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Putin ‘wins’ in eastern Germany

A post-election debate over U.S. missiles and military aid for Ukraine is hampering coalition building in Germany’s east.

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In regional elections in the formerly communist east on Sunday, Russia-friendly parties on both extremes of the political spectrum surged. | Ronny Hartman/AFP via Getty Images

SEPTEMBER 6, 2024 4:00 AM CET

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BERLIN — A heated debate on Russia is crashing the normally more provincial politics of eastern German states, and Vladimir Putin is likely loving it.

In regional elections in the formerly communist east on Sunday, Russia-friendly parties on both extremes of the political spectrum surged — and they are already demanding that German leaders radically change their way of dealing with the Kremlin.

That includes the populist-left Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), a new party named after its founder, a leftist icon who started out in politics as a member of East Germany's communist party, which took third place in both Thuringia and Saxony.

One of BSW's post-election demands: that Berlin halt a plan, announced in July, for the United States to deploy long-range missiles in Germany starting in 2026 to defend NATO territory. Putin, soon after, threatened to take "mirror measures," accusing the U.S. and its allies of escalating tensions.

"Many people are afraid that Germany will allow itself to be dragged into this war and many people also see the great dangers of the U.S. missile plans," Wagenknecht said on German public television after the regional elections.

Members of her party, who also advocate a stop to military aid for Ukraine and peace negotiations with Putin, have since suggested they won't form coalitions with any party that supports the presence of U.S. missiles.

"We see that this is a measure that directly increases the risk of war for Germany and we believe that a state government must really raise its voice here," Amira Mohamed Ali, co-leader of BSW, said on German public radio.



It remains unclear how the CDU will navigate its dilemma over whether to work with BSW. | Michele Tantussi/Getty Images

The BSW's stance puts the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which won in Saxony and came in second in Thuringia, in a difficult position.

With all parties vowing not to govern with the far-right, pro-Russia Alternative for Germany (AfD) despite the party's surge in the elections, the CDU is set to lead coalition talks. But in eastern Germany's new fragmented political landscape, the CDU needs BSW as a coalition partner.

Such a partnership, however, would be highly fraught. CDU leaders on a national level categorically reject BSW's positions on Russia and accuse the party of being a tool of the Kremlin.

"The BSW acts as an extension of the Kremlin and contradicts all values [our party] traditionally stands for," Roderich Kiesewetter, a senior CDU parliamentarian on the

foreign affairs committee, told POLITICO. “This can also be seen as part of Russia's hybrid strategy of shaping the discourse and setting the agenda in Germany.”

Kiesewetter is among some 100 CDU politicians who have launched an effort to rule out cooperation with the BSW on any level by extending a party resolution banning cooperation with the AfD and The Left party, the successor to the East German communist party, to include the BSW.

Sympathy for the Kremlin in the east

But such a move would put local CDU politicians in Germany’s east in a peculiar spot, given the pervasiveness of Kremlin-friendly views among their constituents.

Nearly 3 out of 4 people in eastern Germany do not want the deployment of U.S. missiles in their country, according to a Forsa poll from late July. (Nationwide, half of Germans reject the plan.)

That helps explain why the conservative premier of Saxony, Michael Kretschmer, who led his CDU to a narrow victory over the AfD on Sunday, has views that are out of step with his party’s national leaders when it comes to Russia. In fact, on that subject, he often sounds a lot like a politician in BSW.

“We can no longer provide funds for weapons to Ukraine only for these weapons to be used up and achieve nothing,” he told a German media outlet ahead of the election. Kretschmer has also called for a referendum on the U.S. missile deployment.

It remains unclear how the CDU will navigate its dilemma over whether to work with BSW. But one thing seems certain: The Kremlin is very pleased that a debate is taking place due to the party's rise.



“60 Minutes,” a popular Russian political show, included a segment highlighting the success of BSW, a party, as a narrator put it, that was “formed around the concept of peace.” | Michele Tantussi/Getty Images

The rise of Russia-friendly parties in eastern Germany has been a focus of attention on Russian state television. Coverage of the election on “60 Minutes,” a popular Russian political show, included a segment highlighting the success of BSW, a party, as a narrator put it, that was “formed around the concept of peace.”

The party’s message, according to the show, has found resonance in an eastern Germany where “there is nostalgia for the socialist past and resistance to the U.S. and NATO is quite strong.”

When a guest on the show wanted to dissect the election results in Germany, the host, Yevgeny Popov, also a Russian parliamentarian, intervened in a half-joking manner.

“What is there to analyze?” he said. “Putin won!”