

The Russia Divide

EU member states have diverging expectations of Germany's foreign policy towards Russia. A note from the East and from the West

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Since 2014, Germany has sent mixed signals to the Kremlin with its Russia policy. On the one hand, it took a tougher line. The German government led the EU's response of introducing sanctions for several Russian illegal actions, such as annexing Crimea, downing Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 and cyber and chemical attacks. It also supported the five guiding principles for EU-Russia relations and engaged in allied measures on NATO's eastern flank. On the other hand, Berlin shied away from confrontation with Moscow, opting for political dialogue and economic cooperation instead.

Germany: disinformation target #1

Even if its aggressive actions against Ukraine have been partially stopped, Russia continues with its attempts to influence the country's foreign and security policy. In addition, Moscow continues the build-up of its armed forces with a menacing posture against eastern NATO members and Ukraine, and it seeks to undermine the EU and NATO through corruption, disinformation and division. In this context, Germany has been the prime target for the Kremlin's playbook, with President Vladimir Putin seeing it as susceptible to Russian manipulations.

Germany should take four measures that would herald a new era in its Russia policy and make its signalling towards Russia less ambiguous.

First, Germans need to broaden their collective memory, which has been heavily influenced by Moscow's narrative of the Second World War. While Germany transferred its guilt for the wartime atrocities against the Soviet Union to Russia as its successor, it neglected war crimes committed against Ukrainians, Belarusians and Poles. This still influences German thinking about *Ostpolitik*, causing a tilt towards a Russia-first strategy, a Ukraine-second policy and a partial negligence of the interests of Poland and the Baltic states. To plan a memorial in Berlin, dedicated to the victims of the Nazi occupation of Poland would be – if prominent – a good start to change the old misleading narratives.

We need less ambiguous signals towards Russia

Second, Germans need to better understand the nature of the Russian regime. As enticing as the idea of a common European home from Lisbon to Vladivostok might be, for the foreseeable future Russia will stay a kleptocratic and authoritarian regime that suppresses democracy and civil society at home and disseminates malign influence abroad. Germany's next government must tackle the domestic anti-Western moods that favour replacing the country's *Westbindung* with equidistance

between the United States, Russia, and China – or even for an alliance with Moscow.

Third, Germans need to better understand the nature and consequences of economic cooperation with Russia. Its economic prospects have always loomed big in Germany’s thinking. Yet, projects such as Nord Stream 1 and 2 prove that Russia does not change through trade. It rather uses such projects to put a wedge in Germany’s relations with Central and Eastern European countries and influences its policies by injecting corruption into the German democratic system. In the Nord Stream 2 debacle, Berlin has to abide by all the commitments it agreed upon in the recent US-German statement. Moreover, Germans need to consider who their most important economic partners are. Russia ranked only 14th on the list of Germany’s main trading partners in 2020 and was overtaken by nearly all Visegrad countries, with Poland ranking fifth.

Fourth, Germans need to become less reluctant to develop and deploy their armed forces. Military instruments are prime means of Russia’s pressure against its neighbours and the West. Thus, one can pursue dialogue on security with it only from a position of strength. With changing transatlantic relations and the United States shifting its focus to China, Germany’s military potential grows in importance within NATO. Berlin needs to deliver military capabilities, increase the readiness of the *Bundeswehr* and step up its engagement in defence and deterrence. Military cooperation between

Germany, Poland and the United States on NATO’s eastern flank is a must.

The next German government needs to tackle the country’s weak spots when it comes to Russia and take on more realism and responsibility in the EU and NATO. Germany is no longer able to shape EU Russia policy alone or together with France, thereby overlooking the positions of the Central and Eastern European countries, which are increasingly shared by the Nordic states and others. The failure of the recent Merkel-Macron initiative to resume high-level EU meetings with Putin demonstrates this. Future Franco-German ‘solo’ runs will only antagonize the rest of the EU further. A strong EU Russia policy can only be forged in cooperation with the Central and Eastern European countries, with Poland as an equal partner. ✂

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The European Union cannot leave the Russian question for better days. Contrary to what some suggest when promoting strategic patience, time is of the essence as member states confront Russia’s growing presence and influence in their eastern and southern neighbourhoods. As one of the global powers in Europe, an important trade and economic partner in the energy field, and



2021: don't know 3%, no answer 2% | 2020: don't know 5%, no answer 3%

a major security concern – following its armed interventions in Georgia and Ukraine and its military presence in Nagorno-Karabakh – Russia embodies the many contradictions EU members face when reflecting about strategic stability. More crucially perhaps, the Russian issue encapsulates some of the fundamental differences among them, which stem from history and geography and lead to diverging conceptions over the nature of the EU project.

The divide on Russia undermines the EU

The European order established at the time of the Helsinki Process in the 1970s reflected the balance of forces as it stood then. It was a rather successful attempt at finding a cooperative path in the middle of open confrontation, gradually leading to the end of the Cold War gridlock. But it failed to then shape a new stable order. In the post-Cold War years, from the EU and NATO enlargements to frozen or ongoing conflicts, every new development in Europe added uncertainty to an already precarious situation. Today, the principles and institutions derived from the Helsinki Process look helpless in preserving stability in Europe. And the main reason for this state of play lies in the mutual inability of Russia and its European neighbours to redefine a decent and stable relationship to succeed the Helsinki Process.

If only because the question challenges Germany's vision of Europe's geopolitical future, the country's leaders bear a special responsibility in the definition of a genuine strategy for Russia, which so far keeps evading the EU. There are three reasons reinforcing the feeling of constant misunderstanding among Europeans on the Russian question that has been present since the eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004. First, a growing frustration of Central and Eastern European countries with Western ones, which they perceive as too conciliating to Russia and as pursuing selfish economic interests. Germany's persistent pursuit of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline has created much bitterness. Second, the French-German proposition for a summit meeting with President Vladimir Putin. Third, the insistence of Central and Eastern Euro-

peans on sanctions as the only tool against Russia, which increasingly irritates Western Europeans.

The divide on Russia tops a long series of grievances that risk gradually undermining the EU's political cohesion. And yet the Russian question could represent a more relevant one to start bridging the gap between EU members than some of the divergences related to values and the rule of law. Their divergences on Russia are well defined and have been abundantly discussed. They are not without solutions if there is goodwill from both sides. So, an eventual dialogue with Moscow starts at home: Europeans must listen to each other and recognize that both sides have a point. Central and Eastern Europeans are right when they insist on the need to speak to Russia from a position of strength. But Western Europeans must be heard when they emphasize the limits of a standstill position and call for more agile and proactive diplomacy. A new EU strategy on Russia will need both – a reinvigorated mindset with a more robust and self-assertive European foreign policy and the mutual willingness to shore up the EU's diplomacy.

Cooperation with Russia is worth trying

Germany's next government should genuinely promote this new mindset, together with France, to get it endorsed by all EU members. While remaining vigilant on Ukraine and committed to the Minsk Process, Berlin and Paris should persist in convincing their EU partners that concrete cooperation with Russia is worth trying. Climate change could be a good case in point, in light of substantial EU decisions to be taken in this field, such as the carbon border tax.

To all European countries – and to Germany in particular – a comprehensive approach towards Russia will be essential when figuring out the future political, security and economic architecture of the continent. 

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