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# Germany Worried about Russian Influence in the Balkans

## Putin's Reach: Merkel Concerned about Russian Influence in the Balkans

*By SPIEGEL Staff*



REUTERS

Russian President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel at the 70th anniversary of D-Day commemoration in June.

**Berlin has begun to see Moscow as an adversary rather than as a potential partner. The German government is concerned about efforts by Russian President Vladimir Putin to increase his influence in the Balkans. Stopping him, however, could prove difficult.**

It is a fundamental principle of German foreign policy that talks are the best way to solve diplomatic problems. Such was the rationale behind Gernot Erler's recent trip to Moscow to speak with Russian parliamentarians about the ongoing Ukraine-related difficulties. Erler is the German government's Russia liaison and he has spent much of his political career working towards better relations between Germany and Russia. But his recent trip to the Russia capital was a painful one. There was no one in parliament who was willing to speak with him.

For Erler, the message was clear: Russia is no longer particularly interested in dialogue. That is true for simple parliamentarians just as it is for Vladimir Putin. The Russian president still, to be sure, speaks regularly with Angela Merkel. But the chancellor believes that what Putin says and what Putin does have long since diverged. Russian policy, says Erler, is currently following the "principle of organized unpredictability."

Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who sought to establish a "positive agenda" with Moscow when he took office, is particularly frustrated. In recent weeks, Steinmeier has complained several times of significant breaches of trust perpetrated by the Russians and says he doesn't foresee relations with Moscow normalizing any time soon. Merkel is of the same opinion.

From the perspective of Berlin, Russia has gone from being a difficult partner to being an adversary within just one year. The effort launched in 2008 to tighten cooperation on a number of issues, one in which German leaders placed a great deal of hope, would seem to have come to an irrevocable end. Instead, Berlin is now discussing ways in which it might be able to slow down Russia's expansionary drive -- particularly in the Balkans, a region in which some states are not entirely stable. Elmar Brock, a member of Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) and the chairman of the European Parliament's Foreign Policy Committee, is also concerned about the region. "It is part of a broad strategic approach by Russia to 'infiltrate' the countries politically but mostly economically," he says.

Cold War recipes are coming back into fashion. It is time to begin thinking about a new "containment strategy," says one high-ranking diplomat. The reference is to the concept for curbing Soviet power that was first sketched out in a famous telegram sent in February 1946 by then-US Ambassador to Moscow George Kennan. It went on to become the foundation for Western policy in relations with the Soviet Union.

**The Birth of 'Putinology'**

Stefan Meister, a Russia expert at the German Council on Foreign Relations, agrees, saying that the West needs to focus on self-defense to a greater degree than it has thus far. One official at Merkel's Chancellery says that in some ways the situation is even more difficult than it was during the latter phases of the Soviet Union. Back then, the official says, Moscow at least adhered to agreements.

During the Cold War, Kremlinology was the word used to describe efforts to determine the true intentions of the Soviet leadership. That discipline has now been replaced by "Putinology," but the emphasis on speculation has remained. Even the chancellor, despite dozens of conversations with Putin, doesn't know how far the Russian president is willing to go in the current conflict with the West, or even whether he knows himself. She has spoken to Putin at least 35 times by phone since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis. She also requested a [transcript](http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/23137) of a speech given by Putin at the Valdai Club in Sochi four weeks ago. In it, the Russian president laid out his world view before journalists and political science experts. It is not a view that made Merkel more optimistic.

According to Putin's thinking, the US destroyed the international legal system and is attempting to establish a unipolar global order. He said that the so-called victor of the Cold War is trying to reorganize the world according to its own interests. Putin said that Washington is responsible for the rise of Islamist terrorism as well as the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Libya.

Whereas the US cavalierly intervenes around the world, Washington reproaches Russia for doing exactly that, Putin said with a view toward Ukraine. "What Jupiter is allowed, the Ox is not," he said, referring to the Latin phrase often used to indicate a double standard. But the bear, he continued, "will not even bother to ask for permission." The bear, he said, is the "master of the taiga" and will not cede it to anyone. Putin then said that he doesn't intend to advance into other climactic zones. The taiga refers to the forested region stretching all the way across Russia, and the sentence from Putin's speech has now led Berlin officials to wonder where the taiga ends for Putin and where other climactic zones might begin. Observers have been keeping close track of the Russian president's comments in this regard, but a complete picture has yet to emerge.

Merkel would seem to have drawn her own conclusions. At a Monday lecture held by the German chancellor at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney, where she was following the G-20 summit in Brisbane, Merkel was clear about her view of Russia. "Truly, the Ukraine crisis is in no way a regional issue," she said. "It affects all of us." During the following discussion, she warned that the EU will not yield to Moscow like East Germany once did. "Otherwise, one would have to say: We are too weak, be careful, we can't accept any others, we have to first ask Moscow if it is possible. That's how things were for 40 years; I never really wanted to return to that situation." She then made a particularly notable comment: "And that doesn't just apply to Ukraine. It applies to Moldova, it applies to Georgia. If the situation continues ... we'd have to ask about Serbia, we'd have to ask about the western Balkan countries."

**Tit-for-Tat Reprisals**

Her concerns about the Balkans are justified. Last Wednesday in the United Nations Security Council, Russia surprisingly refrained from voting in favor of extending the EURFOR mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It was the first time it has abstained in such a vote. The reason Moscow gave was that the resolution contained language referring to the country's prospective accession to the European Union. At the same time, Russia expressed reservations about Germany's announced candidacy for the 2016 presidency of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Over the weekend, Putin also left the G-20 summit before its official conclusion, though he claimed that his premature departure was related to the long flight back home to Moscow.

What's more, the Kremlin last week expelled Sabine Stöhr, a long-time employee of the German Embassy in Moscow. In a statement confirming the expulsion of the German diplomat, the Foreign Ministry in Berlin said: "An employee of the German Embassy in Moscow has left the country due to a reprisal measure taken by Russian authorities. We regret this unjust course of action and have expressed our displeasure to the Russian government."

The reprisal was apparently taken in response to the case of a Russian diplomat in the general consulate in Bonn who was accused of spying. German domestic intelligence agents had been observing the diplomat for months and ultimately expelled him from the country. In similar cases in the past, Russia has abstained from retaliation. "This is a policy of pinpricks," said a source in the Foreign Ministry. "We don't know where it is leading."

On Monday, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that several Polish diplomats have likewise been expelled, a move that also came in retaliation for the expulsion of Russian diplomats from Warsaw. The Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that "the Polish authorities have taken an unfriendly and unfounded step. In connection with that, Russia has undertaken adequate measures in response."

Apart from such tit-for-tat pettiness, Berlin has observed a broad new approach by the Kremlin in the Balkans. The focus, officials believe, is an attempt to prevent the region's further rapprochement with, or even accession to, the European Union. "RUS attaches great strategic importance to the Western Balkans," reads a Foreign Ministry analysis entitled: "Russia's Influence in Serbia."

The paper, which is classified as confidential, describes Moscow's efforts to link Belgrade closer to Russia. The endeavor goes beyond military cooperation and Russian deliveries of natural gas. Moscow, the paper indicates, is engaging in "public diplomacy with clear pan-Slavic rhetoric" and enjoys high esteem in the population, not least because of its approach to the Kosovo issue. "Putin's goal is to exert so much pressure on Balkan states that they either back away from EU membership or that, once they become members, influence EU resolutions in a pro-Russian manner," says EU parliamentarian Brok.

**Russian Soft Power**

The same holds true for Serbia's neighbor, Bosnia-Herzegovina. "One gets the impression that Russia is trying to gain influence over all of Bosnia-Herzegovina via the Serbian partial republic Srpska," says German Agricultural Minister Christian Schmidt, who recently made a visit to the region at the behest of Merkel. "That also makes the path of neighboring Serbia into the EU more difficult," he says.

The accuracy of Schmidt's assessment is demonstrated by a paper on "Russia's soft-power strategy" in the Balkans that was drafted for Putin by the influential Council on Foreign Relations in Moscow. The paper notes that: "In this region, which is traditionally tied to Russia, we cannot limit ourselves to investing in companies. We must spend money on infrastructure, and for the people there who see Russia as an alternative to Western power."

Putin would seem to have taken the advice to heart. The Russian Railways company, headed by Putin-ally Vladimir Yakunin, is currently refurbishing a 350-kilometer (217 mile) stretch of track in Serbia at a cost of three-quarters of a billion euros. Furthermore, the Moscow-based oil multinational Lukoil now owns 79.5 percent of the local service-station chain Beopetrol while Gazprom holds majority ownership of the country's largest natural gas supplier. "Russian investments have improved the prospects of regions that were heavily damaged by the NATO bombardment in 1999," the paper reads. In Montenegro, Russia is the largest foreign investor, with Russians controlling one-third of all companies in the country.

The German government believes that Russia's approach in the region has been largely successful. The Foreign Ministry analysis notes that October's 70th anniversary celebration of Belgrade's liberation from the Nazis was moved up by four days to coincide with Putin's visit there. It was also accompanied by a large military parade for the first time in 30 years. The paper doesn't fail to mention that Serbian President Tomislav Nikoli awarded Putin the country's highest decoration during the visit. "Images of tight srb.-rus. bond (are) from our perspective (an) inappropriate signal at a moment when SRB should be emphasizing its EU orientation," the German Foreign Ministry paper pointedly notes.

One particularly odd meeting underscores the methods Putin uses to expand his influence in Serbia. One year ago, Nikoli received the head of the Moscow motorcycle club Night Wolves, Alexander Zaldostanov. Putin refers to Zaldostanov (alias: The Surgeon) as his "brother." The gang has made repeated headlines for its outspoken anti-Semitism and homophobia, stances that are consistent with attitudes widely held in Serbia.

**Exerting Pressure Where Necessary**

It is not easy for the German government to counteract the Russian offensive. "We can't become party to it clear to the Balkan states that accession to the EU is in their interests." a bidding war," says Michael Roth, a state minister in the Foreign Ministry. "We have to continually make

Angela Merkel has also sought to thwart Putin's efforts diplomatically. At a Balkans conference in the Chancellery at the end of August, she encouraged the gathered heads of state and government to commit to a pro-EU path. She has even shown a willingness to exert pressure as necessary. Moscow's effort to grant diplomatic status to a disaster control center Russia established in the Serbian city of Niš is one example. Merkel called Serbian Prime Minister Aleksander Vuči to urge him not to sign the agreement. Berlin was worried that the center might develop into a permanent center of Russian espionage.

Putin's efforts to expand his influence do not stop at EU borders. The German government believes Putin was surprised that Europe was able to come to a consensus on Ukraine-related sanctions -- particularly the fact that even an accession candidate like Montenegro backed the penalties. Now he is doing his best on influence policy-making in individual EU member states, particularly in Bulgaria.

The country has traditionally been closely allied with Russia and is almost completely dependent on Russian natural gas and oil. An internal report from the German Foreign Ministry notes that around 300,000 Russians have bought property in Bulgaria. Officials in the Chancellery are concerned that Putin could seek to instrumentalize the alleged interests of the Russian minority there. Berlin and Brussels are likewise worried that the Bulgarian government could succumb to Russian pressure and block future EU foreign policy initiatives even more often than it has done in the past.

The fundamental problem from a Western standpoint is the fact that the desire for escalation and the ability to do so is not divided equally. Putin appears prepared to promote Russian interests in his neighborhood economically, politically and, if necessary, militarily. The West doesn't have much to offer in response -- and it is completely unwilling to go to war for Ukraine or Moldova. Even the economic sanctions against Russia are controversial in Germany and elsewhere in the EU.

**Bolting the Door**

Critics of Moscow, such as Andreas Schockenhoff, the deputy head of Merkel's conservatives in German parliament, believe that the sanctions must be maintained until the costs become too great for Putin. But even during the last round of EU sanctions, Merkel had difficulty convincing skeptics, such as Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and Hungarian Premier Viktor Orban to agree to the penalties. She was thus particularly upset by recent comments by the EU's new foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, calling the effectiveness of sanctions into question.

During a recent meeting of current and former state ministers in the Foreign Ministry, several participants likewise criticized Berlin's strategy, saying that more concessions must be made to the Russians. Social Democrat politician Klaus von Dohnanyi, for example, argued that Russia must be allowed a zone of influence in its immediate neighborhood.

The resulting image these days is of a Berlin that is at once impotent, alarmed and perplexed -- perhaps one reason that Germany's frustrated foreign minister, for lack of better alternatives, has committed to staying the current course. "Even if you have been frustrated and unsuccessful 100 times," Steinmeier recently told a confidant, "diplomacy means that you still have to open the door the 101st time."

The question, however, is whether the other side hasn't already long since bolted the door.

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