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[Between ideology and vote-seeking](#)



Since the beginning of Ukraine's "Euromaidan" and especially from the time of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the illegal 'referendum' in the peninsula, the Left Party of Germany ("Die Linke") has garnered attention as one of the fiercest critics of how Germany, and the West in general, responded to the developments on their eastern borders. The responses from the left ranged from decrying alleged 'fascists' taking over the Rada (Ukrainian parliament), to calling for lifting sanctions, and eventually recognizing the illegal referendum in Crimea. Unsurprisingly, it did not go unnoticed in the Russian propaganda machine which [celebrated](#) politicians like deputy chairperson Sahra Wagenknecht, whose speeches were seen hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube, the obvious goal being to show Russians that the majority of Germans do not want to punish sovereign Russia, but are forced to obey Uncle Sam. In this respect, members of Die Linke, as voices of reason, were contrasted with U.S. State Department spokesperson, Jen Psaki, representing "dumb Americans". Obviously, many of Die Linke's positions overlap with Russia's interests.

Interestingly, the Left Party's stance on sanctions and Russia's annexation of Crimea is not typical of a leftist party. This begs the question - why so pro-Moscow? I assume Die Linke is a party struggling to reconcile its ideological commitments with rational vote-seeking while competing with far right parties for voter support (both the radical left and right are generally wary of European integration, emphasize state sovereignty, and have strong constituencies in eastern Germany).

Die Linke and sanctions

In the Bundestag, deputies of the Left Party repeatedly attacked the government led by the Christian Democrats and the Social Democratic Party for sanctions introduced against Russia. Gregor Gysi, a charismatic leader of the Left in Bundestag, [decried international double standards](#) wondering why not a single sanction was imposed on Turkey after it occupied northern Cyprus in 1974. On the most general level, aversion to sanctions can be traced to the "economic aggression" debate in the UN General Assembly in the 1970s, where the Soviet Union led the coalition of communist and third-world countries for outlawing economic pressure as a tool of foreign policy. There is no reason to think that Die Linke, the heir of the Socialist Unity Party of the German Democratic Republic, with its Marxist-Leninist roots, would suddenly embrace the idea of "imperialist" countries coercing underdeveloped nations of the periphery. But since Russia is neither communist, nor peripheral, the critique of sanctions seems odd at best.

Another argument for opposing sanctions was, surprisingly, based on [sympathy with German financial capital and firms](#). On the one hand, there is a contradiction in terms - a left party defending what it is supposed to revile. But on the other, one can understand such argumentation as a [commitment to the socially weak](#), and an attempt to appeal to workers who may lose jobs should Germany's export-oriented economy secure fewer contracts in Russia. Moreover, as the German left is significantly more popular in the country's East than West, it has to consider its communist past and ties to Russia. Finally, the main rivals of Die Linke in eastern Germany are far right parties - neo-nazis from NPD and, increasingly, the euro-sceptics from Alternative for Germany (AfD) - and [evidence](#) from research on European integration shows that the radical left and right are both the least supportive of the European Union and common policies. Thus, sanctions, as they represent a common EU policy, should be seen in a broader context of the euro-scepticism of the left, and competition to radical right parties.

Anti-Americanism by default

The German left is known for its notorious anti-Americanism, but [so are their far right counterparts](#). Last year, at the peak of the refugee crisis, leaders of both Die Linke and AfD accused the United States of initiating refugee flows by its insatiable interventionism, implying that the Americans should take care of their fair share of refugees.

Anti-American or not, it is nevertheless an odd position for a left party to pass the “refugee buck” to others instead of welcoming thousands and thousands of newcomers from the Middle East and Africa. The reason might be that refugees are expected to enter the German labor market at some point in the future, and since most refugees would be eligible for low-skilled jobs, there is a growing fear among the socially weak that they would be at a disadvantage and would lose their jobs to the newcomers. Consequently, they demand stricter immigration policy and turn to AfD, forcing the Left to follow suit.

Nevertheless, anti-Americanism can better explain the Left’s stance on sanctions. Pointing to Germany’s significantly higher economic interdependence with Russia than the U.S. has, they imply that since sanctions are not in Germany’s economic interest, Berlin must have been forced to impose sanctions by the White House. How Washington forces its European allies to do what they do not want to is never explained.

Make Germany sovereign again!

It is worth noting that both radical left and right parties decry German sovereignty or, more precisely, lack thereof. [Words of a left MP](#) with regard to sanctions exemplify this picture: “Ms. Merkel, you’re a slave to the U.S. government”. By playing the sovereignty card, the left reasserts the notion of nation-state, moving [closer to the extreme right](#) in its rhetoric. This posture is fully consistent with Vladimir Putin’s positioning of the United States as [“patrons and sponsors”](#) of European nations [deprived of the possibility of acting like sovereign states](#).

In this respect, Die Linke differs from some prominent social democrats like Matthias Platzeck, or ex-chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who represent the German-Russian Forum and Russia-affiliated Nord Stream AG respectively, and have their economic stake at defending Putin’s revisionism. Sympathy of the extreme left with Russia, and Putin in particular, results partly from ideology (sovereignty versus deregulated capitalism, protection of the socially weak versus damaging the economy with sanctions), and partly from competition with the extreme right with which Die Linke “shares” voters (fuelling anti-Americanism in the cases of refugees and economic sanctions).

Logically, resolving the problem of the extreme left (and right) will depend on economic performance and maintaining law and order, and the best response should be more, not less integration in the EU. The Fiscal Compact in the Eurozone was a first step in the right direction, and with rising concerns over terrorism in European cities, better management of the European Union’s exterior borders, and better coordination of national security services are in order. Even if the German government decides to sacrifice Ukraine and lift sanctions as a lesser evil, the problem of radical parties will not be solved. Therefore, it is well-advised to use inducements and side-payments [to tame “centrifugal forces” in the EU](#) and not to act unilaterally, as in the case of “refugees welcome” policy last summer.

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