

A stylized world map composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to represent specific countries or regions.

Germany's Russia Policy

Competing Realities and Windows of Opportunity

ANDREY MAKARYCHEV

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- When dealing with Russia, German diplomacy faces two competing realities, each sustained by explicit political messages addressed to Berlin. On one hand, since fall 2011 the anti-Putin opposition has not only drastically increased its public activities within Russia, but is also trying to reach European – and especially German – audiences. On the other hand, on a daily basis Berlin deals with representatives of the Russian government who develop their own discourse containing strong messages addressed to their German counterparts.
- In this situation of conflicting Russian agendas a number of policy tracks can be further explored. First, despite the lack of progress with the Meseberg initiative, it can serve as a starting point for Moscow's recognition of Berlin's legitimate security role in the common neighborhood. Secondly, the modernization agenda should be re-energized, since Russia desperately needs German investment and technologies.
- Russia's engagement with G20 and G8 provides good opportunities to more deeply socialize Russia as a responsible member of the international community. Moreover, a series of sports mega-projects to be hosted in Russia with a significant German contribution can be used as opportunities for fostering a more open and tolerant policy agenda within Russia.

Introduction

Among European countries Germany has the deepest interest in and traditions of engaging with Russia politically and economically. Almost every week Berlin hosts multiple Russia-focused events that send diverse – though often contradictory – messages to German diplomacy. In this paper I will show how different are the messages addressed to Germany by the anti-Putin opposition and the Kremlin, and what options are available for Germany's Ostpolitik.

I will refer to my own experience of more than two-and-a-half years' observance of and participation in numerous policy-oriented and academic events – discussions, round tables, panels and so on – organized by major Berlin-based foundations (especially the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung), think tanks (DGAP and SWP), as well as universities. Most of these events could have been viewed as meeting points for communication between Russian experts and policymakers, on one hand, and German professional audiences, on the other.¹ The German hosts use these events primarily as interfaces that help them better understand the different dimensions of Russian politics, while the Russian guests usually take advantage of the opportunity to approach the German policy community for delivering their own – sometimes conflicting, if not confusing – interpretations of political reality in Russia.

Signals from the Russian Opposition

The story from the opposition assumes that Russia's way to Europe is being hampered by President Vladimir Putin's regime, which rebuffs European values. Former Soviet institutions – a secret police obsessed with repression, ubiquitous nomenklatura and propaganda apparatus – have been revived. Moreover, the Orthodox Church plays the role of the Communist Party's ideological committee. Putin's regime has restored the corporate state, adopted prohibitive laws, relies on the alleged past glory of the Soviet

Union and lacks a clear idea of the future. To date, archaic and state-dependent segments of society have trumped pro-European reformist social groups that, unfortunately, are fragmented and lacking a common agenda. The opposition fiercely lambasts the Kremlin for its restrictive policy towards civil society and Soviet-style mentality. The Eurasian Union project, in their views, is based on bureaucracy, security services and state corporations.

The major challenges for the Putin regime, in the logic of the opposition, are the ongoing legitimacy crisis and new trends in energy markets that could reduce Gazprom's profits. Security troubles in the Caucasus and rampant corruption make the system even more fragile.

The message from the opposition to Berlin focuses on Germany's alleged responsibility for the post-Soviet space that is becoming increasingly autocratic. Opposition figures call on Germany (and the EU in general) to make the Kremlin fulfill its legal obligations derived from membership of the OSCE and the Council of Europe, as well as those outlined in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Moscow and Brussels. In a more radical version, major EU countries are advised to adopt their own versions of the Magnitsky list restricting international travel for Russian state officials accused of abusing legal procedure and responsible for widespread selective justice. Finally, Europe is expected to disclose information on the fortunes held by the ruling Russian elite in European banks and in real estate. Since in a globalized world it is technically impossible to implement the rule of law in a single country, Europeans are invited to start doing their part of the job.

The Kremlin's Storyline

The picture drawn by the Kremlin's representatives in Berlin is of course completely different. Their story often starts with a path-dependent explanation of centuries-long authoritarianism in Russia. Against this backdrop, they might claim that Putin has enemies whom he has deprived of property and power, and it is these people who are »rocking the boat« and launching information wars against the regime.

1. See our more detailed analysis in: Anna Dmitrieva and Andrey Makarychev, »Yazykovye i kommunikatsionnie strategii germano-rossiiskogo vzaimodeistviya: opyt vkluchonnogo analiza«, in *Rossiya y Germaniya v prostranstve evropeiskikh kommunikatsiy*. Tyumen University Publishers, 2013, pp. 121–132.

Starting with Vladimir Putin's third presidential term, Moscow has not even tried to hide the depth of its normative disagreements with Europe. Many pro-Kremlin representatives in Berlin refuse to share Western concerns about Russia's political trajectory. In addressing German interlocutors, representatives of the official Moscow claim that Russia is getting stronger and an individual pole in a multipolar world. The Kremlin discourse-makers do not see authoritarianism or centralization as detrimental to modernizing the economy by definition, while democracies, in their view, are either in general decline or accused of double standards since they seek to violently impose their social and political values and standards on others. They deny the appeal of the EU's example of well-being and normative standards, and dislike any parallels between Putin's and Stalin's regimes. They pragmatically explain Russia's rebuttal of liberalism by the painful experience of the 1998 financial crisis.

Usually Europe is asked »not to meddle in our affairs«. However, in the meantime Moscow expects that Germany keeps playing the role of Russia's main political lobbyist in the EU and NATO, which was particularly important to Russia when it came to preventing Ukraine and Georgia from signing Membership Action Plans with NATO. Based on this experience, the Kremlin most likely expected that Berlin would ultimately take a similar position and heed Russian objections against Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU. However, the deteriorating relations between Russia and Germany that became evident in fall 2012 at the St Petersburg Dialogue made Moscow's anticipations unrealistic, which ultimately provoked a particularly harsh reaction to Ukraine's drive toward the EU in September 2013.

Germany's increasing reluctance to politically support Russia's claims for its sphere of influence is an effect of multiple normative disconnections between the two countries. It makes it hard for the Kremlin to convince the German audience that the Yukos trial or the »Pussy Riot« affair were completely legal cases: for Germans they are explicitly political. Moreover, German (and European) perceptions of Russia are structured in such a way that stories of incarceration are always reminiscent of Stalinist repressions. This certainly fuels emotional sympathies with regard

to, for example, Mikhail Khodorkovsky (as well as to the Pussy Riot group) even among those who are far away from politics. Such trials only further alienate Russia from Europe and sharpen the existing harsh criticism of the Kremlin in the West. Russia is increasingly perceived as a retrograde state cruelly punishing peaceful protest actions. This definitely undermines the Kremlin's ability to strike political deals with individual EU member states when it comes to Russia's claims to integrate its »near abroad« in Moscow-patronized projects.

Conflicting Messages

In this situation of conflicting messages and divergent political agendas between the Kremlin and its opponents Germany has to find a role. Berlin feels increasingly uncomfortable in dealing cooperatively with the Kremlin, which overtly deviates from the joint agenda on many issues. German diplomacy seeks new policy options, but is obviously not ready to go as far as the Russian opposition would like.

In dealing with Russia, the German political class pursues two ideas. One is grounded in the tradition of Jürgen Habermas: communicative power is a transformative force. Another is based on the experience of the Cold War: change through commerce, which is fully in line with the German understanding of modernization.

Against this backdrop, Germany seeks cooperation with those in the EU who deem that Russia is a European country. It supports its Central European neighbors in their efforts to promote historical reconciliation with Moscow, including a search for common interpretations of the most difficult pages in bilateral relations. In the meantime, Germany seeks to accommodate voices of those who insist that Russia has to accept EU regulatory norms – especially in the energy sector and customs regulations – as the core conditions for a genuine partnership.

Seeing in this prism, the core of German–Russian relations is a constant struggle for a policy agenda. This seems to be quite a sophisticated diplomatic game: while Moscow closes one policy track after another

(no participation in the European Neighborhood Programme, no common policies toward managing the Ukrainian energy system, no dialogue on human rights, no ratification of the third energy package, no continuation of the Meseberg initiative and so on), Berlin tries to contrive new ways of communication in order to engage Russia. This certainly requires creativity and soft power resources. The Kremlin might need artificially constructed external enemies in the West to justify its increasingly repressive domestic rule. But in the meantime, within Russian society itself there is an adequate apprehension of Europe in general – and Germany in particular – as a place for better education, more attractive tourism and medical services, safer banks and high-quality products. This explains why Germany is interested in including civil society organizations in the bilateral dialogue with Moscow, along with traditional diplomacy.

Windows of Opportunity: More Half Open than Half Closed?

In this situation windows of opportunity are still available, though, of course, one may see them as either half-open or half-closed.

First, by signing the Meseberg Declaration in 2010, Moscow – represented at that time by Dmitry Medvedev – has accepted a certain security role for Germany in what Russia still considers its »near abroad«. Two years before that Moscow had welcomed an EU role as a legitimate participant in security talks between Russia and Georgia after the August 2008 war. Perhaps it is from this point that a process of gradual adjustment of security agendas can start, thus triggering gradual transformation of the area of alleged privileged Russian interests to a common neighborhood.

Secondly, by engaging in a modernization partnership – with strong German encouragement – with the EU, Russia has admitted the attractiveness of a European normative order that is quintessential to the concept of European modernity. As practice demonstrates, the Russian government keeps adopting EU technical norms, even if politically claiming Russia's alleged self-sufficiency. In particular, Russia needs German

expertise and know-how in organizing mega-events, from the Sochi Winter Olympics of 2014 up to the FIFA Football World Cup of 2018.

Thirdly, within the trilateral German-Polish-Russian format Moscow has de facto accepted the possibility of redressing relations with Central European – and potentially Baltic – countries. Moreover, Russian diplomacy has conceded a special role for Poland in Eastern Europe. There are several educational, academic and civil society-based projects within the German-Polish-Russian framework, and the question is how to translate their communicative potential into a strong political asset.

Fourthly, Russia held the rotating chairmanship of the G20 for one year and is preparing for the forthcoming G8 chairmanship to culminate at the summit of eight leading world powers in Sochi in 2014. As the experience of the recent G20 summit held in September 2013 in St Petersburg made clear, global fora can be the right place for addressing the most substantial issues raised by the status of great power with regard to the system of global governance. Limiting discussion to only technical and financial matters seems too narrow.

Fifthly, hosting sports mega-events (Universiade-2013 in Kazan, winter Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014, the Football World Cup in a dozen cities in 2018) Russia must act in accordance with the logic of globalization, with marketing and territorial branding, urban renovation projects, trans-national communication and information strategies. In the meantime, mega-events make clear that their overall potential cannot be fully materialized without maintaining openness to the West. Large-scale sports tournaments require legions of volunteers, but, as international experience suggests, they do not function in a sustainable way without robust civil society institutions. Urban planning cannot be effected without top-level city managers, which presupposes a certain autonomy on the part of municipal authorities that is so far lacking throughout Russia. Large infrastructural construction projects can be unsustainable without independent environmental expertise that again requires strong contributions from NGOs, evidently with strong international linkages that have to be encouraged, not



suppressed. And, of course, Germany has a lot to say about its experience of nurturing tolerance and lifestyle diversity, an issue that seems so far to divide Russia and Europe.

Sixthly, as the municipal and regional election campaign leading to elections on 8 September 2013 made clear, the demand for change in Russia has spread far beyond the two largest cities, Moscow and St Petersburg. In Yekaterinburg (a city with a strong German cultural presence and economic interests) and Petrozavodsk (a city that for many years has been involved in a variety of cross-border connections within the EU-sponsored Northern Dimension programme) highly competitive elections ended up with the victories of mayoral candidates relatively independent of the Kremlin. In Yaroslavl's regional legislature the opposition – exemplified, in particular, by one of key figures in Parnas party, Boris Nemtsov – managed to win seats. These examples show that it would be an exaggeration to deem that all Russia is controlled and managed by the Kremlin. Reaching regional audienc-

es eager to foster social changes would certainly be of great value for a balanced German strategy toward Russia.

The German government and civil society groups want to keep up a sustained dialogue with Russia, but in most cases their endeavors end up with largely symbolic gestures. Russia did not feature as an important topic for debate during the most recent parliamentary election campaign in Germany. Many German experts claim that their government lacks a strategy toward Russia. So does Russia. This lack of grand strategies on both sides augments the importance of soft power instruments that focus on developing communicative strategies for socializing Russia in a wider European milieu and involving its most socially active groups in constant communication with Germany. German academic programmes, German Days in major Russian cities and civil society fora constitute fertile ground for engaging with Russian society, which seems to be more culturally open to Europe than its political elites.



About the Author:

Andrey Makarychev is currently visiting professor at the University of Tartu in Estonia. He was an Alexander von Humboldt scholar and guest professor at the Free University, Berlin, from 2011 to 2013.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Department of Central and Eastern Europe
Hiroshimastr. 28 | 10785 Berlin | Germany

Responsible:
Dr. Reinhard Krumm, Head, Department of Central and Eastern Europe

Tel.: ++49-30-26935-7726 | Fax: ++49-30-26935-9250
<http://www.fes.de/international/moe>

Orders / contact:
info.moe@fes.de

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