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[Relations with Russia in the mirror of Germany's election campaign](#)



Germany's election campaign has reached fever pitch; 62 million citizens are set to elect members of the new Bundestag in late September. Foreign policy has traditionally been an uncomfortable topic for candidates and spin doctors: Germans show great interest in global events, which makes it difficult to avoid commenting on the subject, but it is difficult to keep campaign promises on foreign policy given the various factors and developments that are out of the candidate's control. Hence, until recently only the general slogan of "commitment to a unified Europe" has been prominent in speeches by spokespersons and in party platforms.

Relations with Moscow were long consigned to the fringes of Germany's electoral debate. For example, just three sentences in the 2013 CDU [platform](#) were devoted to "good neighborly relations with contemporary Russia." But four years on, the German political class is involved in a much more heated debate on the future architecture of Eurasia.

The liberal and conservative camps

The Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU)

Party leader Angela Merkel is regarded as the most consistent supporter of sanctions against Russia. All most prominent CDU/CSU members support her stance on the issue, from Norbert Roettgen, chairman of the Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee, who [demanded](#) additional sanctions in the wake of Russian Air Force activity in Syria, to Volker Kauder, chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary caucus, who in late 2016 signed a seven-page document [accusing](#) Moscow of “violating international law,” pursuing “deliberate propaganda” and “disseminating biased information.”

However, some high-ranking CDU officials have spoken out in favor of mitigating or lifting sanctions. Heads of East German regions, such as Reiner Haseloff, minister-president of the state of Saxony-Anhalt, strongly [opposed the introduction](#) of fresh trade and economic restrictions; Stanislaw Tillich, minister president of Saxony, urged authorities to [lift](#) existing sanctions “as soon as possible.”

The Christian Democrats are under significant pressure from businesses that trade with Russia. Although the 2017 CDU/CSU platform contains elliptical wording calling for Moscow to comply with the Minsk agreements; sanctions *per se* are not mentioned at all. But it wouldn't be correct to say CDU/CSU advocates of a hardline policy have suffered a devastating defeat. They managed to include in the text a direct assertion [that](#) “the territorial integrity of Ukraine had been brought into question as a result of Russian aggression.”

The Free Democratic Party (FDP)

The German liberals joined the Green Party in condemning Russia's actions in the post-Soviet space most vociferously. In their [platform](#), CDU/CSU's prospective coalition partners called on Russia to “immediately cease the occupation of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine, which violate international law.” The authors of the document spoke of Putin's “policy of intervention,” looked at “the increasingly stern crackdown on the opposition and civil society in Russia” with “great concern” and called for a “condemnation of human rights violations,” urging commentators to “call things by their names.” The lifting of sanctions is directly dependent on Moscow's “abolition” of its current strategy.

But in a recent speech, FDP Chairman Christian Lindner contradicted the platform. The candidate for the post of the Vice-Chancellor and head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) proposed “temporarily removing the issue of Crimea from the agenda” if a liberal-conservative majority is formed. According to most analysts, this statement was merely a tactical maneuver, a political courtesy afforded to business. The current government was forced to officially distance itself from Lindner's statement, [saying](#) policy on Crimea remains unchanged.

Left-wingers and center-left parties

The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)

Social Democrats' opponents, and Russian journalists, enjoy quoting pro-Russian statements by former Chancellor Gerhard *Schröder* and former party Chairman Matthias Platzeck, but in fact these retired politicians' impact on the party's foreign policy is minimal. Both Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel and his predecessor and current President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (both representing the SPD) discount the possibility of alleviating or lifting the sanctions without significant steps by the Kremlin to implement the Minsk agreements. The SPD's vision of the “Russian question” is formulated in the [chapter](#) of the platform titled “the policy of détente.” The text stipulates that “our relations with Russia were harmed by the actions of the Russian government in eastern Ukraine and the violation of international law in connection with the annexation of Crimea.” The “phasing out” of sanctions can happen only subject to “major progress being made in the implementation of the Minsk agreements.”

Green Party

The Green Party doesn't question the restrictions imposed on Russia. Not only have key representatives such as parliamentary leader Katrin Göring-Eckardt spoken out in support of the sanctions, but they have also repeatedly proposed that sanctions be tightened. The Heinrich Böll Foundation, associated with the Greens, is known for its consistency in criticizing Moscow's policy. The Greens' [platform](#) refers to “significant restrictions on freedom of speech and the rule of law” in Russia. Several references are also made to “Russia's aggressive, imperial policy under President Putin.” Developments in Crimea and eastern Ukraine are met with unambiguous criticism. Moreover, Moscow's “brutal military support of Bashar al-Assad” has also prompted

condemnation from the party (a sentiment absent from other parties' platforms).

The Left Party

The successor to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), which now includes a group of activists who broke away from Social Democrats, is regarded as a political force close to the Kremlin. Sahra Wagenknecht, deputy chairwoman of the Left Party in the Bundestag, is known for her criticism of sanctions and her sympathy to Moscow. She has called for "the recognition of Crimea as part of Russia" and [labeled](#) the sanctions "ridiculous." Deputies Wolfgang Gehrcke and Andrej Hunko visited the Donbass in 2015 and met Alexander Zakharchenko, head of the Donetsk People's Republic.

The Left Party mentions the EU's eastern neighbor in six thematic sections of its [platform](#) in sympathetic terms. It suggests that "sanctions and confrontation" should be replaced by "a policy of peace and détente." It emphasizes that the accession of new states to NATO will lead to "tensions in relations with Russia," and says maintaining security in Europe will be possible only "alongside Russia and not in confrontation with it." This stance reflects the views of some of the "systemic leftists" who would like to preserve peace on the continent and avoid a new Cold War at any cost.

At the same time, the Left Party is far from monolithic. Many members, including leftist radicals (the Anti-Capitalist Left) and reformers (some of the WASG group), denounce its pro-Russian policies. This discontent is rooted both in pragmatic principles and in ideology: Today's Russia is perceived as an exemplification of turbo-capitalism, a far cry from socialist ideals. One of the reasons the party has two co-chairs for the party and parliamentary factions is the conflict over key policies.

This intra-party struggle results in compromises over Russia. The faction's strategic [document](#) not only mentions "a collective security system in relations with Russia" and "the futility of the policy of confrontation" but also a "critical" assessment of the actions of "Russian President Putin primarily over domestic policy and the role of Russia in international conflicts (Ukraine, Syria)." Heinz Birbaumann, head of the influential International Commission of the Left, representing the group of the Saarland West German Left, is well known for his skepticism toward Putin. At the June party congress, moderate party members [submitted](#) proposals for amendments mentioning "the annexation of Crimea" and "violations of human rights in Russia" to be introduced to the party's platform. Although these proposals were rejected, they did create a buzz among party members. Galina Vavzinjak, parliamentary faction manager and a spokeswoman on legal issues, openly expressed her discontent over the decision. Stefan Lieblich, a key representative of the Bundestag Committee on Foreign Affairs, spoke of "Russia's illegal actions in the world" in a recent speech.

Right-wingers

The Alternative for Germany (AfD)

The only right-wing party that stands a chance of winning a parliamentary seat actively espouses pro-Russian rhetoric. Party leaders visit Russia regularly, and eagerly grant interviews to Russia Today and Sputnik News. Alexander Gauland, the leader of the party list, [identified](#) Crimea as "historical Russian territory." The AfD faction in Saxony-Anhalt held a "Congress on Russia" in August 2017 with the participation of prominent right-wing radicals and conspiracy theorists. [Relations](#) between the AfD's youth organization and the Young Guard of United Russia remain very close. Still, Russia is mentioned in a mere two sentences in the AfD [platform](#), in the context of economics and security. This is perhaps the only concession made to skeptics. Otherwise, all groups in the party, including the ultra-right Patriotic Platform, see Russia as an attractive alternative to the current Western world order.

Weakness of expert opinions

Well-known Bundestag members from different parties in charge of Germany's policy towards Russia (Gernot Erler, Marieluise Beck, Karl-Georg Wellmann, Franz Tennes and Christoph Bergner) are no longer running for parliament. With rare exceptions, politicians who consider Russia and the EU Eastern Partnership as priorities are not included on the winning lists. Foreign policy spokespeople from two major German parties - Social-Democrat Niels Annen and Christian Democrat *Jürgen Hardt* - are likely to meet in the Bundestag after the 2017 election. However, these politicians only deal with more generic issues, avoiding the finer details of

Berlin-Moscow relations. Today, some predict that limited internal parliamentary expertise is likely to have a negative impact on German-Russian negotiations, especially in connection with the AfD's entry into parliament. At the same time, the role of professional consultations by German think tanks, consultants, and specialists of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is rapidly increasing.

The “pro-Russian stance” of the Bundestag?

The topic of Russia is no longer peripheral to the German election campaign, although it's not dominant. There are no overtly pro-Russian political factions in Germany willing to obediently follow Moscow's initiative. On a strategic level, no political party that stands a chance of entering the Bundestag offers allied relations with Russia, as evidenced by party platforms. At the same time, pro-Russian sentiments are strong in the Left Party and the AfD in particular. They are entrenched in anti-Americanism and an image of Moscow as a new pole of attraction for adherents of leftist and rightist views, respectively. This image is [shared](#) by a considerable proportion of the parties' voters. Domestic political aspects are integral in playing the Russia card. For example, new electoral niches and criticism of opponents play a vital role. Regardless of these trends, the German legislative branch is unlikely to undergo any radical changes in its policy toward Moscow.

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