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Russia's Lavrov says Moscow concerned by German leaders

By Thomas Grove
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Russia said on Tuesday it was concerned by the behavior of German leaders and warned that Europe would suffer if Berlin stopped playing a constructive role in relations between Moscow and the West.

Under Chancellor Angela Merkel, Berlin has taken the lead in trying to convince President Vladimir Putin to engage with the West during the crisis in Ukraine but her criticism of Moscow has sharpened in the last few weeks.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov signaled that Moscow would not be lectured to and its patience was running out.

"We can't not express our concern over what our German colleagues are doing," he told a news conference after talks with Belgian Foreign Minister Didier Reynders.

"Germany has traditionally played a very constructive role regarding EU ties with Russia and the West as a whole with Russia. If Germany would decide to move to issuing orders, then Europe wouldn't win from that and neither would Germany."

As Merkel's patience has worn thin, she has accused Russia of breaking international law and interfering in the domestic affairs of countries seeking closer ties with Brussels.

Long German-speaking Putin's closest partner in the 28-nation European Union, Merkel has backed successive rounds of sanctions against Russia for its role in the Ukraine crisis.

Kiev and the West say Russia has stoked conflict in eastern Ukraine by sending arms and troops to pro-Russian rebels fighting government forces.

Merkel spelled out her position on Tuesday to her conservative Christian Democrats (CDU), saying Russia's annexation of the Crimea peninsula in March was illegal and that the crisis in eastern Ukraine was threatening European order.

"We have had to witness a shifting of borders in Europe, the annexation of Crimea and the questioning of territorial integrity – a core part of Europe's post-war model. The apparent right of whoever is strongest trumped the strength of law," she said.

"Russia has breached and is still breaching international law...neighboring states are suddenly no longer partner countries but spheres of influence," she said, underlining that only diplomacy could resolve the crisis.

German leaders have historically had close ties with Russia, but public opinion supports Merkel's increasingly hard stance against Moscow and the majority of Germans support EU sanctions against Russia, a poll for ZDF television showed last month.

Moscow says countries which support sanctions, in particular the United States, are trying to dictate policy to Moscow and accuses Washington of trying to force its will on Europe in the form of sanctions against Russia.

It annexed Crimea following a referendum in which the peninsula backed reunification with Russia, and about a month after a Moscow-backed president was ousted in Kiev.