

Normality is not in everyone's interest

Gunther Hellmann

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FRANKFURT At the heart of the current crisis of the European Union lies a more fundamental crisis of the national foreign-policy strategies of several key member states. Germany is not alone in this, but it stands out for three reasons: It plays a central role at the heart of the enlarged European Union by virtue of its location and size; it faces its most severe social and economic crisis in decades, and it is governed by a new generation of politicians who have shed inhibitions about using German power.

These factors have led to a major shift in Germany's traditional Europeanist outlook. The code word is "normalization." Since Chancellor Gerhard Schröder came to power in 1998, "normalization" has accelerated every year as Berlin has struggled to reconcile its increasing political ambition with its declining social and economic competitiveness.

When President Jacques Chirac of France and Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain meet with Schröder in Berlin this week, they will be closely watched all over Europe. The Big Three will go out of their way to reassure fellow Europeans that a "directorship" of Germany, France and Britain is not in the air. They are right to the extent that there is little strategic common ground so far uniting Paris, London and Berlin beyond day-to-day European politics. What the meeting in Berlin will confirm, however, is that Germany has finally become as "normal" a European power as Britain or France.

Recall three key events over the past 12 months: Schröder's readiness to openly confront President George W. Bush over the Iraq war together with Vladimir Putin and Chirac; Berlin's reckless push with Paris to suspend the stability pact, and Germany's uncompromising insistence at the Brussels summit in December to stick to the formula of the ill-starred European constitution which would have raised Germany's power and status within the EU.

To be sure, German "normality" can do some good. Schröder, Blair and Chirac will most likely arrive at a few useful formulas for enhancing European security cooperation, thereby bridging an important gap that opened in the run-up to the Iraq war. But those European leaders not invited to Berlin are still right to be suspicious, because Schröder is

openly breaking with an old rule of Germany's European policy: avoiding any appearance that Germany is ganging up with the biggest kids on the block.

What's wrong with that? Isn't there a leadership gap in Europe and hasn't Europe been longing for a normal Germany?

Yes and no. To German ears, "normality" has always had an ambiguous ring. Well into the 1980s, most Germans took pride in being not a "normal," but rather a "civilian power." This reconciled intense feelings of shame for Germany's Nazi past with a sense of pride for the Federal Republic's achievements. But the exercise of civilian power - sending checks but not troops - came to seem increasingly untenable after German unification. NATO made requests for German troops from the Balkans to Afghanistan, and the Germans soon relearned the lesson that soft power was not a key currency in the great power game.

However, since domestic bills were rising rapidly, the needed hard-power resources were not to be found in the military realm. Votes and status in European decision-making were much more important - which is why Schröder has been pushing hard ever since the Nice summit for a measure of recognition of Germany's elevated status. This is not what Germany's neighbors had in mind when they asked for more German "normality."

The irony here is that German acceptance of a "normal" European standard of national interest is threatening to further undermine the European Union's fragile foundation. The opening shots over the European Commission's budget planning are only the most recent sign that European solidarity and "normal" national interests do not match.

If the Big Three meeting in Berlin does yield a joint vision for Europe's future it may well be to make Europe safe for this "normality." Europe's Lilliputians ought to say no to this, not least because neither a German Europe, nor a French nor British one, would be to the benefit of all.

The writer teaches political science at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt.