

Was the EU Crisis the Elephant in the Room? Revisiting Angela Merkel's victory in the German elections

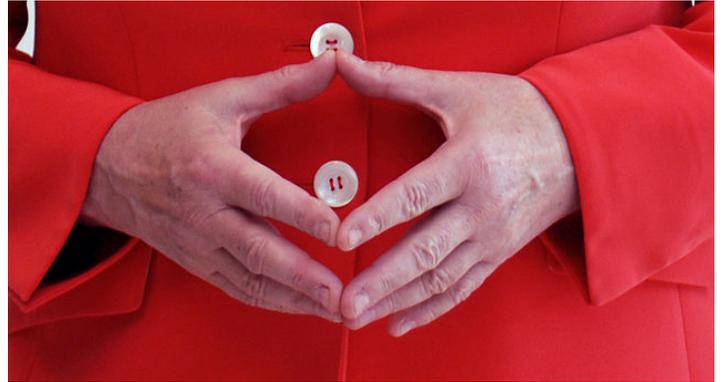
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Eurocrisis in the
Press

By *Hannah Richter*

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While debates about the [possibilities and conditions necessary to form a new German government](#) are still ongoing amongst the different political parties, the general election result appears indisputable. Chancellor Angela Merkel was confirmed as Germany's unchallenged [conservative leader](#) – her unaltered [popularity](#) seems to belie all political criticism. The public perception of Merkel's EU crisis management likely explains this support. Engaging in a political strategy which satisfied both conservative and centre-left voters, I argue that Merkel managed to establish a reputation as reliable crisis-manager which underpinned her election success.



At first glance the EU crisis didn't play a significant role the election campaigns. The [rather uninspired and weary campaigns](#) from both conservative CDU and social-democratic SPD were centred on the [domestic topics](#) of demographics, minimum wage and taxation, where both camps held different, but not incompatible positions. The picture presented was, as already the case in the [run-up to the 2009 elections](#), rather one of unity than of clear opposition with distinguishable political alternatives.

Despite dominating the political discussion throughout the past legislative period, the EU crisis was given remarkably little political room. This fits well into this picture of [feel-good campaigning](#), particularly from the side of the governing conservatives. By contrast, touching upon the difficult question of Europe's future economic and political organization might only have revealed political shortcomings and unaddressed challenges. The conservative government did its best to keep the EU crisis, especially in the form of financial aid for Greece – out of the public's attention prior to the election. When the necessity of further financial support for a suffering Greek economy [became public in late August](#), the German government quickly confirmed the aid package, successfully brushing aside an in-depth discussion.

Thus, the EU crisis played only a marginal role in pre-election debates and political manifestos. It rather, I propose, was the elephant in the room. While scarcely touched on or referred to directly, the elephant's political weight throughout the past legislature is hardly deniable. Therefore, isn't the EU crisis likely to play an important role in shaping the political opinions revealed in the election?

Even though both political camps chose to ignore the elephant in the room in their election campaigns, I argue that it is the Chancellor's reputation which nevertheless reflects the political actions and debates triggered by the crisis. Since elected as the head of a conservative-liberal government in [September 2009](#), Merkel has enjoyed a stable and significant popularity. As opinion polls show, in August 2013 a comfortable majority of [56% of the German](#)



[electorate](#) were satisfied with the conservative-liberal government “under the leadership of Angela Merkel”. Asked, however, for their opinion on the governing parties of conservative CDU/CSU and liberal FDP, only 36% of the respondents felt content.

The second figure hardly comes as a surprise, given the permanent attacks by media and opposition on the political inactivity and short-sighted opportunism of Merkel’s government. It also shows the effect of a number of [political lapses](#) and [scandals](#) involving top-ranking conservative politicians, for instance the [financially disastrous adherence](#) to the European drone programme. Surprisingly, however, the political image of Merkel herself is somehow able to bridge this gap of support. When asked to evaluate the German government, respondents seemed to lose sight of those lapses and instead regard [Merkel as personification](#) of the German government. She [overshadows individual shortcomings](#) with her immaculate reputation – a reputation which is intertwined with her political image as (EU) crisis manager.

With regard to the EU crisis, Germany under Merkel adopted a strict course of minimal action. It generally satisfied centre-left and pro-European voices, as the Merkel government committed itself to financial aid for struggling economies as well as the installation of a European bailout fund. The stability and size of the German economy gave her decisions weight, which – certainly noted with approval by many Germans – saw her stepping up with a strong, [decisive voice in European politics](#). At the same time, however, these commitments were made with just enough reluctance, and coated with sufficient conservative, partially even [nationalist polemic](#), to align with the position of her voter base: the European action was presented as unfortunate, but necessary sacrifice for Germany’s economic integrity which – through no political fault of its leaders – was put at risk by ‘careless and lazy southern Europeans’.

Managing this political balancing act between taken, while limited political action and conservative rhetoric, Merkel succeeded in staging herself as a considerate politician who does what is necessary in times of crisis without taking needless risks for her country. In public appearances such as the [TV debate](#) with her social-democratic challenger Peer Steinbrück, she clearly drew on this image as benevolent “Mummy” of Germany whose care for the welfare of her citizens is EU crisis-proven – and therefore indisputable.

With the broad middle ground covered, little room is left for substantial political criticism. Consequently, the centre-left SPD [failed to present itself](#) as a believable alternative to Merkel’s ‘all-or-nothing’ politics, especially in terms of EU policy. However, the anti-European ‘[Alternative for Germany](#)’ (AfG) was [remarkably successful](#) with their counter-strategy of ‘pointing at the elephant’. Sharply attacking Merkel’s decisions on European grounds, the party was supported by 4.7% of the electorate and only narrowly failed to enter the German parliament.

Nevertheless, the relative insignificance of this Euro-criticism suggests that in Merkel’s case, ignoring the elephant is (and was) a rather successful (power-)political strategy. But at the same time, the AfG’s undeniable partial success reminds of the fact that the EU crisis does open up a certain space for political critique and mobilization, regardless of whether established parties chose to make use of it. If the established parties choose to leave this political space vacant, there is a risk that this political space might be filled by the political right, of which the AfG is neither the [most extreme](#) nor the [only example](#) in Europe.

Hannah Richter holds a MSc (Research) in Politics and International Relations from the University of Edinburgh.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.