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So Germany's to blame for Putin. Really?

Germany has been blamed for its cooperative approach towards Russia. But critics fail to understand its reasoning

Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine has sparked a new introspection in the West. A number of commentators, most of them writing from the US and the UK, have come up with their latest scapegoat: Germany's to blame, they say, with its decades-long policy of appeasing Russia. Really?

People love to dislike Germany. Often for good reasons. Successive Merkel administrations were hard-hearted in their management of the eurozone crisis, imposing crippling austerity on the South. They prioritised Germany's narrow economic interests when dealing with illiberal regimes, including an aggressive Turkey. Germany pursued a similar policy with Russia, too, weaving a tight web of economic relations. Since the turning point of 24 February, it is clear that this policy has outlived its usefulness. But the vitriol hurled at Germany has been excessive in the extreme: 'Putin's useful idiots' was the verdict of a recent Politico Europe article on Germany's leaders. The German president was prevented from visiting Kyiv after being declared persona non grata. It's all getting rather out of hand.

Understanding the German perspective

Extreme criticism of this sort is not only about Germany and how to deal with brutal leaders like Putin. It is also about Europe's role in the international system. And it has gone too far, for at least four reasons:

First, history. Having acknowledged the crimes of Nazism, Germany was re-established on new foundations after 1945. No other country has made historical guilt such an integral part of its national self-consciousness. This led to the drawing up of a pacifist constitution, the consignment of German nationalism to the fringes, and seven-plus decades of commitment to European integration. When the Germans justify Nord Stream by citing the destruction wrought by Hitler's Germany on Russia, or when they say they don't want German tanks

rolling into Ukraine killing Russian soldiers, there is deep historical content in it. One could dismiss it as a thing of the past, but vacuous it isn't, nor is it just pretext.

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Second, Ostpolitik. The Social Democrats in Germany today inherited Willy Brandt's post-1960s doctrine of cooperation, dialogue and detente with the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. This policy, which has been adhered to by every administration since, contributed to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and to the peaceful reunification of the two Germanies. As a member of NATO, Germany did not cease to play an active role in the containment of the Soviet bloc. But it complemented this role with a farsighted policy of opening up to the Soviet Union. A wise policy which was vindicated.

Third, Realpolitik. There is no doubt that its nexus of commercial transactions with Putin's Russia has been commercially beneficial for Germany. Should anyone be surprised if a state chooses to act according to its economic interests? And indeed, the mercantilism of an export-led German economy that grows on the back of foreign trade often leads German foreign policy to forge relations with authoritarian regimes. Nord Stream 2 did leave Germany fully dependent on Russian gas. However, the Scholz administration shut the pipeline down immediately after the invasion of Ukraine and moved forward to support all the heavy sanctions imposed, accepting the resulting economic damage. But the key point here is this: If Europe's main weapon for responding to Putin's aggression is economic sanctions, it is precisely the density of the commercial relations with Russia that makes sanctions an effective lever capable of delivering real pressure. Without these transactions, Putin would have nothing to lose – sanctions would be utterly meaningless! Economic interdependence gives Europe the power to exercise a deterrent by escalating sanctions. Even if it stands to bear a good part of the cost of them itself.

Building bridges not walls

There is nothing black and white about dealing in the long term with a militaristic authoritarian rival, one that holds nuclear weapons. It requires an ever-evolving mix of incentives and sanctions to encourage positive behaviour, discourage negative actions, and respond directly to aggression; a toolkit containing both engagement and containment to be

applied in alternating doses. The German logic of dealing with Russia is helping to maintain a balanced European foreign policy mix, which would otherwise be heavily skewed toward atavistic Cold War hawkishness.

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Fourth, Europe. Peace in post-war Europe owes much to the pragmatic restraint of its leaderships, the taming of nationalisms, the forging of mutually beneficial cooperation. The EU owes its historical success to building bridges, not walls. Of course, when things change, Europe (and Germany) change their mind, to paraphrase Keynes. The EU cannot and must not abandon its doctrine of soft power; rather, it must complement it with hard power and defensive deterrence. But holding the European leaders who sought to engage Russia as a partner responsible for Putin's war is worse than revisionism. It is a plain distortion of logic.

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