

# Russia—A Threat to European Security? A View from Germany

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Tensions between Russia and the European Union, the United States and others have been high since the Russian annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014. Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggressive move sent shockwaves around the world—few believed he was capable of such an overt maneuver. As the dust settled, Germany stepped forward to advocate for a robust response and sanctions against the Russian Federation. Although Germany has at times been branded a “reluctant leader,” Chancellor Angela Merkel showed fortitude and resolve while navigating this complex situation.

Germany's history of division—straddling east and west—and reunification gives it a unique perspective on the current chill in Russian-European relations. Merkel in particular, with her personal history living in East Germany, is perhaps the European leader best suited to handle the widening divide. As decisions are made on an international level about continuing sanctions and the NATO presence in Poland and the Baltics, all eyes will be on Merkel and the Federal Republic. However, opinions in Germany are far from homogeneous when it comes to the way forward.

## Public Perception: the Great East-West Divide

A March 2016 survey by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and its Polish partner, the Institute of Public Affairs (ISP), found that while a large minority of Germans polled (38 percent) perceived Russia to be a military threat, the majority (56 percent) did not.<sup>2</sup> Opinions in Germany were almost the same in a poll conducted one year earlier, even though emotions

were running high at that time in the midst of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Germans, however, are split along the former “East-West divide” in their perception of the Russian threat. In 2015 and 2016 alike, residents of western Germany tended to fear Russia more—44 percent in 2015, 39 percent in 2016, as compared with 31 percent and 32 percent of eastern Germans in 2015 and 2016.

While the Cold War may be over, it continues to shape the way that Germans from eastern and western Germany perceive Russia even today. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, those in the west saw Russia as a foreign and powerful threat. Germans in the east did not have the same experience. While their freedoms might have been curtailed during Soviet times, they developed a greater understanding of the Kremlin and Russian culture.

Germans in the east may also remember the poor state of the Soviet army leaving Germany and thus may not believe that same army could pose a real threat. However, the modernization of the Russian army under Putin's administration has become an increasing concern throughout Germany. This has been particularly clear since the annexation of Crimea and Russia's military engagement in eastern Ukraine, and as new information about Russian militarization has come to light.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, Poles and people from the Baltic states are indeed afraid of Russia's military might and potential, as recent polls have shown. For Poles and non-Russian people from the Baltic states, perceptions of Russia are influenced deeply by

their suffering under Russian and Soviet aggression in the past, not only in World War II and during Communism, but dating back even earlier.<sup>4</sup>

Seventy-six percent of Poles surveyed were convinced that Russia posed a threat to Poland, with only 14 percent not seeing a threat.<sup>5</sup> Both Estonia and Latvia have large minorities (30 percent and more than 40 percent, respectively) whose first language is Russian. Perceptions of Russia in these states are divided along ethnic lines. Overall, 59 percent of respondents from Estonia and 43 percent from Latvia said they felt threatened by Russia in military terms. Yet when broken down by ethnicity, those numbers reveal a stark divide: Eighty percent of native Estonian speakers and 69 percent of native Latvian speakers surveyed see Russia as a threat, while only tiny shares of the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia (7 percent) and Latvia (5 percent) agree.<sup>6</sup>

While Germans may not see Russia as a threat, they would agree with their eastern neighbors that Russia under Putin is not a reliable international partner. As a result, most Germans do not think that the Federal Republic should closely cooperate with the Kremlin. Only one in three Germans polled (33 percent) favored closer cooperation, almost the same rate as in 2013.

### Germany's Debate About Russia

Although most in Germany are critical of the Kremlin and do not support cooperation between the two states, a certain portion of the population supports Putin and the Russian Federation. The term *Russlandversteher*, or person who understands (sympathizes with) Russia, has found its way into common usage in the German media over the past few years. The *Russlandversteher* in Germany include a broad spectrum of people from both far-right and far-left, some pragmatic politicians and Germans in the east who are perhaps nostalgically looking back to the “good old Soviet times.”

In December 2014 a group of prominent so-called *Russlandversteher* published an open letter entitled “War Again in Europe? Not in Our Names!” calling on the German government to take a less aggressive approach to the annexation of Crimea and the media to present a more balanced narrative. Signatories included former Federal President Roman Herzog of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), acclaimed film director Wim Wenders, business people, journalists and even a few bishops. Although not in the majority, these advocates for greater understanding have a powerful voice in the Federal Republic.

Some argue that NATO “counteraction” against Russia is “provocative behavior.” NATO expansion could also be seen as a threat to Russian security. Since 1989, Russia has seen the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the loss of territory,

### *Russlandversteher*

Literally translated, this expression means “person who understands Russia.” The verb “verstehen” has a dual meaning similar to the English verb “to understand,” and so implies an understanding of the facts of an issue as well as an “emotional” understanding in the sense of “sympathizing.” The latter sense underlies the idea of “*Russlandversteher*”: The term characterizes a person who not only understands Russia—if ever one can “understand” Russia in the primary meaning of the word—but very clearly supports it.

influence and global power. Worst of all, from Putin’s point of view, not only did Russia lose its status as a world power, but gave this very power up to its former arch-enemy, the United States (or rather NATO). NATO integrated all the former Eastern European Warsaw Pact states, and three former republics of the USSR on top of that.

From this perspective, “who is perceived to pose a threat to whom?” may be a more critical question than “who started the conflict?” The former has always been the *raison d’être* behind arms races, military deterrence and, ultimately, measures of proactive defense (or worse, aggression).<sup>7</sup>

### Russian Propaganda

There is another group that must not be ignored in this debate, the Russian Germans, or *Russlanddeutsche*. This term denotes ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union, many of whom have settled in Germany, where they now number 2-3 million people.<sup>8</sup> This group is typically apolitical, but in January 2016, many were mobilized after media reports surfaced of the alleged rape of Lisa F., a 13-year-old Russian German girl in Berlin. The girl told police she had been kidnapped and raped by migrants who looked “Middle Eastern,” but later admitted making up the whole story in order to get out of trouble with her family. But long before it became clear that the accusation was false, the damage had been done. A Russian journalist published Lisa’s story, and it was broadly covered in the Russian state media. Russian Germans organized large demonstrations in front of the chancellery in Berlin and in other German cities and argued that the government was not doing enough to protect them. In response, many others in Germany voiced their concern about Russia’s manipulation of the whole case.<sup>9</sup> The incident and subsequent protests caused a minor diplomatic crisis between Berlin and the Kremlin.



### Russian Germans (*Russlanddeutsche*)

German settlers first arrived in the region known as Kievan-Rus, home to a loose federation of East Slavic tribes in present-day Russia and Ukraine, in the late 9th century. Initially, settlers from Germany lived among the Russian people, but in the late 17th century, Czar Alexey Mihailovich forced all foreigners to move outside of Moscow's city limits. The area became known as the "New German" or "German Quarter." Russians called those unable to speak Russian (particularly Western Europeans) "German" or "nemtsy." The term came from Russian "nemoy," meaning "mute."

Catherine the Great was herself a Prussian princess who married into the Russian imperial family. She actively recruited migrants from abroad, especially Germany, promising special privileges such as religious freedom, exemption from military service and local self-administration. Most Germans who answered her call settled as farmers in the Volga region. These German settlers achieved moderate prosperity and became politically and economically influential.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the German settlers lost their special status and were subject to politically motivated "Russification measures." Many emigrated, often to North and South America, in the years leading up to World War I. When the war broke out, the approximately 2.4 million Russian Germans living in Russia were considered potential traitors. While Russian Germans continued to migrate to the Americas during the Bolshevik Revolution and Russian Civil War, emigration came to a standstill under Joseph Stalin's rule. Volga Germans were briefly able to maintain some autonomy by founding the German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR in 1924. When Adolf Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, invading the USSR in 1941, the autonomous republic was abolished and war broke out between the two states. Russian Germans were again seen as potential traitors and sent east to Siberia and Kazakhstan, many forced into manual labor.

As Germany faced defeat, many Russian Germans who had remained in European Russia followed Hitler's retreating army west to Germany. A trickle of migration continued in the following decades. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika in the 1980s and the fall of the Soviet Union led to more significant migration flows to Germany at the end of the 20th century.

The case of Lisa F. brings to light the broader issue of what many have termed Russian "propaganda" as part of the Kremlin's "hybrid war." Much has been written about Russian propaganda and Putin's so-called "troll factories," armies of internet agitators who disseminate pro-Russian misinformation. News outlets such as Russia Today (RT) now publish their stories in English, German and several other European languages, broadening their potential audience. The EU established a task force to address the question of how to react without resorting to true "counter-propaganda" à la Putin. Their efforts include the publication of the Disinformation Review, which, as its name suggests, highlights cases of disinformation circulated in Europe and beyond.

Golineh Atai, Moscow correspondent for Germany's ARD channel, was one of the first well-known and respected journalists who spoke out openly in Germany about the "information war" facing journalists covering Russia. In her acceptance speech for Medium magazine's "Journalist of the Year 2014" prize in February 2015, she addressed the

power of the Kremlin's propaganda machine and the self-censorship to which many journalists outside of Russia have resorted in order to avoid its wrath.<sup>10</sup> Since then, more journalists and commentators in Germany have dared to speak out, and Germans have become increasingly aware of how the Kremlin uses the media to promote its own interests. As the case of Lisa F. has shown, this is still a long and difficult process, even in a country like Germany, which values press freedom greatly as a result of its own history.

### Policymakers

While most Germans (64 percent) do not see Putin's Russia as a reliable partner, the majority (59 percent) hope that Merkel will be able to improve relations with the Kremlin.<sup>11</sup> Merkel, with her personal history of involvement in the demonstrations for freedom in East Germany, has a complex relationship with Moscow.

On a cultural and linguistic level, Merkel and Putin understand one another and each other's backgrounds. Merkel is a fluent Russian speaker and well-versed in Russian literature and

# A History of German-Russian Relations

## 9th - 13th centuries

German settlers arrive in "Kievan Rus"—a loose federation of East Slavic tribes based in present-day Ukraine and Russia



## 1914 - 1918

World War I – Germany and Soviet Union are at war. Germans living in Russia are seen as potential traitors



## 1917 - 1922

Russian Civil War



## 1939

World War II begins in Europe, Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact keeps the peace between Russia and Germany



## From 1941

Russian Germans deported to Kazakhstan and Siberia, many are put into forced labor



## 1945 - 1946

Nuremberg Trials - Allied Powers (USSR, U.S., Great Britain and France) try 22 Nazi criminals



## 1949

GDR (German Democratic Republic) in the east and the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) in the west established as separate states



## Late 1980s

Migration of Russian Germans from USSR to Germany increases under Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika



## 1990

German Reunification



## Since 1991

More than 2 million Russian Germans migrate from the former Soviet Union to Germany



1763



Catherine the Great (born a Prussian princess) signs decree to recruit Germans and other foreigners to settle in her empire— 30,000 people (mostly Germans) arrive within the first five years

1917



Bolshevik Revolution

1924 - 1941



Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within USSR

1941



Nazi Germany launches "Operation Barbarossa" and invades the Soviet Union. Approximately 11 million Soviet soldiers and millions of civilians are killed

1943 - 1948



Many Russian Germans leave Russia for Europe, North America and elsewhere

1948 - 1949



Soviet blockade of West Berlin – U.S. airlift sustains city

1961



Construction on the Berlin Wall begins

1989



Fall of the Berlin Wall

1991



Fall of the Soviet Union

2014



Russia annexes Crimea – Germany responds with criticism and supports EU sanctions

culture. For Putin's part, the German language was a major focus of his KGB training, which he put to use while he was stationed in Dresden in the second half of the 1980s.

Despite this understanding, Merkel is critical of Putin. When pro-Russian forces mobilized in Crimea on March 1, 2014, Merkel publicly spoke about the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The tone of a phone conversation between Merkel and Putin a day later was described as "frosty": In that call, Putin admitted for the first time that the militia active in Crimea was directly connected with Russian troops. Merkel's statement to the press after this phone conversation is considered one of the most severe of her time in office.<sup>12</sup> Merkel went further in a phone call with U.S. President Barack Obama. The New York Times reported that she voiced doubts about whether Putin "was in touch with reality" or lived "in another world."<sup>13</sup>

Merkel leads the Bundestag's grand coalition of the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and center-left Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). Traditionally, the CDU and perhaps more so its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), have been more critical of Russia. However, in recent years, this position has become more complex. Many CDU/CSU politicians still back tough sanctions and an aggressive approach toward Russia. Norbert Röttgen (CDU), chairman of the Bundestag's Committee on Foreign Affairs recently stated that "there is no reason to change the existing course" and that until Russia changes its Ukraine policy, "an easing of the sanctions would divide Western policy and seriously weaken both its credibility and influence."<sup>14</sup> Although Röttgen has a powerful voice in the Bundestag, some CDU/CSU politicians have taken a different approach. Bavarian Minister President Horst Seehofer (CSU), for example, visited the Kremlin in February 2016 to advocate for improved relations between Germany and Russia. Although one of his motives may have been to undermine Merkel and her relatively tough stance toward Putin, his visit demonstrated a shift in his party's platform on Russia.

The SPD, on the other hand, has historically been more understanding and tolerant toward both Russia and its leader. The socialist party has had what some refer to as a "special relationship" with the Kremlin since the era of Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* (Eastern policy). The term denotes the Federal Republic of Germany's foreign policy from 1969–1989, which sought reconciliation and a balance of power with the Soviet Union and the Eastern European states. Rapprochement and pragmatism were favored over a more hardline approach. Social democrats and others believe that this strategy enabled the fall of the Berlin Wall and eventually the reunification of Germany. Without a strong relationship between the Federal Republic and USSR, they reason, the Kremlin would never have allowed Germany to reunify in

such a peaceful way. As a result, many feel gratitude toward Russia for allowing reunification.

Gerhard Schröder continued the party's tradition of friendly ties with the Kremlin as chancellor in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Even now, Schröder remains a vocal advocate for improving German-Russian relations and, as discussed earlier, he was one of the signatories of the open letter to the German government and media in 2014. This advocacy is often linked to Schröder's connections to Russia's Gazprom, which will be discussed in the following section.

## On a cultural and linguistic level, Merkel and Putin understand one another

Parties on the far right and far left, which are currently not part of the ruling coalition, have also shown support for Putin and the Russian Federation and been critical of NATO. On the far right, Alexander Gauland, one of the top officials for the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) recently claimed that NATO is "an instrument of American geopolitics."<sup>15</sup> The party warns against close alignment with the United States and advocates instead for improved dialogue with Russia. Likewise, members of the Left Party (die Linke) have been critical of the "Western" reaction to the situation in Ukraine. They also advocate for a more lenient approach toward Russia and reject what they perceive as U.S.-influenced policy.

### Leading from the Center

Although there are strong disagreements within the German government about the appropriate response to Russian aggression, Merkel's stalwart approach has largely steered the nation's policy. The chancellor's ability to effect change comes not only from her leadership at home, but also from her strength as a leader in Europe and globally through Germany's membership in multilateral institutions and international organizations including NATO, the G7 and the EU. As discussed in the chapter on Germany's role in the EU, the Federal Republic prefers to act in concert with these larger organizations in order to effect change and mitigate risk.

Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen has described this German approach to foreign policy—and the Ukraine crisis specifically—as "leading from the center." She defines the term as "to contribute one's best resources and capabilities to alliances and partnerships," while simultaneously enabling "others with less resources to make their vital contributions as equal partners."<sup>16</sup> In Ukraine, she asserts, "Germany has

demonstrated appropriate commitment at an early stage,” as a part of NATO, the EU and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).<sup>17</sup> According to von der Leyen, Germany’s approach to Russian aggression in Ukraine is rooted in its ability to lead within these partnerships.

Merkel’s personal political capital, combined with her country’s growing economic and political clout, have put Germany in this powerful position. Berlin can exert serious influence within multilateral organizations and effect global and European change. As the longest-serving leader in the EU, Merkel has close personal connections to her counterparts across the continent. These relationships and the respect that she has earned in Brussels and throughout Europe enabled her to rally a consensus that sanctions against Russia were needed to apply pressure on the Kremlin to de-escalate the situation in Ukraine. Despite the protests of some leaders, Merkel was successful in either persuading or strong-arming each of them to agree to the sanctions and later to support an extension of those sanctions.

Although Merkel may have been successful in implementing the policy she felt was needed, the sanctions have not yet produced the results that Merkel had hoped for. Russian aggression continues to create anxiety, especially in NATO’s eastern flank. Furthermore, those suffering the brunt of the sanctions both domestically in Germany and throughout the EU are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the German hardline approach.

### Cutting Economic Ties?

Many German companies are suffering losses because of the sanctions, and some business leaders have been critical of the policy. However, German industry on the whole has backed the sanctions. Ulrich Grillo, president of the Federation of German Industries, argues that long-term security is more important than short-term financial gains.<sup>18</sup>

## Berlin can exert serious influence within multilateral organizations and effect global and European change

Despite the sanctions, some business ventures are able to continue. One such venture currently being debated is Nord Stream 2, a natural gas pipeline that would run between

Russia and Germany through the Baltic Sea. Russian Gazprom and several European energy companies including German BASF/Wintershall and Uniper, an energy company that recently split off from E.ON, are spearheading the project. Schröder has been chairman of the Shareholders’ Committee for Nord Stream since he left office in 2005.

Proponents say that the pipeline is purely about business, not the current political situation. The companies involved hope to make a profit by increasing the volume of gas transported and bypassing the hefty transit fees imposed by Ukraine and other Eastern European states. Supporters also assert that the pipeline will improve the diversity of the energy landscape in Europe, thus improving the continent’s energy security.

Nord Stream 2’s critics argue that the pipeline would undermine existing sanctions, even though it would not violate them directly. It would also increase Europe’s energy dependence on Russia, which the Kremlin could use to its geopolitical advantage. Leaders of several Central and Eastern European states, including states that currently collect substantial gas transit fees and will be bypassed by the new pipeline, wrote a letter of concern to European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in March 2016. They expressed their fears about energy security and energy dependence on Russia. More recently, Poland’s antitrust authority presented opposition to the Nord Stream consortium on the grounds that such a merger would lead to a “restriction of competition” in the market already dominated by Gazprom.

Within the EU, Germany initially spearheaded the campaign to impose sanctions. However, in recent months, it has taken a decidedly softer approach. Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier told the press that “an all or nothing approach, even if it sounds good, doesn’t work.” He continued, “We must still be able to have a joint reflection if we want to find solutions for other big conflicts.”<sup>19</sup> However, as long as the Minsk Agreements are not fulfilled, the German government does not seem likely to consider easing sanctions.

### Old Promises?

In Berlin and elsewhere, decision makers and experts alike are increasingly reconsidering whether isolating Russia is the appropriate strategy and if economic sanctions are productive.

Polish and Baltic fears and demands must also be taken into account: Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski told his German counterpart Steinmeier that Poland wants additional security packages and expects Germany, the United States, Canada and other NATO partners to show more military strength at the Alliance’s eastern border. NATO recently made the decision to send four battalions, 4,000 troops in total, straight to the eastern flank of the alliance in Poland and



the three Baltic states. These moves are meant to assuage real anxieties about future Russian aggression.

NATO troops in Central and Eastern Europe on a permanent basis would be a clear violation of the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris in 1997. The act's stated mission is to "build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security."<sup>20</sup> It was initiated to assuage Moscow's concerns about NATO's eastern enlargement.

Some have argued that the German and U.S. governments made promises about limiting NATO expansion to then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in February 1990 in order to get Moscow's approval for German reunification. In fact, there is no formal, legally binding document stating such a promise or agreement.<sup>21</sup> Gorbachev stated in an interview in 2014, "The topic of 'NATO expansion' was not discussed at all, and it wasn't brought up in those years." However, the former leader recalled, "Another issue we brought up was discussed: making sure that NATO's military structures would not advance and that additional armed forces from the alliance would not be deployed on the territory of the then-GDR after German reunification."<sup>22</sup> Many in Russia feel that these alleged assurances have been violated by NATO in recent years.

### A Final Word

As time has passed, it has become increasingly clear that Russia will not return Crimea to Ukraine. *Russlandversteh'er* argue that the status quo of sanctions and saber-rattling is not a sustainable long-term solution. At the same time, Putin's critics see these measures as critical to preserving world order. There is no consensus among policymakers within the ruling coalition and even within the individual parties. In the coming months, there will be a real debate about the way forward with Russia.

These domestic German debates have a broad impact far beyond Berlin. Germany has proven itself to be a European and global leader in recent years. Despite the deep understanding that Putin and Merkel share, Putin overstepped a line for the chancellor with the annexation of Crimea. This violation has affected German-Russian relations ever since. Merkel and her government's approach toward Russia will certainly continue to have an impact on the EU's choice of policy toward their eastern neighbor. This will have far-reaching global consequences in the long run. The Federal Republic, together with the other EU member states, will continue to shape broader global policy toward Russia in the future.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### ABOUT NEWPOLITIK

Newpolitik provides in-depth analysis of German foreign and domestic policy issues for policymakers beyond Berlin.

## Citations

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- 18 "BDI-Chef hält Russland-Sanktionen für sinnvoll", *Handelsblatt*, May 20, 2015, <http://www.handelsblatt.com/unternehmen/industrie/deutsche-industrie-bdi-chef-haelt-russland-sanktionen-fuer-sinnvoll/11802396.html>.
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- 20 Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation (Brussels: NATO, 1997).
- 21 For more on the "German question," the events around German reunification, Germany as part of NATO, the Alliance's potential Eastern enlargement, Gorbachev's role in all this and the chances missed in the process by both east and west truly to end the Cold War, see: Katja Gloger, *Putins Welt, Das neue Russland, die Ukraine und der Westen*, (Munich/Berlin: Katja Gloger und Berlin Verlag, 2015), pp. 228ff.
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