Germany’s post-Merkel checklist

In 2022, Germany will adjust to being governed by its first new chancellor in more than 30 years. But it does not mean the era of Angela Merkel is over—Germany—and Europe—will live with her legacy and, though she was almost universally praised as a steady leader, history may ultimately not be so kind.

At a time when the world is undergoing rapid, fundamental change, both Germany and Europe have failed to chart a decisive new course. Although Merkel averted multiple catastrophes, her caution may have exacerbated many other problems, such as the German financial crisis. Moreover, many slow-moving crises—such as Germany’s demographic challenges, technological stagnation, climate change, and rising inequality—were left to fester.

To be sure, future historians will emphasize Merkel’s robust crisis management, her cautious leadership style and her habit of listening to all sides before making decisions. Yet, with hindsight, it will also be clear that she was a kind of queen in a kingdom of the blind. At a time when Europe was beset by one emergency after another, she stood out not for her own foresight, but for the dint of the lack of leadership around her.

Merkel was a political missionary. Having begun her chancellorhip after just barely defeating former Social Democrat Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, she never attempted the dramatic liberalizing reforms that she and the Christian Democratic Union had promised in their 2005 election campaign. Whether the result of electoral calculus or a true lack of ideological commitment, strategic ambition would slowly missing from the rest of her political career.

The same can be said for her role within Europe. Although hailed as the consummate European, her approach to European integration often revealed a lack of EU solidarity. She frequently made unilateral decisions without consulting or involving allies, such as when she swore off nuclear energy or supported Nord Stream 2, the Russia-to-Germany gas pipeline that bypasses Poland and Ukraine. Moreover, in the various rescue crises, Merkel did the bare minimum to keep the EU intact, ensuring the kind of change needed to put the bloc on a more stable and egalitarian footing.

In many ways, her solid-but-visionless leadership represented a continuation of a paradigm that has been prevalent throughout the postwar period. The country has long preferred nonstriving leadership of the kind expressed in Reinhard Adenauer’s famous election slogan, “No experiments (or Merkel’s) ‘You know me’.” The alternative, as Germany saw it, is a rude political pill, a French President Emmanuel Macron or the brashness exhibited by Senior Prime Minister David Cameron when he allowed the Brexit referendum.

Although Germany craves progress and recognizes the need for reforms, it has long failed to change. The chancellors of Adenauer, Helmut Kohl and Merkel (who together governed for a total of 46 years) embodied Germany’s post-Merkel checklist

The country is in urgent need of forward-looking, strategic policymaking

The new government must bring an updated leadership style to shake the country from its self-satisfied complacency. It must invest in digitalization and climate action, stabilize the debt brake (balanced budget requirement), and digitalization and climate action, stabilize the budget surplus prior to COVID-19 and can still run into barriers from the so-called debt brake (balanced budget requirement).

These rules can be revised and adapted to allow for greater investment. Similarly, while a more flexible economic policy will face political headwinds, the German Federal Ministry of Finance has already shown that it is willing to tackle these challenges head-on. The alternatives to yet another term of stagnation, which neither Germany nor Europe can afford.