President Putin visits Germany: Moscow and Berlin seek a new role in world politics

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Ever since the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the world's Great Powers are seeking to establish new realities in the struggle for global influence under the banner of an international "alliance against terror".

Last week's state visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Germany marks an important turning point. On the one hand, Putin sought to re-evaluate the international status of the Kremlin through a strengthening of the Berlin-Moscow axis. On the other hand, the German government saw the visit as an opportunity to increase the authority of European foreign policy, under its aegis and with Russia's inclusion.

On September 25 Putin addressed the *Bundestag* (parliament), receiving several standing ovations from members of the government—a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Green Party—and deputies from all of the other parliamentary factions. German business newspaper *Handelsblatt* commented that the scenes in parliament "recalled the uncritical Gorbachev-mania of the 80s."

Putin, who delivered most of his speech in German, emphasised that Europe's economic weight must now find its counterpart in world politics—against the US and together with Russia: "No-one doubts the great value of the relationship between Europe and the United States. However, I am simply of the opinion that Europe can only ensure its reputation as a powerful and genuinely independent centre of world politics when it unites its own possibilities with those of Russia... Now is the time to consider what needs to be done to ensure that a unified and secure Europe becomes the herald of a united and secure world."

Putin justified the necessity of integrating Russia into Europe with the words "the Cold War is over" and that Russia was "a friendly European country" where education expenditure exceeds that for defence.

Directing himself to the German political elite, Putin conjured up the joint traditions of their two countries. He recalled the German princess Sophie von Anhalt-Zerbst, who rose to become Catherine the Great (1762-96), a powerful ruler of Russia, and then made the leap to politics: "Between Russia and America lie oceans, between Russia and German, however, great history."

In order to avoid a too obvious anti-American orientation, Putin immediately added: "Oceans and history cannot only divide, they can also connect." At a breakfast meeting held with government representatives and journalists the next day in Berlin's Steigenberger Hotel, he returned to the same theme, but this time without the moderating after-comment. "We are united with Germany through a great history, with America we are divided by a great Atlantic".

Putin then articulated more bluntly what have long been discussed and secretly striven for in German ruling circles. The modest role that Germany has imposed upon itself, he emphasised, was not commensurable with its position in Europe and the world. No country should permanently suffer from guilt over what it had once done in history. He "urged" Germany to be more self-confident.

Following the terror attacks on America, the Schroeder government sees the possibility of advancing its own ambitious foreign policy aspirations. Even before Putin had delivered his speech to the *Bundestag*, he was surprised by Schroeder's announcement that "the international community must and certainly will come to a more differentiated evaluation with regard to Chechnya".

Up until now the brutal actions of the Russian government in Chechnya have been one of the main obstacles to the development of German-Russian relations. In the rebellious province the Russian army has been responsible for executions without trial, torture and mass deportations as well as a tight media censorship. Since the beginning of the war, which started under Putin's leadership just two years ago, it is estimated that 40,000 have died and 800,000 (two-thirds of the Chechen population) have been forced to flee the province.

Schroeder's "differentiated evaluation" means that the German government is now prepared to close its eyes to the destruction of human rights in Chechnya, as well as the suppression of media freedom in Russia itself. Such factors should no longer be regarded as an obstacle to German-Russian collaboration.

Other leading members of the SPD have also indicated their agreement with the chancellor. The chairman of the foreign policy committee in the *Bundestag*, Hans-Ulrich Klose, made this clear in a radio interview. Klose said that the price for Russian cooperation in the fight against international terrorism was not too high. One had to accept Russia's evaluation of the threat it faced in Chechnya. At an early stage, he added, Russia had indicated that there were external attempts being made to establish a Muslim religious state in Chechnya and Dagestan: "This analysis as we know today is not false."

Bundestag president Wolfgang Thierse (SPD) introduced Putin with the claim that more than any other country, Russia knew the threat posed by fanatical Islamists. The Russian newspaper *Kommersant Daily* commented with barely disguised glee: "And how often have we told them this? Finally, they have got the message!"

The SPD's Green Party coalition partners are also determined to echo this collective change of heart. Just last week ten Green Party deputies had criticised Russian policy in Chechnya in an open letter to Putin. Now the party officially announces that they recognise the efforts by the Russian president "to differentiate between the Chechen people and terrorist fighters."

Deeds must soon follow this change of language in official German-

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Russian exchanges. Together with a closer collaboration at all levels, joint manoeuvres by the Russian and German armies have been planned for this year. At a meeting attended by 350 representatives from industry and finance in Essen last week, Putin promised, to considerable applause, that Russia would deliver oil and gas to Germany in the event of conflict. This is a clear pledge that Germany can reckon with Russian support in the event of a broader conflict in the Middle East, and need not, therefore, be put under pressure by the US.

For its part, Germany will agitate for the integration of Russia into the structures of NATO. In this respect, Schroeder stated that the "close, trusting collaboration" up until now shows that, in light of the threat of international terrorism, "all are well advised" to seek a close working relationship with Russia. Alluding to the US, he said, "Up until now this was not everywhere the case, but now it has become clear."

Parallel to the Putin visit, the German government undertook further initiatives to establish Berlin as an international centre of political power. Just two day's after Putin's *Bundestag* speech, the overwhelming majority of parliamentary deputies voted in favour of a renewed mandate for military action in Macedonia. For the first time ever, the German army will undertake the leadership of a NATO mission, as well as providing the majority of troops—600 from a total of 1,100 soldiers.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi were also in Germany during the Putin visit. The meeting with Mubarak underlined the more powerful role being played by Germany in the Middle East, which Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) has been advancing in the past weeks. The meeting with Berlusconi served to underline the efforts being made to achieve agreement with other European partners for Berlin's new role.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* commented: "Traditional disquiet has arisen amongst some of our Western neighbours. It will take great skill to avoid any misunderstandings and the risks which are involved." There are already fears being raised in the international press of a new "Rapallo", referring to the treaty between Germany and Soviet Russia signed in 1922 in a suburb of Genoa—a measure regarded as an act of betrayal by Great Britain and France, the victorious powers in the First World War.

At a joint press conference given by Schroeder and Berlusconi, the Italian prime minister expressed his agreement with the "differentiated assessment" of the situation in Chechnya, while Schroeder announced that in future, Europe would "work very, very closely together with Russia".

The Kremlin regards closer relations with Germany and Europe as an opportunity to increase its own foreign influence.

Russia officially joined the "alliance against terror" after nearly two weeks of intensive negotiations between Putin and Duma deputies, ministers, the military and leaders of the central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, as well as a 45-minute long telephone call with US President Bush.

Putin has opened up Russian air-space for "humanitarian flights" by NATO, promised Russian participation in search and rescue actions in cases of conflict, the delivery of weapons to the Afghan Northern Alliance which is fighting the Taliban, the exchange of intelligence, as well as virtually unlimited use by the US military of former Soviet military bases in the central Asian republics, the traditional backyard of Great Russian politics.

Moscow's decision to tolerate the opening up of the former Soviet republics to the US army was a source of sharp disputes in the Kremlin. Last week, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov insisted that he was completely unable to imagine a potential stationing of US combat forces in the region.

In the past two weeks and after intensive discussions with leaders of the individual republics, Putin was unable to maintain the Russian veto. The Internet news site *Gaseta.Ru* explained that the weakness on the part of Moscow stemmed from the fact that "we no longer have any economic and political arguments in central Asia." The site continued: "we do not even have enough money for our own campaign against Afghanistan."

Moscow has evidently come to the conclusion that it would not be opportune to risk a conflict with the US in connection with an intervention in central Asia, and thereby profit from the wiping out of the Taliban, which supports the Islamic separatists in Chechnya. In return, the Western powers will guarantee Moscow a free hand in its actions in Chechnya.

The new policy comes about at a time when the situation for the Russian army has worsened dramatically. In the past few weeks, a series of bomb attacks on Russian military vehicles have resulted in many casualties, with the army temporarily losing control over Chechnya's second biggest town, Gudermes. After his telephone conversation with Bush and the visit to Berlin, Putin gave the Chechen separatists a 72-hour ultimatum to decide where they stood in the "struggle against international terrorism". They should immediately hand over their weapons and enter into negotiations, he warned.

At the same time, Bush declared that Chechen fighters should break all contacts to Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda organisation, otherwise Washington would not be able to influence the military operation being led by Putin in Chechnya. According to the CIA, there are 2,500 bin Laden fighters in the Caucasian republic. During Putin's trip to Germany it was also made clear, however, that the new partnership was dependent on tough financial calculations. Germany still holds a trump in its hand in the form of the considerable debts that were owed by the Soviet Union to the former East Germany.

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