

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title text.

Developing a More Comprehensive Russia Policy: Lessons Learned from the German and US Experiences

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- While tensions between Berlin and Washington over Russia policy have decreased, German policy toward Russia is often subject to extreme caricature in the U.S. Historical legacies that shape German policy are not widely known in Washington.
- Germany has established a broad web of relations with Russia over the course of the post-Soviet period.
- The Obama Administration's reset policy, with its emphasis on peer-to-peer civil society interaction, increased business ties, and stronger government-to-government engagement, has many similarities to the German approach. The U.S. could gain valuable lessons learned from the German experience.
- Neither Berlin nor Washington have discovered the "silver bullet" when it comes to Russia policy. While the answer to the question of "what to do" remains elusive, one fact is clear: when Germany and the U.S. pursue divergent policy approaches toward Russia, one can seriously undermine the other.



Content

German policy through American Eyes	3
The Role of Historical Legacies	4
German policy today	5
Recommendations for the United States	5
Recommendations for Germany	5
Recommendations for both governments	6
The View From Moscow	6
Conclusions	6

The relationships among the United States, Germany and Russia are the subject of much misleading analysis in all three countries and elsewhere. The friction and tensions that have resulted serve no country's interests and undermine the long-term prospects of building a Europe that is whole, free and at peace.

This is all the more disconcerting in light of the immense potential for synergy in the US and German approaches to Russia, and what all three countries could accomplish jointly. While fundamentally anchored in shared values, common interests and similar strategic goals, US and German policies toward Russia differ, especially in terms of tone, modalities, and emphasis. Some of this divergence is a natural result of Russia's greater significance, especially in economic terms, for Germany (indeed, US–Russian economic ties remain anemic in comparison to Germany's trade and investment links with Russia). But divergent priorities cannot account fully for the different policy approaches.

This paper contextualizes the respective approaches to Russia, noting differences and convergences, and makes recommendations on how both Berlin and Washington can learn from each other's experiences as they move forward. It also analyzes Russian views on Moscow's relations with both countries, and concludes with proposals for US–German–Russian cooperation.¹

The report is based on a series of meetings organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Center for American Progress over the course of 2009–2011. German and American experts, parliamentarians, academics, and officials participated in these events in Washington and Berlin and also traveled to Moscow for meetings with a wide range of Russian interlocutors. The purpose of the exercise was to examine the two countries' approaches to Russia policy and distill lessons learned for both governments, as well as recommendations for cooperative projects with Russia.

German policy through American Eyes

»German exports trump allegiance to the Western alliance.«²

»Illusions, dreams and ambitions have frequently dominated German thinking about Russia over the centuries.«³

While tensions between Berlin and Washington over Russia policy have decreased markedly in recent years, German policy toward Russia is often caricatured in the United States. Former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's attitudes toward Russia – or more specifically his decision to head the consortium that operates the Nordstream pipeline soon after endorsing it while in office, as well as his praise of Vladimir Putin's democratic credentials⁴ – are seen as the epitome of a German policy that has confused integration with capitulation, leaving its values at the door. Even under the current CDU/CSU–Free Democrats coalition, and with Schröder's SPD in opposition, Germany is often accused of a crass *realpolitik*, whereby its other foreign policy priorities are subordinated to the Kremlin's whims in return for Russian energy supplies.

Schröder's beliefs and actions notwithstanding, the reality of German policy is more complex. Germany is an EU and NATO member state; its relations with Russia will necessarily differ from those with its allies and fellow member states. Germany is bound to the collective defense of the Alliance as an international legal obligation; as part of the Single Market, it must concern itself with the economic well-being of its fellow EU members.

A mantra of German foreign policy post-World War II is rejection of a *Sonderweg*, a »separate path.« In accordance with its Constitution and political tradition, the Federal Republic of Germany is well anchored in the EU and NATO. There is no alternative.

Furthermore, across the German political spectrum, there is broad consensus on both the nature of present-day Russia (in particular, its domestic political morass, but also its sometimes problematic foreign policy) and a vision of a desired strategic future: a democratic Russia, that is a European partner, at peace with its neighbors, and integrated in the world.

Many, if not most, of those who focus on Russia policy in the United States would share these goals, or some version of them. Indeed, US–German tensions over Russia policy are in fact mostly about means, not ends. For a number of reasons, including economic ties, but also historical legacies that are poorly understood in Washington, German foreign policy-makers have opted for a more integrationist approach to Russia than their US counterparts. In part, this stems from a divergence in foreign policy focus between the United States and Germany after the Cold War; for Germany, the new Russia was equally central to its interests, while the United States had significantly fewer interests at stake after the Soviet collapse. If the United States, as a global power with global interests, sees China as primary focus of its international engagement in the years to come, Germany, a regional power, seems to spend an equal amount of time and attention on Russia.

The Role of Historical Legacies

The legacy of World War II continues to play a major role in Germany's relationships with most countries, and its ties with post-Soviet Russia are no exception. Even those Germans born after the war still feel a degree of responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime in the Soviet Union. The Eastern Front was no ordinary war – which would have been bad enough – but a *Vernichtungskrieg*: a war to destroy and eliminate the population of the Soviet Union. Indeed, one-third of the 10.6 million Soviet soldiers killed in the war died in German captivity, to say nothing of the millions of civilians killed by the Nazis or their proxies. A lingering sense of guilt remains.

In addition, many Germans, particularly the generation now in power, are deeply conscious that Nazism represented a failure of their political system, and that despite the robustness of their current democratic institutions, home-grown totalitarianism is a fact of their recent past. Whereas Americans tend to see their country as progressively moving toward full realization of the ideals of its founders, many Germans still see their country as only recently embracing democratic norms. Furthermore, Russians, who of course have a difficult past of their own, seem to relate to Germans more easily as a result.

This combination of lingering guilt and sense of humility about its democratic credentials has had a profound

impact on Germany's Russia policy, especially with regard to tactical approaches. First, policies that seem aggressive toward Russia – or even assertive rhetoric – are anathema. Instead, Germans are inclined to emphasize dialogue, consultation, and integration as a way of overcoming differences with Moscow. Second, many Germans remain profoundly uncomfortable about lecturing the Kremlin about its democratic shortcomings.

A third historical legacy also looms large in Germany's Russia policy: the end of the Cold War and German unification. While the dominant Washington narrative is of Western »victory« and Soviet/Russian »defeat,« many in the German elite believe that the Cold War was resolved peacefully and unification achieved through engagement with the East, a policy many credit to the Eastern Policy (*Ostpolitik*) of West Germany under Chancellor Willy Brandt in the 1960s and 1970s.

Brandt was driven by a number of motives. One of them was to establish working relations with Eastern European countries, including the Soviet Union, in order to ease tensions. The drive was to take practical steps to improve living conditions and not let fundamental objectives, such as unification, turn into roadblocks. The second was to find a way to communicate with East Germany and to establish some kind of working relationship, with the ultimate aim of unification. The key component of *Ostpolitik*, as articulated by Brandt's colleague Egon Bahr, was *Wandel durch Annäherung*, change through rapprochement.

If the seemingly intractable definitive geopolitical conflict that lasted nearly half a century could be resolved through dialogue and consultation, and if their own country's division could be overcome through the pre-1989 engagement and post-1989 integration, then surely, many Germans reason, the same methods can be applied to the current political and security divides between Russia and the West.

Here the historical legacy of European integration (which, until recently, was widely considered a runaway success) more broadly looms large in German foreign policy. Germany was a major advocate of EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe; today's policy toward Russia is in many ways defined by this legacy. Germany is not an advocate of Russia's interests in the EU and NATO, but it is certainly an advocate of Russia's integration with these institutions.

German policy today

And the principles of *Ostpolitik* are alive and well in day-to-day German–Russian relations. Indeed, former foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier adapted *Wandel durch Annäherung* for the post-Cold War period in 2006, calling for *Annäherung durch Verflechtung* (rapprochement through interdependence) with Russia.⁵ But beyond position papers, Germany has implemented this policy on a number of levels:

- A bilateral modernization partnership that was the precursor to the EU–Russia Partnership for Modernization.⁶ The partnership was initiated by German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in 2008. In a speech in Yekaterinburg Steinmeier delineated the main topics: science and education, climate change, energy efficiency, demography, infrastructure and health policy. The modernization partnership was an attempt to find common ground with Russia on issues that could be addressed jointly.⁷ Under the banner of the Modernization Partnership, a number of projects have already been launched, such as the German Science and Innovation Forum in Moscow and a logistics center at St. Petersburg State University.
- A dense network of state-sponsored society-to-society linkages, including via the political foundations,⁸ regularized and multi-issue Track II meetings under the aegis of the German-Russian Forum and the Petersburg Dialogue,⁹ and twinned cities.
- Government encouragement of foreign direct investment by German small and medium-sized enterprises. Today the German Chamber of Commerce represents about 6,600 companies, located throughout almost all of Russia. Their activities have been instrumental in achieving whatever modicum of progress has occurred in corporate governance on a local scale. Germany's commercial interests in Russia also provide a forum for engagement with the government on economic reforms and the rule of law.
- RUDEA, a joint venture on boosting Russian energy efficiency between DENA (the German Energy Agency) and the Russian Ministry of Energy.¹⁰
- Consistent, regularized inter-parliamentary dialogue.

While the effectiveness of these policy instruments remains a subject of debate, they have created a broad web of relations between the two countries. In turn, this has to a certain extent insulated the bilateral relationship against the impact of volatility on the political level — for example, changes in leadership or disagreements between the governments.

Recommendations for the United States

The Obama administration's reset policy, with its emphasis on peer-to-peer civil society interaction, more business ties, and more government-to-government engagement, has many similarities. However, Washington arrived at similar prescriptions not through examination of Berlin's experiences, but through the lessons learned from the previous administration's approach to Moscow. Going forward, the United States should:

- Consult closely with the German government about lessons learned from its engagement with Russia;
- Shape programs based on these lessons;
- Create an informal position similar to the German Coordinator for German-Russian Inter-Societal Cooperation, an MP who has an office in the Foreign Ministry;¹¹ the Coordinator serves as the public face of the society-to-society ties, supporting NGOs and, through them, democracy and the rule of law generally;
- Ensure that, as in Germany, government-led societal engagement puts societal actors in the vanguard;
- Signal to the US public that change in Russia is a long-term proposition, and that Western engagement will be effective only if it focuses on the long term.

Recommendations for Germany

It goes without saying that German policy is not without its flaws, and here lessons from the American experience could prove helpful. First, some Germans *do* confuse constructive dialogue with a perceived need to sugar-coat Russian realities and placate Russian sensibilities. The US practice of regularly speaking out about what's

happening in Russia, which has continued under President Obama,¹² can serve as a reminder of the limited downside for the bilateral relationship of regular, publicly voiced, honest assessments of the situation there.

Second, when it comes to disputes between Russia and NATO, Germany has often taken a back-seat in engaging Moscow, while at the same time questioning US interest in European security. Discussions with Moscow on the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe are a prime example. CFE, although often cited by Berlin as a cornerstone of European security, never features prominently on the agenda at German-Russian summits. But the German government highly values the treaty and pushes the United States to engage with Moscow to revive it.

Finally, Germany can do much more to bring its NATO/EU member-state neighbors to its East on board with its approach to Russia. The tensions within both organizations caused by divergent threat perceptions vis-à-vis Russia is a major problem for Germany and the United States. The German government needs to do more to convince its reluctant allies. The Poland-Russia rapprochement, for example, was certainly facilitated by Berlin's engagement with Warsaw.

Recommendations for both governments

The two governments can also take certain steps to engage Russia more effectively:

- Coordinate messages, both public statements and those delivered on a government-to-government basis.
- Engage in dialogue, and together with other EU and NATO member states, devise a possible »division of labor« with regard to engagement with Moscow.
- Above all, regularly brief allies, and if possible, seek consensus among them on Russia policy.
- Coordinate civil society engagement, and, when possible, integrate efforts in order to avoid duplication and maximize effectiveness.

The View From Moscow

The cognitive dissonance between Germany and the United States on Russia policy has been exacerbated by the publicly declarations of many in Russia who mischaracterize the differences between the approaches of the two countries. Indeed, some in Moscow purport to be convinced that Germany and the United States have radically different assessments of their domestic politics and equally divergent approaches to engagement on security matters. They portray Germany as Russia's advocate inside the EU and NATO, and act as though it can take decisions either on behalf of all member states or in defiance of their preferences. Such characterizations, no matter how factually inaccurate, serve to undermine Germany's credibility among its allies.

This problem is exacerbated by certain actions taken by Berlin that seem to play into the hands of such perceptions. Indeed, German policy-makers might have squared the circle of their commitment to multilateral institutions and global governance, on one hand, and their relationship with Russia on the other, but others have not. The Meseberg Memorandum, signed by Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Dmitri Medvedev in June 2010, is a case in point.¹³ The German side has portrayed it as a modest attempt to incentivize Russian cooperation in resolving Moldova's separatist dispute by offering Moscow the opportunity to explore an institutionalized security dialogue with the EU in return for progress on the conflict. The Russian government, however, claims that the document guaranteed them such a dialogue, and some EU members were understandably concerned that Berlin was unilaterally appropriating an EU decision-making authority.

Conclusions

Neither Berlin nor Washington have discovered the »silver bullet« when it comes to Russia policy. Indeed, especially in terms of achieving shared goals vis-à-vis Russia's domestic development, the United States and Germany have both expended a lot of effort with relatively modest results. Going forward, both countries would do well to assess the effectiveness of their engagement based on the extent to which it furthers their interests, while remaining mindful of the limits of what they can achieve. While the answer to the question of »what to do«

remains elusive, one thing is clear: when Germany and the United States pursue divergent policy approaches toward Russia, one can seriously undermine the other.

Finally, the German–US–Russian triad offers an important forum for addressing the lacunae in the post-Cold War Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Clearly, Russian President Medvedev's proposal for a Euro-Atlantic Security Treaty is a non-starter, precisely because the prerequisites for such an all-encompassing document – mutual trust, confidence, and a solid track record of security cooperation – are absent. But Germany, because of the depth of its ties to Russia, the United States, because of its lynchpin role in NATO, especially for newer member states, and Russia, because of its primacy in Eurasian security arrangements, are in a position to lead a process among all states of the Euro-Atlantic area to create those prerequisites. It might not happen in the short term, but only through such steps can the vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace be attained. The lack of ideological divides and the wide array of shared threats, challenges, and opportunities suggest that, despite current roadblocks, it remains a realizable vision.

1 It is of course important to note that neither US nor German political elites have uniform views of Russia or Russia policy.

2 Philip Stephens, »Testing Times for the West's Odd Couple,« *Financial Times*, August 4, 2011.

3 John Vinocur, »Merkel Is Dancing with a Bear,« *International Herald Tribune*, July 21, 2011.

4 See <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,444069,00.html>.

5 See <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Interviews/2006/061014-SteinmeierRBB.html>

6 See http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/RegionaleSchwerpunkte/Russland/Russland_node.html and http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/russia/press_corner/all_news/news/2010/20100601_01_en.htm.

7 See www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2008/080513-BM-Russland.html.

8 German NGOs politically close to but financially independent of parliamentary parties.

9 See www.deutsch-russisches-forum.de; www.petersburger-dialog.de.

10 See <http://rudea-energy.com/>.

11 See http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/sid_F00C7048278347318E4E9E91DDC69B3E/EN/AAmt/Koordinatoren/D-RUS-Koord/D-RUS-Koordinator_node.html

12 See <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/ci/rs/c41670.htm>.

13 See <http://www.russianmission.eu/sites/default/files/user/files/2010-06-05-meseberg-memorandum.pdf>.



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