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A New Russia Policy for Germany

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SUMMARY

More than any other European state, Germany is responsible for developing and implementing the European Union's (EU's) policy toward Russia. Berlin needs to accept this responsibility, assume leadership, and develop a Russia policy fit for the twenty-first century. To succeed, Germans need to closely watch the evolution of the economic, social, and political situation in Russia and adapt their policy as necessary. The next several years in Russia will be interesting, and the next two decades will be decisive for the country's development.

Recommendations for Germany

- Base the new policy on German and EU interests, principles, and practical needs as well as a realistic assessment of Russia rather than mere impressions of what the Russian people need or a desire to influence the country's domestic politics.
- Broaden people-to-people contacts with ordinary Russians to create social compatibility between Russia and the rest of Europe.
- Demand, when necessary, that Russia live up to its formal obligations, in particular in the field of human rights, but also be prepared to deal constructively with Russia's complaints and criticisms.
- Expand mutually beneficial business ties with Russia but do not expect that such activities will suffice to modernize the country or make Russia and its Eurasian partners "EU-ropean."
- Lead the effort to deepen and widen the security community that essentially already exists between Germany and Russia so that it covers all of Europe and the Euro-Atlantic area.
- Set clear policy goals and develop a long-term strategy toward Eastern Europe—in particular Ukraine—and make that policy fully transparent to Russia.
- Treat Moscow's promotion of Eurasian economic integration and security coordination as legitimate and stabilizing as long as this integration and coordination remain voluntary.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dmitri Trenin is the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center and the head of the center's foreign and defense policy program. A career military officer, he joined the center at its inception in 1994. Prior to that, Trenin had served in Iraq with the Soviet military assistance group and in Germany in a liaison capacity, and he was on the staff of the Soviet delegation to the nuclear and space arms talks in Geneva. He was also a senior research fellow at the NATO Defense College in Rome, and he is currently a member of the Russian International Affairs Council and the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy. Trenin is the author of a number of publications, including the books *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story*; *Getting Russia Right*; *Russia's Restless Frontier*; *The End of Eurasia*; and *Russia's China Problem*. He is a regular contributor to international media and can be found on Twitter @DmitriTrenin.

THE CURRENT GERMAN STANCE

Germany's relations with Russia are suffering from a serious malaise. The fundamental reason is that many assumptions and expectations on which Germany's approach has been based since the 1990s are no longer valid. The more recent reason is the bitter disappointment within the German government, stretching all the way to the top, with Dmitry Medvedev. President from 2008 to 2012, Medvedev immediately raised hopes that Russia would modernize, but those hopes were brusquely dispelled when longtime leader Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin.

In Germany, the public discussion of Russia is marked by extremes. On the one hand, there are claims that Germany's business in Russia is just business: some 6,500 German companies are now active in Russia, and they bring in substantial profits. The often-unstated conclusion is that Germans should not do or say anything to jeopardize this lucrative relationship. In light of Germany's weight in the EU, pursuing such limited policy objectives is at its base an abdication of Berlin's key international role; in terms of the German public's attitudes toward Russia, which are increasingly critical, it is clearly unsustainable.

On the other hand, there is a rival tendency to focus on individual, high-profile human rights cases, such as the trial of members of the punk rock group Pussy Riot for hooliganism, the ban on providing "homosexual propaganda" to minors, and the arrest of Greenpeace activists in the Arctic. The advocates of this tendency support "tougher" policies toward Moscow, but they cannot be sure that pressure will work. This, too, looks like an abdication of responsibility, and it allows critics to argue that the anti-Kremlin statements are made

for internal consumption and have little to do with Russia policy as such.

The German government is somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, though publicly striking a "tougher" posture. The relationship between Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Vladimir Putin is decent, but distant. The chancellor's office is guided in large part by German domestic politics, which put a premium on criticizing Moscow. This stands in contrast to the Foreign Ministry, which is cultivating the "special relationship" with Russia that has existed since German reunification. The chancellor's Christian Democratic Union has recently grown more critical of Russia, while its prospective coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party, generally opposes "Russia bashing."

Such balancing may have its domestic political uses. But the European Union's biggest country lacks clear policy objectives when it comes to the EU's biggest neighbor. That is not an effective way to build a more united and more capable European Union.

TOWARD A BOLD APPROACH

It is time that Germany came up with a Russia policy fit for the twenty-first century and united the rest of the European Union behind it.

Germany has an important legacy on which to draw. Fifty years ago at the Tutzing Evangelical Academy, West Berlin's mayor, Willy Brandt, and his close adviser, Egon Bahr, pleaded for *Wandel durch Annaeherung*, or change through rapprochement—a new policy course toward the then Soviet-dominated East. Six years later, as Brandt became chancellor, the *neue Ostpolitik*, or the new Eastern policy, became official. It led to the recognition of post-World War II realities and a network

of treaties and exchanges that ultimately contributed to the end of the Cold War and helped overcome the division of Germany.

From the *Wandel* to what the Germans call the *Wende*, the fall of the Berlin Wall, just over twenty-five years elapsed. Now, a quarter century after Germany's reunification, there is a need for a fresh start, with equally bold goals.

The goal of the new policy should not be to help a democratic Russia emerge—this is up to the Russian people themselves. Before Russia can become a true democracy, it needs to embrace the rule of law. There is no “other Russia” standing in the wings, ready to take over. Russia has not become, and is unlikely to become in the foreseeable future, another Poland (an EU member) or another Ukraine (an EU aspirant and associate). It will not join the European Union or enter into an association with it. Russia's domestic transformation will take longer than those of former Soviet satellite countries or former provinces because of its history, demographics, and ambitions.

By the same token, demonizing Russia is fundamentally wrong and can be counterproductive. Putin is not “Stalin-light,” as he is sometimes portrayed, and Russia's efforts to integrate Eurasia are not about to usher in a new edition of the Soviet Union or the czarist empire. Russia is not and will not be a threat to the European Union as a whole or its individual member states. Moscow's international position will be that of an independent actor driven by its own specific worldview and national interests.

With this in mind, the realistic German policy goal vis-à-vis Russia should be achieving a growing degree of compatibility between Russia and the European Union. Such compatibility rests above all on stronger ties between ordinary people,

professional communities, and civil societies, and it is ultimately reflected in the standardization of social, legal, and political practices. Compatibility does not mean that Russia will fully assume a European identity or accept all EU norms as its own. Russia and the European Union will remain separate units, and their relationship will be based on cooperation and coordination.

EU-Russian compatibility does not do away with differences and does not exclude all conflict, but it ensures that conflicts, when they occur, are peaceful. It guarantees that all sides act in a transparent and predictable manner. And it solidifies deeper mutual understanding, which helps avoid missteps rooted in misperceptions and miscalculations.

Revamping Germany's Russia policy is preferable to simply letting it drift. The drift, which is already under way, has led the German public and body politic to accept an overly bleak picture of present-day Russia. According to that picture, Russia is not a credible partner for Germany. In German public opinion, the special relationship that has de facto existed between Berlin and Moscow for decades, preceding and intensifying after German reunification, has significantly eroded. There is a danger that, as the drift continues, those strong ties may disappear on the Russian side as well. As a result, the German-Russian connection, a central pillar of stability and cooperation in Europe as a whole, may give way, with important international consequences.

GERMANY'S NEW RUSSIA POLICY

Building a new policy will require both relying on Germany's interests and principles to guide the approach and conducting a realistic assessment of Russia itself to

determine what Russia is, what it is not, and where it is headed. To avert an irreversible drift, Germany must take clear steps toward a more compatible relationship.

BASE THE RUSSIA POLICY ON GERMAN AND EU-WIDE INTERESTS RATHER THAN IMPRESSIONS OF WHAT THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE NEED OR A DESIRE TO INFLUENCE RUSSIA'S DOMESTIC POLITICS.

The German-Russian relationship is affected by Russia's domestic evolution, but it should not be reduced to it. Berlin should not try to decide what is good for the Russian people—they will need to work that out themselves. Rather, it should realize that outsiders' direct political role inside Russia, as in most other countries, will be marginal at best and can well be counterproductive.

That means Berlin should not choose sides in Russian domestic political battles. As Russian authoritarianism decays, new players will enter the political field, but Germany needs to be able to work with all credible actors, irrespective of Berlin's private preferences. The German policy should include all Russian constituencies: conservatives, liberals, and leftists. Compatibility does not mean similarity, but it requires the common—sufficiently broad—ground of some of the basic values, norms, and principles.

Germany's approach must be balanced. A radical, values-first strategy is emotionally satisfying and may be politically useful in the short term, but otherwise it is usually fruitless. By contrast, a wholly unprincipled, value-less approach leads to the moral abyss. Politics, including international politics, has always been the art of the possible. Interests are as important as values.

Germany should focus on its own and the EU's interests when dealing with Russia, from security and economic exchanges to societal compatibility, allowing Berlin to

proceed on the firm basis of its norms and principles. This policy should not be hostage to any specific groups, be it German special economic interests, ideological warriors of all kinds, or former victims of Russia's policies within the EU.

BROADEN PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE CONTACTS WITH ORDINARY RUSSIANS.

Germany's most effective instrument for influencing Russia is its soft power. To maximize that potential, Germany needs to expand people-to-people contacts with ordinary Russians. Efforts in this area will help create social compatibility between Russia and the rest of Europe.

Abolishing visas for travel between Schengen countries and Russia would maximize contact, but that is not an immediate objective due to concerns in EU countries about migration issues. As a step forward, Berlin can support facilitating travel through multiyear, multiple-entry visas that are readily available. Such an approach would go a long way toward the goal of deepened contact while still providing adequate homeland security and crime protection.

DEMAND, WHEN NECESSARY, THAT RUSSIA LIVE UP TO ITS FORMAL OBLIGATIONS, IN PARTICULAR IN THE FIELD OF HUMAN RIGHTS, BUT ALSO BE PREPARED TO DEAL CONSTRUCTIVELY WITH RUSSIA'S COMPLAINTS AND CRITICISMS.

Germany is correct to demand that Russia live up to its obligations under the various international treaties to which Germany and Russia are parties. But it must recognize the distinction between human rights and democracy: while the former is a universal concern, particularly if enshrined in international legal documents, the latter is a national matter. Germany should be prepared at the same time to deal with Russian criticisms of

its own policies, particularly accusations of “double standards.”

EXPAND MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL BUSINESS TIES WITH RUSSIA BUT DO NOT EXPECT THAT SUCH ACTIVITIES WILL SUFFICE TO MODERNIZE THE COUNTRY OR THAT THEY WILL MAKE RUSSIA AND ITS EURASIAN PARTNERS “EU-ROPEAN.”

Extensive German business activities in Russia are no doubt aiding Russian technological modernization and more. They certainly help create a new business and managerial culture. However, truly modernizing requires more than business activities and best practices. What business activities can do is establish a solid connection between a sufficient number of stakeholders on both sides that can stabilize the relationship when it hits a rough patch.

Widening access to each other’s markets and assets is the main way to achieve greater economic compatibility between Germany and the EU on the one side and Russia and its Eurasian partners on the other. This is a material bond that makes the concept of a wider Europe beyond the EU more than a geographic notion.

LEAD THE EFFORT TO DEEPEN AND WIDEN THE GERMAN-RUSSIAN SECURITY COMMUNITY SO THAT IT COVERS ALL OF EUROPE AND THE EURO-ATLANTIC AREA.

It would not serve the German national interest well to end the special relationship with Russia. This relationship is an anchor of peace and stability in Europe as a whole.

Rather, the German-Russian relationship needs to be used as a basis for expanding the Euro-Atlantic security community, which entails extending the de facto exclusion of military force from bilateral relations to all countries in Europe—including those currently outside the EU—and in North America, the United States above all. Germany should lead

this process of forming an inclusive Euro-Atlantic security community.

SET CLEAR POLICY GOALS AND DEVELOP A LONG-TERM STRATEGY TOWARD EASTERN EUROPE—IN PARTICULAR UKRAINE—AND MAKE THAT POLICY FULLY TRANSPARENT TO RUSSIA.

With several countries in Eastern Europe, notably Ukraine, leaning toward integration with the European Union, Germany needs to develop a clear policy stance toward those states and their EU membership perspectives. This policy should be made transparent to all, including Russia, and allow for close interaction with Eastern Europeans and an ongoing dialogue with Moscow to prevent misperceptions and crises. The EU’s relations with Russia are important enough to demand extra care and foresight.

TREAT MOSCOW’S PROMOTION OF EURASIAN ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND SECURITY COORDINATION AS LEGITIMATE AND STABILIZING AS LONG AS THIS INTEGRATION AND COORDINATION REMAIN VOLUNTARY.

Russia is working to forge closer bonds between the countries of Eurasia by pursuing both economic and security integration. But it would be a mistake for Germany to regard this Moscow-driven process as menacing or destabilizing. To the extent this process is voluntary—and it is, as far as present-day relations among Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, the current members of the customs union, are concerned—it serves the economic interests of the countries involved and contributes to stability and development in central Eurasia. The situation would be different, of course, if Russia tried to impose integration on unwilling parties, not to speak of forcing them to join its integration project.

CHANGE ON THE HORIZON

In the next few years, Germany and the European Union are likely to go through important changes that will reshape the EU and adjust the roles larger member states play within the union. At the same time, Russia will go through an even more fundamental evolution that will define what kind of an

economy, polity, and society the Russian Federation will be for the remainder of the twenty-first century. Germans will not be participants in these Russian processes, but they need to be close and patient observers, capable of seeing the coming changes from afar and ready to adjust their policies accordingly.

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