

Germany's Eastern Policy on the Eve of the 2009 National Elections

By Iris Kempe

- How do the German political parties' approaches to Russia differ?
- How has Germany's Eastern Policy changed as a result of the Russian-Georgian war?

Germany's historical background, its many linkages with Central and Eastern Europe, and its geographic proximity make it Europe's most important actor in Eastern Policy. This prominence also makes Germany vital for a solid transatlantic framework to support both the Obama administration's efforts to redesign relations with Russia and overall Euro-American engagement in the EU's neighborhood. The Bundestag elections in September will bring changes mostly at the margins of German foreign policy, as key aspects are examples of cross-party consensus.

Foreign policy is not generally a crucial issue for elections and election campaigns. The only recent exception in Germany was in 2002, when Gerhard Schröder advanced a strong position against a military intervention in Iraq, a position which became not only a decisive factor for his campaign, but also contributed to the victory of the Social Democrats (SPD).

Since the Schröder government ended its term prematurely in 2005 with a staged vote of no-confidence followed by snap elections, Germany has been governed by a grand coalition. During the coalition's term of office, Eastern Policy has become one of the issues that divide the coalition partners: SPD and Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU). Traditionally, Germany's Eastern Policy has been dominated by two issues: first, the view of Russia as a strategic partner that also poses challenges, in particular regarding its democratic development; second, concerns about the EU's neighboring countries and their attempts to gain a position on the European agenda.

Russia Policy a Dividing Factor

The CDU/CSU blames the Kremlin for Russia's democratic shortcomings. The conservative German parties observe developments in the neighboring countries carefully, but nevertheless remain cautious. They do not favor offering Ukraine and other neighboring countries strong prospects within the European Union. The SPD is still a hostage of its historical, personal, and economic proximity to Russia, a legacy that has both positive and problematic aspects. During the German EU presidency, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier tried to contribute a three-pronged approach of cooperation with Russia based on the principle of *Annäherung durch Verflechtung* (rapprochement through cooperation), combining far-reaching relations with Russia with a "European Neighborhood Policy Plus," and a strategy for Central Asia. Neither the SPD's nor the CDU/CSU's Eastern Policy approaches passed the reality check of the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008. The conflict escalation in Europe's neighborhood was an unexpected wake-up call for Germany, for which the country's political elite was not prepared, and which still raises fundamental strategic questions about the most important player in Europe's Eastern Policy.

Until the recent Russian-Georgian escalation, German foreign policy was driven by a combination of actors from the German Foreign Office and the Chancellor's Office. Since the early 1990s, German chancellors have favored a "Russia first" approach that involved close personal relations between Helmut Kohl and Boris Yeltsin, and later between Gerhard Schröder and Vladimir Putin. At the same time, the foreign

ministers had little alternative but to cede Eastern Policy to the Chancellor's Office while formulating their own agenda beyond the "Russia first" approach. The grand collation run by Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Steinmeier (both top candidates from their respective parties in the upcoming 2009 elections) made some revisions to the former "Russia first" approach as a consequence of the Russian-Georgian conflict. On the eve of the conflict, both sides were united in supporting Georgia and criticizing Russia. For a short moment of time there were indicators that the conflict with Georgia might be a defining moment in Germany's relationship with Russia. The Caucasus crisis united German political leaders, who spoke with a single voice in favor of the neighboring countries. Germany's position seemed to change from "Russia first" to Russia-bashing.

While German approaches toward Russia often follow a left/right divide, Constanze Stelzenmüller, in her article published in the March/April 2009 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, concludes that Germany's Eastern policy decision-makers have become less driven by institutional or party affiliation, but rather by age and experiences. As a result, the generation of people in their 50s and older is driven by the legacies of the Cold War and remembering both Russia's role in German reunification and Russia's democratic reforms in the 1990s, as well as the economic ties between the two countries, and is guided by the overall goal of cooperating with Russia even if growing democratic shortcomings might be a cause for concern. On the other hand, a younger generation of Germany's Eastern Policy decision-makers, more familiar with the corruption and rivalry of Putin's Russia, is less influenced by legacies of the past and reconciliation and more by their practical experiences of living and working in a democratizing Eastern Europe and authoritarian Russia. The younger generation's outlook is more driven by democratic breakthroughs, first in Central and Eastern Europe and later in the successor states of the former Soviet Union, i.e., the "rainbow revolutions." If one continues the hypothesis that Germany's Eastern Policy is dominated by personal experiences, one has to be aware of the fact that today's generation of upcoming experts and decision-makers is much less involved with the developments in Eastern Europe than during previous decades.

The Russian-Georgian War: A Wake-up Call

When it became obvious that the casualties of the Russian-Georgian war were more nuanced than originally thought and that Russia and Georgia were both to be blamed for missed opportunities for peace-building, the agenda changed again. In general terms, the SPD was the first to be careful of overstating the positive role of Georgia and of blaming Russia, while the CDU/CSU continued its approach of favoring democratic developments, highlighted by support for the neighboring countries. The other mainstream political parties are less influential in Eastern Policy. The Liberal Democrats (FDP) lack a driving force in Eastern Policy and are less outspoken in promoting new ideas. The Left (Die Linke) remains true to a Russian-friendly line by criticizing the Eastern Partnership as an approach that excludes Russia. The Greens have traditionally represented the interests of the human rights movements and dissidents in Eastern Europe, advocating for civil society movements in Eastern Europe, with partners such as the Russian Memorial or the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia. They have also favored environmentally safe energy policy. At the same time, however, interactions among civil society have not provided contacts for high-level international dialogue.

The Russian-Georgian war caused immediate reactions from the German foreign policy elite, but it also had a longer-lasting impact on Germany's Eastern Policy. During a quick visit to Tbilisi on 17 August Merkel went as far as announcing prospects for Georgia's rapid accession to NATO. On 3 March 2009, political parties submitted two petitions to the German Bundestag outlining Germany's strategy. One came from the government faction CDU/SPD, the other from the Greens. In general terms, the petitions reflected the decreasing cleavages in Germany's Eastern Policy in times of external crisis and

international pressure. The petitions are similar in their support of development and peace-building in the Southern Caucasus and in their support of the OSCE's input in the Caucasus (despite the recent closing of the OSCE observation mission). The major difference between the two is related to Russia. While the Green Party's petition makes no mention of Russia, the CDU/SPD's petition refers to Russia as an actor who, jointly with Turkey and the U.S., contributes to peace and stability in the region. The Caucasus petitions are a litmus test of German Eastern Policy. While overall the differences are rather negligible, the decisive factor is Russia. Although Russia is no longer perceived as the most important player in Eastern Europe, the CDU/SPD's attempts to combine Russia and the neighboring countries in a single policy are more pious hopes than a new strategy.

Beyond Russia: Eastern Partnership?

Based on the decisive factors of Germany's Eastern Policy, one can review the current state of affairs by using the latest developments as a test for future development. The most important issues are related not only to the Caucasus crises but also to the Polish-Swedish initiative of an Eastern Partnership, which in December 2008 was also adopted by the European Commission and became a priority of the Czech EU presidency.

The Eastern Partnership breakthrough is more related to the actors supporting the initiative than to the content, which still requires some clarification and implementation. Originally, the initiative was promoted by the Polish government as an answer to the French initiative of the Mediterranean Union. By satisfying French interests in cooperation with the Southern neighborhood, options for broadening the Eastern neighborhood were also granted. Poland's initiative came up immediately, highlighting neighborhood policy within the Eastern agenda and offering far-reaching options for cooperation, possibly even membership, to the EU's eastern neighbors. In this sense, the approach was similar to the "ENP Plus" Eastern Policy of Germany's EU presidency, but the major difference is that the Eastern Partnership does not mention Russia. If the Partnership had been driven exclusively by Polish actors, then it would have been perceived as an initiative of the new EU member states. Polish efforts to win the support of Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt have made a difference in how the Partnership is viewed within the EU, bridging the east-west divide. As one might expect, Germany's reaction to the Eastern Partnership has been mixed.

On 3 December 2008, Rainer Steenblock, spokesperson for European Affairs for the Greens, and Marieluise Beck, a Green member of the Bundestag, issued a declaration on the adoption of the Eastern Partnership by the European Commission as a good signal from the EU to its Eastern neighbors, bringing Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and the Southern Caucasus further options for partnership with the European Union.

The Greens welcomed the Eastern Partnership as an approach to decreasing the strategic vacuum in Eastern Europe, supporting democratic development, and offering prospects of EU membership for the neighboring countries. Furthermore, the Green Party politicians highlighted the importance of concentrating the neighborhood policy on the Eastern agenda, options for visa facilitation, and the general value of supporting political and economic reform in the neighboring countries. This statement includes a clear perspective: Russia was not mentioned; support is concentrated on the Eastern agenda; and options for cooperation go as far as possible, including sensitive issues such as visa facilitation.

Assessing the reaction on the Eastern Partnership, it is clear that Germany's interest has been limited, in contrast to Poland. Nevertheless, reactions from the SPD also welcomed the Eastern Partnership but immediately introduced the Russian factor by emphasizing that the EU's approach should also consider Russia as an actor too important to neglect in Eastern Europe. Coming back to its approach already promoted during the German EU

presidency in 2007, the Foreign Office's policy planning staff commissioned the Brussels-based Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in spring 2009 to write a (non-official) report on "Synergies versus Spheres of Influence in the Pan-European Space." The report covered whether and how the European Union might, in its policies toward Russia, the Eastern partner countries, and Central Asia, build common programs and projects across these three political spaces. Within the longer German debate, the Social Democrats have consistently been in favor of combining the two agendas of Russia and the neighboring countries. The same position is represented in the Social Democrats' government program draft, which will be an issue of debate during the national party convention on 14 June. The draft favors cooperating with Russia as a responsible partner for global and European security and stability. To implement this, the Social Democrats are expressing their interest in supporting a modern Russia that is based on the rule of law. In addition to the Russian policy, the SPD program supports the implementation of the Eastern Partnership, bringing the neighboring countries closer to Europe. The CDU has not yet published its Eastern Policy agenda.

Toward a European Eastern Policy

Combining the Russian and the neighborhood agenda reflects the challenges of Eastern policy. In particular, the ethno-territorial conflicts and the related consequences in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorny Karabach cannot be solved without considering Russia. Even if decreasing prices on the world energy market are restricting the Kremlin's influence as an energy-based international power, recurring threats of cutting gas supplies to its European neighbors demonstrate Russia's influence from the worst-case perspective. Europe needs Russia as a partner for conflict prevention and solution, not only in its neighborhood, and for sustainable and reliable energy supply. Since March 2009 the Kremlin has commented on the Eastern Partnership as a European approach to creating spheres of influence. For instance, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov condemned the Union's effort to draw ex-Soviet countries closer to the West as meddling in other countries' internal affairs. At the same time, the neighboring countries are having similar reservations as the new EU member states about cooperation with Russia. Considering the Russian-Georgian war and recurring energy conflicts, Russia does not present itself as a partner that is interested in cooperation in equal and democratic terms. Both Eastern Policy agendas offer a reality check, showing that it is not enough to "simply" combine both agendas; rather, Eastern Policy must build linkages and sometimes set priorities.

Using Germany's Full Potential for Eastern Policy

To conclude, Germany is the most important actor in Europe's Eastern Policy because of its historic background, economic and social linkages, and geographic proximity. The Obama administration should make the most of these factors and the potential that Germany offers. In the last decade, Germany's domestic debate differentiated between the SPD's "Russia first" approach, and a critical assessment of the Kremlin's democratic shortcomings carefully phrased by the CDU/CSU and more strongly by the Greens. Currently, this priority-setting still exists but crises, both in the Caucasus and now the global economy, are blurring the differences among Berlin's decision-makers. Overall, Eastern Policy also depends on personal experiences and networks. The Germans travelling and working in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe influence the country's position vis-à-vis Russia. Further developments in Eastern Policy will certainly depend on the election results in September as well as on developments in Eastern Europe. The neighboring countries are under increasing pressure of not failing in their democratic reforms. At the same time, the Kremlin might use this opportunity to swallow the "near abroad"/European Neighborhood. Another violent escalation would force Berlin's decision-makers to take positions inside both the European and the transatlantic frameworks. It is quite sure that further Eastern policymaking is also a particular challenge for the transatlantic agenda. Germany needs Washington to act strongly with Russia. The U.S. needs Germany as the most important European Eastern Policy shaper

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and maker. As this cooperation continues, one is well advised to consider the entire spectrum of German positions, using its access to the Kremlin but also its options to build a European neighborhood policy.

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