

Angela Merkel and Romano Prodi: Antithesis of Populism?

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1. *Introduction*

In history and social sciences, populism is defined as a style of politics that accentuates “common sense”, while denying the ruling elites the capability or even the willingness to defend public interests¹. Populism is therefore a form of political rhetoric that is characterized by polarization, personalization, moralizing, and usually also by anti-intellectualism. Populist movements maintain that they alone represent the interests of the ordinary person. They use existing clichés, stereotypes, and prejudices, and they prefer to work with subjects that are suitable for stirring up strong emotions among citizens. Thus, the agitation of populists frequently works with simplicity and with presumably easy solutions, referring to existing needs of major parts of society. Simple but convincing slogans serve the goal of winning attention and, if possible, of achieving power. Simultaneously, populists accuse their political adversaries of not recognizing problems and of having lost sight of the good of the people. They stress the benefits of direct democracy and reject representative forms of government, while not having a value system and an ideology of their own, but rather being oriented toward day-to-day political issues in a highly opportunistic way².

The American political scientist Marc F. Plattner of the National Endowment for Democracy therefore views populism as a majority-oriented understanding of democracy beyond liberalism and constitutionalism:

“Populists want what they take to be the will of the majority—often as channeled through a charismatic populist leader—to prevail, and to do so with as little hindrance

¹ K. PRIESTER, *Wesensmerkmale des Populismus*.

² In general terms, see S. VAN KESSEL, *Populist Parties in Europe*.

or delay as possible. For this reason, they have little patience with liberalism's emphasis on procedural niceties and protections for individual rights"³.

Currently in Europe, right-wing movements are the dominant factor of populism⁴. However, leftist parties, by applying pacifist, anti-capitalist, and anti-globalist argumentation, can also show typical characteristics of populism. In contrast to right-wing populism, which usually tends to support the exclusion of certain individuals or groups from society, leftist populism is almost always aimed at the inclusion of underprivileged social elements by increasing participation and redistribution⁵.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former Italian Prime Minister and President of the European Commission Romano Prodi, however, are usually considered as "antitheses" of any form of populism. Their soberness and pragmatism are distinctly different from the behavior of those politicians who, with the assistance of the ever-present media, strive for the great stage. They appear to be shy and seem to prefer working in silence over the spotlight of television cameras—away from the public eye. In fact, neither of them was born for politics: the physicist Angela Merkel was first pulled into the laboratories of scientific research, while the legal scholar and economist Romano Prodi started his career in the lecture halls of a university. Even after finding their way into politics, pompous public appearances were anything but their first choice. As politicians, therefore, they were rather atypical, indeed unusable—this was at least first said about Angela Merkel. Nevertheless, both Merkel and Prodi ventured surprisingly successfully to step into politics and, due to their personal qualities, were both surrounded with the nimbus of being anti-populist, indeed embodiments of the "antithesis of populism"—suitable for furnishing politics with a greater degree of well-founded values and, above all, greater credibility.

But are these characterizations correct? Is it not true that all democratic politicians, at least to a certain degree, must also be "populists"? And how do Merkel and Prodi fit into the pattern of "anti-populism", which has been attributed to them so often?

³ M.F. PLATTNER, *Populism, Pluralism and Liberal Democracy*, p. 88.

⁴ See C. MUDDE, *Populist Radical Right Parties*; T. PAUWELS, *Populism in Western Europe*.

⁵ See, for example, G. VOERMAN, *Linkspopulismus*. Also see L. MARCH, *From Vanguard of the Proletariat to Vox Populi*.

2. *The case of Angela Merkel*

“Moving ahead with your head through the wall will not be feasible, because in the end the wall will always win,” Angela Merkel declared 2007 during a major labor dispute between the Union of Locomotive Engineers (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokomotivführer, GDL) and the Deutsche Bahn, thus characterizing her own behavior as well as her relationship with politics. As a result, journalist Nikolaus Blome with the German magazine “Der Spiegel” once called her a “hesitation artist”, while Judy Dempsey, the Berlin correspondent of the “International Herald Tribune”, thought of her as a “phenomenon” and “Deutschlandfunk” even spoke of an “Angela Merkel Code.” This, the German radio station argued, was like the “Riemann Surmise of Politics”—named after one of the most difficult mathematical problems, for which the Clay Mathematics Institute in Cambridge has put up a reward of one million dollars, if anyone could solve it⁶. In other words: to understand Angela Merkel as a politician seems nearly impossible.

a. A misfit to power: Accident or strategy?

Surely, Angelika Merkel was an outsider, if not a misfit, on her way to government power. In earlier days, nobody would have thought her capable of what she is doing today. Born in Hamburg and raised in the former German Democratic Republic, she first worked at the Central Institute for Physical Chemistry at the GDR Academy of Sciences in Berlin-Adlershof. The great political “change” of 1989/90 brought her into contact with Democratic Awakening (Demokratischer Aufbruch, DA), a political citizens’ movement in the GDR, which received merely 0.9% of the votes at the Volkskammerwahl, the first free parliamentary election ever held in the GDR, on March 18, 1990⁷. Thanks to the unexpected 40.8% for the Eastern CDU—an ally of DA in the Alliance for Germany (Allianz für Deutschland)—however, Merkel suddenly, and surprisingly, belonged to the election winners. She was appointed deputy speaker of the last GDR government under Prime Minister Lothar de Maizière and, after the merger of the DA with the

⁶ N. BLOME, *Angela Merkel*; J. DEMPSEY, *Das Phänomen Merkel*; *Der Angela-Merkel-Code*.

⁷ Details in R.G. REUTH - G. LACHMANN, *Das erste Leben der Angela M.*

Christian Democratic Party (Christlich Demokratische Union, CDU) on August 4, 1990, she all of a sudden found herself a member of the CDU although, as her biographer Gerd Langguth has recounted, friends and acquaintances from the 1970s and 1980s had expected her to be ideologically closer to the environmental movement and the Green Party than to the conservative CDU⁸.

After German reunification on October 3, 1990, Merkel received a prominent position as assistant head of a department in the Press and Information Agency of the federal government. She then ran successfully for the German Bundestag and soon thereafter was summoned by Chancellor Helmut Kohl into his cabinet as Minister for Women and Youth. This was a rather small ministry with limited competences and practically no real power, but it offered Merkel the opportunity, as a woman with an Eastern biography and without any political incrimination, to get elected as deputy chair of the CDU. From 1994 until 1998, she served as Federal Minister for the Environment. She was also appointed general secretary of the CDU after her party lost the election in September 1998 and Wolfgang Schäuble assumed the federal leadership of the CDU from Helmut Kohl. During the funding scandal that disrupted the party in 1999-2000, Merkel finally profiled herself against Kohl and even took over the presidency of the CDU on April 10, 2000, after Schäuble had come under criticism as well. Yet her lack of backing within the party could be seen during her candidacy for the office of chancellor before the federal elections in September 2002, when the Bavarian Premier Edmund Stoiber was nominated as top candidate rather than Merkel. Many party members still viewed Merkel as “not fit for the chancellery”—an impression that was shared by a vast majority of the German people.

It was only after Stoiber had lost the election that Merkel applied her real skills in building her own position of power: internally, behind the scenes, unwaveringly, and almost brutally. She now laid claim not only to the chairmanship of the party but also to the position of faction leader of the CDU/CSU in the Bundestag, pushing aside the previous leader Friedrich Merz during a controversial meeting of the CDU presidium⁹.

⁸ G. LANGGUTH, *Angela Merkel*. Also see E. ROLL, *Die Kanzlerin*, pp. 144 ff.

⁹ The decision had already been made in the afternoon on election day, September 22, 2002, in a conversation between Stoiber and Merkel in the Berlin headquarters of

From then on she was the leader of the opposition and a direct rival of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, whom she followed as head of government after the election of September 18, 2005. Thus, Merkel eventually achieved what for so long no one had believed her being capable of: “Kohl’s gal,” as she was once called, managed to climb the ladder of political power until she finally reached the office of chancellor—with some luck, but thoroughly through her own energy, and contrary to the image that had adhered to her.

Many qualities of Merkel’s leadership already became visible in the early stages of her career: persistence and professional competence, but above all a political instinct, the capacity to evaluate and assess political combinations and ratios correctly, and the ability to take advantage of opportunities whenever they presented themselves¹⁰. As chancellor, after November 22, 2005, she continued to exert those qualities and practiced an objective and businesslike style of leadership which differed soothingly from the often blustering, egocentric style of her predecessor, Gerhard Schröder, and was appreciated both domestically and abroad. However, the content of her policy was less inspiring, focusing on a reform of the German federalist system, a cutback of bureaucracy, research and innovation, energy policy, family policy, the labor market, and health reform—all topics that had to be dealt with, but were hardly suitable for inspiring enthusiasm. Looking back, therefore, Merkel’s most significant achievement during her first term in office was the acceptance and continuation, without any compromising, of her predecessor’s policy of the *Agenda 2010* that had been worked out by the then head of the Chancellery, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who is now President of the Federal Republic. This far-reaching program for labor reforms had been highly controversial within the SPD and eventually divided the party, while Merkel increasingly benefitted from the positive effects of the reform program as the German economy, after a long losing streak with ultimately more than five million people unemployed, did better year after year. Although she had done little, if nothing, to contribute to the program, Merkel in fact received much of the credit¹¹.

the CDU when both agreed that Merkel would take up the position of faction leader regardless of the outcome of the election, see E. ROLL, *Die Kanzlerin*, pp. 317 ff.

¹⁰ See A. MURSWIECK, *Angela Merkel als Regierungschefin*.

¹¹ See, for example, K. BRENKE - K.F. ZIMMERMANN, *Reformagenda 2010*; U. BLUM et al., *Agenda 2010*; K.F. ZIMMERMANN (ed.), *Fünf Jahre Agenda 2010*.

She did not even suffer from the poor results of the CDU and CSU in the federal elections of 2009, when the two parties combined received only 33.8% of the votes, which was the worst result since 1949. She continued with her course, focusing mainly on resolving the economic crisis. And when, in the autumn of 2010, the number of unemployed fell below the three million mark, this once again was interpreted as a result of Merkel's policy, fortifying her position of power, since it was believed that she had once again demonstrated her capacity for level-headed and successful leadership. The question was frequently raised, though, as to how she made her decisions: did she seek or avoid conflicts? Did she manage them cunningly as well as quietly, or in a way that was simply unusual for others? Or did she not decide at all—preferring things to develop by themselves? Whatever the case, Merkel seemed to possess the ability to attain settlements and simultaneously strengthen her own position, even under the most difficult circumstances, such as in a coalition with the small Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei, FDP) or in a grand coalition with the Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD)¹². Merkel herself once explained her waiting attitude, which in the end mostly led to decisive action, with a laconic comparison: “I belong to the type of people who, in a gym class, stood on a three-meter diving board the whole period and jumped only in the forty-fifth minute, that is, at the very last moment”¹³.

b. Decisions on an ethical basis

However, the alleged waiting, indeed hesitant, attitude in Merkel's decision-making was only one side of her government practice. The other side was marked by ethically justified determination that could be seen clearly when, in March 2011, she first suspended compulsory military service, which had existed for fifty-five years, and then, a few days after the nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima in Japan, took a fundamental turn in the atomic and energy policy of the Federal Republic, accelerating Germany's exit from nuclear power. Both decisions were made without outer need, let alone external compulsion. The suspension

¹² See R. WILLNER, *Wie Angela Merkel regiert*.

¹³ Quoted in “Welt am Sonntag”, December 31, 2000.

of the draft system, prompted by an ad-hoc alliance of the CSU with Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, the FDP with Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and the Green Party, was popular, but it meant a lasting weakening of the Bundeswehr at a time when the army was needed more than ever and was burdened with an ever increasing number of foreign missions. Similarly, the hasty exit from nuclear energy was largely inspired by ethical motivations. It was a personal choice of Merkel's and could also be interpreted as an approximation to positions of environmental protection agencies whose ideas obviously coincided with Merkel's own imagination¹⁴. Merkel's ideological proximity to the Green Party, which she had already demonstrated during her early years in politics in the GDR, was underlined also by this development.

Without going into further details, it can be said that on both occasions, the suspension of the draft system as well as the early exit from nuclear energy, Merkel revealed a new tendency of decision-making: a situational readiness to make far-reaching adjustments that are in accordance with Merkel's own convictions, which are deeply rooted in East German Protestantism and do not necessarily follow current popular trends or reflect economically sensible advice¹⁵. Due to the fact that Merkel's values have little in common with those of the old "Bonn folks", they are difficult to calculate for the traditional elites and therefore often come as a surprise. Particularly within Merkel's own party, her decisions not infrequently make for irritations, even cluelessness, as deputies and voters of the CDU/CSU have difficulties understanding which party the chancellor actually represents. In fact, some of her decisions seemed to have less in common with the principles of the CDU/CSU than with the ideological premises of the DA opposition movement in the GDR, which led her into politics in 1989.

The growing unrest, which could increasingly be noticed within the CDU/CSU in view of this development since 2011, was only covered up by the lack of personal alternatives and the economic success of the Federal Republic, which made Merkel's replacement appear unnecessary, even risky. In any case, very much to the displeasure of the conservative wing of the Union, but also to the irritation and dislike of the SPD and the Greens whose traditional political themes had been coopted by the

¹⁴ In general, see W. STERNSTEIN, "*Atomkraft – nein danke*".

¹⁵ See in particular V. RESING, *Angela Merkel*.

chancellor, her behavior demonstrated a “trend toward non-partisanship”, as the newspaper “Die Welt” wrote on January 8, 2012. Merkel, the “floating chancellor” had in fact become the “all-party chancellor”¹⁶.

c. The refugee crisis and European populism

This impression even intensified when Merkel, after the federal election of September 22, 2013, formed a grand coalition with the SPD and could govern in a less contested manner than ever before. “She stands for vacating any position, if she has developed new insights,” the Berlin “Tagesspiegel” remarked in 2013 with regard to her leadership qualities. She had in fact proven repeatedly that she was capable of any change of course—and that she was even prepared to violate her own party’s traditional conservative principles. “Something must change in order to keep everything as it is,” Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa wrote in his novel *Il Gattopardo*. For Merkel, the contrary seems to be true: she appears to be steadfast and consistent, but has transformed Germany more than most had considered possible. Some therefore speak of a “lethocratic, lull style of government” and of “flexible conservatism”¹⁷.

Yet this policy was not without risks. While still receiving much applause for her attempt to resolve the Ukraine crisis by establishing an armistice with the Minsk Protocol (“Minsk I”) in September 2014, the Greek issue as well as the refugee crisis, both in 2015, caused her grave concern¹⁸. During a memorable session of the CDU/CSU faction in the Bundestag on July 16, 2015, when the appropriation of a billion euro aid package for Greece was debated, considerable resistance could be noticed for the first time. Since Greece, the critics argued, had already received two aid packages amounting to 223 billion euros without using them properly, another package of 86 billion euros was now laced up—309 billion altogether: a staggering total. And Germany would be liable for nearly 100 billion. Thus on August 19, 2015, when the Bundestag voted on the third bailout for Greece, 133 deputies voted against it, more than half of them from the CDU—apart from 18 abstentions and 46 deputies who preferred not to vote at all. Thus,

¹⁶ *Das historische Kunststück*.

¹⁷ J. WOLLENHAUPT, *Merkels konservative Utopie*.

¹⁸ See M. STAACK, *Der Ukraine-Konflikt*; R. SAKWA, *Frontline Ukraine*.

nearly two hundred deputies of the Bundestag did not follow Merkel despite the fact that she was heading a grand coalition.

Then, only two weeks later, at the end of August and the beginning of September 2015, the refugee crisis began. Merkel decided to allow the refugees who were stuck in Budapest to enter Germany, thus giving an indication that the country would be willing to accept even more. Even though this decision was welcomed abroad as proof of a new, responsible Germany, concerns in Germany itself quickly grew, as the IT system EASY (Initial Distribution of Asylum Seekers) registered 1.091.894 asylum seekers in Germany for 2015 alone. Even when this number, due to errors and duplicate entries, later had to be corrected¹⁹, the figures were so immense that many people were afraid that the problems and challenges for state and society connected with the refugee issue could hardly be handled. Although Merkel's statement "We can do it" in this situation became a familiar quotation, her policy split public opinion: with a "welcome culture" on the one hand and growing hostility toward foreigners, even xenophobia, and an increase of right-wing populism on the other²⁰.

Thus, it was hardly surprising that the criticism of Merkel within the CDU, which had already been noticeably articulated during the Greek crisis, continued to grow. Once again, she had to listen to sharp critique from her own ranks during another session of the CDU/CSU faction on September 9, 2015, for as much as three hours. When she defended her decision vis-à-vis the faction, the rest of her party remained dead silent, while her critics, when they took the floor, received cheers. Nevertheless, on the same day, during a general debate in the Bundestag, she stressed, "The integration of refugees is a priority"²¹. Two days later, she stated in an interview with the "Rheinische Post" that for victims of political

¹⁹ The Federal Minister of the Interior Thomas de Maizière finally spoke of 890.000 asylum-seekers in 2015, out of which 20,000 had been unaccompanied minors. See "Spiegel Online", September 30, 2016.

²⁰ On August 31, 2015, Merkel verbally declared, "Germany is a strong country. The motive dealing with these issues must be: We have done so much—we can do it!", in *Mitschrift, Sommerpressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel*. Merkel repeated this sentence several times, for instance at the CDU party convention on December 14, 2015.

²¹ Also in the Bundestag, Merkel stressed on the same day, September 9, "The integration of refugees is a priority", in "n-tv", September 9, 2015.

persecution, the basic right to asylum “knows no upper limit”²². And on September 15, in an interview with the “Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung” which received great attention, she even went so far as to say, “When we now even begin to apologize for showing a friendly face in emergency situations, then this is no longer my country”²³.

Thus, Merkel seemed to be unimpressed by the public criticism of her refugee policy, which she refused to change as she was obviously convinced that it was right both politically and ethically. She even stayed on course when her personal approval ratings decreased. After an opinion poll at the beginning of October 2015 had shown that 48% of Germans thought Merkel’s handling of the refugee crisis to be wrong, which was supported by only 39%, she still defended her course obstinately, almost stubbornly. “Opinion polls are not my yardstick,” she told the tabloid “Bild” on October 12, 2015. Her norm was the resolution of problems, to which she was fully committed. “For me”, she said, “it is a matter of the basic humanity of our country that we first meet a refugee, like any other human being, with friendliness”²⁴.

Such remarks once again demonstrated Merkel’s basic attitude, which rested upon a firm ethical base and could not be unsettled even by populist movements, like the Pegida demonstrations in Dresden or the campaigns of the newly founded party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). Yet Merkel’s formerly controversial position was also eased somewhat by the fact that in 2016, no more than 280,000 asylum seekers entered Germany, after the so-called “Balkan route” had actually been closed—not by Germany but by the states in the region—and after the European Union had concluded an agreement with Turkey for the resolution of the refugee issue in March 2016. However, this positive picture was heavily clouded by the refusal of most of the countries of the EU to take in refugees in considerable numbers and to participate in coping with the political, social, and financial consequences of the refugee crisis. Thus, the refugee crisis also turned into a crisis of the EU, particularly since populism now reached an alarming extent, while the British decision to leave the

²² “Merkel: Asyl kennt keine Grenze”, in “Rheinische Post Online”, September 11, 2015.

²³ G. BANNAS, *Das Gegenteil einer Entschuldigung*, in “FAZ.net”, September 15, 2015.

²⁴ “Bild-Zeitung”, October 12, 2015.

Union following the referendum of June 23, 2016, seemed to call into question the European project as a whole²⁵.

d. Merkel's fight against populism

No later than with the Brexit decision, the problems that had already impaired Merkel's policy since 2011 reached a new dimension: the suspension of military conscription, the exit from the nuclear consensus, the behavior in the Greek financial crisis, and the uncontrolled opening of the German borders for the admission of refugees. The implications of these problems had been invisible to many for a long time and had been eclipsed by positive economic data and Merkel's outstanding record in national and international public opinion. Yet by maintaining, "We can do it", she had not just bolstered courage and spirit, but also formulated a claim that was difficult to redeem. And with her lone decision to open the borders without prior consultation with the European partners, Merkel had applied pressure to the other states of the EU, which in turn had evoked denial, indeed outright rejection, and revived resentment against an all too powerful Germany in the center of Europe. Even such reservations as had been expressed by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1989/90 against a renewed German predominance in Europe after reunification now unmistakably resurfaced again²⁶. Not a few of the prophecies that Thatcher then dared to express have since that time become a reality.

²⁵ See especially M. RHODES, *Brexit*. Also see G. RATH, *Brexitannia*.

²⁶ In her memoirs, Margaret Thatcher once again summed up her arguments against German reunification. She writes that the reunification "created a German state so large and dominant that it cannot be fitted into the new architecture of Europe." The unification would lead to three unwelcome developments: "The rush to European federalism as a way of tying down Gulliver; the maintenance of a Franco-German bloc for the same purpose; and the gradual withdrawal of the US from Europe on the assumption that a German-led federal Europe will be both stable and capable of looking after its own defence". And providently she warned, "I will hazard the forecast that a federal Europe would be both unstable internally and an obstacle to harmonious arrangements—in trade, politics and defence—with America externally; that the Franco-German bloc would increasingly mean a German bloc ... with France as very much a junior partner; and that as a result America would first bring its legions home, and subsequently find itself at odds with the new European player in world politics", in M. THATCHER, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 814.

Yet for Merkel the refugee issue, the growth of populism, and the British decision to leave the EU were no cause to change her views on Europe. In particular, she did not allow herself to make a populist turn of her own, but understood populism almost as a challenge to intensify her fight against positions, which—in her opinion—must lead to a re-nationalization of Europe. “Europe is unique,” she had already stated as early as May 1, 2008, when she was awarded the Charlemagne Prize in Aachen for her contribution to European integration. She called the “peace-work of European unification” a “gift of reconciliation”, even a “miracle”²⁷. Therefore, it would also be necessary in the future to engage “together for peace and freedom, for solidarity and tolerance, for democracy and the rule of law.” Europe had a “social responsibility—internally within our societies, but also externally in dealing with others”. These common values constituted the “sound compass” for policy and society²⁸. Within this framework, the European Union should not be understood as an alternative to or a replacement of national politics, but as a necessary addition”²⁹.

The refugee crisis and the growth of populism, particularly in countries that were close to Germany, such as France or Austria, or for which it felt a special historical responsibility, such as Poland, were an incentive for Merkel to cling to these basic convictions with even greater commitment than before. In her view, Europe was now at a crossroads where a “compass” was urgently needed—a term that Merkel claimed time and again as a basic instrument of leadership in her actual policy. With such convictions and conduct, she personified the opposite of a populist, indeed an “antithesis of populism”. To what extent she is also prepared to put her own position as chancellor at risk has been proven by her repeatedly in the aforementioned decisions of 2011 and 2015, especially during the Greek crisis and the refugee crisis, and also in advance of the recent general elections, which were held in Germany on September 24, 2017, to elect the members of the 19th Bundestag. Here, Merkel resisted the temptation to play into the hands of populism and preferred to hold on to her basic convictions—even if that meant a loss of electoral support. Indeed, the CDU/CSU won merely 33%

²⁷ A. MERKEL, *Machtworte*, pp. 175 ff.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

of the vote, which meant not just a drop of more than 8% compared with the previous election in 2013, but also the lowest share of the vote for the Union since 1949. In contrast, the populist AfD, which had previously been unrepresented in the Bundestag, became the third party with 12.6% of the vote.

It is therefore justified to speak of a “Merkel system”. Although her style of leadership is often criticized, not the least within her own party, she demonstrates remarkable perseverance: quiet, competent, and unexcited, but committed, personally modest, and without great attitudes. It remains to be seen whether this will also help her to master the many current crises in the European Union as well as in the wider range of international relations without responding to popular trends among the peoples of Europe and without having a vision of Europe’s future herself.

3. *The case of Romano Prodi*

What can now be said about Romano Prodi in comparison with Merkel? This is not the place to assess his personality and policy in the same way as was done with Merkel. But from a German perspective, certain similarities can be noticed which also present Prodi as an “antithesis of populism”.

As early as 1995, when the electoral alliance Ulivo led by Prodi reached a majority, many Italians hoped that fundamental changes would take place in their country. Prodi’s rigorous austerity program made Italy’s entry into the European currency union possible, and his pro-European policy was generally understood as a positive signal that Italy was about to modernize and to fit into the European concert. Actually, at the beginning Prodi—as an experienced economist from Emilia Romagna and former president of the IRI, the largest state holding company in Italy, which he redeveloped, restructured, and partly privatized—represented a stable financial policy of his country. Beyond that, as Laura Fasanaro and Leopoldo Nuti have shown, he was also a faithful European and a dedicated federalist who, probably somewhat unrealistically, even dreamed of the “United States of Europe” in the tradition of Count Coudenhove-Kalergi or Aristide Briand³⁰.

³⁰ L. FASANARO - L. NUTI, *Romano Prodi*.

To what extent Prodi was also perceived as a politician of reason and balance on the European stage was demonstrated by the fact that, after losing a vote of confidence in the Italian parliament and having to resign as prime minister in 1998, he was nominated by the heads of government of the EU as president of the European Commission—an office he took up as successor to Jacques Santer on September 15, 1999, and held until 2004. However, his “somewhat clumsy jovial friendliness”, which he transformed into his “political trademark”, did not always prove to be a guarantee for success³¹. It is true that within the EU Commission, as was the case before in his office as Italian prime minister, he was noticed for his pragmatism and steadfastness. However, he was also accused of a lack of leadership and decisiveness and of “pale visibility”. In his “good European” policy, he stood up for, above all, an enlargement of the EU, which was to become an increasingly federalist union, indeed a United States of Europe, including Turkey whose membership he thought to be in no way problematic³².

The accession negotiations, which under his leadership led to the admission of ten new states to the EU on May 1, 2004, demonstrated Prodi’s sober pragmatism as well as his commitment to Europe and might have resulted in his nomination for a second term, had he not expressed his interest in becoming Italian prime minister once again. Thus, the conservative José Manuel Barroso was nominated by the European Council as candidate for the office of president of the EU Commission and confirmed by the European Parliament on July 22, 2004. He remained in office for ten years, until October 2014, and thus had a lasting impact on the development of Europe at a time when Europe and the world underwent rapid changes.

It seems likely that Prodi could have become such a formative figure in Europe as well, had he not decided to return to Italy in 2004. There he was indeed nominated as top candidate of a center-left alliance, L’Unione, in a nationwide primary election in October 2005, receiving more than 70% of the votes, and he obtained a comfortable majority during the parliamentary elections in April 2006. Chancellor Merkel then hurried to let her Deputy Government Speaker Thomas Steg

³¹ K.-D. FRANKENBERGER, *Machtwechsel in Italien*.

³² *Ibid.*

declare that she hoped for a “stable new government in Italy, capable of acting”, and that she was looking forward to cooperating with the newly elected prime minister³³. Prodi, who in contrast to his predecessor, Silvio Berlusconi, exuded a high degree of credibility and predictability, indeed appeared to be a politician who pursued a similar style of government as Angela Merkel and seemed to be perfectly suitable for common action in Europe: competent and constructive, pragmatic and sober, with a basic pro-European understanding—and, like Merkel, entirely without putting on airs. Thus in a 2006 article, the “International Herald Tribune” called him “Mr. Serenity”³⁴.

However, Article 95 of the Italian constitution allocates only limited competences to the prime minister. The Presidente del Consiglio is more a *primus inter pares* than a real head of the executive branch. He is in fact helpless *vis-à-vis* the rivalry of cabinet members and has few options at his disposal for sanctions, as he cannot dismiss unpleasant ministers. Vice heads of government often see themselves as internal rivals, not as loyal aides. And unlike the German chancellor, Italian heads of government rarely have an effective power base within the party system. This was particularly true for Prodi, as the particularization and fragmentation of the Italian political order since 1994 hardly contributed to improving the situation, in which the defenders of a parliamentary legitimation of government competed with advocates of a personalized plebiscitary mandate. In his struggle against populist trends and individuals, Prodi was in a lost position from the very outset, due to his personal disposition, which excluded any form of populism. Thus, he could neither win the public struggle against his competitors nor could he withstand the internal clashes stemming from ideological heterogeneity within the L'Unione alliance and the diverse clientele groups that undermined his policy and counteracted its goals³⁵.

As early as February 2007, only nine months after his appointment, Prodi thus submitted his resignation as Italian prime minister after failing to receive a parliamentary majority for his policy to withdraw the Italian forces from Iraq, but leaving them in Afghanistan. Though

³³ B. HENGST - S. WEILAND, *Berlin weint Berlusconi keine Träne nach*.

³⁴ I. FISHER, *A Tenuous Time for Mr. Serenity*.

³⁵ See R. MARUHN, *Italien*.

President Giorgio Napolitano did not accept Prodi's resignation and even declared that he would neither dissolve the government nor arrange for new elections, Prodi now was decisively weakened. Although his center-left government could still continue its work for a while, the end was near when, in January 2008, Minister of Justice Clemente Mastella was forced to resign due to allegations of corruption. Mastella's party Union of Democrats for Europe (Unione Democratica per l'Europa, UDEUR) then left the Unione alliance and withdrew its support from the government, thus blessing Italy with another government crisis. On January 28, 2008, after losing a vote of confidence in the Senate, Prodi handed in his resignation; this time it was accepted by the president.

4. *Merkel and Prodi: A comparison*

Prodi's repeated failure can only be partly explained, however, by his lack of characteristics that could have made him a popular politician: personal charisma, compelling rhetoric, and a convincing political concept³⁶. More important were the well-known shortcomings of the Italian political system, which undermine the position of the head of government and do not force both party representatives and clientele politicians to compromise. With his basic attitudes—pro-European and anti-populist—Prodi was in many ways similar to Angela Merkel. Like her, he avoided ostentation and pageantry. Like her, he conscientiously and reliably completed his appointments and drafted a policy that lacked any demagoguery. The contrast to the pompous appearances of Berlusconi and the noisy mass gatherings of Beppe Grillo could not have been more visible. If what Nicola Vendola once said about Grillo is true, that in his rallies “yelling had replaced ideas”, then the soberness of Prodi seemed to be a handicap more than an advantage.

A comparison between Prodi and Merkel, on the other hand, shows some remarkable common ground: an unexcited pragmatism, personal modesty, and the effort to subordinate the self to the substance of politics, but also a certain ineptitude in dealing with the media, which can be

³⁶ In a personal portrait, BBC Rome correspondent David Willey described Prodi, due to his lack of popularity and charisma, as early as in 1999 by using a term of his critics: “the Mortadella”—“after the rather bland sausage for which his city (Bologna) is famous”, in D. WILLEY, *Profile: Romano Prodi*.

a serious disadvantage in a society geared toward public presentation. In a joint government, they might have made a good political pair. Nevertheless, one crucial difference is obvious: while Merkel achieved great triumphs, Prodi remained largely unsuccessful in political terms, at least in Italy. Conversely, it probably would have been the same: in Germany, Prodi might have succeeded, while in Italy, Merkel would have been marginalized or, even more likely, would not have walked onto the stage of politics at all.

It is therefore essential to take the political systems of both countries into consideration in order to understand why the careers of Merkel and Prodi went so differently, despite the similarities in their style of political behavior and leadership. In Germany—with its institutions that provided stability, functioning political parties that were not afraid of reaching a consensus, and a government apparatus that worked for, not against, the chancellor—a leading figure such as Merkel was able to succeed, even though many, not least in her own party, initially suspected that she would be incapable of filling the position of chancellor, and even though she left no doubt that she would not pursue a populist course. In Italy, on the other hand, where after the collapse of the traditional party structure during the 1990's, the public was accustomed to populist leaders with great appearance and a charismatic aura, a solid but nondescript, inconspicuous figure like Prodi could not have a chance in the long run. It almost borders on a miracle that he could win an election at all. Yet to be truthful, he did not win, but rather forged alliances, which then quickly disintegrated in both of his terms.

Thus, Prodi ultimately became a victim of the Italian political system, which—at least for the time being—rewards plebiscitary figures while penalizing sober anti-populism. In other words: Prodi did not fail due to his intellectuality or his political concepts, but rather due to the Italian circumstances where not being a populist amounts to “political suicide”³⁷.

³⁷ This term was also used by Michael Gehler on the example of Gian Franco Fini who refurbished the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano under Giorgio Almirante in 1995, repositioning both its staff and program and renaming it Alleanza Nazionale in order to establish it more firmly in the political landscape of Italy. While Almirante had rejected the “ruling system” categorically, Fini, who earlier had called Benito Mussolini the “greatest statesman of the 20th century”, now tried to present himself as a “statesmanlike anti-populist”—and thus committed, as Gehler writes, “political suicide in Italy”; see M. GEHLER, *Populismus als Indikator für Demokratie*.

In Germany, on the other hand, Merkel could succeed because of a political system that was geared less toward public effects than toward administrative efficiency. The adroit media presence of a chancellor can be useful, even instrumental, as was the case with Konrad Adenauer, Willy Brandt, or Helmut Schmidt. As Merkel has demonstrated convincingly, though, it was not a precondition for successful government. If she also can succeed under more difficult circumstances, like those after the elections of September 2017, remains to be seen.

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