

# How BY STEPHEN F. SZABO Germans View Russia

*And where does America fit in?*

**I**t is not an accident that Germany has emerged as the key Western power in dealing with Russia over the crisis in Ukraine. Germans have been dealing with Russians for over seven hundred years. Over two million Russians are living in Germany today, and Germany is the largest Western economic partner of Russia with over six thousand companies on the ground. In contrast, the United States, with an economic stake about one-fifth that of Germany's, has a small pro-Russia business lobby and a small Russian community.

History has left a number of legacies and images in the German consciousness. There is the legacy of geography. Russia is Germany's big Mexico, a large and often contentious neighbor which cannot be ignored. There is also the legacy of economic complementarity of a resource-rich and technology-poor Russia complementing the resource-poor, technology-rich Germany. There is a legacy both of cooperation and destruction, from Peter the Great, the Hitler-Stalin Pact, and World War II through the Cold War. This relationship has been one of cooperation and engagement since Gorbachev allowed the peaceful unification of Germany in 1990, but suddenly and quite surprisingly, Germans are now facing a confrontational Russia.

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*Stephen F. Szabo is the executive director of the Transatlantic Academy, a partnership between the German Marshall Fund and the Ebelin and Gerd Bucerius Zeit Stiftung, the Robert Bosch Stiftung, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation.*

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220 I Street, N.E., Suite 200

Washington, D.C. 20002

Phone: 202-861-0791

Fax: 202-861-0790

[www.international-economy.com](http://www.international-economy.com)

[editor@international-economy.com](mailto:editor@international-economy.com)

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German views today of that complex and ever-changing country fluctuate, but a few constants seem to remain. Germans have highly ambivalent views about the Russian character and history. They view Russia today as a reemerging, potentially great power, rather than a declining one. They admire Russian culture, and many aspects of Russian history. They feel emotionally and, to some extent, culturally closer to Russians than they do to Americans. They also see Russia's untapped resources and vast market as a great opportunity for German industry and the German economy. A substantial segment of the German public believes that Russians are weak on organizational skills, tend to be highly emotional, and are undisciplined and in need of German leadership in technology.

While Russia seems big to Germans, it is also unruly and unreliable. Only about one-quarter of Germans say they like Russians. When asked what they associate with Russia and Russians, vodka, alcoholism, corruption, and criminality were frequently cited along with the state of Russian democracy and the Russian state. A survey conducted in 2013 by the Bertelsmann Foundation found that Germans accept Russians as colleagues at work and as neighbors, but only minorities would accept them as friends, bosses, or as a son- or daughter-in-law.

Memories depend upon where in Germany you go. Former West Germans and East Germans have very different experiences and memories with Russians over the past fifty years. East Germans lived with over four hundred thousand Soviet military forces in their small country for fifty years and were fed a constant diet of propaganda by the East German authorities exalting them to "learn how to win from the Soviet people." Russian was the required foreign language, and Angela Merkel was so good at it that she won a prize as a teenager. Dissidents were arrested and deported to

West Germany for hard currency, and almost all of those who remained had a good experience with the Russians. They supported *glasnost* and *perestroika* and credited Mikhail Gorbachev for German unification. They heard continual anti-American propaganda and after unification became neutralists rather than supporters of NATO.

Despite its intervention in Ukraine, its seizure of Crimea, and its threats to the Baltic states and northern Europe, Russia is not regarded as either a military or a demographic threat. Both its population and that of Germany are shrinking at a rapid pace and the Russian military threat has been displaced from the heart of Germany during the Cold War to a geographic remove of over a thousand kilometers. Russian incursions into Ukraine have begun to force a reassessment by the German military of a potential Russian military threat, but few believe there is a direct threat to the German homeland and even fewer want to contemplate a military response, including arming Ukraine or stationing NATO forces in eastern Europe. However, among German security services, Russian gangs and transnational crime remain a threat as does the Russian intelligence service and the extensive Russia propaganda and disinformation efforts in Germany.

German views of Russia today have to reconcile the two dimensions of their strategic culture, the dimension of a trading state and that of a country which emphasizes human rights, democracy, and global norms. The main German political parties are divided over Russia. Angela Merkel's party, the Christian Democrats, are split between those who are concerned about the nature of the Putin system both in terms of its lack of democracy at home and its threat to its neighbors, and those who are close to German business and the main pro-Russian

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*German Chancellor Angela Merkel is greeted by Russian President Vladimir Putin during a working visit to Russia in 2008.*



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lobbying groups which represent those doing business with Russia. The Social Democrats are more Russia-friendly, going back to the days of German *détente* policy, known as *Ostpolitik*, and continue to opt for engagement over confrontation. The Linke, a left party which descended from the East German Communist party, is staunchly pro-Russian and pro-Putin, as is the new conservative anti-euro party, Alternative for Germany. Only the Greens have been consistently critical of Putin. Both the print and electronic media have been largely critical of Putin as has the majority of the foreign policy think tank world. While generally negative on Putin and his system, the German public remains staunchly realist, believing that Germany has to find a way to engage with Russia.

The strong leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel has made a difference in the German debate. A recent poll published in March in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* found that 55 percent of Germans blame Putin for what

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has happened in Ukraine and another 34 percent blame the separatists. Earlier reservations about Russian complicity have clearly faded and Putin has lost the battle for German opinion. Support for sanctions remains but is conditional on other countries continuing their sanctions as well. Some business leaders have come out favoring sanctions, arguing that the bigger issues surrounding the rule of law and the stability of the European security order trump economic interests, but German business has not given up on Russia—at least not yet—as a long-term partner, and continues to lobby Merkel to find a way out of the sanctions regime.

Finally there is the growth of anti-Americanism in the wake of the Snowden and other revelations concerning NSA spying on Germans. Unlike France and Britain, this is a big deal in Germany and has fostered a sense among many Germans that the United States and Russia are equivalent in their behavior, both acting as big powers with little concern for international law and the interests of smaller states. The revelations of Edward Snowden, who is a cult hero in Germany despite the fact he is being harbored by Putin, are not the only causes of long-term damage to the American image, but join Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, and disappointment with the once-venerated Obama. However, America-skeptical attitudes predate Snowden. A

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2009 Pew poll taken twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall found that 48 percent of West Germans and 40 percent of East Germans viewed Russia's influence in Germany as negative, while 44 percent of East Germans compared to 42 percent of West Germans thought the United States had a negative influence on their country. Underlying all this is a sense that Germany is now a power which should be taken seriously, but that America continues to treat it as a junior partner at best. The spill-over effect to Russia policy is clear. In the recent poll on Russia and Ukraine, 17 percent of Germans blamed the United States for the crisis.

To this point, the German and American leadership have kept close on Russia policy and this is essential going forward, but it won't be easy. The stakeholders on Russia in the United States tend to be in the strategic community and their focus is on Russia as a military threat. The German stakeholders are largely in business and they have tended to see Russia as an opportunity. Americans have to understand the German aversion to the use of military force and the economic and social constraints working on any German leader. This also means that both sides have to be extremely careful about their public rhetoric and about managing

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what could become a clash of strategic cultures. This is not a conflict between Venus and Mars, as Robert Kagan once famously described the clash of Europe and America, but rather one of an American Mars and a German Mercury, the Roman god of commerce. ◆