

The EU is Reluctantly Getting Tougher with Putin

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Europeans surely remember what happens when you let an autocrat get away with grabbing territories hoping that the last bite will be the last one.

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US President Joe Biden told Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday that the West would respond decisively if there were an invasion of Ukraine.

On Saturday, Biden consulted with French President Emmanuel Macron, who spoke with Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, reported [Reuters](#).

Berlin and Paris preferred to keep a low profile in the Ukrainian crisis. However, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is unwilling to postpone the opening of Nord Stream 2, and French President Macron is running for re-election in a country where pro-Russian sentiments run deep.

However, US pressure on Scholz and Macron's eagerness to steal the spotlight in the post-Merkel era has pushed both leaders to be more vocal and united. Will the EU's tougher stance help defuse the crisis?

Until a couple of months ago, Germany was run by the respected Angela Merkel. She had the respect of Putin. Scholz, Merkel's successor, is not as charismatic and has been timid and passive on the Ukrainian crisis. Scholz was summoned to Washington earlier this month, where officials complained that "Scholz has switched to mute."

Germany's refusal to deliver weapons to Ukraine is causing frustration in Kyiv and among NATO members. After the White House meeting last week, Biden and Scholz tried to show a united front. Yet Scholz refused to refrain from activating the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline if Russia invaded Ukraine.

Under Merkel, by contrast, Germany had been tough on Putin and had acted swiftly. When Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014, Merkel had been proactive and convinced all EU members to impose sanctions on Russia. Together with France, Germany had established the so-called “Normandy format,” which included Russia and Ukraine.

Back then, Europe had been at the negotiation table. Today, Putin talks directly with Biden over the Europeans’ heads. Putin sounded dismissive after meeting with Macron in Moscow last week and suggested that his only real interlocutor was Biden. This is, of course, part of Russia’s old practice of divide and rule when dealing with NATO. But Putin would not have ignored Merkel the way he ignored Scholz so far.

For Putin, Scholz is a more convenient interlocutor than Merkel because he lacks her authority and gravitas and is a member of the Social Democrats (SPD). Having grown up in East Germany, Merkel had no sympathy for Russia. Further, she was also strongly Atlanticist like the rest of her party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The Social Democrats, by contrast, have historically been more favorably inclined towards Russia. Since Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* in the early 1970s, the party has sometimes been dubbed *Russlandverstehher*, or “a Russia understander.” Moreover, former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, a member of the Social Democrats, has been very sympathetic to Russia and has been on Putin’s payroll for years, chairing the consortium that built Nord Stream 1 and 2.

In addition to chairing the Nord Stream projects, Schröder joined the board of Russian gas giant Gazprom. Moreover, Schröder has recently accused Ukraine of “saber-rattling.” True, Schröder is no longer chancellor, and Brandt sounds like ancient history.

But concerns about Germany’s new government regarding Russia are not unfounded. Recently, the government fired Vice-Admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach, the head of the German navy, for saying that the West should show Putin respect and recruit Russia as an ally against China.

Although Schönbach was fired for his comments, he did express a sentiment shared by many decision-makers in Germany. Indeed, the concept of *Russlandverstehher* has been updated with that of *Putinverstehher* – those who understand Putin.

From its refusal to supply weapons to Ukraine to its insistence on building Nord Stream 2 – that increases EU dependence on Russian natural gas and which was opposed by the US – Germany is seen as undermining a united Western front.

Nord Stream was built under Merkel, and therefore the Social Democrats are not the only ones to blame for Europe’s dependence on Russia’s natural gas. The EU could impose stricter sanctions on Russia, but Putin could close gas pipelines to the EU in response.

The consequences would be unmanageable, especially in the winter since the EU imports about a third of its natural gas from Russia (on average, though countries like Austria and Finland import all their natural gas from Russia). Of course, turning off the gas ta

would also be costly to Gazprom, and tough Western sanctions would hurt the Russian economy.

Nevertheless, Russia would be able to hold on for quite a while, thanks to \$600 billion of reserves sitting in its central bank. And so far, Gazprom has made quite a lot of money thanks to the higher gas prices produced by the crisis. So it could be that maintaining the situation without war is good enough for Putin.

Germany poses a problem to the EU regarding natural gas because it consumes a quarter of the EU's gas supplies. Moreover, it has become more reliant on natural gas since it decided to shut nuclear plants following the Fukushima disaster.

Germany, however, is not the only reason why Putin is hardly facing a united European response. France is part of the problem too.

There is no French equivalent for the German expression *Russlandversteher*, but there is a French equivalent for the attitude. Indeed, former French Prime Minister François Fillon was recently added to Putin's payroll by joining the board of Sibur, Russia's petrochemicals giant.

Unlike their German counterparts, French conservatives are not unanimously Atlanticists – far from it. Fillon, who ran for President in 2017 as a Gaullist candidate, is a Russophile. Gaullist foreign policy was always about reducing French reliance on the United States. Hence, Charles de Gaulle pulled France out of NATO's military command in 1966.

During the 2003 Iraq crisis, former French president Jacques Chirac (himself a Gaullist) had criticized the governments of eastern Europe, which were about to join the EU, for daring to show support for the United States. France had built a united front against the war in Iraq with Russia and Germany.

Macron is not a Gaullist, although the Gaullist tradition primarily inspires his foreign policy. He has hardly contributed to show a united front vis-à-vis Russia. On the contrary, he described NATO as “brain dead” and called for “dialogue” with Russia two years ago.

Just like Chirac two decades ago, Macron has been floating the idea of a European army, something the Americans have consistently opposed as an idea that risks undermining NATO.

Macron talks somewhat confusingly about a “strategic autonomy” – a typical French way of using code language. But Eastern European countries oppose the idea as much as the US does. Moreover, Macron's declarations and views of NATO have played into Putin's divide and rule tactics.

As Scholz was in Washington, Macron flew to Moscow and Kyiv. While Macron's efforts to defuse the crisis are genuine, his diplomacy is not unrelated to France's upcoming elections. France's presidential elections will take place in April, and Macron cannot afford to go against French public opinion.

French public opinion is split with strong Russian sympathies that transcend right and left. The presidential candidate for the center-right, Valerie Pécresse, is a moderate conservative committed to NATO. Howe

other contenders with clear-cut views, both from the right and left, sympathize more with Russia than with the US. This includes Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour on the right and Jean-Luc Melanchon on the left. All three have committed to pulling France out of NATO.

Putin knows he can count on French public opinion. Yet things are likely to look different after the elections. According to The Economist's election model, Macron has a 79% chance of re-election. If re-elected, Macron will likely get tougher on Russia whether Putin invades Ukraine or not.

At the beginning of his term, five years ago, Macron tried to impress Putin by inviting him to the Palace of Versailles and establishing a personal relationship at his vacation home on the Mediterranean coast. But Putin has mostly ignored Macron. Macron has also been angered by the deployment of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group to Mali, where French troops are under pressure.

Macron now calls Russia a "destabilizing power" for attacking former Soviet republics with hybrid attacks, thus endangering Europe's security. Macron now warns of "serious consequences" if Russia invades Ukraine. He no longer wants to be accused of being too soft or even complicit with Moscow or dividing the EU and NATO. Besides the threat of economic sanctions, Macron has also deployed French troops to Romania to strengthen NATO's presence there.

On February 8, the day after the Putin-Macron meeting in Moscow and the Biden-Scholz meeting in Washington, a trilateral meeting was held in Berlin between the leaders of France,

Germany, and Poland. The EU's two heavyweights finally show a united front with Poland, an EU and NATO member that shares a border with Russia (the Kaliningrad exclave).

Finally, Scholz issued a strong-worded statement on Ukraine stating: "A further violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine is unacceptable and would lead to far-reaching consequences for Russia, politically, economically and surely strategically, too."

This new European front and tougher talk coming out of Berlin will hopefully convince Putin to compromise on Ukraine's relations with NATO and the EU. Europeans surely remember what happens when you let an autocrat get away with grabbing territories hoping that the last bite will be the last one. And if Putin gets away with conquering Ukraine, Chinese President Xi Jing Ping will feel confident about taking control of Taiwan.

One possible explanation for Putin's behavior is that he is using the Ukrainian crisis, which he created, to lift the economic sanctions imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. If the situation manufactured by Putin boils down to the lifting of sanctions, a compromise might be at hand.

On the other hand, if he is serious about his revisionist agenda in Eastern Europe, the crisis will likely last and even escalate.

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