

**KATJA GLOGER
GEORG MASCOLO**

**The
FAILURE**



**An Investigative Report
of Germany's Russia Policy**

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Katja Gloger & Georg Mascolo

The Failure

An Investigative Report of Germany's Russia Policy

EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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»Where it mattered – it mattered all the time.«
Herta Müller

For Hannah and Mara

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Alternative Realities

This September 25, 2001 – so it will be said for far too long – was one of the most hopeful moments in German-Russian relations. Comparable, at best, to that now-faded early summer morning of June 12, 1989, when a man – radiant, self-confident, and visionary – captured the hearts of West Germans on Bonn's Rathausplatz, a little boy in his arms. »Gorbi, Gorbi,« the people called out to Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It was one of those happier days when, though still unspoken, the way was being paved for German reunification.

On this autumn day in 2001, however, the world feels unpredictable and dangerous. The terrorist attacks of September 11 are just two weeks behind us, and there is talk of war – war against terror. At 3:15 p.m., a guest from Moscow steps up to the lectern of the German Bundestag; the president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, has chosen Berlin for his first state visit. He brings hope and a measure of confidence. He promises a new era marked by peace and cooperation: »Stable peace on the continent is a paramount goal,« he says. And: »Russia is a friendly European nation.«

But it is not just what this man says this afternoon that is important. How he says it is also important. »Today, I will take the liberty of delivering the main part of my message in the language of Goethe, Schiller, and Kant, in the German language,« says the Russian president, switching to German. He speaks quietly, reservedly, politely, which reinforces the message.

Every day of the parliamentary session, members of parliament walk past inscriptions selected and carefully preserved by a German-Russian commission – left behind by

Red Army soldiers in Hitler's Reichstag in the victorious month of May 1945, graffiti of their time, scribbled with a charred piece of wood or colored grease chalk. The names of their hometowns, including in Ukraine; joy at the triumph of victory. The walls and columns with Cyrillic messages stand as a warning reminder of the Germans' war of annihilation against the peoples of the Soviet Union. In the middle of the German parliament. »*Na Berlin!*« was the cry in the last months of the war – to Berlin!

In the year of war 2025, similar propaganda messages are circulating in Russian cities, schoolchildren are painting them on posters, some are sticking them on their cars as stickers: »*Mozhem povtorit!*« – We can do it again! What they mean is: We will win. Whatever the cost. We will defeat you.

Worlds separate them and their cult-of-victory president from those in Russia for whom, over bitter decades, a different, quiet message applied, linked to a tender hope for reconciliation: »*Lish' ne bylo by voyny.*« Anything but war again. Just no more war. Never again.

Peace in Europe can only be achieved with, not against, Russia. That has been the German political maxim since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the peaceful reunification of a divided country. On this day, September 25, 2001, that moment seems within reach. And indeed, many see Putin as a »German in the Kremlin.«

His speech is repeatedly interrupted by applause and friendly laughter. At the end, the members of parliament and the entire assembled state leadership – Federal President Johannes Rau and Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder – rise to their feet. Former finance minister Theo Waigel detects a »Kennedy effect.« The applause seems endless. Putin stands silently, almost shyly, behind the podium, only his eyes betraying his satisfaction. It is a triumph. The Russian head of

state, a retired lieutenant colonel of the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB), once said of himself that he was a specialist in dealing with people.

This September 25, 2001, is one of his masterpieces.

However, there is another story to tell about this appearance. Putin had expressed his wish to speak in the Bundestag during his state visit early on. But for months, there was debate about whether Putin should even be »given the honor« of addressing the plenary.

At the turn of 2001, he had invited the Schröder couple to Moscow for the Orthodox Christmas celebrations and had taken Schröder and his wife for a sleigh ride. Now he wanted to win over the rest of the country, to appeal to the Germans' sense of responsibility for their shared history and, presumably, their romanticized love of Russia.

»The only ›critical‹ point at present: Putin's speech to the Bundestag plenary,« according to a memo from the German Foreign Office. The question had been submitted to the chancellor and the federal president, and the draft submitted to the chancellor was written in a rather »cautiously negative« tone.¹

This is because appearances by foreign guests before the German parliament are generally granted only very rarely. The Bundestag's Protocol expresses concerns and even offers a diplomatically polite excuse: one could point out »that the

1 From the files of the Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office (PA AA) released for this book: On the Russian president's state visit to Berlin in 2001, including: PA AA, B 41-ZA/389340 and PA AA, B 63-ZA/487863. The memo »Possible speech by Putin to the German Bundestag« states: »The only ›critical‹ point at present: Putin's speech to the Bundestag plenary. No position has yet been taken by the Bundestag Presidium, ... we are deliberately holding back externally ... The Federal President has not taken a position; the Federal Chancellery is positive about Putin's request.« Elsewhere it states: »There is therefore a possibility that the chancellor will not go along with the negative vote at the working level.«

Bundestag probably does not even have a plenary session on the day in question.«

Then the chancellor himself intervened. A compromise was reached.

At the end of August, the parliament conveys two conditions to the Russian ambassador in Berlin: Putin's speech in the Bundestag must be »held largely in German« in order to »demonstrate a certain special nature.«

And afterward, Putin must meet with members of the Foreign Affairs Committee for a discussion. The duration is even specified as at least forty-five minutes. It is to be expected that the war Putin is currently waging in the Autonomous Republic of Chechnya will also be discussed. On the very first night of his presidency, just a few hours after the not very democratic transfer of power from Boris Yeltsin on December 31, 1999, Putin flew to Chechnya and presented medals and hunting knives to Russian soldiers there. In the West, he has already attracted attention with his particularly crude, inhumane language: »You will forgive me, but if we catch them on the outdoor toilet, we will wipe them out in the shithouse.« Or: »They must be exterminated like vermin!«

A group of Bundestag members from the Alliance 90/The Greens party wrote an open letter to Putin: »The human rights of the civilian population in Chechnya and the rights of refugees have been cruelly disregarded.«²

Now, shortly after September 11, there is great concern that things could get even worse. That Putin will use 9/11 to wage his own barbaric campaign against terror in the Caucasus without being held accountable. From the beginning, wars have been one of his political tools of choice.

2 For the remarkable history of the letter's creation, see: Bundestag parliamentary group AK IV Visit by Vladimir Putin. In: Green Memory Archive, B II 4 BTF 1998-2002, No. 21. Cem Özdemir is also among the signatories of the letter.

One of the authors of the open letter is former GDR civil rights activist Werner Schulz: German politicians celebrated Putin like »Gorbachev's grandson,« he says, failing to recognize him as »the KGB's protégé.« He knows exactly this type of secret service agent and deeply distrusts him. Schulz thus demonstrates an astonishing knowledge of human nature.

There is a verbatim transcript of Putin's speech in the Bundestag and YouTube videos that have been viewed hundreds of thousands of times. The discussion with the members of the Foreign Affairs Committee is archived in a three-page »synopsis« that remains confidential to this day and is particularly noteworthy because of Putin's answers. Here, it is not about Kant and Schiller and Goethe, but about Putin's actions in Chechnya.³ The situation there is »still being followed with concern in Germany,« says CDU/CSU parliamentary group leader Friedrich Merz. Putin plays down the situation, saying he has just presented a peace plan. And: Since September 11, »Russia no longer accepts double standards« – different standards when it comes to the war on terror.

3 In October 1999, Russian troops once again march into the North Caucasian Autonomous Republic, which is striving for independence and ruled by clans – just a few years after the end of the first Chechen War, which Russia lost, leaving tens of thousands dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. In October 1999, Putin had just been appointed Russian prime minister. Previously, he had been director of the domestic intelligence service FSB – it is inconceivable that this military invasion, planned over months, took place without his knowledge and involvement. Prior to this, bomb attacks on residential buildings in Russia had claimed hundreds of lives – allegedly the work of Chechen terrorists. But suspicion quickly fell on the FSB. The Second Chechen War did not end until 2009. Since then, Ramzan Kadyrov has ruled the Russian republic in a dictatorial manner, financed by Moscow. There have been repeated serious human rights violations.

A Specialist in Dealing with People

It soon became apparent that Putin is a master at sending different messages, sometimes on the same day. He has perfected this skill. But too many in the German political class only hear and see what they want to.

Putin leaves nothing to chance, not even on this September 25, 2001. Some key ideas in this speech, even fundamental principles about Russia being open to good business, were formulated by a former top German official and a German industrial manager who has known Putin for a long time: Horst Teltschik, former foreign policy advisor to Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who already negotiated German reunification, and Klaus Mangold, chairman of the German Eastern Business Association. At Putin's request, Mangold even flew to Moscow specifically to prepare for the speech. In a sense, the Germans themselves wrote the speech that is still used today as proof of the »other Putin,« as deliberate evidence of his supposedly better European intentions.

As was the case on September 25, 2001, in the Bundestag, this is often the case when looking back on the past three decades of German-Russian relations. Much is not as it seemed to be at first glance or as it has become fixed in memory. Much was seen – and yet not sufficiently understood. This includes the alternative reality that Putin inhabits.

With the start of the European year of war 2022, those responsible are faced with the ruins of German Russia policy – or, more precisely, their Putin policy. What's more, with the *Zeitenwende* (»turning point«), three decades of German foreign policy, a seemingly unprecedented political and economic success story, are being put to the test. After all, Germany in particular had seen itself as *the* expert for Russia and recommended itself as such – a country that had been linked

to Russia for centuries in an often terribly tangled relationship. The German seal of approval *Ostpolitik* – whatever one wanted to understand by it – was considered a moral foundation of West German foreign policy, and the paradigms of »change through rapprochement« and »modernization partnership« seemed unshakable.

But taking a closer look, facing up soberly to the realities created by Putin, who now seems eternal, and the causes and consequences of his rule, was – and remains – a crucial challenge for German Russia policy, a task for the future.

This book attempts to do just that. It fills many of the gaps that have arisen in recent decades as a result of embargoes and secrecy regulations, political spin, and the simple unwillingness of those responsible to engage in in-depth discussion. At times, the official support from ministries and government agencies was as generous as it was astonishingly unbureaucratic. Files were quickly unblocked and made accessible – for example, on Putin's speech in the Bundestag in 2001 or the fateful NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008.

But time and again, this openness turned into the opposite without any explanation. Ultimately, tens of thousands of pages of documents on crucial milestones were reviewed, including files on the so-called Minsk peace process, the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, and one of the most adventurous chapters of the »modernization partnership,« which could also be described as »change through defense technology«: the close German-Russian military cooperation that began after the 2008 war in Georgia and only ended with the annexation of Crimea. A Russian officer had already been detailed to take up his new office with the German army command in Strausberg, Brandenburg. In the case of Ukraine, however, weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion, the German government was still debating whether the delivery of

ninety sniper rifles by NATO represented an unacceptable risk of escalation.

Dozens of key contemporary witnesses provided personal accounts and were willing to engage in detailed discussions, including the former head of the Federal Chancellery, twice minister of foreign affairs, and current federal president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, on three occasions. Among those interviewed were a chancellor, chancellor's advisors, ministers, diplomats, Bundeswehr officers and NATO officials, and William Burns, one of the foremost experts on Putin and most renowned US diplomats of his time. The longtime ambassador to Moscow and later director of the CIA played a key role in uncovering Putin's concrete plans for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine at the end of 2021. Others, without whom this book could not have been written, requested strict confidentiality.

Two people declined requests for an interview; to this day, they seem not to want to acknowledge any mistakes in their respective Russia policy, at least not publicly: Gerhard Schröder declined, citing his health, while former Chancellor Merkel cited scheduling conflicts and »equal treatment reasons.« According to a message from her office, she receives a great many requests »from all over the world.«⁴

When it comes to the failure of German Russia policy, Schröder's name is usually mentioned first, followed by the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Of course, this is first and foremost related to Schröder's unprecedented and highly

4 This was stated in a message from her office on April 29, 2025. In response to a detailed list of questions, Merkel's office replied that the Federal Chancellery should be contacted, »as official documents relating to the term of office of former Chancellor Dr. Merkel are not filed in the office of the former Chancellor, but in the Federal Chancellery.« Information dated June 23, 2025

paid lobbying activities for Russian gas and his friend Vladimir, whom he defiantly continues to defend to this day. His story is also one of political self-destruction.

Gerhard Schröder was chancellor for seven years, Angela Merkel and her Christian Democratic Party (CDU) ruled for sixteen long years. For her, too, Russia policy was always a matter for the boss. Unlike Schröder, there is no evidence that she had any illusions about Putin's system or personality. This makes the question of how to deal with her Russia policy all the more urgent. »We didn't want to see it,« Wolfgang Schäuble, leading member of the CDU and president of the German Bundestag, said publicly and too late.

This makes the answer to the question of German responsibility all the more compelling: Could, or even should, Germany have stood in Putin's way much earlier? Why did Germany believe until the very end that it could »sate« Putin, as German historian Herfried Münkler puts it? That it could satisfy, even pacify him?

Politics does not depend solely on individuals. And yet Vladimir Putin plays a decisive role in the assessment of recent German Russia policy. How can it be explained that he — of all people — was trusted to bring peace and political modernization, or at least that there was a desire to deal with him pragmatically? Why were his background, his profession, and his calling as an intelligence officer, along with his methods and mission, so systematically ignored?

Vladimir Putin, former »deputy operational representative« at the KGB branch office in Dresden, made the most meteoric political career in post-Soviet Russia. It is astonishing what German intelligence agencies knew about this man when he appeared on Russian television on New Year's Eve 1999 as the new president, pale and frail. By then, his closest friend from his KGB days in Dresden had already submitted

a lengthy psychological profile of Putin to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Germany's Federal Domestic Intelligence Service (BfV). The case file under the code name »Pantaleon«—Greek for »the all-merciful«—describes a cynical and deeply nationalistic secret service officer. In addition to judicial investigation files on Putin's KGB days in Dresden, files from the BfV were also released and evaluated for this book.

It is remarkable how meticulously the Chancellery in particular sought for so long to lock away all information about Putin's KGB past. As recently as 2020, the »public weal« was explicitly invoked in this context: any disclosure could have »an impact on international relations and diplomatic trust« and impair the »negotiating ability of the federal government.« A »Lex Putin« from the highest authority.⁵

It is both astonishing and irritating how precise the findings and assessments of Putin and the system of power of the *siloviki* (security officials) he perfected were time and again—only for the wrong conclusions, or none at all, to then be drawn. After Putin's second historic speech in Germany—his harsh reckoning with the West at the 2007 Munich Security Conference—a secret scenario paper was drawn up by the planning staff of the Foreign Office. Its »imperial-authoritarian Russia« variant predicts a very dark future in great detail, including armed conflict over Crimea and eastern Ukraine, as well as close cooperation between Russia and China.

The scenario is assessed as »unlikely.«

The paper is filed in the archives of the Foreign Office and is still classified as »confidential.«

5 Instruction from the Federal Chancellery, division 722, to the Historical Office of the BND, August 4, 2020

His Russia Knows No Boundaries

The comprehensive dossier compiled by the BND and the BfV for Chancellor Merkel on disinformation operations and Russian hybrid warfare against Germany back in 2017 reads like a warning sign. Far too little was done, and early and repeated calls for a tough response – such as the expulsion of a large number of secret agents and the closure of Russian consulates general – were always rejected. A specially formed federal-state working group to deal with the »hybrid threat« had agreed to hold a »kickoff meeting« on the afternoon of February 24, 2022.

»Too late« is too often the basic pattern in Germany.

And: »Carry on as usual.« Despite everything. And Putin's appetite for risk grew.

Even when the »Crimea scenario« described as early as 2007 became a reality of war; when the suppression of the opposition, as well as poison attacks and murder – even on German soil – became part of Putin's policy; when it was clear that his Russia, a nation under arms, was waging war not only against Ukraine but also against the morally »decadent« West. Western governments have made their own mistakes in dealing with Russia, especially in the 1990s. But that does not explain the widespread justification of Putin's master narrative about his country's need for security, which the West allegedly so shamefully neglected. No one bothered to ask: Who is actually threatening Russia? And how? The state of siege that Putin has conjured up in such martial fashion is of his own making.

Until the end of her last term in office, Angela Merkel insists on dialogue, even for the sake of dialogue itself. This also applies to the so-called »Minsk process,« which is still being halfheartedly adhered to in February 2022 because there is »no alternative.«

Until the very end, the Chancellery believes that Russia's economic ties with Germany are too strong and that the price of military aggression would be too high, even for Putin. Misunderstanding the nature of the man and the system, they are counting on his rationality, his political cost-benefit analysis, and even on the greed of his gangster regime. But in a system of autocratic power charged with radical conspiracy theories, there has long been much more at stake for them, these self-appointed defenders of Russia's honor and history, who in the end are only destroyers:⁶ the justification and expansion of a supposedly independent and unique »Russian civilization« that uses brutal force to reclaim what belongs to the empire. »Russia knows no borders,« Putin says in 2025 with the same benevolent smile with which he now declares the people of his country to be »my children« and takes them hostage.⁷ He describes his presidency as »destiny.« Not taking these alternative realities, which have become deadly reality, seriously, not recognizing this Russia – Putin's Russia – as a threat early enough, is one of the more unforgivable mistakes. Instead, people reflected their own illusions.

And Europeans have to listen to him tell them that they will soon be lying at the feet of their »owner,« Donald Trump,

6 See also: Stephen Kotkin: The Weakness of the Despot. In: *The New Yorker*, March 11, 2022, and: Russland stellt sich selbst eine geopolitische Falle (Russia is setting itself a geopolitical trap). In: *Der Spiegel*, April 7, 2022. Lilia Shevtsova: *Putin's Russia* (Washington, D.C. 2003). And the groundbreaking works of Karl Schlögel, such as: Karl Schlögel: *Das sowjetische Jahrhundert. Archäologie einer untergegangenen Welt* (München 2017)

7 To date, only one person has ruled Russia, the Soviet Union, for longer: Stalin. An impressive testimony to Putinism is the »documentary« »Russia. The Kremlin. Putin. 25 Years« by Russian state television channel Rossiya 1 on the occasion of Putin's 25th anniversary in office, broadcast in early May 2025. A nighttime visit to Putin's Kremlin apartment with its gym and private chapel; Putin has had a long day at work; the refrigerator is stocked with healthy Russian kefir, organic, of course. And in the background – no coincidence, of course – is a portrait of Tsar Alexander III, who is credited with the quote: »Russia has only two allies – the army and the navy.« https://vk.com/video-24371598_456308065?to=L3ZpZGVvLTl0MzcxNTk4XzQ1NjMwODA2NT8-

»wagging their tails« in a friendly manner. The same Trump who, in August 2025, rolled out the red carpet in Anchorage, Alaska, for a suspected war criminal, according to an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court ICC. By then, Putin has already been responsible for more than a million deaths and injuries.

A pandemic and the Russian president's real or supposed self-isolation are also used to explain the order to his armies to launch the full-scale invasion on Ukraine. »No one can say whether Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022 could have been prevented had the pandemic not happened and, instead of virtual meetings, face-to-face exchanges had been possible,« asks former Chancellor⁸ Merkel. In any case, her explanations suggest that she believes the Merkel approach—constant, patient dialogue—would at least have prevented the worst. As one participant recalls, she put it this way already at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008: »Vladimir, we need to talk about this again.«

This book dares to look behind the propaganda facade of Putinism, but it is not a book about the late, seemingly eternal Putin and his system. Rather, it identifies breaking points; chronologically structured, it cannot and does not seek to be a chronology of German Russia policy. Instead, the analysis of these turning points can help to comprehend decisions and understand their motivations. They were often made in complex, dynamic situations with emotionally complicated actors and conflicting interests—and perhaps some of them really were »without alternative.« »What we are doing now to strengthen resilience and defense capability should have been started fifteen years earlier. But who in Berlin, Brussels,

8 Angela Merkel in an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung*, March 14, 2025. See also: Angela Merkel: *Freedom. Memoirs 1954–2021. With Beate Baumann* (London 2025), Kindle edition, p. 669

and Washington was ready for that back then? Those who have always claimed to have known everything should ask themselves this question,« summarizes Markus Ederer, a renowned diplomat who played a decisive role in shaping German Russia policy as state secretary in the Foreign Office. But what was right yesterday may turn out to be wrong today.⁹

It is the prehistory of a present that is so unpredictable and dangerous today.

The tensions in the former »traffic light« coalition government of the Social Democrats, Greens, and Free Democrats are still palpable today. While former Chancellor Scholz claims that his measured course of action helped »prevent an even bigger war,« his former deputy Robert Habeck calls it »pathetic« to »adorn oneself« with the great support for Ukraine. Instead, he says, the question must be asked whether earlier arms deliveries might have contributed to »changing the course of the war.«

The word »failure« comes up frequently in the research for this book, and the term is used as passionately as it is disputed. It is interpreted as being too sweeping, underestimating the necessary but difficult process of engaging Russia, a partnership for peace, at least precarious stability in crises. And also underestimating the importance of Germany's special relationship with Russia, this view towards the East. In fact, many political actors involved with Russia made wise and necessary efforts, sought to build trust through dialogue, and negotiated small and very small steps. It would be both wrong and unfair not to acknowledge these efforts. And yet, when viewed as a whole, there remains a strategic failure in German Russia policy, at the latest since the annexation of

9 Conversations with Markus Ederer, including May 4, 2025. See also: Herfried Münkler: *Macht im Umbruch: Deutschlands Rolle in Europa und die Herausforderungen des 21. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin 2025)

Crimea of 2014 by Russia. In Germany's self-declared strategy of dialogue and deterrence, deterrence – which includes its own military defense capabilities and the robust defense of democracy – was abandoned, not to mention the convenient consideration of the business interests of German industry. »Zeitenwenden,« turning points, including with regard to Germany's Ukraine policy, could – and should – have begun much earlier. Above all, however, the dynamics of an increasingly radicalizing regime, a violent potentate on a historic mission, were underestimated. What a fatal illusion it was to rely on Vladimir Putin as someone who would at least recognize the basic norms of pan-European security.

Putin, Putinism: from the very beginning, it was an attack on freedom.

It is imperative to come to terms with Germany's Russia policy, not least because of our own history. We Germans, who knowingly and willingly waged a war of annihilation against the peoples of the Soviet Union, owe it to many to do so: to those who suffered as a result of Putin's wars, to the victims of his obsessions. Yes, we owe it to those in Russia who warned early and courageously about the crimes and Putin's path to total dictatorship. The guardians of history from the banned human rights organization Memorial, who had to hide their archives. The journalists who call the war »war« and whose publications are banned. The students and lawyers, often so young, who rebel because they have to, they cannot do otherwise. And who know that they face the threat of the labor camps, the Gulag. There are few, too few in Putin's Russia. And there are many, too many, who still settle into an apparent normality, willingly seduced.

Coming to terms with our history – above all we owe this to the people of Ukraine. The least would be honesty and sincere attention. They have been defying the war for many

years now. They are paying the highest price. Every day. In the summer of 2025, the twelfth year of the war, they see their hopes of living in an intact, unscathed country fading. And yet: they have made their decision – a decision against imperial darkness, they resist the pull of evil pasts, Putin's Russian world, from which there is no escape. They see Europe, fragile as it may be, as their last and best hope. They have a vision of a future that is their own. Their path to the West is bumpy, full of stones, winding, leading to abysses, including those of their own terrible and repressed history.

Who, if not us, knows what is at stake?

Forward into the Past

On the ground floor of the Chancellery on Berlin's Willy-Brandt-Straße, in the so-called crypto operations center, stands an inconspicuous metal box. No German is allowed to tamper with the device; maintenance is reserved for Russian technicians alone. The box secures a direct and encrypted connection between Berlin and Moscow. If there is anything to connect in these times, that is.

Nevertheless, the connection is tested regularly, originally according to a procedure agreed between Russia and Germany, punctually at 8:30 a.m. Central European Summer Time. »This is Berlin« was the agreed protocol, and Moscow was to confirm the strength and clarity of the connection with a numerical code. The »5« stood for perfect sound. The government does not like to talk about this direct line; when Chancellor Scholz was once asked by journalists how he actually talks to Putin, he responded evasively: »It's not like I send a text message asking, ›shall we do it again?‹« There is a connection suitable for this purpose, he said.¹⁰

The permanent line between the Kremlin and the Chancellery is reminiscent of better times. In February 1989 – before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union – the Soviet government surprised the German embassy in Moscow with a proposal for an encrypted direct line.

Until then, such a direct line had existed only between nuclear powers – initially between the Soviet Union and the United States after the highly dangerous Cuban Crisis, and later also with London and Paris. The aim was to avert nuclear war. The line to the Germans, on the other hand, was intended to build trust. Gorbachev wanted to be able to talk

¹⁰ See also: *Die Welt*, March 21, 2023

to Kohl at any time, and to do so on a secure line so that no intelligence service could eavesdrop. Not even his own. Gorbachev knew that the KGB was bugging him. He discussed truly confidential matters with his wife, Raisa, every evening on walks.

The »Agreement between the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Establishment of a Direct Communications Link between the Federal Chancellery in Bonn and the Kremlin in Moscow« was quickly concluded, signed on June 13, 1989—and even made it into the Federal Law Gazette.¹¹

Initially, communication was possible only by fax; later a telephone connection was added. »When Germans and Russians get along well, it benefits all the peoples of Europe,« declared Minister of Foreign Affairs Hans-Dietrich Genscher.

After the hotline was established, the recipient of messages from Germany was Mikhail Gorbachev for another two years, interrupted only during three anxious days in August 1991 when the KGB led an unsuccessful coup against him. The failure of this coup is inextricably linked to a Russian politician named Boris Yeltsin—first a hero, then a tragic figure of the transition with a penchant for authoritarian decisions. Just in time for the turn of the millennium, Vladimir Putin was on the line and remained so for the next twenty-five years, interrupted only by the term of stand-in president Dmitry Medvedev. The German government realized—late, but better late than never—that while Medvedev was allowed to make phone calls, he had no say in anything.

11 »Announcement on the establishment of the German-Soviet agreement on the establishment of a direct communications link between the Federal Chancellery and the Kremlin,« Bonn, August 8, 1989

Before Putin comes on the hotline, a friendly female voice can be heard on the line – Putin’s interpreter, a diplomat previously stationed in Berlin. »May we invite the president to the conversation?« she asks, and then Putin is connected. Putin always begins in German: »Good afternoon, it’s good that we have the opportunity to talk.« Then he switches to Russian. If he dislikes a translation of his words, he corrects it. This has been going on for years, according to those who have listened in. Once, he corrected the German word »Vollpfosten« (dumbass) to »Vollidiot« (complete idiot). He was referring to then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych. He usually does not bother waiting for translations of the German contributions into Russian. When Putin grows impatient – which happens often – he switches to German. His tendency to lecture is dreaded. Putin does not like to listen.

And he has the feeling that the Germans, of all people, are not listening to him – at least not well enough.

Hundreds of messages have been exchanged via the hotline, during high points and low points alike in German-Russian relations. From the outset, the aim was to resolve crises: in April 1991, for example, when Bundeswehr soldiers twice approached a Soviet tactical nuclear weapons depot in Altengrabow in Saxony-Anhalt. Information about nuclear weapons depots and schedules for their removal was a priority for German intelligence. The Red Army soldiers fired, hitting a Bundeswehr major in the arm and injuring a second officer with glass shards from the rear window that had been shot through.¹²

12 Sascha Gunold: Abzug unter Beobachtung. Zur Rolle von Bundeswehr und Bundesnachrichtendienst beim Abzug der sowjetischen/russischen Streitkräfte aus Deutschland 1990-1994. Dissertation, Universität Potsdam (Potsdam 2022)

Chancellor Olaf Scholz tried to avert the most dangerous crisis – the impending outbreak of the largest land war in Europe since 1945 – in a phone call on February 21, 2022. Unlike in the United States, no official verbatim transcripts are made of such important phone calls in Germany, only summary notes; some advisors have the right to listen in. One of them records this phone call – requested by Putin – in his notebook: in a remarkably friendly tone, Putin explains that the Russian state will recognize the »declarations of independence« of the »People’s Republics« of Luhansk and Donetsk and that he will sign the corresponding decree in one hour. The »genocide« of the Russian people in eastern Ukraine must come to an end, he says.

This is already the third conversation Scholz has had with Putin since taking office; the personal meeting at that legendary long table in the Kremlin took place just a week earlier. Scholz has consistently called for »de-escalation« while showing a willingness to engage in dialogue – even at the highest level, via video or in person, together with French President Emmanuel Macron, perhaps even with US President Joe Biden. On Scholz’s desk lies a comprehensive briefing for the talks, along with maps. His advisors have urged him to issue a »strong« warning to Putin, because the situation is more than threatening. The BND, Germany’s foreign intelligence service, has declared the Russian deployment along »the entire border« complete. Putin, in turn, has indicated that Russia may be forced to respond to »increasing military activities« by NATO, »including through the implementation of military-technical measures.«

Now Scholz wants to know from Putin whether such »military measures« will be taken.

Putin: »That depends on the situation.«

Scholz: »We are very concerned about what might happen now. Where do we go from here?«

Putin: »But dialogue is possible. We don't want combat operations.«

Scholz: »I am very disappointed. Combat operations must be prevented. This is a very precarious moment. You must be aware of that.«

Putin: »I share your concern. We will stay in touch.«

The phone call is short. It lasts exactly thirty minutes, from 4:43 p.m. to 5:13 p.m. German time.

This marks the end of the latest in a long line of German attempts to contain Vladimir Putin—to convince him not to take the step of launching a major war of aggression. February 21, 2022, 5:13 p.m., marks the end of this great hope: that peace in Europe can be achieved with Russia.

After twenty-five years of his rule, no one can say how far he and his power brokers will go to achieve their goals.

»High Human and Moral Standards«

It would not have taken much for the hope of a democratic Russia to have existed only for a brief moment. In 1991, Germany was reunified, the states in the eastern half of Central Europe and the Baltic states were once again independent, the Warsaw Pact was dissolved. The Charter of Paris, signed by Mikhail Gorbachev among others, described a new, democratic Europe that would extend as far as Vladivostok. But in mid-August, eight elderly men—led by elements of the Soviet military and the KGB—attempted a coup in Moscow. In the Lubyanka, the headquarters of the feared secret service, cells had been cleared, lists of those to be arrested were ready, thousands of handcuffs at hand. One of the leaders of the »State Committee for the State of Emergency« was KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov.

Just a few months earlier, on April 10, 1991, Kryuchkov had been in Berlin for a secret meeting with German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) to negotiate the end of the Cold War between the secret services. Without success. Schäuble never forgot the coldness and harshness of this interlocutor – this KGB type.¹³

For three dramatic days, the world literally held its breath.¹⁴ People watched live on television as protesters built barricades and stood in the way of tanks; as trade unions called for strikes and Russian President Boris Yeltsin became the hero of an entire country's resistance – the man who, shortly afterward, would successfully challenge Gorbachev for power.

During these three midsummer days in 1991, a country lost its fear. These days – described in the files of the Foreign Office as the »August Revolution¹⁵» – accelerated the implosion of an empire and the political end of Mikhail Gorbachev,

13 An Udenkbares gedacht (Thinking the unthinkable). In: *Der Spiegel*, February 19, 1995, as well as conversations between the author and Wolfgang Schäuble and other participants in the meeting. Like Kohl, Schäuble was concerned that the toxic legacy of the secret services could complicate German unity.

14 PA AA, BAV 164 MOSK 29749; August 19, 1991: »In the early morning of August 19, a coup d'état was effectively announced in the Soviet Union,« reports the German Embassy in Moscow, adding that a battalion of T-80 tanks, a battalion of BMP-2 armored personnel carriers, anti-aircraft tanks, and fire trucks are approaching the city center. »The marching movements appear disorderly. The forces have presumably left their positions in a state of alarm, tanks have knocked down guardrails, skidded into the opposite lane and come to a standstill due to lack of fuel.« There had been no indications of an impending coup: »It came as a complete surprise.« However, this is not true: there were rumors within THE KGB. And US Ambassador Jack Matlock had already delivered a message from Bush to Gorbachev on June 20, warning of a coup. Gorbachev apparently did not take it seriously enough. See: Jack Matlock: *Autopsy on an Empire. The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York 1995), p. 542 ff.

15 PA AA, BAV 164 MOSK 29749

the man who wanted to believe in a reformed Soviet Union until the very end.¹⁶

On August 22, thousands of people marched through downtown Moscow, past Red Square and the Bolshoi Theater. Their faces were proud and joyful.

They gathered in Lubyanka Square in front of the KGB headquarters – now the seat of the FSB, one of the KGB's successor organizations. The Lubyanka is the stone symbol of Soviet tyranny; terror as state doctrine. Under Stalin, thousands of death sentences were carried out in the courtyard; confessions and judgments extracted through torture lie behind steel vault doors in the basement corridors – tens of thousands of fates contained here alone, lives sorted into cardboard boxes, »Keep forever« written on the file covers. The word »Lubyanka« was also feared among German emigrants who had fled to the Soviet Union to escape Hitler – Herbert Wehner was one of them, as were Walter Ulbricht and so many others. The survivors returned to Germany after 1945, their fear buried deep in their hardened hearts.¹⁷

In front of the Lubyanka stood the monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Cheka, the Bolshevik secret police that preceded KGB. »Iron Felix« was one of the found-

16 See also the memoirs of Alexander Yakovlev, a long-standing member of the Politburo who, until his death in 2005, advocated an unconditional and unsparing reappraisal of Soviet history, including his own personal history. Conversations with the author; see also: Alexander Jakowlew: *Ein Jahrhundert der Gewalt in Sowjetrußland* (Berlin 2004). Mikhail Gorbachev; conversations with the author since 1990. His autobiography: Michael Gorbatschow: *Alles zu seiner Zeit. Mein Leben* (Hamburg 2013). Original edition: *Na jedine s soboj* (Moscow 2011). William Taubman: *Gorbachev. His Life and Times* (London, New York 2017)

17 Foreign correspondents were granted access to the KGB archives in the Lubyanka for the first time, and the author was among the first to do so. See: *Der lange Schatten des Genossen Stalin* (The Long Shadow of Comrade Stalin). In: *Stern*, November 29, 1990. Katja Gloger: *Fremde Freunde. Deutsche und Russen. Die Geschichte einer schicksalhaften Beziehung* (München 2017), p. 291 ff.

ers of the »Red Terror,« which claimed at least 250,000 victims in the first four years after the October Revolution of 1917 alone. »Chekist« was always a term as power-conscious as it was terrifying. Chekists belonged to an elite – »shield and sword« of the party – feared and privileged, hovering above all the Soviet misery, a very special caste.¹⁸ Chekists were the architects of absolute arbitrariness.

Vladimir Putin has always been proud to be a Chekist. He still is today.

One day later, on August 23, 1991, two cranes lifted the multi-ton »Iron Felix« from its pedestal; the figure ended up in Moscow's »Sculpture Park,« a kind of open-air museum of Soviet history. For a little while, the empty pedestal served as a backdrop for souvenir photos, providing a professional photographer with a source of income. But on that August 22, the demonstrators did not penetrate the interior of the Lubyanka. There was no storming of the building, as there had been of the East Germany's Stasi headquarters in the GDR. In Russia, the apparatus of oppression remained intact at its core – along with the negative stereotypes, images of an enemy and ideology of a network that would soon discover the advantages of state-sponsored robber capitalism. Only names and titles changed.

Few people noticed that a small plaque was missing from the entrance to the Lubyanka, one that had been mounted just above entrance No. 1. As a precaution, KGB employees had removed it and taken it to a safe place.¹⁹ It

18 Representative examples: Oleg Gordievsky, Christopher Andrew: *KGB. Die Geschichte seiner Auslandsoperationen von Lenin bis Gorbatschow* (München 1990). Christopher Andrew, Vasily Mitrokhin: *Das Schwarzbuch des KGB. Moskaus Kampf Gegen den Westen* (Berlin 1999). Matthias Uhl: *GRU. Die unbekannte Geschichte des sowjetisch-russischen Militärgeheimdienstes von 1918 bis heute* (Freiburg 2024).

19 Andrei Soldatov, Irina Borogan: *The New Nobility. The restoration of Russia's security state and the enduring legacy of the KGB* (Philadelphia 2010), p. 91 ff. As well

commemorated Yuri Andropov – the only KGB chairman to have reached the top of the Politburo and thus the leadership of the Soviet Union. As Soviet ambassador to Budapest, Andropov had been operationally responsible for suppressing the 1956 popular uprising in Hungary. In the early 1980s, he was firmly convinced that the United States was planning a devastating nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union; he considered the 1983 US military exercise »Able Archer« in Europe as proof. Operation »RYaN« – the largest operation ever undertaken by the KGB – was intended to gather evidence of concrete plans in order to preempt the Americans. KGB agents in Washington were ordered to count the number of cars in the Pentagon parking lots and check whether hospitals were hoarding blood reserves – and if so, how many. Even the Stasi feared Andropov's obsessions. The head of foreign intelligence, Werner Grossmann, was reprimanded in Moscow after his agents failed to find any evidence: »But they were convinced; they could not be dissuaded,« recalled the Stasi colonel general, who died in 2022.²⁰ At the time, Grossmann feared his own comrades in Moscow more than the class enemy.

Andropov's deployment of SS-20 medium-range missiles – capable of reaching Western Europe – plunged the Federal Republic into a major political crisis over rearmament. The fact that the world was once again on the brink of nuclear war for the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis only became clear when the files of the KGB archives in Ukraine were made available to researchers.²¹

as: Calder Walton: *Spies. The epic intelligence war between East and West* (New York 2023)

20 Conversation between Großmann and the author, January 2019

21 <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/people/ukraine-committee-state-security-kgbkdb>

In December 1999, a distinguished visitor arrives at the Lubyanka for the »Day of Honor for Security Service Employees.« The man is remarkably familiar with the interior of the building. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin had himself been chairman of the KGB's successor, the FSB, until recently – and he already knows that he will be Russia's next president. Putin leaves no doubt about his convictions. He has ordered the reinstallation of the commemorative plaque in honor of his former superior, Yuri Andropov. At the festive dinner, Putin says – with some still thinking it a joke: »The advance team that you delegated to work undercover in the government has successfully completed stage one of its mission.«²² In doing so, he takes one of the first steps toward the systematic rehabilitation of the secret services as early as 1999. From then on, they are no longer the »shield and sword« of the Communist Party but of a strong, Greater Russian state headed by secret service officer Putin, who openly acknowledges the legacy of the KGB. Felix Dzerzhinsky – portrayed as a model of iron discipline and resolve. Yuri Andropov – presented as a modest reformer and fighter against corruption who had sought to halt the decline of the Soviet Union.

Every year on the Day of Honor for Security Service Employees, Putin reliably makes an appearance, delivering a speech or sending video congratulations to the gala evening. He declares that the service demands »special qualities, special constitution of character« and a firm faith in one's country,« in the Russian original he speaks of »high human and moral standards.« He praises the employees for »always finding an adequate response to every threat to the sovereignty and unity of our society.«²³ And there he stands with

22 Quoted in: Angus Roxburgh: *The Strongman. Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia* (London, New York 2012), p. 25

23 For example, in 2014: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47269>. See also: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75916>

his back ramrod straight before a huge hall filled to the last seat—even high in the balconies—the mighty Russian national flag and the coat of arms with the double-headed eagle arrayed behind him. He seems almost small, modestly serving the noble cause.

At least the constant demands for the re-erection of the Dzerzhinsky monument have been rejected. But so, too, have demands for the erection of a monument to the millions of victims of Stalin and his tyranny. The only reminder of the mass terror is a small memorial on the opposite side of Lubyanka Square, erected by the Russian human rights organization Memorial—forcibly dissolved and banned in 2022, and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It is a boulder from the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea, where the first camps of the gulag archipelago stood.

Russia's path to dictatorship and war cannot be understood without understanding Putin's origins. He is only the latest in a long line of secret service officers whom Yeltsin promoted to high and highest office toward the end of his term. As prime minister, Putin is already the third with a KGB past. But Putin as Yeltsin's successor? »The forty-seven-year-old Putin, who has extensive experience in Germany, is thus the fifth Russian prime minister in just seventeen months,« the German embassy assessed skeptically in September 1999. »However, it remains to be seen whether this accolade from Yeltsin, who has only minimal support among the population, will not have negative consequences for Putin.«²⁴

»A striking number of ›Chekists‹ (members of the power ministries that emerged from the former KGB) have attained

24 PA AA, B 41-ZA/333855; Politischer Halbjahresbericht Russische Föderation (Russland), September 1999

key positions in the government in recent months,« the German embassy in Moscow observed in its semi-annual political report²⁵, describing this disturbing Russian pattern. Yeltsin had prevented a coup in 1991, but was now handing over power piece by piece to precisely these old forces. He was completing the authoritarian turn; soon, four out of five of the country's leading officials would have ties to the military or the secret services.²⁶ They held all the levers of power in their hands.

It should have been a shrill alarm signal: that a secret service was taking power so unhindered.

In Germany, however, these decisions were also linked to hopes for stability and a new political beginning. The »Yeltsin system« was coming to an end, the German embassy wrote; the president had »lost authority. His physical condition is unstable; pneumonia in November was followed by a stomach ulcer in January.« Added to this was alcohol. The political bulletin read as grimly as the medical one: impeachment proceedings in the Duma, corruption allegations directed at Yeltsin's family. Organized crime was flourishing, and the profiteers of so-called »voucherization« – the privatization of key industries – were called »oligarchs.« A debt, banking, and currency crisis left people losing their entire savings overnight. For almost two years, the country had been teetering on the brink of default – national bankruptcy.²⁷ The *devyanostye*, the »nineties,« became synonymous with chaos and humiliation.

25 PA AA, B 41-ZA/333855; Politischer Halbjahresbericht Russische Föderation (Russland). March 1999

26 See, for example: Olga Kryschtanowskaja: *Anatomie der russischen Elite. Die Militarisierung Russlands unter Putin* (Köln 2005)

27 Summary: https://www.iwh-halle.de/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/wirtschaft_im_wandel/12-98-2.pdf. See also: Hans-Jürgen Burkard, Katja Gloger: *Jenseits von Kreml und Rotem Platz. Bilder aus Russland* (München 1995)

During these years, Vladimir Putin rose to the very heart of power.

A Reliable Man

Who exactly is this Putin? »What policies does he stand for?« the German embassy in Moscow asks—and gives two diametrically opposed answers: »Skeptics focus primarily on Putin's KGB/FSB background, while optimists tend to focus on his time as deputy mayor of St. Petersburg under the recently deceased Anatoly Sobchak.«²⁸ A reformer.

Whether the skeptics or the optimists were right is something that should have been best judged in Germany. After all, Putin not only had »extensive experience of Germany,« as the embassy euphemistically described his KGB time in Dresden. The Germans also had extensive experience of Putin.

The optimists were mainly found in Hamburg, which has a special history with Putin's birthplace and hometown of St. Petersburg. Hamburg had been twinned with the city since the 1950s—the first of its kind in West Germany. The initiative came from what was then called Leningrad; the two »seaports« had much in common.

In the early 1990s, the people of Germany were grateful for reunification. Gorbachev had risked a great deal by agreeing to unity; only later did it become clear how imploringly and futilely he had asked Washington, London, and Berlin for massive economic aid. »To hell with it. ... We prevailed and they did not. ... We cannot allow the Soviets to tear victory out of the jaws of defeat,« US President George H. W.

28 PA AA, B 41-ZA/354455; Politischer Halbjahresbericht Russische Föderation (Russland). March 2000

Bush dismissed Gorbachev's appeal for equal treatment early on.²⁹

An entire country was collapsing; alarm messages poured into the »Task Force CIS Aid« at the Foreign Office. Children were said to be dying in Leningrad because of a supposed lack of medical equipment for transplants. The head of »Aid to CIS,« a young diplomat named Christoph Heusgen, forwarded the request to Hamburg. Another call for help had already arrived there – this time for support in the fight against tuberculosis.

The people of Hamburg were particularly committed; the local newspaper declared their willingness to help a »role model for the entire continent.« Relief efforts sprang up everywhere; the Symphony Orchestra of the public television station NDR organized benefit concerts, performing Beethoven's »Missa solemnis.« People donated money for oranges and milk powder, along with meat, canned fruit and vegetables, and disposable syringes. By mid-1992 alone, citizens had packed more than 600,000 parcels of food and clothing worth thirty million marks. Thousands of them remained unopened in shipping containers; many went »missing« – and often ended up on the black market in St. Petersburg. In that same St. Petersburg, Putin had already risen to considerable power as deputy mayor, responsible for the city's foreign relations. All applications for export licenses crossed his desk. And there were many of them, especially for oil and timber.

Putin allows himself a certain autobiographical license when it comes to his transition from Dresden to St. Petersburg. He claims to have resigned from the KGB – but says the

29 As Quoted in: Philip Zelikow, Condoleezza Rice: *Sternstunde der Diplomatie. Die deutsche Einheit und das Ende der Spaltung Europas* (München 1997), p. 302. See also: *Mit dem Glück ist es nicht so einfach* (Luck is a complicated thing). Interview with Mikhail Gorbachev by the author. In: *Stern*, March 14, 2013. The West refused to help with a kind a Marshall Plan for Gorbachev's ailing Soviet Union.

letter was lost. He also claims to have driven a taxi in between—though he only first mentions this in 2021. It is a proven fact that he worked for Anatoly Sobchak, dean of the law faculty at the University of St. Petersburg, where he was responsible for »international affairs«—at least in the past, a classic KGB position. Then, after Sobchak's election as mayor in 1991, he brought Putin into the city administration. Putin became his problem solver—his fixer.

The Hamburg State Archives hold a collection of files that help explain how deliberately Putin built close ties to politics and business in Germany as early as the 1990s.³⁰

He appeared in Hamburg on the very first Day of German Unity in October 1991, a guest at a reception hosted by Gruner+Jahr publishing house. At Sobchak's side, Putin quickly got to know the leading figures in German politics: Volker Rühe, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, and Helmut Kohl. Hamburg First Mayor Henning Voscherau described Putin as the »real mayor of the city«—»cautious, disillusioned, always on his guard, and strangely fearless.«³¹

During these years, the »potato crisis« made headlines: Would Red Army soldiers come to help and load German potatoes onto ships bound for St. Petersburg? »The Hamburg public is eagerly awaiting the first Russian soldiers in the Hanseatic city since 1813, the liberation from Napoleon,« wrote *Die Zeit*. But the Red Army did not come. In the end, it was mainly students who helped.³²

30 The Hamburg State Archives granted a swift and unbureaucratic lifting of retention periods, insofar as these were still applicable. Ref. ST 1212–3245/2023 dated 15 September 2023

31 Conversation with the author, Hamburg, 2015. The Hamburg State Archives also hold an extensive estate of Henning Voscherau. Access would only be possible with the consent of the family. This was not granted. Information from the State Ministry of Culture and Media dated October 4, 2023

32 Die Hamburger Kartoffelkrise (The Hamburg potato crisis). In: *Die Zeit*, November 9, 1990

Putin demanded substantial support for the capitalist transformation of the economy – for example, a »center for patent law,« since in the Petersburg region alone there were 370,000 scientists who had until then been employed almost exclusively in the arms industry. In business, he said, they were taken advantage of because of their inexperience. These »highly qualified employees« could produce »communication technology and household appliances.« Hamburg was to help with distribution.

Big money was at stake in the idea of turning his hometown into a financial center: in March 1993, Putin came to Hamburg for four days. Before one hundred entrepreneurs at the Hamburg headquarters of Dresdner Bank on Jungfernstieg, he promoted »trust and investment« with his lecture »St. Petersburg, a Market with Opportunities and Risks for the Hamburg Economy.«

And the German Investment Corporation (DEG) – a federal corporation for the promotion of private enterprise in developing countries – wanted to become more involved in Eastern Europe, especially in the new Russia. Putin proposed the establishment of a joint »investment company« in which newly founded Russian banks from St. Petersburg could also participate. Mayor Voscherau personally appealed to Kohl for support of these ambitious plans. At the time, St. Petersburg was considered the wildest of Russia's wild cities – rampant corruption, organized crime at the highest levels. Putin assured him that he had been waiting a long time for a »concrete proposal« of this kind and recommended one of the local banks, which, he said, had sufficient financial resources.³³

33 PA AA, B 63-ZA/170689; Letter from the Consul General of the German Consulate in St. Petersburg to Rainer von Otheграven dated April 29, 1993

More importantly, it had the necessary »political backing,« according to a memo from the German consulate.³⁴

Putin had earned a reputation among the Germans as a reliable fixer – someone who offered help when you wanted to solve a problem. Like the von Lambsdorff family, old Baltic nobility. An ancestor had been Russian foreign minister under the tsar and lay buried in the Lutheran cemetery in St. Petersburg. The resting place needed renovation, and the von Lambsdorffs asked Sobchak for help at a meeting. Putin handed them his card. The Hamburg files contain press clippings from that time: The newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* called him »the representative of a new generation of politicians.«

»He proved to be a ray of hope,« says Barnim Foth, head of the Senate protocol and foreign affairs department, who was also responsible for St. Petersburg and Putin. »He was absolutely reliable; whatever he promised was implemented.«³⁵ Putin the fixer. On the one hand.

34 PA AA, B 63-ZA/170689; Putin's proposal dated April 27, 1993. Report by the German Consulate General in St. Petersburg on DEG activities in St. Petersburg dated May 11, 1993. On DEG and the business practices of its managing director Rainer von Othegegraven, see also: *Chef auf Reisen* (Boss on the road). In: *Der Spiegel*, February 18, 1996

A commission of the St. Petersburg City Parliament, headed by the courageous geologist Marina Salje, who was chairing the City Parliament's Food Commission during this time of need, investigated massive corruption allegations as early as 1992, including allegations against Putin. After Putin's election in 2000, she withdrew completely to a village in northwestern Russia for many years, hiding her archives. It is said that she had been threatened. It was not until 2010 that she gave interviews again. She died in 2012. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/28/marina-salye>. See also: Masha Gessen: *The Future Is History. How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York 2017)

Until 2009, the Federal Criminal Police Office BKA and the Darmstadt public prosecutor's office investigated a real estate company from St. Petersburg, where Putin was on the advisory board until March 2000. The suspicion that the company could be a money laundering operation is never proven, and the case is closed. Neither the BKA nor the Darmstadt public prosecutor's office still have the extensive investigation files. Information from THE BKA dated November 26, 2024, information from the Darmstadt public prosecutor's office dated December 3, 2024

35 Conversation with Barnim Foth, February 21, 2025

On the other hand, Foth witnessed two appearances by Putin, only one of which became public knowledge. In February 1994, Foth quickly ushered Putin—who had arrived unexpectedly in Hamburg—to the table of the annual Hamburg Matthiae-Mahl banquet. Dating back to 1356, this gathering is considered the oldest banquet still celebrated worldwide. Hundreds of guests from politics, business, and society sit at very long tables set with the Senate silver. A Hamburg high mass.

The keynote speech that evening was delivered by Estonian President Lennart Meri. Annexed by Stalin, the Baltic states had been the first to declare their independence from the Soviet Union—their peaceful human chain for independence stretched six hundred kilometers across all three Baltic states. Like so many, Meri's family had suffered under Stalin's terror; like tens of thousands of Balts, they were deported to Siberia. As a twelve-year-old boy, Lennart Meri had to fight for survival as a lumberjack and potato peeler. That evening, Meri warned against »Russian expansionism«. He warned the guests against »dangerous wishful thinking.«

Then a door slammed shut. In the middle of the speech, Putin abruptly stood up, his footsteps echoing. »He left the hall with his knees locked, each step accompanied by the creaking of the oak parquet.«³⁶ Foth saw the Russian consul general hesitate briefly, then follow Putin.

The Senate Chancellery's newsletter described the incident under the headline »Putin Did Not Stay Long...« as a »scandal.«³⁷

36 Der türknallende Russe (The door-slamming Russian). In: *Die Zeit*, February 15, 2016

37 Newsletter of the Senate Chancellery, 2004

Putin later claimed that the door had simply slipped out of his hand.³⁸

Thirty years later, on February 20, 2024, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas addressed the guests at the Matthiae-Mahl. In preparation, she read the speech that Lennart Meri had delivered three decades earlier. »I got goosebumps,« she said. What Meri had feared had become a reality of war. »What if we had listened to him back then,« she said, »really listened?« And she asked: »Are we listening now?«³⁹

Foth, who had been chief of protocol at the time, was not surprised by the Putin scandal of 1994; as he had also gotten to know the other Putin. The man who was furious about the tent that had become a symbol of Hamburg's generosity: on Hamburg's Rathausmarkt the NGO Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB) (Workers' Samaritan Federation) collects thousands of aid packages for St. Petersburg in its »ASB tent.« Putin publicly declares: »We will always support the campaign.«⁴⁰

Behind closed doors, he denounces the »begging tent« and demanded that Mayor Voscherau have it dismantled. »It was outright blackmail,« recalls Foth. »Putin definitely threatened to sever relations between St. Petersburg and Hamburg if Mayor Voscherau did not have the tent removed from the town hall square. Putin thought purely in nationalistic terms; he didn't care about helping people. He felt that the ASB tent was publicly humiliating proud Russia. He couldn't bear that.«

Voscherau – who, along with his brother Eggert, would later play a key role in the German-Russian gas business,

38 Natalija Geworkjan, Andrei Kolesnikow, Natalija Timakowa: *Aus erster Hand. Gespräche mit Wladimir Putin* (München 2000), p. 212 ff.

39 <https://www.hamburg.de/politik-und-verwaltung/senat/rathaus-hamburg/matthiae-mahl/rede-der-ministerpraesidentin-kaja-kallas-590156>

40 For example, in the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, January 15, 1994

proved to be less clearvoyant when it came to Putin's character. In 2004, dozens of professors in Hamburg protested against Putin being awarded an honorary doctorate, arguing that under his rule, »the young Russian democracy was being transformed into the president's personal regime.« Furthermore, Putin did not have »sufficient scientific achievements,« a prerequisite for the honor.

In fact, rumors persist that Putin had his doctoral thesis on »state management of natural resources« written by his doctoral supervisor, Vladimir Litvinenko. The rector of the St. Petersburg Mining University went on to become a billionaire and long-time patron of the German-Russian Raw Materials Forum.

Voscherau, however, told the critics to »shut up.«⁴¹

Putin's early German network also included manager Klaus Mangold, known as »Mr. Russia.« He served as long-time chairman of the German Eastern Business Association, and it was his initiative that launched the »German-Russian Strategic Working Group« to promote economic relations, which had been meeting since 2000. He also played a key role in the »Petersburg Dialogue.« Mangold sat in virtually every small – and many of the smallest – circles where big business was discussed.

Mangold resigned from his position as Russian honorary consul for the federal state of Baden-Württemberg after Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. And even then, only after initial hesitation.

41 Die Ehre des Dr. Putin (The honor of Dr. Putin). In: *Der Tagesspiegel*, August 1, 2004. At the time, Voscherau's predecessor Klaus von Dohnanyi spoke of self appointed »moral guardians« who staged a »Hamburg scandal.« Even in 2025, the now 97-year-old elder statesman continues to seek understanding for Putin's Russia. Ukraine, he says, has no claim to Crimea and Donbass. <https://www.thepioneer.de/originals/thepioneer-briefing-business-class-edition/podcasts/die-ukraine-hat-keinen-anspruch-auf-die-krim-und-auf-den-Donbass>

In the early 1990s, Mangold – then head of the Quelle mail-order company – was scouting for new markets in Eastern Europe. He had big plans for St. Petersburg: he wanted to acquire a department store. We have no business at all in the city, Mangold told Mayor Sobchak during a dinner in 1992.

Then a slight man spoke up in perfect German. That was not true, he said. He drove past a Quelle branch every day, said Putin. And he suggested meeting there the next morning at 7:30 a.m. sharp. Mangold had the matter checked that same evening: indeed, an enterprising small businessman was letting customers leaf through old Quelle catalogs for a small fee.

Mangold kept the dinner's seating arrangement.⁴² Seated at the same table as Putin that evening were: Alexei Miller, the future head of Gazprom; Dmitry Medvedev, the future president; German Gref, the future minister for economic affairs; and Igor Sechin, a former KGB colleague who would become CEO of the oil company Rosneft – the same Rosneft for whose supervisory board Schröder would later be recruited.

The Chancellery later dubbed these connections the »Petersburg camarilla« – an attempt to make a dangerously Putin-friendly chancellor named Gerhard Schröder think twice.⁴³

In Petersburg, the network formed under the name »Ozero« – »the lake.« A small dacha cooperative on a lake outside St. Petersburg, where a striking number of those who would rise to power and billions alongside Putin – the Putin oligarchs – found one another. A striking number of them had pasts and presents in intelligence and security structures.

42 Conversations with Klaus Mangold, including May 17, 2024

43 See preparations for Chancellor Schröder's talks with Putin during his state visit in September 2001, point 9: Domestic policy / media / separation of powers

These were the »siloviki,« the men of power from the security ministries. It was the nucleus of a system of power based on *prodazhnost* – the conviction that everything and everyone is for sale, that in the end everyone has a price and will name it.⁴⁴ It became the *modus operandi* of the regime.

And then there was Matthias Warnig, a long-time officer of the GDR's Ministry for State Security Stasi – a GDR agent deployed in the West, an »*OibE*« (Offizier im besonderen Einsatz – officer on special assignment). Most recently in charge of espionage against the major German banks – one of which, Dresdner Bank, hired him in May 1990, even before German reunification.⁴⁵

By then, Warnig had already managed – as an apparently undetected Stasi operative – to become an advisor to GDR Economics Minister Christa Luft and take a seat at the negotiating table on, of all things, the German-German monetary union.

There has been much speculation about whether Putin and Warnig knew each other from their days in the GDR and had therefore begun making plans for the period after the collapse of the old system early on. The files of the German intelligence services⁴⁶ contain no evidence of this.

44 Many of the terms could be applied to the US under Trump in 2025. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/09/opinion/america-russia-authoritarian-language.html>

45 His responsibilities are evident from an organizational chart of Main Directorate XV of the HVA in Berlin. According to this, Warnig was deputy head of division 5 in 1989. According to the BfV, this division was responsible for »economic intelligence« – against »Deutsche Bank AG, Dresdner Bank, and Commerzbank.« According to Commerzbank (which took over Dresdner Bank in 2009), Warnig joined Dresdner Bank AG on May 28, 1990: »Activities in the new federal states and at the interface with the Treuhandanstalt, not specified in detail.« Shortly thereafter, Warnig was already in Moscow. Information from Commerzbank dated February 20, 2025

46 From 1991, the BfV kept a so-called »P-file« on Warnig. The reason for this was a request for information from the Federal Prosecutor General, who opened a preliminary investigation against Warnig in the same year on suspicion of secret service activities.

Apparently, the two actually met for the first time in St. Petersburg in the fall of 1991, when Warnig – equipped with a thermos and sandwiches – waited in Putin’s anteroom for an appointment. Dresdner Bank had sent Warnig to St. Petersburg to obtain approval for the establishment of a representative office, the first Western bank branch in the city. »We had similar problems, worries, fears,« the former Stasi officer explains of his relationship with the former KGB officer. »He wondered what would come after the collapse of the system. I faced the same questions.«⁴⁷

The Stasi personnel file still contains the sentence: »Comrade Warnig shows no excessive material interest. He lives in a modestly furnished old apartment and owns a Trabant«⁴⁸.

That changed. A close and lucrative friendship developed between Putin and Warnig. Warnig became one of the most powerful men in the German-Russian energy business – responsible for the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines – and also served as a back channel for at least Minister of Economic and, thereafter, Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel. Warnig arranged meetings with Putin, conveyed messages on pipeline issues, the war in eastern Ukraine, and possible escape corridors for the people in war-torn Syria. During the coronavirus lockdown, State Prime Minister Manuela Schwesig (SPD) of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania asked him to mediate on whether the Russian Sputnik vaccine could also be produced in her state.⁴⁹

Warnig’s story is one of the most astonishing German-German careers. Warnig is the only German to end up on a

47 In one of his rare interviews, Herr Putin hat kein Handy (Mr. Putin does not have a cell phone). In: *Die Presse*, February 8, 2018

48 »Information report on foreign cadres,« Main directorate A, SWT/Working Group 1, May 2, 1986, Federal Archives

49 <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/manuela-schwesig-wollte-sputnik-v-mit-hilfe-des-putin-freundes-matthias-warnig-beschaffen-a-9e40b7b4-692c-46d5-a372-960851c1fa28>