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Merkel's Legacy, as Seen From Russia

Angela Merkel's long tenure was a period of relative, if not always palatable, predictability in German-Russian relations.

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Angela Merkel. **Bernhard Ludewig / FinnishGovernment (CC BY 2.0)**

Angela Merkel's sixteen years as German chancellor have shaped Berlin's place and role in Europe and in the twenty-first-century world at large. Her legacy will live on long after she steps down from the leadership. While firmly embedded within the European Union, Germany has essentially become its sole, though by no means, absolute leader.

It is a peaceful champion of a soft European version of liberalism. Vocal support for values does not, however, translate into interventionism.

Nor does it prevent Germany from pursuing its business interests or waging a pragmatic foreign policy — within the limits of the EU/NATO framework. Merkel's leadership was almost always steady and dependable, and her policies were largely predictable. True, neither

Germany within the EU nor the EU within the U.S.-led system have achieved strategic autonomy on her watch, but that was hardly Merkel's objective.

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Viewed from Moscow, Merkel's legacy can be summarized as follows: reconfirmation of Germany's Atlanticist orientation; achievement of a *primus inter pares* position within the European Union; and distancing from Russia, while keeping in touch with it.

Atlanticism Reenergized

In 2005, Merkel succeeded Gerhard Schroeder, the Social Democratic leader who took over from Helmut Kohl as a result of the 1998 election. Under Schroeder, newly reunified Germany's ambition to play a more autonomous role in world affairs reached its peak. In 2003, Berlin, Paris, and Moscow had even formed a new *entente*, as Russia's then foreign minister Igor Ivanov called it, to oppose the U.S. invasion of Iraq and potentially act as a counterweight to Washington.

The vision of a greater Europe from the Atlantic to the Pacific based on the marriage between the German/European industry and Russian resources was just about to take shape.

Merkel, a former East German citizen, faced the need to be accepted by Germany's largely Atlanticist political elite, as well as by Berlin's principal allies in Washington. Mending strained ties with the United States became a priority for her, and she worked hard on it. Merkel succeeded, and in return, she got American support for Germany's leading role in Europe, albeit within the general framework of U.S. global leadership.

This did not mean Germany blindly following the United States at every turn: in 2008, Merkel refused to accept George W. Bush's bid to include Ukraine and Georgia in NATO, and in 2010, Germany took no part in the NATO military operation in Libya, even abstaining at the relevant UN Security Council vote alongside China, India, and Russia. At the same time, Merkel did not allow the embarrassing public scandal over U.S. intelligence tapping her cell phone to get out of hand.

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During the Donald Trump years, Merkel — who did not get along too well with the forty-fifth U.S. president — rose to become the de facto temporary leader of the liberal West. That unanimous and apparently natural choice of the vast majority of European and American elites was recognition of the national prestige of both Merkel personally and Germany, and of their clear evocation of democratic values and the practice of liberal policies.

Merkel's informal tenure as leader of the West ended with the election of Joe Biden, but with Britain's departure from the European Union following the 2016 referendum, Germany's position as Washington's principal ally within the EU had been elevated even higher. This is the main element of Angela Merkel's legacy.

Primus Inter Pares

When Merkel first became chancellor, Germany usually worked in tandem with France within the EU. Over time, Berlin rose to a position of preeminence, de facto making Paris its junior associate. During her tenure, Merkel worked with four French presidents: Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy, François Hollande, and Emmanuel Macron. With every change of command at the Élysée Palace, the German chancellor appeared to stand taller. The appointment of her ally Ursula von der Leyen as president of the European Commission was a sign of the influence of both Germany and Merkel.

To achieve that position, Germany had to manage major EU expansion, the debt crisis, and Brexit. Merkel did well on all three.

Her only major failure was the immigration crisis of 2015, but once the negative consequences of the massive influx of migrants became apparent, she worked hard to stem the inflow and limit the damage.

Berlin's single leadership had to be accepted by its European partners, including those who were historically fearful of Berlin's *diktat*. Particularly important in this regard were Germany's eastern neighbors, Poland and the Baltic states, which were historically allergic to anything that might look like a reborn German Reich or any form of German-Russian collusion. To get their backing, Berlin had to take account of those countries' special interests. It should be added, though, that German business gained much from the expansion of the EU to integrate Eastern European countries.

Distancing From Russia

Angela Merkel was the first German chancellor to speak Russian fluently, but this did not lead to a closer relationship with Moscow. In fact, the relationship grew markedly more distant, for several reasons. One was the reaffirmation of Germany's Atlanticist credentials, even at a time when Russia's relations with the United States were rapidly deteriorating. In 2007, Merkel was in the room in Munich when Russian President Vladimir Putin delivered his famous speech in which he lashed out at U.S. global hegemony.

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Another reason already alluded to was the enlargement of the European Union from 2004 to include a dozen former communist countries. This changed both the complexion of the EU and the balance within it. Many of the new entrants had had painful relations with the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, or had even been part of the Russian realm in the past, and were still reeling from it.

Berlin, which aspired to lead the expanding European Union, could not afford to ignore those sentiments. The EU's enlargement also turned Eastern European countries into important trading partners and investment opportunities for Germany: far more so than the Russian Federation, which had long dominated Germany's eastern trade.

Finally, as the Cold War receded into the past, the division of Germany and Berlin was

overcome, and the country's physical security was assured, German society started to pay more attention to other issues, primarily environmental and climate-related, and social and political values, including human and minority rights.

To the post–Cold War generation of German politicians, Russia was no longer the country that held the key to German reunification; nor were its forces a huge presence in East Germany; nor was it viewed as a land of economic opportunity in the east.

Rather, post-Soviet Russia stood for a failing attempt at democratization, a grossly inefficient and primitive oligarchical economy, and an increasingly authoritarian regime led by a former KGB operative who used to work in East Germany.

Angela Merkel's personal relationship with Vladimir Putin was apparently decorous throughout, but never overly close. There was certainly no warmth there, unlike between Putin and Schroeder, or even Boris Yeltsin and Helmut Kohl.

However, the German-Russian relationship initially moved forward with economic projects, political consultations, and high-level societal fora like the German-Russian Petersburg Dialogue. There was a moment in mid-2011 when Merkel publicly expressed her preference for Putin's chosen interim successor, President Dmitry Medvedev. Like then U.S. president Barack Obama, the German chancellor saw Medvedev, in contrast to Putin, as a modernizer and a much more convenient partner for the West.

At that time, Merkel and her then vice chancellor and foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier were promoting a modernization partnership with Russia in the hope that modernization would not be limited to technology and the economy — in line with Putin's idea of a Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok, which he laid out before the German business community during a 2010 visit — but would also transform the Russian political system and society according to the Western model.

In that respect, Berlin's expectations turned out to be wishful thinking. Major disappointment set in as Putin decided to run for the Russian presidency again.

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The last seven-plus years of Merkel's involvement with the Kremlin were marked and marred by the Ukraine crisis, Crimea, and the armed conflict in Donbas. As a result, the post–Cold War German-Russian partnership degenerated into a transactional relationship with increasing mutual criticism and decreasing trust.

In Putin's eyes, Berlin's connivance with Paris and Warsaw over what the Kremlin regarded as the Maidan coup in Kyiv that toppled the elected president amounted to a massive breach of trust. In turn, Russia's forceful reaction to the developments in Ukraine stunned Merkel and her colleagues. In vain did Putin appeal to German gratitude for Moscow having turned the key on reunification; Merkel, reflecting the views of not only the German political class, but also much of the public, saw Russia's actions as changing borders by force and thus upsetting the post–Cold War order in Europe. Merkel took the lead in imposing rafts of EU sanctions on Russia.

Unlike other Western leaders, however, Merkel did not respond to the crisis by severing all contact with Moscow in an attempt to "isolate" and thus "punish" Russia. The German chancellor, while being very critical of Russian policies, kept the line of communication to the Kremlin open.

In February 2015, Merkel put at stake her own prestige by flying to Minsk for marathon negotiations to broker a ceasefire in Donbas. Since then, much of her interaction with Putin has been devoted to the conflict in Ukraine's southeast. Her approach could be described as critical dialogue, with both sides trading critical arguments, but also looking for ways and means of managing the standoff.

Germany's critical public attitude toward Russia was not limited to Ukraine-related issues. Starting with the campaign focusing on the "values gap" with Russia and the thrashing of Germany's own so-called *Putin-Versteher*, or Putin-empathizers, the criticism was becoming wider and more scathing.

Accusations of Russian media meddling in German politics, of Russia's involvement in the Bundestag hacking, and the murder of a former Chechen rebel commander in Berlin's central Tiergarten marked a clear downward trend in the relationship. In 2020, Merkel publicly supported a German military laboratory's findings that Russian anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny, who had been flown from Russia to Germany for emergency medical treatment, had been poisoned with a chemical nerve agent. Merkel herself visited the activist in a Berlin hospital.

Symbolically, the Navalny incident closed the book on what had remained of the three-decades-long German-Russian partnership.

The partnership may be in the past, but the relationship continues. In 2021, Merkel passed an important test in defending German interests from U.S. pressure.

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Despite the strained relations with Russia and vehement criticism from the EU's eastern flank countries such as Poland and the Baltic states, not to mention hysterics from Ukraine, Merkel succeeded in reaching a deal with U.S. President Joe Biden on allowing the completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia under the Baltic Sea. Merkel's unfailing consistency and stubborn determination under enormous pressure, which eventually led to a positive outcome for Germany, was closely watched and appreciated by the Kremlin.

It was also appreciated that before leaving office, she made one last visit to Russia.

Seen from Moscow, Angela Merkel's long tenure was a period of relative, if not always palatable, predictability in German-Russian relations. Vladimir Putin often disagreed with the German chancellor, but he undoubtedly respected her. For Russian policymakers, Germany remains the European Union's key member state.

Historically, Moscow's relations with the major powers have heavily depended on its interaction with the leaders of those powers. The future of the relationship will depend in no

small measure on who succeeds her and how skilled that successor is at the art of statecraft. Merkel is leaving behind very big shoes to fill.

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