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German Reliability: Berlin to Remain Skeptical of Ukraine's EU Prospects

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German viewers who tuned in to this month's pre-election "TV duel" between Angela Merkel and Franz-Walter Steinmeier, the leaders of the country's top two parties, saw nothing of the sort. Instead, they were treated to a backslapping appraisal of the two coalition party leaders' cooperation in running Germany for the past four years. "You're like a harmonious old couple!" one of the moderators said. Viktor Andriyovych and Yulia Volodymyrivna, take note.

The election on September 27 looks set to produce either a repeat of the grand coalition between Chancellor Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) and Steinmeier's Social Democrats (SDP), or an alliance between Merkel's party and the liberal, business-oriented Free Democrats (FDP) – the current chancellor's preferred option.

Either result would have little effect on Germany's foreign policy course. Even a surprise victory for Steinmeier would not create a major shift; after all, he has been serving as foreign minister in the coalition.

Ukraine's relations with Germany will continue to be strongly influenced by the "strategic partnership" that Merkel and her predecessor Gerhard Schroeder have developed with Russia. Cooperation is driven by Russia's status as Germany's main source of gas, a major trade partner and key investor, and has a tangible influence on German policy towards Ukraine.

Russian-German ties are strengthening: At a recent meeting between Merkel and Russian President

Dmitry Medvedev in Sochi, a number of projects were discussed covering energy and commerce, including continued cooperation on the Nord Stream gas pipeline to deliver Russian gas to Germany via the Baltic Sea, bypassing Ukraine.

The recent "rescue" of Opel by a Kremlin-backed consortium was encouraged and feted by Merkel and Steinmeier for "saving German jobs," a pre-election boost for both. Critics say the deal is economically flawed, political in nature and highlights the increasing sway Russia holds over Germany.

The close Russia-Germany relationship makes Berlin very sensitive to Moscow's foreign policy needs. It goes some way to explaining Merkel's eagerness last year to put the brakes on Ukraine's ambitions for a NATO Membership Action Plan, which Moscow vehemently opposes. It also helps to illuminate Germany's reluctance to beat the drum for Ukraine at the European Union, another touchy subject given the Kremlin's claim to "privileged interests" in its "near abroad." Merkel's silence at the press conference in Sochi when Medvedev reiterated his decision to effectively break off relations with Ukraine was also telling.

But Ukraine cannot always play the Russia card to explain away its own shortcomings. A key reason for German reticence on Ukraine is the political divisions within Ukraine that prevent consistent policy implementation and progress on reforms. Germany's position on Ukraine and the EU can be summed up as follows: reforms first, which we'll support, then we'll see – but no promises. Its opposition to NATO

integration is not only because of Russian considerations, but based on the lack of support within Ukraine, a consequence of its proponents' failure to explain to Ukrainians how it would benefit them.

Even before the elections, Ukraine knows more or less what to expect from the new German government. While Germany's attentiveness to Russian needs in the region will be hard to influence, Ukraine's policymakers should concentrate on where they can impact relations by pushing through crucial reforms, particularly in the energy sector. At the same time there is a need to establish consen-

sus on a consistent foreign policy, defining concrete aims and methods to achieve them in order to enable Ukraine to develop relations to its advantage. Ukraine also needs to build a stronger case for deeper EU integration by showing it is ready: the Euro-2012 football tournament is an opportunity that cannot be allowed to fall by the wayside.

The German election campaign may have frustrated some analysts as dull, but the example of a civilized relationship between competing coalition partners Merkel and Steinmeier would be a good one for Ukraine's policymakers to follow.

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