

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Wall Street Journal. – 31.03.2014

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The Russia Lobby in Germany

Berlin's foreign-policy leadership boils down to 'let's-talk-this-over' and 'maybe-we-can-do-nothing.'

Російське лобі в Німеччині

Зовнішньополітичне лідерство Берліну зводиться до "давайте це обговоримо" і "що якщо нічого не робити"

Російські інтереси в Німеччині лобіюють досить могутні промислові та політичні групи впливу, частина Соціал-демократичної партії, а також ультраліві та ультраправі противники Євросоюзу. Вони успішно культивують ідею про те, що в діях Путіна в Україні винен Захід що принизив Росію і що протистояння з Москвою практично з будь-якого питання обернеться для німецького бізнесу катастрофою, повідомляє колишній виконавчий редактор International Herald Tribune Джон Винокур. Старання Берліна уникнути конфронтації пофарбовані нервозністю, не повною відвертістю і крайньої емоційністю, йдеться в статті. "Якщо Україна опиниться розчленованою, розділеною на російські протекторати, це стане тріумфом Володимира Путіна і неприхованою поразкою Барака Обами. Що ж стосується Німеччини, для неї це означатиме продовження звичного життя та комерційної діяльності на власних егоцентричних умовах", вважає автор.

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303978304579473082453217614>

Germany's Russia lobby includes industrial and political influence groups of considerable power, a faction of the Social Democratic party, and anti-European Union activists of the far left and right. They successfully encourage the notion that the West, America in particular, has humiliated Russia to the point of being responsible for Vladimir Putin's actions on Ukraine—and, above all, that confronting Russia on virtually any issue is catastrophic for German business.

A little reality here, please.

According to the German Statistical Office, Russia ranks 11th as a German trading partner, behind Belgium. Data from the MSCI research organization shows that, as a percentage of overall revenue among listed European companies, the highest German exposure to Russia is 11.5% for retailer Metro. BASF is exposed to Russia for 4.1% of its revenue, as is Siemens. Volkswagen, Porsche and BMW are situated at 4.8%, 4.8% and 3.6%, respectively.

In fact, Switzerland-based soft-drink bottling firm Coca-Cola Hellenic faces about double the combined Russian exposure of those German auto makers.

That's great to know for bar bets. But it also says that Germany's efforts to avoid being tough with Russia on Ukraine are colored by a nervous, not totally frank and extremely emotional element. Arguments against stronger sanctions could be countered by stressing the factual limits of the lobby's "we're-gonna-go-broke" poor-mouthing.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel, right, and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in Berlin last month. Reuters

But the wider context for the German government involves postwar national guilt, and centuries of a both romantic and ruthless vision of Russia as a nearby Amazonia. It represents enormous potential German wealth, coupled with a German notion of Russia's need for German guidance.

In the Germany of Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, all of these habits get masterfully massaged by the Russians.

Last week, I asked a high-level European security official to evaluate Germany's position on Ukraine. He said, "I don't see the positive effect of all these phone calls by [Mrs.] Merkel to Putin. As for [Mr.] Steinmeier, there have been instances at international discussions where he seems to be pitching for the other side."

Held up against the crisis in Ukraine, Germany's new, projected engagement in foreign-policy leadership boils down to making sure its old "let's-talk-this-over" and "maybe-we-can-do-nothing" approaches stay in place.

In February, to wide international applause (and to occasional remarks that Chancellor Merkel wasn't necessarily on board), Federal President Joachim Gauck dared Germans to take risks for freedom and justice, to turn away from comfort and excuses, and to assume possibly painful front-line responsibilities in the world.

Here's a checklist on how Germany's coalition government was holding up to that task with 40,000 Russian troops just over Ukraine's eastern frontier.

When Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen, a Christian Democrat, said last week that it was important for NATO countries on Russia's borders that the Alliance "show its presence" there, she was immediately shot down by Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, a Social Democrat. Mr. Gabriel said, "The impression must not be given that we're playing with military options even in theoretical terms."

In the process, Mr. Gabriel looked like he was disregarding a warning issued the day before by U.S. Gen. Philip Breedlove, the top commander of NATO forces in Europe, about the unexplained and troubling nature of the Russian troop buildup.

Who came to the defense of Ms. von der Leyen, after the vice chancellor clobbered her on an issue where she was in tune with a developing aspect of NATO policy? Chancellor Merkel said nothing specific.

The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's (FAZ) explanation for why was not reassuring. The newspaper reported, in fact, that the chancellor's silence involved her government's resistance to

a plan under in discussion in Brussels, which would preposition "heavy military equipment" in the Baltic states and Poland. This is the kind of action to which U.S. President Barack Obama is referring when he says that NATO will maintain a "regular presence" in Alliance countries that feel threatened by Russia.

More discomfort: The FAZ described NATO members' broad view that Germany was slipping into its old passive mode, akin to its position during NATO's Libya incursion. This included its attitude towards certain "practical measures." Presumably, this means deeper and riskier involvement than flying the air patrols over the Baltic Sea that the Germans had previously indicated they would undertake.

All the same, it is commonplace among allies to say that Germany is an ultimately sure partner in the Ukraine crisis because of Mrs. Merkel's known mistrust and dislike of Mr. Putin. But the notion can wear thin.

After years of Germany accommodating Russia, the problem now comes down to weak expectations for fundamental change in Germany's approach. Since little in the realm of future cooperation can be expected of Mr. Putin, it would be reasonable for Berlin to consider that its current relations with Russia can not survive the Crimean aggression.

But Mrs. Merkel, Mr. Steinmeier and German public opinion give no sign of willingness to concede the point.

In terms of the existence of a Ukraine whole, free and anchored to Western institutions, that means its new leaders in Kiev must limit their reliance on Germany. It also supports their case for pressing (and perhaps shaming) the Obama administration and the rest of Europe into accepting historical responsibility for preventing new Russian adjustments to the post-Cold War map.

If Ukraine instead winds up dismembered, neutralized and parceled into Russian quasi-protectorates through an ugly international deal, the result will be a triumph for Vladimir Putin and an undisguised defeat for Barack Obama. As for Germany, it would mean life and business continuing pretty much as usual—on Germany's own deeply self-involved terms.

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