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Dreaming of normalisation. Germany vs. Russia

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Russia's aggression towards Ukraine and its propaganda actions targeting Germany have resulted in an increase in German society's distrust of Russia and to more assertive political reactions. They have also translated into unprecedented, increased support for eastern allies within NATO. Posing as an architect of the peace process in Ukraine, Germany has indirectly become a hostage to the success of this process (or the lack of it). However, the involvement of both Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in working out and implementing the Minsk agreement has not brought the results Berlin had expected. This has amplified Germany's disappointment with both Russia and Ukraine. However, withdrawing from this involvement would scarcely be imaginable due to the significant political capital invested in these actions so far. Hence the attempts to save face and the efforts to ensure the implementation of the agreement, as well as the temptation to devise its subsequent variants (which would be increasingly less favourable for Ukraine).

The German debate on the sanctions imposed on Russia is becoming an element of domestic politics as shaped by the campaign preceding the autumn 2017 elections to the Bundestag. Unlike Chancellor Merkel, in this campaign the SPD is trying to play the role of "a party of peace" seeking rapprochement with Russia, regardless of the fiasco of the present version of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik. The intention to prevent conflict escalation should sanctions be tightened and the related attempt to force the implementation of the Minsk agreement result from both the lack of consensus over this matter within the ruling coalition and the conviction that it is necessary to maintain dialogue with Russia and simultaneously develop NATO's defence capability.

The rising disenchantment with Russia

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its aggression in the Donbas have triggered an acceleration and advancement of the shift in Germany's thinking about Russia. Once Germany's strategic partner, Russia has now become its strategic problem. The beginning of this shift dates back to the period of disappointment with Dmitry Medvedev's presidency and to Vladimir Putin taking the office of Russian President in 2012 for the third time. When the Russian-Ukrainian war broke out, Germany's approach towards finding a resolution to this conflict was based on the principle of 'strategic patience' towards Russian aggression and on the assumption that Europe is fated to cooperate with Russia and the welfare and security of the continent are possible only in cooperation with Russia and not against it or without it. This attitude was the result of a clash of two concepts for Germany's approach towards Russia. The first assumes that Russia is Germany's strategic partner, indispensable for maintaining stability in Europe, and that good relations with Russia are worth the concessions on the part of the West. The other assumes that Russia is a state with a significant potential for destruc-

tive actions (as exemplified by the annexation of Crimea, the aggression towards Ukraine and the military intervention in Syria) and that for Germany it is merely one of its significant partners, excluding the EU and the USA (similar to China and Turkey, for instance), but not the most significant one[1]. The division does not always run along the lines of specific party membership. It can be stated, however, that the first approach, which makes reference to Brandt's Ostpolitik, is more popular with Social Democrats, post-Communist Left and Alternative for Germany (AfD), while the other – with Christian Democrats and the Greens.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its aggression in the Donbas have triggered an acceleration and advancement of the shift in Germany's thinking about Russia.

The exacerbation of the domestic dispute over Germany's relations with Russia is also connected with the ongoing German campaign ahead of the 2017 Bundestag elections. Foreign policy (mainly the approach towards Russia; policy towards the USA, including the TTIP issue; the future of the EU) has become one of the major fields of dispute between the coalition members (CDU/CSU and SPD), who otherwise have a similar platform in numerous other areas. Similar to the remaining portion of the political elite, business circles and society, Chancellor Merkel would like to achieve a normalisation of relations with Russia as soon as possible. She supports the idea of dialogue combined with the strengthening of NATO's own defence capabilities. This was evident when she consented to the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank and to extending the economic sanctions against Russia in June 2016. At the same time, Merkel signalled Germany's readiness to gradually lift the sanctions, should Russia implement at least a portion of the Minsk agreement (hence the increasingly frequent suggestions that the Minsk settlements should be modified and a new version of the agreement, Minsk III, should be adopted)[2]. However, this intention is increasingly less likely to be put into practice due to Russia's military intervention in Syria, including the air strikes on Aleppo, which convinced Merkel to support the plan to impose additional sanctions on Moscow.

The Social Democrats for their part consider the subsequent dialogue offers, such as those involving arms control, more valuable than the plan to create an effective deterrence mechanism within NATO. In their opinion, lifting the sanctions would be a priority. Recently, the SPD has toughened its stance and begun to criticise NATO exercises which Steinmeier referred to as "sabre-rattling"[3]. This was also evident during his visit to Yekaterinburg in August 2016, when he gave a "fundamental" (as he called it) speech in which he compared the annexation of Crimea with the Western intervention in Libya and NATO's intervention in Kosovo. By doing so, he *de facto* echoed Russian propaganda. In his speech he also remarked that the destroyed

[1] Anna Kwiatkowska-Drożdż, Konrad Popławski, 'The German reaction to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict – shock and disbelief', *OSW Commentary,* 3 April 2014, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-04-03/german-reaction-to-russian-ukrainian-conflict-shock-and

[2] In a commentary published by the *WirtschaftsWoche* weekly, Florian Willershausen argues that the peace process needs to be revived and this would be possible only after renewed negotiations on the Minsk agreement. Aside from emphasising need to formulate a 'Minsk III', the author also claims that specific provisions should be adopted in relation to Ukraine, if the latter wants to receive further aid from Europe. See Die Ukraine braucht ein neues Friedensabkommen, http://www.wiwo.de/politik/ausland/sanktionen-gegen-russland-die-ukraine-braucht-ein-neues-friedensabkommen/13708328.html New terms of the revised agreement, more favourable for Ukraine (for example the inclusion of the USA in the Normandy format), were formulated by: H. Kostanyan, S. Meister, Ukraine, Russia and the EU: Breaking the deadlock in the Minsk process, https://www.ceps.eu/publications/ukraine-russia-and-eu-breaking-deadlock-minsk-process

[3] Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier on relations between NATO and Russia, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Infoservice/Presse/Meldungen/2016/160619_BM_Bild_am_Sonntag_engl_version.html

Syrian cities, including Aleppo (though failing to mention that Russia was among the forces that destroyed them), should be rebuilt by Germans "hand in hand" with Russians[4]. Similarly, the strong objection by the Social Democrats to imposing additional sanctions in response to Russia's intervention in Syria is intended to emphasise the SPD's profile as "a party of peace and dialogue". The policy pursued by the SPD is the outcome of the party's low approval rating (around 20%), its search for issues to be discussed during the campaign ahead of the Bundestag elections (including the intention to take advantage of the polarisation of opinions within society on what the most appropriate policy towards Russia should be), its efforts to regain the support of ordinary party members (who usually tend to support Russia) and its response to the pro-Russian orientation of the AfD. It also stems from the heritage of Ostpolitik as the only successful project in foreign policy to be attributed to this party. However, within the ranks of the SPD disparate voices can also be heard which object to the policy of rapprochement with Moscow[5].

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In the debate over the policy towards Russia and the effectiveness of the sanctions, both the coalition party CSU and the opposition party Greens argue that the economic sanctions are effective and that it would be premature to lift them (although members of these two parties are not unanimous on this issue, e.g. the CSU leader Horst Seehofer has long proposed reducing the sanctions). A similar stance adopted by a large portion of Christian Democrats and the Greens towards cooperation with Russia is interesting in the context of possible coalitions which would likely be formed after the Bundestag elections. Any future coalition made up of these parties may cause the future government to abandon the SPD-promoted paradigm of unavoidable cooperation in Germany's relations with Russia. Meanwhile, in the opinion of the biggest opposition grouping, the Left, and the extra-parliamentary AfD party, the sanctions are an ineffective instrument which harms the German economy.

No holds barred

At the beginning of 2016 Germany changed its perception of the threats posed by Russian propaganda. Until then, the German government tended to assume that what was at stake in the information warfare with Russia was Germany's moral supremacy and that this warfare posed no real threat to the institutions of the state and to public order. In February 2015, at the Munich Security Conference, Angela Merkel spoke about Russia's advantage in propaganda terms and Germany's Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen said that the enemy's "destructive narrative" should be revealed. Despite this, when asked about its strategy to counteract Russian influence in the media, Germany's foreign ministry replied that "pluralism and media freedom" are the best remedy for manipulation[6]. At present, Germany argues that Rus-

[4] Rede von Außenminister Frank-Walter Steinmeier an der Ural Federal University Jekaterinburg, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2016/160815_BM_Jekaterinburg.html

[5] The founders of the group which is critical of Russia include second line activists, for example historian Jan C. Behrends, lawyer Martin Luithle and entrepreneur Joachim Schaller. Cf SPD-Mitglieder gründen Arbeitskreis Genge Gabriels Ostpolitik, *Zeit Online,* http://www.zeit.de/politik/2016-05/russland-sanktionen-spd-gabriel-ostpolitik-arbeitskreis, The party leadership tried to block the process of the official launch of the task force operating within the party: See SPD vertritt nur noch Kreml-Positionen, http://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/ausland/eu/id_78187150/martin-luithle-spd-vertritt-zunehmend-nur-noch-kreml-positionen-.html

[6] Schriftliche Fragen mit den in der Woche vom 1. Februar 2016 eingegangenen Antworten der Bundesregierung, p. 16, 5 February 2016, http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/074/1807473.pdf

sia is able to use its propaganda to destabilise the situation within the country and one of its goals is to oust Chancellor Merkel from power. According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) and the ministry of the interior, biased reporting on the events in Germany offered by the German language versions of the news portals Russia Today and Sputnik News is intended as revenge for the stance adopted by the German government on the sanctions against Russia.

Germany argues that Russia is able to use its propaganda to destabilise the situation in the country and one of its goals is to oust Chancellor Merkel from power.

Fallacious information spread by the above-mentioned portals regarding Germany, the migration crisis and the functioning of the German state (the so-called Lisa case) has inspired the so-called late repatriates (i.e. ethnic Germans repatriated to Germany from the former Soviet republics after 1990) to hold numerous rallies. In all, over around two weeks in January and February 2016, more than 12,000 repatriates across Germany attended protests against the government's policy towards the migration crisis and against immigrants (the total number of repatriates living in Germany is estimated at 2.5 million). The incitement of a community which hitherto had been passive convinced the German leadership that Russia is able to exert a genuine destabilising influence on the domestic situation in Germany[7].

As a consequence, the German Federal Chancellery ordered the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) and the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) to find out whether these disinformation campaigns had been plotted by state structures of the Russian Federation and whether this activity forms part of a more comprehensive operation aimed at fuelling the hostility between the German citizens and immigrants. The German leadership fear the influence of Russian propaganda on the electoral campaign and the results of the 2017 elections. In its report published in July 2016, the research centre SWP (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik – an analytical institute providing advice to the German Federal Chancellery) indicated that Russia may try to destabilise the pre-election campaign and mobilise extremist groups against Germany's constitutional order[8]. Cyberattacks staged by Russia targeting, for example, German politicians are another threat. In 2015, a cyberattack was launched at the Bundestag (the perpetrators managed to intercept the passwords used by the administrator of the entire computer system used by parliament), and at the beginning of 2016 another attack targeted the CDU headquarters in Berlin. A cyberattack organised in August 2016 targeted certain parliamentary groupings (SPD and the Left Party), members of parliament and local branches of specific parties, including the CDU branch in Saarland (election to local parliament will be held there on 26 March 2017) and the CDU's youth organisation – Junge Union. These actions intensified after the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine[9].

Regardless of whether BND and BfV will manage to find conclusive evidence to prove direct involvement of the Kremlin in the defamatory campaign against Germany, the very fact of ordering such an investigation, publicising this in the media and the comments offered by public officials and politicians constitute a warning

[7] Experten: Putin will Merkel stürzen, 10 March 2016, http://de.euronews.com/2016/03/10/experten-putin-will-merkel-stuerzen

[8] S. Fischer, M. Klein (eds.), Denkbare Überraschungen. Elf Entwicklungen, die Russlands Außenpolitik nehmen könnte, SWP-Studie, July 2016, http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2016S15_fhs_kle.pdf#page=20

[9] According to experts quoted by Süddeutsche Zeitung, responsibility for the recent attack can be attributed to Russian hackers from the apt28 group (or Sofacy) acting on commission from Russian services. This was also confirmed by Arne Schönbohm, head of the German Federal Office for Information Security. Cf A. Ciechanowicz, Rosyjskie cyberataki na Niemcy, *Analizy OSW*, 28 September 2016, http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2016-09-28/rosyjskie-cyberataki-na-niemcy

sign for Russia, its supporters in Germany (the so-called *Russlandversteher* or those who understand Russia) and anti-immigrant parties and movements. At the same time, it should be noted that the suspicion that foreign intelligence may have inspired the actions by anti-immigrant movements is not being used by the German government in its domestic political fight. Such accusations involving the right-wing AfD party are extremely rare[10].

Economic contacts continue to be a very important element of Germany's policy towards Russia and are intended to accelerate the normalisation in Berlin's relations with Moscow.

The change of the German government's approach has inspired German media to frequently discuss the issue of information warfare. In the long term, the presence of the negative image of Russia in the media (including regular references to Soviet Russia and the Cold War) may trigger a desire to review pro-Russian attitudes, while at present it serves to boost society's support for maintaining the sanctions.

The economy *first*?

Regardless of the awareness of the threats posed by Russia and the present sanctions, economic contacts continue to be a very important element of Germany's policy towards Russia and are intended to accelerate the normalisation in Berlin's relations with Moscow. Despite Russia's declining significance for the German economy (see Appendix), in the second half of 2015 the economic dialogue became intensified. This was possible due to the temporary stabilisation of the situation in Ukraine and to Germany focusing on the issue of refugees, among other things. Under the combined auspices of the ministries of the economy in both countries a German-Russian platform for entrepreneurs was launched (its first meeting was held in Moscow on 22 October 2015) and two visits by Germany's minister of the economy and energy, Sigmar Gabriel, to Moscow were organised (on 28 October 2015 and 21–22 September 2016). Moreover, in November 2015 German and Russian members of parliament met in Moscow under the newly formed energy task force (formally an extra-parliamentary body). The task force is headed by Peter Ramsauer (CSU), chairman of the Bundestag's Economic Affairs and Energy Committee[11]. One of the main discussion topics was the Nord Stream 2 project. Germany treats this project as a business undertaking that does not violate the sanctions and is in line with European energy policy[12]. At the same time, Germany granted political support to this project, for example, when Gabriel discussed its elements with President Vladimir Putin and Gazprom's CEO Alexei Miller during his visit to Moscow in October 2015. All this suggests that the project is of major significance for German politics[13].

[10] Kiesewetter klagt Kreml-Chef Putin an, 3 February 2016, https://www.gmuender-tagespost.de/account/log-in/?aid=864880

[11] The proposal to form this group was put forward back in 2012. Cf Streit um Sanktionen: Grüne boykottieren Energie-AG mit Russland, http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/soziales/russland-gruene-verweigern-arbeitsgruppe-mit-der-duma-a-1068426.html and Es geht ums Erdgas: Deutsche Nebenaußenpolitik in Russland und der Einfluss der Konzerne, http://www.dieterjanecek.de/de/article/200.es-geht-ums-erdgas-deutsche-nebenau%C3%9Fenpolitik-in-russland-und-der-einfluss-der-konzerne.html

[12] During a press conference with the President of Lithuania, Chancellor Merkel emphasised the significance of European energy security and the business-oriented nature of the project. See Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und der Präsidentin der Republik Litauen, Dalia Grybauskaitė, 20 April 2016, https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2016/04/2016-04-20-bkin-litauen-grybauskaite.html

[13] This was mentioned for example by Vice Chancellor Gabriel, who emphasised that the project is in Germany's interest. Gabriel verteidigt Russland-Pipeline, *FAZ,* http://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/wirtschaftspolitik/nord-stream-2-gabriel-verteidigt-russland-pipeline-13975022.html Equally significant are Gabriel's suggestions that NS2 should be excluded from European jurisdiction to thereby limit the possible external influence on the project. Cf EU prüft Opal-Pipeline von Gazprom, http://diepresse.com/home/wirtschaft/international/5011626/EU-pruft-OpalPipeline-von-Gazprom

At present, no debate is being held in Germany over the plan to tighten gas cooperation with Russia and the consequences of the potential construction of Nord Stream 2 for Germany's partners in Central and Eastern Europe. There is consensus, dating back to the beginnings of Ostpolitik, that raw materials-oriented cooperation with Russia leads to mutual economic benefits and to an improvement in political relations. The few voices objecting to the idea emphasise the question of increased gas dependence on Russia, the fact of disregarding the interests of Central and Eastern European states, Ukraine in particular (despite the German government's declared support for Kyiv involving the construction of the second branch of the pipeline, Ukraine may lose EUR 1.8 billion which it presently earns on the transit of gas), and threats to the implementation of Germany's climate policy goals (because the project provides for increased use of gas instead of energy generated from renewable sources)[14]. The most important criticism was contained in the letter by Manfred Weber, the chairman of the European People's Party in the European Parliament and member of the CSU, CDU's coalition partner in the German government, to European Commission Vice President and to Germany's Vice Chancellor, Sigmar Gabriel. In his letter Weber opposed the pipeline's construction[15]. Despite legal doubts[16] and the objection voiced by the states of Central and Eastern Europe and some EU Commissioners, it is likely that the new branch of the pipeline will be built because this is in Germany's interest (Germany will be able to play the role of Europe's gas hub).

Since the annexation of Crimea, Germans have continued to show their lack of confidence in Russia, although they less frequently point to Russia as a military threat.

Lobbying organisations are important actors in German-Russian relations; despite Russia's annexation of Crimea and its actions in eastern Ukraine, they failed to significantly review their approach. These organisations include the German-Russian Forum headed by Matthias Platzeck, former Prime Minister of Brandenburg. Its management board members include several former diplomats such as Ernst-Jörg von Studnitz and Andreas Meyer-Landrut. Despite the sanctions, the Forum continues to actively support the plan to increase Russia's involvement in cooperation with Germany. This involves intensified dialogue with Moscow, the lifting of sanctions, increased economic cooperation, joint participation in resolving international conflicts and a fundamental change in Germany's thinking about Russia[17]. In the other important German-Russian forum, the Petersburg Dialogue, a change of leadership was effected under pressure from the German Federal Chancellery. The former Prime Minister of the German Democratic Republic Lothar de Maizière, a proponent of the closest possible relations with Russia, was replaced with Ronald Pofalla, a close collaborator of Angela Merkel and former head of the German Federal Chancellery, who is more critical of Moscow. At present, efforts are underway to devise a new cooperation format for this forum. The first meeting of the Petersburg Dialogue under new leadership was held in Saint Petersburg, in July 2016, for the first time since 2012. Similarly, some research centres, including SWP, are lobbying for the

[14] Grüne gegen Nord Stream 2, Drucksache 18/8401, https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/201605/-/422780

[15] Top German MEP joins foes of controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/ba24e8ac-0e27-11e6-ad80-67655613c2d6.html The most prominent critics of Nord Stream 2 include MEPs from the Christian Democrat group (for example Norbert Röttgen, Bernd Fabritius, Christoph Bergner, Michael Fuchs) and the Greens.

[16] Sz. Kardaś, R. Bajczuk, Antymonopolowe problemy projektu Nord Stream 2, http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2016-08-24/antymonopolowe-problemy-projektu-nord-stream-2

[17] M. Platzeck, New rapprochement with Russia. Why is it in our interest and what can we do to support it?, http://russlandkontrovers.de/wiederannaeherung-an-russland/

development of energy relations with Russia[18]. Germany's federal states are involved in lobbying for increased cooperation with Russia. Examples include Bavaria (the stronghold of the CSU, a ruling coalition party) and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (this state hosts the Russia Day, co-financed by the Nord Stream consortium). Both federal states nurture very intensive economic contacts with Russia in spite of the relatively insignificant value of their exports. In 2015, Bavaria exported to Russia goods worth EUR 2.5 billion, which represent a decrease of one third as compared with 2014; at the same time Russia was ranked 15th on the list of export destinations recorded for this federal state[19]. In the case of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Russia's share in its exports was more significant, particularly when taking into account the economic weakness of this federal state (Russia was ranked 4th and accounted for EUR 717 million; in 2014 the value of exports was EUR 1.07 billion). Additionally, around a hundred companies from this federal state are doing business with Russian companies[20]. The visits by the Prime Ministers of certain federal states (Thuringia, Bavaria) to Moscow, their meetings with President Putin and their demands that sanctions should be lifted (the Prime Ministers of Saxony, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) are intended to help improve the economic position of these states in their relations with Russia and to facilitate the process of proceeding to a more comprehensive format of cooperation with Moscow, *de facto* disregarding the changes resulting from Russia's annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the war in Ukraine.

The durable decline of confidence in Russia

Both the actions of Russian propaganda in Germany and the attempts to maintain good economic relations with Russia do not translate into an improvement of how German society views Russia. Since the annexation of Crimea, Germans have continued to show their lack of confidence in Russia (64% of Germans view Russia as an unreliable partner; a survey by Bertelsmann Stiftung and ISP, Partnerschaft unter Spannung, April 2016[21]), although fewer respondents than before see Russia as a military threat (56% are not afraid the military threat posed by Moscow) and they do not consider it necessary to build permanent bases in Central and Eastern Europe (67% of the respondents oppose this idea; a Politbarometer survey commissioned by ZDF, July 2016)[22]. The respondents are aware of the poor condition of German-Russian relations and fear that these may continue to deteriorate as a result of present developments. The Germans largely support the policy towards Russia

[18] In December 2015, SWP published a text intended to initiate the reconstruction of economic relations between the European Union and Russia by way of carrying out projects in the field of energy (aside from gas, also including renewable sources of energy, energy efficiency and innovative technologies) and refraining from discussing the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The text can be considered a reply to the criticism offered in relation to the Nord Stream 2 project and an expression of support for its implementation. Regardless of the present political conflicts, the proposal involving development of cooperation in the field of energy is identical to declarations by German energy enterprises (Uniper, formerly E.ON) and chemical companies (BASF) which invest in Russian gas fields and are interested in maintaining cooperation with Russia on favourable terms; https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2015RP08_gsv_wep.pdf

[19] In 2015, Poland was ranked ninth on the list of states to which Bavaria exports its goods (the survey comprised the period from January till September 2015); http://www.stmwi.bayern.de/fileadmin/user_upload/stmwivt/Publikationen/2015/2015_11_26_Aussenhandelsreport_2015-09.pdf

[20] Beziehungen des Landes Mecklenburg-Vorpommern zu Russland, http://www.regierung-mv.de/static/Regierungsportal/Ministerpräsident%20und%20Staatskanzlei/Dateien/pdf-Dokumente/Russlandtag2016_Faktenblatt%20(002).pdf Another example is North-Rhine Westphalia which in 2014 exported to Russia goods worth EUR 4.4 billion (a drop of 20% versus 2013). Despite this, the actions carried out by this federal state do not undermine the official policy pursued by the federal government regarding the sanctions.

[21] The latest and at the same time the most comprehensive research regarding the German public opinion's attitude towards Russia and its aggression against Ukraine was conducted in April 2016. See Partnerschaft unter Spannung. Wie die Deutschen über Russland denken, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/publikationen/publikation/did/partnerschaft-unter-spannung/

[22] Deutsche sehen Verstärkung der Nato-Truppen in Osteuropa skeptisch, https://www.welt.de/newsticker/news1/article156895601/Umfragen-Deutsche-sehen-Verstaerkung-der-Nato-Truppen-in-Osteuropa-skeptisch.html

as pursued so far by Chancellor Merkel (and the EU) (44% of them support the policy pursued by the government; 25% argue that the coalition's policy is too strict). At the same time, support for maintaining the sanctions imposed on Russia has not been unanimous. On the one hand, 62% of Germans support the plan to maintain the sanctions (46% of the respondents are for continuing them in their present form, 16% would like the sanctions to be tightened and 27% are against the sanctions). On the other hand, 69% of the respondents would rather see a resumption of economic cooperation instead of continuation of the sanctions (Russland in Europa, TNS Infratest, March 2016)[23]. Low public support for the plan to lift the sanctions and the simultaneous consent for expanding economic cooperation are convenient for some of the political parties. They enable these parties to support deeper economic cooperation regardless of the sanctions, and at the same time to avoid the risk of losing the voters' trust. Regardless of the disillusionment with Russia's policy towards Syria (66% of the respondents assess Russia's involvement in Syria negatively), the Germans continue to argue that at present the question of resolving this conflict is the most important task in bilateral relations (this view is supported by 49% of the respondents; the resolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine is indicated by 13% of them)[24].

Summary

Neither the shock caused by Moscow's attack on Ukraine, nor the present impatience and disappointment with the Kremlin's approach to implementing the Minsk agreement, combined with awareness of the threat posed by Russian propaganda, have impacted on the process of devising new concepts for the policy towards Russia. It should be emphasised that German Social Democrats are the only political group to continue to believe in a direct continuation of Brandt's Ostpolitik, and actions by representatives of the remaining political options are merely reactive.

The toughening of the SPD's pro-Russian rhetoric and the efforts to undermine the policy towards Russia pursued by the government so far are connected with the launch of the campaign in Germany ahead of the elections to the Bundestag to be held in the autumn of 2017. The Social Democrats' approval rating, the lowest in many years, combined with the weak position of the party's leader, force the party to emphasise its uniqueness. One of the few areas for manifesting how this party differs from the Christian Democrats is the policy towards Russia (the two parties are unanimous on a large number of other issues). At the same time, the SPD is trying to limit the flow of its voters to the AfD and to win supporters from the Left, with which it may want to form a governing coalition after the elections.

The German government has become impatient with the lack of progress in implementing the Minsk agreement. At the same time, it opposes the idea of exerting greater pressure on Ukraine to ensure the implementation of its part of the commitments and to possibly impose new sanctions on Russia for its failure to implement the deal. Berlin is aware that the deal's fiasco will be tantamount to a drop in Germany's credibility. This is why voices are increasingly heard in Germany suggesting that the Minsk agreement should be modified. In this way Germany would maintain the appearance that the peace process is progressing, which in turn would enable the first sanctions to be lifted in 2017. This would foster the normalisation in Germany's relations with Russia, much desired by all German politicians.

[23] Russland in Europa: Annäherung oder Abschottung? https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/internationale-verstaendigung/im-fokus-russland-in-europa/publikationen.html

[24] *Ibidem.*

APPENDIX

Chart 1. The value of Germany's exports to Russia and to Poland in 2012 and 2015

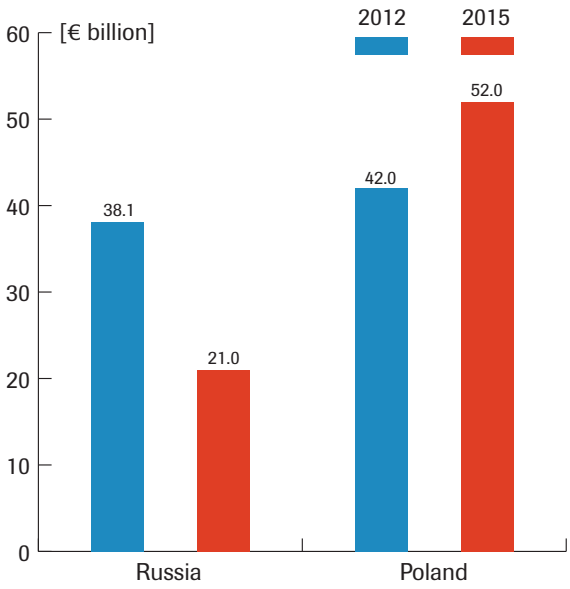
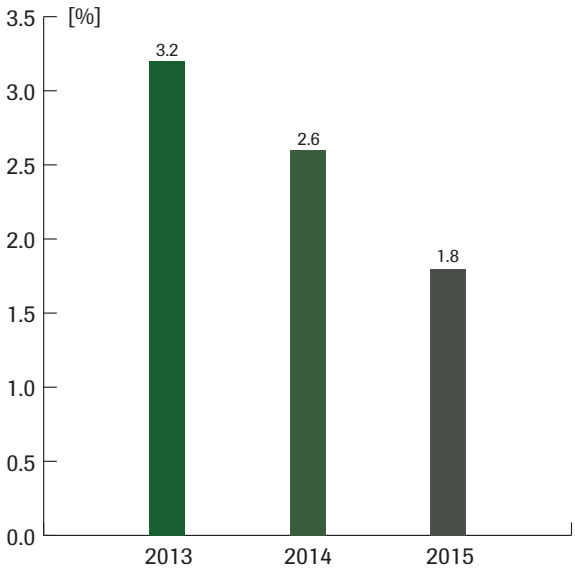


Chart 2. Russia's share in Germany's exports in 2013–2015



Source: Ranking of Germany's trading partners in Foreign Trade, www.destatis.de/EN/FactsFigures/NationalEconomyEnvironment/ForeignTrade/TradingPartners/Tables/OrderRankGermanyTradingPartners.pdf?__blob=publicationFile

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