

## 10 years since the Russian-Georgian war: a new German “Ostpolitik” is needed

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23-25 August 2018 marked Chancellor Angela Merkel's first regional trip to the South Caucasus, including visits to Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Chancellor's visit not only had an immense significance for these countries, but also demonstrated Germany's (and in a wider sense the EU's) strategic interest towards the region. Angela Merkel's visit to Georgia coincided with the 10th anniversary of the August War, its consequences still being felt today. 20 percent of Georgia's territory is occupied by Russia with the threat of annexation that now seems as impending as never before.

During the visit, Angela Merkel recognized the progress Georgia has made regarding its democratic and economic development in the last ten years, calling Georgia a very important partner in the context of the Eastern Partnership. Chancellor Merkel expressed Germany's support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, she persistently refrained from calling the status of the breakaway regions of Georgia “occupied territories by Russia” and instead described the situation as “unfair” until a meeting with students, where she was relented to use the term occupation for the first time.

Still, the Georgian people were disappointed by the Chancellor's messages when it comes to Georgia's NATO aspirations. For the past two decades, Georgians have been unyielding in their wish for Euro-Atlantic integration, with the latest opinion poll showing 75% of the citizenry supporting the country's stated goal to become a NATO member. However, these aspirations were not met with reciprocal alacrity from the German side when Angela Merkel stated that she was not able to see Georgia's swift accession to NATO in the context of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is interesting to note that this statement was made by a head of government whose country joined NATO while or even because part of its territory was under Soviet occupation.

Regarding the EU, the Chancellor's remark about Georgia and Ukraine as the next potential pair the EU may start talks with after the accession of the Western Balkan countries was more promising than the one about NATO. The message was far from supporting an official ‘European perspective’ for Georgia, but still provided a good motivation for all stakeholders to keep working towards this direction, which in turn is in Germany's and the EU's long term interest.

The Chancellor was candid and pragmatic when stating that Germany cannot refuse cooperation with Russia when it comes to energy, reminding the audience that even during the cold war, Europe and Russia or the then Soviet Union had close ties in the energy sector. However, she also tried to

assure those who expect a tougher stance towards Russia by stating that in case Vladimir Putin wanted to export gas to Europe, he had to meet minimum political standards.

It is fundamental that Germany and the EU perceive the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine as two sides of the same coin. This was implicitly denoted in the Chancellor's statement that she also meant Georgia's territorial integrity when she talked about inviolability of Ukrainian borders. In that respect, Germany and its allies should expand sanctions on the Kremlin unless Russia stops aggressive activities in Georgia, and ensures free movement of persons and goods across the dividing lines. The latter would qualify as the minimum political standard which Russia has to meet, referring to Merkel's own words. Imposing restrictions on persons included in the Tatumashvili-Otkhozoria list, a blacklist of individuals responsible for grave human rights violations in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region, also supported by the European Parliament's resolution, would be the first right step by Germany in this direction.

Despite the fact that Germany remains one of the most important allies for Georgia's sovereignty and one of its largest bilateral development cooperation partners, the Russian factor has always been present in setting Germany's policy towards Georgia. Before Merkel's visit, there was a ray of hope in Georgia that a '*new Ostpolitik*', voiced by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and aimed at identifying new ways to cooperate with Russia in the interests of all European countries and reaching out to Georgia and Ukraine, would be backed by Angela Merkel. However in Tbilisi, the Chancellor fell short of openly embracing her foreign minister's position by saying that there was not a new orientation regarding Germany's Eastern European policy. She interpreted Heiko Maas's words as emphasizing the importance for Germany to have good relations with Russia, and, on the other hand, to have a clearer policy towards Eastern Europe.

Paradoxically, Merkel appears, by and large, to be sticking with traditional *Ostpolitik* principles while the foreign minister, coming from SPD ranks, airs the courageous idea to re-conceptualize Berlin's and Brussel's Eastern policy. Georgia is an important country to Germany and the EU not only in terms of its continued contribution to international security, i.e. by being the largest non-NATO and the largest per capita troop contributor to NATO's missions in Afghanistan, and its allegiance to a common European idea, but even more importantly, in the context of Europe's long term energy security. It would thus be in Germany's interest to develop a policy towards Georgia (and Ukraine) independent of Russia, similar to Berlin's approach towards the Western Balkan states. The new policy should cater to Georgia's Western ambitions notwithstanding the Kremlin's view on the region as its own "sphere of influence". Acknowledging the high stakes, the European partners, and Germany in particular, should not risk losing an important ally due to its fate of having a revisionist power as a neighbor.

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