

Taming the Bear? Germany and Europe's Fragile Eastern Frontier

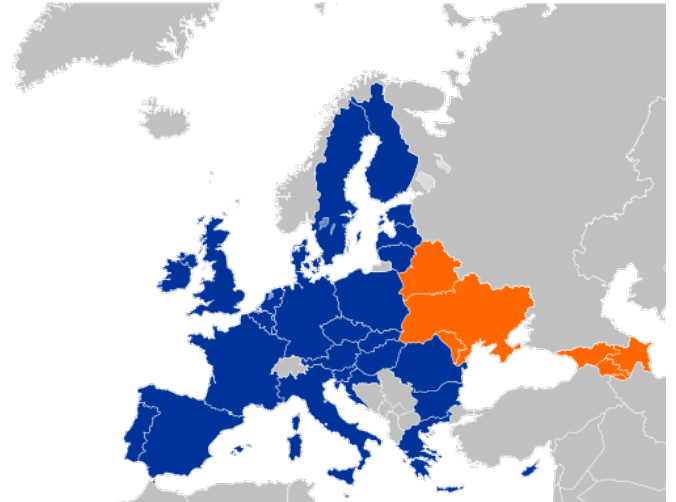
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Eurocrisis in the
Press

By [Kevork Oskanian](#)

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Over the past few years, the EU's monetary woes have placed Germany's central role within the European project in the limelight. Its sheer economic weight made its agreement to the various bail-outs and rescues mandatory; the Merkel government's insistence on austerity over stimulus, and the over-ruling of elected governments have further weakened the Union's claims to democratic legitimacy, already on shaky ground because of the weight of its unwieldy, powerful Brussels bureaucracy.



Europe's Southern troubles, its democratic crisis, and the by now undeniably prominent role played by Germany within them appear not to have diminished the formidable soft power it extends to its east, among the former Soviet states: having been left outside the formal confines of the European

Union, many have, at the same time, continued to aim for some degree of integration with Brussels. Six states in particular – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and the Ukraine – have, since 2009, been part of the EU's [Eastern Partnership](#), a process aimed at their further integration through a series of bilateral 'Association Agreements' – including a 'Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement' – with the states concerned.

Although the Partnership does *not* promise the participating states outright membership, it does aim to adapt their regulatory frameworks and political systems to European standards. Some of the participating states – notably Georgia and Moldova – have moreover been more or less forthright about their long-term wish to join the EU: the prospect of loosening their ties with an increasingly authoritarian and regionally assertive Russia therefore seems to amply compensate for the glaring democratic or monetary imperfections within the European project.

Berlin's amalgamation of its 'Ostpolitik' within the broader framework of democratisation and EU expansion has been a feature of politics on the continent since the end of the Cold War and German unification. There are, however, serious questions as to [whether the Federal Republic will be able to continue relying on this largely non-confrontational approach](#), in light of Moscow's growing unwillingness to accept perceived encroachments onto, what it regards as, its sphere of influence, even if they are of a purely economic and political nature, by a largely 'soft-power' EU.

European and German policymakers [have often emphasised the politically or strategically neutral status of the EaP](#): the project, they assert, is *not* aimed at anyone, without mentioning the elephant, or in this case, bear in the room – Russia. The Kremlin, in turn, has grown increasingly irritated at what it sees, rightly or wrongly, as an attempt to infringe on, as it formally calls it, its "sphere of privileged interest", or, less formally, its "near abroad". While carefully adhering to the niceties of Westphalian sovereignty, it has used health concerns, and commercial arguments, intermixed with the occasional threat, to sanction former Soviet states – like Armenia, Moldova, and the Ukraine – for their participation.

Brussels and Berlin may offer as many assurances as they like; for Moscow, strategic calculations in the FSU are still very much zero-sum, especially when it comes to integration processes bypassing its control. Former Soviet

states can either associate with the EU, or become members of the Kremlin's own preferred integration project, the Eurasian Union. Moscow is still very much conscious of the continued dependence of former Soviet republics on its markets and energy supplies, and choices in favour of Europe have usually resulted in rather convenient 'problems' in the quality standards of [agricultural and food products](#), or ominous references to 'cold winters' in the absence of [Russian gas](#).

The EU and the Soviet Union had a similar spat over the alignment of former Soviet republics earlier in the previous decade. Following the Ukraine's 'Orange' Westward lurch, Russia's Gazprom— often seen as an extension of the state —became particularly insistent on Kiev's repayment of its overdue gas bills, eventually [cutting off its \(and, by extension, much of Europe's\) gas supply in the winter of 2009](#). Subsequent statements by various Russian policymakers have raised suspicions that the Kremlin is considering the use of its Eastern neighbours' 'energy dependence' as a weapon against their European aspirations.

If history is any guide, Europe will have some difficulty in devising a unified approach to a potential Russian challenge similar to that of 2009. At the time, Germany [resisted calls](#) by Eastern and Central European states to involve the European Union in response to Russia's cut-off. Germany was also instrumental in upholding ambiguous, non-committal policies regarding the potential membership of former Soviet states like [the Ukraine](#) and Georgia. Maintaining a good working relationship with Moscow had been a priority for successive German governments since reunification, as had been a concern with avoiding Russia's perception of EU expansion as a threat.

Germany's decreased dependence on transit routes through former Soviet States like the Ukraine and Belarus would seem to have increased the probability of such divisions re-emerging in the event of a similar crisis: with the '[Nord Stream](#)' pipeline running directly from the Russian to the German pipeline grids under the Baltic sea, any 'disciplinary' measures imposed by Moscow on states within its 'near abroad' would have even more uneven effects within the EU than was the case in 2009. Their impact would mainly be felt by states in the Balkans and South-Eastern Europe, who, with the [downscaling and/or delaying](#) of the rival Nabucco pipeline — partly because of [official Germany lack of interest](#) — have been left highly dependent on Russian supplies.

Much will depend on the exact composition of the next German government. Merkel's administration had become more critical of Moscow in the years since 2009. Several prominent [voices within the governing coalition](#) have recently voiced unusually strong criticism of Putin's [crackdown on NGOs](#), and Russia's [anti-LGBT legislation](#), to the consternation of German business groups; the conservative-liberal coalition has also demonstrated its willingness to run roughshod over Russian interests during the 2012 Cyprus financial crisis. In advocating '[democratisation through engagement](#)', Merkel's main opponent — the SPD's Peer Steinbrück — seems to be adopting a more conciliatory tone to Russia than many of his right-wing counterparts. This would also fit into a historical pattern, whereby the SPD generally assumed more dovish attitudes towards Germany's East than the CDU — with former chancellor [Gerhard Schröder](#) as perhaps the best example of such Russophilia.

The voters have now spoken, and first results point to a [grand coalition between CDU and SPD](#) as a likely outcome, muddying the waters even further for the EU's Eastern Partners, who are looking forward to a tense period in their relations with Moscow. Whether Berlin will act as a mitigating influence on Brussels' response (as it has traditionally done), or advocate a hardening of policies in response to Russian pressures in Europe's Eastern frontier very much remains an open question. Its answer may very well determine the future of Europe's Eastern frontier, and its relations with Moscow for many years to come.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

