Germany Prepared for Long-Term Dispute With Russia

By Rainer Buergin and Daryna Krasnolutska - Nov 26, 2014

German Chancellor Angela Merkel signaled she’s ready for a long confrontation with President Vladimir Putin over Ukraine as her foreign minister said the two countries’ relations must be “remapped.”

As government forces and pro-Russian separatists battle in Ukraine’s east, Germany’s goal is keeping the former Soviet republic sovereign and whole, Merkel said in a speech to parliament in Berlin yesterday. Russia’s actions threaten “the peaceful international order and breach international law” and the European Union needs unity to confront it, she said.

“We need patience and staying power to overcome the crisis,” she said to applause from lower-house lawmakers. Economic sanctions on Russia “remain unavoidable” as a cease-fire in eastern Ukraine fails to hold, she said.

Merkel, who has emerged as Europe’s main conduit to Putin in the Ukraine crisis, used some of the strongest language yet to hint at her exasperation, as she retraced attempts by world leaders to reach out to the Russian president during a year of escalating conflict.

Germany was “sparing no effort” to try to reach a diplomatic solution, she said. The EU’s biggest economy has also taken into account Russian concerns about the impact of Ukraine’s free-trade deal with the bloc. Ukrainian former President Viktor Yanukovych abandoned a plan to sign the agreement, triggering the crisis that preceded Putin’s annexation of the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea in March.

Russia Breaching

“None of this justifies or excuses Russia’s annexation of Crimea,” said Merkel, who held a four-hour discussion with Putin at the Group of 20 summit in Australia this month. “None of this justifies or excuses the direct or indirect participation in the fighting in Donetsk and Luhansk. Russia is breaching Ukraine’s territorial integrity.”

Russia poses “no threat to anyone” and is intent on avoiding “geopolitical games, intrigues and especially conflicts, no matter how much someone would want to drag us in,” Putin said at a meeting with military commanders yesterday in Sochi, Russia. “It’s necessary to reliably protect Russia’s sovereignty and integrity and the security of our allies.”
NATO Worry

Rebels attacked Ukrainian forces in almost two dozen locations in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the National Security and Defense Council said on Facebook yesterday. The Sept. 5 cease-fire in eastern Ukraine has been repeatedly broken.

“The relationship with Russia will definitely have to be remapped,” German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said in a speech to parliament. “Where we will stand 10 or 15 years from now, what the European security architecture will look like -- I don’t know.”

Unhelpful Statements

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization isn’t discussing accession of Ukraine, Seibert said, a day after President Petro Poroshenko said Ukraine would decide on entry in a future referendum. German Foreign Ministry spokesman Martin Schaefer said Ukraine should focus on economic reform.

German resistance to Ukraine's membership in the 28-nation military alliance, an echo of statements by French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius this week, is a warning to Poroshenko not to aggravate the conflict with pro-Russian separatists that has killed more than 4,300 people in almost eight months.

For Putin, the alliance once arrayed against the Soviet Union remains an adversary. Ukrainian membership in NATO would be absolutely unacceptable, a Russian government official said this week, asking not to be named discussing diplomatic policy. Any referendum that backed NATO membership in Ukraine would lead to further escalation which Russia wouldn’t tolerate, the official said.

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