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Merkel Says Russia Punishing Countries for Leaning Toward EU

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel attending a cabinet meeting in the Chancellery in Berlin on Wednesday.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel accused Russia on Sunday of interfering in the domestic affairs of numerous countries that are seeking closer ties to the European Union.

"Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine are three countries in our eastern neighborhood that have taken sovereign decisions to sign an association agreement with the EU," Merkel told German daily Die Welt in an interview.

"Russia is creating problems for all three of these countries," she said, pointing to "frozen conflicts" in breakaway regions like Transdnestr, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as Russian interference in eastern Ukraine.

Moscow has shown its displeasure with Moldova's pro-European course, confirmed in an election last week in which a pro-Russian candidate was prevented from participating, by banning imports of Moldovan wines, vegetables and meat.

Last month Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a "strategic partnership" agreement with Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia, drawing strong criticism from NATO and the EU.

Beyond these moves, Merkel accused Moscow of trying to make countries in the Western Balkans economically and politically dependent on Russia in order to gain influence there.

She defended her decision at a NATO summit in 2008 not to put Ukraine and Georgia on track for membership of the military alliance, but reaffirmed NATO's commitment to defend countries in Eastern Europe, like Poland and the Baltic states, that are members.

"There is no reason to talk about a war in the Baltics. But regardless, Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which sees an attack on one member as an attack on the alliance as a whole, stands," Merkel said.

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