

Ukraine, NATO, and German Foreign Policy

Don't overestimate Berlin's statements concerning Russian interests in the former USSR

By Andreas Umland

Since the beginning of April, Germany has become a rather less popular country in Ukraine's capital Kyiv and Western provinces. Patriotic Ukrainian elites are mostly right in their evaluation of the effects of recent German foreign policies. At the summit in Bucharest in early April, it was not the least Germany's refusal to immediately invite Ukraine to NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP) that led to the postponement of the issue to NATO's next large meeting later this year.

Subsequent assessments of the behaviour of Chancellor Angela Merkel before and at the Bucharest summit by Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian commentators across the world were of a wide variety. The most radical reaction constituted, perhaps, the article "Germany against Kyiv's Westward push" by Dr. Taras Kuzio, the West's most prolific public commentator on current Ukrainian affairs, in Ukraine's major English-language weekly "Kyiv Post" of 3rd April 2008 (<http://orangeukraine.squarespace.com/journal/2008/4/3/reforming-without-a-map-no-go-from-nato.html>). It would be no particular exaggeration, as Dr. Kuzio might himself agree, to call his article anti-German. Kuzio talks about, among others, German nationalism and sees parallels between pre- and post-war German foreign policies – sensitive themes in today Germany. Being German, I am still sympathetic to Kuzio's and similar motivations of other commentators: Ukraine's inclusion in MAP seemed near in early April 2008. And, indeed, the German Chancellor's different opinion was an important – perhaps, even the major – factor in preventing it.

However, Kuzio and other commentators tend to misunderstand and -represent German intentions, and take too seriously German public references to Russian interests. Germany has indeed a history of special relations to Russia. Yet these times are, contrary to what many Russian politicians and intellectuals continue to believe in, long gone. True, today, Germany plays the role of the "good cop" within Western policies towards Russia. Yet that is exactly what Berlin's behaviour is about – Germany is just playing this part.

Also true, former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder took the "good cop" role a bit too seriously. Yet, his infamous labelling of Putin as a "spotless democrat" is as much a joke in today Germany as George Bush's description is of what he had seen while looking into Putin's eyes, in the US nowadays. Schroeder's behaviour after he left office – he took a job at a German-Gazprom joint-venture he had set up himself while being Chancellor – has largely discredited his policies regarding Russia. While German managers and entrepreneurs have considerable interests in Russia, the German political and intellectual elites have become as disillusioned about Putin as the decision makers and opinion leaders of other Western countries.

Moreover, Chancellor Angela Merkel is different from Schroeder. She grew up in Eastern Germany and thus got to know first-hand the ethos and methods of Soviet-bloc political police, namely of the "Stasi", the infamous East German political police, with which Putin closely cooperated when he served for the KGB in Dresden in the late 1980s.

Today, Germany's stand on Ukraine's current MAP participation is less related to any particular pro-Russianness. Instead, it seems driven by another – eventually, more rational – assessment of the implications that a NATO offer for Ukrainian participation in MAP would have. As is all too well-known, the majority of Ukraine's population is still against NATO membership. The figures for February 2008 were 53% against and 21% in favour. There continue to be far too many reservations about NATO among ordinary Ukrainians to start serious "membership action". Most probably, a NATO offer now would

thus have had the immediate effect of mobilizing Ukrainian anti-NATO forces, and their utilization of widely spread anti-Western stereotypes - with unknown consequences. A current MAP participation by Ukraine would thus, probably, do more harm to Western-Ukrainian relations than bring Kyiv any closer to NATO. In view of the dim prospects of any serious talk about Ukraine's entry into NATO in the foreseeable future, there is currently little reason to get into a fight with the Russians.

To be sure, such a fight would be fine and well, if a majority of the country's population were in favour of NATO membership (and might be thus, in that regard, justified concerning Georgia where this is, apparently, the case). But, at this point in time, the question is: What are we going to fight for with Moscow, as regards Ukraine? If the Ukrainians themselves do not (yet) want into NATO: What is all the fuss about? Moreover, the Russians would and, in fact, already do pretend that they are not only defending their own interests, but those of the majority of Ukrainians. Given recent Ukrainian polling data, this claim cannot be easily dismissed.

The main culprit in this story seems to be not Germany, but NATO itself. It has done too little too late in terms of explaining to Ukrainians what NATO is about. Instead, Ukraine's political and public discourse remains corrupted by Soviet legacies. It is shaped by Russian government-controlled mass media and the bizarre conspirological political publicism that dominates Russian and Ukrainian book markets today.

In this particular regard, Germany, namely the influential Hamburg magazine DER SPIEGEL, does play a rather dubious role: DER SPIEGEL lends its name and reputation to one of Moscow's major publication projects in Ukraine - the infamous weekly "Der Spiegel - Profil". This coloured high-circulation journal is edited by Mikhail Leontev, a well-known Russian anti-Western propagandist, former "persona non grata" in Ukraine, founding member of neo-fascist Alexander Dugin's "Eurasia" Movement, etc. (see, on this issue, my German-language letter to DER SPIEGEL at <http://spiegelkritik.de/2008/03/17/bedenkliche-spiegel-kooperation/>). One could argue though that the primitiveness of "Der Spiegel - Profil's" anti-Ukrainianism has the unintended effect of supporting pro-NATO forces in Ukraine (reminding the ambivalent repercussions of transmissions in Ukraine of the dubious television reports from Kyiv by Russian TV "journalists"). And, DER SPIEGEL, it appears, is assisting in this. Yet, this would be a strange way, indeed, for German journalists to contribute to further improvement of relations between Ukraine and the West.

There remains a gap between the West's and most Ukrainians' understanding of NATO's nature and aims. As a result, Western statements on NATO-Ukrainian relations come across as pushy in Ukraine. Many Ukrainians ask themselves: What do NATO officials and leaders of Western countries want from us? Unless, NATO takes more active action to explain its history and intentions to Ukrainians, it will be lacking support in Ukraine, and not alleged sabotage of Ukraine's European aspirations by Germany, that will continue to prevent serious NATO-Ukrainian rapprochement.

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