



**Η ΚΑΘΗΜΕΡΙΝΗ**

# The misunderstood German policy with Russia



Before the recent reversal in German foreign policy, commentaries had presented Germany over the last weeks and months as a dangerously cowardly country, delaying a united European front against Russia. They have put forward Germany's extensive economic ties with Russia and reluctance to supply the Ukrainian side with weapons.

As a matter of fact, however, Germany has been the major power supporting Ukraine's realignment with the West and attempting to prevent Russia from invading the country from the beginning. The misunderstood German method is even the key to dealing with Russia.

When the Cold War ended with a success for the West, Western countries had not shown overwhelming military capabilities – like many would have liked it to display over the past weeks and months. Neither were they standing ready to confront Soviet power militarily anywhere it tried to reassert its rule. The balance of military power during the Cold War created a stalemate to resolve the conflict.

The Cold War ended for the same reason there has been a predicament in Ukraine since the Orange Revolution of 2004 and 2005: The pull effect of European liberal institutions on Central and Eastern European countries. The urge to join the vast open European market led millions to move with their feet out of the Soviet bloc, precipitated the collapse of Soviet-

controlled governments, and cemented the post-Cold War status quo through the economic prosperity of former Soviet satellites and republics. The fact that Ukraine has been gravitating towards the West came for no other reason.

Who has been supporting primarily those liberal institutions that have exerted such a pull effect on Central and Eastern European countries? Not France, nor the United States, not even the UK. In European integration, France never genuinely promoted liberalization. It requested instead numerous side payments from Germany in the form of interventionist programs to mitigate the perceived cost of free markets for its subsidized industry and uncompetitive monopolies.

The United States played only a minor role in the development of the European architecture of open markets – what Ukraine wants to join now is the European Union, not the OECD. Regarding the UK, it has always shown a hesitant strategy towards the organizations of European cooperation and is no longer a member of the EU.

Germany is the real supporter of the European liberal order, which has been so attractive for Central and Eastern European countries. The very fact Ukraine has looked towards Europe rather than Russia over the last two decades is largely a German achievement.

Regarding NATO, Central and Eastern European countries did not join for the sake of it, but to protect their realignment with the German-led European order of free markets. US military capabilities and guarantees were admittedly useful, albeit not indispensable.

So, even though Germany has been the major power attracting Ukraine to the West, has its role changed so much recently to justify the recent condemnations of German policies? The answer is no. On the contrary, Germany has been the major power trying to prevent Russia from invading Ukraine.

What has been the primary Western threat against Russia in case of an

invasion? Not a fully fledged US-led military retaliation, but massive sanctions cutting economic exchanges between Russia and Europe. Germany was the Russia's second trade partner after China. It is, therefore, the Western country with the most leverage on Russia. Notably, Germany is geographically closer than China to Russia's neuralgic centers, making Germany a vital partner.

The first economic sanction on the table was the cutting of the gas trade. Germany did not subscribe to the Nord Stream project out of weakness vis-a-vis Russia. This project has been instead a major German instrument to raise the costs for Russia of an invasion of Ukraine.

Cutting economic links between Russia and the West before Russia invaded Ukraine would have only accelerated this invasion. Only the prospect of extensive exchanges between Europe and Russia could have made the post-Cold War order acceptable for Russia.

Germany supplying weapons to Ukraine before the invasion would not have deterred Russia either. On the contrary, it would have confirmed the Kremlin's thinking that it was in a zero-sum game with the West, and with Germany in particular.

Vladimir Putin has been aware of this situation. His calls to de-Nazify Ukraine testify to his obsession with Germany. He also chose the transfer of power at the German chancellery to start the crisis, thinking that the new German government could be more prone to miscalculations.

In a nutshell, condemning Germany's supposed cowardice has been misplaced. Now that Mr Putin has despised the offers of economic cooperation, he will face the consequences, but only through their liberal architecture can Europe and the West once more prevail.

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