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Can Germany Summon the Will to Lead?

By **JOHN VINOCCUR**

BERLIN — Basic question awaiting a clear answer: As Germany tries out its would-be status as Europe's international heavyweight, what does Angela Merkel have to say about Vladimir Putin's certain victory in what is called a presidential election on March 4?

A response from Germany, Russia's eager "strategic partner" and biggest Western economic provider, is required because it's blindingly clear, after Russia's veto (with China in tow) of a U.N. Security Council aimed at stopping the massacres in Syria, that Mr. Putin is running his campaign on a platform of Cold War-style defiance of the West.

Its broad consequences are worrisome. Yet Mr. Putin could easily brush off remonstrance from America or Britain. It might even facilitate his tactics.

But Germany bravely singling Russia out as a growing problem? It would signify a full stop for a kind of German indulgence that regards Russia as a only dose of patience's distance from democracy and cooperation, and that provides Mr. Putin with Western leverage and Western hesitation. And it would shock the Putin team and serve as marker for the Russian electorate.

Mr. Putin has now demonstrated he is looking for trouble. The truth is he won a kind of victory en route to his veto, forcing the Security Council to tear the guts from its final draft resolution: gone were a ban on arms shipments, the possibility of new sanctions, and a call for President Bashar al-Assad's departure.

Mr. Putin's goal is not only to paint an American-led enemy in time for next month's vote, but to get the West to back off on Iran and on deployment of NATO's missile shield in Europe through threats and by sowing the notion that America is shoving its friends into confrontations they don't need.

Germany counts enormously here. It has the West's biggest economic hold on Russia and, historically, a (sometimes delusional) vision of the two countries' potential for a golden destiny together. With Germany having gained in power and influence through its appearance of rigor and solidity, if not flexibility, during Europe's debt misfortunes, the issue now is how assertive Ms Merkel wants to be in naming Mr. Putin's game. If she

chooses to lead, she will make clear that a review of relations with Russia is under way, that its election procedures will be under intense scrutiny, and that in prolonging the extermination of thousands of people by a regime armed by Russia, Mr. Putin will find only contempt in Germany.

The occasion and the urgency are there. The alternative is a Germany seeking to hide behind a comfortable default position as an above-the-fray go-between. It would be a sign of the West's weakness and a failure of German political instinct.

The precedents and current indicators of a demonstration of German resolve are not terrific: When the heat was on in Libya this spring, Ms. Merkel's Germany turned its back on France, Britain and the United States, and — abstaining alongside Russia and China — refrained from standing with its allies in approving Security Council intervention.

Since the veto on Saturday, Guido Westerwelle, the German foreign minister, after saying he regretted and was disappointed by the action (and sounding like a high school guidance counselor scolding a kid for bringing a whoopee cushion into class), has done a wishful-thinking number about somehow returning the issue to the Security Council.

Ms. Merkel hardly leapt at the problem when she met with Nicolas Sarkozy in Paris to discuss the veto's aftermath. Rather, the French president said he would be speaking to the Russian leadership about the "scandal" for the chancellor and himself.

Ultimately, Germany, now supposedly leading Europe, faces the question of how much responsibility it wants to take concerning the world's most jagged political issues. To me, the West seems at a point when a heavy injection of German political courage could make a greater contribution to its role in world stability than Germany's austerity-for-all economic vision.

A hard detail: next week, the Organization of Economic Growth and Development will report that Germany's potential for growth will decline from 1.5 to 1 percent or below over the next 10 to 15 years. That's economic bottom-feeding — and a brutal irony that would reduce the legitimacy the country might have this year as a global political voice.

So, what are the odds on Ms. Merkel, in a position of rare influence, saying something true and meaningful now about the implications of the awful behavior of Mr. Putin and what to do about the reality of his return to the Russian presidency?

I asked John Kornblum, a former U.S. ambassador and a keen observer of Germany, what he thought of the likelihood of a new kind of German commitment to leadership beyond economics (although the massive trade imbalances favoring Germany are a root factor in Europe's debt and deficit grief).

“The Germans take more responsibility?” Mr. Kornblum asked, as if having to field the dumbest question of the week. “They’ll run from it.”

Could well be.