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German Foreign Policy towards Russia in the Aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis: A New *Ostpolitik*?

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Abstract

This essay investigates the shift in Germany’s *Ostpolitik* approach to Russia as a result of the latter’s increasing domestic authoritarianism and assertive foreign policy, particularly its violations of international law in the Ukraine crisis. This prompted Germany to take the initiative in formulating EU sanctions against Russia. However, Germany has attempted to reconcile the sanctions policy with a diplomatic approach to resolving the Ukraine crisis by seeking ways of engaging Moscow on broader security and economic issues, as Russia is considered an essential factor in European and global security and a key energy supplier. Thus, *Ostpolitik* has not been abandoned altogether; it continues to play a role and shapes the long-term objectives of Germany’s Russia policy.

The relationship between Germany and Russia is considered to be an essential determinant of European politics and security. This perception was strengthened after 2013, when Germany emerged as the main economic and political power within the European Union and took up a leading role in shaping EU foreign policy. Following the onset of the Ukraine crisis, German chancellor Angela Merkel has led EU diplomatic efforts in conflict resolution. Germany has been the most influential EU country in the various negotiation formats concerning the crisis, from the Weimar triangle (including also France and Poland) to the Normandy group (comprising Germany, Russia, Ukraine and France). Moreover, Merkel led the shuttle diplomacy that negotiated the Minsk-2 agreement in February 2015.1

In addition to its current political influence, Germany’s long-standing diplomatic relations with Russia have allowed the country to play a leading role in the negotiations. Berlin adopted a cooperative approach in its foreign policy vis-à-vis Moscow in the late 1960s (Krumm 2012, pp. 114–23; Schildt 2003, pp. 153–79). During the Cold War, this approach—known as *Ostpolitik*—was based on the idea that economic and political engagement with Moscow would lead to positive change, both within the Soviet Union and in bilateral relations.

1The agreement included a ceasefire between the Ukrainian army and the pro-Russian rebels fighting in Eastern Ukraine, the holding of elections in the regions of Donetsk’s and Luhans’k, the return of these regions to full Ukrainian government control and the decentralisation of powers in Ukraine through a constitutional reform that would recognise the special status of the Donetsk’s and Luhans’k regions. The full text is available at: http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/21b8f98e-b2a5-11e4-b234-00144feab7de.html#axzz42PSUGUCw, accessed 10 March 2016.
German governments adopted the same stance towards post-Soviet Russia, with an even stronger emphasis on promoting ‘change through economic interlocking’ (Annäherung durch Verflechtung). The political capital accumulated through decades of cooperation, as well as perceptions of its influence and trustworthiness both in Russia and the EU, enabled Germany to become the key mediator and Moscow’s main interlocutor during the Ukraine crisis.2

However, Russia’s violations of international law, notably its annexation of Crimea and military support for the separatists in the Donbas, have called into question the fundamental tenet of Ostpolitik, the pursuit of cooperation with Russia. Some analysts have claimed that, by supporting EU sanctions against Russia and condemning Russian policies in Ukraine, German leaders have abandoned Ostpolitik (Vestring 2014; Meister 2015). Others have argued that German policy towards Moscow has changed, but ‘not as dramatically as some headlines have suggested’ (Forsberg 2016, p. 23). At the other end of the spectrum, some pundits have contended that business interests determine German foreign policy, thereby implying that the logic of ‘change through economic interlocking’ will continue to guide Berlin’s relations with Russia (Kundnani 2015; Szabo 2015).

This contribution explores the extent to which a shift has taken place in German foreign policy, and investigates the factors that help understand any such change. It argues that a shift of attitudes vis-à-vis Russia took place from late 2012 and became more noticeable during 2014, as the Ukraine crisis escalated. It was driven first by domestic developments in Russia (notably the deterioration of democracy and the rule of law since 2012) and, most significantly, by Russia’s violations of international law in the Ukraine crisis. However, this change should not be interpreted as a major reformulation of German foreign policy. Although relations with Russia have cooled considerably, Ostpolitik has not been abandoned altogether; it continues to play a role in current developments and shapes the long-term objectives of Germany’s Russia policy.

**German foreign policy: key tenets and the challenge to Ostpolitik**

Germany’s foreign policy has been based on a set of tenets and values that could be reconciled with one another for several decades. In addition to Ostpolitik, these included the rejection of war as a means of resolving disputes, respect for human rights, support for democratic principles, transatlanticism (the post-war alliance with the US), multilateralism and European integration (Berger 1997; Banchoff 1999, pp. 259–89; Wittlinger 2011). While Ostpolitik dates back from the late 1960s, most of the other tenets were formulated in the first post-war years, when the Federal Republic regained its sovereignty.

The disastrous outcome of the dictatorial and militaristic policies of the Third Reich largely explains the rejection of war as a means to resolve disputes and the widespread support for a norm-based foreign policy among both German leaders and the public (Berger 1996). Germany’s pacific security culture has often prevailed over other foreign policy tenets in circumstances when they contradicted each other. For instance, the rejection of the use of force and respect for international norms proved a stronger determinant of German foreign policy than transatlanticism when German leaders decided not to participate in the US-led war against Iraq in 2003 (Bjola & Kornprobst 2007). Moreover, cooperation and multilateralism

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2Anonymous interview with official, Division for Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Eastern Partnership, at the Federal Foreign Office of Germany, Berlin, 28 October 2015.
in international relations are valued highly. European integration is seen as epitomising these norms and principles, and is therefore strongly advocated by the German political leadership.³

Reconciling the cooperative approach towards Russia with support for human rights and democratic principles was arguably one of the most difficult balancing acts for German politicians. Nonetheless, a solution was found in the idea that economic cooperation would have positive spillover effects on Russian domestic political and economic developments. German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has been one of the staunchest supporters of this approach: economic interlocking would bring about domestic change in Russia and lead to a rapprochement with the EU (Steinmeier 2007). In terms of policy making, the German–Russian Partnership for Modernisation (PfM) launched in 2008 reflected this stance.⁴ Through the PfM, German leaders hoped to both promote Germany’s economic interests and strengthen the rule of law in Russia, while their Russian counterparts were keen on economic consolidation and technology transfers from the West (Meister 2012; Makarychev & Meister 2015). The PfM was uploaded at the EU level in 2010, with the objective of promoting domestic reforms in Russia and enhancing bilateral trade, particularly through Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organization (which eventually occurred in 2012). The PfM complemented previous agreements between the EU and Russia aimed at developing a strategic partnership, notably the Four Common Spaces, covering the economy and the environment; freedom, security and justice; external security; and research and education (EU & Russia 2010; David & Romanova 2015, p. 2).

However, the cooperative approach to Russia was increasingly challenged starting from the autumn of 2011. The irregularities in the Russian parliamentary and presidential elections in the winter of 2011–2012 and the authorities’ repressive reaction to the ensuing protests signalled the judgement that economic partnership with the West had not led to improvements in democratic standards. Moreover, in the months after the elections, the Russian political establishment adopted several authoritarian measures, curtailing the rights of the LGBT community and compelling NGOs that received funding from abroad to register as ‘foreign agents’. The authorities also adopted a more nationalistic and strongly conservative rhetoric, in an attempt to recover the support of part of the Russian electorate (Koesel & Bunce 2012; Gel’man 2013, pp. 3–10). These developments called into question the appropriateness of a policy of engagement and cooperation with the Kremlin.

The Ukraine crisis accelerated the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. Russia’s policies in Ukraine clashed with most tenets of German foreign policy. The Kremlin’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and its military support of the separatists in Eastern Ukraine collided with the principle of rejecting the use of force and abiding by international law. Russia took unilateral action, to the detriment of a negotiated solution of the crisis, and its separatist allies in Ukraine prevented democratic elections in the area under their control.

³In defence policy, German leaders tend to consider the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as complementary to the transatlantic alliance; the CSDP is the preferred framework for civilian operations, whereas NATO is favoured for robust military engagement. However, due to the widespread opposition of the German public opinion to the use of military force, the civilian instruments of the CSDP are often seen as offering a more palatable option for German policy makers (Würzer 2013, pp. 28–9).

Moreover, Russian foreign policy overtly clashed with two of the pillars of Germany’s positioning in the international arena, European integration and transatlanticism. The crisis in Ukraine was precipitated by the issue of Kyiv entering into an Association Agreement with the EU, which Russia fiercely opposed. It became clear that the Russian leadership considered further European integration in the post-Soviet space as a threat to its strategic interests. Putin explicitly rejected the Euro–Atlantic order, arguing that it was imposed by the West on Russia in the 1990s, and advocated a multipolar security architecture where Russia and the West recognise each other as equal partners and respect each other’s strategic interests.\footnote{‘Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club’, The Kremlin, 24 October 2014, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860, accessed 4 February 2016.}

Furthermore, the US’ strong condemnation of Russian actions in Ukraine and its pressure on Germany to follow suit created profound tension between Berlin’s transatlantic alliance and its traditional policy of cooperation \textit{vis-à-vis} Russia.

Under these circumstances, German leaders decided to support sanctions against Russia and accepted the costs that these would entail for the German economy. Policy makers in Berlin were particularly vocal in their criticism of Russia’s violations of international law. Merkel defined the annexation of Crimea as ‘criminal’ (Merkel 2015), while Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble compared it to Hitler’s annexation of the Sudetenland (Reiermann 2014). Russian reactions included both a firm repudiation of the accusations and attempts to ease tensions. The Russian foreign ministry issued a protest to the German embassy in Moscow about Schäuble’s remarks, after which Schäuble was criticised by Merkel and backtracked.\footnote{Deutsche Welle, 3 April 2014, available at: http://www.dw.com/en/russia-protests-sch%C3%A4uble-comments-on-crimea-sudetenland-with-german-ambassador/a-17542060, accessed 3 February 2016.}

On the other hand, despite Merkel’s condemnation of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Putin conveyed to her that he remained interested in improving relations with the EU (MacFarquhar 2015). While voicing criticism of Russia, German leaders kept communication channels with the Kremlin open and came out strongly in favour of a negotiated solution to the crisis; Merkel repeatedly reiterated that there was no military solution. Despite having been weakened by developments on the ground and tensions with the other main German foreign policy tenets, the logic of \textit{Ostpolitik} continued to play a significant role in decision making and in some influential parts of German society, notably in the business world and intellectual circles (Forsberg 2016).

\textit{Ostpolitik revisited: agents and practice of Germany’s Russia policy in 2014–2015}

German foreign policy towards Russia during the Ukraine crisis was shaped by the interaction of domestic and external factors. External factors pushed Berlin towards taking a critical stance. The US and several EU member states, particularly Poland and the Baltic states, immediately took a hard-line position \textit{vis-à-vis} Russian policies. Initially, Merkel and Steinmeier attempted to resolve the Crimean crisis through talks. When this strategy failed, German leaders led efforts to impose sanctions on Russia.\footnote{‘Economic War with Russia: A High Price for German Business’, \textit{Spiegel Online}, 17 March 2014, available at: http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/germany-to-play-central-but-expensive-role-in-sanctions-against-russia-a-959019.html, accessed 11 January 2016.} Germany’s position was seen as decisive for the overall EU stance \textit{vis-à-vis} Russia. As the leading economic power in the EU and Russia’s main European commercial partner, Germany steered EU foreign policy. In
this role, its actions were also influenced by the desire to heed the transatlantic partnership and achieve consensus within the EU—and thus to act in accordance with the ‘transatlantic’ and ‘Europeanist’ foreign policy tenets. Practically, this meant reconciling the German foreign policy stance towards Russia with those of the US and eastern EU member states. Nonetheless, German leaders rejected the proposal to send weapons to the post-Maidan Ukrainian government, as advocated by Republican congressmen in the US and treated as a possibility by Barack Obama, since pursuit of a military solution to the conflict collided with Germany’s post-war pacific security culture.

The forces at work in the domestic arena were more complex. Most mass media and public opinion surveys were very critical of Russia. In April 2014, over 50% of Germans interviewed in a survey conducted by the Allensbach Institute considered Russia as a threat to Germany, whereas before the Ukraine crisis two thirds thought that Russia was no threat to their country. In the same period, supporters of deeper cooperation with Russia diminished from over 50% to 32% of the interviewees. The majority considered Putin and Russia responsible for the Ukraine crisis, but a sizeable minority (between 20% and 30% of interviewees) blamed the West and the new Ukrainian government. Moreover, the percentage of those considering Russia a ‘world power’ reached 67% in March 2015, compared to 45% in 2008 (Von Steinsdorff 2015, pp. 2–5).

Most politicians took a very critical stance towards Russia. Both parties in the governing coalition (the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats) and the Green Party (in opposition) supported Merkel’s policy of condemning and sanctioning Russia for its violations of international law. After initial hesitation, some of the main representatives of German business and industry (notably Markus Kerber, director general of the Federation of German Industries) also supported the government’s line, arguing that gross violations of international law could not be tolerated and that peace and freedom stood above economic interests (Forsberg 2016, p. 34). This was particularly significant, as it refuted the argument that German foreign policy towards Russia is determined exclusively by national business interests (Kundnani 2015; Szabo 2015).

However, a closer look at the German domestic scenario reveals important nuances highlighting the persistence of Ostpolitik thinking in both the policy and business communities. While accepting the imposition of sanctions as a necessary evil, the associations of German industry remained sceptical of their effectiveness and appeared keen to see them lifted as soon as tensions with Russia started to de-escalate. Matthias Platzeck, head of the German–Russian Forum (an influential forum bringing together representatives of German and Russian civil society), repeatedly criticised the sanctions for being both counterproductive (Bidder & Scheppe 2015) and fostering a siege mentality, thereby strengthening Putin’s hold on power. Indeed, the surveys of the independent Russian polling organisation Levada showed that Putin’s approval rating soared in 2014 and 2015. Although other factors may have played

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8Richard Sakwa argues that, following Russia’s annexation of Crimea, ‘German foreign policy lost some of its independence and swung behind Washington’ (Sakwa 2015, p. 225).
a more important role (notably the widespread patriotic enthusiasm following Russia’s annexation of Crimea), it is plausible that Western sanctions contributed to rallying Russians behind Putin. This may change in the long run, as Russians feel the impact of the economic crisis. However, two years after the West imposed sweeping economic sanctions, despite the drastic depreciation of the ruble, Putin’s approval rating has remained very high.

Platzeck was not the only prominent figure to criticise Merkel’s stance towards Russia. Several former chancellors and foreign ministers—including Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl, Gerhard Schröder and Hans-Dietrich Genscher—expressed strong reservations about Merkel’s policy and argued for the resumption of dialogue and diplomatic cooperation with Moscow. Their criticism of Merkel’s policy also highlighted the different stances of the current and the previous generations of German leaders vis-à-vis Russia. While the two German chancellors preceding Merkel (Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder) had close personal relationships with Russian presidents, Merkel never developed similar ties with Putin (Krumm 2012). Their relationship is seen as having soured after Putin’s denial of Russian military actions in Ukraine and Merkel’s subsequent decision to impose sanctions on Russia (McGuinness 2015).

Even within the governing coalition, different points of view exist. The Social Democratic view of a policy of détente and engagement, following the Ostpolitik tradition initiated by Willy Brandt, remains one of the most influential. With Social Democratic leader Frank-Walter Steinmeier as head of German foreign policy, this view continues to play an important role in the foreign ministry, where negotiations (rather than confrontation) are seen as the only way of solving the current crisis, and partnership is still considered the long-term goal of relations with Moscow.12 Prior to the Ukraine crisis, Steinmeier was a staunch supporter of cooperation with Moscow, particularly through the PfM; after the annexation of Crimea he has expressed moderate criticism of Russia, while appearing keen on upholding dialogue with Moscow (Belov 2015, pp. 6–11).

Despite the present tensions, the persistent influence of Ostpolitik thinking is discernible in current German foreign policy making, which has combined firm condemnations of Russian violations of international law with consistent support of diplomacy and dialogue. In February 2015, arguably the tensest moment of the Ukraine crisis so far, Merkel firmly rejected the idea of supplying weapons to Ukraine and initiated the diplomatic efforts that led to the Minsk-2 agreement. As the fighting in Eastern Ukraine lost intensity in the spring and summer of 2015, other political moves pointing to further dialogue and the resumption of German engagement with Russia took place. Angela Merkel was the only Western European leader who travelled to Moscow to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II. She declined the invitation to attend the military parade on the Red Square in Moscow, on 9 May, and only arrived in the city the day after. However, the fact that she travelled to the Russian capital to commemorate the anniversary, and held talks with Putin, highlighted her willingness to uphold both the historical reconciliation with Russia and direct diplomatic contacts with the Russian leadership.

Steinmeier also travelled to Russia to commemorate the anniversary. Together with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, he attended an event in Volgograd, the site of a battle where the Soviet army gained a decisive victory against the German army. At the event, Steinmeier argued for reconciliation between Germans and Russians. He called Volgograd ‘the city of heroes’ who ‘began Europe’s liberation from Nazi dictatorship’. With implicit

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12 Anonymous interview with official, Division for Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Eastern Partnership, Federal Foreign Office of Germany, Berlin, 28 October 2015.
reference to the Ukraine crisis, he described the joint commemoration as ‘an opportunity for us [Germans and Russians] to practise understanding and to peacefully resolve any antagonisms and conflicts between us’ (Steinmeier 2015a).

Perhaps even more significantly, in the summer of 2015 German energy companies E.ON and Wintershall (together with Royal Dutch Shell, the French ENGIE and the Austrian ÖMV) restarted cooperation with Russian state energy company Gazprom on new joint energy projects. At the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June, E.ON, Shell and ÖMV signed a memorandum of intent with Gazprom for the expansion of the Nord Stream pipeline, which ships Russian gas to Germany via the Baltic Sea (Matalucci 2015). The expansion would double the capacity of the pipeline (from 55 to 110 billion cubic meters a year), thereby practically ending the dependency of EU–Russia gas trade on Ukrainian transit pipelines (Siddi 2015). Wintershall joined the Nord Stream-2 consortium in July and called for the end of sanctions against Russia. In September, the companies participating in the consortium pushed forward the project by signing a shareholders’ agreement.13

German officials argue that Nord Stream-2 will contribute to European energy security.14 In a meeting with Putin in October 2015, German Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel stated that building the pipeline is in the commercial interest of Germany and Europe.15 This line of thinking was criticised by several European leaders, mostly from East-Central Europe. According to them, Nord Stream-2 would perpetuate the EU’s energy dependence on Russia, disregard the interests of Ukraine and some East-Central European states (which would lose their strategic role as transit countries for Russian gas exports to Western Europe) and signal to the Kremlin that economic cooperation can resume before the Ukraine crisis is solved.16 However, Merkel has minimised the political significance of the project, arguing that it is a commercial endeavour (Steinhauser 2015).

In fact, Nord Stream-2 is both a commercial and a political project. It is a commercial project because private Western companies are involved and have an interest in importing Russian gas through a route that appears more secure than the Ukrainian transit pipelines, particularly in the light of the current confrontation between Russia and Ukraine. The construction of the pipeline is estimated to cost nearly €10 billion; however, if Nord Stream-2 were to replace Ukrainian transit, it would eliminate the related transit tariffs ($3 billion in 2014) and the necessity of modernising Ukrainian pipelines, which would also be very costly.17 On the other hand, the project has a strong political dimension because it is led by a Russian state company, Gazprom, and it would negatively affect the strategic significance of Ukraine and some East-Central European countries in energy trade. It may also reduce their energy

14Anonymous interview with official, Division for Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Eastern Partnership, Federal Foreign Office of Germany, Berlin, 28 October 2015.
security, at least until they diversify their energy imports and strengthen interconnections with Central and Western European markets (Dickel et al. 2014). However, Nord Stream-2 may also have positive political repercussions if, through energy cooperation, it helps improve the broader relationship between the EU and Russia. Incidentally, energy cooperation was one of the key drivers of German Ostpolitik towards both the Soviet Union and Russia and had a positive impact on political relations (Högselius 2013).

Despite the resumption of cooperation between some Western energy companies and Gazprom, German business associations have remained cautious about future prospects for EU–Russian and German–Russian trade. The Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft, the main representative of German industrial and commercial interests in Eastern Europe and Russia, estimates that the sanctions will remain in force until the Minsk-2 agreement is implemented. The Ost-Ausschuss claims that long-lasting damage has been done to economic relations with Russia, as mutual trust has been weakened and Moscow will try to diminish its dependence on business with the West in the future. Indeed, in 2015 German–Russian trade decreased by 35% compared to the previous year as a result of EU sanctions, Russian countersanctions and the economic crisis in Russia. At the same time, the Ost-Ausschuss also argues that the sanctions against Russia are a driver for negative developments, as they reinforce Moscow’s isolation and the radicalisation of its policies. The Ost-Ausschuss advocates the gradual lifting of sanctions during 2016.

Its leadership claims that the policy of isolating Russia, rather than Ostpolitik, has failed. Eckhard Cordes (2015), chairman of the Ost-Ausschuss until the end of 2015, argued that, in the last ten years, Ostpolitik was a feature of German–Russian relations, but did not shape Western policy towards Russia sufficiently. According to Cordes, German policy makers were engaged in defusing crises that were caused by the policies of other countries, such as the plans of the US and East-Central European states to integrate Ukraine and Georgia into NATO and deploy ballistic missile defence in Eastern Europe. This view is corroborated by Germany’s (and France’s) opposition to offering NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest. The issue was a major irritant in relations with Russia, which perceives further NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe as a threat. Furthermore, as Cordes argued, the success of the German Ostpolitik in approaching Russia is highlighted by the fact that Berlin is the Western country with the best working relationship with Moscow. This allowed Merkel to play the role of mediator in the Ukraine crisis and achieve a diplomatic deal in Minsk. Cordes’s successor as chairman of the Ost-Ausschuss, Wolfgang Büchele, is considered to be closer to Merkel than Cordes, who openly criticised the sanctions against Russia (Büschemann 2015). Nonetheless, Büchele believes that ‘The most important concern of the Ost-Ausschuss must be improving relations with Russia in the medium term’. Ost-Ausschuss support for Ostpolitik, which encompasses its political as well as economic dimensions, is partly explained by the very nature of the organisation, which was created

19 Anonymous interview with senior manager, press and communication office, Ost-Ausschuss der Deut...n. Berlin, 29 October 2015.
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in the 1950s to facilitate the resumption of German trade with Eastern Europe and became one of the key instruments of Brandt’s Ostpolitik in the 1960s and 1970s (Jüngerkes 2012).

To a large extent, the positive assessment of Ostpolitik is shared at the German foreign ministry. German foreign policy officials argue that the PfM with Russia has not failed, as projects continued to be implemented throughout the Ukraine crisis. A broader partnership with Russia, as well as cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union, is portrayed as the long-term goal of EU–Russia relations, even if it is made conditional to the implementation of the Minsk-2 agreement.21 German officials do not want further escalations of tensions with Moscow and attempt to keep diplomatic and trade channels open. Steinmeier’s proposal, made in November 2015, to offer EU investment and energy concessions to Russia in order to prevent a clash over an EU–Ukraine trade deal is typical of this approach (Barker et al. 2015).

German officials saw their stance towards the Ukraine crisis vindicated when the Ministerial Council of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) voted by consensus to entrust Berlin with the OSCE Chairmanship in 2016.22 The OSCE is the only pan-European security organisation where both Russia and Western countries are represented and where the two sides have had regular contacts throughout the Ukraine crisis; its efforts to resolve the crisis have been praised by both Western leaders and Putin.23 Moreover, the OSCE is playing an important role in monitoring the implementation of the Minsk agreement and the overall security situation in eastern Ukraine. The powers of the country holding the Chairmanship are limited and decisions in the organisation are taken by consensus. However, the choice of Germany can be interpreted as an act of confidence in the country’s capabilities to mediate the Ukraine crisis and as an endorsement of its strategy—combining diplomacy with economic leverage—for future negotiations.

According to Steinmeier (2015b), Germany will use its OSCE Chairmanship to restore dialogue and trust in Europe, within the scope of OSCE principles such as the inviolability of borders. In his address to the OSCE Permanent Council in July 2015, Steinmeier unambiguously blamed Russia for the infringement of this principle and of international law. However, his call for dialogue, promoting economic exchanges and civil society cooperation, resonated with the tenets of German Ostpolitik. Steinmeier stressed the importance of civil society contacts within the OSCE framework, as part of the human dimension of the Helsinki Final Act. Significantly, civil society contacts are also a fundamental component of German Ostpolitik, and have been pursued consistently by the influential German–Russian Forum, with particular

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21 Anonymous interview with official, Division for Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Eastern Partnership, Federal Foreign Office of Germany, Berlin, 28 October 2015.


emphasis on youth exchanges, cultural cooperation and city partnerships. Furthermore, Steinmeier’s announcement that the German chairmanship will focus on ‘common threats’ such as ‘international terrorism, radicalisation, cross-border drug trading, and risks in cyberspace’ can be seen as an attempt to keep Moscow involved in security cooperation on issues where Western and Russian interests converge. During his visit to Moscow in October 2015, Sigmar Gabriel told Putin that Germany and Europe can be ‘important partners’ for Russia in discussing topics such as Syria and Ukraine, thereby implying that Germany wants to engage Russia in broad negotiations on global security issues. Policy makers in Berlin consider cooperation between Russia and the US in these areas as particularly important for the improvement of East–West relations. For this reason, they see coordination between Washington and Moscow on their policies related to the Syrian crisis as a desirable outcome. Following the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, German officials viewed the incipient cooperation between Russia and the US-led coalition to fight the Islamic State as a positive development. In late November, Steinmeier proposed that Russia be allowed to return to the G-8 (from which it was excluded after the annexation of Crimea) if it continued to cooperate with the West over Syria and in the implementation of the Minsk-2 agreement.

Conclusion: a new Ostpolitik?

Developments in German foreign policy during 2015 showed that the country has not entirely abandoned Ostpolitik. In German foreign policy circles, talk about the existence of a strategic partnership with Russia is muted, but this is still seen as a long-term objective that could be achieved when the current crisis is resolved and Russia restores its commitment to international law and OSCE principles in Europe. Meanwhile, German leaders have maintained a policy of diplomatic engagement with Moscow, which can also be seen as a legacy of Ostpolitik. This stance—together with Germany’s rising influence in European foreign and security policy—has allowed Berlin to gain the trust of all sides in the Ukraine crisis and play the role of mediator. Significantly, countries that have taken a more militant stance in the crisis have been excluded from the negotiation process (notably Poland, after February 2014) or have not taken part in it (notably the US). Moreover, German leaders have supported energy cooperation with Russia, particularly through the Nord Stream-2 project, and have attempted to engage Moscow in negotiations concerning global security issues.

The policy of diplomatic engagement inherent in the philosophy of Ostpolitik has proven to be an important factor in achieving, for the time being, a negotiated path to de-escalate the crisis. What has evaporated, on the other hand, is the idea that economic ties alone are a


26 Anonymous interview with official, Division for Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Eastern Partnership, Federal Foreign Office of Germany, Berlin, 28 October 2015.

sufficient condition to achieve democratic domestic change in Russia, as well as the thought that Russian leaders would always prioritise economic interests over geostrategic goals (and hence avoid any confrontation with the West that may damage lucrative bilateral trade). In the past decade, Ostpolitik has focused excessively on an economic agenda, while overlooking the fact that its spill-over in terms of democratisation and rule of law was limited. Security issues hardly played any role in post-Cold War Ostpolitik. This meant that German foreign policy towards Russia did not adequately address a field that was considered crucial by the Russian counterparts. Until the Ukraine crisis, Berlin largely left the initiative on security and geopolitical issues to the US and other European partners in the Euro–Atlantic camp. Due to their long-standing mistrust of Russia and Moscow’s threat perceptions, accompanied by aggressive foreign policy responses, relations between the West and Russia have become confrontational.

German policies during the Ukraine crisis suggest that a new type of Ostpolitik, combining diplomacy, economic engagement and a focus on the respect of norms, has gained momentum and will remain prominent in the foreseeable future. This approach is the result of an interplay between key tenets of German foreign policy: respect for international law, the rejection of war, multilateralism and the long-standing policy of engagement with Moscow. There may be tensions between the components of this approach, particularly if Russia does not cooperate in negotiations and escalates the military conflict in Ukraine. It is possible that German leaders will have to accept difficult compromises on issues where Russia or some of its Euro–Atlantic allies are unlikely to give in. For instance, they may have to relax Germany’s drive for economic cooperation with Russia in areas where its East-Central European allies perceive it as threatening, or at least provide them with guarantees. On the other hand, if German leaders pursue reconciliation with Russia, they may have to decouple the extension of sanctions against Moscow from the full implementation of the Minsk-2 agreement, provided that ceasefire violations stop and Russia cooperates in de-escalating the crisis.

Despite these limitations, the German approach to Russia appears as the best available option for engaging Moscow and de-escalating both the Ukraine conflict and the current European security crisis. Berlin can use its considerable leverage to demand the respect of international law and offer the prospect of renewed economic cooperation to Russia, which is becoming more and more attractive to Moscow as its economy reels from low oil prices. Most importantly, Germany’s refusal to supply weapons to Ukraine and seek a military solution to the crisis greatly reduces the probability of an all-out conflict between Russia and NATO, at least as long as Berlin remains at the helm of Western foreign policy towards Moscow.

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