

Leadership aspirations versus reality: Germany's self-concept in Europe

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On 29 August 2022, German chancellor Olaf Scholz made a much-reported speech at the Charles University in Prague. Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and Europe's multiple crises, he outlined his plans for European integration and addressed the various policy challenges ahead. The speech was also an opportunity to respond to the overwhelming demand, both at home and abroad, for Germany to take a leadership role in Europe.¹ For international observers, it was therefore a chance to see whether Germany has finally overcome its 'leadership avoidance reflex', which William Paterson famously diagnosed in the early 1990s.²

Traditionally, Germany has indeed shied away from taking on leadership in Europe, leaving that role to France and deploying its diplomatic power only reluctantly.³ However, as the EU entered a 'polycrisis', demands for German leadership abounded and even German politicians themselves claimed a need to lead.⁴ This raises the question of whether Germany's self-concept regarding regional leadership has changed. In fact, while there has been much research on whether and how

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¹ See, for example, Bernhard Blumenau, 'Breaking with convention? *Zeitenwende* and the traditional pillars of German foreign policy', *International Affairs* 98: 6, 2022, pp. 1895–1913 at p. 1904, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia166>.

² William E. Paterson, 'Muss Europa Angst vor Deutschland haben?', in Rudolf Hrbek, ed., *Der Vertrag von Maastricht in der wissenschaftlichen Kontroverse* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1993), pp. 9–18 at p. 10.

³ Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson, *Germany and the European Union: Europe's reluctant hegemon?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan/Red Globe Press, 2019); Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Tamed power: Germany in Europe* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁴ Federal Foreign Office, 'In schwierigen Zeiten den transatlantischen Moment nutzen—unsere gemeinsame Verantwortung in einem neuen globalen Umfeld', speech by Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs Annalena Baerbock at the New School, New York, 2 Aug. 2022, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/baerbock-den-transatlantischen-moment-nutzen/2545656>; Federal Ministry of Defence, 'Grundsatzrede zur Sicherheitsstrategie: Streitkräfte wieder in den Fokus rücken', speech by Federal Minister of Defence Christine Lambrecht, 12 Sept. 2022, <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/grundsatzrede-zur-sicherheitsstrategie-5494864>; Federal Ministry of Defence, 'Führung aus der Mitte', speech by Federal Minister of Defence Dr Ursula von der Leyen at the Munich Security Conference, 6 Feb. 2015, https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/03_Materialien/Redemanuskript_BMin_von_der_Leyen_MSC_2015.pdf. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 27 April 2023.)

Germany provides leadership in the EU,⁵ whether the country's political elite can imagine Germany taking on leadership in Europe has not been empirically investigated. Such knowledge is essential, however, as it would be pointless to demand or speculate about Germany leading in the EU if not even those who shape Germany's EU policy envisaged their country in such a role. This article therefore poses the question: to what extent does the German political elite perceive its country as a potential or actual leading power in the EU?

An answer to this question is of both conceptual and empirical relevance. Regarding its conceptual contribution, the article adds to the dynamic literature on Germany as a regional power.⁶ Even if Germany's role in Europe has always been a moving target for political scientists, there is broad agreement that the country has shifted towards an ever more powerful position.⁷ Scholars have assessed how the country evolved from being a 'tamed power'⁸ to a 'normalized power'⁹ and, more recently, to a 'status quo power'.¹⁰ Nowadays, in the light of the unprecedented crises and challenges facing the EU, we may ask whether Germany has evolved further into a leading power in Europe. As regards existing theories of regional leadership,¹¹ the article argues that the self-concept of a state's political elite is an important but neglected explanatory factor for the (non-)provision of leadership.

Whether or not the EU's largest member state eventually takes on leadership of the bloc could prove crucial in overcoming the challenges ahead. Empirically, there is no doubt that German leadership is in great demand¹²—but what is less

⁵ See, for example, Lisbeth Aggestam and Adrian Hyde-Price, 'Learning to lead? Germany and the leadership paradox in EU foreign policy', *German Politics* 29: 1, 2020, pp. 8–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1601177>; Mathias Matthijs, 'The three faces of German leadership', *Survival* 58: 2, 2016, pp. 135–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1161908>; Magnus G. Schoeller, *Leadership in the Eurozone: The role of Germany and EU institutions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁶ See, for example, Blumenau, 'Breaking with convention'; Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson, 'Germany and the European Union: from "tamed power" to normalized power', *International Affairs* 86: 5, 2010, pp. 1051–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2010.00928.x>; Hanns W. Maull, 'Reflective, hegemonic, geo-economic, civilian...? The puzzle of German power', *German Politics* 27: 4, 2018, pp. 460–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1446520>; Douglas Webber, *European disintegration? The politics of crisis in the European Union* (London: Bloomsbury/Red Globe Press, 2019).

⁷ Gunther Hellmann, 'Germany's world: power and followership in a crisis-ridden Europe', *Global Affairs* 2: 1, 2016, pp. 3–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2016.1148829>; Herfried Münkler, *Macht in der Mitte: Die Neuen Aufgaben Deutschlands in Europa* (Hamburg: Edition Körber-Stiftung, 2015); William E. Paterson, 'The reluctant hegemon? Germany moves centre stage in the European Union', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 49: s1, pp. 57–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2011.02184.x>.

⁸ Katzenstein, ed., *Tamed power*.

⁹ Bulmer and Paterson, 'Germany and the European Union'.

¹⁰ Peter Becker, 'Germany as the European Union's status quo power? Continuity and change in the shadow of the COVID–19 pandemic', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2085770>; Patricia Daehnhardt, 'Germany in the EU: an assertive status quo power?', in Klaus Larres, Holger Moroff and Ruth Wittingler, eds, *The Oxford handbook of German politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 529–58; Frank Schimmelfennig, 'Deutschland in der Europäischen Union: Hegemonie, Intergouvernementalismus, Status-quo-Macht', in Katrin Böttger and Mathias Jopp, eds, *Handbuch zu deutschen Europapolitik*, 2nd edn (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021), pp. 561–78.

¹¹ See, for example, Derek Beach and Colette Mazzucelli, eds, *Leadership in the big bangs of European integration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Walter Mattli, *The logic of regional integration: Europe and beyond* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Schoeller, *Leadership in the Eurozone*.

¹² See, for example, Piotr Buras and Jana Puglierin, 'Beyond Merkelism: what Europeans expect of post-election Germany', European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Beyond-Merkelism-What-Europeans-expect-of-post-election-Germany.pdf>; Jeremy Cliffe, 'Germany is doomed to lead Europe', *The Economist*, 25 June 2020.

obvious is whether Germany will supply that leadership. Despite many assessments and analyses, we still lack empirically sound knowledge on Germany's self-concept as a potential leader in the EU. This article seeks to fill this gap by drawing on a hitherto untapped survey among members of the German political elite.¹³

The results of the survey show that the German political elite has finally cast off its much-cited leadership avoidance reflex. The members of this elite perceive the demand for leadership and they are, in principle, willing to provide it across EU policy fields. At the same time, the survey reveals a gap between leadership aspirations and (perceived) reality. Although German decision-makers think they should take the lead in the EU, they find that, in reality, they mostly fail to do so. Hence, this article refines the conceptualization of Germany as a reluctant hegemon by analytically separating its willingness to lead from its actual provision of leadership. While Germany nowadays conceives of itself as a potential leading power and no longer shies away from accepting this role in Europe, it still fails to deliver.

For Europe, the question of Germany's self-concept regarding regional leadership has never been more relevant than in light of the war in Ukraine. The war has repercussions in many EU policy areas, ranging from energy via economic and fiscal policy through to foreign trade. Most importantly, however, European decision-makers need to know whether there is a power they can rely on when reconfiguring Europe's security architecture. The findings of this article bring good and bad news in this regard. On the one hand, the German political elite conceives of itself as a potential leading power in Europe. This gives rise to the hope that Germany will eventually live up to the growing expectations. On the other hand, the fact that the German elite has so far failed—even in its own opinion—to assume a leading role in many EU policy areas suggests that the EU is a difficult environment for member states to take on leadership. This leaves the EU with heightened uncertainty about Germany's future role and the possibility of overcoming its polycrisis.

The article is structured as follows. The first two sections review the state of the art and outline the article's empirical and theoretical contributions. The following two sections are dedicated to the methodology and the findings of the elite survey. The fifth section briefly applies the findings to Germany's plans for Europe based on Chancellor Scholz's Prague speech. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings, draws implications for both the EU and Germany's role within it, and outlines an avenue for future research.

The state of the art and the gap in the literature

The literature on Germany's role in the EU is well established and multifaceted. To provide a concise overview, one may distinguish between three main strands of literature concerning regional power, hegemony and leadership.

¹³ Magnus G. Schoeller, 'Leadership in the EU? The self-concept of German political elites (SUF edition)', *AUSSDA*, VI, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11587/CXSAYP>.

In the first strand, Germany has been conceptualized as a regional power with particular attributes: for example, a ‘civilian power’,¹⁴ a ‘tamed power’,¹⁵ a ‘normalized power’,¹⁶ a ‘geo-economic power’,¹⁷ a ‘central power’¹⁸ and a ‘status quo power’.¹⁹ In all these concepts there is agreement that due to its size and economic strength Germany is a regional power, but where they diverge is in the emphasis they place on different attributes that characterize its role in Europe. Earlier conceptualizations consider Germany’s influence as being limited to its economic weight and the promotion of norms (e.g. the rule of law), with the EU being both an external constraint and a window of opportunity for a manifestation of German power. More recent contributions, by contrast, conceptualize Germany’s power as more assertive and comprehensive, and thereby include a geopolitical and security dimension. In these conceptualizations, it is not so much the EU that shapes German power, but rather German power that shapes the EU and its policies.²⁰

Second, in the 1990s after German reunification, scholars began to apply the concept of hegemony to Germany’s role in Europe.²¹ Although this conceptualization was disputed from the outset, it has maintained its intellectual appeal over the years.²² Especially since Germany moved ‘centre stage’²³ in eurozone crisis management, the literature on German hegemony in the EU has prospered.²⁴ Nevertheless, whether Germany actually takes on a hegemonic role remains debated. Even in the most likely case—that of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), where Germany is undoubtedly the most powerful among the member states, a final assessment depends on the definition of hegemony, and is therefore controversial.²⁵

¹⁴ Hanns W. Maull, ‘Germany and Japan: The new civilian powers’, *Foreign Affairs* 69: 5, 1990, pp. 91–106, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20044603>.

¹⁵ Katzenstein, ed., *Tamed power*.

¹⁶ Bulmer and Paterson, ‘Germany and the European Union’.

¹⁷ Hans Kundnani, ‘Germany as a geo-economic power’, *The Washington Quarterly* 34: 3, 2011, pp. 31–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2011.587950>; Stephen F. Szabo, *Germany, Russia, and the rise of geo-economics* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹⁸ Münkler, *Macht in der Mitte*.

¹⁹ Becker, ‘Germany as the European Union’s status quo power?’; Daehnhardt, ‘Germany in the EU’; Schimelfennig, ‘Deutschland in der Europäischen Union’.

²⁰ See Jakob Eberle and Alistair Miskimmon, ‘International theory and German foreign policy: introduction to a special issue’, *German Politics* 30: 1, 2021, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2020.1849147>.

²¹ Andrei S. Markovits, Simon Reich and Frank Westermann, ‘Germany: hegemonic power and economic gain?’, *Review of International Political Economy* 3: 4, 1996, pp. 698–727, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692299608434377>.

²² See, for example, James Sperling, ‘Neither hegemony nor dominance: Reconsidering German power in post-Cold War Europe’, *British Journal of Political Science* 31: 2, 2001, pp. 389–425; Beverly Crawford, *Power and German foreign policy: embedded hegemony in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

²³ Paterson, ‘The reluctant hegemon?’.

²⁴ See, for example, Matthias Matthijs, Miguel Otero-Iglesias and Hubert Zimmermann, ‘A new German hegemony: does it exist? Would it be dangerous?’, in Hubert Zimmermann and Andreas Dür, eds, *Key controversies in European integration* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 234–50; Bulmer and Paterson, *Germany and the European Union*; Webber, *European disintegration*.

²⁵ See, for example, Matthias Matthijs, ‘Hegemonic leadership is what states make of it: reading Kindleberger in Washington and Berlin’, *Review of International Political Economy* 29: 2, 2022, pp. 371–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2020.1813789>; Joachim Schild, ‘The myth of German hegemony in the euro area revisited’, *West European Politics* 43: 5, 2020, pp. 1072–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1625013>; Magnus G. Schoeller, ‘Centrifugal forces in a hegemonic environment: the rise of small-state coalitions in the Economic and Monetary Union’, *European Political Science Review* 14: 1, 2022, pp. 1–17 at pp. 4–6, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773921000254>.

The third and most recent strand of literature shifts the focus from hegemony to leadership. For a long time, scholars refrained from applying the concept of leadership to Germany. William Paterson even held that Germany had a 'leadership avoidance reflex'.²⁶ However, since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2013/14, academics have increasingly come to the conclusion that Germany has been seeking, and partly assuming, leadership in the EU.²⁷ Since then, there has been a growing literature on Germany's leadership which consists mainly of case-studies on single EU policies or issues. While most authors have focused on analyses of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP),²⁸ there have also been studies on Germany's (non-)leadership in the EMU,²⁹ as well as in defence³⁰ and migration policy.³¹ Studies on the CFSP find that Germany has indeed assumed leadership, although on several issues it has failed to implement its leading role successfully.³² With respect to the EMU, by contrast, the assessment is largely negative, except on single issues that are clearly in Germany's self-interest and occasional instances of co-leadership with France.³³

What we still lack, however, is a study on Germany's leadership (or the absence of it) across EU policy areas. Moreover, many existing studies lack an operationalizable definition of leadership, which makes it difficult to understand how the authors came to their assessment of Germany's leadership record. In other words, judgement of whether and how Germany provides the EU with leadership depends on the (often implicit) understanding of leadership of the author concerned. While Germany's leadership performance therefore lies to a considerable extent in the eye of the beholder, we know little about whether German political elite members see themselves in a leading role across different areas of EU policy. Indeed, existing

²⁶ Paterson, 'Muss Europa Angst vor Deutschland haben?', p. 10.

²⁷ Aggestam and Hyde-Price, 'Learning to lead?'; Sebastian Harnisch and Joachim Schild, eds, *Deutsche Außenpolitik und internationale Führung: Ressourcen, Praktiken und Politiken in einer veränderten Europäischen Union* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014); Matthijs, 'The three faces of German leadership'.

²⁸ e.g. Aggestam and Hyde-Price, 'Learning to lead?'; Liana Fix, 'The different "shades" of German power: Germany and EU foreign policy during the Ukraine conflict', *German Politics* 27: 4, 2018, pp. 498–515, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1448789>; Niklas Helwig and Marco Siddi, 'German leadership in the foreign and security policy of the European Union', *German Politics* 29: 1, 2020, pp. 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2020.1719073>; Magnus G. Schoeller, 'Tracing leadership: the ECB's "whatever it takes" and Germany in the Ukraine crisis', *West European Politics* 43: 5, 2020, pp. 1095–1116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1635801>; Nicholas Wright, 'No longer the elephant outside the room: why the Ukraine crisis reflects a deeper shift towards German leadership of European foreign policy', *German Politics* 27: 4, 2018, pp. 479–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1458094>.

²⁹ Matthijs, 'Hegemonic leadership is what states make of it'; Schoeller, *Leadership in the Eurozone*.

³⁰ Robin Allers, 'The framework nation: can Germany lead on security?', *International Affairs* 92: 5, 2016, pp. 1167–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12702>; Tuomas Iso-Markku and Gisela Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet, 'Towards German leadership? Germany's evolving role and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy', *German Politics* 29: 1, 2020, pp. 59–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1611782>.

³¹ Wulf Reiners and Funda Tekin, 'Taking refuge in leadership? Facilitators and constraints of Germany's influence in EU migration policy and EU–Turkey affairs during the refugee crisis (2015–2016)', *German Politics* 29: 1, 2020, pp. 115–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1566457>.

³² Helwig and Siddi, 'German leadership in the foreign and security policy'.

³³ Schoeller, *Leadership in the Eurozone*; Magnus G. Schoeller, 'Germany, the problem of leadership, and institution-building in EMU reform', *Journal of Economic Policy Reform* 23: 3, 2020, pp. 309–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17487870.2018.1541410>; Hanno Degner and Dirk Leuffen, 'Brake and broker: Franco-German leadership for saving EMU', *Journal of European Public Policy* 28: 6, 2021, pp. 894–901, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1751678>; Joachim Schild, 'Leadership in hard times: Germany, France, and the management of the Eurozone crisis', *German Politics and Society* 31: 1, 2013, pp. 24–47, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2013.310103>.

scholarly assessments disagree on whether Germany's self-concept as a potential regional leader has been characterized by change or rather by continuity.³⁴ An empirical answer to this question will therefore be at the centre of this article.

Theoretical contribution

In 1997, Peter Katzenstein argued that Germany was a 'tamed power' characterized by a Europeanized identity and the use of soft power restrained by multilateral institutions. Accordingly, he saw Germany's foreign policy as characterized by 'the conscious avoidance of ... seeking a strong leadership role in the European Union'.³⁵ Thirteen years later, in 2010, Simon Bulmer and William Paterson declared this conceptualization obsolete, arguing that Germany had in the meantime become a 'normalized power', prepared to defend its interests through a more assertive diplomacy including, if necessary, unilateral action and the full use of its economic and institutional power resources.³⁶ Another thirteen years later, in light of Europe's multiple crises and the war on its borders, we may ask whether Germany has evolved further into a (potential) 'leading power'.

As long as Germany 'tamed' its power through self-restraint, it was shielded from demands for leadership—a role left to France. However, since a 'normalized' Germany projects its full power in the EU, it must also deal with demands for regional leadership. The open question is whether Germany will deliver. If Katzenstein was right, and there has been a Europeanization of German state identity, we can expect Germany to use its power to provide leadership in times of crisis. This article therefore takes a first step in providing a sound answer to this open question by focusing on Germany's self-concept. The underlying assumption is that all theoretical considerations on Germany's leadership would be pointless if not even the German political elite saw itself as a potential leading power in Europe.

Reviewing major theories of international relations and regional integration with a view to European disintegration, Douglas Webber concludes that 'the EU stands and falls with Germany'.³⁷ Germany's commitment to European integration, however, is contingent on domestic developments, according to Webber. Just as in his account, the willingness to lead and its domestic sources have remained a contingent variable in many approaches to regional leadership (see below). By focusing on Germany's self-concept, this article therefore contributes not only to the conceptualization of Germany's role in Europe, but also to leadership theory in the context of regional integration and international relations.

³⁴ See e.g. Beverly Crawford and Kim B. Olsen, 'The puzzle of persistence and power: explaining Germany's normative foreign policy', *German Politics* 26: 4, 2017, pp. 591–608, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2017.1364365>; Maull, 'Reflective, hegemonic, geo-economic, civilian ...?'; Nicole Koenig, 'Leading beyond civilian power: Germany's role re-conception in European crisis management', *German Politics* 29: 1, 2020, pp. 79–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1496240>.

³⁵ Peter J. Katzenstein, 'United Germany in an integrating Europe', in Katzenstein, ed., *Tamed power*, pp. 1–48 at pp. 2–3.

³⁶ Bulmer and Paterson, 'Germany and the European Union'.

³⁷ Douglas Webber, 'How likely is it that the European Union will disintegrate? A critical analysis of competing theoretical perspectives', *European Journal of International Relations* 20: 2, 2014, pp. 341–65 at p. 359, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066112461286>.

First, in many theoretical approaches to international or regional leadership, the actual willingness of a powerful state to provide leadership is either neglected or taken for granted.³⁸ Charles Kindleberger made willingness explicit as a necessary condition of leadership, but he inferred willingness from behaviour, which is tautological.³⁹ The few approaches that put (un)willingness at the centre of their analysis refer to the leader's cost–benefit calculations, domestic politics, unclear preference formation or competing international expectations.⁴⁰ While this article does not question the importance of these factors, it argues that willingness to lead depends crucially on the normative considerations of the relevant actors about what role they should assume at the regional and international level.⁴¹ In other words, the self-concept of a country's political elite determines its willingness to provide regional leadership.

Second, the article argues that an elite's self-concept is not necessarily consistent with its (perceived) action. Willingness in principle is necessary but not sufficient to provide leadership, as external factors can prevent a state from taking the lead even though it is willing to do so. In making this conceptual distinction, which is underpinned by the survey results presented below, the article refines conceptualizations of Germany as a 'reluctant hegemon'⁴² or 'reluctant leader',⁴³ where the willingness to lead and the actual provision of leadership are usually thought of together. Thus, the finding that the German political elite does not see itself in an actual leadership position *despite* its general willingness to lead adds to the concept of a 'leaderless Europe',⁴⁴ as it points to the relevance of the EU's structural obstacles to leadership, such as its polycentric character and its many institutional constraints.

Third, as outlined in greater detail in the following section, the article makes the concept of regional leadership amenable to sound empirical analysis by unfolding and operationalizing it through nine indicators.

Methodology

The methodological tool of choice for scrutinizing Germany's self-concept regarding the issue of leadership is a survey of its political elite. Without sacrificing much internal validity (correctness of observation), elite surveys allow us to gather data on opinions, attitudes and beliefs at an individual level while maintaining a

³⁸ See e.g. Beach and Mazzucelli, *Leadership in the big bangs*; Mattli, *The logic of regional integration*; Jonas Tallberg, *Leadership and negotiation in the European Union* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³⁹ Charles P. Kindleberger, 'Dominance and leadership in the international economy: exploitation, public goods, and free rides', *International Studies Quarterly* 25: 2, 1981, pp. 242–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600355>; David A. Lake, 'Leadership, hegemony, and the international economy: naked emperor or tattered monarch with potential?', *International Studies Quarterly* 37: 4, 1993, pp. 459–89 at p. 462, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600841>.

⁴⁰ Bulmer and Paterson, *Germany and the European Union*; Sandra Destradi, 'Reluctant powers? Rising powers' contributions to regional crisis management', *Third World Quarterly* 39: 12, 2018, pp. 2222–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1549942>; Schoeller, *Leadership in the Eurozone*.

⁴¹ See for example Heinrich Best, György Lengyel and Luca Verzichelli, eds, *The Europe of elites: a study into the Europeaness of Europe's political and economic elites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴² Bulmer and Paterson, *Germany and the European Union*.

⁴³ Abraham Newman, 'The reluctant leader: Germany's euro experience and the long shadow of reunification', in Matthias Matthijs and Mark Blyth, eds, *The future of the euro* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 117–35.

⁴⁴ Jack Hayward, ed., *Leaderless Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

high degree of reliability and external validity (generalizability). In addition, ‘elite surveys permit collection of large amounts of data ... for a relatively lower cost in terms of money and time’.⁴⁵ This is particularly true for web-based surveys, which allow for larger samples and do not imply an interviewer effect, but which also entail lower response rates.⁴⁶ The supposed weakness that surveys measure subjective opinions rather than objective facts⁴⁷ is an advantage in this study, as the aim is precisely to assess the subjective (self-)perception of the German political elite. Hence, an elite survey is the right methodological tool to study the views of actors who are in a position to decide, actually or potentially, about Germany’s provision of leadership in international and European affairs.

Elite research is a well-established field in Germany, and elite surveys have been carried out to great effect, but there have been few cross-sectoral studies.⁴⁸ Likewise, in the realm of EU studies, scholars have increasingly made use of elite studies.⁴⁹ However, so far there has been no investigation of how German elite members perceive their country when it comes to providing leadership in EU policy-making. As a result, we lack reliable knowledge about the German perspective on this crucial question of European integration.

Defining and sampling political elite members

Political elites are ‘small, relatively cohesive, and stable groups with disproportionate power to affect national and supranational political outcomes on a continuing basis’.⁵⁰ Among the various methods that were available for the identification and selection of these people, this study opted for the ‘positional method’. This sampling method identifies political elite members based on their formal position within institutions. On the one hand, this ensures a high level of reliability. On the other hand, the method is indifferent concerning the fuzzy boundaries of elites and the varying degrees of actual influence.⁵¹ What may be regarded as a downside of the positional approach is an advantage for this study, as it seeks to identify not only actors who exert direct influence but also those

⁴⁵ Juan Rodríguez-Teruel and Jean-Pascal Daloz, ‘Surveying and observing political elites’, in Heinrich Best and John Higley, eds, *The Palgrave handbook of political elites* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 93–113 at p. 95.

⁴⁶ Rodríguez-Teruel and Daloz, ‘Surveying and observing political elites’, p. 103.

⁴⁷ Herbert F. Weisberg, ‘The methodological strength and weaknesses of survey research’, in Wolfgang Donsbach and Michael W. Traugott, eds, *The Sage handbook of public opinion research* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), pp. 223–31.

⁴⁸ Elisabeth Bunselmeyer, Marc Holland-Cunz and Katrin Dribbisch, *Projektbericht “Entscheidungsträger in Deutschland: Werte und Einstellungen”*, Discussion Paper P 2013-001 (Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, 2013), p. 4; Céline Teney, Sarah Carol, Oliver Strijbis and Senem Tepe, *Elite survey of the bridging project “The political sociology of cosmopolitanism and communitarianism”*, Discussion Paper SP VI 2018-105 (Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, 2018).

⁴⁹ See, for example, Hussein Kassim et al., *The European Commission of the twenty-first century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Richard Whitaker, Simon Hix and Galina Zapryanova, ‘Understanding members of the European Parliament: four waves of the European Parliament Research Group MEP survey’, *European Union Politics* 18: 3, 2017, pp. 491–506, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116516687399>.

⁵⁰ Heinrich Best and John Higley, ‘Introduction’, in Best and Higley, eds, *The Palgrave handbook of political elites*, pp. 1–6 at p. 3.

⁵¹ Ursula Hoffmann-Lange, ‘Methods of elite identification’, in Best and Higley, eds, *The Palgrave handbook of political elites*, pp. 79–92.

who have the potential to influence Germany's EU policy indirectly or in the near future (e.g. after a change of government).

Following the positional approach, we can define political elite members more specifically as 'incumbents of leadership positions in powerful political institutions ... who, by virtue of their control of intraorganizational power resources, are able to influence important (political) decisions'.⁵² This includes politicians and high-ranking officials working in German ministries and the Chancellery, the Office of the Federal President, the German parliament (Bundestag), the main political parties,⁵³ the Permanent Representation of Germany to the EU and German embassies in EU member states, as well as German officials in the European External Action Service and German members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Within administrative organizations, a top-down approach is applied whereby those persons in the highest position of power are sampled.⁵⁴ In total, therefore, the survey included a sample of 1,044 persons, of whom 997 could actually be contacted and 54 returned a (quasi-)complete questionnaire (on response rate issues, see 'Findings', below).

The survey was active between 21 April and 1 September 2021. The impact of the federal elections on 26 September 2021 on the survey results can be expected to be relatively small, as the sample was designed in such a way as to include also those members of the German elite who were not in an executive position at the time of the survey, but could assume such a position in the future (see above). The sample thus included, for example, opposition politicians and the leadership of *all* parties represented in parliament. Since most relevant politicians did not change due to the elections (although possibly their role shifted from government to opposition, or vice versa), and the relevant parties as well as many officials in the ministries remained the same, the post-election sample would look very similar.

Conceptualizing and operationalizing leadership

Assessing the self-concept of political elite members regarding leadership in international or regional affairs requires 1) a definition of leadership; 2) a conceptualization that unfolds the definition into various dimensions of leadership; and 3) an operationalization that translates these dimensions into concrete indicators.⁵⁵ When finally designing a questionnaire (see below), the respondents needed to be given the possibility of specifying their own understanding of leadership in order to safeguard the internal validity of the findings.

Scholarly definitions of leadership are countless. A comprehensive and yet specific definition which masterfully integrates the fragmented state of the art has been provided by Robyn Eckersley: 'Leadership ... is defined as a process of interaction whereby one or more actors (the leaders) exercise asymmetric influ-

⁵² Ursula Hoffmann-Lange, 'Studying elite vs mass opinion', in Donsbach and Traugott, eds, *The Sage handbook of public opinion research*, pp. 53–63.

⁵³ Those parties which are represented in the Bundestag.

⁵⁴ See Teney et al., 'Elite survey', p. 10.

⁵⁵ Willem E. Saris and Irmtraud N. Gallhofer, *Design, evaluation, and analysis of questionnaires for survey research* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2014).

ence in attracting or negotiating the consent or acquiescence of other parties (the followers), either directly or indirectly, in ways that facilitate collective action towards the achievement of a common purpose in a given community'.⁵⁶ A similar definition proposed by Schoeller includes two further elements: first, the use of power resources as a necessary condition for the provision of leadership and, second, policy or institutional change to improve collective action as a stated goal of political leadership.⁵⁷

These definitions provide us with the following dimensions of leadership: an availability and use of power resources, exertion of asymmetric influence, a commitment to a common purpose, formation of consent or acquiescence, and a stated goal of policy or institutional change. At the conceptual level, these dimensions find their expression in two typical actions of a leader: getting a group to the Pareto frontier—that is, proposing or realizing collective betterment without making anyone worse off—and selecting a point of agreement on the Pareto frontier—that is, enabling one among several viable solutions and thus excluding alternatives.⁵⁸ More concretely, Jonas Tallberg conceptualized these actions as agenda management, brokerage and representation.⁵⁹

These conceptual dimensions can be broken down into nine indicators of leadership, which were assessed in the survey with regard to Germany's role in the EU: 1) developing initiatives or programmes to solve common problems; 2) assuming responsibility for the implementation of common initiatives or programmes; 3) acting as a broker or mediator among the members of a community; 4) exerting decisive influence on the evolution of a community or a common endeavour; 5) investing more than other members of the community in the success of a common endeavour; 6) striving for positions of responsibility (e.g. influential posts or offices); 7) representing common interests to third parties; 8) contributing more than other members of the community to improving common decision-making processes and/or policies; and 9) providing a vision for the future development of a community or a common endeavour.

Designing the questionnaire

The complete questionnaire consists of seven parts.⁶⁰ While part 1 asks for the main policy field and institutional affiliation of the respondents, part 2 investigates which EU policy they see as presenting the greatest need for action. Building on the leadership indicators outlined above, part 3 surveys the role respondents believe Germany should play in the EU. By contrast, part 4 assesses how respondents perceive Germany's actual role in the EU. To evaluate the answers with

⁵⁶ Robyn Eckersley, 'Rethinking leadership: understanding the roles of the US and China in the negotiation of the Paris Agreement', *European Journal of International Relations* 26: 4, 2020, pp. 1179–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661209270>.

⁵⁷ Schoeller, *Leadership in the Eurozone*, pp. 21–2.

⁵⁸ See Derek Beach, *The dynamics of European integration: why and when EU institutions matter* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 17–20.

⁵⁹ Tallberg, *Leadership and negotiation in the European Union*, pp. 17–29.

⁶⁰ Schoeller, 'Leadership in the EU?'

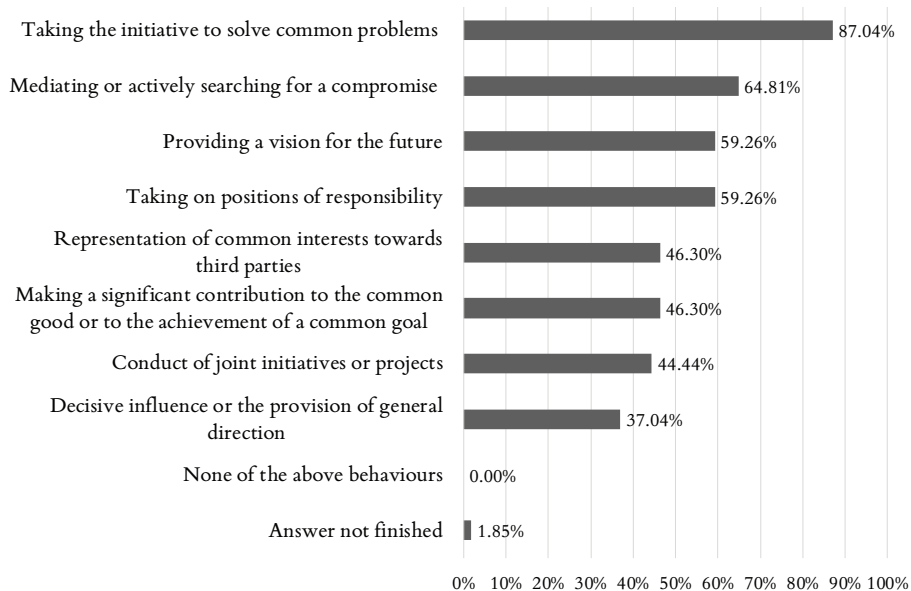
reference to the issue of leadership, part 5 gauges the respondents' understanding of leadership. Having introduced the concept of leadership, part 6 asks the respondents to assess the demand for and supply of German leadership in their respective policy fields and beyond. Finally, part 7 collects relevant personal attributes of the respondents, which serve as control variables in the data analysis, such as age, gender and party affiliation.

Survey findings

The survey results show that German political elite members approve the notion of their country assuming a leadership role across different policy fields and various understandings of leadership. At the same time, the survey exposes a considerable gap between normative endorsement of a German leading role ('leadership aspiration') and the actual performance of Germany ('leadership reality') as perceived by the respondents.

In order to properly interpret the survey results, it makes sense to first take a look at the respondents' understanding of leadership. As figure 1 illustrates, taking the initiative to solve common problems is considered by far the most characteristic behaviour associated with political leadership—an understanding that 87 per cent of the respondents share. This is followed by mediating or actively searching for a compromise (65 per cent), assuming positions of responsibility, and providing a vision for the future (59 per cent each). The fact that no one responded that none of the predefined roles qualify as leadership shows that the nine indicators comprehensively cover the respondents' understanding of leadership.

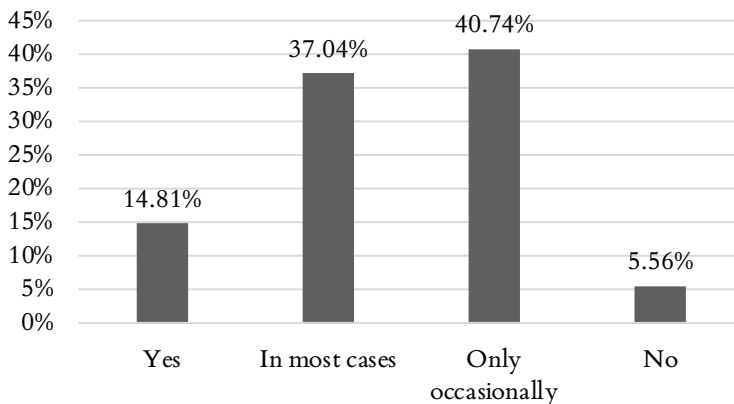
Figure 1: Results of survey question 'Which of the following behaviours do you regard as political leadership? (Multiple answers possible)'



Overall, the survey reveals a high level of agreement across EU policy fields that Germany should take a leading role.⁶¹ Depending on the understanding of leadership, the proportion of those who fully or somewhat approve of such a role ranges between 63 per cent⁶² and 91 per cent.⁶³ This strong claim for leadership stands in stark contrast with the respondents' perception of Germany's actual role in the EU. The share of those who fully agree that Germany fulfils one of the predefined leadership roles ranges between 0 per cent⁶⁴ and 19 per cent.⁶⁵ Adding those who 'rather agree' that Germany performs such a role, the approval rates range between 22 per cent⁶⁶ and 65 per cent.⁶⁷

Importantly, the above data refers to survey questions that were asked *before* introducing the concept of leadership. Once the respondents had the chance to indicate their own understanding of leadership, they were explicitly asked whether they believe that Germany takes a leading role in the EU (figure 2). The figures confirm the gap between leadership aspirations and reality, as less than 15 per cent would fully agree that Germany takes a leading role in the EU (figure 2a). When asked about the policy field they know best, the respondents' assessment of Germany's leadership record becomes even gloomier. On average, only one-third (33 per cent) of the respondents believe that—at least 'in most cases'—Germany plays a leading role in their policy area (figure 2b).⁶⁸

Figure 2a: 'In your opinion, does Germany take on a political leadership role in the EU (beyond single policy areas)?'



⁶¹ For detailed figures, see Schoeller, 'Leadership in the EU?.'

⁶² 'Germany should contribute more than other states to improving EU decision-making and/or policies.'

⁶³ 'Germany should provide a vision for the future development of the EU.'

⁶⁴ 'Germany independently develops initiatives or programs to solve problems in the EU.'

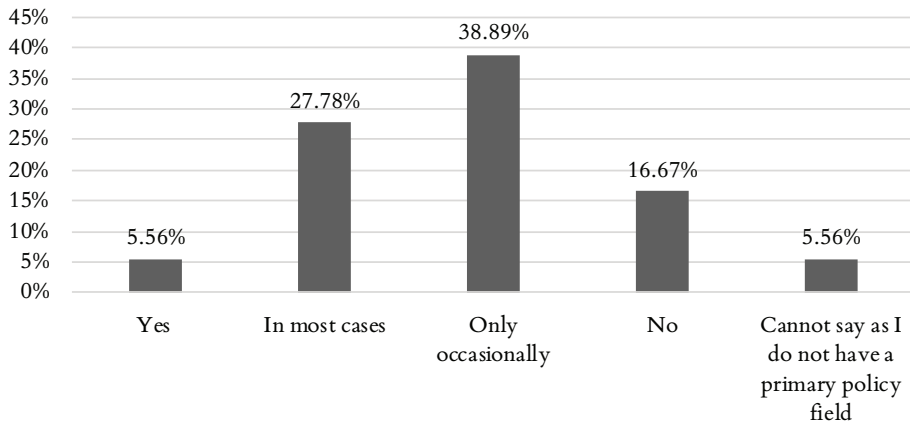
⁶⁵ 'Germany invests more than other countries in the success of European integration.'

⁶⁶ 'Germany provides a vision for the future development of the EU.'

⁶⁷ 'Germany invests more than other countries in the success of European integration.'

⁶⁸ This average is consistent across policy fields, with the only exceptions being foreign and security policy (50 per cent) and economic, monetary and financial policy (44 per cent): Schoeller, 'Leadership in the EU?.'

Figure 2b: 'If you think only of the policy field in which you are primarily active, does Germany take on a leadership role?'



The gap between leadership aspirations and the actual provision of leadership becomes even more obvious when we only look at those who fully agree that Germany assumes leadership. As figure 2 shows, regarding Germany's general role in the EU, less than 15 per cent would fully agree that Germany provides leadership (figure 2a); within their primary policy field, which they know better, less than 6 per cent of the respondents are fully convinced that Germany has taken the lead (figure 2b).

In particular, two observations stand out regarding the gap between leadership aspirations and reality. First, approval of Germany taking on leadership is at its highest when it comes to the question of providing a vision for the future of the EU. In total, 91 per cent of respondents think that Germany should provide such a vision. By contrast, only 22 per cent believe that Germany actually does provide a vision, with less than 2 per cent thinking that this role description fully applies to Germany (figure 3, below). Hence, the perceived leadership gap is greatest when it comes to providing a vision for the future of the EU.⁶⁹

Second, taking the initiative to solve common problems is considered the most characteristic of all leadership roles (see figure 1 above). Quite consistently, 83 per cent of the respondents fully or somewhat agree that Germany should do this. However, only 56 per cent consider it 'rather true' that Germany actually develops such initiatives.⁷⁰ More strikingly, not even one respondent believes it is fully true that Germany develops initiatives or programmes to solve problems in the EU. The fact that none of the surveyed elite members are fully convinced that Germany does what is considered most characteristic of the provision of leadership clearly exposes the perceived gap between leadership aspirations and reality.

⁶⁹ This is reflected in the fact that more than half (58 per cent) of those who fully agree that Germany should provide a vision think that in reality this is 'rather not' the case: see Schoeller, 'Leadership in the EU?'.
⁷⁰ Schoeller, 'Leadership in the EU?'.

Figure 3a: 'Germany should provide a vision for the future development of the EU.'

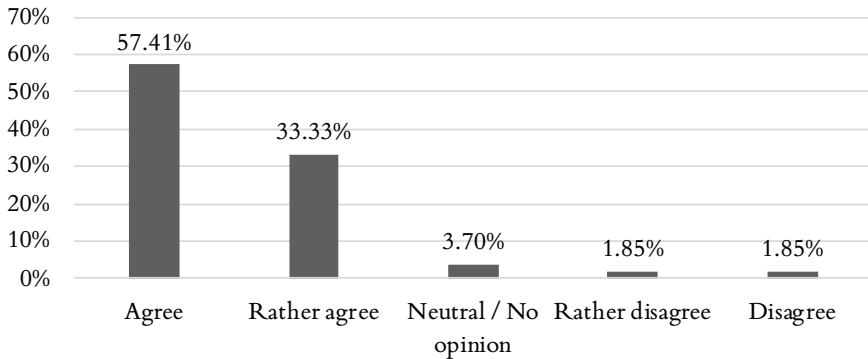
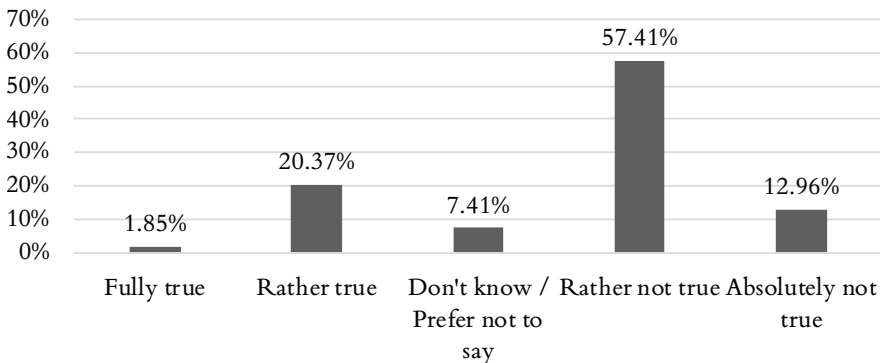


Figure 3b: 'Germany provides a vision for the future development of the EU.'



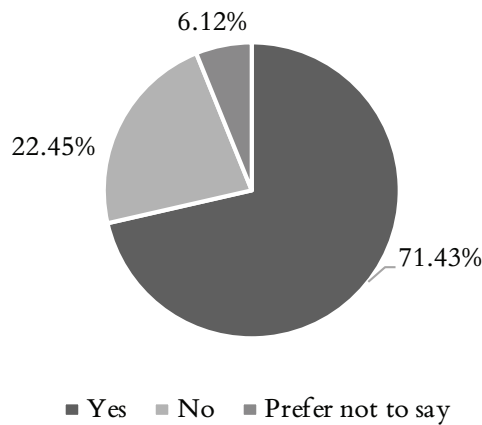
The leadership aspiration–reality gap is not only reflected in the discrepancy between what Germany should be doing and what it is actually doing in the EU. There is also a gap between the perceived leadership demand from abroad and Germany's leadership supply. Although most respondents are of the opinion that Germany is not taking the lead in their respective policy areas, a majority of more than 70 per cent⁷¹ has the impression that other EU member states expect or even demand leadership from Germany (figure 4). When asked for concrete examples of such a demand for leadership, the answers span a large set of policies that range from climate policy and the international management of marine pollution and plastic waste, via governance of the EMU and the Next Generation EU coronavirus recovery fund, through to foreign and security policy⁷² and the EU's strategy towards China. In the words of one respondent, leadership from Germany is demanded 'actually everywhere'.⁷³

⁷¹ 71.4 per cent of those respondents who answered the relevant question.

⁷² Foreign and security policy stands out, in that even 87.5 per cent of respondents active in this policy area perceived a demand for German leadership from other member states. Notably, this was before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. After the outbreak of the Ukraine war, this demand has arguably become even stronger.

⁷³ Translated from the original: 'eigentlich überall'.

Figure 4: 'In the policy field in which you are primarily active, do you have the impression that other EU member states expect or demand a leadership role from Germany?'



Regarding the survey's control variables, it is striking that German politicians are more sceptical than civil servants when it comes to the provision of leadership. Not even one of the politicians surveyed thinks that Germany assumes a permanent leading role in their main policy area, and only 15 per cent think that Germany does so in most cases. By contrast, 62 per cent of the civil servants surveyed believe that Germany provides leadership, at least in most cases, in their primary policy field. The asymmetry between sceptical politicians and affirmative state officials persists even when controlling for government vs opposition members, with the interesting result that, regardless of their political colour, state officials are more convinced of Germany's leadership potential than government politicians.⁷⁴

The survey has a response rate of 5.42 per cent. While a low response rate is not untypical for a web-based elite survey, it raises the question of a bias in the results. Indeed, it is not the response rate as such that should worry us most, but a possible *non-response bias*.⁷⁵ Regarding gender, women are slightly under-represented in the respondents compared to the sample (28.7 per cent vs 25.6 per cent).⁷⁶ However, if controlled for other factors, this has no significant impact on the reported results. Regarding party affiliation, the government parties at the time (Christian Democrats—CDU/CSU and Social Democrats—SPD) are under-represented compared to their vote share in the legislative period, whereas the Liberals (FDP) are over-represented. As the opposition is naturally more sceptical about Germany's leadership record, a higher share of government politicians and

⁷⁴ The difference between politicians and civil servants is robust when checking for other control variables too, such as gender and policy area. Even if we control for party affiliation, the correlation remains visible, although it is somewhat weakened: see Schoeller, 'Leadership in the EU?'

⁷⁵ J. Michael Brick, 'Optimizing response rates', in David L. Vannette and Jon A. Krosnick, eds, *The Palgrave handbook of survey research* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 383–91.

⁷⁶ The questionnaire includes 'gender' as a control variable. The answer option 'other' ('*divers*') was not selected by any of the participants. To determine 'gender' in the sample, first name was taken as a proxy.

officials among the respondents would have produced a more optimistic picture. This difference would be relatively small, however, because even if the bias is 'corrected' by weighting the responses based on the vote share of government vs opposition parties, the reported results would change only slightly. For example, instead of 33.3 per cent of respondents believing that Germany provides leadership in their primary policy field at least in most cases, an estimated 37.8 per cent would be of that opinion. Hence, while the under-representation of the government in the survey responses creates a non-response bias, this does not change the overall findings.

The aspiration–reality gap in practice: policy implications and the Prague Speech

What do the survey results mean for a German leadership role in Europe in the years to come? While Chancellor Scholz delivered a comprehensive outlook on Germany's aims for Europe in his Prague speech,⁷⁷ the survey results presented in this article suggest that Germany's leadership aspirations often seem to fail in the face of reality. This section therefore takes up the major claims in Scholz's speech and evaluates them with regard to the identified leadership aspiration–reality gap. The speech emphasizes four issue areas where Scholz sees a great need and opportunity for action in the EU: enlargement and EU institutional reform, sovereignty and defence, migration and fiscal policy, and democratic values and the rule of law. The aspiration–reality gap is reflected in each of these four areas. While the aims and aspirations are at times clearly expressed, it remains largely open what a German leadership role could contribute in this regard. Indeed, Scholz avoided using the term 'leadership' in connection with Germany's role in Europe, which stands in contrast to other speeches by former or current German government representatives.⁷⁸

First, Scholz expressed his commitment to further EU enlargement to include the countries of the western Balkans and eastern Europe (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia). To enable further enlargement, he put forward reform proposals for the EU's decision-making institutions. Regarding the Council of the European Union, Scholz advocated a transition from unanimity to majority voting in the context of the CFSP. While Scholz mentioned the concerns of small member states in this regard, his speech omitted to provide for a way to obtain their consent and thus realize his proposal. With respect to the European Parliament (EP), Scholz proposed a new rule for the allocation of seats following enlargement, according to which 'each electoral vote carries roughly the same weight'. In practical terms, one representative (MEP) of the EU's smallest member state, Malta, would thus correspond to circa 161 German MEPs. Hence, even if Malta sent only one MEP, this would bloat the EP to a total of circa 867 MEPs—something that Scholz

⁷⁷ Federal Government, 'Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague', 29 Aug. 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/scholz-speech-prague-charles-university-2080752>.

⁷⁸ Federal Foreign Office, 'In schwierigen Zeiten'; Federal Ministry of Defence, 'Grundsatzrede zur Sicherheitsstrategie'; Federal Ministry of Defence, 'Führung aus der Mitte'.

explicitly wanted to avoid with his proposal. More importantly, however, the current principle of 'degressive proportionality', which is enshrined in article 14.2 of the Treaty on European Union and which grants the electoral votes of smaller member states greater weight, is meant to protect those states from the dominance of a few larger states. Changing this principle is therefore hardly reconcilable with leadership for the benefit of all member states.

The second issue area covered in Scholz's speech concerned European sovereignty and defence. Scholz called for a 'Made in Europe 2030' strategy and 'a Europe that leads the way on important key technologies', together with proposing concrete measures such as common standards for a European circular economy, a pan-European broadband internet, infrastructure for an internal energy market based on renewables, a European hydrogen network and investment in climate-neutral aviation fuels. However, with the exception of a European space for mobility data, which could be connected with the German 'Mobility Data Space', a German leadership role in realizing any of these aims was not mentioned. In contrast, the chancellor proposed two concrete instances of German leadership in the field of defence. First, Germany wants to ensure that the planned EU rapid deployment capacity is operational in 2025, provide the core troops for it and take responsibility for the establishment of an EU headquarters when it will head the deployment force in 2025. Second, Germany envisages developing a new air defence system, which will be designed in such a way that other European states can participate.

The third area of focus was EU migration and fiscal policy. Regarding migration, Scholz suggested more binding partnerships with countries of origin and transit, making Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria full members of the Schengen area, and being swifter in granting migrants the opportunity to take employment in other EU member states. However, with the exception of offering the Czech EU presidency Germany's support in negotiating a reform of the European asylum system with the EP, it remained unclear whether and how Germany would provide leadership in achieving these aims. Regarding the EU's fiscal policy, Scholz reiterated Germany's longstanding policy of fiscal restraint and stressed the need to reduce high debt levels in other eurozone countries. In this context, he referred to a German position paper on the further development of European debt rules. The paper suggests detailed changes in the procedural rules on government spending and debt reduction, rather than any change in aims or principle.⁷⁹ Notably, the speech did not mention any proposal on assisting deficit states in reducing their debt levels or stabilizing the EMU by other means, such as correcting external trade imbalances in deficit and surplus states alike, establishing a fiscal redistribution mechanism and unblocking discussion on a European deposit insurance scheme.

Finally, the chancellor referred to a need to support the Commission in safeguarding liberal values and the rule of law, but he neither specified what this

⁷⁹ Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, 'Proposed principles to guide the German government in deliberations on the reform of EU fiscal rules', 5 Aug. 2022, <https://www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/EN/Downloads/P/proposed-principles-to-guide-the-german-government-in-deliberations-on-the-reform-of-eu-fiscal-rules.html>.

support should look like nor outlined what form a German contribution could take.

In summary, the leadership aspiration–reality gap revealed by the survey is also reflected in the Prague speech, in which Scholz addressed the most pressing challenges ahead in European integration. While the German aspirations became clear—the chancellor not only listed current problems, but also possible solutions—the question of whether Germany would take a leadership role in achieving the stated goals remained largely open. To be fair, putting issues on the agenda and making proposals can in itself be considered an instance of leadership, and a broad speech on the future of the EU might not be the appropriate setting to outline concrete leadership action down the road, especially since the latter also depends on the approval of other actors such as EU member states and domestic coalition partners. Indeed, the reluctance of potential followers at the European level and domestic veto players could be one cause of the leadership aspiration–reality gap (see Conclusions, below). In this context it is also noticeable that the speech was largely restricted to concrete problems and possible fixes and did not attempt to present a more far-reaching vision of the future of European integration.

Conclusions: from normalized power to leading power?

In 2010, Bulmer and Paterson argued that Germany had moved from being a ‘tamed power’ to a ‘normalized power’.⁸⁰ More than a decade later, we may ask whether Germany has moved further from being a normalized power to being a leading power in Europe. In the light of recent crises and catastrophes, most notably the war in Ukraine, the question is anything but trivial.

Leadership, defined as a process in which an actor uses its power resources to exercise influence to help a group achieve a common goal, manifests itself in a wide range of behaviours and functions. Such leadership roles include, for example, taking the initiative to solve common problems, mediating and searching for compromise, and providing a vision of the common future. With regard to all these roles, the German political elite has clearly overcome its (in)famous ‘leadership avoidance reflex’.⁸¹ It now advocates a German leadership role in all major EU policy areas, ranging from foreign affairs and security via economic and monetary policy through to climate and environment policy. This broad leadership aspiration also shows that Germany’s historical burden is no longer a reason for the country’s political elite to abstain from taking the lead in Europe.⁸²

At the same time, however, German political elite members largely agree that in reality Germany does not live up to the high expectations associated with regional leadership (apart from occasional instances). Instead, Bulmer and Paterson’s characterization of Germany as a normalized power still holds. Rather than using its resources to help the EU realize a common purpose, Germany pursues

⁸⁰ Bulmer and Paterson, ‘Germany and the European Union’.

⁸¹ Paterson, ‘Muss Europa Angst vor Deutschland haben?’, p. 10.

⁸² The option that Germany should not take on a certain leadership role because this would not be acceptable in the light of Germany’s history was only chosen as a response twice during the entire survey.

its national interests as any other powerful member state would do. The result is a glaring gap between leadership aspirations and reality. For the EU, this aspiration–reality gap implies high levels of ambiguity—and hence uncertainty—regarding Germany's role in confronting the various challenges ahead. While there is no doubt that Germany still pursues a multilateral approach, with close co-ordination with France in particular, its status quo bias seems hardly reconcilable with the pressing demand for regional leadership.

Hence, this study has qualified the concept of Germany being a 'reluctant hegemon'⁸³ or 'reluctant leader'.⁸⁴ When this concept is applied to Germany's role in Europe, willingness to provide leadership and the provision itself are usually thought of together. This study has separated leadership aspirations from the actual provision of leadership. In contrast to previous research, it has thus shown that it is not Germany's general willingness or self-concept that is preventing it from providing leadership in the EU, neither is it a perceived lack of demand for leadership. The problem lies in the actual realization of a leading role. Indeed, leadership research has shown that even if an actor is willing and able to take the lead, leadership may fail for a variety of reasons. Successful leadership is costly and often requires making sacrifices of one's own interests in order to reach a super-ordinate common goal. Moreover, the preference constellation among followers must allow agreement on a leader's proposal on how to achieve a common goal, which becomes more difficult the more actors are involved. Finally, institutional constraints such as decision-making rules and legal provisions must leave the leader sufficient latitude to realize its strategies and goals.⁸⁵

Therefore, in an institutional environment like the EU, with many diverse actors, various checks and balances, and multiple veto points at different decision-making levels, it may become impossible to overcome divergences of preferences among member states to lead them to a common goal. This abstract insight becomes clearer at the level of concrete policies. In eurozone crisis management, for example, the common goal clearly consisted in preserving the common currency. While all the member states could easily agree on this aim, their preferences on how to reach it strongly diverged between fiscal restraint on the one hand and fiscal solidarity on the other. While Germany's efforts to (re-)establish fiscal restraint in the eurozone might therefore be regarded as an instance of leadership in northern member states such as the Netherlands and Finland, hardly anyone in Greece or Italy would be likely to attest to a German leadership role in eurozone crisis management.

The result of strongly diverging preferences and high institutional constraints in the EU is likely to be what Jack Hayward described as 'leaderless Europe'.⁸⁶ Even when powerful actors are in principle willing to take on leadership, they fail due to environmental circumstances. For future research, it will therefore be a major task to further investigate the reasons for the leadership aspiration–reality

⁸³ Bulmer and Paterson, *Germany and the European Union*.

⁸⁴ Newman, 'The reluctant leader'.

⁸⁵ Schoeller, *Leadership in the Eurozone*.

⁸⁶ Hayward, *Leaderless Europe*.

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gap identified in this article—and possibly even to discover solution strategies. Regarding Germany's current and future role in Europe, the findings imply that overcoming the 'leadership avoidance reflex' has been necessary but not sufficient to offer leadership in hard times. Unless Germany also manages to identify and overcome the persisting obstacles to successfully providing leadership, which may even involve putting the EU common good ahead of particular national interests, future European integration in an increasingly unstable international environment appears more uncertain than ever since the end of the Cold War.