



How Germany helped blaze Putin's path into Ukraine

Berlin gave the Russian president the benefit of the doubt until it was too late.



People protest Ukraine intervention in front of the Russian Embassy in Berlin, Germany | Omer Messinger/Getty Images

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BERLIN — As Moscow waged war in Georgia in the fall of 2008, German political and business elites gathered in Russia's palatial embassy in the country's capital for a lavish ball featuring of caviar, Champagne and song.

“Russia has no fear in Berlin,” one visitor recounted at the time. “Russia is among friends.”

For Germany, the party never stopped.

From the Georgian invasion to the annexation of Crimea, the downing of MH-17 and the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, Germany has always found a way to forgive its friend to the east. As BASF's then-chief executive, Eggert Voscherau, told the enthusiastic partygoers in 2008, peace can't be achieved “through exclusion.”

The sentiment — Germany's unofficial Russia policy ever since — helped blaze Vladimir Putin's path into Ukraine, precipitating what many fear could be the collapse of Europe's post-Cold War security architecture.

After Putin signed decrees declaring the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk independent of Ukraine and dispatched more troops there, Germany announced it wouldn't grant the Nord Stream 2 pipeline an operating license. But it was too little, too late.

There are many fathers of the disaster unfolding in Ukraine. The United States refused for years to believe that Putin was as dangerous as he has turned out to be. The United Kingdom was more interested in attracting oligarchs' wealth than in asking where it came from.

But make no mistake: No country has done more to downplay and forgive Russia's transgressions than Germany. In popular mythology, that loyalty (like much else in modern Germany) is tangled up in its war guilt. If that were really the reason though, Germany would owe an even greater debt to Ukraine and Belarus, countries that lost even more of their people in the war at the hands of the Germans but who barely even feature in the country's collective remembrance culture.

The truth is, Germans like to do business with Russia. As the BASF CEO noted at the ball in 2008, “energy-rich Russia” and “technology-rich Germany” are a good match. In addition to former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, the affair attracted a broad swath of German elites, from football legend Franz Beckenbauer to state leaders to the chief executive of Porsche.

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Why let a little incursion or two rain on the parade?

German defense contractors certainly haven't seen much reason to.

For Putin, the big lesson from Georgia was that Russia's military was not as capable as he thought, so he set about modernizing it with — you guessed it — Germany's help. One particularly controversial project involved the sale of combat simulation systems for €100 million. Under pressure from allies, the German government eventually canceled the deal — after 95 percent of the gear had been delivered.

Even after Putin annexed Crimea and triggered the war in east Ukraine, Berlin refused to join the U.S. in sanctioning Moscow, agreeing only to do after nearly 300 innocents were killed in the downing of MH-17.

Thereafter, Germany continued to give Putin the benefit of the doubt, despite repeated reminders — whether Russia's role in Syria's destruction or the murder of a Chechen rebel leader in broad daylight in central Berlin — that he couldn't be trusted.

Putin's decision this week to shred the so-called Minsk protocols, blueprints for ending the war in eastern Ukraine negotiated in large part by Germany, should lay to rest claims that he ever took Berlin's calls for “dialogue” (repeated like a mantra for years by former Chancellor Angela Merkel and her foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who has since become president) very seriously.

He was just playing for time.

With oil prices high, Russia's coffers full and his military at the height of its capability, Putin is perfectly poised to invade Ukraine and realize his larger aim of ensuring the country doesn't drift further into the Western fold.

Many Germans, however, see another culprit behind the Ukraine crisis: NATO. The myth that Washington promised Russia not to expand NATO eastward is considered received wisdom in many quarters of Germany. That's due in large part to the fact that people are regularly told so on German public television.

As part of the false balance German media tend to create when it comes to Russia, members of the Left, a party born of the former East Germany's Communist Party, are often invited to news programs and talk shows about Ukraine. (Never mind that the party won less than 5 percent at the last German election.)

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“NATO has expanded, not Russia,” Sevim Dağdelen, a leading member of the Left told a primetime audience last week.

Sahra Wagenknecht, one of the Left's most-prominent members, followed a few days later on a popular Sunday program, accusing America of seeking to “conjure up” an invasion with “aggressive” rhetoric.

While it might be easy for the discerning viewer to dismiss such claims as absurd, their constant repetition to an audience of millions has helped Russia drive a wedge into German public opinion, one that Putin has used to complete Nord Stream 2 and sow doubt about the country's alliance with the U.S.

More than half of Germans don't want Ukraine to join NATO anytime soon, for example. And as recently as last month, two-thirds of Germans supported putting Nord Stream 2 into operation.

One of the people most responsible for creating that wedge is Sigmar Gabriel, former leader of the Social Democrats who also served as both economy and foreign minister in Merkel's Cabinet.

“I supported Nord Stream because I believed in the notion that economic projects carry a peace dividend,” Gabriel told German radio in an interview on Wednesday. “The question for me and Merkel is whether we were too optimistic.”

Putin would appear to have settled that question once and for all. Whether Germany will abandon its magnanimous stance toward Russia is another question.

On Tuesday, about 600 people gathered in front of the Russian Embassy in Berlin to protest the Kremlin's latest invasion of Ukraine.

Neither Gabriel, who attended the ball in 2008, nor any of the other party guests, for that matter, were anywhere to be seen.

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