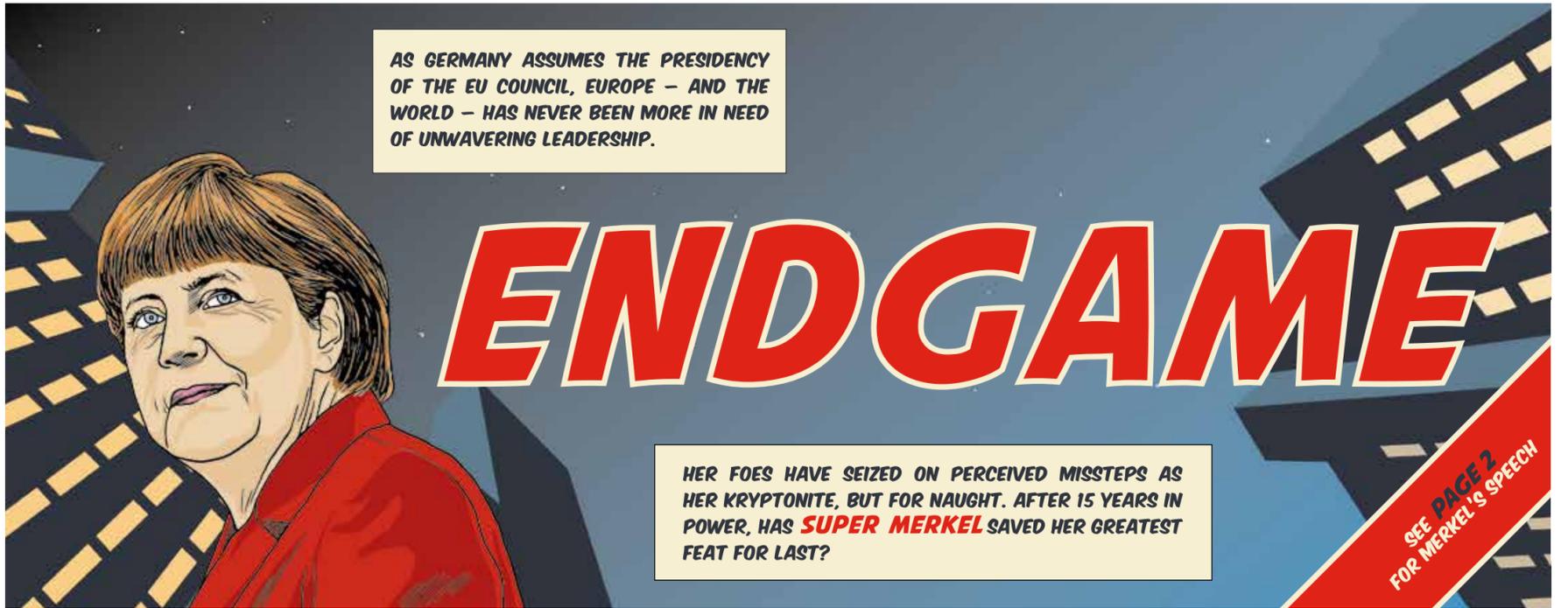


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AS GERMANY ASSUMES THE PRESIDENCY OF THE EU COUNCIL, EUROPE – AND THE WORLD – HAS NEVER BEEN MORE IN NEED OF UNWAVERING LEADERSHIP.

END GAME

HER FOES HAVE SEIZED ON PERCEIVED MISSTEPS AS HER KRYPTONITE, BUT FOR NAUGHT. AFTER 15 YEARS IN POWER, HAS **SUPER MERKEL** SAVED HER GREATEST FEAT FOR LAST?

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Commission possible

Ursula von der Leyen is working hard to offset the impact of the pandemic

BY SYLVIA SCHREIBER

The idea of selling the European Green Deal as Europe's "man on the moon moment" was no doubt very much to the liking of Ursula von der Leyen. She is an expert at setting the perfect stage for introducing policies with an emotive tone and professional glow. Last December, less than 14 days after being elected president of the European Commission, von der Leyen stepped up to the microphone to announce a new epoch – one in which green investments and regulations would usher in the ecological transformation of Europe. She spoke of the "mobilization of the entire continent" and called for the "decarbonization of industry and transportation," promising at least €100 billion in new funds. The goal was to render Europe climate neutral by 2050, with an interim target of reducing CO₂ emissions by at least 50 percent by 2030.

Although von der Leyen has a reputation for launching large projects without knowing exactly if or where they were going to land, her plan for a Green Deal actually came at the perfect moment, as millions of young people were taking part in the Fridays for Future demonstrations. After a somewhat bumpy inauguration, the new president – the first woman to head the

European Commission – garnered respect for her latest launch. She brought a breath of fresh air to the Brussels behemoth and encouraged her officials to bundle all planned environmental, energy and economic legislative proposals together in a new package under the Green Deal banner: the ambitious climate protection law, closed-circle economies, recycling regulations, sustainable agriculture,

there were even export bans of medical goods to other EU countries. There were also ugly scenes at border crossings and loud cries from Southern Europe, which felt abandoned, especially by Germany. The number of virus-related infections and deaths skyrocketed and the lockdowns began, with each EU country fending for itself.

In those early days of the pandemic, Ursula von der Leyen had

Von der Leyen passionately presented what she called a Marshall Plan for Europe

CO₂ taxation, the rededication of entire budgets, etc. The year 2020 was supposed to mark the launch of the ecological age – with Europe at the very forefront of efforts to save the planet.

Of course, everything turned out differently. And in January and February, as COVID-19 made its way from China to Europe, as the first mass graves appeared in Italy and the healthcare systems of EU member states teetered on the verge of collapse, the EU was nowhere to be seen. Each nation pursued its own course on border closings and health regulations and

all but disappeared. "It was as if she didn't know whether there was anything she could even do with the commission at that moment," says one Brussels insider. After all, the EU does not do health policy, which is still the domain of each individual member state.

It was not until late March that the president emerged from her Corona shock, issuing the first guidelines for health-related border management, introducing a strategic EU stock of medical equipment and reopening the flow of goods at Schengen borders via the "Green Lane." The Euro-

pean Commission also cooperated with member states to bring back 600,000 EU citizens stranded abroad and in some cases loosened EU budgetary and financial regulations for EU countries and industries. Still, the EU had not yet provided any concrete road map for Europe to protect its citizens and emerge united from the crisis.

"Europe has been ambushed by an unknown enemy," wrote von der Leyen in the conservative daily *Die Welt*. Soon thereafter came the moment when the president – a passionate horse rider – took up the reins again. After Germany's Angela Merkel and France's Emmanuel Macron presented a gigantic reconstruction plan for Europe consisting of €500 billion in grants for EU members in need, von der Leyen added an additional €250 billion in credit for an EU recovery plan to be supplemented by the 2021–2027 EU budget with a volume of roughly €1.1 trillion.

With clenched fists emphasizing every sentence, von der Leyen passionately presented what she called a "Marshall Plan for Europe" to the EU parliament: "We will get out of this crisis together and make decisions about future investments together." The plan would later be given the more contemporary name "Next Generation EU."

By mobilizing this huge sum of EU funds, von der Leyen was

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A HERCULEAN TASK

BY PUBLISHER
DETLEF PRINZ

Anyone in 2020 with a pair of eyes or ears cannot help but recognize the enormity of the tasks and challenges confronting Germany's current presidency of the EU Council. At stake is nothing less than the internal reconciliation of Europe and the fortification of our continent in the eyes of the world, so that it can again play an important role in international affairs and speak with a united voice that can be heard across the globe. This is where we stand at the moment.

The fact that expectations of Germany's Council presidency also include the finalization of the EU's



financial framework, ambitious progress on EU climate policy and the sustainable reinforcement of our continent's digital sovereignty – not to mention addressing the never-ending conflict in the Middle East and the ongoing crisis with Iran – shows how critical German Chancellor Angela Merkel's political experience will be in the coming months, just as her much vaunted ability to distinguish between what's important and what's urgent will be indispensable in holding the European Union together by means of an appeal to both our larger and smaller member states. This is a herculean task.

Nevertheless, I am personally convinced that if there is anyone in Europe up to the job of tying up the EU's many loose ends into one cohesive whole and giving our continent the boost it so urgently needs, that person is Angela Merkel. We should all wish her the best of luck, as Germans – and as Europeans.

BY WOLFGANG ISCHINGER

For more than a decade, the European Union has been in constant crisis mode – from the financial and the refugee crises to the seemingly never-ending Brexit negotiations. The COVID-19 pandemic is more than just the newest addition to this conglomerate of challenges that former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has dubbed Europe's "polycrisis." The economic and political repercussions of the pandemic are so severe that European leaders cannot resort to their usual tactics of incremental adaptation. This time, it will simply not be enough.

With the European Union at the brink, all eyes have turned

to Germany. This is not just because Berlin happens to hold the EU Council presidency for the second half of 2020 – although this role does put the country in the driver's seat. All across Europe, governments are looking for German leadership because – whether it likes it or not – Germany has become Europe's "indispensable nation," as then-Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski proclaimed in 2011.

This does not mean that Germany should assume the role of

hegemon in the European Union or that it could or should actually lead alone. It means that, without German leadership, there is not much hope for the EU to successfully cope with the challenges it is facing. Germany assuming a forward-looking leadership position, while not alone sufficient for Europe's economic recovery and the development of a truly common European foreign and security policy, is one necessary condition.

For Germany, there is no more vital national interest than the

survival of the European Union – for both economic and political reasons. While we often discuss our economic dependence on exports to China, it is the European single market that will determine the future of the German economy, which would be devastated if European integration were to unravel.

As Chancellor Angela Merkel recently noted, "Germany will only fare well in the long term if Europe fares well." In political terms as well, Germany is dependent on European cooperation.

It is an exceptional moment in the history of Germany as it is surrounded by friendly neighbors who are (almost all) members of its most important international institutions, the EU and NATO.

Our security and our political influence in the world depend on these partnerships. In a world increasingly shaped by great-power strategic rivalries and transnational risks, the European nation-state alone offers no refuge – not even for the most populous member state of the European Union.

How Germany and its partners deal today with the pandemic and its repercussions will shape the European Union of tomorrow. Germany could become Europe's "enabling power" and,

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