

GERMANY'S NEW *OSTPOLITIK*

Gilbert Doctorow

When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and the possibility of German reunification arose, setting on the immediate to-do list of Europe and of the broader trans-Atlantic community the realization of political ambitions that dated from the very start of the Cold War, there were forebodings in France and the U.K. that there could be trouble ahead. As President Francois Mitterand reportedly joked with regard to his own misgivings, he liked Germany so much that he wanted there to be two of them.

At a minimum, Germany's European allies feared that the new more powerful Germany would break free of the constraints of the European Economic Community and NATO to define an independent path serving its own interests. There was particular concern that Germany might strike a strategic deal with Russia to secure peace in Europe without the Americans and at the expense of the West.

However, with the encouragement of both Russia and the United States, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl seized the opportunity and proceeded posthaste with reunification while remaining firmly anchored to the other member states of the EEC and NATO. The fears of the French and the British over Germany's reliability as a partner in what became the European Union proved to be misplaced. Yet, German reunification and the move of the capital back to Berlin ultimately have resulted in other challenges to the European order which one could hardly have envisioned back in 1989. As I argue in this essay, they have contributed mightily to the unfolding Ukraine crisis and to the present East-West confrontation that looks very much like a New Cold War.

The generalized failure of International Relations professionals, not to mention lay journalists and the broad public, to get its collective mind around the German problem begins in Germany itself. I propose to examine that first, then to look into the conceptual limitations that prevail in the United States, the single greatest arbiter of world opinion on all international matters large and small. I will end this survey with a look into the reactions to the changing role and ambitions of Germany within Russia, which surely has to be one of the most interested powers in what is occurring.

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In Germany, the post-reunification move of its capital from what was intended to be its temporary site in Bonn to the city which forged the German nation, Berlin, was always considered to hold potential for a change in the political culture of the country. But the most common supposition was always a change from Western liberalism and free thinking to Prussian military tradition and social conservatism. Changes in geopolitical calculations inherent in a move of the center of gravity away from the French-Luxembourg-Dutch-Belgian borders to the neighborhood of Poland were not given due consideration.

Now the reality of the new neighborhood intrudes into the daily life of Germany's statesmen and federal officials. When you visit a Kaufhof department store in downtown Berlin today, you find that directions inside the store are given also in Polish, and many of the shoppers are indeed Poles on day trips. When you speak to German Mittelstand factory owners based in Berlin today you hear how one or another slips

across the border during working hours to look in on his production sites in Poland.

It is reasonable to expect that the changed neighborhood influences German state policy, whether or not it is the subject of an ideology or a doctrine. Indeed, within Germany today there is no such ideology or even consciousness of its special place in Europe, because, in her 10 years in power, Angela Merkel has made a virtue of down-to-earth pragmatism. She has eschewed any “big vision” such as her predecessor Helmut Kohl took pride in.¹ Moreover, political correctness in Germany today blinds its citizens to the possibility of there being a home-grown foreign policy in general and an *Ostpolitik* in particular.

The suggestion that Germany has reverted to the geopolitical and economic domination of a neighborhood that in the pre-WWI decades was called *Mitteleuropa* would strike German political observers as odd, even antiquarian. The notion that Germany has re-entered a direct competition with Russia for control of the Balkans and southeastern Europe through Ukraine to the Caucasus would be seen as a provocation.

From the 1960s to the new millennium, Germany was always the most powerful partner in the French-German tandem that was at the core of what has become the European Union. With a backward glance at its inglorious past in WWII, Germany gladly took the rear seat to France in representing Europe to the world.

Today the place of France in keeping Germany out of the limelight has been assumed by Brussels. As a good European citizen, Germany defers to Brussels to speak on its behalf. This is, of course, a convenient fiction given that all of the European Institutions – the Commission, the Council and the Parliament – are now led by officials who have effectively been chosen and supported by Angela Merkel and her party.

But if Germany pulls the strings of power in Brussels, the concepts guiding the exercise of that power are pan-European. Far from reverting to Prussian conservatism and

militarism, Germany since reunification has fallen under the sway of trends in political and societal thinking coming from the West.

Germany has adopted not only the *acquis*, the entire body of EU law, but also EU mythology. This means, first of all, universal values that act as a comprehensive smoke screen for national egoism, one that is more persuasive than mere deference to France ever could be.

Both parties of the German coalition government, representing the bulk of the country's political establishment, share the enthusiasm for the secular religion that has settled in the European Institutions in Brussels. We may call this a religion because it rests on unprovable postulates that are taken on faith by believers to be the highest truth.

The first article of this modern day catechism is that authoritarian regimes cannot live in peace with democratic nations. This is so because authoritarian regimes are necessarily brittle; they do not enjoy the support of the people and when challenged by domestic opponents they must deflect attention from themselves by inventing enemies abroad, undertaking acts of aggression that build international tension and facilitate isolation from the greater world. Another key article of faith is that foreign policy must be built on values of democracy and protection of human rights plus rule of law. It is outdated at best and immoral at worst to ground foreign policy on national interests.

The issue is highly relevant to any discussion of Germany's new *Ostpolitik*, because in practical terms the aforementioned articles of faith provide justification in German mainstream thinking for breaking with Moscow, ending business as usual with a regime that gets poor grades in democracy, human rights and the rule of law.² The allegedly authoritarian regime of Vladimir Putin is held up as a textbook case of aggression abroad. In the view of the political establishment in Brussels and in Berlin, the annexation of Crimea and assistance to separatists in Donbass are instrumentalized

¹ Packer, George. The Quiet German. The Astonishing Rise of Angela Merkel, the Most Powerful Woman in the World // *The New Yorker*, December 1, 2014.

² Doctorow, Gilbert. 2015 Schlangenbad Dialogue: the East-West Confrontation in Microcosm / Lalibre blogs, May 12, 2015. Mode of access: <http://usforeignpolicy.blogs.lalibre.be/archive/2015/05/12/2015-schlangenbad-dialogue-the-east-west-confrontation-in-mi-1143250.html>.

by Putin and his entourage to rally the nation to its side and foil domestic opposition.

There are many features of the European Union policy that work splendidly to Germany's special advantage today. The Euro has been a boon to the export-led German economy by its intrinsic discount to the overly powerful Deutsche mark. The bail-outs of failing the southern Member States after the financial crisis of 2008 paid off German creditors on what were arguably ill-considered loans. All of this is kept from public discussion in Germany; it is buried within EU formulations of solidarity.

Similarly, the premature accession of a number of the new Member States from the former Soviet bloc served German economic aggrandizement handsomely. And where the unbalanced relationship and grievances from the past have proven thorny, as in the case of Poland under the rule of the Kaczynski brothers earlier in the new millennium, Germany has made a special effort to establish peace by acceding to the foreign policy ambitions of these neighbors in what concerns the lands farther to the East. Hence, Germany's blind eye to the Russia-bashing policies and irresponsible efforts to tear Ukraine from the Russian sphere of privileged relations such as flourished under Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk or under Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė. Indeed, even when the price of these imprudent policies became clear in terms of the emerging crisis in Ukraine, Angela Merkel proceeded with the warm relations by overseeing Tusk's installment as European Council president.

From the moment when sanctions against Russia came onto the agenda of the EU following Crimea's annexation (or reunification with Russia, depending on one's political standpoint), there were commentators who argued that Germany would not support sanctions or would water them down. These analysts pointed to the more than 20 billion euro of German capital invested in Russia and the 300,000 German workers who depend for their livelihood on good relations with Moscow.

Instead, as 2014 progressed, Chancellor Merkel emerged as the Continent's leading proponent of tough sanctions against Russia, riding herd over the 28 Member States to ensure compliance and support. Political observers

outside Germany have assumed this was done under US pressure and against the interests of her own country. Within Germany, that view has been propagated only by the small far Left opposition party, *Die Linke*, with fewer than 10% of deputies in the Bundestag.³

No serious examination has yet been done into the relative advantages to the German economy of its trade and investment with Russia versus the benefits accruing to Germany from its close economic integration with Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as other former Soviet bloc countries now inside the EU. They are, after all, major subcontractors to German industry, usually without full cycle production in the country, meaning they are suppliers of components and subassemblies while full value from overseas sales is enjoyed in Germany.

When the calculations are done, it may well turn out that the strategic partnership with Russia could be sacrificed on the altar of German national economic interest without reference to the more subjective and disputable altar of geostrategic orientation. Acquiescence in the anti-Russian policies of these neighborhood partners may be a small price for Germany to pay.

At a recent high-level German-Russian conference, under the aegis of the main think tank of the SPD, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the U.S. role in the conflict with Russia over Ukraine was not invoked once in the course of three days of intense discussions.⁴ The conceptual framework of participants was strictly limited to the EU's well-meaning efforts to meet the aspirations of Ukrainians and put them on a path to improved governance, greater democracy, and economic reform through the Association Agreement with the EU. The problem, on the European side, if any existed,

³ See, for example, the fiery speech of Die Linke parliamentarian Sahra Wagenknecht in December, 2014 / Russia Insider. Mode of access: http://russia-insider.com/en/sahra_wagenknecht_speech.

⁴ Doctorow, Gilbert. 2015 Schlangenbad Dialogue: the East-West Confrontation in Microcosm / Lalibre blogs, May 12, 2015. Mode of access: <http://usforeignpolicy.blogs.lalibre.be/archive/2015/05/12/2015-schlangenbad-dialogue-the-east-west-confrontation-in-mi-1143250.html>.

was a failure to appreciate Russia's red lines.

In summation, although establishing hegemony in its neighborhood and extending that neighborhood to Ukraine for the sake of economic and political profit at the expense of Russia figures nowhere in German thinking, including expert thinking of specialists in relations with Russia, German deeds tell a different story. In that sense, the smoke-screen of EU foreign policy to explain the crisis with Russia amounts to dangerous self-deception. Germany controls Brussels in the final analysis and its own actions of backing Polish and Baltic revanchism incrementally have put it on a collision course with Russian geopolitical interests. Hence, the Ukraine crisis.

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Meanwhile, in the United States the prevailing view of the driving forces in the Ukraine crisis and of the broader East-West confrontation is a mirror-image of what exists in Germany. The conflict as seen across the Atlantic is grounded in the US-Russian relationship. The role of Europe in general and of Germany, in particular, is taken to be zero. This thinking cuts across the whole spectrum of American politics.

The American foreign policy establishment takes it to be axiomatic that Germany is a loyal follower of American policy in dealing with Russia's violation of the post-Cold War order through its annexation of Ukraine and support to the separatists in Donbass. When and if Germany fails to snap to attention, extra, behind-the-scenes arm-twisting does the trick, as Vice President Biden boasted earlier this year, and then Germans perform as expected, bringing Europe along with them.⁵

The few specialists in Russian affairs, who also pay attention to German domestic politics, take the existence of a Ukraine crisis as a given and look at how German policy towards Russia has evolved since, rather than examine the possibility of Germany having been a causal factor in the genesis of the crisis.

⁵ Every rule has its exceptions. George Friedman takes such a view when he describes Germany as an independent actor and 'significant player' in the Ukraine crisis. See, *Germany Emerges // Stratfor Global Intelligence*, February 10, 2015. However, Friedman does not develop this.

The small minority that does not accept the Washington narrative also ignores Europe and Germany within it as independent factors in the conflict. We may take as the leading example the writings and public appearances of Professor John Mearsheimer, author of the controversial essay published by *Foreign Affairs* magazine on why the West is to be blamed for the Ukraine crisis.⁶ The 'West' is taken to mean the United States, since the leading causal factor in the outbreak of the conflict, in Mearsheimer's view, was NATO expansion and, in particular, the possibility of NATO accession for Ukraine. NATO accession has been and remains an America-sponsored proposal which met repeatedly with resistance from Europe, most famously at the April 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest where Germany and France decisively defeated the American initiative on the subject.

As a counterpoint to the observations made above regarding the German establishment conference in Schlangenbad, we can make reference to a conference in Washington, D.C. held in the Hart Senate Office Building in late March 2014. During a full day of discussions of the causes and possible solutions to the Ukraine standoff with Russia, only one speaker directed attention to Europe's role in bringing on the crisis.⁷

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For much of 2014, the East-West confrontation over Ukraine was viewed in Russia in terms of the old adversarial relations with the United States. This is entirely understandable given that throughout the Cold War the USSR measured itself only against the United States. Europe never counted as an independent force.

Insofar as Germany received the attention of Russian political observers at all, it was expected to continue its traditional role as Russia's advocate within the EU. Even when Chancellor

⁶ Mearsheimer, John. Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault // *Foreign Affairs*, September-October, 2014.

⁷ Presentations to U.S.-Russia Forum, Washington DC, March 25-26, 2015. Mode of access: <http://newcoldwar.org/presentations-to-u-s-russia-forum-in-washington-dc-march-25-26-2015/>.

Merkel clearly was pursuing quite a different position as enforcer of the sanctions, Russian analysts were in no rush to reassess relations with Germany. The reappraisal began only this year, when the zigzags in the Chancellor's policies, in particular, her leading role in bringing about the Minsk-2 accords, suggested that Germany was an independent actor with its own agenda.

In a sign that the mainstream Russian foreign policy analysts have indeed taken notice of the issue, one can cite recent remarks by Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*. In an interview with Max Fisher published in the US, Lukyanov noted that the change in German conduct to a hard line on Russia was at first attributed to American pressure, but finally, that explanation was not persuasive: "We wanted to believe that this change was entirely because of American pressure on Germany. I spent two months in Germany earlier this year, and I can say American pressure is there, of course. But in fact, it's much deeper. This is really about Germany repositioning itself as the European power."⁸ So far Lukyanov has not developed this idea further.

One Russian researcher who has developed it into a complex and comprehensive explanation is Igor Shishkin, deputy director of the Institute of CIS Countries in Moscow. On 15 March, he published a 20-page essay entitled "Merkel and the Fourth Reich." Shishkin posits Frau Merkel with an ambitious policy of putting Russia down in the service of German economic and political interests.

He tells us that Germany integrated the GDR immediately after 1989, then spent another 15 years digesting the former Warsaw Pact countries from which it extracted enormous wealth as colonial overlord. Now in Ukraine Germany is poised to realize its centuries-long ambition of *Drang Nach Osten* – to obtain control of the enormously productive farmland of Ukraine and its mineral wealth. Here Germany's national aspirations coincided with Washington's geopolitical strategy dating from 1997 when Zbigniew Brzezinski explained in

The Grand Chessboard that Ukraine must be excised from the Russian sphere of influence to prevent Russia's return to great power status. Thus, Germany was given the green light by Washington to proceed.

The problem with Shishkin's thesis is that it sets out a German program which no one in Germany would recognize, which has no contemporary authors or supporters. Instead, the answer to the puzzle is more banal, though no less dangerous for world peace.

As I noted at the start, no ideology has been crafted in Germany to drive its actions in the East. But these actions incrementally have put it on a collision course with Russian geopolitical interests. The Russians did not see this coming, just as the Germans, for the most part, were surprised at how they had triggered a violent Russian reaction. And yet it was a major causal factor in the current conflict over Ukraine, no less than NATO expansion engineered by the United States.

We may earnestly hope that the crisis in Donbas will become nothing worse than a frozen conflict or even find resolution should the political provisions of the Minsk-2 accords be fully implemented. But the bigger issues of the operating principles and intellectual horizons guiding American, Russian and German policies in Eastern and Southeastern Europe must be properly understood if there is not to be another acute East-West conflict in the medium term. Such proper in-depth analysis will devote all due attention to Germany's new *Ostpolitik*, both at the subjective and objective levels.

⁸ Why One of Russia's Top Foreign Policy Experts is Worried about a Major War with Europe / Vox Topics, Johnson's Russia List, No. 91, May 7, 2015.

Germany's New *Ostpolitik*

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Abstract: *A survey of perceptions of Germany's new Ostpolitik in Russia, the United States and Germany. The author argues that Germany's abandonment of its strategic alliance with Russia by assuming the lead on sanctions within the EU has not received due attention of experts because it is not supported by any doctrine within Germany itself. The new Ostpolitik is the product of many small steps. It is the consequence of Germany's uncritical acceptance of democracy promotion as the guideline to foreign policy coming from Brussels and of Berlin's political accommodation with its neighborhood, the new EU Member States to the East, bringing their revanchism and hostility to Russia into the EU institutions that Germany controls.*

Key words: Germany, Ostpolitik, Russia, economic sanctions, doctrine, foreign policy, EU, NATO.

Новая восточная политика Германии

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Аннотация: В настоящей статье предлагается обзор восприятий новой немецкой восточной политики (Остполитик) в России, США и в самой Германии. Автор считает, что отказ Германии от стратегического партнерства с Россией в связи со своим решением активно продвигать санкции против Кремля не получил должного внимания экспертов, поскольку эти изменения не подкреплены никакой новой доктриной внутри страны. Новую немецкую Остполитик можно концептуализировать только в ходе анализа многих конкретных шагов. Такая политика является следствием не критического принятия тезисов о продвижении демократии, которые стали новым руководящим принципом внешних сношений, в сочетании с политическими компромиссами Берлина в отношениях со своими соседями среди новых членов ЕС. Реваншизм и враждебность к России этих государств были привнесены ими в центральные учреждения ЕС, где доминирующие позиции занимает именно Германия.

Ключевые слова: Германия, Остполитик, восточная политика, экономические санкции, доктрина, внешняя политика, Европейский Союз, НАТО.