

"Germany's Russia Policy: Comparative Perspectives and Consequences for Transatlantic Relations"

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Judging by recent polls, the average German is now more likely than ever to view Russia as an untrustworthy ally, and yet Merkel has insisted that the Germany-Russia strategic partnership will remain in the medium term. This puzzling bit of Germany's Russian policy was one of many topics touched on by Hannes Adomeit during last week's event, "Germany's Russia Policy: Comparative Perspective and Consequences for Transatlantic Relations" hosted by the AICGS. Dr. Adomeit is a German-Russian relations expert who has served as head of the research section on Russia and Eurasia at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin, in addition to teaching Russian and European studies at the Warsaw campus of the College of Europe. With harsh rhetoric emerging from both sides of the Atlantic and altogether uncertainty regarding the future of Germany's Russia policy, last week's event at the AICGS was a timely teaser of how future transatlantic relations will be shaped.

The central portion of Adomeit's presentation was dedicated to investigating German public-opinion regarding Russia. Adomeit's major point was that Russia's image in Germany was falling precipitously even before Russia's recent action in Crimea. Several times a year, German pollsters conduct interviews in which they ask the questions: "Do you consider Russia to be a trustworthy partner?" In November 2009, nearly 40% of respondent said that they could trust Russia; in February 2014 the number had fallen to 14%. Furthermore, when the German public was recently asked if the imposed sanctions against Russia were too weak, adequate, or too strong, 43% of respondent

believed they were too weak, 34% adequate, and only 18% too strong. It was Dr. Adomeit's view that these perceptions are a reflection of the critical position taken by recent news reporting toward Russia's domestic and foreign policy alike.

Adomeit also discussed the attitudes of Germany's mainstream leadership, noting that there is much greater cohesion among the ruling coalition than might have been expected. During separate interviews with the German media, Chancellor Merkel (CDU) and Foreign Minister Steinmeier (SPD) both affirmed the usefulness of the imposed sanctions against Russia, although Steinmeier has stressed that sanctions should merely be one part of a comprehensive strategy aimed at bringing Russia back to the negotiating table. Moreover, both Merkel and Steinmeier rejected militaristic solutions based upon an "outdated" policy of containment, with Merkel claiming that the unlawful invasion of Crimea is as much a crisis of values as it is a crisis of international politics. It therefore appears that the Germany-Russia "strategic partnership", in the short term, is no more. That being said, Adomeit was sure to note that both Merkel and Steinmeier have expressed their desire to maintain a strategic partnership with Russia in the medium and long term, indicating the continued importance that Russia will hold in German foreign policy.

However, Germany is by no means united in opposition to Russia incursion into Crimea. Adomeit was keen to discuss those within Germany who prescribe to the so-called view of *Russland-Versteher*, or perhaps more accurately, *Putin-Versteher*. This is the camp occupied by those who are sympathetic to the position of Russian President

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Vladimir Putin, typically claiming to know what Russia is all about while at the same time finding rationalizations for Russia's arguments and actions. The proponent of this alternate viewpoint espouses a variety of arguments including but not limited to: NATO has broken its promise not to expand "one inch" eastward of unified Germany; economic sanctions are ineffective, useless, or counterproductive; the annexation of the Crimea was not such a big deal considering it was Russian to begin with. While the camp of *Putin-Versteher* is extremely diverse and includes previous SPD chancellors Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Schmidt, Adomeit made it abundantly clear that he does not agree with proponents of this camp. In fact, Adomeit explicated his belief that pro-Russian sentiment is only viewed as a powerful force in Germany due to the need of political talk shows to provide a "balance" of opinion, thereby given proponents of Russian action a highly publicized and legitimating avenue for voicing their views.

Lastly, Adomeit touched on the possible consequence that Germany's Russia policy will hold for transatlantic relations. While political commenters have not shied away from claiming on one end that the Crimea crisis will destroy transatlantic ties, and on the other end that it will strengthen transatlantic ties, Adomeit advanced a more measured view, claiming that it is still too early to definitively know how the Crimea crisis will alter to dynamics of transatlantic relations. Dr. Adomeit viewed the likely consequences of the Crimea crisis on transatlantic relations as depending on two main factors: how the Crimea situation continues to evolve and the development of the American political landscape before and after the 2014 midterm elections.

A lively discussion followed Dr. Adomeit's presentation, with a variety of participants speaking about a wide variety of issues including Germany's historical *Ostpolitik*, Hungary anomalous turn towards Russia in recent elections, the effects of sanctions on Russia's economy generally and Putin's bank account particularly (there have been

a series of minor runs on Russian banks and significant capital flight as corporations continue to fear devaluation of the Rubel), and the effect of Russian sanctions on the developments of Germany's *Energiewende*. All in all, the event at the AICGS provided a simultaneously comprehensive and concise account of German views regarding Russia, views which will play a major role in how the transatlantic partnership will be shaped in the future.