



DW PODCAST Merkel's last dance: The Merkel Method (Episode 08)

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Host: Michaela Küfner, DW's Chief political editor

Guest: Katarina Barley (SPD), Vice President European Parliament

Sound: Ben Zemke

Producers: Nina Haase, Sylvia Cunningham

Executive Producers: Rosalia Romaniec, Max Hofmann

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FULL TRANSCRIPT:

Michaela: Angela Merkel started as German chancellor-elect in a TV studio full of men on election eve 2005. Her margin of victory would be tight, but minute by minute, it became clearer that her CDU party had won these elections. Angela Merkel would become the first female chancellor of Germany. Only this hadn't quite sunk in yet, with the incumbent Social Democrat, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Here's what went down as one of the biggest political embarrassments in German TV history.

Schröder: She won't be able to put together a coalition under her leadership with my Social Democratic Party. That's unequivocal, don't be fooled.

Michaela: Angela Merkel would go on to do just that. Her own conservative CDU party had given her ample opportunity to develop strategies against overly confident male competitors, which might explain her levelheaded response to Gerhard Schröder.

Merkel: We are willing to accept the election result as it is, if we are the strongest party in the German parliament, then we are the strongest party that is the will of the German voters and everybody will have to accept that. And after a few days of reflection, even the Social Democrats will have to accept it as reality.

Michaela: That reality would translate into 16 years of Angela Merkel as German chancellor. Becoming the first woman at the helm of Europe's largest economy in 2005 was the one thing but staying in power for so long, quite something else. So how did she do it? What makes up the Merkel method of politics that only began to show that night?

You're listening to Merkel's last dance. Here we analyze the policies and political style that coined Angela Merkel's own political brand of stability in Germany and Europe. And we ask what comes next when the Merkel era comes to an end after elections in September? With me is one of Europe's most seasoned politicians as committed Social Democrat and former minister in two Merkel Cabinets, Katarina Barley has worked with, for and campaigned against Angela Merkel over those past 16 years. Now she's vice president of the European Parliament. Welcome, Katarina Barley.

Katarina: Thank you very much.

Michaela: Now, from where you're sitting now in Brussels and the one on one experience you've had with Angela Merkel is that clip from her early days representative of how she deals with political competition?

Katarina: Absolutely. And it started well before that. It started actually when she entered politics in the very first place, being originated in former GDR and then entering politics kind of, well, as a mature age then, many people do, but completely new to the whole system. And she actually adapted very quickly, but kept this very individual way that she handles conflicts, that she tackles new topics, etc. so I think she has a very special mixture of experiences and characteristics that make her as she is, and she should stay that way.

Michaela: Well, you've been in countless cabinet meetings with Angela Merkel. How did she deal with conflict there?

Katarina: Well, it is that she stays absolutely calm. And the one thing that is, I think the most special and most remarkable thing about her is that it's never about her ego. And that is something quite special to politics and especially, of course, to my politics. There have been countless examples for that. And that gives her a huge advantage against most of the people that she faces, because it's just not about herself. She just doesn't, at least that's my experience, she doesn't care at all if she looks, you know, weak or foolish or whatever in a moment because she sees it in a longer perspective. And that is her huge thing.

Michaela: Now, there's quite a few male egos, both in her conservative CDU camp, but also in the Social Democrat camp, is there something like female solidarity, even around a cabinet table?

Katarina: Well, there are huge, huge egos in every single party. It's not limited to the two big parties.

It's in every single party. And of course, you do need a willing to well, to win. I mean, otherwise you can't win elections. But the interesting thing with Angela Merkel is that it doesn't coincide with an ego, which it mostly does. So female solidarity. Yes, I think it is very obvious that the people she has the most confidence in, that she relies on, that she trusts are women. And she does have a very strong network with women that have been with her for a very long time as well in the political sphere as at staff level.

Michaela: Now, your own Social Democrat Party was very strategic in trying to work through why they lost that 2005 election that brought Angela Merkel to power. And it had a scientist conduct a study on the social fabric of Germany, Gero Neugebauer, it was Matthias Platzeck, the Social Democrat leader back then, who told Angela Merkel about this, and she picked up this study and went with it. And how important has opinion polls and public opinion been to the way she conducts politics?

Katarina: Very much, I believe. It is quite well known that in the Kanzleramt, in the chancellery, there being polls done just about every day, I guess, and I think she sees herself more as someone who serves the public than someone who realizes own political goals. And polls for this government, for this party leadership have been a way of finding out what people want, obviously. But also, there has been signs, scientific expertise on for example this nudging thing. So how do you actually get people to, how do you get them hooked on something you want them to be interested in? So it's not, I mean, she's the opposite of naive. She knows exactly what she's doing, but she does it in a very irrational way. Maybe one could say that.

Michaela: In 2010 when one of the biggest polling companies Allensbach, published the yearbook, she said: from those daily polls, one can never tell what is down to the excitement of the day and what marks a deeper felt sentiment for people, to recognize what is what is very important in politics.

Katarina: Well, Angela Merkel never rushes. She just doesn't. She can even stay calm when it gets really exciting, when there are mass demonstrations or when there's a huge outrage in the media or whatever. Very often in these situations, she just stays calm and she just waits till the mud settles and until it's clear where the right way to go appears. So, I think patience is also a very strong part of her character.

Michaela: Well, she said about her own decision making, she says, quote, 'I need a long time and I decide late when I take decisions. And if I haven't thought things through, I can't decide.' Well, some of this is encapsulated into a word, into a verb, actually, in German, which is called merkeling through. And you gave a newspaper interview ahead of the last elections where you said, I think people are fed up with her way of conducting politics. Is that what you meant?

Katarina: Yes, that's what I meant. She is not passionate about anything. But maybe it's also because

she entered politics so late. I mean, a lot of people, at least if they're not a member of a party or a member of a parliament, but at least a lot of people who end up in professional politics were passionate about politics very early and developed certain opinions that are the basis for what you then do. And she entered politics very late. And of course, she had thought about a lot of things and politics. But with the two countries merging and now looking at a lot of questions for the very first time, maybe that also makes us so different from a lot of top professional politicians that she just allows herself to do that, to say I'm just not sure yet. And this is also quite extraordinary. But what I meant was, in fact, this lack of passion, you don't really know what she is for or against, for example, same sex marriage until the moment she dropped her card into the ballots, I did not know if she would vote for or against. And this is unusual for politicians. And like me being a very passionate politician, for me, I mean, you have to know that before you do it, you have to have an opinion. So, there's a good and a bad side to that, I guess.

Michaela: Angela Merkel, of course, didn't drop her opposition against same sex marriage, but she did even the way for MPs to take a free vote on it. And then she was actually praised during that Harvard speech for allowing for same sex marriage to actually be accepted here in Germany. Did you feel robbed at that moment in time?

Katarina: Well, this is a very, very interesting topic, maybe the most interesting in the whole 16 years, because a lot of media coverage said that this was Merkel being a genius. I mean, because she allowed for same sex marriage to come without actually doing anything very formally. It was the end of the term. And she gave an interview, not in a big newspaper or a big TV channel, but in a, I don't know if you remember what it was...

Michaela: It was in a theater, actually, it was in Brigitte. It was a women's magazine and it was a theater full of people. I was actually in the room. Yeah.

Katarina: Yeah. So, but it was not like something that usually millions of people would see.

Michaela: No.

Katarina: And I am convinced, I have no idea if I'm right, but I am actually convinced that it was not planned, that it was not a strategic move because that one could have done differently and it was not at all sure that it would end how it ended. So, I think it was actually it was a small theater, and in a theater you start to just chat a bit, you let go a bit, you let loose and then you say things that maybe you wouldn't say in a setting where you're much more controlled. So, what she did say then was, if I remember it right, please correct me. Well, yeah, maybe next, in the next term, we're not going to do it this term, but maybe in the next term we will, which was an offer for the Greens, obviously, she was not willing to give it to us, but she said then we have something to offer in a new coalition, that was what was behind it. So, and then, of course, we, as Social Democrats said, no,

come on, if you're ready to do it then have to do it now and with us and why not? And so, if I'm right, if it was more like an accident, in the end, it was turned into a favor because she now appeared as the genius who really knows how to play this. And she voted against same sex marriage and she's not being praised for it in the homosexual community. But in the population as a whole, a lot of people think that she did that, which actually happens with a lot of things, which, of course, for every coalition partner is extremely frustrated. And people believe that she introduced the minimum wage, which, of course, I mean, CDU was massively against, massively. People think that she managed the exit from nuclear energy in Germany, which in the end she did. But, of course, the Social Democrats and the Greens did it. And then she pulled out until Fukushima and then she went back. So, this is because she is, kind of, you can project anything into her because she is so vague, and she doesn't put her opinion on the table all the time. She listens and she moderates, and she finds compromises. But in a lot of things, you don't really know what is actually her opinion. And that makes it easy for people to believe, well, she has the same opinion as I do.

Michaela: With me is Katarina Barley, the vice president of the European Parliament. And until 2019, she was justice minister in Angela Merkel's cabinet. In 2013, Angela Merkel achieved an election success with basically a slogan saying, you know me, let's just have a listen into that:

Interviewer: Miss Chancellor, you now also have the opportunity to sum up your message in 90 seconds.

Merkel: Dear fellow citizens, we've exchanged our arguments. Now it's up to you, you can cast your votes. You know me, and you know which issues I want to address and how I do that. We've had four good years in Germany, and I would like the coming years to be good ones too.

Michaela: So, is that her key to success, promising four more good years and not being too specific about what exactly she wants to achieve?

Katarina: Well, at that moment, yes, and that's exactly the point that we have already touched upon. I mean, you can criticize her for not taking a stand, but you can also praise her for including everyone. It's very hard to say she's against me because you don't know really what she is against, except for the refugee question, of course.

Michaela: In an interview at the time, you said that Angela Merkel was in your camp over the whole migration issue.

Katarina: Well, she had a very humanitarian approach to that. It was the only subject that I felt she was emotional about. And it might have to do also with her past and with the country she grew up, that she knew what it's like when people want to flee and not, and what political imprisonment is, etc.. So this was probably why she was very emotional about that. And theoretically, she was very

much in line with a lot of us, what a lot of us thought. My criticism at the time was that she didn't actually get her people to take the action necessary for that. That's actually the policy was being done to solve the problems that she named and that she wanted to be solved. But she didn't actually push for that being done. That was my criticism at the time.

Michaela: Well, and to this day, she's been unable to actually forge a European consensus on that very issue of migration. I just want to play you another quote where during a TV debate, she was asked if she entered all her political positions into that computer program called Wahlomat, where you can find out which party you are in favor of, whether she can be sure that it would be her own party. Let's just listen in.

Interviewer 2: If you fill out the voting intention tool, are you really sure the result will be your conservatives, or might it be the Social Democrats?

Merkel: I believe CDU can very well come out of this. And certainly, I have arguments for that

Michaela: So, she then goes on to say a lot of general things. So, she doesn't even say yes definitely, she would come down as conservative CDU. Which party do you believe she would come out as? Could she be a social Democrat at heart?

Katarina: I don't know. That is the point. You just don't know. You don't know what she thinks. For example, when it comes to a problem like housing. That was a very interesting point when I was in government, because I had to do with the Ministry of Interior, Horst Seehofer, whom I disagree on a lot of issues. But when it comes to housing, he is actually very much social Democrat, he used to be a minister for social affairs also, and that shows in these things. So, we actually were quite aligned when it came to the proposals. And I remember thinking or maybe even saying, I don't remember that exactly, I wonder if Angela Merkel is on our side here, because, of course, we have this enormous lobby group for the big investing housing companies that own half of Berlin, that are opposed to any sort of social measures. And when it comes to housing and I knew that the CDU and CSU would be fighting against that. And Horst Seehofer knew that too, by the way. And she didn't really take a stand, it was again that she tried to moderate and said, look, you have to try to find a way, you know, you have to speak to this person maybe. But she did not say, and she probably never said this to me, this is my position, I'm going to fight for that, I'm going to support you or anything. It's more like you will have to figure that out. It's your job.

Michaela: When Angela Merkel got the Salomone Prize for promoting European unity in 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy, the then French president, said that she taught him patience. A decade later, the current French president, Emmanuel Macron, received the award and Merkel gave a speech honoring him. Is there anything that Angela Merkel has taught you?

Katarina: I think she is very, very impressive person. And I really like her personally, I think she's a

very, very witty, very likable person. The public image doesn't reflect her well because she keeps a lot to herself. But she's actually, it's fun to work with her. I think, yes, well, patience is probably the right word. There is a quote of Confucius saying you only have to sit long enough at the riverside to see your enemies being washed by. And that's what she does. And sometimes I think, yes, I should actually be a bit more patient sometimes.

Michaela: And what about in 2018 when French President Emmanuel Macron received the award and Chancellor Merkel gave a speech congratulating him, you were actually there in Aachen. What did you make of that?

Katarina: It was actually one of the moments where I was disappointed by Angela Merkel. Because exactly the same thing that we just talked about happened again. Macron held one of his speeches. I mean, he's very eloquent and he's very passionate. And even now, having watched and followed, what comes of what he says for some years and being a bit disillusioned about that, she just said what was in her notes. And it had nothing passionate at all and it had no new ideas. And that was one of the days where I thought to him, this way of doing politics is very efficient, but it has its limits,

Michaela: The lack of vision. That's what's been criticized very often about Angela Merkel also not responding to that Sorbonne speech by French President Emmanuel Macron. Well, your Social Democrat Party used to be, I have to say, the big tent party of Germany. It's the oldest party. It's now polling at around 15 percent. Now, three out of four Merkel cabinets were in a so-called grand coalition between Angela Merkel's conservative CDU and the Social Democrat SPD. How much damage did Angela Merkel do to the Social Democrats?

Katarina: It's not that she did damage. I mean, we knew very well why we did not want to enter into the last grand coalition, because on the one hand, if you have worked together for a long time, the things that you can achieve together are more or less exhausted. So, there was no real perspective of what we thought we could now work on together. And of course, I mean, she has had the same effect on the liberals when they had a coalition, because she has this effect that I described earlier, that she is a field of projection. So, everyone can say she is on my side. She's there for me because you will not hear the opposite from her. And we knew that, of course. But I mean, the Greens and the Liberals were not able to form a government. I think they would have liked to, especially the Greens, and it would have made life for us a lot easier. But they didn't. So, we had to step in. And I think it was a matter of our responsibility to do so.

Michaela: Previous to that election, that's somewhat almost politically forced the Social Democrats into yet another so-called grand coalition, your then top candidate, Martin Schulz, said the following

Schulz: If the headquarters of a party or a government office drive down voting turnout systematically like this, intentionally as a strategic measure to win the election, then maybe in the Berlin bubble, you'd call it asymmetric demobilization. I call this an attack on democracy.

Michaela: Now, he later apologized for that. At the same time, how much damage do you feel has been done to political debate and the debating culture here in Germany? And is she responsible, as some are saying, through that migration crisis for the rise of the far right AfD party?

Katarina: Well, these are two very different questions. On the one hand, it was a strategy. I mean, you always get to know that sooner or later, what Martin Schulz just said, as the metric demobilization. So, which means actually to put people asleep kind of politically to have them think, well, things are fine and I don't have to really worry or care, which makes it worse. So it was a strategy. And I do agree that that is a strategy which might help one political force. But it is not something that is helpful for democratic interaction and a healthy debate in civil society. On the other hand, she, when it comes to refugee situation, I mean, she had to take a stand there and she did. And I think she did it in a way that really reflected the responsibility she had to take that time. And she did. And she stuck to it. And yes, a lot of people did not think that she was acting in the right way. It got very emotional. And migration is always a topic that can be abused by political extremists. But if she had acted differently, they would also have been massive outrage by other political forces. So I never felt that she was not willing to discuss. I mean, she did say this word that was definitely damaging, 'alternativlos'. That was definitely a notion that was not helpful because, of course, every political activity has an alternative. But apart from that, I think that she took a stand and stuck to it. I think this is still the way the political leadership had to work in that situation.

Michaela: Alternativlos, no alternative. That was a word that she used very often, particularly around 2015. But it's also a word that she stopped using more recently because she got so much criticism. With me is Katarina Barley, former justice minister from the Social Democrats in Angela Merkel's cabinet and now the vice president of the European Parliament. There were occasions when Angela Merkel took a very, very clear stance. That was when Donald Trump was elected. And here's one that went down as a historical moment.

Merkel: The times in which we could completely rely on others are to some extent over, as I have experienced in the past few days, which is why I can only say we Europeans must take our destiny into our own hands. Of course, in friendship with the United States of America, in friendship with Britain, in good neighborliness wherever possible, including with Russia and other countries. But we have to be aware we Europeans must fight for our future ourselves and for our destiny. And I will gladly do that together with you.

Michaela: Now, this was after she'd encountered Donald Trump at the NATO summit, also as part of the G7. And you said that it was simply too easy to take a stand in the Bier-tent as she did there. What did you mean by that?

Katarina: Well, I don't think that she was even very clear. I mean, quite obviously, Donald Trump was not an ally of the European Union and he turned out to be a specific, I could almost say, enemy to Chancellor Merkel herself as a person. But the times that we could rely on this one partner are

somewhat a little over. So what is clear about that? We have to take it in our own hands. There is nothing clear about that. What does that mean? Does that mean that we are going to have a real foreign secretary on the European level? Does that mean that we are working towards a common European army? What actually does that mean? I don't know if you know what that means. I don't, I still don't. She was more confrontative than she usually is, yes. But she was not clear on what that would mean, I would say.

Michaela: Well, one of the things she was very clear on is when her own CDU party failed to prevent a free Democrat state premier being elected in Thuringia with the help of the far right AfD party. This was seen as coercion with the far right AfD. She was on a trip to South Africa and this is what she said there.

Merkel: One must say that this process is inexcusable, which is why the result has to be reversed. The CDU must not participate in a government under the elected state premier. It was a bad day for democracy.

Michaela: Now, this arguably killed off the political chances of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who until then was seen as the heir apparent of Angela Merkel. What were your thoughts when you heard her say that doing so much damage within her own party?

Katarina: That was secondary to me. I was very relieved that she did state that message. I think she again, maybe because she is not used to saying things so clearly, again, I think chose the wrong words: 'rückgängig machen', to reverse. You cannot reverse things in a democracy. You can have another election or another vote in the parliament and do it differently, but you cannot reverse things in a democracy. I think this word has also been, of course, taken up by the far right, the extreme rights to say, hey, we're not a democracy anymore. And I thought that was a pity because what she actually said, I thought was right. And I think she really did not want to have to say that because she probably knew what that meant for Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer. And I do not believe that she actually wanted to end the political career of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer as a party leader. But it was obvious that Kramp-Karrenbauer was not in control of the situation and that she had to bring in her political power and her standing to solve this terrible situation.

Michaela: Now, usually she's known as someone who sticks by people who she trusts. For instance, Peter Altmaier, whom she trusts, who's been with her for a very long time. How would you describe that dynamic of her own network of people she trusts and sticks with?

Katarina: I think this is a very important aspect for her, because when she entered politics. She was in an environment, especially when she was elected head of the party, that was very hostile towards her. And there were a lot of men who did not take her seriously, who did not accept her in that position and who wanted her out and who actually tried to get her out. And she needed people to trust and to rely upon. And I think she is extremely reliable. So people then, I think they find each

other, also in politics, people who can trust and be trusted. So she built up this network slowly and very consistently.

Michaela: Looking at the Brussels perspective. Now, I'm just going to play you a clip by Mark Rutte, the prime minister of the Netherlands.

Rutte: I believe her when she says that the fall of the Berlin Wall was a bigger event in her life than becoming chancellor. Why I believe her? Because she brings levelheadedness and common sense into politics. When she starts to speak in the European Council, many EU leaders may still be looking at their mobile phones, but then they put it away, put their pen down, and we listen to what she has to say. She has this enormous authority

Michaela: Now, by now, Angela Merkel is pretty much seen as a sitting duck politician, yet she has so much international clout. How do you explain that?

Katarina: With her structure of her character and the political experience that she has, she is a perfect diplomat. And because she has a lot less ego than the others, she is, I think my experience is, that she is not only being respected because what she says, you know, that she has reflected very well on it and that she is not only doing it to do a power play, that she's always trying to get people together to find a compromise amongst all. So I think she is very respected for this. And it's not only an image, it's also that she actually brings something to a summit, a quality, an ability of getting everyone to take it seriously and to really come back together again and again and again until you have reached a compromise. And I think that's something that she is very good at and the people almost admire her for, I would say.

Michaela: Now, Angela Merkel has the reputation of being a crisis manager, not just over the Greek debt crisis, but more recently, at the beginning of the pandemic, she was seen as someone who was exercising her forte, which is crisis management that didn't last that terribly long in the German public perception. And then there was this Easter turnaround where she announced a lockdown and then took it all back. Let's take a listen to that,

Merkel: This mistake is mine and mine alone. At the end of the day, I carry the ultimate responsibility as per my office. And this is also true for Monday's decision regarding the Easter lockdown.

Michaela: Clearly, she's taking responsibility for what she says is a mistake. But it was a mistake after almost 16 years in government. It was a failure to coordinate it pretty much one would otherwise say it was a beginner's mistake not to talk to all interlocutors before you implement something like that. How did you explain this to yourself?

Katarina: In the Corona pandemic she had a very difficult task to fulfill because a lot of our state

responsibility. So she always had to coordinate these 17 interests, the 16 states and the federal interest. And I do not believe that this was entirely her mistake. I think she said that she took the responsibility because it is her last term, because there were these two Christian Democratic prime ministers in the states who are battling for their image. And I think she could have perfectly said we as a group, we just messed it up and she didn't. So I don't think it was a beginner's mistake, I think that there were just very different opinions of how to tackle that and she did not have the authority, maybe that is the point. Maybe five years ago she would have just said that's the way we're going to do it and she would have managed to align everyone. But she didn't manage, and it was not the first time during the pandemic. Very early she already said we have to be more severe on what we do, otherwise we're going to sit here again in two weeks. But she did not manage to convince the others. So I thought it was actually quite a brave move to say it's only on me because it was not.

Michaela: Now, after 16 years of Angela Merkel in power, if you had to write the chapter over the political method Angela Merkel, what made her political brand work? What would be the title?

Katarina: Maybe it would be 'It's a listening exercise', because that's what she does. She listens and she gathers information and she takes different perspectives. And then in the end, it's not that she does a big show, maybe even she leaves it to other people. So what she does is actually listen and hear and react. And I would say if that would become a book, it's not a manual because I think no one can become Angela Merkel, not even Angela Merkel style by just following her example. I think it's really her life as a whole, her background and very special circumstances that have made her the politician that she is.

Michaela: So what do you expect will come next? How will Germany change? Not necessarily through who gets elected, but through the absence of Angela Merkel?

Katarina: You can't separate the one from the other. Of course, that is the question. And it's very interesting that we have three very different personalities who want to become her successor. And by seeing who will win this election, we know what the Germans want because on the one hand, you can have this completely different. You start, you can have someone who is from the same party and maybe politically quite close, but a very different character. Or you can have someone who is from a different party but who has very similar ways of this kind of diplomatic approach, I would put it. Not being Angela Merkel, of course, taking a very clear stance, but this diplomatic thing, especially on the European level, I would say that Olaf Scholz is probably very similar to her. So either people want something completely different, they want something well, you know, we still want conservative, but we can't have Angela Merkel any more. Or they say we want the very rational and very diplomatic way of governing, but with a different political message. So I find that very interesting, what's going to become of it.

Michaela: What will you definitely miss and what will you definitely not miss about Angela Merkel?

Katarina: Well, I'm already missing her sense of humor because I'm not a member of the cabinet anymore. I do like the approach that you think things through before you do something. That's not natural to every politician. What I will miss definitely is this very unpretentious attitude that she has. I like that, it's very little about herself and very much about the country and the people.

Michaela: And what will you be glad to see go?

Katarina: I will be happy to see more passion in politics, more clarity on political stands, on opinions. That is what I'm looking forward to.

Michaela: Katarina Barley, vice president of the European Parliament and former minister in two of Angela Merkel's four cabinets. Thank you so much for talking to us.

Katarina: You're very welcome.

Michaela: I'm Michaela Küffner, DW's chief political editor, and you've been listening to Merkel's last dance, your podcast examining Angela Merkel's leadership in the final months of her 16 years as chancellor of Germany. This episode was produced by Ben Semke, Nina Haase and Sylvia Cunningham. Executive producers are Rosalia Romaniec and Max Hoffman On Twitter you can find us on DW_politics and if you'd like to share your thoughts, do send us an email at cp-podcast@dw.com.

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