



A Pragmatic Policy Toward Russia

Germany Should Strengthen Its Negotiating Position

By Stefan Meister

Russia's global importance is growing – along with its support for authoritarian stability, internal repression, and interference in other countries' internal affairs. Under its current leadership, Russia is not a responsible partner in international crises; instead, it exploits them to improve its own negotiating positions. Over the past ten years, Russia and Germany have turned away from each other. Although the limits of their cooperation will be felt in Germany's next electoral term, Germany needs a pragmatic policy toward Russia. Germany must cultivate diplomatic relations with Russia and seek to cooperate on issues of mutual interest, such as climate change and stabilization in Afghanistan. To strengthen its own negotiating power in relation to Moscow, Germany should invest in resilience and defense capabilities in the framework of the EU and NATO, engage more intensively in conflict resolution worldwide, and promote social exchanges with Russia.

Russia's Increased Geopolitical Importance

As a nuclear power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia has, in recent years, become a key player in conflicts in the EU's neighboring countries and beyond. Examples include its military role in Syria and Libya, its role in the negotiations on the nuclear deal with Iran, and the developments in Ukraine, Belarus, and the South Caucasus following the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020. Russia will continue to play a more important role in future, including with regard to the stabilization of Afghanistan and the possibility of migration to Europe. For its part, Germany is the key EU country when it comes to relations with Russia.

It is Russia's most important EU trading partner, and the biggest purchaser of raw materials such as oil and gas. Since the end of the Cold War, Berlin has played a key role in shaping EU relations with Moscow via approaches such as the partnership for modernization.

DETERMINING FACTORS An Authoritarian Challenge

Yet Russia and Germany have turned away from each other, particularly since Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. First, Germany and Russia are part of a systemic conflict: The Russian leadership supports authoritarian regimes, the weakening of democracy worldwide, and a multi-

polar world order dominated by a few major powers and in which conflicts can be resolved by military means – in these contexts, Moscow's cooperation is increasingly coordinated with China. By contrast, Germany stands for an open society and for the strengthening of democracy and the rule of law, and it supports multilateral solutions to global conflicts. The tension between these two positions will continue to grow in the coming years. Second, conflict with the West – and that includes not just the United States and NATO, but also the EU – has become a key source of internal legitimacy for Russia's leadership. Germany, as a leading power in the EU, is no longer a partner in this context, but rather an opponent to be weakened.

This also has repercussions for civil-society exchange and dialogue projects with Germany. Since 2012, Russia has developed into a fully authoritarian state, complete with systematic internal repression of the political opposition and independent media, and limits on exchanges with external stakeholders, particularly civil society. External funding for NGOs and the media is drying up due to laws that label foreign-funded organizations as foreign agents. The work of German foundations and NGOs in Russia could be made even more difficult in the coming years, and further organizations could be forced to pull out of the country.

Despite Russia’s growing global importance, the Kremlin often has no interest in a solution to conflicts in the

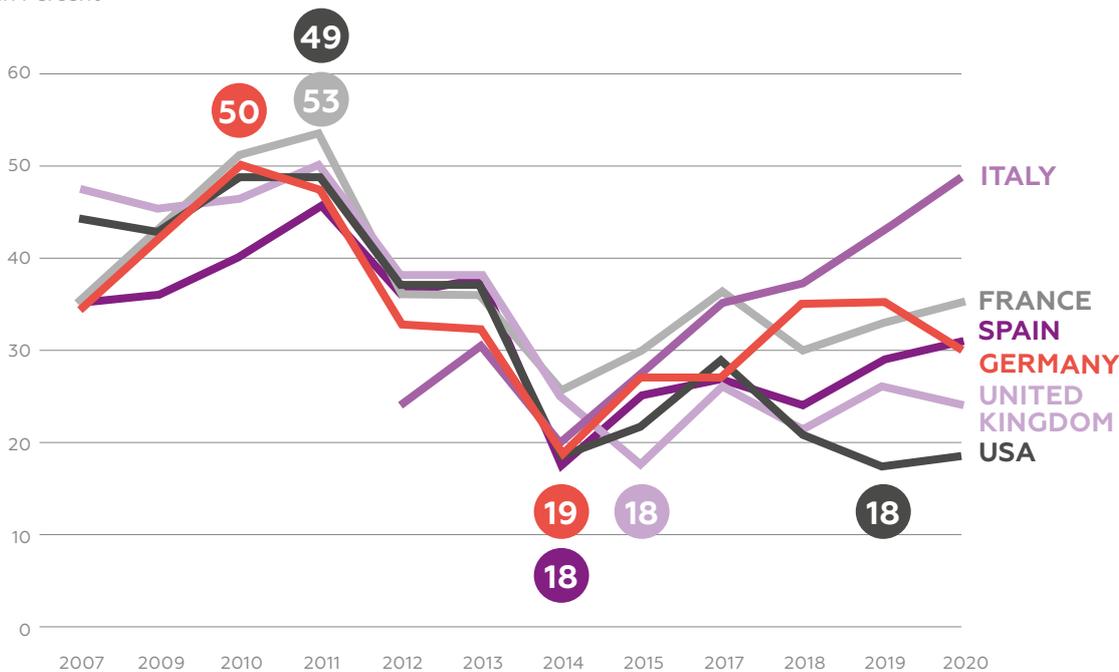
post-Soviet space or worldwide. Instead, it exploits these conflicts to improve its negotiating position in other areas; as a result, it is not a responsible partner. Russia’s engagement in Syria served, among other things, to improve its own position in relation to the United States and the EU on issues such as sanctions. The post-Soviet conflict zones in the South Caucasus, Moldova, and Ukraine are a means of influencing the states concerned. The annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas are examples of how the Russian leadership wishes to prevent post-Soviet states from being integrated into the EU and NATO. Moscow has no interest in a solution on Donbas until its demand for a federalization of Ukraine has been implemented, thus securing Russia’s influence.

CHALLENGES
A Balance Between Conflict and Cooperation

The campaign against Germany in connection with the poison gas attack on opposition politician Aleksei Navalny, the assassination of the Georgian national Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin’s Tiergarten park, the hacker attacks against the German Bundestag, and disinformation campaigns to undermine the credibility of the media and political institutions show that Russia’s leadership is increasingly pursuing its interests even in Germany with no consideration for Germany’s position. Germany’s cooperative approach toward Russia’s leadership has thus reached its limits, and the concept of

Russia’s Image Has Deteriorated in Many Countries in the Last Decade

Positive Image of Russia in Percent



Country	Difference from 2007 to 2020
Italy	+11
France	0
Spain	-4
Germany	-4
United Kingdom	-23
USA	-25

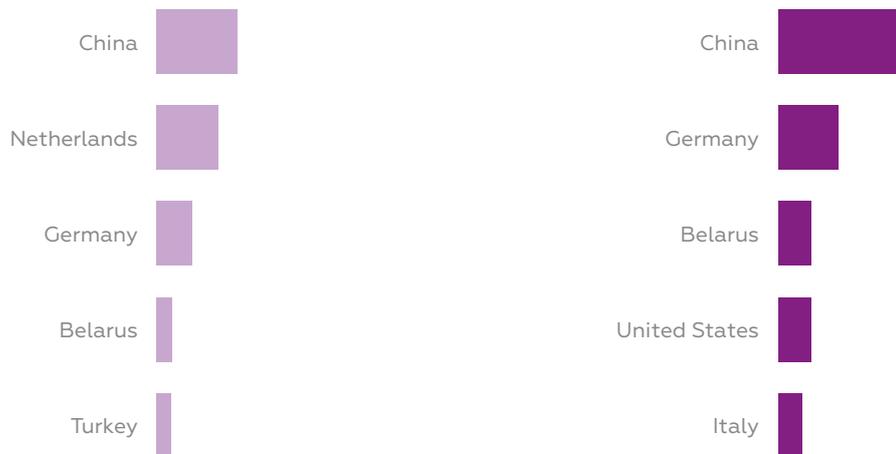
Source: Pew Research Center, Global Attitudes Survey, Summer 2020

Russia’s Main Trading Partners and Commodity Groups

Russia’s Main Trading Partners (2019)

Export Goods %

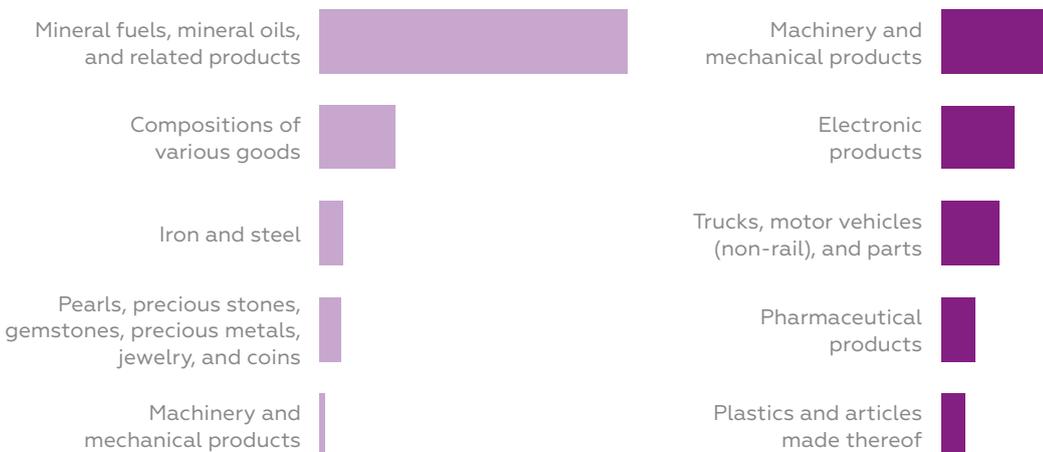
Import Goods %



Russia’s Main Commodity Groups (2019)

Export Goods %

Import Goods %



Source: Germany’s Federal Statistical Office (Destatis), 2021/UN Comtrade

change through rapprochement has failed. Likewise, German support for the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline has not made the Russian leadership any more willing to compromise on issues such as Donbas. On the contrary, the Kremlin is exploiting the pipeline to sow division in the EU and in transatlantic relations. A paradigm shift is visible in this context: The Kremlin views Germany, as a leading power in Europe, increasingly as part of the problem rather than of the solution. Consequently, Russian policy now aims to weaken Germany internally, with the aim of undermining cohesion in the EU and transatlantic relations, as well as strengthening Russia's own negotiating position.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Germany Must Strengthen Its Negotiating Position

Germany needs a policy toward Russia that is based on a realistic assessment of Putin's system, rather than on the approaches of the past. It is wrong to claim that Moscow can be expected to adopt a more compromising approach if greater cooperation is offered. Instead, boundaries should be set when dealing with Russia, without slipping into ideological criticism. This is the prerequisite if Germany is to pursue a more consistent policy toward Russia, one that gives the Russian leadership less influence over German internal politics and strengthens Germany's toolkit with regard to sanctions, military support for partner countries, and negotiations with Russia in regional conflicts. The Kremlin can only be influenced by changing its cost-benefit calculation.

In the coming years, Germany should expect a more aggressive Russia that will use military and hybrid means to assert its interests. Weakening Germany will be regarded as a way to weaken the EU. Projects that promote economic and energy interdependence with Russia should therefore

be subjected to scrutiny. Investment is needed in defense capabilities in the framework of NATO and the EU, as well as in digital security and societal resilience. Firmer action must be taken against enemies of democracy in Germany and the EU to decrease internal vulnerabilities.

As Russia plays an important role in conflicts worldwide and cooperates only if doing so is in its own interests, **it is essential to seek pragmatic diplomatic relations and to improve Germany's own negotiating position** via greater engagement in conflicts in its neighborhood and worldwide – as well as taking more responsibility in upgrading multilateral institutions. Germany will only be taken seriously by Moscow as a negotiating partner if it is a player in conflict resolution that is also willing to send peacekeeping forces and, if necessary, to engage in military intervention. This should take place within the framework of alliances (NATO and the EU) and multilateral formats (the OSCE).

Social exchanges and change in Russia must become a priority for German foreign policy. Despite the more difficult conditions, projects with the growing Russian diaspora should be expanded, dialogue projects in the fields of cultural and youth exchange and town-twinning arrangements should be supported, and visa facilitation should be introduced for Russian society. There are also issues, such as disaster risk reduction, climate change and its impacts, and the green transition, where shared interests exist and projects can be used to promote dialogue.

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DGAP

Advancing foreign policy. Since 1955.

Rauchstraße 17/18
10787 Berlin
info@dgap.org · www.dgap.org
@dgapev

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