

# As populism replaces pragmatism, Angela Merkel exits the political stage

Angela Merkel's departure means the EU's future is up for grabs.



Angela Merkel has been German Chancellor since 2005 (Source: Getty)

While others in Europe were losing their heads, it seemed Merkel was just about keeping hold of hers.

Brexit, the rise of the far right in eastern Europe, the economic turmoil threatening to engulf Italy - while this storm swelled on Germany's borders, Merkel was just about finding shelter.

However, since 2015 the long-serving Chancellor has been struggling to keep her head completely above water, and the announcement yesterday she will be stepping down as her country's leader is not a surprise.

While the German economy has been relatively stable since the 2008 crash - aside from a minor dip in 2013 - Merkel's migration policies have fuelled the most seismic political divisions in the country.

Her decision to allow more than a million migrants to come to Germany in 2015, as Europe experienced its biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War, prompted a backlash at the ballot box.

The nationalist Alternative for Germany party (AfD) rode the concerns over the influx of migrants to secure third place in the 2017 federal election, going from zero to 94 seats in the Bundestag.

The CDU/CSU coalition, of which Merkel is the head, lost 65 seats, and was forced into protracted talks with the centre-left SPD to form a government. It wasn't until March 2018 - six months after the vote - that Merkel's fourth term as German Chancellor officially began.

Yet it wasn't the SDP which gave Merkel her biggest headache, but the leader of CSU, Horst Seehofer – an interior minister in the coalition government.

In June, he threatened to unilaterally impose tougher restrictions on migrants coming to Germany, including turning away those who had been registered in another European country. Merkel initially balked at the suggestion as it would potentially undermine the border-free Schengen arrangement on mainland Europe. Public opinion backed Seehofer, and Merkel had to reach a compromise with him in order to keep her shaky coalition together. The CSU may have control of just 46 out of 709 seats in the Bundestag, but so weak was Merkel's grip on power she had no choice but to let the tail wag the dog.

Any sense a crisis had been averted came to end in a series of regional elections in recent weeks. The CSU lost its majority in the Bavarian regional parliament in mid-October for the first time since 1957, and in the state of Hesse on Sunday Merkel's CDU and her SDP coalition partners both saw their votes fall by 10 per cent.

It wasn't just the AfD which saw a pick up at the ballot box. The Greens have also been attracting more voters, and in the Hesse elections on Sunday polled equally with the SDP. It seems that German voters, like many others across the West, are shunning those who hold up pragmatism as key a political virtue in favour of idealists.

The impact her retiring will have on the EU depends very much on her successor. Merkel has been resolute in her support for the European project, willing to use her own taxpayers' money to bail out Greece and Italy (albeit while driving a hard bargain on those governments' spending plans), refusing to bend rules on free movement ahead of the UK's EU referendum, or the tenants of the single market in the Brexit negotiations. Indeed, her problems with her CSU allies stemmed from her wanting to find a European-wide solution to the migration crisis, not resort to a bi-lateral deal with Austria.

One person repeatedly flagged up as her successor is Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the general-secretary of the CDU. She was appointed to the post by Merkel in February, sparking rumours of a succession plan being put in place, but the former minister-president of the state of Saarland has her own political identity. In August, Kramp-Karrenbauer suggested refugees should undergo a

year of national service to help integrate into Germany, and she has also called for a wider debate about the country's migration policy.

One person who may have mixed feelings over Merkel's departure is French President Emmanuel Macron. With Merkel gone, his attempt to position Paris, not Berlin, as the heart of Europe could be made easier. However, should the next German Chancellor be less of a europhile than Merkel, Macron may find he is the one responsible for keeping the increasingly fractured project on the road.

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