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## Europe sharply divided over Vladimir Putin's re-election

### *Європа різко розділилася у зв'язку з переобранням Володимира Путіна*

*Помічники федерального канцлера Німеччини Ангели Меркель висловили надію на те, що Президент Росії В. Путін буде прагнути до співпраці з Україною, як єдиною найбільшою причиною для існуючих санкцій. Очільник зовнішньополітичного відомства ЄС Федеріка Могеріні, яка відвідала Україну, також наполягає на тому, що ослаблення санкцій є неможливим.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/19/europe-sharply-divided-over-vladimir-putins-re-election>

European reactions to Vladimir Putin's re-election have been sharply divided: some politicians see it as necessary to try to repair a difficult relationship; others argue **Russia** under Putin has irreversibly turned away from western liberal values and international norms; and a third group – the new rightwing populists – has been straight-out rejoicing.

Outside Europe, in countries as far apart as China, Venezuela, Iran and Japan, leaders sent formal congratulations or promises to work alongside Moscow, but in much of **Europe** things were less straightforward.

The conflict among mainstream European politicians was epitomised by a meeting on Monday between the Polish government – the arch Russian critics inside the EU – and Angela Merkel, the European leader who has expended the most energy trying to form a working relationship with Putin.

The Polish deputy foreign minister, Konrad Szymański, called on Germany to cancel the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that is due to send Russian gas through the Baltic Sea into **Germany** and Europe.

Merkel's allies politely declined the request, pointing out the \$11bn, (£7.8bn) 760-mile (1,225km) pipeline is a private sector enterprise, and no legal grounds exist to stop the project. Her aides instead expressed the hope that Putin would seek cooperation on Ukraine, the single biggest reason for existing sanctions.

The EU foreign affairs chief, Federica Mogherini, who visited Ukraine last week, insisted no relaxation of sanctions was possible.

Merkel's spokesman said the German chancellor would congratulate Putin on his re-election, as tradition dictated, but this would include cautionary advice about the “challenges” facing German-Russian relations.

Opinion polls in Germany show strong support for a new dialogue with Russia, especially among supporters of the rightwing AfD.

The German foreign minister, Heiko Maas, said was difficult to regard the election result as fair, and he expected Russia to remain a difficult partner. He said he regretted that the region of Crimea, which was annexed from Ukraine four years ago, had been included in the election, calling the situation “unacceptable”.

Interviewed in Bild, the German defence minister, Ursula Van der Leyen, played a balancing act, saying Putin was no longer a partner, but counselling against installing red lines.

The former SPD foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel said he thought sanctions should be lifted and the EU should take up Putin’s offer to allow UN peacekeepers into Ukraine, even though the mandate and scope of the job is unclear.

“We must adopt an attitude that we are never naive, but not too afraid to offer the partner again dialogue, arms control, disarmament readiness. The voice of Germany must always be the voice of reason.”

In France, the attitudes were equally ambivalent. The French president, Emmanuel Macron, who frustrated Putin by turning the populist tide running against the EU last year, turned heads after his own election by extending an open hand to Putin in the form of a summit in Versailles.

Since then, however, Macron’s attitude has cooled amid frustration with Putin’s refusal to put pressure on the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. Macron has made the use of chemical weapons by a nation state a red line in terms of upholding international law. But short of practical or reliable US military support for action over the use of such weapons, Macron has seen Assad kick over his red lines, largely with Russian protection at the UN. It has led to rare, stinging criticism of Macron from his predecessor, François Hollande, for failing to enforce the threats.

Commerce also plays a role. Macron is due to take a large business delegation to St Petersburg in May, as well as hold meetings with Putin in Moscow. Across the intellectual right in France there is a strong argument that Russia historically deserves greater respect, and if shown that respect, will respond.

But the biggest change in European politics has come from Italy, with the electoral success of the pro-Kremlin Northern League and 5 Star Movement. The league has formally joined a political alliance with Putin’s United Russia, and its leader, Matteo Salvini, has been photographed in Red Square wearing a Putin T-shirt, while M5S members have praised Moscow’s military intervention in Syria and railed against Nato, blaming it for fomenting Ukraine’s Maidan protests that ousted the Moscow ally Viktor Yanukovich. M5S has also called for EU sanctions on Russia to be lifted.

Outside the EU, the greatest opposition to Putin came from central European states on the frontline with Russia. The Georgian president, Giorgi Margvelashvili, was the most positive about a watershed change of mood towards Russia, saying: “There is a ‘now moment’ in the United States; there is a ‘now moment’ in London; there is a ‘now moment’ in Brussels ... a moment of comprehension of the [threats] to security for all nations that are challenged by Russia.”