

**LSESU German Society and LSE European Institute public lecture**

## **Managing Europe – What is Germany's Responsibility?**

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I would like to start out by saying that Germany's responsibility in Europe is not completely different from the responsibility that other European countries have: namely to foster the positive and successful development of both Europe and the world.

To understand this responsibility, it is no longer absolutely necessary to draw a connection to the crimes that were committed by the Nazi regime. On the other hand, of course important lessons were drawn from the years leading up to 1945. Germany's commitment to the West, and our commitment to the path of European integration, is one of these essential lessons. In any case, that's a conclusion that many European countries have drawn from history.

But ever since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, other developments have taken place that have key implications for Germany's international role and responsibility today. Through reunification, Germany's significance in the world has grown. And this means that our responsibility has grown too. And now – with the crises in and near Europe in recent years – Germany has found itself playing a new management role as well. Expectations are now directed toward Germany – expectations that surprised us at first and that we weren't too happy about: After all, since 1945, we didn't really want to be bothered by questions of power or responsibility.

On the one hand, if you were to ask me whether Germany plays the role of leader in Europe – and this is something we are either urgently implored to do, I'm thinking here of the well-known historian Brendan Simms, for example, or are bitterly deplored for doing – I would always relativize this by saying that the European Union is made up of 28 countries with equal rights. This isn't just an empty phrase. This is reality.

And with all due respect for Henry Kissinger, I don't think his statement that Germany is "too big for Europe and too small for the world" is really very helpful. After all, all of us – each nation-state on its own – is too small for this world! Discussions about structural parallels between today's conditions and conditions during the Bismarck era or during the German Empire, or the use of concepts such as "dominance" or "hegemony", or even "semi-hegemony" – these are not plausible categories for decision-makers in Europe today. And, by the way, they don't fit with the German governments actual experience. Hegemony, or leadership by a single country – that doesn't work in Europe. That's another lesson that history has taught us over and over again. On the other hand: We Germans do have a management role to play in Europe, whether we want to or not. And we have a shared responsibility. This is true, if for no other reason, simply because of our location in the centre of Europe, and because of our economic strength.

Nevertheless, quite a few Germans do express a desire not to get too involved in things out there in the world. And this desire is still certainly connected to our involvement in two world wars and the barbarity of the Nazi regime, and maybe also to the decades of living in a divided Germany, when Germans got used to an artificially sheltered existence in two separate, partially sovereign states that were situated within two competing global systems.

Recently, a survey showed that nearly 60 percent of Germans would be opposed to providing military support for NATO allies, even if they were attacked by Russia. This means that no other NATO country has a lower level of willingness to fulfil its obligations under the alliance. This is alarming and shameful, especially if you recall that, in the decades before the Berlin Wall came down, West Germans owed their security to the solidarity of their allies.

That's why the intensifying debate we are having in Germany – about our responsibility and role in the world – is so important: It is in Europe's interest, and therefore also in Germany's interest, for Germany to take on more responsibility.

Today's world is constantly changing. We are facing multiple crises, and a multi-polar system is emerging again. These new developments automatically give Germany a role in helping to build and shape better systems and rules, and German history is no longer the central factor in determining this role. Our history may still be used sometimes in domestic politics for purposes of making a political argument – for or against some kind of foreign policy commitment. And when our history is mentioned today by other countries, it usually serves a polemic function. Unfortunately, we saw some of this during the European debt crisis, and now we are seeing it again in the current refugee crisis, but in a different way.

A lot of outside commentators – and some in Germany too – are saying that Germany's response to the refugee crisis is driven by its desire to free itself of its history. The late Lord Weidenfeld recently made this argument in an interview he gave shortly before his death. I think that's taking things a bit too far.

What I do definitely see is a moral imperative not to make refugees pay the price for Europe's inability to take effective action. We simply have the duty to help – not because of our history, but because of the hardship that these people are experiencing, which we can mitigate. This is not moral imperialism. It is not an attempt to establish moral hegemony. And it is not some tyrannical display of German virtue, or any of the other negative things that have been said.

Simply stated, we did our part to help save Europe's honour. The images from Budapest and Calais were not something that Europeans could be especially proud of.

But, on the other hand, I do admit: We Germans seem to have this need, now and then, to realize that we too can be good people – like when we welcomed the world as our guests at the 2006 World Cup, or, yes, last September when we gave a warm welcome to refugees at Munich's main train station. And this may be connected in some way to the fact that, as a people, we didn't really like ourselves very much, and understandably so.

I would now like to take a closer look at the question: What exactly is Germany's shared responsibility when it comes to the urgent issues facing us today?

On the issue of refugees, we in Germany and Europe will have to commit a lot more resources to improving conditions in the regions that are producing refugees and in the countries that border these war-torn regions. And we will have to put much more effort and resources into helping find a solution to the conflict in Syria. The aim here is to find ways to make it unnecessary for people to leave their home countries and regions in the first place.

I would like to urge that we use the refugee crisis as an opportunity to make progress towards a common European foreign and security policy. That would give an important and meaningful impetus to the process of European integration. Our need for a joint overall strategy is all the more urgent because we Europeans can no longer assume that the United States will perform these tasks for us. To do this, it is essential for Europe to be able to benefit from the United Kingdom's global experience in diplomacy and security policy.

We also share responsibility for overcoming the crisis in Ukraine, which is no longer at the centre of media attention, but which continues to smoulder. I think President Putin understands something that not all Europeans themselves really understand. We Europeans are not very confident about our own soft power – that is, the attraction of our social model that combines democracy, the rule of law, and social market economies. But Putin is very aware of this. He fears it and responds with hard power.

This is what the current government sees as the real "threat" to Russia: It's not the expansion of the European Union and NATO into the territory of the former Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union –

which, mind you, has taken place at the explicit and autonomous wish of the countries of central Europe and the Baltic region. Rather, it's the fact that this European soft power is moving closer, coming face to face, with the Russian system. This has turned into a competition between systems, which the EU did not seek out, and which we did not start. But Putin appears to be afraid to let this competition play out openly. That's why he's trying to weaken Europe by dividing us and tempting us to think only in narrow national terms.

We must not play into his hands. Europe's social model is more humane and more attractive. We owe it to ourselves to protect this model against destructive strategies.

And what is Germany's responsibility when it comes to the eurozone and the European Union?

Today, this means sticking to the rules if we expect other countries to do the same. It means remaining Europe's anchor of stability and engine of growth. And it means showing that balanced budgets, growth and investment are not mutually exclusive, but rather go hand-in-hand. Europe must have a strong economy if it wants to be effective in tackling the urgent tasks of our time, and if it wants to retain global relevance in the future.

In recent years, we've made good progress in improving the stability of the eurozone. That's why it is absolutely essential that we stick to what we have agreed – precisely because the eurozone's economy is starting to recover thanks to the reforms that have been implemented and the improved fiscal discipline that is now in place.

None of this means that we want a "German" Europe. That is simply nonsense. We want a Europe that is strong and competitive. We want a Europe that can actively shape global policy in the future. And – let me add – we want the United Kingdom to be with us as we move forward!