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Anthony Faiola

Germans displeased by Victoria Nuland gaffe

BERLIN — Germans were already smarting from revelations that U.S. intelligence listened in on the phone conversations of Chancellor Angela Merkel. Then came Nulandgate.

On Thursday, a video was posted on YouTube in which Victoria Nuland, the top U.S. diplomat for Europe, disparagingly dismissed European Union efforts to mediate the ongoing crisis in the Ukraine by bluntly saying, “F--- the E.U.” On Friday, Merkel, through press attache Christiane Wirtz, described the gaffe as “absolutely unacceptable,” and defended the efforts of Catherine Ashton, the E.U.’s foreign policy chief.

“The chancellor finds these remarks absolutely unacceptable and wants to emphasize that Mrs. Ashton is doing an outstanding job,” Wirtz said.

Still freshly furious over the phone-tapping scandals, Germans took to Twitter and other social media in a litany of bitter comments. “Since we know now that the leadership circles in the #USA don’t give a s--- about Europe, we should just stop the Free Trade Agreement,” came one tweet from @klllercher, referring to ongoing negotiations to forge a transatlantic free-trade deal. Meanwhile, a spokesman for the German Foreign Ministry said at a media briefing Friday that “this just goes to show once more that wiretapping is stupid.”

[Read a quick guide to who’s who on the call]

Some German news media, however, were quick to warn against overreaction. Der Spiegel online published an opinion column titled “Relax, Europe.”

“Europe should simply laugh about the American F-word,” the outlet said in an editorial that also offered a critique of the E.U.’s diplomatic efforts in the Ukraine. “Some humor would do no harm to the transatlantic relationship at the moment.”

In Brussels, E.U. officials remained publicly mum. Though the story played big across the continent, the official response beyond Germany appeared relatively muted. But the Germans were not the only ones smarting. Reactions among Austrian members of the European Parliament ranged from outrage to schadenfreude.

“Victoria Nuland must step down after these remarks, otherwise there has to be a suspension of negotiations about the E.U.-U.S. free-trade agreement,” Jörg Leichtfried, leader of the Austrian Social Democratic delegation in the European Parliament, told the Austrian press agency APA, according to the daily Die Presse.

Nuland quickly apologized for the comments, with the United States pointing the finger Thursday at the Russians for recording and posting her private conversations with U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey R. Pyatt.

“We have a long and enduring relationship with Germany,” State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said in Washington. She noted that Secretary of State John F. Kerry was in Germany last week.

“We expect we’ll be back to business as usual with them as well,” Psaki said.

Nevertheless, analysts said the unscripted moment served to underscore a serious point: the increasingly strained nature of the U.S. relationship with continental Europe — and, first and foremost, with Germany. In the aftermath of the exposure by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden of U.S. intelligence-gathering efforts in the region, distrust of the American agenda in Germany has jumped appreciably.

Experts say the image of the United States has suffered deeply, with the Nuland gaffe reinforcing perceptions of American heavy-handedness at a highly sensitive time. This week, for instance, the Sueddeutsche Zeitung newspaper published fresh allegations that the United States had wiretapped former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder. In response, Schröder gave an interview to

the Bild newspaper in which he said, “The U.S. has no respect for a loyal ally and for the sovereignty of our country.”

Olaf Boehnke, head of the Berlin office of the European Council on Foreign Relations, said the gaffe could not have come at a worse time. To some extent, German officials — particularly Merkel — have sought to put the wiretapping scandal behind them, pragmatically attempting to move forward and mend the transatlantic relationship. Nuland’s comments, he said, had just made that effort more difficult, particularly with the increasingly skeptical German public.

“It was really the worst thing that could happen; Germans will be going home tonight to discuss this at dinner,” Boehnke said. “It fits into a broader picture that German people have of the U.S. betraying the trust in them.”

Anne Gearan and Stephanie Kirchner contributed to this report.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/germans-not-amused-by-nuland-gaffe/2014/02/07/66885a02-900d-11e3-878e-d76656564a01_story.html