PUTIN TRIES TO REBUILD THE BERLIN WALL

For over a decade, Moscow's propaganda machine and its networks of agents and agents of influence have targeted Germany.

Russian narratives have played on German anger about the influx of Muslim immigrants, bolstered the political right's hostility to change it feels threatens its values, encouraged the political left's concerns about American influence, and inspired general unease about the consequences of the Western sanctions regime against Russia for the latter's continuing aggression against Ukraine.

All of this has been well-documented, allowing for multiple close examinations of its impact on German domestic and foreign policies (Krym Realii, August 31, 2018; Gordonua.com, November 15, 2019; Kasparov.ru, September 27, 2014).

But now, the Kremlin is becoming involved in another "internal" German matter as part of its broader campaign to peel that country off from the West, weaken the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union, as well as expand Russian influence there and across Europe.

Namely, Moscow is actively supporting a rise of East German separatism. Over the past several weeks, three developments have highlighted this Russian political offensive:

*The commemoration in early November of the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall,

*Moscow's attention to and even promotion of East German anger at the western part of the country,

*The decision of the German parliament to end the special taxes Berlin had collected since the early 1990s to ease the absorption of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) into the German Federal Republic (GFR) (Kommersant, November 16; Teleskop-by.org, November 19; Style.rbc.ru, November 8).

That the Kremlin should move in this direction is perhaps not surprising. On the one hand, Moscow rarely creates a problem out of whole cloth but instead exploits those that arise, building on them for its own purposes.

East German separatism certainly falls into in that category. As Ukrainian-German analyst Vladimir Sergiyenko notes, "[R]esidents of the former GDR in Germany today, above all, do not like the decline in the quality of education, the lack of guaranteed jobs, and attempts at manipulation of public opinion" that they feel they have suffered (Ukraina.ru, November 19).

Furthermore, Vladimir Putin served in the GDR as a KGB officer, and there is little doubt that the now-defunct Eastern Bloc state still occupies a special place in his view of the world.

At the same time, however, playing in the troubled waters of East German separatism involves enormous risks, including the possibility that the entire enterprise will backfire and lead more Germans to adopt a hostile attitude toward Moscow—even if they agree with it on other issues.

Consequently, Moscow has been relatively cautious about its interest in playing this card. But a new article in *Svobodnaya Pressa* entitled "*When Will They Restore the Berlin Wall?"* by Russian commentator Dmitry Rodionov, provides some important insights on how the authorities in Russia view the issue and, thus, what they are focusing on and may seek to exploit (Svobodnaya Pressa, November 10).

In it, Rodionov interviews two experts close to the regime: Vladimir Lepekhin, the director of the Institute for the Eurasian Economic Community, and Stanislav Byshok of the CIS-EMO International Monitoring Organization.

Lepekhin stressed that the *Ossis* and the *Wessis* (as the residents of the two former Germanies often call themselves) have vastly different mentalities. Eastern Germany's *Ossis* still view the world from a materialist perspective and, "therefore, are pragmatic in everything that concerns politics and the social sphere."

In contrast, the *Wessis*, he argued "are more zombified by libertarian propaganda." Thus, the former are the natural allies of Russia while the latter are often its opponents.

The differences in mentality are reflected, he continued, in the attitude of the two toward immigrants. The *Ossis* are more hostile to Muslim immigrants, while the *Wessis* are "trapped" in the multicultural matrix the West promotes. Further, the *Ossis* remain attached to traditional values, while the Wessis are "more oriented toward transnational capitalism."

Some think that "the East Germans want to become Western," Lepekhin said—but "this is not so." Indeed, "for a significant part of the GDR residents, the tearing down of the [Berlin] Wall marked a tragedy. This is one of the reasons for the divisions between the two parts of Germany. Another explanation is that those in the east can see that those in the west view them as "a province" of the FRG. As a result, "many of them are nostalgic for the GDR."

What is especially noteworthy, the Moscow analyst argued, is that the East Germans are "a restraining influence on libertarian politicians both in Germany and in the EU as a whole. The most varied forces in Europe sympathize with the positions of the East Germans," including Marine Le Pen in France and the residents of Scotland, Ireland, Corsica and Catalonia.

Thus, the stronger such "anti-libertarian" forces are within Germany, providing a counterweight to

Berlin and the West, the better for Russia.

Byshok, the analyst from CIS-EMO, further developed those points. He asserted that, because Russians in Kaliningrad and Vladivostok so closely resemble those who live in the capital, many in Moscow are inclined to underrate regional differences in other countries.

But in Germany, like in Italy and the United Kingdom, such regional variations can be enormous and powerful. The Alternative for Germany Party (AfD), for example, has its roots in the former GDR. The two parts of Germany also have diverging attitudes toward the country's Nazi past, with the *Ossis* seeing the Nazis as capitalists the Soviets defeated and the *Wessis* viewing them as criminals rather than in class terms.

Residents of the former GDR resent that Bavaria is treated as an autonomous area while they are not, he continues; and demographic contrasts between east and west are exacerbating all such concerns, leading to more support for some kind of revival of the GDR.

What is striking about Lepekhin's and Byshok's comments is how much they reflect Soviet perspectives. It is almost as if the Berlin Wall never fell—and that probably explains Moscow's sympathy for those in the former GDR who wish it never had.

Paul Goble is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Serving in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Voice of America, he has been decorated by the governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for his work in promoting Baltic independence and the withdrawal of Russian forces from those formerly occupied lands.