, identify an important aspect of Germany's *sui generis* pre-dominance, which is the fact that it does not possess a sufficient resource advantage (when compared to other countries in the region such as France or the United Kingdom) to be a "full" hegemonic power when contrary to the Western hegemony as claimed for by the United States from 1945 up to the present day. Although Germany indeed has the largest population in the EU, it is not disproportionately larger than the other major EU states; and although its economy is larger, only the amounts of the German external trade surplus can be considered disproportionate, which is largely due to the German economic structure (based on the Rhine Capitalist model, still far more industrialized than the rest of the EU) as it developed after 1945. It is also due to economic choices of German governments in controlling wages in export sectors, namely those taken during the Schröder government (1998-2005), as the 'Agenda 2010'. That is, although Germany has a relative advantage in resources that would always make it an important power in Europe, they would not necessarily guarantee the preponderance it had in the decisions of the Euro crisis (or the Ukraine crisis) and certainly do not substantiate a 'hegemony', even if incomplete.

Kundnani, however, does not justify his concept sufficiently. It remains largely unclear what are the characteristics of German power and leadership in the EU that make it a "semi-hegemonic" power; nor does he locate the concept of "semi-hegemony" in the broader context of various academic approaches already mentioned on the concept, be it within Political Science or I.R. If properly developed and theorized, the concept of "semi-hegemony" has some academic potential, but it is never used as more than a "label": further work on refining this description through an academic lens would in my view be an important contribution to future work on this topic, and one which hopefully can properly apply the concept of "classic" hegemony to the concrete reality of Germany in the context of the EU.

Another problem which I identify arises when it is assumed that Germany's hegemony is "incomplete" because there is an internal reluctance of the country to assume this role. On the contrary, I would argue that it should not automatically be assumed that such incompleteness is necessarily against the German national interests. Looking critically, I consider that the opposite may even be true: the basic assumption that its hegemony is somehow incomplete or semi-hegemony effectively absolves Germany from political responsibility for the consequences of its decisions on EU leadership when convenient *and* yet it allows Berlin to act decisively when its interests are at stake – either decisively shaping the solutions adopted by the EU / or vetoing solutions that would benefit other member states. This acquittal of responsibility has serious consequences, given that in this way Germany can continue to refute criticism for the way its power operates within the European institutions. Moreover, such acquittal is particularly acute when the German lead on EU Crisis decision-making continues to be characterized by factors such as the three outlined below.

Firstly, the lack of consistent agreement on the part of other EU member states in relation to the concrete measures taken by Germany when it takes the lead in crisis situations, observed in the Euro crisis (by the southern countries of the Eurozone) and during the Refugee crisis (mainly by the Eastern Member States, where terms such as "moral imperialism" were used). This was caused by the normalization of the resistance by an increasing number of member-states to decisions taken unilaterally by Germany (even if with the best intentions) but which affect the whole of the EU. In this context, terms such as 'Skepticism', 'Ambivalence' and 'Resistance' (as in Greece during the Euro crisis or by the eastern governments during the refugee crisis) by the member states are justified, even though said countries should be followers of the German leadership, according to the often referenced Hegemonic theory, namely HST. It was no coincidence that the crisis in Ukraine, the only one in which Germany clearly agreed to self-inflict a price to its national interests – by imposing sanctions on Russia that wounded its strong economic ties with that country – was, in the last decade, the only in which the political leadership of Germany was more widely accepted by the rest of the EU.

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Secondly, the strong conditionality that Germany imposed on the more dependent EU member-states (mainly observed with the Debtor countries in the Euro crisis) to ensure the supply of the kind of 'public goods' that hegemonic powers provide in order to maintain the overall stability of the system in a way which is widely accepted by other states. Such a conditionality was not present when the USA first assumed the mantle of Hegemon of the Western world, according to HST, after 1945, with the "Marshall Plan". But when it came to the Eurozone, the agreed solutions instead forced countries to internal devaluation and strict adjustment in a time of stark economic depression and without popular domestic support. Not only there was nothing resembling a "Marshall Plan", but instead came a refusal to seriously consider solutions like Eurobonds or temporary fiscal transfers that would have at least eased a very unilateral adjustment process that fell almost entirely upon the populations of the debtor countries of Southern Europe, and especially Greece. The consequences were disastrous and caused prolonged and very serious economic contractions; in the case of Greece, the deepest economic crisis ever recorded by a developed country in peace times, coupled with massive flight of talented and educated young people. The crystallization of this German posture was the various support programs approved for countries such as Greece, Portugal and Ireland and supervised, largely in accordance with the designs of Berlin, by a troika composed of the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund – whose presence Merkel was insistent on in order to give her support. In seeking this policy, much criticized in southern Europe and even internationally by famous economists such as Krugman and Stiglitz, it is no wonder that Germany has combined its role as the "savior of the Euro" with the leadership of the group of "creditors" in northern Europe, against the "debtors" of southern Europe.

Thirdly, and finally, the refusal, shared by all dominant political forces in Germany, to apply more of its economic resources to make Germany a military force befitting its political weight and becoming a country with a much greater weight in alliances like the NATO and do away with what Americans and even other Europeans consider their "free riding". There has been an evolution since the compromise agreed at the 2014 NATO summit (the same year as Russia's annexation of Crimea), from which the German military budget has been slightly increased. However, successive years of lack of investment in the German army continue to have their effects: an official report by the Military Commissioner of the German parliament, quoted by Deutsche Welle (2018), stated that less than 50% of the main weapons systems in the German armed forces were ready for interventions, or even for training their military forces.

In this way, Germany's 'reluctance' can in my opinion be interpreted critically as something more closely resembling 'selfishness' at times: despite the permanent rhetoric about Europe, it seems rather that what counts more are national interests, the dictates of the German public opinion, the German political balance or the limits imposed by some of the "veto" powers of the German political system. Germany is not alone in behaving as a Power of this kind, and since Lord Palmerston we know that "the only eternal thing in the states is their interests"; however, such logic clashes with the notion of a Germany that has always declared itself during this period of crisis as 'Europeanist' and seeking to save the EU, a fact for which Merkel was not infrequently acclaimed.

Another aspect of the nature of German predominance is that such German policies are structural and thus go far beyond Merkel. The weight of German institutions must not be downplayed, and the analysis of Germany in the EU should go deeper than an excessive focus on the analysis of the Chancellor's personality and political style. In fact, even within Germany, Merkel was not necessarily the "toughest" position in the context of the Euro crisis: Schäuble's public proposal for a forced Greek exit from the Eurozone, which did not have the approval of the German Chancellor, should be remembered. One can also consider the enormous power that German domestic institutions already hold within the EU, with the greatest example being the Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe, which has always stood firm on occasions where it could have yielded to the European consensus. This Court not infrequently issued decisive opinions on EU policies that could or could not be supported by the Merkel government and in what form, which meant rather telling: the entire EU awaiting the decision of the court of one of its 28 member states. It was a clear affirmation of the Germanic preponderance, an indispensable power that, even if it didn't get everything it wanted within the EU, certainly wouldn't have anything it did not want.

The most classic example of this power of German intuitions was the issue of the creation of Eurobonds, defended by numerous European governments and international observers and economists, but always outright rejected by Berlin, with the partial justification that it would never be accepted by the German Constitutional Court, even if it

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somehow became a policy of the German Government. This meant that an institution that was created as a balance on German counter-power had rather the opposite effect of “strengthening the back” and further solidifying the policy positions of the German leadership in EU negotiations. When this Eurobond idea was put to Merkel in 2012 and even after the joint declared support of France (the newly elected President Hollande, who had defeated the more pro-German Sarkozy), Spain and Italy – the three biggest economies of the Eurozone after Germany itself – Merkel replied that it would not happen “during my life” (Brown, 2012) and the fact that its approval by the Constitutional Court seemed impossible made this refusal even more definitive and credible. As of 2021, it has never ever been remotely conceivable that such a solution would be implemented, even though numerous economists have come out in support of it.

Alternative reflections about the nature of German Power

Another systematic reflection on the nature of German hegemony in Europe is condensed in the assertion that contemporary Germany acts as a “géo-economic power” in Europe. Although similar conceptions have previously described Germany as a trading state that prioritizes wealth and prosperity and emphasizes trade and multilateral cooperation in relation to defense and security policies (Rosecrance, 1986; Staack, 2000), this argument gained a somewhat more ‘assertive’ reinterpretation with Kundnani and Stephen F. Szabo. The interpretation of German power as “géo-economic” could explain Germany’s apparent paradox – being both an economic giant and a military “dwarf” – by defining the country as mostly interested in economic and financial power gains rather than the traditional geopolitics supported by a strong military force.

In my view, this reflection is questionable, or at least it should be accepted with caution. In its central assertion that Germany’s policies are primarily pursued in its economic interests, it fails to explain the response to the Ukraine crisis. Following its logic, Germany could not have assumed the leading role it played in imposing economic sanctions on Russia, when it was the member state that would lose the most absolutely, given the enormous number of its businesses directly affected by the sanctions and also the weight of Russia for its export-based economy (Webber, 2019).

In the concrete case of the Ukrainian crisis, Germany was always clear in its opposition to a “militarization” of this crisis and more specifically opposed either to a NATO intervention or to the arming of Ukrainian forces in the fight against the separatists supported by Putin’s Russia, rather placing the priority burden on preserving unity within the EU. In the words of then-German Foreign Minister Steinmeier: “preserving this unity and sharing the burden of leadership are Germany’s top priorities (...) In other words: Germany’s partners shouldn’t expect too much from Berlin through more military contributions: ‘politics before force’” (Maull, 2018, 464). In commenting on this clear position of the Merkel government, many authors have returned to the aforementioned notion of Germany as the example of a “civilian power” popularized by Hanns Maull.

Maull presented several relevant insights into how Germany exercises and does not exercise power. In particular, he seems to capture what Stelzenmüller characterized as the lack of vision and strategy in the conduct of German foreign policy. For this author, Germany can have a lot of Power, but without the necessary sense of purpose, vision, and strategy to lead in external crises such as the Ukraine crisis, even considering its clear predominance in the economic and financial sphere of EU: “Germany has now acquired full sovereignty but has not regained strategic autonomy in the classical understanding of freedom of action” (Stelzenmüller, 2016, 55). Hyde-Price (2015), in a similar vein, suggests that Germany is a ‘giant’, although it suffers from ‘sleepwalking’, and refers to Germany’s ‘weak strategic culture’.

I find however that perceiving Germany as being politically oriented by its civilian power profile, while capturing some basic features of its decision-making nature on foreign policy, is not entirely convincing. Namely, the basic theoretical premise assumed by Maull (2018, 467), that power is “a concept and a phenomenon that is closely linked to causality”, can lead to the error, referred to in Berenskötter and Stritzel (2019, 8), of “thinking that ‘civil means’ are used only in productive and cooperative ways (in terms of “power to / with”), although they can be easily mobilized to sustain a hierarchy and can have coercive effects”. On this point, suffice for the readers to recall that the exercise of German power during the Euro crisis in Greece or Portugal was certainly ‘civil’ (and not military) but that did not stop

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it being both assertive and decisive. Additionally, Maull does not seem to consider sufficiently that the explanation of German ambivalence about the use of military force is largely a direct impact of the decentralization and parliamentary centrality in German political decisions – in a way completely unknown in powers like the US or France, in which such decisions are very centralized in the person of the President. This means that Germany can with a shift in public opinion not so closely follow the “Civilian Power” approach: the example of the military intervention in Kosovo in 1999, in which the German public was convinced by the center-left government that the need to help prevent a genocide should outweigh the reluctance to use military forces, is a good example of how this ‘civilian’ status is not necessarily permanent.

This concept is also addressed by a broader criticism by Eberle (2019) on the inconsistency of the debate on German power, with a focus on the popularity of the latter concepts here reviewed – “Civil Power” and “Goeconomic Power”. As the author points out, these concepts are at both extremes of a view of Germany (maybe implying even a selfish vs. altruist lens) and he considers that they cannot provide a grand narrative of how German power actually works in practice. While broadly agreeing, I would state that it could perhaps be possible to reconcile these concepts by using a typically ‘realistic’ focus: the primacy of the German national interest. Seen through this lens, it emerges in my view a much clearer continuity in Germany’s actions and decision in the “triple crisis”: Germany only provides leadership when it suits it; which is not that uncommon for a powerful state, even if it is not particularly “Pro-European”.

A perspective built upon the centrality of German national interests as drivers for its political decisions (or non-decisions) would help explain some of the characteristics of German dominance that Eberle and others identified: the inconsistency, both temporal (very strong in the Euro crisis, almost non-existent in the Brexit negotiations) and “sectoral” (most pressing in economics, almost non-existent in the security domain and European defense) of the German dominance in the EU. It also relates well to the observed resistance that arises in situations where German national interests do not correlate with the interests of less powerful states (whether Greece in the Euro crisis or Visegard’s countries during the refugee crisis), even if those German interest are rhetorically advertised as being “European” – as they often are – instead of merely German.

Conclusions and the German view on this debate

Because it reflects on a topic so widely debated – both in academia and outside it – this article does not escape from being just another small contribution to a growing body of literature that poses such questions, and it does not always manage to offer definitive answers. I hope I have demonstrated that this topic is not only timely and relevant from a scientific point of view, but also has an undeniable political relevance, given the importance of defining and clarifying Germany’s role in Europe, which no member state escapes and which it has effects well beyond the borders of the EU. I also hope to have contributed to the notion that, conceptually, there is a gap in the literature about how this German hegemony can be defined, both theoretically, with regard to the concept of ‘hegemony’ as understood in a I.R. sense; and empirically, in how such a concept can be put to the test against how German power actually works in the EU system. This gap, which this article aims to help become clearer, can be summarized by the following paradox: while the term ‘hegemony’ is the most often used to describe Germany’s status in the EU, hegemony remains a highly contested and somewhat vague in the context of IR and Political Science in general.

The process of European integration has formed, incrementally, a Union whose ties and mutual economic dependence have no historical precedents for states that remain nominally independent: open borders, a common supreme court or (for the Eurozone) a common currency, are typically seen as attributes of a nation-state and yet the EU already possesses them. This fact contributed to Germany being able to transform its structural power into an ideational hegemony and into an institutional power superior to any other member state.

However, a better understanding of whether the German “hegemony” exists and how it works is an important task that many are still struggling with, more than a decade after the start of the Euro crisis and on the year in which Angela Merkel will leave, after four terms, the leadership of Germany. It is the task of scientific research and future political debate to reach conclusions about the present and future course of Europe with Germany at its center. Thomas Mann’s famous dictum of desiring a European Germany and not a German Europe has had a curious

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resolution over the last decade: a European-oriented Germany that, even so, seems increasingly to be leading (certainly in the Euro crisis) a "German Europe".

Additionally, the concept of German hegemony, as it has been used, denotes some lack of interest in studying the growing importance of the EU's supranational institutions, such as the European Parliament and the Commission. And, also, on other institutions in the pan-European political space, namely EU party families, as well as European Business Groups and Labor Unions. This emerging genuinely European socio-economic sphere is one through which power can be transmitted and shaped within the EU, at a European rather than national level. The existence of genuine supranational characteristics within the EU system does not necessarily exclude the existence of a German hegemony; but they must still be considered in a serious analysis of hegemony, as there are arguments to be made as to the emerging pan-European institutions. If translated to politics, could this one day transcend the borders of member states in ways that have not been done as of this moment (whether due to linguistic, cultural, historical or political barriers)? The question deserves to be considered.

Most of the debate about German power and its hegemony in the EU is carried out by external observers. So, it seems natural to conclude with a look at the thinking and concepts that prevail in Germany itself, where Germans, contrary to popular belief, increasingly want to openly discuss their role in the EU and how better to use German power. Some German foreign policy experts (see for instance Speck, 2012) continue to deny that 'hegemony' is an adequate concept to define Germany's status in the EU, while others argue that Berlin's occasional hegemonic decisions are unnecessary (Kunz, 2015). On the other hand, some of the debate is quite self-critical: scholars like Habermas or Beck regularly identify and criticize the existence of a "German Europe", in a strand of literature that considers Germany as hegemonic in Europe, largely as a consequence of the global economic crisis. As noted by Bruno and Finzi (2018), "Jürgen Habermas tends to focus on the intentional, structural and inevitable nature of the new role played by Germany in view of its size and economic importance after reunification" while "authors such as Ulrich Beck highlight the importance of contingency issues, that is, the asymmetric impact of the economic crisis". However, their conclusion about Germany's central or even hegemonic role is similar.

A rather constructive part of the debate on the nature of German power has been led by the German government itself: then-German Defense Minister Von der Leyen proposed in 2015 the concept of "leading from the center" to describe Germany's role in the EU while former German President Gauck (2014) spoke about the German responsibility to use its power. Then-foreign minister Steinmeier (2016) defined Germany's approach as the 'main enabler' in the EU and a 'reflective power', with the premise that Germany over the past two decades has been pushed to a central role in European and global affairs by profound changes in the international order – one which Germany must continue to be a factor of continuity and stability. In this decade, according to such view, those global changes thus forced Germany to "reinterpret the principles that guided its foreign policy for half a century" (Maull, 2018, 464).

Finally, an official German Government document (Bundesregierung, 2012) referred to Germany as a *Gestaltungsmacht*, that is, creative or molding power. Although the elements of the discourse of 'benign hegemony' are visible, the *Gestaltungsmacht* would not occur within a hierarchy configuration, but within cooperative and networked relationships. As current Foreign Minister Maas emphasized in the Bundestag, "our international shaping power remains (...) above all, with the coherence/solidarity [*Geschlossenheit*] of Europe" (Maas, 2018, 1).

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