

Germany in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict: a political or a humanitarian mission?

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Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, profound changes in Germany's thinking about Russia, its political elite and foreign policy, can be observed. The trust most German politicians had in their former strategic partner has now lessened. At the same time, Germany has been particularly involved in the process of resolving the conflict, which was demonstrated by the intensive diplomatic actions it undertook. When these failed, Chancellor Angela Merkel did not hesitate to force through the introduction and maintenance of economic sanctions. At the same time, however, this evolution in Germany's thinking about Russia has not translated into any change in the two basic assumptions of the German attitude towards a possible solution to the conflict. First, Germany supports the concept of 'strategic patience' in politics in the context of Russia's aggression. Second, it is convinced that Europe is fated to cooperate with the Russian Federation, and Europe's welfare and security are only possible with Russia as a partner in cooperation, not against it or without it. Therefore, in the immediate future no radical change in Germany's policy as pursued so far should be expected. This provokes questions concerning not only the effectiveness of Berlin's current actions, but also – in a broader sense – Germany's ability to negotiate and achieve real, political solutions to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, reaching beyond (another) ceasefire. The Minsk agreements of 12 February can be considered a success worthy of a humanitarian mission carried out in the hope of reducing the number of casualties. However, the political mission undertaken by Chancellor Merkel and Foreign Minister Steinmeier aimed at "ensuring Europe's security order"¹ has so far resulted in the sense of helplessness and frustration which have recently dominated Germany's policy towards Russia².

The German diplomatic offensive

For Germany, the Ukrainian-Russian conflict is tantamount to the violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity of one of Europe's states, and its possible escalation is seen as a prelude to another armed conflict in Europe. Therefore,

Berlin has been treating the mission to find a solution to this conflict as the most prominent challenge in its foreign policy since Germany's reunification. In the opinion of German politicians, the only possible method of solving the conflict is the doctrine of 'strategic patience'³, which provides for the lasting and consistent pursuit of

¹ Merkel emphasised the goal of solving the Russian-Ukrainian conflict during the press conference with President Barack Obama on 9 February 2015. Cf. <http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2015/02/2015-02-09-merkel-obama.html>

² For more on this topic, see Anna Kwiatkowska-Drożdż, 'Germany on Russia. Yes to links, no to rapprochement', *OSW Point of View*, February 2014.

³ The concept of 'strategic patience' in foreign policy was mentioned by Chancellor Merkel and other politicians at the Munich Security Conference on 7 February 2015. Germany has also been using this argument in relation to the fall of the Berlin Wall and Germany's reunification, for example in the context of the 25th anniversary of the reunification. <http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2015/02/2015-02-09-merkel-obama.html>

one's policy, even if it brings frequent failures. The immediate cause of the German-French initiative launched during the visits by Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande to Kyiv (on 5 February) and Moscow (on 6 February), which were aimed at achieving a ceasefire and defining the conditions for its observance, was the escalation of military actions in the Donbas. The debate on the legitimacy of NATO states possibly supplying weapons to Ukraine has also played an important role, as such a move could cause deep divisions between the USA and Germany. The sense of the failure of the diplomatic actions carried out so far was also important; Minister Steinmeier has repeatedly mentioned his disappointment at the lack of progress in the negotiations⁴.

Meeting with President Putin in Moscow, Chancellor Merkel changed her initial position. Previously, she had called for clear progress in de-escalating the conflict as a precondition to meet Russia's president in the so-called Normandy format (such a meeting was originally planned to take place in Astana in mid-January)⁵. Moreover, she withdrew from opposing the meeting in Moscow (which had long been called for by some German politicians and experts)⁶. However, due to the renewed offensive by Russian-backed rebels launched in mid-January, and the growing number of casual-

ties in Donetsk and Mariupol, Chancellor Merkel decided to become personally involved in the negotiation process and bring about a ceasefire. This decision was also influenced by the debate currently under way in the USA concerning the possible supply of weapons to Ukraine.

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Chancellor Merkel strongly opposed this possibility (for example, she spoke about this at the Munich Security Conference), seeing it as posing a risk of escalating the conflict. Her consent to the meeting in Minsk was also motivated by the failure of German diplomatic actions, mainly carried out to date by Minister Steinmeier. Since the beginning of the crisis Germany tried to secure the signing of a binding agreement on ceasefire. This was the concept behind the Minsk deals signed on 5 September 2014 and the protocol signed on 19 September 2014. For Germany, these documents formed the basis for further political negotiations, and Chancellor Merkel made the possible lifting of the sanctions imposed on Russia conditional on their provisions being fully respected.

The deal reached in Minsk on 12 February 2015 to resolve the conflict in the Donbas opened the way to a ceasefire, but at the same time imposed more obligations on Ukraine than on the separatists. Additionally, Russia may use this deal as a basis for blaming Ukraine for not respecting its provisions, while its full observance may lead to the legitimisation of the separatists. At the same time, the deal does not allow Russia to implement its strategic goals towards Ukraine, which may suggest that the document

⁴ For example, Steinmeier mentioned this in the context of preparations for the summit in Astana and during the Munich Security Conference. Cf. <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Europa/Aktuell/150119-BM-RfAB.html>; Rede von Außenminister Steinmeier bei der Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz 2015 [Speech by Foreign Minister Steinmeier at the 2015 Munich Security Conference], http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/InfoService/Presse/Reden/2015/150208_BM_M%C3%BCSiKo.html

⁵ The so-called Normandy format involves meetings of representatives of Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia (at various levels). The name relates to the first meeting between Chancellor Merkel and the Presidents of France, Ukraine and Russia in June 2014 during the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the Normandy landings. Among the major preliminary conditions for organising a Normandy-format meeting in Astana, Germany listed the withdrawal of heavy equipment from the regions covered by the fighting in eastern Ukraine, and an exchange of prisoners of war. Cf. <http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/32071.html>

⁶ Cf. Stefan Meister, 'Putin richtig verstehen' [To understand Putin right], <https://dgap.org/de/think-tank/publikationen/dgapstandpunkt/putin-richtig-verstehen>, 'Linke: Merkel soll nach Moskau fahren' [The Left: Merkel should travel to Moscow], <http://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/926826.linke-merkel-soll-nach-moskau-fahren.html>

will likely only contribute to a temporary de-escalation of the conflict⁷. Even a fragmentary solution such as this one has been enough to allow Germany and France to save face. Moreover, some elements of public opinion in Europe even considered it proof of Germany having passed a specific kind of leadership test.

Russia – a strategic challenge

In spite of the efforts to achieve a binding political agreement and to solve the conflict by diplomatic means, i.e. by carrying out a 'political mission', Germany has been confronted with Russia's unwillingness to cooperate. As a consequence, it has continued to limit its goals to finally facing the situation in which the political mission becomes a *de facto* 'humanitarian mission' with a limited goal: to suspend military actions and halt the rise in the number of casualties.

In a broader context, reaching beyond the present conflict, Germany has treated Russia as a state with immense potential for destruction. At the same time, Berlin is convinced that whatever happens, Russia will remain the EU's most important neighbour and that European security can only be built "with Russia, not against it"⁸. Germany also excludes the neutral option of building up security "next to Russia". Moreover, it sees Russia as an important partner without which it would be impossible to solve many international crises (such as the crisis over the Iranian nuclear programme or the conflict in Syria). Therefore, voices calling for the need to apply a dual strategy towards Russia are being heard ever more frequently in Germany. This dual strategy is the so-called *conengagement*, a combination

of the policy of *containment* and that of *engagement*⁹. This assumption has become the basis for continued offers of cooperation extended to Russia (including reviving the Partnership for Modernisation¹⁰ and signing a free trade agreement between the EU and the Eurasian Union¹¹). These offers have been presented to Russia not only by Germany's top Social-Democratic politicians, but also by Christian Democrats with

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Chancellor Merkel as their leader. At the same time, during the NATO summit in Newport on 4–5 September 2014, Germany approved the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank. In 2014 Germany took part in increased NATO activities in the Baltic states, Poland and Romania. Berlin also agreed to cooperate with Poland and Den-

⁷ After Szymon Kardaś, Wojciech Konończuk, 'Minsk 2 – a fragile truce', *OSW Analyses*, 12 February 2015,

⁸ This provision was included in the coalition agreement of the current government, composed of representatives of the CDU, CSU and SPD parties, 'Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten' [Shaping Germany's future], 16 December 2013. The issue of building security in Europe with Russia was also mentioned by Chancellor Merkel during the Security Conference in Munich on 7 February 2015. Cf. <http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Rede/2015/02/2015-02-07-merkel-sicherheitskonferenz.html>

⁹ Wolfgang Ischinger, 'Eine Aufgabe für Generationen. Der Westen muss gegenüber Russland auf eine neue Doppelstrategie setzen' [A task for generations. The West needs to adopt a new dual strategy towards Russia], *Internationale Politik* 1, January/February 2015, p. 30-35; Ischinger, Germany's former ambassador to the USA and the United Kingdom, and Chairman of the Munich Security Conference, can serve as an example of Germany's evolution of views on Russia. At the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict he strongly opposed any decisive approach to Russia and reiterated part of the Russian narrative concerning the West's mistakes, cf. <http://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/runder-tisch104.html> However, in the debate on possible weapons supplies to Ukraine launched in January 2015, he did not rule out such an option. Cf. 'Pledge weapons for Ukraine or the violence will go on'.

¹⁰ This was mentioned by Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) in an interview for the *Handelsblatt* daily, 20 January 2015, <http://www.bmwi.de/DE/Presse/reden,did=682552.html>

¹¹ However, this format of cooperation would be asymmetrical, and would not lead to any change in Russia's policy (as it would continue to pursue its current goals within the Eurasian Union), forcing the other Eurasian Union states to unconditionally support the Kremlin's position. Moreover, representing other countries within an international organisation would enable Russia to position itself as a mediator in the internal conflict in Ukraine, and not as one of its actors. Cf. Adam Eberhardt, 'Dialogue with the Eurasian Union on Ukraine – an opportunity or a trap?', *OSW Commentary*, 1 December 2014.

mark on improving the readiness of the Multi-national Corps Northeast in Szczecin. According to announcements, in 2015 German soldiers will participate in exercises organised in Poland and the Baltic states as part of an increased rotating military presence on NATO's eastern flank¹².

During the Russian-Ukrainian conflict the German government has gradually increased its criticism of Russia, and in the EU forum Berlin has accepted the task of creating and implementing a policy supported by the 28 EU states (including stepping up the sanctions, sometimes against the position of some EU states, for example after the shooting down of the Malaysian passenger plane). Germany's assuming the role of a creator of the EU's policy towards the conflict in Ukraine has partly been forced on Berlin, but it has also partly been a consequence of the ambitions pursued by Germany

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as a leader in the EU. This results both from Germany's leading role in the EU, its economic power and traditional ties with Russia, and the weakness of the remaining EU actors. What is particularly evident is the inertia of the EU institutions, which at best are serving as 'secretarial offices' supporting Germany's actions, as well as the weakness of individual states: France (due to its economic problems) and the United Kingdom (which has been distancing itself from the EU). Also President Barack Obama, nearing the

¹² In 2014 Germany participated in the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1 (SNMCMG1) operating on the Baltic Sea, in NATO's additional AWACS radio-electronic reconnaissance flights over Poland and Romania and in the air policing mission over the Baltic states. Cf. Justyna Gotkowska, 'A weak link? Germany in the Euro-Atlantic security system', *OSW Point of View*, January 2015.

end of his second term in office, is unwilling to get involved in the conflict in Europe, although during Chancellor Merkel's visit to Washington both Obama and Merkel tried to confirm the West's unity on the matter, even when facing "differences in the respective countries' positions" concerning possible support for Ukraine.

Divisions within society

The policy of Angela Merkel's government towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict enjoys the support of a large portion of German society. In spite of a drop in Germany's exports to Russia (by 18% in 2014 compared with the previous year)¹³, economic circles have also accepted the primacy of politics over the economy, and are following the sanctions imposed on Moscow. Among other factors, this results from Germany's good economic results in 2014 and from the conviction that Russia's actions are destabilising conditions for doing business, and are thus threatening German economic interests.

The high public support for the government's actions results, among other factors, from Chancellor Merkel's ability to balance and combine the often conflicting lines of German political and public debates, and apply compromise solutions in her everyday government routine. It seems that Germany's mood continues to be determined by two major approaches to Russia. On the one hand, there is still a numerous group of proponents of *Ostpolitik*¹⁴, who sup-

¹³ After: The Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations (Ost-Ausschuss), 'Exporte nach Russland um sechs Milliarden Euro gesunken' [Exports to Russia dropped by six billion euros], <http://www.ost-ausschuss.de/node/791>

¹⁴ According to this group, Russia is perceived as the European Union's key geopolitical partner with which cooperation is necessary to create a stable European security order. They see a strategic partnership with Russia, even at the price of concessions, as a condition for stability in Europe, especially in the context of security challenges in the post-Soviet area which is considered Russia's natural 'zone of influence'. For this type of cooperation with Russia to become fact, it is necessary to build an institutional framework for political and economic relations, both bilaterally and between the EU and Russia. Cf. Anna Kwiatkowska-Drożdż, Konrad Poptawski, 'The German reaction to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict – shock and disbelief', *OSW Commentary*, 3 April 2014.

port the idea of meeting Russia's demands and treat sanctions as an inefficient element of the USA's fight with Russia. On the other hand, various groups are disappointed at the lack of results from the policy pursued so far of making repeated offers of rapprochement with Russia in Europe. From the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the group of so-called *Russlandversteher* (or 'those who understand Russia') has weakened considerably, and more and more actors admit that Russia is not a reliable partner for Germany.

In a public debate currently under way in Germany concerning the approaches to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the lines of division between the various positions do not run clearly along the lines of party membership. Admittedly, there is a consensus that the initiative undertaken by Germany and France was right, although regarding the possible supply of weapons or possible solutions to the conflict in Ukraine, opinions vary. One section of the elite claims that rejecting the possibility of supplying weapons to Ukraine is a strategic mistake in the negotiations with Russia (this view has been expressed for example by Marieluise Beck from Alliance 90/the Greens and Michael Gahler from the CDU), while the other believes that Ukraine should adopt a binding commitment to give up its plan to join NATO (the Left). Similar divisions have been evident in the context of the sanctions: 45% of CDU/CSU supporters consider them a proper reaction to Russia's actions, while another 45% think otherwise. In the group of Social Democrats supporters, the sanctions are approved of by 55%, and 41% believe that they should be lifted. In both cases the coalition parties need to overcome another obstacle which makes their sharp anti-Russian rhetoric unfavourable to them. On the right side of the political stage, the Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany (AfD) is trying to win over the disappointed CDU/CSU electorate by using pro-Russian slogans, whereas on the left side of the political stage, strong pro-Russian views are promoted by the post-Communist Left.

Despite this, most Germans support the EU's sanctions against Russia (65% of those surveyed in an opinion poll conducted in February 2015 for the Infratest dimap centre) and would welcome a more decisive reaction by the EU to Russia's actions than that displayed so far (55%). At the same time, 70% of society fears an escalation of the conflict between Russia and the West, 48% of whom understand that Russia may feel threatened by the West. Moreover, 69% of Germans oppose NATO's permanent presence in Eastern Europe, and 78% of the respondents claim that Russia is a partner which cannot be trusted.

Summary: A humanitarian mission instead of a diplomatic one

Due to its involvement in resolving the conflict with Russia, Germany has strengthened its leadership within the European Union. Public debate is practically free of opinions questioning Germany's legitimacy to conduct negotiations on behalf of the EU, and Berlin has played a key role in these

Germany's assumption of the role of creator of EU policy towards the conflict in Ukraine has partly been forced upon it, and has also partly been a consequence of the ambitions it has pursued as a leader in the EU. This has been a consequence of Germany's leading role in the EU, its economic power and traditional ties with Russia, and the weakness of the remaining EU actors.

talks (although it is aware of the risk of losing its credibility, should the talks fail). This is not only because President Putin does not want to talk to any other country on resolving the conflict, but also because a large portion of EU states, as well as the USA, are willing to entrust Germany with this task. It seems that with this level of support German diplomacy could achieve considerable progress in the talks with Russia. However, there have been

numerous strategic limitations in Germany's policy towards Russia's aggression in Ukraine¹⁵. Currently, by giving in to Russia's blackmail, its 'arguments of power' and 'unpredictability' has been its most important limitation. This was demonstrated by the radical change in Chancellor Merkel's attitude and her consent to repeated negotiations in Minsk. It was the escalation of military actions by the separatists and the large number of casualties that convinced Chancellor Merkel to travel to Moscow and negotiate the proposals submitted by President Putin. Previously, she had strongly opposed this plan. Moreover, both the German Foreign Minister and Chancellor Merkel herself immediately ruled out the possibility of supplying weapons to Ukraine, which deprived them of a strong argument in their negotiations with Russia. Moscow, on the other hand, has repeatedly tried to convince the West that it will only yield to pressure (for example, from the EU's joint economic sanctions). By pursuing this policy Germany has been reiterating Russia's narrative in which a solution to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict could only be achieved by implementing either of two

mutually exclusive scenarios: one being diplomacy and political solutions, and the other involving the supply of weapons to Ukraine. An option combining diplomatic actions with a demonstration of military potential is to be available only to one side – Russia. If applied by the West, this option would mean an 'escalation of the conflict'.

The question arises of whether Germany, having assumed responsibility for conducting negotiations in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, is still carrying out a diplomatic mission aimed at achieving a political agreement with Russia (not involving Ukraine's surrender), or whether it is carrying out a humanitarian mission only. The reason for the latter would be to maintain peace and stability in the region and – more importantly – avoid further casualties, which at the same time would mean giving up hope of a real political solution to the crisis in the region in the immediate future. It should be hoped that the German government is aware that the conflict with Russia is in effect a conflict over the shape of the international order, reaching far beyond the war in the Donbas and even beyond the conflict between Russia and Ukraine¹⁶.

¹⁵ Cf. J.Gotkowska, 'A weak link?', *op. cit.* The author lists several major limitations to Germany's foreign policy towards Russia, including historical reasons (memory of the defeat on the Eastern front, the Soviet occupation and the division of Germany, as well as the fact of considering Russians, and not Ukrainians or Belarusians, as the main victims of Nazi Germany, excluding Jews); Germany's perception of the USA not as a guarantor of security in Europe, but as a state which could destabilise this security (for example by using military arguments); and the growing economic and political focus on emerging powers, which could lead to the weakening of trans-Atlantic ties.

¹⁶ Cf. Chancellor Merkel's statement during a debate at the Australian think tank Lowy Institute for International Policy on 17 November 2014: "The Ukrainian crisis is not just a regional matter – it concerns us all". The Chancellor added that "it is not only about Ukraine, but also about Moldova and Georgia. Are we expected to ask [Russia's – editor's note] consent [for EU enlargement – editor's note] in the presence of Serbia? In the presence of the Western Balkans? This would be against our values." Cf. <http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2014/11/2014-11-17-diskussion-lowy.html>

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