

# The Power of “Merkiavelli”: Representations of Angela Merkel in the Portuguese Press (2008-2015)

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**Abstract**—Since 1989, with the Fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany has undergone a profound restructuring political and economic process. When the Euro Crisis broke out, Germany was no longer the “sick man” of Europe. Instead, it had recovered its dominance as the strongest and wealthiest economy within the European Union. With the European Debt Crisis, that has been taking place in the European Union since the end of 2009, Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel has gained the power of deciding, so to say, on the fate of the debtor nations, but she neither stands for binding German commitments, nor refuses assistance. A debate on whether Merkel’s hesitation has been deliberated and used as a means of coercion has arisen on international print media, and the Portuguese Press has been no exception. This study, which was conducted by using news reporting, opinion articles, interviews and editorials, published in the Portuguese weekly *Expresso* and the daily *Público*, from 2008 to 2015, tries to show how Merkel’s hesitation, depicted in the press by the term “Merkiavelli”, was perceived in Portugal, a country that had to embrace the austerity measures, imposed by the European Central Bank, but defined under Angela Merkel’s leading role.

**Keywords**—Euro crisis, “Merkiavelli”, cultural studies, Portuguese quality press.

## I. INTRODUCTION

GERMANY is the wealthiest and the most powerful economic force in today’s Europe. In the context of the late financial crisis, unleashed by the collapse of the Lehman Brothers in 2008, Germany has conquered the status of economic superstar, as its economy succeeds while the diseased economies of the Southern European countries continue to struggle for survival. This prominent position, however, has not always been the case. When the Germans came out of World War II, their country was devastated: besides being divided into four military occupational zones, the war had destroyed great part of all housing, a large proportion of the German population was living in extreme poverty and the industrial output in 1945 was only 14% of its 1936 level [1, p. 32-37]. Later, in 1990, when the reunification of the two German States became possible, Germany’s economy also experienced intense pressures, as West Germany had to mobilize a high amount of money to smooth the transition. The absorption of East Germany’s economy, as well as a 50-year legacy of central planning, led Germany to a prolonged period of dismal macroeconomic performance [1, p. 334-340]. However, a series of economic and political reforms (Hartz Reforms) introduced by the center-left chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and enacted between 2002 and 2005,

bore fruit and provided the basis for the German Economic Miracle (*Wirtschaftswunder*) [1, p. 360-365]. When the Euro Crisis broke out by 2008, Germany was walking tall again and could no longer be labeled as “the sick man of Europe”. On the contrary, Germany became the strongest and wealthiest economy in the European Union – all debtor nations depend on Germans’ willingness to provide financial support and to guarantee the stability of the Euro. Thierry Breton, former Minister of the Economy, Finance and Industry of France (2005-2007) and current businessman, stated that “Berlin is alone in the cockpit”, allocating Germany’s hegemony to the fact that the French economy has been losing ground, as well as to Britain’s desire to remain outside the Eurozone [2]. Europe’s future is being “Made in Germany” and it will continue for the next few years. Without having looked for it, Germany is now considered to have a hegemonic power that has often been questioned by intellectuals, such as Ulrich Beck, who brought into light the discussion on the existence of a German Europe, instead of a European Germany [3]. Germany’s new influence in Europe is specifically linked to the resolution of the Euro crisis.

Angela Merkel, Germany’s chancellor since 2005, has been profiting from this new economic scenario, conquering a stronger position in the European balance of power. Known as *Kohls Mädchen* [Kohl’s girl] (reference to the chancellor Helmut Kohl, Germany’s chancellor from 1982 to 1998) at the beginning of her political career, Merkel has shaped herself into one of the world’s most influential politicians. Germany’s economic predominance and financial supremacy brought Angela Merkel to a commanding position that gives her the power to create the guidelines for the austerity policy imposed to the profligate southern European countries. In this regard, we must consider Beck’s book, *Das Deutsche Europa* [German Europe], in which Merkel’s logic of action is analyzed [3]. For this German sociologist, Merkel’s main characteristic is a tactical adroitness that he identifies as a Machiavellian strategy. Beck highlights the fact that, similarly to Niccolò Machiavelli, who claimed that intense crises are the right opportunity to change History [3, p. 45-46]; Angela Merkel embraced the Euro crisis as the propitious moment to reorder the European power relationships. Grounding her power on Germany’s economic welfare, Merkel accomplished a political and ideological hegemony: She decides on whether to provide or refuse aid to indebted countries, depending on whether they accept the German stability-oriented policies or not. Bearing in mind the idea of a political affinity between Merkel and Machiavelli, Beck brings forward the concept of “Merkiavelli’s model” [6], which he bases on the following

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four complementary components:

1. The combination of nation-state orthodoxy and Europe-building: One of the points Beck mentions as making part of Merkel's Machiavellian politics is the German Chancellor's ability to position herself between Eurosceptics (who refuse assistance to all debtor nations) and pro-Europeans (who call for German commitments), without taking either side. Instead, she keeps both options open. Merkel uses a *jein* strategy [yes and no], saying neither *ja* [yes], nor *nein* [no]. This enables her to connect German willingness to provide credit with the readiness of the debtor nations to satisfy the conditions imposed by the German stability policies. Thus, on the one hand, Merkel satisfies the orthodox adherents of the nation state, and on the other hand maintains the promise of Germany's financial assistance [3, p.48].
2. Hesitation in giving credit to debtor countries: The art of hesitation is Merkel's main source of power. Ulrich Beck explains that Merkel resorts to a hesitation strategy as means of coercion. Indeed, the fact that debtor nations fear Germany's delay or even refusal of credit leads them to embrace German policies of austerity. Beck clarifies that the only one thing that would be worse than being overwhelmed by German money is **not** being overwhelmed by German money, as the ruin of the debtor countries would be inevitable [3, p. 48-49].
3. The primacy of national electability: All measures defined to overcome the Euro crisis, says Beck, only go ahead after passing Germany's evaluation on how they may be relevant for German domestic politics or not. Though Merkel is concerned with Europe's stability, her priority is to assure Germany's wellbeing, so only measures that can promote German interests, maintain Germany's competitiveness in the global market and ensure Merkel's own position will count with the chancellor's support. Merkel tries to be loved indoors and feared abroad, taking profits from both domestically and foreign relations [3, p.49-50].
4. **German Culture of stability:** Merkel's ideological hegemony is seen through her power to define which actions should be taken by debtor nations, in order to overcome the economic and financial crisis. Merkel insists on the German magic formula for success: saving, as the only path to stability. Thereby, the European debtor countries find themselves forced to embrace the German Culture of stability and follow an agenda that is now set in Berlin [3, p. 50-51].

With the previous topics in mind, Ulrich Beck brings up the idea of the emergence of a "German Europe" for discussion. It should be noted, however, that the new Germany, which has successfully established itself through the Euro crisis, has gained a new face: it is no longer seeking for the role of master of Europe, but rather of its educator. Merkel is seeking the mentoring of the southern "sloppy" countries that need to improve their sense of responsibility [3]. A debate about Merkel's pedagogical principle has taken place in the European media. The present study will show that Merkel's

reluctance to lead, her desire for European integration and also her fear of instability deserved particular emphasis in the Portuguese press, especially because Portugal, being one of the PIGS ("PIGS" is an acronym, with a strong negative connotation, used in economics and finance, after the financial crisis, to refer to the fragile economies of the Southern European countries, namely Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain [4]), and therefore one of the countries under Merkel's mentoring, Portugal has not been the exception. Merkel's reluctance to lead, her desire for European integration and her fear of instability deserved particular emphasis in the Portuguese press.

This paper aims to assess the way the Portuguese society and politicians looked at Merkel's key strategies to get hold on power. In order to attain this objective, a series of texts collected from two quality Portuguese newspapers, namely the daily *Público* and the weekly *Expresso*, were analyzed. In 1975, Helmut Kreuzer, a German theorist and researcher in Literature and Media, underlined the importance of print media, stressing that these texts were worth of as much attention as literary texts [5].

*Das deutsche Europa*, by Ulrich Beck, is a baseline study that directly deals with this matter [3]. Its purpose, however, is to explain Beck's neologism – *Merkiavelli* – and not to analyze how it is being perceived by other countries. The present study does not give an exhaustive overview of what has been written in the Portuguese press, but this topic is still being developed under the scope of a PhD research.

The rest of this article is organized as follows: Section II introduces the methodology used for this study, while the results are discussed in Section III; finally Section IV concludes the study and suggests future directions.

## II. METHODOLOGY

To approach the *corpus* under study, it is important, even if only briefly, to outline the profile of the two Portuguese newspapers we have worked with. The daily *Público*, founded in 1990, quickly won the appreciation of the political class, as well as of intellectual and business groups. Its main purpose was to "introduce a new rhythm in the Portuguese press" [6] and to create an "effective, attractive and imaginative journalism", which would focus on "quality" and reject "sensationalism". This journalistic project featured itself as independent of any political, ideological, economic or private power [6]. *Expresso*, founded in 1972 by the journalists Francisco Pinto Balsemão, Augusto de Carvalho and the jurist Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa (currently Portugal's President of Republic), soon gained a prominent place in the Portuguese press due to its informative rigor and critical analysis.

For this study, two chronological axes were taken into account: One concerning the emergence of the financial crisis in 2008, the other regarding the celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the German reunification in 2015.

This study has relied on the theoretical and methodological reflections settled within the framework of Siegfried J. Schmidt's *Medienkulturwissenschaft* [Media Cultural Studies]. According to this Germanist, media are the mirror of a

society's culture, as well as instruments in the construction of the reality [5, p. 41-42]. Schmidt sought to understand the influence media have not only over people's perceptions, feelings, knowledge, communication, socialization and interaction, but also over politics and economy. The theories presented by Klaus Merten, a German theorist in Media Studies, about content analysis were also taken into account, as they demonstrate how newspaper articles may be a fruitful source of study of the social sciences [7].

### III. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Angela Merkel has been an inescapable figure during the Euro crisis. Both analysts and politicians tried to understand her often-erratic behavior, which so many times seemed to place the European Union at the edge of the abyss. One of the topics that most deserved the attention of the Portuguese press had to do with Merkel's hesitation and weak leadership during the Euro crisis.

Starting with *Público*, this subject was brought forward to discussion through the analysis of an interview given by Durão Barroso to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The then President of the European Commission, highlighted Merkel's inability to perceive the effects of the crisis on the world economy and, in what her hesitation is concerned, Barroso looks at it as part of a strategy to make other European countries follow the German rules [8]. In the article "A nova questão alemã" [The new German Question], the journalist Teresa de Sousa also looks at this issue. Starting by mentioning that the German power in Europe only makes sense when backed up with a high sense of responsibility for the European integration, Sousa also goes through Merkel's lack of readiness to answer to the European financial crisis. Sousa points out that Merkel's hesitation and weak leadership is probably linked to a change in the German national interests. According to this journalist, there is a new German generation, who has not directly experienced the war, nor the German guilty and who is not willing to proceed with the so called "check policy" (that is, being willing to pay whenever necessary, without any guarantee). This new generation, says Sousa, feels that Germany is in position to defend its national interests, like any other European country, and that it is time to Berlin start acting in the European framework in a different way. Sousa suggests that Merkel delays political decisions, satisfying the German public opinion that opposes to the financing of the European indebted countries [9]. In another article, entitled "A chanceler quer temos e a que gostaríamos de ter" [The chancellor we have and the one we would like to have], Teresa de Sousa goes on with this topic, supporting her point of view on one of the chronicles Timothy Garton Ash published in the *Guardian*. Sousa quotes this British historian, who explains Merkel's dilemma as follows:

"Há já mais de um ano que Merkel tenta encontrar a estreita – talvez inexistente – linha onde o mínimo que pode ser feito para salvar a periferia da zona euro se cruza com o máximo que ela pensa que a opinião pública alemã pode suportar" [For over a year now, Merkel has been trying to find the thin - perhaps nonexistent - line

where the least that can be done to save the periphery of the Eurozone intersects with the maximum she thinks the German public opinion can bear] [10].

Angela Merkel's hesitation is thereby explained as a means to guarantee the German interests. In other words, Merkel tries to, on the one hand, maintain the health of the European Union (although barely), and assure the primacy of national electability. In an article, symptomatically called "Eu até simpatizo com a senhora Merkel..." [I even sympathize with Ms. Merkel], the journalist José Manuel Fernandes states that Merkel is not destroying the European legacy left by her political ancestors, as many pro-Europeans say, and supports the idea that moral values are being reversed: in his opinion, it does not make sense that the fault of the debt crisis stops being assigned to the ones who were really responsible for them, to become responsibility of others who have always complied with the rules – which has been Germany's case. Fernandes justifies Merkel's hesitation, reminding that, since 1991, all German governments have promised taxpayers that they would never have to honor debts owed by other countries – this is not due to a German national egoism, but rather to the new belief that, before committing to Europe, Merkel should commit herself to Germany's national interests [11]. Along the same lines, the journalist Jorge Almeida Fernandes signs the article "Temos razões para detester Merkel?" [Do we have reasons to hate Merkel?], in which he focuses on the German chancellor's effort to keep a balance between a nation-state orthodoxy perspective, moved by nationalists that consider they have to save Germany from Europe, and a Europe-building one [12]. Jorge Almeida Fernandes looks at Merkel's political approach as a sagacious one:

"O estilo e a tática de Angela Merkel não são inocentes. Basta lembrar o modo como se desembarçou de todos os rivais e "matou o pai" Helmut Kohl. Na sua representação política, gosta de combinar hesitação com inflexibilidade. Cultiva a imagem da "senhora que diz não" aos europeus. [...] Aos parceiros, explica que está amarrada por uma opinião pública hostil a financiar os défices europeus, por um exigente Bundestag (parlamento) e por um Tribunal Constitucional que ameaça inviabilizar toda a sua política europeia. Perante os alemães, a política do "não" tem uma vantagem: quando diz "sim", pode explicar-lhes que não é cedência mas a alternativa perante a catástrofe." [12] [Angela Merkel's style and tactics are not innocent. Just remember how she got rid of all her rivals and how she "killed her father" Helmut Kohl. In her political representation, she likes to combine hesitation with inflexibility. She cultivates the image of the "lady who says no" to Europeans. [...] To the partners, she explains that she is tied by a hostile public opinion that is against financing the European deficits, by a demanding Bundestag (parliament) and by a Constitutional Court that threatens to make her European policy unviable. Among the Germans, the "no" policy has an advantage: when she says "yes", she can explain to them that it is not a compromise but the alternative to the catastrophe].

Jorge Almeida Fernandes emphasizes that we are living a turning point in History. Merkel, alongside with the former Germany's chancellor Gerhard Schröder (1998-2005), marks the beginning of a new era. One of the main priorities of the current German political leaders is no longer to prove their commitment to the European project, but rather to the national one. Fernandes introduces the term "merkelism" to refer to Merkel's ability to adapt her political strategy in a way that she can give preference to the German public opinion and, at the same time, maintain the balance in the Eurozone. In this respect, Fernandes also refers to Merkel's art of hesitation as a way to impose the German culture of stability. Indeed, Merkel's hesitation is used as a means of coercion to get indebted countries make the necessary structural reforms, with no "ifs" nor "buts", and that will be essential to avoid future financial irresponsibility [12].

*Expresso* also addresses the discussion on Merkel's commanding position at the heart of Europe. We may start by considering three articles symptomatically entitled "A Senhora Europa" [Madam Europe] [13], "Super Merkel" [14] and "Nas mãos de Merkel" [In Merkel's hands] [15]. In the first article, the journalist Daniel do Rosário emphasizes the fact that Merkel is the one who defines Europe's agenda and path [13]. Cristina Peres, who usually writes about international affairs, defines the German chancellor as "Super Merkel" and places special emphasis on her ability to foster consensus and find the right solution for each negotiation process [14]. The journalist Luís Marques signs the article "Nas mãos de Merkel" [In Merkel's hands] and shows that she is the one who is ruling Europe:

"A senhora, dizem, é intratável, tem mau feitio e cara de poucos amigos. Nada faz para parecer simpática [...]. Mas é a ela que todos recorrem quando estão em apuros. É nela que procuram a salvação como os peregrinos fazem a Fátima. A senhora governa um dos países da Europa, não a Europa. [...] Mas é a ela, não a Durão Barroso, que vai prestar contas, que tem contas a prestar. [...] A senhora manda na Europa, federaliza as economias, fiscaliza os orçamentos nacionais e vai aplicar aos outros as suas próprias regras. A Alemanha, o seu país, está prestes a fazer pela via pacífica o que nunca conseguiu pela via militar. Governa os outros sem disparar um tiro." [15] [The lady, people say, is intractable, has a bad temper and looks like having few friends. She does nothing to look nice [...]. But it is to her that everyone resorts when in trouble. It is on her that people look for salvation, as pilgrims do in Fátima. The lady rules one of Europe's countries, not Europe itself. [...] But it is to her, not to Durão Barroso, that people deliver accountability. [...] She rules inside Europe, federalizes economies, oversees national budgets, and applies her own rules to others. Germany, her country, is about to do through a peaceful way, what was never able to do through a military one. [Germany] rules without firing a shot.]

The Portuguese writer and journalist Miguel Sousa Tavares brings forward the article "Adeus, Europa?" [Goodbye,

Europe?], in which he comments on the fact that everyone genuflects Merkel: "a Europa já não conta, só conta a sr.<sup>a</sup> Merkel. Quando é preciso falar com a Europa, fala-se com ela" [16]. [Europe no longer counts, only Ms. Merkel does. If you need to talk to Europe, you talk to Merkel]. In another article, named "A Alemanha" [Germany], Tavares stresses the same idea, saying that the only things that seem to currently matter inside Europe are Berlin and Merkel's will [17]. "Angela Merkel – the Superstar" [18] and "Merkel *über alles*" [Merkel above all] [19], signed by the journalists Luísa Meireles and Cristina Peres respectively, are two articles in which Merkel is presented as one of the most powerful women in the world, ruling among all.

In the article "Alemães malditos e incredulos" [Those damned sceptical Germans], an exclusive from *The Economist* and translated by Alice Stilwell, it is highlighted that Germany is ready to represent its interests with a "new vigor" [20]. Merkel, it is said, takes time to make decisions and does not have a prompt answer to the crisis, due to her wish to strictly defend Germany's economy, law and constitution. Merkel will only strategically approve Germany's solidarity, when the debtor nations understand they must also "do their homework" and show they are willing to absorb Germany's culture of stability. "A irredutível estupidez de Merkel" [The irreducible stupidity of Merkel], signed by the journalist and opinion maker João Vieira Pereira, alludes to Merkel's hesitation as a strategy to control the German electorate's opinion until the elections and shows how Merkel tries to profit from both domestically and foreign relations [21]. Similarly, Miguel Monjardino, foreign affairs columnist with *Expresso*, publishes his article "A Alemanha e o Big Bang estratégico" [Germany and the strategic Big Bang] to show that Merkel's art of prudence is attached to the need to guarantee the support of the German public opinion:

"[...] a maioria dos alemães acha que Berlim não deve fazer mais para ajudar os países em dificuldades. [...] a sociedade alemã não me parece propriamente entusiasmada com o seu regresso à sua condição de potência europeia. A prudência de Merkel tem a ver com este estado de coisas. A decisão de consolidar o poder alemão dentro da zona euro e no Fundo Europeu de Estabilização Financeira já foi tomada. O problema da líder alemã é convencer a sua sociedade de que esta decisão é a melhor para o país. [...] Até agora a opção da chanceler tem sido camuflar a mudança com as imagens da continuidade e dos pequenos passos" [22]. [... the majority of the German people thinks that Berlin should not do anything else to help debtor countries. [...] German society does not seem to be really enthusiastic about its return to its status of European power. Merkel's prudence has to do with this state of affairs. The decision to consolidate German power within the Eurozone and the European Financial Stabilization Fund has already been taken. The German leader's problem is to convince her society that this decision is the best for the country. [...] So far, the chancellor's option has been to camouflage the change, by providing a feeling of

continuity and small steps].

Merkel's logic of action is hereby understood through the notion of national electability: though German's responsibility towards the European integration cannot be forgotten, national interests are now at the top of Merkel's priorities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The euro crisis made Angela Merkel's power stronger, leading her to a prominent position inside the European balance of power. Proof of this is that, for the sixth time in a row, Forbes has considered the German chancellor as the most powerful woman in the world. Merkel is known for her methodical and prudent style that makes her political decisions slow, but successful. Her tactical action, which, in the context of the financial crisis, has so many times exasperated Europe, has been the subject of a strong debate throughout the international press. Regarding the Portuguese one, and considering the data collected in the two newspapers analyzed under the scope of this study – the daily *Público* and weekly *Expresso* -, we can identify a positive perception over Merkel's action. In fact, if on the one hand we find the idea that the Teutonic budgetary discipline, which she tries to impose to debtor nations, may arise old ghosts and put the European stability at stake, on the other hand, we find an optimistic look over the main results. Being able to, at the same time, satisfy pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics, both indoors and abroad – which is what Ulrich Beck identifies as the *Merkiavellian strategy* – Merkel has succeeded and conquered a leading position that Europeans cannot deny.

On 24<sup>th</sup> September 2017, Merkel won her fourth term as Germany's chancellor (albeit with her worst result ever). She continues to occupy her place as *Frau Europa* [Madam Europe] and will likely influence the future of the European project.

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