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Angela Merkel's Leadership in Germany's Open Door Policy on Handling the Refugee Crisis in Europe

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This study examines Angela Merkel's leadership in the Open Door Policy to address the refugee crisis that occurred in Europe in 2015. The conflict in Syria caused its citizens to seek refuge in other countries, leading to a surge in global refugee numbers. Europe, due to its geographical proximity to the Middle East, was significantly impacted by this wave. In response, Germany, under Chancellor Angela Merkel, decided to open its borders to Syrian refugees, contrasting with other EU countries that chose not to accept them. This policy also faced domestic opposition from the AfD party and the anti-Islam PEGIDA movement. Using the concept of leadership, this paper aims to answer the question: how did Angela Merkel's leadership influence Germany's Open Door Policy towards handling the refugee crisis in Europe?.

Introduction

Since the end of World War II, political upheaval and conflicts in the Middle East have brought the refugee issue to international attention. The conflict in Syria, driven by political and ideological issues, has resulted in numerous casualties, prompting Syrians to seek refuge elsewhere. This has led to a global increase in refugee numbers (Fahham & Kartaatmaja, 2014). Syria, with 7.9 million refugees, has the highest number of refugees worldwide (European Commission Directorate-general for Communication, 2014). Europe, due to its geographical proximity to the Middle East, has become a strategic region for receiving refugees. According to Eurostat data, the EU received 626,715 refugees in 2014, the highest since 1992 with 672,000, and granted asylum to more than 185,000 refugees. This number doubled to 1,221,885 asylum seekers in 2015 (Eurostat, 2019).

The EU, through the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) established by the European Commission under the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) framework, set minimum common standards for the treatment of refugees in member states to ensure

shared responsibility (Muharjono and Eflar, 2015). In response, Germany, under Chancellor Angela Merkel, decided to accept refugees through the *Flüchtlinge Willkommen* or *Open Door Policy* on August 24, 2015. This policy opened Germany's borders to anyone in need, especially refugees from conflict countries like Syria. Germany accepted over 1 million refugees. The German government stated that Syrian refugees would be welcomed and allowed to stay, regardless of which EU country they first entered.

Germany created several large-scale programs to handle the refugee crisis, providing around 11 trillion rupiah in total aid, including 5.6 trillion rupiah in humanitarian aid, 4.5 trillion rupiah in bilateral aid, and 1.2 trillion rupiah for crisis resolution (Federal Ministry of The Interior, Building and Community, 2015). The German government established the Financial and Socio-Political Development (ISFD) to manage additional financial assistance for refugees in Germany. This aid included education and health funds, aimed at helping refugees become independent in Germany. During the refugee crisis, the German government also increased the number of BAMF (Federal Ministry of Migration and Refugees) staff by 4,000 to expedite the asylum process. The asylum rejection process for migrants from safe countries was accelerated, as was the acceptance process for asylum requests from refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Iraq (ibid, 2015).

However, this policy faced domestic opposition from the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party and the anti-Islam PEGIDA movement, which argued that Middle Eastern refugees were disrupting Germany's established order (European Islamophobia Report, 2015). The PEGIDA movement, which became active in 2015, had 25,000 followers and held weekly demonstrations in Dresden. They demanded that Germany stop the *wilkommenkultur* program (Bojovic, 2016). Additionally, they criticized Angela Merkel's slogan "we could stand for it," claiming that Germany's acceptance of refugees was futile.

Despite protests and opposition, both internal and external, to *the Open Door Policy*, Chancellor Angela Merkel reaffirmed her stance that Germany would uphold its principles of providing protection to those in need. As Merkel emphasized in her speech (MENAFN, 2015):

What we are experiencing now is something that will occupy and change our country in the coming years. We want this change to be positive and we believe we can accomplish that.

This study aims to explain Angela Merkel's leadership in Germany's Open Door Policy in handling the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015. Using the concept of leadership, the study analyzes how a country's actions are influenced by the identity of its leader. It examines the personality and background of Angela Merkel in formulating refugee acceptance policies during the 2015 European refugee crisis, despite significant pressure from the AfD party and the PEGIDA movement, as well as other EU countries opting not to accept refugees. Thus, this research will analyze Angela Merkel's leadership in Germany's Open Door Policy in handling the refugee crisis in Europe.

Research Methodology

Concept of Leadership

In constructivism, identity is defined as the attributes of international actors that provide motivation and drive their actions. Identity is an inherent characteristic of actors that arises without the need for differentiation from others, or more clearly, identity is something that actors are aware of themselves without needing intersubjectivity. Identity views actors as unique individuals who are distinct from others (Wendt, 1999).

In this case, the actor is Angela Merkel as Chancellor of Germany. While leaders of other member states restricted or closed their borders to refugees, Angela Merkel chose to open Germany's borders and accept refugees beyond the set quota. This also highlights how the actor's subjectivity towards others differs. Other countries viewed refugees as a security threat, whereas Germany considered them a responsibility.

Margaret G. Hermann and Joe D. Hagan (1998), in their work "International Decision Making: Leadership Matters," explain that leaders determine internal and external constraints based on their interpretations formed by experiences, goals, beliefs about the world, and sensitivity to political contexts. These interpretations drive the government to support decisions or strategies made based on their assessments of what is likely to happen and to determine their position. This forms the basis for a country's foreign policy decisions. This assumption highlights the importance of a leader's role in policymaking, where the ultimate decision-maker and director of bureaucratic actions are the leaders themselves.

Leadership has a strong influence on the policy-making process. The formulation of a country's foreign policy is related to the personal characteristics of its leaders, who have a significant impact. According to Margaret Hermann (1980), policy orientation is influenced by the personality of the leader at the time. The leader's background and life experiences play a role in shaping their character and personality, as these analyses

provide a clear picture of the personal tendencies of leaders or the reasons behind their actions.

This study will explain four leadership indicators influencing foreign policy-making according to Margaret G. Hermann (1980). First, beliefs, which are the basic assumptions of national leaders about the world. Beliefs refer to the leader's interpretation that can influence their environment, role, and strategies. In a political context, beliefs relate to ideology, nationalism, or the leader's control or power. Second, motives, which are the main reasons why a leader takes certain actions. Third, decision style, referring to the methods a leader uses in decision-making. This includes openness to new information, risk consideration, complexity of structure, information acquisition process, and tolerance for ambiguity. Fourth, interpersonal style, or personal characteristics, which describe how policymakers interact with others. Two personal characteristics are paranoia, meaning suspicion or distrust of other policymakers, and Machiavellianism, meaning immoral or manipulative behavior.

Literature Review: Leadership in International Relations

Leadership plays a crucial role in international relations and the process of foreign policymaking. In Andrea K. Grove's book *Political Leadership in Foreign Policy: Manipulating Support across Borders* (2007), Grove argues that leaders are not just bound by structural forces and constraints; they can actively manipulate elements in both domestic and international environments to gain support for their foreign policies. According to Grove, the correlation between domestic and international politics provides political leaders with opportunities to garner support for their foreign policy decisions.

Angela Merkel's success in *the Open Door Policy*, which focused on refugee acceptance, brought humanitarian issues from the Holocaust as a collective memory of the German society. According to Grove (2007), individuals play a significant role in leveraging the interconnection between domestic and international situations. Many leaders benefit from such situations, exemplified by President Soekarno's strategy in his confrontation policy against Malaysia.

Furthermore, Grove (2007) asserts that leaders are critical actors during crises or periods of uncertainty. In the tradition of political psychology, there are two important approaches supporting this argument. The first is the "Great Man" approach, which focuses on the leader's qualities, such as charisma, personality, historical background, and political experience. The idea is that these qualities make certain individuals particularly suited to lead during difficult times. The second approach is the "Firefighter,"

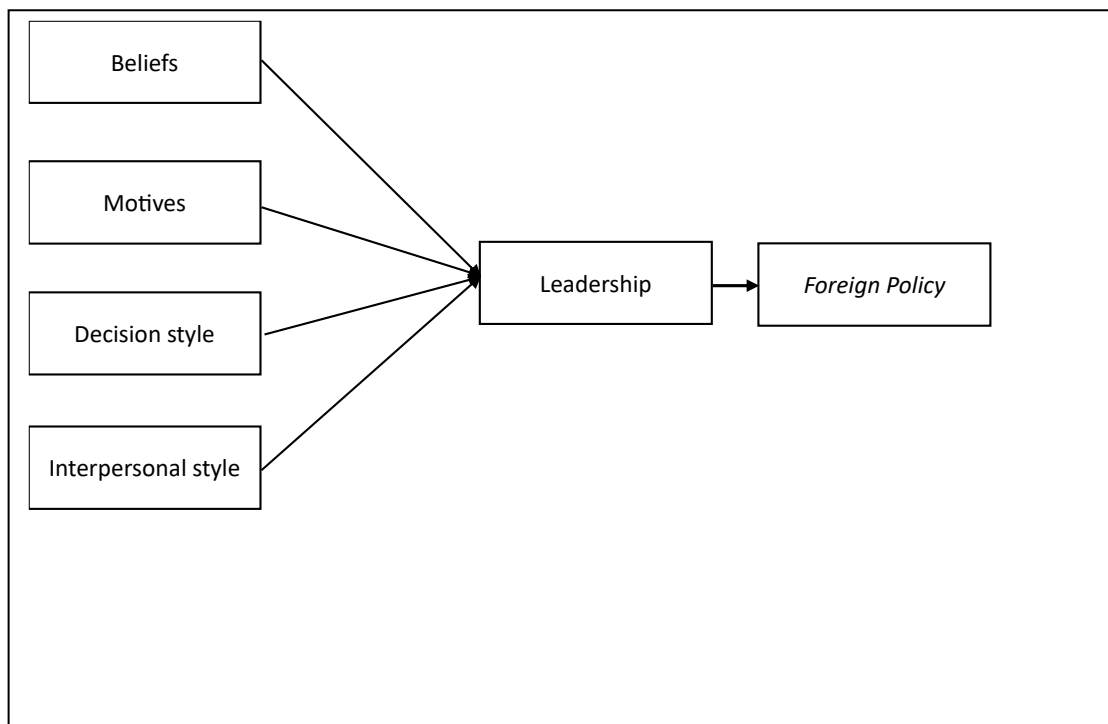
which emphasizes the leader's drive and determination to solve problems. In crises, a strong leader is seen as someone who can take control and find solutions.

Leaders play a vital role in shaping foreign policy during crises, such as the Cold War or the refugee crisis. Angela Merkel had previously succeeded in leading Europe out of the Euro crisis and leveraged this to gain support for her refugee crisis policy. The implication is that the decisions and actions of individual leaders can significantly influence a country's foreign policy strategy in such situations.

Operationalization of Theory

Based on Margaret Hermann's (1980) explanation of the concept of Leadership, leadership influence is shaped by four variables: beliefs, motives, decision style, and interpersonal style. The operationalization of the leadership concept can be seen in the chart below:

Chart: Operationalization of Leadership Theory

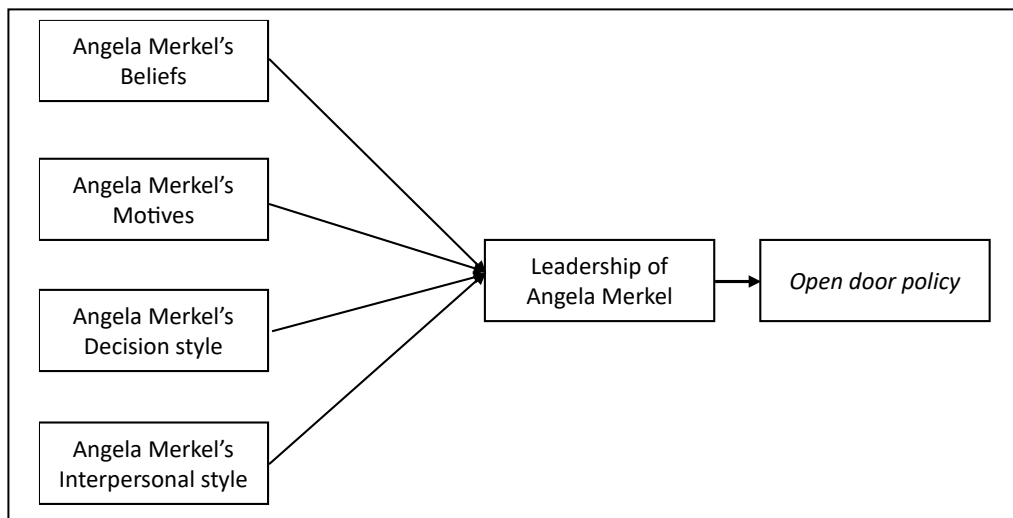


Source: (Created by the Author, 2023)

Analysis Model

Following the operationalization of the above concept, the model for analyzing the operation of these variables is illustrated as follows:

Chart: Leadership Theory Analysis Model



Source: (Created by the Author, 2023)

Data Collection Method

This paper employs qualitative research methods and document study methods to answer the research question, referring to Christopher Lamont (2015) in the book *Research Methods in International Relations*. Archival and document-based research involves collecting data from official documents, original reports, policy statements, legislation, and media reports, which can be used to reference and analyze primary sources (Lamont, 2015). Internet-based research is used to gather data from media sources, articles, journals, ebooks, and official government and international organization websites (Lamont, 2015) involved in the issues discussed in this paper.

Discussion: Analysis of Angela Merkel's Leadership in Germany's Open Door Policy Toward Handling the Refugee Crisis in Europe

Beliefs

Beliefs, according to Margaret G. Hermann (1980), refer to a political leader's assumptions or views about the state of the world, which influence their interpretation of their environment and, consequently, the strategies they employ. In this context, the perspective on both domestic and international environments shapes Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership in formulating her foreign policies. Beliefs in politics often refer to ideology or nationalism (Hermann, 1980). This perspective places the nation as the top priority. Leaders with a strong sense of nationalism have a deep bond with their country, making their actions and policies emphasize national honor and identity. Additionally, beliefs are grounded in self-confidence to control events (Hermann, 1980).

According to Alexander Wendt (1999), a nation's identity can change due to events and how a leader interprets those events. The Holocaust drastically changed Germany, with the largest genocide forcing European Jews and non-Jews to become refugees and seek help from other countries. This event left a traumatic mark on European society, particularly in Germany.

Besides the Holocaust, the mass migration from East Germany to West Germany during the Cold War, driven by the desire for a better life, also left a significant impact. The communist government's restrictions in East Germany limited people's activities, leading to traumatic experiences. Angela Merkel, who lived in Brandenburg, East Germany, witnessed these events firsthand. Seeing East Germans striving to cross the border for a better life in West Germany, Merkel viewed the Berlin Wall as a symbol of tyranny. These traumatic experiences became a collective memory of humanitarian events in Germany.

Halbwachs (1992) argues that collective memory occurs when a group of people shares memories of significant cultural events, shaping how individuals within the group view themselves socially. Halbwachs asserts that all memories are seen and recorded, with people perceiving them through shared social experiences. This collective memory underpins Angela Merkel's perspective on German national identity and secures public support for her Open Door Policy. In her speech, the Chancellor stated (Knight, 2019):

We cannot view this as something that just happened, that a constitution can endure the test of time for seven decades as a foundation of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law as the Grundgesetz. Diversity, including through immigration, has been here in the heart of Europe for centuries. We have learned how immigration changes our country, and how it will continue to change our country, and we have learned that our country must become a country of immigration and integration.

Moreover, Angela Merkel used this policy to improve and restore Germany's humanitarian image internationally. The Chancellor emphasized that this policy was a form of Germany's accountability for past events. Merkel became the first Chancellor to visit the Nazi concentration camp 'Auschwitz' (Flurry, 2008). She courageously acknowledged that the Holocaust was Germany's responsibility and fault, stating in her speech (ibid, 2008):

The mass murder of 6 million Jews, carried out in the name of Germany, has brought indescribable suffering to the Jewish people, Europe, and the entire world. Germans are filled with shame over the Nazi Holocaust.

On another occasion, Merkel reiterated that this history cannot be forgotten but must be a responsibility and a lesson for Germany's future. In her speech, she emphasized (CNN, 2015):

This is taught in German schools for a good reason, and it will not be forgotten. I see no reason to change our view of history in any way. We know that those responsible for these crimes against humanity were Germans, and we ourselves.

In her speeches, Merkel consistently highlighted that the Holocaust was Germany's past mistake and an integral part of the nation. This became a central agenda in her decision to accept refugees during the European refugee crisis. She used it to evoke the German people's collective memory to support *the Open Door Policy*, despite domestic opposition.

Motives

Chancellor Angela Merkel, as the head of the German government, played a crucial role in shaping foreign policy. A leader's behavior in governance can be seen as the reason behind their actions. According to Margaret G. Hermann (1980), motives are the primary reasons why a leader takes certain actions. Every political leader's actions, especially in decision-making, are based on their motivations.

Motives influence a leader's interpretation of their environment and the strategies or policies they employ in response. Hermann (1980) identifies two types of motives: the need for power, which is the most analyzed reason for a political leader's policy-making, and the need for affiliation or approval.

The Open Door Policy became Angela Merkel's main policy during the refugee crisis in Europe, enabling Germany to accept over 1 million refugees from Syria. Prior to this, Merkel had successfully helped the European Union navigate the Euro crisis, propelling her to the pinnacle of her political career as both Chancellor of Germany and President of the European Council. Her success in managing the Euro crisis led to her third term as Chancellor in 2013 (Westervelt, 2011). In her victory, Merkel was determined to gain power as Chancellor and form affiliations with other countries. In her campaign speech, Merkel stated (Hewitt, 2017):

I ask the people of Germany to give us a strong mandate, so I can continue to serve Germany for the next four years, for a stronger Germany, a country highly respected in Europe, that will defend its interests and also befriend many countries.

During the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, Merkel implemented a bold policy that differed from other EU member states. *The Open Door Policy* was also aimed at securing

legitimacy, recognition, and support in the next election. Merkel received widespread praise and was dubbed "Mutti" or mother by Europeans (The Local, 2018). This opened the opportunity for Merkel to serve a fourth term as Federal Chancellor in 2017, making her the longest-serving Chancellor.

Decision Style

Decision style refers to a leader's decision-making method (Hermann, 1980). Chancellor Angela Merkel is a leader who considers the level of risk in her decisions. In formulating *the Open Door Policy*, Merkel weighed various factors. As a leader, Merkel is known for assessing risks in each policy she adopts. Through *the Open Door Policy*, Merkel viewed refugees differently from other countries; while others saw refugees as a burden, she saw them as an opportunity (BBC, 2015).

Merkel's view that refugees are an opportunity is grounded in truth, as Germany, an advanced industrial country, faces a shortage of productive-age workers. Germany's demographic development is marked by a declining birth rate, increasing life expectancy, and an aging population, leading to a future labor shortage (Hewitt, 2015). This demographic challenge threatens Germany's economic stability as decreased production output would follow a lack of a productive workforce.

In 2015, Germany had a population of 83 million, with a negative growth rate. Germany faced population decline due to higher death rates compared to birth rates, coupled with increased life expectancy. Life expectancy was 77 years for men and 82 years for women, and the population aged 80 and above saw an increase, according to the German Federal Statistical Office (Prameswari, 2018).

Based on German Federal Statistical Office data, the population aged 15-24 was only 8.5 million, a small number compared to Germany's total population of 83 million, representing just 10.3 percent of the total population (Prameswari, 2018). In 2015, Germany was the second oldest country globally after Japan, and it was projected that by 2060, the population would only reach 260 million if no actions were taken (ibid, 2018). Therefore, Germany sought to prevent this worst-case scenario by implementing *the Open Door Policy* as a solution.

Germany faced demographic issues requiring productive labor, with population increases since 2011 during the European refugee crisis. German statistics recorded a 0.9 percent population increase in 2015, with 717,000 from initial refugee additions. In 2015, refugees entering Germany were predominantly male (65 percent), with the rest being

female. Half of the refugees were under 24 years old, 25 percent were under 15, and the rest were elderly (ibid, 2018).

This made the arrival of refugees in Germany an opportunity for Angela Merkel to alleviate the demographic pressure faced by the country. Germany has provided various services for refugees, such as housing and healthcare. In relation to solving this demographic pressure, several educational programs have been provided, including German language classes, job training and skills programs, and efforts to facilitate refugees' integration into the labor market (OECD, 2017).

The arrival of refugees provided a demographic balance for Germany, as most were under 35, positively impacting the economy. Refugees were given decent lives through employment and better living conditions. As Chancellor, Merkel demonstrated that she was a rational actor, considering the risks and benefits in her policies.

Interpersonal Style

Interpersonal style refers to how a leader interacts with other policymakers, whether they are aligned or opposing. Foreign policy often results from these interactions. According to Margaret G. Hermann (1980), interpersonal style encompasses how policymakers interact with others, with two personal characteristics: paranoia, meaning suspicion or distrust of other policymakers, and Machiavellianism, meaning immoral or manipulative behavior.

The relationship between policymakers influences the resulting policies, whether they are directed as resistance or hostility or as friendship. Regarding *the Open Door Policy*, Merkel issued this policy as a reaction to EU countries closing their borders and not accepting refugees during the crisis. In her speech, Merkel stated (Siadari, 2015):

We cannot close the borders; if we build fences, people will find other ways. There is no stopping the arrival of refugees.

Border walls symbolize tyranny for Merkel, recalling her past reality of seeing East Germans striving to cross the border to West Germany for a better life. Merkel strongly opposed EU member states closing their borders to refugees, stating in her speech (ibid, 2015):

We Eastern Europeans, I consider myself an Eastern European, have seen that isolation does not help," she said. "The refugees will not stop if we only build fences, and I have lived behind a fence long enough.

Hungary, the most vocal country opposing the influx of refugees into Europe, particularly those from Syria, responded poorly to Germany's policies. Hungary began constructing a 175-kilometer-long fence along the Hungary-Serbia border, specifically to reject and redirect the flow of refugees from that border area to other regions (Dearden, 2016). The border consisted of a double-layer fence made of barbed wire, three meters high, and was patrolled by 3,000 officers.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban stated that the arrival of predominantly Muslim refugees would damage Europe's predominantly Christian order. In a speech at the Royal Palace in Budapest, he said (Dearden, 2016):

Christianity is the last hope of European countries. With mass migration, we will see our nightmare come true. Western countries fail to see Europe under attack,... If hundreds of millions of young people are allowed to move north, there will be immense pressure on Europe. If all this continues, major European cities will be populated by a Muslim majority.

This statement naturally received a response from Chancellor Angela Merkel. In her speech, she said (Siadari, 2015):

When someone says, 'This is not Europe, I will not accept Muslims,' I must say, this is non-negotiable... Who are we to defend Christians around the world if we say we will not accept a Muslim or a mosque in our country? We will not do that.

She argued that the Christian values in Europe had nothing to do with rejecting refugees. Instead, these values should be demonstrated by a welcoming and open attitude towards refugees. This open-door policy was a form of resistance against countries deciding not to take responsibility for handling the refugee crisis in Europe.

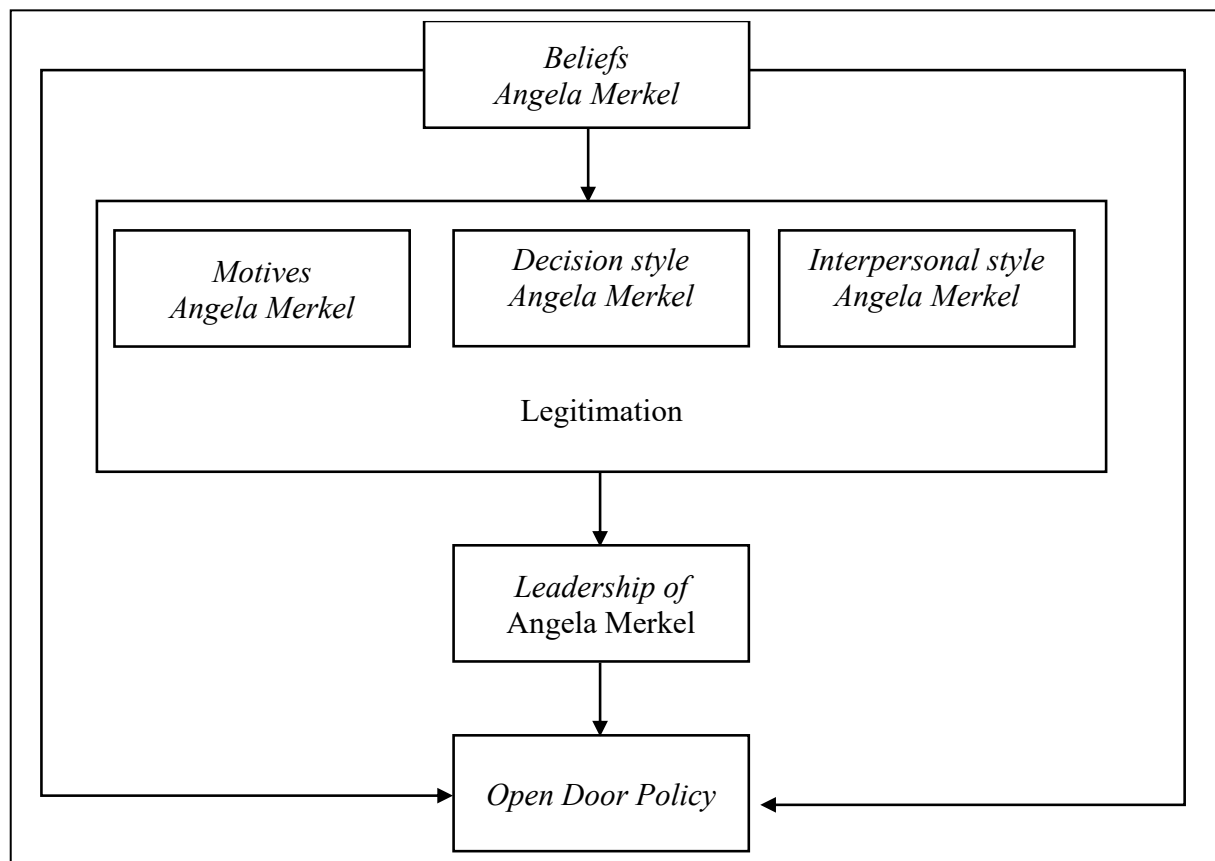
Analysis of the Relationship Between Leadership Variables

According to Margaret Hermann (1980), leadership is influenced by four variables: beliefs, motives, decision style, and interpersonal style. However, the author sees that analyzing the relationship between these leadership variables depends on the actor being analyzed, as some variables may directly influence others or have an indirect impact. In analyzing Angela Merkel's leadership in Germany's open-door policy regarding the refugee crisis in Europe, the dominant variable is beliefs. Angela Merkel's beliefs were shaped by the collective memory of humanitarian events in Germany, such as the Holocaust, which caused the largest refugee wave in history, and the separation of West and East Germany. This background led Chancellor Angela Merkel to become a leader who places humanitarian issues at the core of her foreign policy.

This policy faced opposition both internally and externally. Internally, it was opposed by Germany's right-wing party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and the anti-Islam movement, Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (PEGIDA). Externally, the policy was contested by EU member states in the Visegrad Group, which includes Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

To achieve consistency and maintain the open-door policy in handling the refugee crisis in Europe, Angela Merkel needed strong legitimacy. Thus, while beliefs influenced other variables indirectly, the motives, decision style, and interpersonal style were all aimed at securing legitimacy for the open-door policy, reflecting Merkel's humanitarian beliefs.

Analysis of the Relationship Between Leadership Variables



Source: (Created by the Author, 2023)

The motive variable refers to Angela Merkel's reasons for creating policies during crises. Merkel was re-elected as Chancellor after successfully developing policies to help the EU out of the Euro crisis and handling the refugee crisis in Europe. This shows that legitimacy is achieved when policy-makers have the power to maintain their policies.

The decision style variable highlights Merkel as a leader who considers risks in policy-making. The arrival of refugees in Germany could address the demographic pressure or the grey population issue. This demonstrated that refugees were not a burden but an opportunity to improve Germany's economy. Changing the German public's perception from viewing refugees as threats or terrorists to seeing them as a solution to demographic problems was crucial for gaining positive public support.

Lastly, the interpersonal style variable describes Merkel's characteristic of paranoia or distrust of other policy-makers who oppose her policies. The open-door policy was a response to Hungary closing its borders to refugees, claiming it would disrupt Europe's Christian order. Merkel aimed to deconstruct the idea that humanitarian issues would harm Europe's religious order. To gain international legitimacy, particularly from EU countries, Merkel emphasized Germany's successful policy to handle the refugee crisis. In her speech at the Annual Reception for the Diplomatic Corps in Meseberg, she stated (The Federal Chancellor, 2016):

Of course, remedying the causes of flight and displacement is even better than mitigating their effects. That is why we continue to focus our efforts on bringing peace to the conflict in Syria. Our Federal Foreign Minister is intensely involved in this. The basis for a political transformation process is that the agreed ceasefire is respected and that it is possible for the millions of internally displaced persons to receive assistance. There must be an end to the use of outlawed weapons such as barrel bombs. There must be an end to targeted attacks on hospitals and humanitarian personnel. There must be an end to starvation policy.

Merkel explained that Germany had worked to achieve peace in Syria through political processes such as ceasefire agreements, particularly stopping the use of chemical weapons. This demonstrated that Merkel's policies were a form of resistance against actions contrary to her beliefs.

Conclusion

Based on the research, it can be explained that Angela Merkel's leadership in the open-door policy has had a significant impact on handling the refugee crisis in Europe, assessed through Margaret Hermann's four leadership indicators.

First, beliefs or faith are tied to nationalism rooted in Germany's national identity, namely humanitarianism. Second, motives or reasons for Merkel's open-door policy during the refugee crisis aimed at gaining power and affiliation with other countries, particularly Turkey, to help Germany handle the refugee crisis. Third, decision

style shows Merkel as a leader who considers risks in policy-making, viewing refugee arrival as an opportunity to balance Germany's productive age demographic. Lastly, interpersonal style or individual interaction highlights Merkel's distrust of other policy-makers who oppose her policies. The open-door policy was a response to Hungary closing its borders to refugees.

Germany's identity, formed by collective memory, led Merkel to position Germany as a country upholding humanitarian values. This was reflected in Merkel's open-door policy, which allowed refugees from Syria and other conflict-affected countries. Despite the significant risks, Merkel believed Germany had a moral obligation to assist refugees in need of protection.

Merkel's decision garnered substantial support from the German public, though there was notable opposition due to concerns about the increasing refugee numbers potentially causing social and economic issues. Ultimately, the open-door policy significantly impacted managing the refugee crisis in Europe, saving many lives and setting an example for other countries to show solidarity with refugees.

Among the four indicators, beliefs or faith most strongly influenced the other three: motives, decision style, and interpersonal style in the open-door policy. This is because the open-door policy created by Chancellor Angela Merkel reflected Germany's identity shaped by the collective memory of the Holocaust and the separation of West and East Germany.

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