

FTD: A Different Ostpolitik

In response to reader requests, I have created a new sidebar section which lists some of the various by-lined articles I have authored in recent years for easier navigating. As part of the effort to catch up and post a few older articles up to the blog, below you'll find a piece I wrote for the Financial Times Deutschland in October of 2006. While clearly some of my opinions have longer shelf-life than others, a good amount of these issues remain important as the EU and Russia prepare to meet in Samara this week.



A Different Ostpolitik

By Robert R. Amsterdam

Financial Times Deutschland, October 11, 2006 (English translation)

While leaders from the spheres of politics, business and academia meet in Dresden this week for the annual Saint Petersburg Dialogue on German-Russian relations, the world is witnessing dramatic developments in Russia, from the politically-motivated killing of Anna Politkovskaya, to the roundup and deportation of Georgian citizens, to an imminent billion-dollar state asset-grab from Shell.

Where does Germany, and the Saint Petersburg Dialogue, stand on these developments?

The relationship between Germany and Russia has never been stronger. Since Chancellor Willy Brandt achieved his historical breakthrough with Ostpolitik three decades ago, focusing on conversation rather than confrontation, solid foundations have been built for the tremendously successful diplomatic and business relations of today. Yet as evidenced by the constant stream of negative developments over the last few years, today's Russia is increasingly incongruous with the Russia that Germany hopes for.

It was not by chance that just before this year's Saint Petersburg Dialogue, the German Foreign Ministry revealed that it has elaborated a new Ostpolitik for relations with Russia. The blueprint, a product of the Social Democrats dominating the Foreign Ministry, calls for closer relations with Russia not only for Germany, but also for the EU, which will be presided by Berlin for six months starting this January.

Chancellor Angela Merkel appears to be in favour of a more cautious approach towards Russia. She is said to be sceptical of any renewed Ostpolitik that does not adequately take into account the interests of Poland and the Baltic States, and which ignores altogether issues of human rights.

Indeed, Chancellor Merkel has met three times this year with her Russian counterpart. She has differentiated relations with Russia to place civil and political freedoms and rule-of-law issues on the agenda. She has met with Russian non-governmental organisations. She has highlighted human rights issues related to Chechnya. In a letter to Guido Westerwelle, Chancellor Merkel went as far as to express concern over the "unacceptable" treatment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the oil company head jailed for political reasons.

In contrast, the new Ostpolitik being espoused by the Foreign Ministry is a shocking surrender to sinister forces within the Russian leadership, and an overt signal to them that their belligerent authoritarianism will be tolerated by Germany - in exchange for preferential treatment in energy relations. This is a dangerous signal to send to a regime that has taken to wielding power with recurring disregard for both Russian law and international law.

Throughout his chancellorship, Gerhard Schroeder consistently ignored Russia's drastic retreat from commitments to a competitive market economy, democracy and the rule of law. Even worse, Mr Schroeder derailed attempts to exert Western pressure on Moscow over its growing abuses of power. While Russia was backsliding, Mr Schroeder focused only on deeper commercial and political ties for Germany.

Perhaps unwittingly, Mr Schroeder's Germany was complicit in entrenching the corrupt figures that have consolidated their power in Russia. He has been the leading apologist of a regime that has done away with regional elections, muzzled the free press, seized control of courts, imprisoned or expelled its opponents and expropriated billions of dollars worth of private property - including that of foreign investors.

Such developments should have been taken as warnings about the true nature of those who have come to power in Russia. Yet too many German business and political leaders have chosen instead to deny, dismiss or discount the gravity of what has been occurring. Russia is an important business partner, and therefore, so goes the argument, a strong Kremlin is good for stable business relations.

This argument is short-sighted and flawed. Undoubtedly it is important to secure stable market conditions for the 10,000 German companies active in the Russian economy. It is also important to secure long-term energy supplies from Russia. However doing so through a mix of opportunism and cowardice is not the right approach, and it has already begun to backfire.

Germany has shamelessly employed a double standard in its official positions on Russia. The successes of German firms in the Russian market have been built upon "constitutional dumping" - tolerance for legal standards so low that they would never be accepted in Germany. Yet the place of Russia in frameworks of partnership with the West, in a shared marketplace and a shared space of justice and human rights, demands the attention of the West whenever and wherever fundamental principles are under attack. The flagrant abuses of the current regime in Moscow suggest that those in power believe that their conduct is without consequence. This is what Germany's unwavering support has taught them, at least until now.

If the new Ostpolitik becomes a reality, the world may begin to view Russia's human rights violations as Germany's human rights violations. Every time a political party is outlawed, Germany's signature will be on the paper; every time an opponent of the state is imprisoned without fair trial, Germany's hand will be on the key; and every time an outspoken journalist is savagely murdered, there will be blood on Germany's hands. Is drawing these connections the only way to awaken the ethics among the blindly pro-Russian Social Democrats?

Engaging Russia is critical for all of the benefits that a solid partnership entails both East and West. However this engagement must be within a constructive framework, built upon real respect for fundamental principles of market economics, the rule of law and democratic processes.

The time for self-interested opportunism has passed. As has been understood by Chancellor Merkel, a new relationship with Russia must be built upon solid foundations to ensure growth, prosperity and security for the future, both in Russia and in the rest of Europe. Germany's own best hope can only be based on an unwavering commitment to its own principles, following the path of Chancellor Merkel - active engagement on honest terms. If not, Germany may soon find itself isolated from its EU partners, and facing serious troubles with a post-Putin regime that is less beholden to prolonging the romance with Berlin.

This year's Saint Petersburg Dialogue may well reveal who in Germany has their hands tied, who lacks the courage to speak out, and who will have the leadership to lay the foundations for Germany's future as a truly independent partner rather than as a dependent little brother of Russia.