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Learning to Lead? Germany and the Leadership Paradox in EU Foreign Policy

LISBETH AGGESTAM and ADRIAN HYDE-PRICE

Germany's growing leadership role in the European Union over recent years has been subject to a broad-ranging debate. The changed EU foreign policy-making procedures introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, with a significant delegation of formal leadership functions to the EU level, have created a new dynamic between EU institutions and member states, thereby complicating the picture of how and why Germany exercises leadership in the CFSP. We use social role theory to analyse Germany's emerging leadership role in European foreign and security policy. We begin by drawing an important distinction between German power on the one hand, and its capacity for leadership on the other. German leadership in European foreign policy has emerged as a result of the Ukraine crisis and is being shaped by the interaction between domestic level factors and the role expectations of its key allies and partners. The form of German leadership in the CFSP reflects the paradoxical nature of post-Lisbon European foreign policy, which we argue can be explained in terms of 'cross-loading' dynamics of Europeanization that are horizontal and informal. We illustrate the evolving form of German leadership with original data from an extensive interview survey and a case study of the Ukraine crisis.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines Germany's growing leadership role within European foreign policy, focusing on the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Calls – both from within and without the Federal Republic – for an enhanced German role in the Union's foreign and security policy come at a time of cascading challenges to Europe's post-war liberal order (Krastev 2016). The multiple crises confronting Europe's liberal order have posed a critical challenge to its values and institutions, and highlighted the need for effective and legitimate leadership to solve collective action problems. The 2009 Lisbon Treaty was designed to address these collective action problems by centralising formal leadership functions in EU foreign policy in Brussels. Of particular importance in this regard was the bolstering of the position of the EU High Representative and the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), both of which challenged state-based practices of leadership (Adler-Nissen, 2014). Paradoxically, however, this delegation of formal leadership functions

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to the EU has taken place at the very moment that Germany has begun exercising a significant leadership role within EU foreign policy.

This article examines how and why Germany exercises leadership in the CFSP post-Lisbon. The delegation of formal leadership functions to the EU level has created a new dynamic between EU institutions and member states, thereby complicating our understanding of Germany's emerging leadership role in the CFSP. Examining the confluence of these two developments – Germany's leadership role in Europe and the reconfiguration of the CFSP – is of vital importance for understanding both the changing character of the EU and the future of European order.

We argue in this article that existing leadership role relations in EU foreign policy, as well as patterns of interaction between Member States on matters of foreign affairs, are changing across the board in the post-Lisbon era, prompting new types of informal leadership practices. As a major actor in the EU and one with a key stake in the CFSP, Germany provides a prism for exploring the emergence of these new leadership practices. The aim of the article is to study German leadership in post-Lisbon EU foreign policy by examining why, when and how Germany has taken on new responsibilities for foreign and security policy leadership, and what this tells us about contemporary EU foreign policy governance. In particular, we examine two questions: What is the relationship between German power and leadership, and what distinctive forms has German foreign policy leadership taken?

The literature on German foreign policy and the CFSP tends to answer these questions from two baselines. One (predominantly liberal in approach) argues that Germany shies away from taking on a leadership role and asserting power when it comes to foreign policy, and emphasises the taming and diffusing of German power (Crawford and Olsen 2017; Maull 2011, 98–103; Katzenstein 1997; Longhurst 2005; Kirste and Maull 1996). The consequence of this is – at best – forms of shared leadership. This approach also tends to stress continuity in post-cold war German foreign policy (Eberle and Handl 2018). The second body of literature (largely but not exclusively realist in its approach) maintains that Germany's central power and position give it either a dominant position in the CFSP or is dismissive of EU foreign policy cooperation altogether (Szabo 2015; Kundnani 2014; Hellmann et al. 2007; Karp 2005; Wagner 2005; Schwartz 1994; Pedersen 1998). We take a distinct position by arguing that these two bodies of literature do not help us explore the issue of German power and leadership in European foreign policy in a nuanced manner. By utilising an innovative conceptual framework, we open up some new lines of enquiry about German leadership and power in EU foreign policy. Our aim in doing so is to contribute with new knowledge, not only of Germany as a central EU member states, but importantly about new emerging processes of Europeanization in post-Lisbon EU foreign policy.

Our central claim is that there is a gap in the literature – both theoretically and empirically – on the distinct nature and forms of leadership in EU foreign policy. While power has been a central concept in debates on both the EU as a global actor (Aggestam 2008; Sjusen, 2006) and German foreign policy since re-unification (Anderson and Goodman 1993; Harnisch and Maull 2001), the concept of leadership has been largely overlooked and under-theorised. This gap is all the more striking since many of the concepts in the debate on European and German power rest on specific assumptions about leadership and agency. Systematic studies of the character

and forms of German leadership (Harnisch and Schild 2014) or of Germany's leadership role in the CFSP (Helwig 2016) are still relatively few and theoretically underdeveloped. The closest is probably the literature that focuses on German power as hegemony (Paterson, 2011; Leonard and Guerot, 2011; Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 2000), but – as we argue below – this literature is predominantly structural in its approach and therefore tends to overshadow the agential nature of leadership.

We define leadership in this article as a process in which an actor purposely seeks to influence and guide activities in a group towards collective goals, decisions and outcomes (Avery, 2004, 22). As such, we argue that it is best understood and explained as a *social role*. We draw on social role theory to help us conceptualise and explain leadership as a process that emerges through the development of shared role relations between leaders and followers. We suggest that Germany is in a process of learning new leadership roles in the CFSP and that the catalyst for this has been external, in the shape of the Ukraine crisis. This new and evolving German role conception manifests itself in an increased willingness to assume a leadership role in European foreign, security and defence cooperation – without necessarily aspiring to a dominant position in the CFSP. The German political elite is engaged in a process of 'role making' as it responds to both profound geostrategic shifts in its external environment, and the role expectations of others. In contrast to arguments that stress continuity in German foreign policy – based on its civilian power heritage (Harnisch and Maull 2001), 'leadership avoidance complex' (Paterson 2015, 316) or primacy of geo-economic interests (Kundnani 2014) – we point to a new willingness to provide political and strategic leadership in European foreign, security and defence policy. As a result of changes in post-Lisbon EU foreign policy governance, German leadership is manifested in new forms of informal leadership practices within the CFSP, in which new patterns of cross-loading interaction between EU Member States are increasingly prevalent and significant (Aggestam and Bicchi, 2019).

The article is organised into three main parts. We begin with a brush clearing exercise in the diverse literature on leadership to specify more precisely how we define and approach the concept of leadership theoretically, particularly in relation to the concept of power with which it is often conflated. The second part elaborates on what we argue is a leadership paradox at the heart of EU foreign policy post-Lisbon that has unsettled leadership role relations within the CFSP and given rise to new informal practices by EU Member States. This line of argument draws on findings from a leadership interview survey with diplomats from the EU Member States and the EEAS. The third part focuses on German leadership in European foreign policy, and analyses how Germany is learning new roles and adopting different forms of leadership. We illustrate the evolving nature and form of German leadership with a case study of Germany's response to the Ukraine crisis.

2. DEFINING LEADERSHIP

The concept of leadership has received scant attention in the field of European Studies, in contrast to the more extensive treatment it has attracted in political science and public administration (Tömmel and Verdun, 2017, 104). The majority of studies have been an empirically thick description of particular individual leaders of European institutions,

such as Jean Monnet or Jacques Delors, or national leaders, particularly those of France and Germany as the ‘motor’ of European integration. The more theoretically driven work has been focused on the function of the Presidency in leading the Council (Tallberg 2006; Beach and Mazzucelli 2007). Studies of leadership in European foreign policy are particularly scarce (see, however, Aggestam and Johansson 2017; Helwig, 2015). In the field of International Relations (IR), the concept of leadership has largely been subsumed in broader conceptualisations of power and hegemony, and while there is a thriving study of leadership in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), much of this is focused on the role of individual leadership (Walker, Malici, and Schafer et al. 2011). It is a truism to say that the concept of leadership is an essentially contested concept. The confusion rests on a lack of specification about what the concept refers to: specific individuals, positions, processes or outcomes? Often it relates to all these four facets of leadership without specifying more precisely how ‘leadership’ is understood and conceptualised.

This article conceptualises leadership by drawing on social role theory, which emphasises the social and relational dimension of leadership. We argue that understanding the leader-follower nexus is critical to explaining the constitution and reproduction of leadership. Role theory offers a tool for exploring the interaction between the purposeful (strategic) action of agents and structural constraints (Searing 1991; Thies and Breuning 2012). Leadership is a process in which an actor purposely seeks to influence and guide activities in a group by ‘providing solutions to common problems or offering ideas about how to accomplish collective purposes, and mobilizing the energies of others to follow these courses of action’ (Keohane 2012, 19). Leadership is thus best understood and explained as a *social role*. Leadership is not a great power attribute that can simply be ascribed to particular actors on the basis of their power and status but is a social role that emerges from the interaction between different actors. Theoretically, we argue that to understand the possibilities and types of leadership, we need to analyse how role expectations and role conceptions dynamically interact in the context of the leader-follower nexus that shape the leadership process and the subsequent role performance (Aggestam and Johansson 2017). Empirically, we argue that the combination of the Lisbon treaty changes, followed by the ‘game changer’ of the Ukraine crisis (Bagger 2019, 57–58), have led Germany to develop new forms of European foreign and security policy leadership which we conceive of as an act of innovative ‘role making’.

2.1. *Power and Leadership*

While the concepts of power and leadership are intimately connected, they are not synonymous. As Burns succinctly notes, ‘All leaders are actual or potential power holders, but not all power holders are leaders’ (Burns 1992, 18). There is no direct causal link between power and leadership, and no amount of capabilities and resources will ‘make a nation powerful unless its leadership uses these resources with maximum effect on the international scene’ (Stoessinger 1991, 34). This distinction between power and leadership is critical to our theoretical framework and is particularly important given the tendency to conflate the two in discussions of Germany as a hegemon. As Oran Young (1989, 88) notes, ‘leadership differs from overt hegemony in that it involves a distinct element of negotiation or give-and-take in contrast to processes in which an obviously dominant actor simply dictates terms so others who have no

choice but to acquiesce'. Although some scholars have sought to redefine 'hegemony' in more consensual terms (Bieler and Morton 2004; Cox 1983), popular and mainstream academic approaches to hegemony emphasise the importance of structural power and the latent element of coercion.

For this reason, we use the concept of 'leadership' rather than 'hegemony'. We believe that the concept of leadership is better suited to the analysis of Germany's changing role in Europe for two main reasons. Firstly, the concept of leadership emphasises the importance of agency and 'deliberative power' (cf. Strange 1988, 24–26). Secondly, in contrast to the broader and more ambiguous concept of hegemony, leadership – as we define it here – is much more specific to particular issues, situations, and contexts, and is essentially group-oriented. A key assumption follows from this: while Germany may lead ON certain issues in the CFSP, it may well take the role of follower on another issue. It is important to stress that we do not privilege agency over the structure, but essentially see leadership as an emergent role formed in the interaction between agency and structure.

Within International Relations, theoretical discussion of power has revolved around the concepts of power as resource, relationship and status (Berenskoetter and Williams 2007; Barnett and Duvall 2005). Our approach is based on an understanding of power both as an ability of A to get B to do what B would not otherwise do (Dahl 1957), and as an agent's ability to influence the structures which set the context and shape the behaviour of others (Hay 1995, 191). This involves both tangible and intangible resources (Stoessinger 1991, 34), and – we emphasise – is crucially dependent on the specific policy domain. Drawing on Mann (2012), we identify four distinct domains of power relations: economic, political, military and ideational. We, therefore, see power as multi-dimensional rather than monolithic and unidimensional, operating with distinct logics in different policy domains (Baldwin 2016). Leadership, we argue, is one aspect of political power, and involves an ability to formulate strategic goals, engage in reflexive learning and mobilise followers for collective action. Following Stoessinger, we argue that 'the quality of a nation's *leadership* and the image which it projects upon the world are important sources of power. If leadership is defective, all other resources may be to no avail' (Stoessinger 1991, 34). A nation's political power is thus relational and depends on the quality of its leadership and both 'its image of itself and, perhaps, most crucial of all, the way it is viewed by other nations' (Stoessinger 1991, 34).

2.2. *Leadership as a Process*

In the academic literature, leadership is approached from a number of perspectives (Grint, 2005), but we focus here primarily on leadership as a relational and interactive process between 'leaders' and 'followers'. This view of leadership dovetails with our relational view of power that underlines the importance of an actor's self-image and how others view it. The nexus between leader and followers is of central importance. To be effective, leadership must be accepted as legitimate by followers (Clark 2005, 2). Legitimacy can derive from formal and informal leadership positions, or individual leadership character traits and skills, but is primarily generated in an interactive process of negotiation between leaders and followers. To understand and explain German leadership in European foreign policy, it is important to investigate followership. At the end of the day, it is the followers who actually confer leadership on an actor.

Role theory provides a heuristic framework for analysing leadership as a process. It helps us focus on internationally and domestically held role expectations of German leadership and how they interact with the role conceptions held by the governing elite. Role expectations are normative ideas about appropriate leadership behaviour that other actors (*alter*) prescribe the role-holder (*ego*). Role conceptions shift the analytical focus to the leadership role that an actor attribute to itself (Aggestam, 2006). While the study of German role conceptions has received considerable attention in the scholarly literature (Maull, 2018; Hyde-Price 2000; Kirste and Maull 1996), there has been very little systematic work done on the international role expectations of German leadership.

The interactional perspective of leadership that we advance in this article suggests that roles are not static, and that new roles can emerge as a consequence of a learning process that generates new definitions and understandings. Learning is defined as the development of new beliefs, skills, or procedures, which is the result of observation and interpretation of experience (Harnish 2011, 11; Levy 1994). Innovation and learning is usually triggered when an actor faces a new situation – particularly a crisis - for which s/he has not been prepared. In role theory, a distinction is made between role-taking and role-making. Role-taking assumes the stability of an ascribed role, while role-making involves greater scope for agency in the development of a role through an experimental learning process (Biddle and Thomas 1966, 7). Importantly, role-making may also trigger a corresponding change in the roles of other actors (Harnish 2012, 49). Strategies of role-making may, therefore, have a wide impact on institutional contexts. This, we argue, is the case with Germany's emerging leadership role in the CFSP, which involves the dynamic reshaping of the leader-follower nexus, and the emergence of new informal leadership practices based increasingly on cross-loading.

2.3. *Types of Leadership*

Leadership is the generic concept for different types of leadership behaviour that is closely linked to specific situations, contexts and group interactions, which is why the literature has generated different typologies of leadership. Drawing on the work of Young (1991) and Parker and Karlsson (2014), we identify four types of leadership: structural, entrepreneurial, ideational and directional. (1) *Structural leadership* rests primarily on material attributes including asymmetrical power resources and geographical location, and can also be the consequence of successful 'milieu shaping' (Wolfers 1962) that has created an institutional, legal and procedural landscape that enhances the influence and authority of the leader. This is important to consider in terms of the influence Germany derives from its economic power, and the political influence it enjoys given its success in shaping EU governance structures in its own image (Matthias 2016, 142; Bulmer, Jeffery, and Paterson 2000). While structural leadership clearly overlaps with hegemony in some important ways, it is important to reiterate our distinction between leadership and hegemony: we argue that leadership is more functionally specific and unstable in contrast to mainstream conceptions of hegemony, which tend to view hegemonic forms of leadership as structurally stable, continuous and broader. (2) *Entrepreneurial leadership* rests on an ability to broker mutually beneficial agreements among followers. It is associated with transactional skills in bargaining, aiming at identifying points of mutual interest and negotiating a consensus agreement (Tallberg 2006). Historically, this is associated with the Bismarckian

role of Germany as Europe's 'honest broker' (Hyde-Price 2000, 75). (3) *Ideational leadership* refers to an ability to shape followers' preferences by providing intellectual guidance and creating new knowledge to alter existing perceptions of an issue. It is proactive leadership that sets new collective goals and seeks to mobilise the support of followers in pursuit of them (Burns 1992). It is therefore intensely interactive and deliberative and assumes that arguments matter and that interests and preferences are not static. (4) *Directional leadership* refers to a form of Aristotelian 'virtuous leadership', and involves 'setting an example' for others to follow. As such, it is a unilateral activity that does not involve the same degree of deliberation and interaction as either entrepreneurial or ideational leadership, but can be a prelude to these more proactive forms of leadership. A common reference to this type of leadership is the steps that have been taken by Germany or the EU on setting an example regarding environmental measures to prevent global warming. Similarly, some would argue that Germany sought to take moral leadership in the initial phases of the migration crisis, while consequently failing to attract followers. It is important to note that we see these four as Weberian 'ideal types', and that in practice we expect them to overlap, and for the mix of types of leadership to change over time.

Finally, it is important to clarify how we relate leadership to outcomes and consequences, i.e., successfully achieving common goals and preferences. Effective leadership can be measured in two ways: first, in establishing a leader-follower nexus in which the lead actor's leadership is accepted as legitimate by its followers; and second, in achieving the specific policy outcomes reflecting shared preferences. These distinctions are important to bear in mind when we judge German leadership during the Ukraine crisis. While German leadership might not have resolved the actual conflict, it was successful in diplomatic crisis management and in brokering a common EU position on sanctions vis-à-vis Russia.

3. GERMANY AND THE LEADERSHIP PARADOX IN EU FOREIGN POLICY

Germany's willingness to take greater responsibility for leadership in European foreign, security and defence cooperation is the catalytic impact of the Ukraine crisis, but the specific forms this leadership has assumed are being shaped, not just by German identity and culture, but also by the paradoxical nature of the post-Lisbon CFSP. The 2009 Lisbon Treaty was intended to enhance the EU's ability to speak and act with greater cohesion in international affairs as a global actor. Important leadership functions, such as agenda-setting, coordination and representation were delegated away from the nationally rotating EU Presidency to the EU High Representative (EUHR) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The result is a hybrid foreign policy system, where formal leadership functions have been centralised to the EU-level, while decision-making remains intergovernmental and largely consensual between the EU Member States. Hence, despite the significant changes to the formal leadership functions in the Lisbon Treaty, the EU still lacks a clear leadership structure in foreign policy given the fragmented character of the European polity (Tömmel and Verdun 2017, 103; Hyde-Price 2013). The exercise of leadership is therefore complex and deeply contested.

We argue that German leadership has to be understood in context of the new distinctive patterns of interaction that have emerged in the post-Lisbon EU foreign policy

governance system. Rather than leading to a top-down centralised process of Europeanization, a new pattern of horizontal and informal interactions involving cross-loading between EU Member States – as a whole or in smaller ‘like-minded groups’ – have emerged (Aggestam and Bicchi, 2019). The drivers of these changes are both internal and external. The internal cohesion and solidarity among EU Member States have steadily fragmented since the big enlargements of 2004/2007. On several foreign policy issues, the energies of the EU High Representative have mainly focused on trying to maintain the cohesion of the EU rather than proactively providing leadership (Aggestam and Bicchi, 2019, 9). At the same time, the external environment has deteriorated with new challenges and cascading crises demanding swift responses and concerted action. It is within this new context of internal and external challenges that international and European expectations of German leadership have been generated, and to which German policy-makers have responded with innovative ‘role-making’.

Importantly, this does not mean that these informal practices should be equated with re-nationalization or de-Europeanization, where the goal of a Member State is to uncouple its policy commitments to the EU. Rather, cross-loading is linked to a process of Europeanization based on new informal leadership practices. Our analysis of German leadership draws on the definition provided by Wong and Hill (2011, 218) that refers to cross-loading as ‘the mutual influence which the Member States exert on each other, independent of mediation by the EU institutions’. We argue that the cross-loading dimension of Europeanization can help us understand new regrouping dynamics in foreign policy cooperation among the EU Member States, which shapes the distinctive forms of German leadership that have emerged in this context.

Evidence for this comes from the findings of an interview survey on European leadership role expectations (see Aggestam and Johansson, 2017).¹ They show that European and national diplomats have divergent views about what type of leadership different actors are expected to perform. While diplomats working in the EEAS think their most important task is to set the agenda and deliver policy proposals, national diplomats consider the role of the EU High Representative and the EEAS as primarily representational and in some cases an important facilitator to reach consensus. The overall findings suggest that Member States doubt whether the new institutional set-up post-Lisbon has led to more efficiency – as originally intended – and helps explain why Member States are seeking new informal ways to cooperate to prevent the unravelling of EU foreign policy.

What is striking from the findings in the survey is the perception of Germany as a central player in the CFSP. When asked to rank three of the most influential Member States in the CFSP, the respondents (which included the EEAS) ranked Germany the highest at 57%, France at 24%, and the UK at 17%. If we only include Member States’ respondents, Germany’s ranking increases to 66%, thereby confirming the *de facto* position of Germany as ‘*primus inter pares*’. However, the result should be seen as indicative rather than affirmative in that this was posed as a general question and as most respondents pointed out, leadership is highly contextual and issue specific. France is, for instance, seen as a much more influential leader in Africa. The results from the survey show that there is no ‘orthodox’ model of the appropriate way to lead in EU foreign policy or by whom. Nonetheless, for the case of the Ukraine crisis which we examine here, it is quite clear that Germany is perceived to be playing the central leadership role in EU foreign policy (see Siddi in this special issue).

4. LEARNING TO LEAD? GERMANY AND THE UKRAINE CRISIS

Germany's evolving conception of its new leadership role in Europe is evident from the Ukraine crisis which developed from late 2013, and reached its culmination in the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea and the subsequent eruption of armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Prior to this, there were clear indications that key sections of the German political elite recognised that they needed to assume greater responsibility for leadership in European foreign and security policy. Not only was Germany seen as a 'black hole' in NATO, but its unwillingness to work with European partners in CSDP missions or in policy towards the Middle East and North Africa – epitomised by its abstention from the Libya intervention in 2011 – was widely criticised by its European and transatlantic partners (Neukirch and Repinski 2014; Oppermann 2012; Miskimmon 2012; Sikorski 2011; Müller 2011; Maull 2011; The Economist 2011). German willingness to assume leadership in the Eurozone crisis but its failure to assume responsibility in foreign and security policy was increasingly recognised to be unsustainable in the long term by the German elite (Bagger 2015: 9; Hellmann 2016).

Responding to the role expectations of its transatlantic and European partners, a 'reset' of German foreign and security policy was announced in a series of coordinated speeches at the Munich Security Conference in February 2014 by President Gauck, Foreign Minister Steinmeier and Defence Minister von der Leyen (Hyde-Price 2015). This promised a more active engagement with European foreign and security policy, and greater commitment to both the CFSP and NATO. Shortly afterwards, as the Ukraine crisis erupted, and Europe's democracies were forced to confront the most serious challenge to Europe's security order since the end of the Cold War, the German government found itself facing a radically altered strategic environment.

Russia's use of 'hybrid warfare' and its illegal annexation of Crimea constituted a profound existential challenge to the norms, values and institutions of post-cold war Europe's rules-based multilateral security order. No country felt this more keenly than Germany, whose post-cold war grand strategy was based on the assumption that globalisation was shaping a more cooperative and peaceful global order (Bagger 2019). Russia's transformation from a 'partner in modernisation' to a strategic competitor and military security threat was felt particularly acutely in Germany (Forsberg 2016). Given its central geostrategic location in the heart of Europe between East and West (Klinke 2018), and its complex and many-layered relationship with Russia – which embraces diplomatic relations, trade, security and foreign policy, as well as culture and historical memory (Siddi 2017) – the Federal Republic felt compelled to play a leading role in managing the crisis, and in formulating a strategic response to Russian aggression (Fix 2018).

The Ukraine crisis was thus the catalyst for the emergence of Germany as a driving force in European foreign policy. Given its structural location as Europe's *Zentralmacht*, and the role expectations of its allies, partners and neighbours (Brummer and Oppermann 2016), the German foreign policy elite exhibited a new willingness to take on a leadership role in foreign and security policy. Germany's Euro-Atlantic allies expected Berlin to take a leading role in crisis management because of its multifaceted links to the Russian regime. This was the case with both the Obama administration, and Germany's EU partners and neighbours, all of whom looked to Germany

for leadership (Speck 2015; Oppermann 2018). This role expectation was in no small part due to the German government's inherent reflex to consult and inform its partners and allies at all stages of the negotiations with Russia, which helped consolidate the emerging leader-follower nexus.

From the start, two distinctive aspects of German foreign policy leadership were evident. The first was a somewhat traditional emphasis on the need for European cooperation and 'shared leadership'. As Foreign Minister Steinmeier made clear, Germany's top priorities were preserving the EU and 'sharing the burden of leadership' (Steinmeier 2016). However, this did not mean that Germany was willing to leave crisis diplomacy to the EU, or that it sought to exercise 'shared leadership' through the formal institutions of the CFSP. On the contrary, the second distinctive aspect for German foreign policy leadership was a marked preference for informal leadership practices and 'mini-lateral' cooperation with key EU partners, rather than utilising the formal institutional structures and procedures of the CFSP – in other words, cross-loading. This was clear in February 2014 when the governments of Germany, France and Poland agreed to activate the 'Weimar triangle' as the vehicle for diplomatic crisis management. Rather than working through the formal post-Lisbon institutions of the CFSP, the foreign ministers of the three Weimar triangle countries flew directly to Kiev on 21 February 2014 in order to negotiate a political compromise and broker an agreement to resolve the crisis. The decision to utilise the framework of the Weimar triangle reflected a belief in Berlin that the deteriorating situation in Ukraine was too strategically and politically sensitive to be left to EU, particularly after Catherine Ashton, the then EU High Representative made an appearance at the Maidan protests in Kiev in December 2013 and hence was viewed as politically biased. The use of Weimar triangle also demonstrated Germany's understanding of its leadership role as a form of 'shared leadership', working in tandem with its traditional European ally France, as well as its key East Central European partner at the time, Poland.

Given its extensive links with Russia and emerging leadership role in the EU, the German government emerged as the key Western interlocutor with Moscow. Chancellor Merkel was in regular phone contact with President Putin and was at the centre of discussions with EU and NATO allies. 'If there is a solution to the crisis', it was noted at the time, 'it may lay in Berlin, in the personage of Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor and de facto leader of the European Union'. She has maintained a low public profile, but 'behind the scenes, though, she is at the centre of things', keeping in regular contact with Putin and other key international actors (Cassidy 2014). Frank-Walter Steinmeier also maintained an ongoing dialogue with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, and played a critical role in diplomatic crisis management with his colleagues in the Weimar triangle. Both Merkel and Steinmeier have actively coordinated policy with the United States, the G7, the OSCE and the EU. For her part, Defence Minister von der Leyen was active in NATO.

Germany's leadership role in the diplomacy surrounding the Ukraine crisis is particularly evident from the Normandy Contact Group, also known as the Normandy Format. This was created in June 2014 in the margins of the 70th Anniversary celebrations of D-Day, and involves the leaders and foreign ministers of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine. The Normandy group helped prepare the ground for the Geneva

talks that led to the signing of the Minsk memorandum of September 2014 ('Minsk I'). After repeated violations of the ceasefire, a follow-up agreement was negotiated by the Normandy group and signed in February 2015 (Minsk II'). At all stages of these negotiations, German diplomats were intensely active behind the scenes in order to identify a mutually acceptable compromise, build consensus within the international community, and inform and consult with EU members. This was important, not least with smaller EU Member States, who instinctively mistrust Contact Groups of big powers. As a small state diplomat pointed out, 'size matters, but also their way of acting' (Interview survey 2016).

What is most striking about Germany's response to the Ukraine crisis is the evolution of a new style of German political and diplomatic leadership, reflecting both an on-going process of 'role-making' and reflexive learning. Germany's approach to the crisis has been characterised by an emphasis on diplomatic engagement with Russia, and a focus on building consensus within the EU and NATO on policy towards Russia. German policy has thus been to develop a nuanced approach that combines firm support of Ukraine and condemnation of Russian actions, along with continuing diplomatic engagement with Moscow. However, the style of German leadership has evolved beyond either 'structural leadership' (which involves a more passive reliance on indirect influence through EU institutions (Matthias 2016, 141) or 'entrepreneurial leadership' (associated with the Bismarckian 'honest broker' role), and has increasingly taken the form of 'ideational' or 'directional' leadership. The 'honest broker' role assumes a more disinterested ability to negotiate mutually beneficial agreements between followers, without necessarily seeking to set the agenda or impose preferences on others. In the context of the Ukraine crisis, however, German leadership has been much more proactive and deliberative, seeking to set new collective goals and reshape followers preferences by providing new conceptual and ideational knowledge. Thus the German government has argued that Russia's challenge to the rules-based multilateral order has profoundly changed Europe's geostrategic environment, and pushed for a comprehensive package of sanctions aimed at putting pressure on the Putin regime (Yoder 2015). What is particularly significant is that Berlin has done this in the face of resistance from more pro-Russian EU governments, and against opposition from domestic political and economic interests in Germany itself. In a speech to the 'East Forum Berlin' on April 9 2014, Foreign Minister Steinmeier explicitly argued that defending the liberal world order was more important than unfettered trade with Russia, 'even if that would mean sustaining economic disadvantages', because 'if we in Europe would tolerate the law of the powerful to prevail over the power of the law the damage would be far greater in the long run' (Steinmeier 2014).

What is also evident from Germany's leadership role in the Ukraine crisis is the ease with which it assumed a central role, as well as the flexibility and pragmatism of German diplomacy (Koeth 2018; Daehnhardt and Handl 2018). Despite its strong commitment to the EU and the CFSP, Germany was willing to use a variety of international organisations and institutional forums, including the OSCE, the EU, NATO, the Weimar triangle and the Normandy Contact Group. This reflects the new cross-loading dynamics in European foreign policy, and Germany's role as both a facilitating coordinator (reflecting its traditional strength as an entrepreneurial leader) and its

new role as a more proactive and deliberative leader, learning new skills as both an ideational and directional leader. What is also remarkable is that Germany was not only willing and able to adopt a new leadership role, but was also able to consolidate ‘followers’ around this leadership role through its willingness to consult and inform (Bildt 2015). Both the US administration of President Obama and EU member states looked to Germany to take the diplomatic lead, whilst the Russian regime also saw Berlin as its preferred interlocutor. It is thus evident that through the experience of crisis diplomacy in Ukraine, Germany has both learnt how to lead, and become more comfortable with a more proactive leadership role in European foreign and security policy.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has examined Germany’s growing leadership role within European foreign policy, drawing on social role theory, and situating German foreign policy leadership in the case of the Ukraine crisis in the context of the EU’s post-Lisbon leadership paradox. Germany, we have argued, has been learning to lead, and this learning process has been accelerated and compressed by the urgency and seriousness of the Ukraine crisis. Given the multifaceted nature of the complex crisis – military, political, diplomatic and economic – all major government ministries have been drawn in to crisis management, ensuring that the learning process has been widely disseminated throughout the German governmental apparatus.

Germany has been engaged in a process of learning to lead in three main areas: diplomatic negotiations, politico-military crisis management, and EU sanctions policy. Its emerging leadership role across these three domains has been driven by an interaction process, involving external expectations of a leadership role by EU partners, the United States and Russia, and evolving German role conceptions. What is also very striking is how flexible, pragmatic and innovative German leadership in this crisis has been. Germany has utilised a range of informal leadership practices and mini-lateral fora, involving cross-loading and facilitated coordination, rather than relying on the formal institutional structures and procedures of the CFSP. This confirms our analysis of the EU’s post-Lisbon leadership paradox.

The full implications of this new German leadership role in European foreign policy remain to be seen, but our analysis does suggest that Germany is increasingly comfortable with a leadership role, and is steadily learning how leadership can most effectively be exercised within the EU on a range of policy issues. What is clear is that the confluence of Germany’s leadership role in the EU and the post-Lisbon reconfiguration of the CFSP means that cross-loading has become a much more significant feature of European foreign policy than has previously been recognised. In addition, we suggest that Germany’s evolving leadership role in European foreign policy must be understood more as a dynamic and interactive process, rather than simply as a manifestation of hegemony.

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NOTE

1. The survey targeted all Political and Security Committee ambassadors and European Correspondents from the 28 Member States, and a sample of 25 EEAS high-level officials in Brussels and 21 EU-delegation ambassadors for interviews. The response rate from this sample was 81 per cent with a guarantee of anonymity. Mixed method approach was used with close-end questions, asking for responses on scales or rankings, with some open-ended follow-up questions included for illustration.

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