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Germany's Policy towards Russia: New Wine in an Old Wineskin

Ryszarda Formuszewicz

The tougher tone in Germany's policy towards Russia reflects changes in Berlin's perception of the eastern giant and in its own self-perception as a power willing to play a more active international role. This readiness for leadership could cement Germany's status as a key international player whilst handing it the influence necessary to secure its own primary economic interests vis-à-vis Russia. However, it will also require Germany to critically address the long-standing premises of its policy towards Russia, and its appetite to overturn old assumptions remains limited. Lessons drawn by Germany now, in particular with regards to the causes of the Ukraine crisis, will prevail as a guideline for its Russia policy, and as such will also be decisive in the prospects for Polish–German cooperation.

With German Power Comes German Responsibility

Germany is a leader on EU economic policy but is facing greater expectations in foreign policy, too. During the recent Munich Security Conference, when leading German politicians delivered speeches signalling greater readiness for international engagement, they hardly expected that the first serious test for this new active foreign policy would emanate in Ukraine shaken by domestic protest. Even if Germany has played a lead role in Europe's eastern policy before then, crisis management in Eastern Europe—inevitably involving Russia—is hardly its preferred direction. What these politicians had in mind presumably was rather Africa or other distant areas of conflict, especially given the subtext of their speeches—the need to oil the dysfunctional Franco–German engine.

Germany is nevertheless become accustomed to its new power and influence. A significant characteristic of this international leadership role seems indeed to be a new assertiveness towards Russia. If Gerhard Schröder sought close and consensual relations with Russia, it was to provide leverage for Germany to play in the premier league; now, though, Berlin feels strong enough to diversify its role beyond simply advocating Russian interests on the European stage (if congruent with German priorities). This new self-confidence is manifested in a more critical assessment of Russian action, and a competitive element in bilateral relations is becoming more visible. The Cyprus “bail-in” in 2013 has shown that when vital interests diverge, Germany is ready to play against Russia.

Whilst this mantle of leadership certainly explains the shift to tougher rhetoric on the part of Germany, old habits die hard. During the first stage of the Ukraine crisis, Germany looked upon Russia as something akin to a “sparring partner,” as equal interlocutors with competing interests, so they were not engaged in real confrontation and precautions of some sort were taken to protect the participants. Thus, Ukraine was not prioritised in German policy and became a pawn in complex trade-offs, including other bilateral or

multilateral issues, in particular, security issues such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan or developments in Syria and Iran. Indeed, Russia was the defining factor in Germany's stance towards the Ukraine crisis from the very beginning, affecting Berlin's foreign and European policy at every step. Only with the Russian grab for Crimea did that finally change. With much more at stake, the responsibilities of leadership status rocketed.

German Theory Meets Reality

There is a parallel between the Merkel-II government of 2009–2013 and the current grand coalition: both have had to match their lofty ideas with an ugly reality. Between 2009 and 2013, the critical situation in Greece and the proliferation of the eurozone crisis challenged the fundamentals of the Christian Democrat party's identity, pitting an instinct for cooperation in Europe against a growing dissatisfaction with the quality of Germany's partners. It was this that led to a growing readiness to accept the mantle of leadership in the EU. Now, the Social Democrats, having joined the CDU/CSU in government with a clear mission to improve relations with Russia, are seeing their intellectual heritage, *Ostpolitik*, put to the test.

The coalition agreement reflects long-standing SPD preferences towards Russia,¹ expressing an intention to renew what has been traditionally good communication channels. And, shortly after the government took office, visible steps were taken in this direction, not least with the nomination of the reputedly Russia-friendly Gernot Erler, as coordinator for inter-societal cooperation with Russia, the Eastern Partnership and Central Asia countries, who replaced Andreas Schockenhoff, who had been openly critical towards Russia. But just as the CDU/CSU had to rethink and then to act, so too did the SPD. And the presence of the SPD in government made the tougher tone towards Russia stronger and more credible as with it there is no doubt that everything has been tried to avoid the confrontation.

This tougher stance towards Russia was, however, facilitated by long-term trends. Most notably, the bilateral relationship has leaked out of the strictly intergovernmental sphere and into the popular arena. Thus German–Russian affairs are no longer confined to the economic (and high cultural) sphere but have broached issues of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and Berlin must take into account popular sentiment. The regular DeutschlandTrend survey shows that this is hardening. In March 2014, only 15% of respondents perceived Russia as a “reliable partner”² (in 2008, after the war in Georgia, it was 34%). This shift is partly down to the Arab Spring of 2011, which underlined popular scepticism towards the idea of soft-soaping autocratic leaders. But it also reflects scepticism towards Russian President Vladimir Putin. He is seen as democratic by just 8% of respondents (showing that the *lupenreiner Demokrat* narrative of the Schröder era is bankrupt) while 75% expressed distrust in him.³

As for Germany's political and economic elites themselves, disappointment about Russia's internal development, the long-term prospect of reducing Germany's reliance on Russian energy imports (*Energiewende*), and Russia's decreasing economic attractiveness have all prepared the ground for a shift (ongoing but open-ended) in the significance of Russia in Berlin's mental map. Germany had always stuck to the principle of cooperation instead of confrontation with Russia, and of inclusion instead of exclusion. Now, though, Germany sees Russia as a spoiler.⁴ An attempt to solve the frozen Transnistria conflict in 2010 by encouraging Russia to contribute brought limited results, and the Russian approach to the Syrian crisis since 2011 has been followed by criticism, even if the initiative to remove the regime's chemical weapons is appreciated. The annexation of Crimea finally confounded the German belief in Russia's

¹ R. Mützenich, “Außenpolitik mit sozialdemokratischer Handschrift. Die Ergebnisse der Arbeitsgruppe ‘Außenpolitik, Verteidigungspolitik, Entwicklungszusammenarbeit und Menschenrechte’ aus sozialdemokratischer Sicht,” *IPG Journal*, www.ipg-journal.de.

² For comparison, Poland was cited by 63% as a “reliable partner,” and the United States—under criticism because of the NSA scandal—received 38%.

³ ARD-DeutschlandTrend, “Solidarität mit der Ukraine,” 6 March 2014, www.tagesschau.de.

⁴ “Debate on government statement,” Deutscher Bundestag, Stenografischer Bericht, 20. Sitzung, Berlin, Donnerstag, den 13. März 2014; “Debate on the government statement before the European Council on 20/21 March 2014,” Deutscher Bundestag, Stenografischer Bericht, 23. Sitzung, Berlin, Donnerstag, den 20. März 2014.

willingness to cooperate on international security. Nevertheless, the old dogma of German foreign policy—that security could be achieved only by engaging, and not excluding Russia remains valid.

Seeing their instinct for cooperation challenged by reality, German politicians have come to understand that their options to influence Russia are very limited. This is one reason for why Germany has proved ready to flex its new economic power. While German business is against the idea of imposing sanctions,⁵ decision-makers seem convinced that Europe (or at least Germany) is able to endure the pain, contrary to Russia. And yet, there is a question whether (re-)gaining the ability to influence Russia will return as a primary aim for Berlin, encouraging Germany to take the quasi-mediator position between the EU/West and Russia and pushing Germany back onto a conciliatory path even at the expense of its relations with other partners and allies.

In Search of the “True” Roots of the Crisis

The ongoing German debate on Crimea, on Russia and on Eastern policy is focused on crisis management, in particular on the questions of the adequate response to Russia’s excesses and what costs would there be for the German economy. But there is also a more fundamental discussion about the reasons for the conflict. That strand becomes louder, especially because economic circles increase the pressure for business-friendly relations.⁶ Moreover, the outcome of this debate could well push Germany back onto its traditional path. This is because its proponents are disinterring three historic moves that fans of a more conciliatory line view as mistakes: the eastward expansion of NATO, the West’s insufficient recognition of Russian concessions, and the EU’s mismanagement of the Eastern Partnership.

According to widespread opinion in Germany, the West pledged during the course of German reunification not to expand NATO eastwards.⁷ When expansion nevertheless went ahead, and when in 2007 Washington proposed a missile-defence shield,⁸ Russia felt deceived and increasingly encircled. This broken-pledge argument is used chiefly by the opposition (Gregor Gysi and his Left Party) and is often referred to during media debates and interviews. The argument persists although the documents concerning German re-unification have been declassified and the existence of any such promise has been ruled out.⁹ It is echoed in opinions that NATO enlargement fundamentally harms Russia’s security interest and that the 1999 and 2004 expansions of the North Atlantic alliance were premature, hasty and clumsy. In this argument, the perspective of new NATO Member States goes unrecognised.

The next line of argumentation alleges a lack of accommodation for Russia, in particular with regard to the West’s expanding influence in the post-Soviet zone. Here the existence of numerous Western initiatives and overtures towards Russia are quite simply passed over. The cooperation between Russia and NATO is thus ignored as is the fact that Russia was not interested in cooperation with the EU within the Neighbourhood Policy framework, claiming special status. Recent EaP instruments and initiatives, according to this line of thought, should thus have been compensated for by adequate proposals for Russia. The prevalence of this argument is rather surprising given the sheer number of German-led initiatives for developing cooperation.

⁵ It is noteworthy that despite all known reservations and general resistance to economic sanctions within German economic circles, a leading representative of the German economy, Ulrich Grillo, president of BDI (Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie), supported the chancellor on the introduction of economic sanctions if necessary as a commitment to the “primacy of policy.”

⁶ The chief executive of Siemens met with Vladimir Putin on 26 March at the official residence outside Moscow, breaking ranks with the West in an attempt to enforce a change of course with the Russian leader.

⁷ The argument of this pledge has been used by Russia during negotiations before the first round of NATO enlargement after the collapse of the Eastern bloc. It was said that there was a compromise between U.S. President George Bush and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev. In Germany, the promise is seen to have been confirmed by the words of Hans-Dietrich Genscher.

⁸ “The inclination to align mutual security interests was less marked. For example, the missile-defence project was pushed ahead without particular consideration for Russian sensibilities,” Frank-Walter Steinmeier, “Euro-Atlantic Security: Before and after the ‘Reset,’” in: W. Ischinger (ed.), *Towards Mutual Security: Fifty Years of Munich Security Conference*, Göttingen, 2014, p. 262.

⁹ On the lack of any such agreement, see: M. Kramer, “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,” *The Washington Quarterly*, April 2009.

And finally, a third set of arguments criticizes the concept and conduct of the Eastern Partnership as a policy whose risk potential with Russia was not properly considered. The most important accusation here, shared by the Chancellor herself, is that Ukraine has been forced to make a choice between West and East, either/or (*entweder/oder*), without a proper assessment of the interdependencies between Ukraine and Russia.¹⁰ It is the European Commission that thus bears most blame for the current setback and is made responsible in part for the devastating outcome. Doubts have also been raised over the wisdom of the EU swiftly taking sides with the Ukrainian opposition.¹¹ The question of how to involve Russia in constructive consultation without enabling it to block further developments remains unsolved and could lead towards regression in EU Eastern Policy.

These three lines of argument uniformly ignore the ambivalent impact of Germany's consensual approach towards Russia after reunification, even though the current international crisis comes down in part at least to Berlin's "Russia first" policy, its preferences in the EU's Eastern Policy, as well as decisions taken bilaterally with Russia. Indeed, Germany's political elite actually feel their decision has been confirmed to block Membership Action Plans (MAPs) for Ukraine and Georgia at the Bucharest NATO summit of 2008 and the foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, has again expressed opposition to Ukraine's membership in the Alliance. Although there is increasing discussion about Germany's energy dependency on Russia, the idea that the Nord Stream pipeline is a tool of Russian geopolitics has hardly been addressed.

There is thus a high degree of sympathy for Russia's traumas. Even Moscow's historical explanations for its actions have been accepted, and few Germans seem to wonder how they would react if their own country cited an historical justification to "take back" Kaliningrad. It is no surprise, then, that the commentators highlighting the responsibility borne by Germany towards Russia because of WWII tend to ignore the same logic of responsibility towards Ukraine. It shows the resilience of the *Ostpolitik* doctrine, and its later incarnation "Partnership for modernization"—still a declared project in the coalition agreement: there is still an assumption that Russia can change and that Germany can help it. There is also a failure to recognise that Berlin's "Russia-first" approach has in fact turned Germany into something of a brakeman when it comes to transforming Eastern Europe.

Outlook: Old Flames Never Die?

From the perspective of the CEE countries one of the most meaningful statements in the coalition agreement of the CDU, CSU and SPD reads as follows: "In shaping our relations with Russia, we want to take into account the legitimate interests of our mutual neighbours."¹² This sentence, which was included in the previous coalition agreement, has always left room for interpretation: what "interests" do the Germans consider "legitimate"? It seems the Crimea crisis has delivered some clarification: neighbours' individual and joint desire for security in the face of a violation of international law. And yet, it is unclear how Germany's respect for these interests will develop: decisive would be the follow-up and exit path towards a normalisation strategy with Russia after the crisis.

The ruling coalition shows a degree of unity in its diagnosis and assessment of the Ukrainian crisis, but the operative conclusions for future policy decisions will need more reflection before they are elaborated, as clearly manifested through the criticism that came quickly after Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen supported an increased NATO presence on the external borders of the alliance.¹³ Germany's political elite probably may duck the necessary critical debate concerning *Ostpolitik*, with this omission influencing policy

¹⁰ See: "Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel zum Europäischen Rat am 19./20. Dezember," 18 December 2013, www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Regierungserklaerung/2013/2013-12-18-regierungserklaerung-bk-er.html;jsessionid=6C4347E744DF71CF90F5302B4C73F4D6.s1t2.

¹¹ See "On Ukraine, the EU has made too many misjudgements," interview with Germany's new Russia policy coordinator, Gernot Erler, 12 December 2013, *IP Journal*, www.ip-journal.dgap.org.

¹² "Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten, Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD, 18. Legislaturperiode," signed on 16 December 2013; non-official translation by Konrad-Adenauer Foundation, www.kas.de.

¹³ "Von-der-Leyen-Vorschlag: Koalition streitet über Nato-Präsenz im Osten," 23 March 2014, www.spiegel.de.

conduct and cooperation options. Simultaneously, Germany could be tempted to regain influence on Russia by sacrificing the effort to work out a joint position in the EU based on a broad agreement.

The line Germany will take in Russia policy in the medium and long term depends on the way some key questions will be tackled. First, how will Germany position itself in the process and how will it address the compatibility challenge of the different roles it used to play in the EU relationship with Russia. If Germany is willing to maintain leadership on that issue, it should consider that the leadership mandate could be undermined by a simultaneous performance as a mediator between the EU (or the West) and Russia. Second, assuming there will be no further Russian escalation in Eastern Ukraine, what should be the visible effects of the legal non-recognition of Crimea's annexation that would prove that it is not simply "business as usual." And, third, bearing in mind that Europe witnessed the breach of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and that this violation continues, how should the "as well as" model (*sowohl-als-auch*) Germany is advocating for translate into political action?¹⁴

Vivid Polish–German cooperation in EU eastern policy could contribute significantly to securing lasting EU interest in support for Ukraine, for the sake of stability foremost. This will be necessary not only in the medium and long term but also sooner, during the possible stand-by phase after the European elections and negotiations on handing out key functions. The Weimar triangle—which in a way returns to its origins—could deliver on this particular issue, as now in encouraging reflection about the adjustment of the European Neighbourhood Policy.¹⁵ The necessary condition for it, however, is that Germany keeps to the inclusive approach in its leadership.

¹⁴ This approach was based on the assumption that the coexistence of EU (German and mostly economic) and Russian (foremost political and security) interests and influence is possible, but it was formulated at the time when the main objection towards Russia was that it exploited the difficult economic situation of Ukraine to discourage the country to sign an Association Agreement with the EU. No one would question the need to cooperate with Russia but the *modus vivendi* should reflect further developments. There is a risk that the proposed "bridging role" for Ukraine between the EU and Russia (see, for example, the CDU draft manifesto before the EP election) could simply turn into another "B" word—"buffer"—which would be not only not enough for transformation but also for the stabilisation process in the country.

¹⁵ "Building a stronger compact with our neighbours: A new momentum for the European Neighbourhood Policy—Statement by the Foreign Ministers of the Weimar Triangle," 1 April 2014.