Ukraine and German-Russian Relations (August 10, 2015)

Abstract

Kerstin Holm, former correspondent for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Moscow, analyzes the consequences of Russia's actions in Ukraine and the Crimea on German-Russian relations and explains Putin's motives.

Source

End of a romance

The relationship of trust between the two countries has ruptured

Will Angela Merkel go down in history as the chancellor who broke with Russia and divided Europe again? This incredibly controlled, crisis-resistant politician never made a wrong move in relations with Russia. She did not sit in a sauna with a president with a proclivity for drunkenness. She is not associated with any embarrassing pronouncements like that about Vladimir Putin as a flawless democrat. On visits to Moscow she deliberately sought contact with civil rights activists, unlike her predecessor who refused to do so. And then she ruptured the relationship of trust which had been built up under several predecessors since Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* – because the Kremlin, unwilling to accept a leadership in Ukraine that was not favorably disposed toward it, annexed Crimea in violation of international law, and is supporting the rebels in Eastern Ukraine against the Kiev government with an undeclared military operation.

Russia's economy is struggling as a result of Western sanctions. Poverty in the country is growing, but so is the support for President Putin, under whose increasingly harsh domestic political line human rights activists and academics, in particular, are suffering. A wave of emigration is in full swing. But Germany's exports are also suffering. The Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations reports that 150,000 jobs have already been lost in Germany, most of them in mid-size companies. The two sides want nothing more to do with each other. In May, at a meeting of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Lithuania with the title "Literature, Values, European Identity," a Russian woman who opines that her country's culture of remembrance could also be given consideration is brusquely told that this would contradict European values. Western artists are backing away from planned projects with Russians. In Russia itself, where just a year ago the Germans were the most popular foreigners and Angela Merkel was the most admired foreign female politician, the likeability ratings have plummeted. Was that necessary?

A red line has been crossed: A majority of people in Germany think so. The Putin system with its human rights violations, with corruption, rigged elections, and instrumentalized courts has been trying Europe's patience long enough. At the latest when the loyal-liberal experiment with the tandem president Dmitri Medvedev was discarded by the Kremlin and Putin – to the horror of the thinking public – was re-enthroned in 2012, it was clear that for Europe, shared values were not in sight with this increasingly authoritarian system. When Russia annexed Crimea following the Maidan Revolution in Kiev in February 2014 and smuggled weapons and soldiers to Donezk and Lugansk, Europe's red lines – the prohibition against military force and the annexation of the territory of other states – had been crossed. Moscow's position that the change of power in Kiev was illegitimate because it was dictated from the streets did not convince anyone, since the parliament and the president were confirmed by elections. And the fact that CIA chief John Brennan visited Kiev in April 2014 under a different name, which enraged Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, points to activities that likely protected Ukrainian military installations

from being paralyzed by Russian hackers.

In contrast to a majority of Russians, a majority of Ukrainians wants to get serious with our values of democracy, freedom, and equal rights. The country is striving toward the West, wants to modernize itself, and escape the swamp of Russian despotism and imperial oppression. We know Russia's complaints about the Eastern expansion of NATO to its very doorstep. Yet NATO could hardly refuse the legitimate request for protection from Moscow's long-suffering former satellites. Merkel explicitly does not recognize Putin's territorial red line. For his security interests to be taken into account, Russia would have to cease its threatening rhetoric against the Baltic states, for example. To its European neighbors, it is the primary security risk.

In this role, as the primary security risk, Russia feels it is the potential target of attack and it does not see NATO as defensive and trustworthy as the latter sees itself. The aerial bombing of Belgrade in 1999 without a UN mandate, the secession of Kosovo from Serbia – without a referendum – nine years later is considered illegal not only in Moscow. Even more so the war to remove the dictator in Iraq in 2003 with its apocalyptic consequences, which Germany supported only logistically, but where many old and new NATO countries, especially Poland, but also one-and-a-half thousand Ukrainians, defended our values. The NATO air raids on Libya's despot in 2011, immediately after then-President Medvedev – against the will of his Prime Minister Putin – had agreed to a UN flight ban, seemed like a slap in the face. For that reason, too, Putin – who in 2001 made the case in the Bundestag, in fluent German, for common security structures that should include Russia in the decision-making – is a different man today. And even though a nuclear agreement was finally achieved with Iran, thanks not least to Russia's participation, NATO and US President Obama, who promised five years ago to forego the Eastern European missile defense shield in the event of such an agreement, want to build it nonetheless. Possibly because Moscow is now playing the nuclear card. Most of all, it is on the wrong side, beyond the NATO fence. And with its attacks on its own civil society and the anti-Western, militaristic propaganda, it is becoming for Europe increasingly the Evil Empire.

Russia and Europe are playing different political games. Europe has committed itself to the emancipation of the individual, which modernization and prosperity guarantee. Russia above all wants to be a global player, it defends every inch of its sphere of influence tooth and nail. Rights of liberty of the individual are subordinate to that. If the state machinery deems itself under pressure, it trims them back roughly and extensively.

That the Europeans are letting themselves be led by the trans-Atlantic partner in the great game is something Moscow sees as self-disenfranchisement and betrayal. The priority of the alignment with the West, which unites the continent, means for Russia that it no longer finds there any full-fledged partners for a dialogue.

This was evident in 2009, for example, when the German government had already given its blessing to the purchase of a majority stake in Opel Germany by the Russian Sberbank, which was then blocked by the US parent company General Motors. But also in Merkel's non-reaction to the tapping of her cell phone by the NSA. When Europeans foist their values on Russians, says the writer Victor Jerofejev, the latter often have the impression that they want to take the house key out of their hands.

The relationship between Germany and Russia resembles that of a couple at the end of a long, intense, and fruitful romance. Both sides feel betrayed, are traumatized. The historian of Eastern Europe Karl Schlögel, who devoted his life as a researcher to spheres of Russian history and culture, has bitterly regretted his fixation on Russia and has discovered Ukraine as the better alternative. His colleague Gerd Koenen, expert on the mutual projections of Germans and Russians during the Communist period, is dismayed, because Russia has checkmated itself with its policy toward Ukraine. Some fathers and grandfathers still don't want to realize it. Above all former politicians and diplomats, and especially the

former chancellors Gerhard Schröder, Helmut Kohl, and Helmut Schmidt, want to save the relationship they helped to build, and they are appealing to the current leadership in Berlin not to cut the threat of friendship.

Death of Germanophilia: Russians with ties to Germany are also despair. The journalist Victor Loshak is only one of many who are devastated by the sudden demise of Russian Germanophilia. The historian Alexei Miller is troubled by the fact that in Europe the ethic of responsibility in the face of history, as reflected in the German prohibition against denying the Holocaust, was replaced, at the instigation of some Eastern European countries, by the cultivation of one's own nation as a collective victim. Miller complains that this serves less the establishment of thriving relationship and more the goal of placing oneself principally in the right, especially vis-à-vis Russia. The scholar sees in a Russian patriotism that has gone out of control not least a tit-for-tat response to this. In fact, in the past, when conditions overall were friendlier, one could certainly hear critical comments on Russian history from Putin and his followers.

The composer Vladimir Tarnopolski, who sees himself as a pupil of German culture and has nothing good to say about Putinism, nevertheless believes that the Germans should have shown understanding for the Russian annexation of Crimea, the majority of whose inhabitants wanted it – especially in view of the reunification of Germany, which many Europeans did not want at the time. Tarnopolski grew up in Dnepropetrovsk in Ukraine and has been summering on Crimea for decades. He detests jingoistic slogans like "Krymnash" ("Crimea is ours"). Still, he is convinced that the annexation of the peninsula that had once been "given" to Ukraine, where two fleets and both Ukrainian and Russian troop contingents were stationed, prevented a war following the Maidan Revolution, since nearly all residents of Crimea no longer wished to be Ukrainians.

Russian proposals for repairing the relationship seem as utopian as the longing of German Russia experts for the status quo ante. The opposition politician Leonid Gozman hopes that Putin and those around him will recognize that Russia needs new leadership and will step down voluntarily. The Moscow economic sociologist Vladislav Inosemzev even hopes that the Western sanctions will cause the Putin system to implode. But Inosemzev admonishes that if that were to happen, the EU would have to accept Russia into its structures and install its legal system there. The continent would then be united, peace secured. Such illusions, which believe that Mother Europe, which is fighting for a democracy in line with the market and is groaning under streams of refugees, still has the strength to play the big game, reflect above all the wish that the split of Atlantic Europe from Eurasia should not be irreversible.

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