

MOTHERLY CRISIS MANAGEMENT: REVISITING ANGELA MERKEL'S LEADERSHIP DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

By Verena Kasirye

Celebrating 15 years in office this November, Angela Merkel is the European Union's longest serving leader and the world's longest serving female head of government. Recently, Merkel not only made headlines with her tenure jubilee but even more so with her style of leadership during the coronavirus crisis. Heralded as Germany's "silver bullet" of crisis management,¹ the 66 year old has been leading by example and many leaders look to her for guidance and inspiration. Particularly for women, it is a promising quest to explore what Angela Merkel has to offer that makes her leadership during the pandemic so remarkable and exemplary.

The coronavirus pandemic hit Germany in many ways: the health and social system were strained, the economy fell into recession and social cohesion

was put to a test. Luckily, Merkel's response to this built on long-standing experiences in managing various crises where she steered Germany and the EU through intricate dilemmas. During her 15 years in office, Merkel had been titled the "chancellor of crises", precisely because of her involvement in the 2007 financial crisis and 2015 refugee crisis. Although her decisions in these were never undisputed, they still shaped a leader with stamina to fight through adversities.

Lucky coincidence, Germany faced the coronavirus not only with such an experienced crisis manager but also with a scientist in the lead. A trained quantum chemist, Merkel has been applying a strong scientific angle to her emergency response and her crisis management has been tied closely to the recommendations of notable virologists and epidemiologists. Her approach does not distinguish her leadership entirely from other nations, but

her confidence in science and facts certainly sets a precedent for other leaders to follow.

This alone does not do justice to lay out Merkel's leadership success, which has been attributed to manifold reasons. One of them is the chancellor's frank communication and mediation efforts, which have been a characteristic of her leadership all throughout the pandemic. A key moment in this must have been Merkel's televised speech in March, addressing the people of Germany over previously adopted lockdown measures. Perhaps it was the novelty of the situation – it is unheard of a German chancellor to address the nation on a political matter on TV – or perhaps it was her emphatic speech that validated her words. What stuck was that, while she presented the hard facts on the virus, she repeatedly called for compassion and made it clear that she expected no less of every citizen than to act in solidarity with all members of society.

¹ Boden, Cindy (2020). Angela Merkel: Ausland feiert Deutschlands „Wunder-Waffe“ - vier Komponenten entscheidend. In: Merkur, 23.10.2020.

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What followed were several more speeches that all similarly struck the right note: Her mixture of sobriety about the facts and empathy with her people overshadowed the tense atmosphere in the country. Unlike during the refugee crisis, her affirmative “We can do this”-mantra installed *real* confidence in the people and gained their support for the lockdown measures: Germany’s coronavirus cases dropped in the subsequent weeks and Merkel’s approval ratings soared.

Authenticity and care

During the summer months, Merkel’s style of leadership continued this course. Many times she has been heard to plead with people to show

sense and heart. Even when the coronavirus cases increased again, she did not point the finger but rather resorted to pleading and reasoning with the people of Germany, who wanted to see a return to normalcy faster than she deemed possible.

Internationally, this communicative approach has been named a key trait of her leadership although it not only bore success.

In Germany, the federal states remain with strong decision-making powers so that their recent reluctance to impose a second lockdown caused Merkel visible frustration. When the federal states refused to get on board with stricter measures, she replied in defiance: “Then we’ll sit

again in two weeks. It’s just not enough what we’re doing here. Everyone is just looking for their loopholes.”

Interestingly, the public did not rate this as a blow to her success but rather as an assertion of her authenticity and genuine care for the well-being of the country. Many were also surprised by such an offhand remark of the chancellor who had often been criticised for her neutrality and supposed lack of charisma.

While this one may have slipped, Merkel’s generally level-headed leadership is exemplary for her history of sailing the ship steadily when Germany hit stormy seas. Already before the pandemic, it was the chancellor’s rational decision-making and

modest manner that gained her government a high level of trust.² During the pandemic, her style of leadership remained pragmatic, her communication straight-forward and her appearance calm. Instead of polarising, Merkel unites. Instead of making electrifying promises, she keeps sailing the ship sturdily like an experienced captain who knows that the storm is not yet over. This persistence in Merkel's leadership has resulted in much international attention: Recently, new terms like "Merkelina" have lauded her determination to problem-solving and setting good examples.³

In fact, setting good examples is another trait that makes the list of Merkel's leadership style: When the chancellor found out she had been in contact with a doctor who tested positive for COVID-19, she immediately quarantined in her home in Berlin, where she conducted her government business for two weeks. Unlike other world leaders defying medical advice and government policies, her actions underlined her credibility and once again validated the public's approval of her. Post quarantine, little can be criticised about Merkel's setting an example. Diligently, she has been wearing a mask, sticking to the government guidelines and conducting high-level government meetings digitally.

Lessons for female leadership

All in all, Merkel's leadership during the pandemic and

during the previous years has been astounding because it does not match the classical description of "leading". Rather than standing at the front, she "leads from the centre", a former German minister had once remarked. And rather than pressing ahead and wearing blinkers for the people's needs, Angela Merkel has been a caring leader who urges for empathy and collaboration. Her leadership has been characterised by pragmatism and resilience to keep searching for the middle road and adjusting to new demands. This is also the path that she has been walking during the coronavirus pandemic and which was famously labelled the "hammer and dance" strategy.⁴

While several observers had indeed labelled her a lame duck after her resignation as party leader in 2018 and announcement not to compete in the next elections, Merkel emerged, once again, as a solid crisis manager.⁵ Retrospectively, it seems Germany's first female chancellor has been handling the crisis with the foresight of a real leader. Ironically, in her early years as a politician, Merkel was target of a lot of mockery that saw her as unable to stand up to this very task.

As a protégée of former chancellor Kohl, she was known as his "little girl" and in her first years as chancellor was sarcastically titled "mommy", expressing the disregard of

many who saw her unable to follow in the footsteps of her great - and male - predecessors. Some reduced mommy Merkel to what they deemed the only suitable "position of power" for a woman: motherhood.⁶ Merkel has meanwhile spat out an edgy re-interpretation of this motherhood. Along with her political growth, mommy Merkel now refers to a compassionate leader or, as Bernard Koucher, former Foreign Secretary of France, put it "a woman who knows how to be strong but never harsh."⁷ With her leadership style having gained approval over many years, Angela Merkel has become a mother figure for the nation of Germany and for German, maybe even European, politics.

Her care and sense of duty is what make her not only a great crisis manager but also a laudable female leader. As a mother figure in Germany's recent political history, she has shown a range of characteristics that were key in her successful crisis management and that are attributed to many female heads of state: resilience, empathy, collaboration, care, pragmatism, and courage, to name only a few.⁸ Not only Angela Merkel ticks these boxes but numerous other female leaders do.

² Fukuyama, in: Podcast "Stunde Null".

³ Roa, Ricarda (2020). Sin circo, Merkel cerca al virus. In: Clarín, 21.04.2020.

⁴ France24 (2020). Germany's 'eternal chancellor' Angela Merkel marks 15 years in office. In: France24, 22.11.2020.

⁵ Kottasová, Ivana (2020). How Angela Merkel went from lame duck to global leader on coronavirus. In: CNN World, 07.05.2020.

⁶ Raether, Till (2017). Die Mutti aller Schlachten. In: Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin, 12.03.2017.

⁷ Duffé, Julian et al. (2020). Le Maire, Raffarin, Ayrault, Kouchner... ils racontent «leur» Merkel, au pouvoir depuis 15 ans. In: Le Parisien, 21.11.2020.

⁸ Champoux-Paille, Louise; Croteau, Anne-Marie (2020). Why are women leaders excelling during coronavirus? In: Independent, 22.05.2020.