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**The Russian Vector in the Foreign Policy of Friedrich Merz's
Government: Between Rhetoric, Strategic Pressures and Latent
Pragmatism**

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Abstract. *On May 6, 2025, Bundestag elected F. Merz as Federal Chancellor and approved the composition of the Cabinet of Ministers. The new coalition formed by the CDU/CSU and SPD bloc inherited almost completely the destroyed German-Russian relations from the previous government. Analyzing political attitudes of key ministers and logic of foreign policy vectors, the author highlights the institutionalization of the strategy of "cold detachment" in relation to Russia. The study concludes that Berlin is consolidating the policy of containment in political, diplomatic, and military-strategic dimensions, while keeping open limited opportunities for some interactions.*

Keywords: *Germany, EU, NATO, Russia, black-red coalition, Friedrich Merz, Lars Klingbeil, foreign policy, CDU/CSU, SPD*

Introduction: Setting the Analytical Framework

The change of government in Germany in the spring of 2025 formally concludes the period of so-called "traffic light coalition" (SPD–Greens–FDP), which found itself not only in a position of electoral defeat but also in a state of internal fragmentation.

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Political legacy of the cabinet of Olaf Scholz, who headed the federal government since December 2021, includes deteriorating foreign policy positions, erosion of trust in the Chancellor's office, weakened public approval, and frozen (or rather suspended) state of bilateral relations with Russia. While the results of early federal elections in February 2025 were, in general, predictable, the return of CDU/CSU to power (in coalition with SPD) was not only a political reversal but also a complex signal to all of Germany's international partners, including Russia. The role of Friedrich Merz as Chancellor and configuration of the new federal cabinet brought a mixture of cautious expectation and concerns in Moscow: a reconfiguration of actors has occurred, but will it lead to a reconfiguration of approaches?

This paper is not meant to offer speculative assumptions or formulaic extrapolations. It aims at fixing the starting conditions for Russian-German agenda under the new government, trace the degree of continuity and possible changes, and delineate the boundaries of what's permissible, likely and realistic in short and medium term. The methodological approach is based on a triangulation of sources: content analysis of the coalition agreement of May 2025; monitoring of statements by key figures in federal government, Bundestag, and federal lands; and retrospective look at how current politicians acted in the previous "Ukrainian" phase of bilateral relations (2022-2024).

Political Legacy of Scholz Government and the Starting Conditions of Merz Cabinet

By the time the new German Chancellor Friedrich Merz was elected (May 6, 2025), relations between Germany and Russia were practically frozen across most traditional dimensions.

Political dialogue was ceased completely, between both governments and ministries. The most recent high-level contacts date back to early 2022, after which the federal government systematically curtailed bilateral platforms and informal channels. Bundestag mechanisms of dialogue were dismantled as well.

Think tanks and expert forums, previously serving as analytical bridges, were shut down. The majority of German institutions – from Friedrich Ebert and Heinrich Böll foundations to German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and SWP – were included in the list of undesirable organizations in Russia. In response, they suspended activities in the Russian Federation and excluded Russian participants from European programs.

Economic ties have significantly shrunk. Although German companies continue to operate in selected niches of the Russian market, the trade turnover fell to one of its historical lows since the 1990s. The economic section of German Embassy was significantly reduced. The pivot of German business institutions (notably the Eastern Committee of German Economy) has shifted from Russia to Central Asia and South Caucasus.

Public diplomacy and cultural-historical cooperation remains only in symbolic formats: museum and archival cooperation, support for German minority in Russia, technical programs in regions. Projects in education and youth exchanges were discontinued, and German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) ceased new program admissions. A few German schools in Moscow and St.

Petersburg continue to operate, but in a reduced format and under strained administrative conditions.

The intellectual tone of the German political establishment – especially on the eve of May 9 – became increasingly anti-Russian. Statements by party leaders and Bundestag deputies no longer distinguish between criticism of the Russian government and generalized rejection of Russia as an actor in European security. This was symbolically reflected in the decision of Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) to expand surveillance of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), who previously advocated pragmatic relations with Moscow, and to begin media monitoring of the statements perceived as "pro-Russian".

The coalition agreement, signed by CDU/CSU and SPD in May 2025, contained only cursory references to Russia. It was mentioned in the context of support for Ukraine, threats to the European order, and need to modernize NATO. The absence of any substantive section on bilateral relations with Moscow reflected the reluctance of the new government to propose even a conceptual framework for dialogue or engagement. Against this background, the appointment of pro-Atlantic and ideologically committed figures to the key positions – including SPD co-chair Lars Klingbeil as Vice-Chancellor and CDU foreign policy spokesman Johann Wadephul to the Foreign Ministry – points to preservation of the tough line towards Russia.

At the same time, positions of Chancellor Merz and his chief of Federal Chancellery, Carsten Linnemann, remain more reserved. They refrained from anti-Russian rhetoric and framed Russia-related issues primarily through the lens of European and transatlantic obligations. This moderation opens up a potential corridor – albeit narrow – for tactical adjustments in Berlin's policy, should internal or external political dynamics shift in favor of a more pragmatic course.

Key Figures and Institutional Positions in Merz Government's Policy towards Russia

Despite the modest attention to Russia in the coalition agreement of CDU/CSU–SPD government, composition of the cabinet and initial political signals point to preservation, and in some aspects, tightening of Berlin's hard line towards Moscow.

Its main speaker is expected to be the Federal Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul (CDU), who replaced Annalena Baerbock (Greens) and is known for his extreme anti-Russian position. Wadephul has consistently advocated for expansion of arms deliveries to Ukraine and even supported the transfer of Taurus missiles, opposed by the previous chancellor. He proposed as well a sharp tightening of the German policy on Russia in the OSCE and the UN.

The second key figure is Vice Chancellor Lars Klingbeil (SPD), a prominent proponent of strengthening NATO's Eastern flank and European defense capabilities. It was Klingbeil, even before elections, who emphasized the long-term nature of conflict with Russia and the need for structural containment mechanisms.

Defense Minister Boris Pistorius (SPD) retains his position and plays a leading role in shaping the security policy. He has already announced the need for preparing the Bundeswehr for a potential

military conflict with Russia by 2030, confirming plans for expanding armed forces, intensifying exercises on the Eastern flank, and enhancing defense cooperation within NATO.

Chancellor Friedrich Merz and his new head of the Federal Chancellery, Carsten Linnemann, have so far been refraining from personal initiatives or signals. However, Merz has previously spoken of Russia as a “strategic adversary” and regularly emphasized that there is “no place for old illusions.”

Updated leadership of the Interior Ministry under CSU – likely represented by Markus Söder’s protégé – will be responsible for Germany’s internal security and oversight of the Federal Office for Protection of the Constitution. This includes monitoring potential pro-Russian disinformation, espionage, and extremism, as well as the Alternative for Germany (AfD), recently classified as a “definitive right-wing extremist.”

Finally, a few individual state leaders, such as Michael Kretschmer (CDU, Saxony), who has moved from a dialogue-based position to tough rhetoric, and Peter Tschentscher (SPD, Hamburg), who has not broken off cooperation with Saint Petersburg, could play their role in regional policy. However, their influence is limited and has not affected the general attitude towards Moscow.

The Russia Factor in Foreign Policy Agenda of the New Coalition

Formation of the CDU/CSU–SPD government did not result in clear redefinition of Germany’s policy towards Russia. The coalition agreement largely repeats the key formulations on supporting Ukraine, defending international law, and maintaining European and transatlantic unity. However, the “Russia factor” continues to affect all major policy vectors of the new cabinet.

In the transatlantic dimension, Moscow remains the primary “security threat” and justification for Germany’s increased defense spending and its strategic focus on NATO. Washington expects Berlin to be a reliable partner in the policy of containment and deterrence. Friedrich Merz intends to meet these expectations.

Germany has to maneuver between internal differences in the EU regarding attitudes towards Russia. While Eastern European and Nordic countries push for further isolation of Moscow, some southern member states still seek channels for dialogue. Berlin tends to support the “hawks,” but with emphasis on institutional solidarity.

In Indo-Pacific and China strategies, Russia is indirectly present as well, as a component of the “authoritarian challenge.” Germany’s economic diversification and reduction of dependencies on China are justified by the need to avoid the “energy dependence on Russia” scenario. Thus, Moscow is viewed as a negative reference point in a broader geopolitical realignment.

The Russia-Ukraine axis is now fully integrated into Germany’s military and political agenda. Military assistance to Kyiv, support for its EU and NATO ambitions, as well as reconstruction of Ukraine with German participation – are all publicly justified through the “threat from the East” narrative.

The Baltic-Scandinavian macroregion, where Germany plans to deepen its economic, military and energy cooperation, is increasingly shaped by the logic of Russia's containment. Berlin views this region as one of the key frontlines in competition with Moscow, especially in terms of cybersecurity and critical infrastructure protection.

Conclusions: Strategic Implications and Russia's Potential Response Options

The new German government, formed by CDU/CSU and SPD, is not expected to significantly alter the trajectory of Berlin's policy towards Russia. The rhetoric of "containment," focus on military deterrence, continuation of sanctions, and alignment with U.S. strategic priorities will remain to be the central pillars.

However, there are several important nuances and medium-term possibilities that should not be overlooked.

Germany does not seek a direct confrontation with Russia and prefers to maintain control over escalation dynamics, especially within NATO. The government may be open to limited technical or humanitarian dialogue, particularly under pressure from business associations and land governments.

The rhetoric is not yet institutionalized into a new doctrinal model. While anti-Russian sentiments are widespread in media and political discourse, the coalition agreement remains cautious and avoids overly aggressive formulations. This creates space for future adjustments – should international conditions permit.

Internal contradictions may grow. The SPD's position – especially in the Bundestag and at the level of regional party structures – may diverge from that of CDU hardliners. Business representatives and industrial lobbies are already expressing concerns over the consequences of long-term disengagement from Russia.

The current U.S. administration can trigger recalibration of Germany's foreign policy. If Washington, indeed, reduces its involvement in the Ukrainian conflict or focuses inward, Berlin will face a strategic dilemma: either assume a greater responsibility or revise its commitments.

In this context, it is better for Russia to refrain from symmetrical political rhetoric and focus on pragmatic, long-term instruments of influence instead:

- developing alternative platforms for dialogue with business and scientific circles;
- engaging with municipal and land-level structures in Germany (where permissible);
- strengthening media and analytical work in the German-speaking space;
- maintaining readiness for future re-engagement in economic and security issues (once a window of opportunity opens).

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