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## Germany Struggles to Find United Stance on Russia

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**Russian aggression in Syria has divided Merkel's coalition government. The chancellor isn't opposed to more sanctions, but the Social Democrats favor a conciliatory approach -- and are preparing to use the issue in the coming election campaign. By SPIEGEL Staff**

On the day of his return from the United Nations General Assembly in New York on the last Monday in September, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier met with German Chancellor Angela Merkel for lunch. They talked for two hours, but their discussion was dominated by one single issue: Germany's relationship with Russia -- or, to be more precise, what remains of that relationship.

In meetings held on the sidelines of the General Assembly, Steinmeier became aware just how little interest Russia has in a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Syria. Even as he and other Western diplomats were doing all they could to get the Russians to the negotiating table, Russian bombs were falling on Aleppo and perhaps even on a UN aid convoy. Such actions stand "in direct contradiction to Russian claims that it supports a diplomatic solution," Steinmeier complained in concert with his counterparts from the US, France and Britain. The patience of the Western quintet -- a reference to the five leading countries involved in searching for a solution to the Syria crisis, made up of the US, Germany, France, Britain and Italy -- with Russia is "not unlimited," the German foreign minister said.

The patience of Steinmeier's party, the Social Democrats (SPD), by contrast, appears to be inexhaustible. Merkel, at least, didn't get the impression during her lunch with Steinmeier that he

and his party, her junior coalition partner, would be prepared to take a more hardline approach to Russia. On the contrary.

It isn't yet clear who will be the SPD's lead candidate in next year's general election, but a fundamental policy decision has already been made: The center-left Social Democrats intend to distance themselves from Merkel's Russia policies and to invoke their tradition as a party of peace.

They are doing so out of age-old conviction, but also out of tactical considerations. Large segments of the German population, particularly in the eastern part of the country, feel closer to Russia than to the United States. And many -- in western Germany too -- fear a new Cold War. As such, the SPD leadership believes that voters would be amenable to revisiting a policy of détente with the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

### **'Fundamentally Skeptical'**

The current debate over the possible imposition of new sanctions on Russia offers a preview of what may come. The US, Britain and France accuse Russia of probable war crimes in Syria, but SPD leaders reject the idea of applying new penalties on Moscow. "I am fundamentally skeptical of new sanctions against Russia in connection with the Syrian conflict," says Stephan Weil, the SPD governor of Lower Saxony.

That's bad news for Merkel. She is in principle supportive of intensifying sanctions if Russia, together with the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad, continues destroying Aleppo. But she is also facing pushback from the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Bavarian sister party to Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU). "I don't believe that new sanctions will cause Russia to come around," says Christian Schmidt, deputy head of the CSU.

Many governments in the European Union would also like to see a new approach to Russia. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has managed to get the issue on the agenda of this Thursday's dinner meeting of EU heads of state and government. On Monday, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said that Europe is not considering new sanctions on Russia.

The SPD, in short, can count on powerful allies both inside Germany and in the EU as it seeks to score points against the chancellor on the Russia issue in the coming months. "Invoking the peaceful policies of Willy Brandt and détente between east and west continues to engender uninterrupted support," Niels Annen, the SPD's foreign policy spokesman, said recently in the Bundestag, Germany's parliament. "Many voters continue to favor dialogue with Russia despite all of the difficulties and setbacks."

Already, SPD foreign policy events are well attended, says the party's deputy floor leader Rolf Mützenich. "As in past campaigns, the SPD should present itself as the party of peace," he says. The fact that pleas for cooperation with Moscow sound not unlike the pro-Putin sympathies of the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany is of no concern to Mützenich. "We aren't trying to curry favor with Putin." The SPD's task, he says, "is to identify new political paths in times of uncertainty."

## **'Waiting Impatiently'**

The SPD isn't just interested in avoiding new sanctions on Russia due to its role in Syria. The party would also like to see the lifting of sanctions imposed two years ago after the Russian annexation of Crimea and Moscow's support of separatists in eastern Ukraine. Erwin Sellering, an SPD member who was recently re-elected as the governor of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, has already successfully tested the new strategy. Even before the state parliamentary election campaign began, Sellering held a Russia Day for German companies and, in the presence of Russian Industry and Trade Minister Denis Manturov and SPD head Sigmar Gabriel, said: "We are all waiting impatiently for the sanctions to finally fall so we can resume our peaceful economic cooperation."

Matthias Platzeck, former SPD head and chair of the German-Russian Forum, says that relations with Russia have worsened considerably since the application of sanctions. "Everyone who is currently demanding new sanctions should keep that in mind."

The SPD believes that a majority of the German population supports its approach to Russia. Surveys regularly show that more than half, and sometimes up to two-thirds, of Germans believe that sanctions on Russia should be loosened or lifted completely. Sympathies for Putin are likewise astoundingly high. According to a survey commissioned by the influential German weekly *Die Zeit* in late August, 29 percent of Germans trust the Russia president just as much or more than the chancellor. The NATO dual strategy of deterrence and dialogue, by contrast, is unpopular. According to a survey conducted by the pollsters at Forsa, 63 percent of respondents believed that NATO should limit itself solely to dialogue.

German industry is also supportive of the course charted by the SPD, a party which business leaders have not traditionally seen as an ally. Germany is one of Russia's most important trading partners and the effects of the sanctions have been significant. In 2014, exports from Germany to Russia dropped by 18 percent and they dropped by another quarter last year.

In spring, Steinmeier proposed that sanctions against Russia be removed "step by step," and not just once Moscow has fulfilled all of the conditions laid out in the Minsk Protocol, the fall 2014 agreement that aimed to stop the fighting in eastern Ukraine. A short time later, Steinmeier warned NATO against "saber rattling and cries for war" when it came to Russia. "Of course the campaign is approaching," Steinmeier said in an August television appearance and invoked former SPD Chancellor Brandt's rapprochement with the Soviet Union in the 1970s. "You surely won't be surprised when I, as a Social Democrat, attempt to benefit from experiences that made our country safer."

## **Naive Hopes**

Back then, the timing of Steinmeier's comments was favorable. Ahead of the July NATO summit in Warsaw, alliance hardliners were outdoing each other with new demands and, at the same time, the Minsk peace process was making little headway, partly because Ukraine itself was proving uncooperative. Many at the time were looking for a way to normalize relations with

Moscow and Russia's intervention in Syria had led to hopes that the West and Moscow could cooperate in that country.

As has now become apparent, such hopes were naive. Russia's March announcement that it was withdrawing most of its air force from Syria proved deceptive and those war planes that were sent home were quickly replaced by assault helicopters. Since the collapse of the most recent Syrian cease-fire in September, an increasing number of jets have been sent to Khmeimim, Russia's air base near besieged Aleppo -- and they are capable of carrying a greater payload and of flying more sorties.

Ever since jets apparently belonging to the Syrian regime or the Russian military spent hours destroying a UN aid convoy and a Red Crescent depot on September 19, claims by Moscow that they are interested in negotiations have lost all credibility. Last Tuesday alone, Russian war planes flew attacks on numerous Aleppo neighborhoods, dropping fragmentation bombs and explosives originally designed to destroy underground bunker facilities. Monster Betab-500 bombs of this type have hit the last remaining hospitals in Aleppo, partially or completely destroying several of them. Now only five such facilities remain with just two dozen doctors on duty. For the more than 250,000 residents trapped in the encircled eastern half of the city, treatable injuries often end in death. Doctors Without Borders says that only 11 working ambulances remain in the city.

Last week, France drew the consequences. Putin cancelled a planned visit to Paris after French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault announced that France would ask the International Criminal Court in The Hague to consider investigating possible Russian war crimes -- although Moscow has never ratified the Rome Statute, the treaty underlying the court.

War crimes listed in the court's statute include: intentional attacks on the civilian population; launching attacks in the knowledge that they will cause loss of life to civilians or damage to civilian objects; attacks on buildings that are not military objectives; the use of poison or poisoned weapons; and the use of weapons and methods of warfare that cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering.

Witness testimony, video footage and the remains of discharged munitions provide ample evidence that Russia has committed these forms of war crime in the course of its air war on Aleppo. The evidence for crimes committed by the Assad regime, which has spent years dropping barrel bombs on civilians and has even employed chemical weapons, is even stronger.

### **Geo-Political Realities**

The question Germany's SPD must now face is whether they should really campaign on a platform that calls for greater understanding for a presumed war criminal like Putin. There is plenty of nostalgia present in the SPD approach to Russia. The party remembers Willy Brandt's policy of *détente* with the Soviet Union (known as *Ostpolitik*) fondly. For the SPD it is a kind of golden age, a time when the party won important elections. Brandt, according to the party narrative, led Germany out of a diplomatic dead-end it had maneuvered itself into by refusing to

recognize East Germany and the Oder-Neisse border with Poland. The policy of rapprochement was successful because it reflected geo-political realities at the time.

But the SPD likes to forget that the first phase of *Ostpolitik* was followed by a second, less glorious chapter. Instead of supporting the 1980s pro-democracy movements that had developed in Eastern Bloc countries, leading Social Democrats -- in the opposition at the time -- preferred to maintain their friendly relations with autocratic regimes. Historian Timothy Garton Ash has referred to this chapter of SPD foreign policy as "shadow policy" that was characterized by "unprincipled party-political opportunism." Unlike in the Brandt era, many Social Democrats at the time chose to ignore shifting realities.

The current SPD course more closely resembles the second phase of *Ostpolitik* than the successful first phase. Even deputy SPD floor leader Mützenich, hardly a hawk when it comes to Moscow, harshly criticized his party's "rapprochement romantics" last year and warned against the "misconception that old-style *Ostpolitik* was possible following the annexation of Crimea." In contrast to the 1960s and 70s, he said, the current task is to react to Moscow's expansionary policies, not merely recognize new realities.

Merkel is not opposed to dialogue with Moscow. But in contrast to Steinmeier and the SPD, she has never harbored great hopes for Putin's willingness to compromise. The chancellor believes that the sanctions applied to Russia in the Ukraine crisis have been effective and believes that additional punitive measures in response to the bombing of Syria should be considered. Sanctions "can by no means be excluded if the murdering continues in Syria," CDU floor leader Volker Kauder, one of Merkel's closest confidants, told SPIEGEL last week. The chancellor, though, is well aware that this position is not widely supported in the EU.

### **Split Conservatives**

Within her party, though, there are plenty who support a harder line against Russia. Elmar Brok, a member of the CDU and chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in European Parliament, has demanded that the sanctions be broadened. He believes that the next time EU leaders meet, they should extend the current penalties by a year instead of just for six months, as has been the practice. "That would send a strong message to Putin that the West is serious," Brok says.

Brok is also extremely critical of the SPD's intention to campaign on a more conciliatory approach to Russia. "The SPD must also recognize that, given the situation in Aleppo, now is not the time to discover one's affection for Russia." Manfred Weber, floor leader for the center-right European People's Party in European Parliament and a member of the German CDU, has challenged the SPD to give up its "appeasement policy to Mr. Putin and to finally take a clear position. Cuddling up to Moscow can only end in failure."

Still, German conservatives remain split on the issue. Horst Seehofer, head of the Bavarian CSU, has called for the step-by-step lifting of existing sanctions against Russia. And Merkel's policies, too, are contradictory. Thus far, the chancellor has done nothing to stop the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, which will deliver Russian natural gas directly to Germany.

Once completed, the project will make Germany even more dependent on Moscow for energy -- a dependence that Merkel has said she would like to reduce. Demands for additional sanctions are hardly credible if the German government continues to expand its energy cooperation with Russia.

Merkel has thus far hidden behind claims that the pipeline is first and foremost "an economic project." But even European Council President Donald Tusk couldn't refrain from commenting on the hypocrisy. "In my perspective, Nord Stream does not help diversification" of energy supplies, he grumbled at an EU summit last December. Merkel was only able to remove a critical passage about the pipeline from the summit declaration with some effort.

### **Following Merkel**

At Thursday's summit, Renzi will seek to hold a discussion on Germany's contradictory position on Russia. He is critical of what he sees as Merkel's double standard: First the EU blocked the South Stream Pipeline over Italian objections and now Merkel wants to push through Nord Stream 2 purely out of national interest.

The German government continues to support the project and Berlin believes the law is on its side. Because the Nord Stream pipeline leads directly from the Russian Baltic Sea coast to Lubmin on the German coast, the EU doesn't have a say on the issue, argue lawyers within the Chancellery and Economics Ministry.

Yet with Putin continuing, and even expanding, his air war in Syria, an increasing number of conservative politicians in Germany are turning their backs on the project. "As long as Putin continues dropping bombs on civilians, the EU should refrain from supporting Nord Stream 2," says EPP floor leader Weber.

Merkel is set to meet with Putin in Berlin on Wednesday together with French President François Hollande and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, in a gathering of the so-called Normandy Format. The Normandy Format is a diplomatic group aimed at resolving the situation in eastern Ukraine. It will mark the first time that Putin has visited Germany in four years.

It's become clear, regardless, that Putin will play a role in the German general election campaign next year. Recently, foreign policy experts within the SPD met in Berlin. The discussion went back and forth and nobody was particularly pleased about Putin's actions in Syria and Ukraine. But then, as the evening wore on and after a couple glasses of wine, one of those present said what many in the SPD think: "We can't simply follow Merkel and support her policy on Russia as well!"