Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 22.08.2018 www.osw.waw.pl

Putin meets Merkel in Meseberg

Witold Rodkiewicz, Anna Kwiatkowska

On 18 August, Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Vladimir Putin held a working meeting at the castle in Meseberg near Berlin. It was the first bilateral meeting in Germany both politicians have held since 2013. In May this year the head of the German government visited the President of Russia in Sochi, and the two have also met regularly in multilateral formats.

Before the talks in Meseberg, Angela Merkel said in a short statement for the press that the topic of the meeting will include the situation in Ukraine and the implementation of the Minsk agreements. She admitted that a lasting truce had still not been achieved, and she expressed the hope that an attempt to stabilise the situation would soon be made. Merkel mentioned the possibility of organising a UN peacekeeping mission, and emphasised that Germany is ready at all times to work within the Normandy format. The Chancellor pointed out that Ukraine "must continue to play a role in gas transit to Europe, even after the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is activated". In the context of Syria, according to Merkel, the most important thing is to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe in connection with the battles around the city of Idlib. Germany also wants to give political impetus to the political process aimed at organising constitutional reform and elections in Syria. Merkel said she continued to respect the nuclear agreement with Iran, but she is observing the country's actions in Yemen and Syria and its weapons programme with apprehension.

Before the meeting, President Putin primarily emphasised the importance of economic cooperation with Germany. He recalled that Germany is one of the largest customers of Russian energy as well as an important transit country. According to Putin, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is a purely commercial venture. He insisted that implementation would reduce risks related to gas transit, and satisfy the growing demand for gas in Europe. According to Putin, Nord Stream 2 will not prevent the use of the traditional transit route for Russian gas through Ukraine, but only if it is economically viable. Putin called for increased humanitarian support for Syria, especially with regard to rebuilding infrastructure in areas to which refugees could return. The President also confirmed that there was no alternative to the Minsk agreements, and supported the Normandy format and the OSCE's observation mission.

The Russian president's spokesman later called the talks "very substantive" and useful, describing them as "watch synchronisation" (i.e. comparing and/or coordinating their positions), and explained that achieving specific agreements was not the aim. According to the Kremlin's spokesman, the leaders agreed on the need to defend the Nord Stream 2 project against attacks from third countries and attempts to politicise the project (in the

context of the US's announcements of further sanctions). The leaders also expressed their concern about the "unpredictability of the decisions" being taken by "certain countries" regarding customs tariffs. The spokesman also announced the appointment at expert level of a four-party group (Germany, Russia, France and Turkey) for cooperation on Syria, with particular focus on the migration crisis. The spokesman confirmed that the talks also covered Ukraine, and Putin's adviser on foreign affairs, Yuri Ushakov, added that a possible summit meeting of the Normandy group (Russia, Ukraine, Germany, France) was being discussed, but without mentioning any specific dates; at the same time he suggested that prior understandings would be necessary to ensure a satisfactory outcome of any such meeting.

Commentary

- The details about what took place during the meeting have been very scarce, provoking unfavourable comments in Germany. Another cause for concern for German public opinion was the secretive atmosphere and the lack of information after the recent meeting between the Chancellor and the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, and the head of the General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, as was the fact that Chancellor Merkel conducted some of her conversations with President Putin without an interpreter, in contrast to the usual custom. The lack of comprehensive information may be due to the fact that no agreement on the key issues has yet been reached. Merkel probably regarded the meeting with Putin in Meseberg as one of a series, especially as another meeting is planned for September between Germany, France, Russia and Turkey, which will be dedicated to the situation in Syria.
- The two sides were closest with regard to the Nord Stream 2 issue, the implementation of which they strove to present as a done deal. However, Germany is demanding a continuation of gas transit through Ukraine after the gas pipeline is launched, which Putin refuses to accept. He will continue to use the prospect of discontinuing transit to put pressure on Kyiv, for example in the matter of the financial disputes between Gazprom and Naftogaz in the European courts (Gazprom is challenging the verdict of the Arbitration Tribunal in Stockholm). Putin hopes that Germany, together with Russia, will defend the Nord Stream 2 project against possible sanctions by the US, and Germany for its part wants to send a signal to Washington that it does not intend to be blackmailed by President Trump. However, possible sanctions by the US on the companies participating in the project could fundamentally change their stance and create a serious problem for Chancellor Merkel.
- Regarding the other issues raised at the meeting, the two sides did not offer any joint solutions. In the case of the Donbas war, we can see a hardening in Russia's stance. Putin is probably making Russian support for a limited UN mission in the region dependent on Berlin putting effective pressure on Kyiv to non-reciprocally implement the political conditions of the Minsk agreements. Russia is also visibly putting pressure on Germany over Syria, and Putin has long suggested that the Syrian refugees' return to the country is conditional on German financial and economic support for the reconstruction of Syria from its war damage. At present, however, the situation of the Syrian refugees in

Germany is being brought under control, so Merkel has no reason to succumb to Putin's blackmail.

- From Moscow's point of view, the creation of a new format (Russia, Turkey, Germany, France) for political talks on Syria is a mechanism for drawing Berlin into resolving the Syrian question on Russian terms, bypassing Washington. This fits in with Berlin's ambitions to play a greater role in moderating the peace processes in various hot spots around the world and freeing itself from US influence.
- From the Russian point of view, therefore, the meeting in Meseberg was mainly a political demonstration targeted at the US; on the one hand, the aim was to increase tensions in German-American relations, and on the other to offer Berlin perspectives of pragmatic cooperation in solving the problems which are most important for Germany. From Merkel's point of view, the meeting was intended to sound out the Russian Federation's current positions, especially on security issues concerning Syria, Ukraine and Iran, matters which Berlin considers insoluble without the participation of Russia. If even partial solutions, or at least a visible narrowing of differences, were achieved, Merkel would have achieved success not only on the international stage, but also domestically, where her position since the Bundestag elections in 2017 is not as strong as before. Conducting a balanced foreign policy has repeatedly boosted Merkel's poll ratings during her 13-year rule. Such a success would also give her the opportunity to avoid being criticised as a Chancellor with just one subject: refugees and the misguided migration policy.

Anna Kwiatkowska-Drożdż, Witold Rodkiewicz in cooperation with Artur Ciechanowicz