

Berlin: Above all dialogue

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During her telephone conversation with President Vladimir Putin on 2 March, Chancellor Angela Merkel condemned Russia's violation of international law and suggested establishing a Fact Finding Mission and an international contact group whose participants would include Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE or the Council of Europe. In response to Russia's moves in Crimea, Germany, along with all the other G7 nations, withdrew from preparations for the G8 summit in Russia. This stance was upheld by Minister of Foreign Affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier during the meeting with his Russian counterpart on 3 March. In a statement published after the meeting, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasised the lack of understanding between the two countries, and Steinmeier warned that unless significant progress was made in de-escalating the conflict, the European Council could impose EU sanctions on Russia.

At the same time, Germany is opposed to excluding Russia from the G8 (nor did it want preparations for the summit to be discontinued but it changed its stance due to fear of isolation), and is very sceptical about the imposition of EU sanctions on Russia.

Commentary

- The German government sees its role in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict over Crimea as that of a liaison in maintaining dialogue between Russia and the West. This is the stance Germany would traditionally adopt as a consequence of both the vision for Germany's role in international politics and its desire to maintain good political and economic relations with Russia. Germany's opposition to the use of sanctions, which it feels are ineffective and will only aggravate the crisis, also fits in with the German approach to international politics. Germany (as is usual in the case of conflicts in the post-Soviet area) is convinced that a long-term resolution of the crisis in Crimea will only be possible if Russia is engaged and its stance is taken into account. This may mean *de facto* opening up the way to German consent to the federalisation of Ukraine.
- There is not total agreement on the German political scene and in the media over the approach their country needs to take on Russia's role in the current crisis. While the opinion that Russia has violated international law is commonly shared, there is a wide array of proposals as to how Germany should respond: from suggestions that Moscow should be granted greater involvement and its interests regarding Ukraine (and all other Eastern Partnership countries) should be respected; that sanctions against Russia do not need be introduced (for example, the new Coordinator for Intersocietal Cooperation with

Russia, , Gernot Erler from the SPD or Peter Gauweiler (CSU) have called for this); even up to demands that the EU should respond firmly and impose sanctions (for example, from the Greens and some representatives of the CSU).

- Representatives of the German economic sector, who traditionally wield great influence on German politics, fear Russia's reaction to the possible imposition of sanctions, e.g. cuts in the gas supply to Germany. Now that the share prices of such brands as Adidas, Metro group, Commerzbank, BASF and Deutsche Bank have fallen significantly at Frankfurt stock exchange, this fear has been further augmented. Representatives of big business have long been appealing for the possibility of regulating Ukraine's trade relations with the EU and Russia that would facilitate the even development of Ukraine's trade in both directions, disregarding the fact that Ukraine cannot be at the same time a member of the Customs Union and participate in the EU's free trade area.