

Why Germany Is No Longer Russia's Best Western Friend

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Germany has been Russia's key partner in Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but there are signs that Berlin is prepared to change this situation — and the sticking issues will take a long time to resolve and could determine the future of Russia–Europe relations as a whole, analysts say.

Last week, German Chancellor Angela Merkel toughened her rhetoric on Russian President Vladimir Putin in an apparent sign she is prepared to endure a long-term confrontation.

"The actions of Russia [in Ukraine] have called the peaceful order in Europe into question and are a violation of international law," she said in a speech in parliament Wednesday.

"Economic sanctions remain unavoidable and show that in our efforts to get through

the crisis we will need patience and perseverance," she said.

In the same week, the annual meeting of the high-profile St. Petersburg Dialogue Germany-Russia forum that was attended by Merkel and Putin in person was postponed indefinitely, the forum's organizer Martin Hoffman told The Moscow Times.

"We are losing Russia not in terms of Putin and elites, but in terms of people at large," Hoffman, the director of German-Russian forum said in a phone interview.

The meeting of the forum's chairs was scheduled for Dec. 1, but was canceled due to Germany's demand to reform the forum for it to include more independent civil society members.

Matter of Principle

Germany has chosen to put the wellbeing of the EU above its own bilateral relations with Russia in deference to the values that define the EU, Fyodor Lukyanov, head of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, told The Moscow Times.

"For them, the priority is European unity and the future of the EU, which is increasingly becoming a German organization. It made the choice to act in the name of the EU and underline its leadership," he told The Moscow Times.

Analysts said Merkel is keenly aware of her country's unofficial role as the leader of the EU, and is exercising caution in the knowledge that other state leaders look to Berlin for guidance.

"Merkel expresses the policy of the union as a whole now," Lukyanov said.

Bolstered by the economic centralization that followed the 2008 financial crisis, Germany, whose export-oriented manufacturing has benefited over the last 15 years from the weakening of the euro, found itself in a leading role in Europe; in terms of the Ukraine crisis this role is also strengthened by the country's traditionally strong ties with Russia.

Germany bailed out much of the EU after the 2008 financial crisis, which pushed the common currency project to the brink of collapse. As a result, the country feels even stronger now about keeping the EU united, and is treading a fine line to avoid sparking divisions among the union's diverse 28 members, analysts said.

At the same time, the concept that with power comes responsibility is also driving Germany's Russia policy, experts agreed.

Germany's Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said earlier this year that Berlin should assume an expanded and more assertive role in international affairs. The policy, sometimes dubbed the "New Responsibility," called for more German leadership in European affairs.

Germany is no longer squeezed between the U.S. and Russia, said Ulrich Speck, a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe in Brussels.

"Germany cannot be a mediator anymore, because it is an actor now; Germany is the big guy by itself," he said in a phone interview.

Crossing a Red Line

In this situation, a stronger Germany had a choice: It could lead Europe in an attempt to mediate the crisis, reaping benefits from the increased trust with Russia and Putin in particular, or it could toughen its rhetoric and emphasize that the Kremlin has crossed a red line by annexing Crimea.

The key issue in this situation was the legality of Russia's Crimea annexation, which is contrary to the EU rhetoric and values, said Vladislav Belov, head of the German Studies Center at the Russian Academy of Science.

"It is very important for Merkel to maintain strong rhetoric on Putin and Russia, demonstrate her unbending will and independence from Moscow," he said.

On Friday a poll commissioned by ZDF television found that 58 percent of Germans back the EU sanctions even if they damage the German economy, up from 52 percent a month ago. The poll also found that 76 percent supported the sharper tone of Merkel's recent criticism of Putin's policies.

Belov expects that Merkel will keep up the harsher rhetoric for at least three or four months, until the EU has to decide whether it will extend sanctions against Russia or not. In the long term, the status of Crimea will be agreed upon at least informally: The recent plea by former German minister Matthias Platzeck to recognize Crimea as Russian territory is a sign that this process is under way, Belov said.

Personal Chemistry

In a recent in-depth profile of Merkel, the New Yorker magazine reported that Putin had lied to her on at least one occasion: in May, when the official Kremlin statement about a phone call between the two leaders was more positive than the stance Merkel believed they had agreed on in advance. According to the profile, Merkel was furious and canceled a call scheduled for the following week.

A comparison of each of the three official Kremlin statements on phone calls between Merkel and Putin in May revealed nothing that stood out. Overall, Merkel and Putin have spoken on the phone at least 40 times in the last nine months, according to the Kremlin's website.

Tatyana Stanovaya of the Center of Political Technologies think tank in Moscow said that Merkel's personal enmity toward Putin plays a large role in bilateral dynamics.

"Merkel personally dislikes Putin as a person, so she is putting her stakes on regime change in Russia, which will take some time. She thinks it's impossible to agree upon anything with today's Russia and its leader, who cannot be trusted," Stanovaya said in a phone interview.

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At the same time, Belov pointed out that when Putin was two hours late for a meeting with Merkel in Milan in October, her advisors told her to cancel it, but the meeting was instead re-scheduled for another time.

"Putin and Merkel spoke for four hours in Brisbane [at the recent G20 Summit], they communicate with each other more than they do with any other world leaders. This is constructive dialogue, but its content is secret," he said.

During the summit in November, Merkel confronted Putin during a face-to-face meeting between the two leaders in a Brisbane hotel, but the four-hour stand-off did not yield much fruit. Several German officials told Reuters following the meeting that they anticipate a long period of confrontation, "akin to a second Cold War."

At the same time, on a number of occasions Merkel has said that she doesn't let personal emotions interfere with her political judgement or logic.

"With Russia now, when one feels very angry I force myself to talk regardless of my feelings," she said in a speech at the German Historical Museum last May as quoted by the New Yorker. "And every time I do this I am surprised at how many other views you can have on a matter that I find totally clear."

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