

From *Ostpolitik* to 'frostpolitik'?

Merkel, Putin and German foreign policy towards Russia

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Germany's relationship with Russia is widely considered to be of fundamental importance to European security and the whole constitution of the West since the Second World War. Whereas some tend to judge Germany's reliability as a partner to the United States—and its so-called *Westbindung* in general—against its dealings with Russia, others focus on Germany's leadership of European foreign policy, while still others see the Russo-German relationship as an overall barometer of conflict and cooperation in Europe.¹ How Germany chooses to approach Russia and how it deals with the crisis in Ukraine, in particular, are questions that lie at the crux of several possible visions for the future European order.

Ostpolitik is a term that was coined to describe West Germany's cooperative approach to the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries, initiated by Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1969. As formulated by Brandt's political secretary, Egon Bahr, the key idea of the 'new eastern policy' was to achieve positive 'change through rapprochement' (*Wandel durch Annäherung*). In the Cold War context, the primary example of *Ostpolitik* was West Germany's willingness to engage with the Soviet Union through energy cooperation including gas supply, but also pipeline and nuclear projects.² Yet at the same time West Germany participated in the western sanctions regime concerning technology transfer to the Soviet Union and its allies, and accepted the deployment of American nuclear missiles on its soil as a response

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¹ See Walter Laquer, *Russia and Germany: a century of conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1990; first publ. 1965); Celeste Wallander, *Mortal friends, best enemies: German–Russian cooperation after the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Angela Stent, *Russia and Germany reborn: unification, the Soviet collapse, and the new Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Stephen Szabo, 'Can Berlin and Washington agree on Russia?', *Washington Quarterly* 32: 4, 2009, pp. 23–41; Constanze Stelzenmüller, 'Germany's Russia question', *Foreign Affairs* 88: 1, 2009, pp. 89–100.

² See Frank Bösch, 'Energy diplomacy: West Germany, the Soviet Union and the oil crises of the 1970s', *Historical Social Research* 39: 4, 2014, pp. 165–85.

to comparable Soviet nuclear armaments. A cooperative approach, understood as the continuation of *Ostpolitik*, remained at the core of German policy towards Russia through the geopolitical tumult at the end of the Cold War, German unification and Soviet dissolution, as well as changes in the German government coalitions and chancellorship. After Brandt and Helmut Schmidt, both Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder—though neither of them from the very beginning of their respective chancellorships—formed cooperative relations with the Soviet Union and its successor the Russian Federation, and nurtured good personal relationships with Russian leaders in particular. Germany accordingly came to be recognized as Russia's strategic partner or even Russia's advocate in Europe.³

The key principles of *Ostpolitik* seemed to remain intact when Angela Merkel of the Christian Democrats became federal chancellor in 2005. There were many who believed that Merkel's relationship with Moscow was going to be less friendly, given her background in the dissident movement of the former German Democratic Republic.⁴ However, while Merkel did not form a close personal relationship with President Putin, no major changes in Germany's policy towards Russia followed. Germany remained Russia's key partner in Europe, and a 'modernization partnership', designed to intensify cooperation in various fields, was formed when Dmitri Medvedev became president of Russia. The Russo-German partnership, though not immensely successful in political terms, seemed as stable as ever.⁵ Christopher Chivvis and Thomas Rid argued that no imminent change in the fundamentals of German policy towards Russia seemed likely.⁶ Jonas Wolff also believed in the continuity of German foreign policy towards Russia and contended that normative concerns had had, at best, only a limited impact on actual policies.⁷ Or, as Graham Timmins summarized the state of the relationship in 2011:

While Germany's rhetoric towards Russia has become slightly more guarded under Merkel, a stable and constructive relationship with Russia remains very much in Germany's national interests, and the recurrent themes of German business interests, Germany's increasing energy dependency on Russia and the wider concerns for pan-European political order are the priorities which drive continuity in German foreign policy.⁸

³ Alexander Rahr, 'Germany and Russia: a special relationship', *Washington Quarterly* 30: 2, 2007, pp. 137–45; Mark Leonard and Nicu Popescu, *A power audit of EU–Russia relations*, policy paper (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2007); Susan Stewart, 'Germany', in Maxine David, Jackie Gower and Hiski Haukkala, eds, *National perspectives on Russia: European foreign policy in the making?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 13–29.

⁴ Stefan Kornelius, *Angela Merkel: the Chancellor and her world* (Richmond: Alma, 2013); George Packer, 'The quiet German: the astonishing rise of Angela Merkel, the most powerful woman in the world', *New Yorker*, 1 Dec. 2014.

⁵ See Angela Stent, 'Germany–Russia relations 1992–2009', in Kjell Engelbrekt and Bertil Nygren, eds, *Russia and Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Hans-Joachim Spanger, 'German–Russian relations: a pan-European mission as national interest', *Studia Diplomatica* 65: 1, 2012, pp. 33–44; Alexander Rahr, *Der kalte Freund: warum wir Russland brauchen. Die Insider-Analyse* (Munich: Hanser, 2011); Leyli Rustamova, 'German–Russian dialogue and economic interaction', in Andrey Makarychev and Andre Mommen, eds, *Russia's changing economic and political regimes: the Putin years and afterwards* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 189–203.

⁶ Christopher Chivvis and Thomas Rid, 'The roots of Germany's Russia policy', *Survival* 51: 2, 2009, pp. 105–22 at p. 119.

⁷ Jonas Wolff, 'Democracy promotion and civilian power: the example of Germany's "value-oriented" foreign policy', *German Politics* 22: 4, 2013, pp. 477–93 at p. 485.

⁸ Graham Timmins, 'German–Russian bilateral relations and EU policy on Russia: between normalisation and the "multilateral reflex"', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 19: 2, 2011, pp. 189–99 at p. 199.

During 2012, however, things started to change, and this more negative trend soon came to a head during the Ukraine crisis in 2014. From this time up to the present, the relationship between Germany and Russia has not evinced the same level of mutual appreciation as previously. As early as 2012, journalists and analysts were announcing the ‘end of the Ostpolitik’ and declaring: ‘German–Russian relations enter a new ice age.’⁹ Despite Germany’s continuing efforts to negotiate solutions to the crisis in Ukraine with the Kremlin, Germany is no longer seen as Russia’s advocate.¹⁰ Stefan Meister argues that the basis of ‘Germany’s Russia policy, dominated by economic interests for over two decades, is now shifting to political interests.’¹¹ Yet some scholars detect very little change in Germany’s policy towards Russia, despite the cooler attitude.¹² In the view of Stephen Szabo, German foreign policy is subordinating overall grand strategy to business interests, reducing the role of political and administrative leaders in the government and clearly downgrading Germany’s normative power.¹³ The change in German foreign policy identified by Hans Kundnani concerns rather the long-term weakening of Germany’s western ties, while Richard Sakwa has opined that ‘German foreign policy [has] lost some of its independence and swung behind Washington’.¹⁴

In this article I will first ask whether a *major* change in Germany’s policy towards Russia has in fact taken place. In order to understand how deep the change is, or *might* be, we also need to analyse how and why the alleged change materialized in 2012–13, before the Ukrainian crisis, and then became more palpable in 2014–15 during the crisis. This line of enquiry will also provide a good opportunity to evaluate a range of theoretical approaches and other ways of understanding German foreign policy, since most of them—strategic culture, role concepts, institutions and domestic politics—have been geared towards explaining continuity more than change. Moreover, I will look at the evolution of Germany’s foreign policy towards Russia and the surrounding foreign policy debate, with a particular focus on the present Ukrainian crisis. Based on both public sources and participant/observer interviews conducted repeatedly in Berlin and Moscow from 2012 to 2015, the article argues that Germany’s policy has changed significantly but not as dramatically as some headlines have suggested: the overall goal of aiming at partnership

⁹ David Kramer and Lilia Shevtsova, ‘Germany and Russia: end of Ostpolitik?’, *American Interest*, 13 Nov. 2012; Ralf Neukirch and Matthias Schepp, ‘Chilly peace: German–Russian relations enter a new ice age’, *Spiegel Online*, 30 May 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-and-russian-relations-are-at-an-impasse-a-835862.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

¹⁰ Jakob Mischke and Andreas Umland, ‘Germany’s new Ostpolitik: an old foreign policy doctrine gets a makeover’, *Foreign Affairs*, 9 April 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/western-europe/2014-04-09/germanys-new-Ostpolitik>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015; Wolfgang Seibel, ‘Arduous learning or new uncertainties? German diplomacy and the Ukrainian crisis’, *Global Policy* 6: Issue Supplement S1, 2015, pp. 56–72.

¹¹ Stefan Meister, ‘Politics trump economics’, *IP Journal*, 5 Feb. 2015, <https://zeitschrift-ip.dgap.org/en/ip-journal/topics/politics-trump-economics>, accessed 9 Nov. 2015.

¹² See e.g. Ryszarda Formuszewicz, ‘Germany’s policy towards Russia: new wine in an old wineskin’, PISM policy paper no. 7 (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs, April 2014).

¹³ Stephen Szabo, ‘Germany’s commercial realism and the Russia problem’, *Survival* 56: 5, 2014, pp. 117–28 at p. 119, and *Germany, Russia and the rise of geo-economics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹⁴ Hans Kundnani, ‘Leaving the West behind’, *Foreign Affairs* 94: 1, 2015, pp. 108–16; but see also Elizabeth Pond, ‘Germany’s real role in the Ukraine crisis’, *Foreign Affairs* 94: 2, 2015, pp. 173–6; Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: crisis in the borderlands* (London: Tauris, 2015), p. 225.

with Russia, and the tendency to emphasize diplomacy and negotiation rather than military force, have not changed—but the strategic priorities and the image of the current Russian leadership have. It further suggests that understanding the sources of change in Germany's policy towards Russia requires more than the standard accounts of international relations that focus on changing power relations or domestic politics and related shifts in the prevailing interpretation of national interest. Rather, a key element in the change is to be found in the diplomatic interaction between the leaders and foreign policy elites of the two countries in response to Russia's violations of key norms of international law and disappointment with political developments in Russia and Putin's way of dealing with the crisis.

The erosion of *Ostpolitik*

When Merkel was elected federal chancellor of Germany in 2005, it was expected that German–Russian relations would become less close than they had previously been under Schröder and Putin. Schröder not only continued the *Ostpolitik* tradition of friendly relations; he also searched for joint political positions with the Kremlin on international issues, as for example during the Iraq War of 2003, and refrained from criticizing Russia for defects in the rule of law or human rights violations. He maintained a close relationship with Putin and had a strong personal interest in Russia, taking frequent holidays there and adopting a Russian orphan girl. Away from the chancellorship, Schröder's Russian orientation manifested itself in his chairmanship of the board of the Nord Stream pipeline company. Schröder's attitude towards Russia and Putin was epitomized in his emphasis on Russia's importance in world politics and his defence of Putin's credibility as a champion of democracy.¹⁵

In contrast to Schröder, Merkel was more willing to raise concerns with regard to Russia's democratic development and human rights situation.¹⁶ In the view of Lilia Shevtsova, Merkel was the 'only political leader to speak frankly with Putin about rights and freedoms', but was 'forced by political necessity to tone down her criticism'.¹⁷ Indeed, she was not willing to sanction Russia or its leadership for violations of human rights or other common norms. Like her predecessor, she focused on fostering commercial and economic cooperation. German–Russian trade continued to grow despite the financial crisis and other problems in the world economy. At the same time, Merkel did not refrain from using sharp language when problems of economic importance arose. In 2007, for example, she criticized the move by Russia to cut off oil supplies to five European countries without warning them beforehand and accused Russia of betraying German trust. She declared: 'It is not acceptable when there are no consultations about such moves', and reminded Putin that 'you cannot build cooperation based on true

¹⁵ See Gerhard Schröder, *Entscheidungen: mein Leben in der Politik* (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 2006).

¹⁶ Rahr, 'Germany and Russia'.

¹⁷ Lilia Shevtsova, *Lonely power: why Russia has failed to become the West and why the West is weary of Russia* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), p. 218.

mutual trust in this way'.¹⁸ On the other hand, Merkel was prudent when it came to security policy. She did not, for example, support the idea of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, as promoted by Washington at the time of the Bucharest summit in April 2008. Germany did, however, urge Russia to adopt a constructive approach to solving problems related to the frozen conflicts in the former Soviet Union and to lower tension with Georgia. Merkel did not oppose the construction of a NATO missile defence system, but wanted the United States to engage more fully with Russia on the issue.

While Merkel was suspicious of Putin from the beginning—a famous anecdote about her first meeting with him relates that he gave her a toy dog as a gift and at the next meeting he brought his dog into the room although he knew that she was afraid of them—she had a much warmer relationship with Dmitri Medvedev when he served as president of Russia from 2008 to 2012.¹⁹ As noted above, in autumn 2008 a German–Russian ‘modernization partnership’ was formed to enhance links between commercial, educational, legal and civil society actors in the two countries; and at a bilateral meeting between Merkel and Medvedev at Meseberg Castle near Berlin in June 2010, ideas of Russia’s closer integration into European structures were discussed.²⁰ Merkel’s support for President Medvedev’s policy agenda was also visible when she participated in his Global Policy Forum in Jaroslav in September 2011.

One of the reasons why German policy towards Russia did not change very much when Merkel became federal chancellor was that the foreign ministry was occupied by Social Democrats. Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was known to be Schröder’s trusted man and a staunch supporter of a cooperative *Ostpolitik*. Steinmeier openly criticized Merkel for her policy towards Russia, accusing her of playing too much to domestic opinion and attempting to isolate Russia.²¹ Compared to Merkel, Steinmeier was also more concerned about the negative consequences of missile defence for Russia and European security.

During the second term of Merkel’s chancellorship, between 2009 and 2013, the foreign ministry was headed by Guido Westerwelle of the Free Democrats (then a partner in the governing coalition). During his period in office, Westerwelle kept a fairly low profile when it came to Germany’s Russia policy. He advocated the policy of ‘change through trade’ with Russia, but was widely criticized for not having a clear foreign policy doctrine.²² He called for more inclusion of Russia in the international community, but criticized Moscow, for example, for supporting the Assad regime in Syria.²³

¹⁸ ‘Merkel’s criticism of Russia over energy marks shift in ties’, *Deutsche Welle*, 12 Jan. 2007, <http://www.dw.de/merkel-criticism-of-russia-over-energy-marks-shift-in-ties/a-2307173>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

¹⁹ Kornelius, *Angela Merkel*, p. 181; ‘German–Russian relations: Medvedev charms Merkel at Munich summit’, *Der Spiegel*, 17 July 2009.

²⁰ Andrew Rettman, ‘Germany and Russia call for new EU security committee’, *euobserver*, 7 June 2010, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/30223>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

²¹ ‘Kritik an Merkels Außenpolitik “Ängstlicher Blick auf die Schlagzeile”’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 Nov. 2007.

²² Matthias Geis and Jörg Lau, ‘Annäherung ohne Wandel’, *Die Zeit*, 8 May 2013, <http://www.zeit.de/2013/20/entspannungspolitik-annaeherung-sozialdemokraten>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

²³ ‘Russland steht auf falscher Seite der Geschichte’, interview with Guido Westerwelle, *Welt Online*, 11

As noted above, relations between Germany and Russia began to deteriorate in 2012.²⁴ Merkel's attitude towards Moscow had already soured in September of the previous year when Putin announced that he and Medvedev were going to swap jobs and he intended to make a renewed bid for the presidency; Merkel was disappointed at Medvedev's departure from the top job.²⁵ One of the first signs of problems in German–Russian relations came in June 2012, when Germany's federal President Joachim Gauck cancelled a meeting with President Putin and their joint appearance at the public opening of the 'German Year' in Russia.²⁶

At the same time, in the summer of 2012, the case of the female punk band Pussy Riot was widely covered in the German media, with the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* running a cover page story about the prosecutions of the band members and even alleging that Russia was sliding into dictatorship.²⁷ When Merkel met with Putin in November 2012 she questioned the prison sentences handed down to members of the band. Putin responded angrily and told the press: 'Mrs Chancellor spoke about the girls jailed for their performance in a church. Does she know that one of them had hanged a Jew in effigy and said that Moscow should be rid of such people? Neither we, nor you, can support people who assume an anti-Semitic position.'²⁸ In fact, it transpired that the band had used Nazi signs ironically in one earlier performance. Hence, Putin's allegation of anti-Semitism on the part of Pussy Riot did not reassure Merkel; on the contrary, it only helped confirm her in her negative view of Putin.

The German government's more critical attitude towards Russia was widely echoed in German politics and society.²⁹ In November 2012, the Bundestag accepted a resolution that was very critical of Putin's regime: 'Parliament notes with mounting concern that, since President Vladimir Putin's return to office, legislative and judicial measures are being taken which combine toward increasing control over active citizens, criminalizing critical engagement and creating a confrontation course against government critics.'³⁰ The Foreign Office regarded the tone of the motion as too sharp and moderated it to be more conciliatory, putting emphasis on the importance of Russia in the global setting and deleting remarks related to civil protests in Russia, which again created a new twist. Despite this toning down, Russians were upset with the Bundestag's resolution.

March 2012, <http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article13915773/Russland-steht-auf-falscher-Seite-der-Geschichte.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

²⁴ Stefan Meister, 'Germany's Russia policy under Angela Merkel: a balance sheet', *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 22: 2, 2013, pp. 28–44, and 'Deutsche Russland-Politik', *Internationale Politik*, no. 6, 2012, pp. 54–9.

²⁵ Kornelius, *Angela Merkel*, p. 185.

²⁶ Florian Gathmann, 'Schwierige Präsidenten-Beziehung: Gaucks Putin-Problem', *Spiegel Online*, 29 Aug. 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/praesident-gauck-geht-russlands-staatsoberhaupt-putin-aus-dem-weg-a-852531.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

²⁷ 'Husband of Pussy Riot member: "We'll continue to fight, no matter what the verdict"', *Spiegel Online*, 14 Aug. 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-husband-of-pussy-riot-member-nadezhda-tolokonnikova-a-849730.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

²⁸ Miriam Elder, 'Vladimir Putin reacts angrily to Angela Merkel's Pussy Riot comments', *Guardian*, 16 Nov. 2012.

²⁹ Judy Dempsey, 'Berlin starts to test its ties to Russia', Letter from Europe, *New York Times*, 30 Oct. 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/30/world/europe/30iht-letter30.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

³⁰ 'Resentment strains German-Russian relations', *Deutsche Welle*, 17 Nov. 2012, <http://www.dw.com/en/resentment-strains-german-russian-relations/a-16382648>, accessed 20 Nov. 2015.

They refused to talk to Andreas Schockenhoff, Christian Democrat member of the parliament and special envoy to Russia, who had regularly criticized Russia and was behind the original motion. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused him of making 'slandorous accusations' and demanded his removal.³¹

The German–Russian summit of 2012, held in the framework of the Petersburg dialogue, reflected these growing disagreements. The dialogue, between civil society representatives of the two countries, was meant to be an instrument for creating and deepening mutual understanding and trust; yet on this occasion it contributed to confrontation and distrust. The German representatives accused Russia of restrictions of freedom and violations of human rights. The case of Pussy Riot was brought up. As a reply to these criticisms, the Speaker of the Duma, Alexei Pushkov, came to the conference, gave a speech attacking Germany for behaving like a headmistress, and left. The German participants were in turn upset.³²

The research community in Germany had also become more critical of Russia.³³ The 'modernization partnership' was deemed empty, and the idea of 'change through trade' was seen as an ineffective strategic tool: indeed, the whole concept was mockingly called 'trade without change'. Germany's partnership for modernization with Russia was accused of bringing about patronization instead of modernization. The most prominent German public figure among those who defended Russia, Alexander Rahr of the German Foreign Policy Institute (DGAP), who had written a biography of Putin, was criticized for being too close to the Kremlin and not therefore an independent expert.³⁴ The wave of criticism of Russia alerted the faithful supporters of *Ostpolitik*, and the Social Democratic Party's (SPD) Gernot Erler accused the German pundits of creating an atmosphere hostile to Russia.³⁵

All the time new issues were emerging that created tensions between Russia and Germany and gave rise to critical opinions in Berlin. In January 2013, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle warned Russia that anti-gay legislation which the Duma was preparing would have a negative effect on German–Russian relations.³⁶ In March 2013, German politicians protested against the Russian authorities raiding non-governmental organizations in Russia—including affiliates of German NGOs, such as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation—under the new law on 'foreign agents'.³⁷

³¹ Kramer and Shevtsova, 'Germany and Russia'.

³² Benjamin Bidder, 'Rugby vs. softball: barbs abound in Russian–German consultations', *Spiegel Online*, 16 Nov. 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/a-harsh-tone-dominates-russian-german-consultations-in-moscow-a-867622.html>; Oliver Bilger, 'Deutsche Kritik empört Russland', *Handelsblatt*, 16 Nov. 2012, <http://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/petersburger-dialog-deutsche-kritik-empoeert-russland/7397962.html> (both accessed 6 Nov. 2015).

³³ Fabian Burkhardt, 'Neopatriomialisierung statt Modernisierung: Deutsche Russlandpolitik plus russischer *otkat*', *Osteuropa* 63: 8, 2013, pp. 95–106; Wolfgang Eichwede, 'Einmischung tut not. Wider den Selbstbetrug der Putin-Freunde', *Osteuropa* 63: 4, 2013, pp. 91–100; Hans-Henning Schröder, 'Russland in Europa. Randbemerkungen zur deutschen Russlanddebatte', *Osteuropa* 63: 8, 2013, pp. 107–14; Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, 'Wandel statt Anbiederung: warum wir eine neue Russlandpolitik brauchen', *Blätter für Deutsche und International Politik* 58: 7, 2013, pp. 82–92. See also Hans Kundnani, 'The Ostpolitik illusion', *IP Journal*, 17 Oct. 2013, <https://zeitschrift-ip.dgap.org/de/ip-die-zeitschrift/archiv/jahrgang-2014/januar-februar/die-ostpolitik-illusion>, accessed 9 Nov. 2015.

³⁴ Jörg Lau, 'Wie soll Deutschland mit Russland umgehen?', *Die Zeit*, 14 March 2012, p. 4.

³⁵ Gernot Erler, 'Schluss mit dem Russland-Bashing!', *Die Zeit*, 9 June 2013.

³⁶ Severin Weiland, 'German Foreign Minister criticizes Russian legislation', *Der Spiegel*, 29 Jan. 2013.

³⁷ Benjamin Bidder, 'Razzia bei Adenauer-Stiftung: Russland verprellt seine Partner', *Spiegel Online*, 26 March 2013,

After the federal elections in September 2013, and after prolonged negotiations, in December 2013 a new government took office in Germany—again a ‘Grand Coalition’ between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats. Merkel embarked on her third term as chancellor, with Steinmeier resuming the position of foreign minister. The CDU’s Schockenhoff was replaced by the SPD’s Erler as the government’s Russia envoy. This was taken as a signal that Germany was not going to abandon the basic line of cooperative *Ostpolitik* towards Russia. Instead of the normal single sentence on Russia, the coalition agreement between the CDU and SPD contained a full paragraph on the country, emphasizing the tradition of cooperation between Germany and Russia. But it also indicated, in diplomatic language, that Germany was ready to voice criticism against the Russian government and expand its relations with Russian civil society. ‘The closeness of mutual relations will depend’, the text read, ‘on the degree of democratic development in Russia.’³⁸

Germany, Russia and the Ukrainian crisis

The crisis in Ukraine—in particular, the occupation and annexation of Crimea by Russia in February and March 2014, and Russia’s subsequent involvement in the militarized separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine—created the most severe confrontation in relations between Russia and the West since the Cold War. For Germany, the crisis was a test case of where its loyalties lie. Is it part of the West, or does it have a special relationship with Russia? Is it ready for tough action when international norms are broken, or is it only speaking softly and without a stick?

Political protests and instability started to approach crisis levels in Ukraine after Victor Yanukovych rejected the association agreement with the European Union in November 2013. At the time Germany did not have a clear-cut policy on Ukraine, partly because the government was in transition. Merkel criticized Russia for its Cold War mentality, but at this point she put more blame on Yanukovych for his failure to sign the agreement than on Russia.³⁹ German leaders then verbally supported the opposition movement Euro-Maidan, in which the German-based boxing star Vitali Klitschko was a prominent figure. In one of his last actions as foreign minister, Westerwelle even participated in the march of the opposition in Kiev in December 2013, which irritated the Kremlin.⁴⁰

When the crisis in Ukraine escalated in February–March 2014, Germany was ready to assume a role as mediator, or at least to serve as a contact partner for Russia. Yet Germany was also willing to advocate tougher action in terms of

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/russland-computer-der-adenauer-stiftung-bei-razzien-beschlagnahmt-a-891003.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

³⁸ Ingo Manteufel, ‘German Russia policy to be realigned’, *Deutsche Welle*, 29 Nov. 2013, <http://www.dw.de/german-russia-policy-to-be-realigned/a-17262166>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

³⁹ Valentina Pop and Andrew Rettman, ‘Merkel criticises Russia on eve of Vilnius summit’, *euobserver*, 27 Nov. 2013, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/122264>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁰ ‘Besuch bei der Opposition in Kiev: Westerwelle wehrt sich gegen russische Kritik’, *Spiegel Online*, 5 Dec. 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/besuch-in-kiew-westerwelle-wehrt-sich-gegen-russische-kritik-a-937307.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

sanctions if Russia escalated the crisis. A third strand in Germany's policy was support to Ukraine. In formulating this response to Russia's action, it was also pushing for unity in the West and in the EU in particular. Germany ruled out the use of military force as a solution to the crisis, believing instead in the power of long-term diplomatic efforts to meet the challenge.

Merkel reacted strongly to Russia's occupation and annexation of Crimea and then to Russian military involvement in eastern Ukraine. Immediately after the occupation of Crimea, Merkel made it clear that Russia had violated international law and that no partnership can work without a core set of shared values. Merkel tried to persuade Putin to cancel the referendum in Crimea; when not only did it go ahead, but annexation followed, she opted for targeted sanctions and advocated more sanctions if Russia took further military action in Ukraine. When the military conflict in eastern Ukraine escalated, she called for a ceasefire and urged Putin to use his authority and influence over the separatists there.⁴¹ She also showed solidarity with the new Ukrainian leadership, supported Ukraine's increasing ties with the EU and spoke in favour of new solutions in European energy politics to reduce dependency on Russia. She declared, however, that the fundamentals of *Ostpolitik* had not changed: in the medium and long term, she insisted, a partnership with Russia would be continued.⁴²

From the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, Merkel spoke regularly over the phone with Putin and orchestrated international efforts to resolve the crisis. In March 2014, she succeeded in getting Putin's approval for an OSCE-based fact-finding mission to Ukraine.⁴³ In the summer, she reportedly attempted to broker a solution to the crisis that would have included Russia's delivery of gas to Ukraine and its acceptance of Ukraine's association agreement with the EU, while the West would refrain from offering NATO membership to Ukraine and would lift sanctions without, however, formally recognizing Crimea as part of Russia.⁴⁴ Merkel seemingly had reservations about the ceasefire agreement that was achieved in Minsk in September 2014, and continued to point out breaches of it over the course of the autumn. She did not travel to the International Investment Forum in Sochi in October 2014, but met with Putin in October in Milan and in November in Brisbane. In both cases, the tone of the meeting was coloured by diplomatic incidents strongly indicative of the persisting tensions: in Milan Putin let Merkel wait five hours for his arrival,⁴⁵ while in Brisbane he left the

⁴¹ 'Dancing with the bear: Merkel seeks a hardline on Putin', *Spiegel Online*, 24 March 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/merkel-and-europe-search-for-an-adequate-response-to-putin-a-960378.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁴² 'Merkel will "enge Partnerschaft mit Russland" fortsetzen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 May 2014, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/die-kanzlerin-in-der-f-a-z-merkel-will-enge-partnerschaft-mit-russland-fortsetzen-12941420.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁴³ 'Putin agrees to Ukraine "fact-finding" mission after talk with Merkel', *Deutsche Welle*, 2 March 2014, <http://www.dw.com/en/putin-agrees-to-ukraine-fact-finding-mission-after-talk-with-merkel/a-17468591>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁴ Margareta Pagano, 'Land for gas: Merkel and Putin discussed secret deal could end Ukraine crisis', *Independent*, 17 Aug. 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/land-for-gas-secret-german-deal-could-end-ukraine-crisis-9638764.html#>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁵ Jim Yardley and David M. Herszenhorn, 'Making Merkel wait, finding time for truffles', *New York Times*, 17 Oct. 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/18/world/unbowed-putin-chews-the-scenery-in-milan.html?_r=0.

meeting early because he felt he was being treated as a second-tier member of the G20. These meetings made it clear that the German and Russian leaders disagreed over the causes and resolution of the Ukraine conflict; but they also indicated that Merkel was ready to have a dialogue and that Putin still regarded Merkel as his most important interlocutor in Europe.⁴⁶ Even though the attempts to have a dialogue on what Russia really wanted made little progress,⁴⁷ Merkel invested a great deal of personal authority in achieving a renegotiated ceasefire between the parties in February 2015 in Minsk.

Merkel regarded negotiation as the only way to solve the conflict in Ukraine. She emphasized the impact of sanctions, which would not be lifted until the Minsk agreement had been implemented, but resisted new sanctions and rejected the idea of delivering lethal weapons to Ukraine. In her speech at the annual Munich security conference in February 2015, Merkel criticized Russia sharply for violating international law and breaking its commitments; however, she also stated that the crisis in Ukraine could not be solved by military means.⁴⁸ Instead, she emphasized that long-term commitment and patience would be required to bring the conflict to an end. In another balancing act, Merkel decided not to travel to Moscow to attend the military parade held to celebrate the anniversary of the end of the Second World War, instead to arrive in Moscow the following day and participate in commemorations at the graves of fallen soldiers.⁴⁹

Most of the other leading CDU politicians held similar positions to Merkel, and some used even harsher language. Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, for example, compared Russia's actions in Ukraine to the expansionism of Nazi Germany. When speaking to a group of schoolchildren, Schäuble said that Hitler had adopted similar methods when he annexed the Sudetenland: 'That's something that we all know from history.'⁵⁰ Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen was more careful, stressing diplomatic solutions to the crisis and rejecting the idea of Ukraine joining NATO.⁵¹ Later she argued that Russia had destroyed a massive amount of trust, but also that NATO should stick to the commitments it had made to Russia in the Founding Act.⁵² At the same time, some of the Christian Democrat old guard,

⁴⁶ Peter Müller, 'Gespräch in Brisbane: Merkel verliert die Geduld mit Putin', *Spiegel Online*, 15 Nov. 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/g20-gipfel-merkel-wirft-putin-wegen-ukraine-expansionsstrebenvor-a-1003107.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁷ Noah Barkin and Andreas Rinke, 'Merkel hits diplomatic dead-end with Putin', *Reuters*, 25 Nov. 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/25/us-ukraine-crisis-germany-insight-idUSKCN0J91EN20141125>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁸ Angela Merkel, 'Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel anlässlich der 51. Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz', Munich, 7 Feb. 2015, <http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Rede/2015/02/2015-02-07-merkel-sicherheitskonferenz.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁹ 'Merkel bleibt Weltkriegsgedenkfeier in Moskau fern', *Zeit Online*, 11 March 2015, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-03/angela-merkel-moskau-militaerparade-absage>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁵⁰ Christian Reiermann, 'Fighting words: Schäuble says Putin's Crimea plans reminiscent of Hitler', *Spiegel Online*, 31 March 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/schaeuble-compares-putin-moves-in-crimea-to-policies-of-hitler-a-961696.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁵¹ 'Wir werden den Konflikt friedlich lösen', *Bild*, 7 April 2014, <http://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/Content/DE/Interview/2014/04/2014-04-07-von-der-leyen-bild.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁵² 'German Defense Minister: "Russia has destroyed a massive amount of trust"', *Spiegel Online*, 11 June 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/interview-with-german-defense-minister-on-russia-and-global-conflicts-a-974569.html>.

including Kohl's one-time adviser Horst Teltschik and the former Federal President Roman Herzog, associated themselves with the critics of the government's line. Teltschik, for example, was one of the initiators of an open letter entitled 'Another war in Europe—not in our name' and published in *Die Zeit* in December 2014. The letter appealed for 'a new policy of detente' and warned German politicians and media against demonizing Russia and the Russians.⁵³

The Social Democrats were in general more cautious than the conservatives when it came to criticizing Russia. At first, Foreign Minister Steinmeier did not support sanctions against Russia; in particular, he considered it wrong to exclude the country from the G8. Later, however, it became difficult to identify any significant difference between his position and Merkel's. Steinmeier supported the EU policy of three stages of sanctions, and argued that 'no one in Europe believes that we could simply return to business as usual in our dealings with Russia following the annexation of Crimea'. He reacted angrily to pro-Russian demonstrators, telling them that the world is complicated. Moreover, he warned the Kremlin that 'Russia can be in no doubt that it will have to reckon with a strong reaction if it wants to go beyond Crimea'.⁵⁴ On the other hand, he was quick to praise Putin for his constructive moves and he defended Germany's Ukraine policy from accusations that it was too weak and reminiscent of appeasement. He explained that while in the NATO ministerial council he was accused of being too soft on Russia, when 'I come back to Germany ... I am attacked on the grounds that we have absolutely no understanding for Russia'.⁵⁵ In November 2014 Merkel and Steinmeier assured the Bundestag that there was no difference between their views, and that all their actions had been coordinated and mutually agreed.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Steinmeier continued to give public statements seeking accommodation with Russia that could be easily understood as representing a perspective different from Merkel's. In December, with the rouble falling sharply, Steinmeier warned that more sanctions would not be good for European security and that Russia should not be brought to its knees.⁵⁷ In June 2015, before the G7 meeting in Germany, he said he regarded Russia's return to the G8 as desirable.⁵⁸

Some prominent SPD politicians, such as the party leader and Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy Sigmar Gabriel, also expressed views critical of Russia. Gabriel urged, for example, that Russia must negotiate and distance itself from the violence in eastern Ukraine.⁵⁹ He also believed that Germany had no

⁵³ 'Wieder Krieg in Europa? Nicht in unserem Namen', *Die Zeit*, 5 Dec. 2014.

⁵⁴ Matthias Nass and Michael Thumann, 'Frank-Walter Steinmeier: "Das ist politisch inakzeptabel"', interview with Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, *Die Zeit*, 16 April 2014; 'Steinmeier warnt vor Sanktionen gegen Moskau', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 April 2014; Frank-Walter Steinmeier, 'Aufgeben ist keine Option', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 May 2014.

⁵⁵ Stefan Wagstyl, 'Steinmeier feels pressure as Russia outburst goes viral', *Financial Times*, 24–25 May 2014; 'Steinmeier verteidigt deutsche Ukraine-Politik', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 Sept. 2014.

⁵⁶ 'Merkel bekräftigt Einigkeit der Koalition gegenüber Putin', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 Nov. 2014.

⁵⁷ 'Russland nicht in die Knie bringen', interview with Frank-Walter Steinmeier, *Der Spiegel*, 20 Dec. 2014.

⁵⁸ Burkhard Ewert, 'Steinmeier setzt auf Rückkehr Moskaus in Kreis der G8', interview with Frank-Walter Steinmeier, *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*, 4 June 2015, <http://www.noz.de/deutschland-welt/politik/artikel/581980/steinmeier-setzt-auf-ruckkehr-moskaus-in-kreis-der-g8>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁵⁹ 'Russland muss handeln', interview with Sigmar Gabriel, *Passauer Presse*, 14 March 2014.

alternative to Russian gas, but did not see that as a problem for Germany, pointing out that the Soviet Union had been willing to deliver gas even during the worst times of the Cold War. Moreover, defending common values was for him more important than economic gains.⁶⁰ Most SPD members were, however, sceptical towards sanctions and hoped that these could be lifted when Russia accepted the result of the presidential elections in Ukraine held in May 2014. Even though critical views of Russia in the ranks of the party became more marked, particularly after the Malaysian passenger plane MH17 was shot down in eastern Ukraine in July,⁶¹ many SPD politicians continued to hint that the crisis should be resolved on the basis of accommodating Russian perspectives. In August, Gabriel argued for the federalization of Ukraine.⁶² In November, the former party chairman and Minister-President of Brandenburg Matthias Platzeck spoke of the need to acknowledge the annexation of Crimea as part of Russia, although he later distanced himself from this position.⁶³ Experienced SPD foreign policy experts, however, tried their best to argue that a nostalgic policy of *rapprochement* and yielding to the Kremlin would not help to solve the crisis.⁶⁴

Many former SPD politicians openly defended Russia and criticized the West. Perhaps the most prominent of these was former Chancellor Schröder, who argued that the European Commission had not understood that Ukraine is a culturally divided land and that it was a mistake to force it to choose between an association agreement with the EU and a customs union with Russia.⁶⁵ Schröder's comments pleased neither the conservatives nor the Greens in the European Parliament, who wanted to silence him because of his controversial position as board chairman for German–Russian gas pipeline company. His known friendship with Putin was also seen as creating a bias.⁶⁶ Yet Schröder was not the only Social Democrat *Altkanzler* who understood Russia; Helmut Schmidt, too, criticized the West and insisted that sanctions against Russia were stupid.⁶⁷ Another prominent SPD member, Klaus von Dohnanyi, argued that it was the Americans rather than the Russians

⁶⁰ 'Gabriel sieht keine Alternative zu russischem Gas', *Zeit Online*, 18 March 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/2014-03/gabriel-russland-gas>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁶¹ Severin Weiland, 'MH17-Abschuss: CDU und SPD fordern Härte gegenüber Putin', *Der Spiegel*, 21 July 2014.

⁶² 'Gabriel plädiert für Föderalisierung der Ukraine', *Die Welt*, 23 Aug. 2014.

⁶³ 'Russland-Politik: Ex-SPD-Chef Platzeck will Annexion der Krim anerkennen', *Spiegel Online*, 18 Nov. 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/ukraine-krise-matthias-platzeck-will-legalisierung-krim-annexion-a-1003646.html>; 'Russland-Politik: SPD-Politiker Platzeck nimmt Aussagen zur Krim zurück', *Spiegel Online*, 19 Nov. 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/matthias-platzeck-rudert-in-debatte-um-krim-annexion-zurueck-a-1003829.html> (both accessed 6 Nov. 2015).

⁶⁴ Rolf Mützenich, 'Entspannung ist kein Appeasement: wir brauchen vieles, aber keinen Kniefall von Moskau', *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*, 19 Jan. 2015, <http://www.ipg-journal.de/kolumne/artikel/entspannung-ist-kein-appeasement-744/>; Karsten Voigt, 'A new phase of Russia and Ostpolitik has begun', *American Institute for Contemporary German Studies*, Johns Hopkins University, <http://www.aicgs.org/issue/a-new-phase-of-russia-and-ostpolitik-has-begun/> (both accessed 6 Nov. 2015).

⁶⁵ 'Ukraine-Konflikt: Schröder macht EU für Krim-Krise mitverantwortlich', *Spiegel Online*, 9 March 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/krim-krise-ex-kanzler-gerhard-schroeder-kritisiert-eu-a-957728.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁶⁶ 'Antrag im Europaparlament: EU-Abgeordnete wollen Schröder Sprechverbot zur Krim erteilen', *Spiegel Online*, 13 March 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/krim-eu-parlamentarier-wollen-gerhard-schroeder-maulkorb-verpassen-a-958405.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁶⁷ 'Helmut Schmidt hat Verständnis für Putins Krim-Politik', *Zeit Online*, 26 March 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/2014-03/schmidt-krim-putin>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

who had created the problem by attempting to bring Ukraine into NATO. Even so, he emphasized that to understand Russia's viewpoint was not necessarily to approve its actions.⁶⁸

Gregor Gysi, leader of the left-wing PDS (Democratic Socialist Party), also defended Russia and deemed the West at least equally culpable in provoking the crisis. While he pronounced Russia's actions in Crimea wrong, he also stressed that 'Germany and its allies aren't behaving any differently' and accused critics of Russia's actions of hypocrisy. In Gysi's view, Russia's use of force in the Ukraine was comparable to western action in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.⁶⁹ Curiously enough, the populist political movements in Germany were also opposed to assisting Ukraine or sanctioning Russia, though the question divided members of the Eurosceptic party Alternative for Germany.⁷⁰ The German far right also had difficulty in deciding whether it supported Putin or the Ukrainian nationalists: some prominent members of the National Democratic Party of Germany were critical of the sanctions against Russia and participated in a meeting of the European far right held in St Petersburg in March 2015 to support Russia's policy.⁷¹

Other opposition parties mainly supported the government's Russia policy during the Ukraine crisis. The Green Party, which had stood for a values-oriented foreign policy approach towards Russia, regarded the sanctions as justified because Russia had violated international norms and divided Ukraine. Together with the Christian Democrats, the Greens were also most willing to advocate sharper sanctions should the Russian-sponsored offensive in eastern Ukraine continue.⁷² Yet there were also dissident voices: for example, the former minister Jürgen Trittin, criticized the policy of sanctions against Russia.⁷³ The Free Democrats, who had lost all their Bundestag seats in the 2013 elections, for the most part supported the sanctions against Russia on the basis of the liberal values of democracy, freedom and respect for international law;⁷⁴ however, even here there was criticism of the sanctions from some quarters. Most prominently, the former

⁶⁸ Klaus von Dohnanyi, 'Was sie in die Knie zwingt', *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 18 April 2014, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/was-sie-in-die-knie-zwingt-klaus-von-dohnanyi-zur-ukraine-krise-12914417.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁶⁹ Roland Nelles and Fabian Reinbold, 'Gysi-Interview zur Ukraine: "Der Westen hat auch alles falsch gemacht"', interview with Gregor Gysi, *Spiegel Online*, 9 May 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/ukraine-gregor-gysi-im-interview-ueber-russland-und-merkels-politik-a-968391.html>; 'Merkels Anti-Militär-Maxime zwischen Krim und Kosovo', *Sächsische Zeitung*, 13 March 2014, <http://www.sz-online.de/nachrichten/merkels-anti-militaer-maxime-zwischen-krim-und-kosovo-2795078.html> (both accessed 6 Nov. 2015).

⁷⁰ Bernd Lucke, 'Putin spaltet die AfD', *Zeit Online*, 28 Aug. 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/2014/36/bernd-lucke-afd-putin-spaltung>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁷¹ 'Treffen europäischer Rechtsextremisten: NPD-Politiker Voigt wirbt für Putins Politik', *Spiegel Online*, 23 March 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/npd-politiker-udo-voigt-stellt-sich-hinter-putins-ukraine-politik-a-1024957.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁷² 'Özdemir fordert "spürbar" schärfere Sanktionen gegen Russland', *Zeit Online*, 18 Feb. 2015, <http://www.zeit.de/news/2015-02/18/deutschland-oezdemir-fordert-spuerbar-schaerfere-sanktionen-gegen-russland-18163606>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁷³ Claudia Kade and Karsten Kammholz, 'Putin schafft Grundlage für russischen Maidan', interview with Jürgen Trittin, *Die Welt*, 20 Nov. 2014, <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article134520127/Putin-schafft-Grundlage-fuer-russischen-Maidan.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁷⁴ Richard Herzinger, 'Die FDP geißelt den "Selbstekel" des Westens', interview with Christian Lindner, *Die Welt*, 30 Dec. 2014, <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article135844812/Die-FDP-geisselt-den-Selbstekel-des-Westens.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

chairman of the party and long-serving foreign minister from the 1970s to the 1990s Hans-Dietrich Genscher doubted the wisdom of the sanctions and showed understanding of Putin's objectives.⁷⁵

As for the key lobby groups, German industry and business interests—in particular the big companies that had invested in Russia—were at the beginning of the crisis inclined to view Russia's behaviour in Ukraine from a similar perspective to the critics on the left. In their view, sanctions were not the proper way to influence Russia and solve the crisis. When the chief executive of Siemens, Joe Kaeser, met with Putin in Moscow in March 2014, he did not mention Ukraine at all, but rather emphasized the company's commitment to do business with Russia and underlined the need for dialogue with Russia instead of sanctions.⁷⁶ Later in the spring, German industry became more supportive of sanctioning Russia, despite the economic consequences. Markus Kerber, director-general of the Federation of German Industries, announced that the federation was perfectly ready to comply with the government's line, albeit 'with a heavy heart'. He argued that gross violations of international law could not be tolerated and that peace and freedom stood above economic interests.⁷⁷ A third of German companies operating in Russia, including BASF and Opel, withheld their investments in Russia because of the crisis, the Russian economic downturn and the perceived Russian hostility to foreign investors.⁷⁸ During 2014, exports to Russia were cut by 20 per cent and 50,000 German jobs were at risk. For these reasons, the Committee on East European Economic Relations of the German Economy (Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft) in particular continued to voice scepticism towards the sanctions, warning of the increasing negative economic consequences for Germany; even so, while it expressed hopes for a quick end to the conflict, it did not challenge the government's policy directly.⁷⁹

As if the unholy alliance of capital, the left, and right-wing populism were not enough, it was joined by diverse activists. Perhaps the weirdest of all German public figures in the camp of *Russlandverstehers* was the arch-feminist Alice Schwarzer, who suddenly announced her sympathy with Putin and wanted to see Ukraine as a bridge country. Despite Putin's macho image and his use of military force in Ukraine, she regarded the Russian reaction as understandable because 'it wasn't

⁷⁵ 'Genscher für Ende der Russland-Sanktionen', *Zeit Online*, 18 Sept. 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/2014-09/hand-dietrich-genscher-putin-russland-ukraine>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁷⁶ 'Siemens CEO meets Putin and commits company to Russia', *Financial Times*, 26 March 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intel/cms/s/0/6d774238-b506-11e3-a746-00144feabdco.html#axzz2zoNU5UY2>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁷⁷ Markus Kerber, 'German industry should speak hard truths to Putin', *Financial Times*, 7 May 2014; Michael Baumhüller and Karl-Heinz Büschemann, 'Völkerrecht geht vor Geschäft', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16 June 2014; 'German industry lobby supports tougher sanctions on Russia', Reuters, 28 July 2014; 'Ukraine-Konflikt: industrie unterstützt mögliche Sanktionen gegen Russland', *Spiegel Online*, 14 June 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/unternehmen/ukraine-konflikt-bdi-unterstuetzt-moegliche-sanktionen-a-975157.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁷⁸ Jack Ewing and Alison Smale, 'In reversal, Germany cools to Russian investment', *New York Times*, 28 Dec. 2014.

⁷⁹ 'Deutsche Wirtschaft lehnt Sanktionen gegen Russland ab', *Deutsche Wirtschafts Nachrichten*, 26 June 2014, <http://deutsche-wirtschafts-nachrichten.de/2014/06/26/deutsche-wirtschaft-lehnt-sanktionen-gegen-russland-ab/>; 'Hoffnung auf vertiefte Wirtschaftsbeziehungen mit Russland', *Handelsblatt*, 12 Feb. 2015, <http://www.handelsblatt.com/unternehmen/industrie/ostausschuss-chef-eckhard-cordes-hoffnung-auf-vertieftewirtschaftsbeziehungen-mit-russland/11368460.html> (both accessed 6 Nov. 2015).

all that long ago that Nazi Germany invaded Russia'.⁸⁰ Another prominent public figure who supported the annexation of Crimea was Jürgen Elsässer, the controversial publisher of *Compact Magazin* and organizer of the so-called 'Monday demonstrations' for peace in Berlin.⁸¹

The German media are often regarded as having a bias against Russia, but analysts who examined the content more systematically concluded that the news reports on Russia were mostly accurate and factual.⁸² Among researchers and journalists, there were voices representing positions both in favour of and against sanctions.⁸³ Those inclined to understand the Russian position and criticize the West included many prominent journalists such as Gabriele Krone-Schmalz and Peter Scholl-Latour.⁸⁴ The most famous pro-Russian figure among the German research community, Alexander Rahr, had become an adviser to the Wintershall oil and gas company and was not very vocal in public during the Ukraine crisis.⁸⁵ While many researchers focusing on Russia were reluctant to come down on one side or the other in public, in April 2014 300 German intellectuals and activists wrote an open letter in support of Putin. They accused the German mass media of being Russophobic and criticized the United States for its willingness to use the crisis in Ukraine as a pretext for its own imperialist policy.⁸⁶ There were no academic researchers participating in the more famous pro-Putin appeal 'Another war in Europe—not in our name', but 50 Political Science and International Relations academics, headed by Professors Gunther Hellmann and Reinhard Wolf of Frankfurt University, replied to it with another open letter arguing that the policy of detente with Russia had to be based on realities and not on wishful thinking, and stating that the appeal was 'counterproductive because it rests on false premises, further irritates Germany's partners in Eastern Europe and strengthens the hardliners in Russia'.⁸⁷ Over 100 researchers on eastern Europe, led by the Kiev-based German scholar Andreas Umland, signed another response to the open letter criticizing its implicit tendency to reward territorial expansion.⁸⁸

⁸⁰ Alice Schwarzer, 'Warum ich trotz allem Putin verstehe!', 18 March 2014, <http://www.aliceschwarzer.de/artikel/warum-ich-trotz-allem-putin-verstehe-316675>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁸¹ Thomas Korn and Andreas Umland, 'Jürgen Elsässer, Kremlpropagandist', *Zeit Online*, 19 July 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2014-07/juergen-elsaesser-russland-propaganda>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁸² See Annabelle Ahrens and Hans-Jürgen Weiss, 'The image of Russia in the editorials of German newspapers', in Reinhard Krumm, Sergei Medvedev and Hans-Henning Schröder, eds, *Constructing identities in Europe: German and Russian perspectives* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2012), pp. 147–69; Verena Bläser, 'Zum Russlandbild in den deutschen Medien', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66: 47–8, 2014, pp. 48–53.

⁸³ Robin Alexander, 'Putin blamiert Deutschlands Außenpolitik', *Die Welt*, 10 March 2014, <http://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article125637098/Putin-blamiert-Deutschlands-Aussenpolitik.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁸⁴ Gabriele Krone-Schmalz, *Russland Verstehen: Der Kampf um die Ukraine und die Arroganz des Westens* (Munich: Beck, 2015); Andreas Austilat, Julia Proisinger and Björn Rosen, 'Ich verstehe mich gut mit Ganoven', interview with Peter Scholl-Latour, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 17 Aug. 2014, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/weltspiegel/interview-mit-peter-scholl-latour-scholl-latour-ueber-die-krise-in-der-ukraine-und-edward-snowden/9652136-2.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁸⁵ 'Deutscher Putin-Unterstützer gibt den Russland-Experten', *Die Welt*, 20 April 2014.

⁸⁶ 'Offener Brief an Putin', *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Online*, 28 March 2014, <http://www.nrhz.de/flyer/beitrag.php?id=20163>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁸⁷ Gunther Hellmann and Reinhard Wolf, 'Détente without illusions', American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 16 Dec. 2014, <http://www.aicgs.org/issue/detente-without-illusions/>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁸⁸ 'Friedenssicherung statt Expansionsbelohnung', *Zeit Online*, 11 Dec. 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/2014-12/>

Those who expressed understanding of Russia seem to have dominated the public discussion, particularly at the beginning of the crisis.⁸⁹ When Charles Grant, director of the London-based think-tank the Centre for European Reform, visited Berlin in April 2014, he ‘found that a number of senior thinkers and officials were making excuses for Russian conduct in Crimea. They more-or-less blamed not only NATO enlargement but also the EU for some of Russia’s actions, arguing that Brussels should have tried harder to consult Moscow over the Eastern Partnership’.⁹⁰ However, during the course of the crisis the climate of opinion among the foreign policy elite changed definitively, particularly after the bringing down of the Malaysian passenger aircraft, and Grant’s experience would be difficult to replicate since that point.

German public opinion reacted to the Ukrainian crisis in a rather ambivalent way, but came to support its own government’s and the EU’s policy, including the sanctions against Russia. This support seemed to solidify as the crisis unfolded. German public opinion wanted to see their country as a mediator rather than as a party to the crisis, and a clear majority ruled out military assistance to Ukraine. In March 2014, German views were divided fairly evenly: poll results indicated that about half of Germans found the government’s approach to the Ukraine crisis appropriate while 29 per cent regarded it as too hard and 18 per cent as too soft.⁹¹ In April 2014, 60 per cent of poll respondents considered the West’s response to the crisis appropriate, and in November there was 58 per cent support for the economic sanctions, despite the negative effects on the German economy.⁹² Some earlier surveys, however, had shown that more than two-thirds of Germans were opposed to economic sanctions before they were adopted; and in March 2014, 55 per cent of Germans had sympathy for Putin’s view that Ukraine belongs to Russia’s sphere of influence, while almost as many believed that the West should simply accept Russia’s annexation of Crimea.⁹³

In sum, the German response to the crisis in Ukraine, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine has been based on a firm condemnation of Russia’s action and a consequent willingness to impose sanctions. Yet this has obliterated the core principle of Germany’s traditional *Ostpolitik*, according to which the country sees itself as Russia’s chief interlocutor in Europe. Former Green

aufruf-friedenssicherung-statt-expansionsbelohnung, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁸⁹ Ralf Neukirch, ‘The sympathy problem: is Germany a country of Russia apologists?’, *Spiegel Online*, 31 March 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/prominent-germans-have-understanding-for-russian-annexation-of-crimea-a-961711.html>; ‘Was die Putin-Versteher in Deutschland antreibt’, *Welt Online*, 29 March 2014, <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article125984905/Was-die-Putin-Versteher-in-Deutschland-antreibt.html> (both accessed 6 Nov. 2015).

⁹⁰ Charles Grant, ‘What is wrong with German foreign policy?’, *CER Insights*, 6 May 2014, <http://www.cer.org.uk/insights/what-wrong-german-foreign-policy>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁹¹ ‘N24-Emnid-Umfrage zu Putin: Mehrheit der Deutschen befürchtet Annexation weiterer Gebiete durch Putin’, *N24*, 27 March 2014, <http://www.presseportal.de/pm/13399/2699056/n24-emnid-umfrage-zu-putin-mehrheit-der-deutschen-befuerchtet-annexion-weiterer-gebiete-durch-putin>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁹² ‘Mehr Zustimmung zu Russland-Sanktionen’, *ZDF Politbarometer*, 28 Nov. 2014, <http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/beitrag/video/2292994/Mehr-Zustimmung-zu-Russland-Sanktionen-#/beitrag/video/2292994/Mehr-Zustimmung-zu-Russland-Sanktionen->, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁹³ ARD, *ARD DeutschlandTREND*, March 2014, <http://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend2178.pdf>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

foreign minister Joschka Fischer defined the change in Merkel's policy as that she 'no longer defines her policies in terms of "small steps"; now she takes strategic threats seriously and confronts them head-on'.⁹⁴ Differences between Chancellor Merkel and her Christian Democratic party, and Foreign Minister Steinmeier and his Social Democrats, have been more a matter of emphasis than a real clash of two separate foreign policy lines. Different views and opinions have been presented in the German foreign policy debate, but the strongest criticism has come from parties and people who are not at the core of power. Both German industry and German public opinion came to support the foreign policy line, which was not generally expected when the crisis started.

The nature of German eastern policy and foreign policy change

Foreign policy is often explained in terms of continuity, and German foreign policy is no exception to this trend.⁹⁵ Although all theories of foreign policy at least *implicitly* contain some explanation of change, there are also a couple of attempts to deal with foreign policy change as a discrete theoretical topic.⁹⁶ German foreign policy and its change in respect of Russia provides a good case for looking at these theories on a general level; more specifically, it offers a critical edge to current mainstream theoretical approaches to German foreign policy.⁹⁷ This is a necessary corrective, because Germany's Russia policy has often been neglected in analyses of trends and changes in German foreign policy.

How profound was the change in German foreign policy? Using Charles Hermann's taxonomy, the change in German policy towards Russia was a 'program change', involving changes in the methods or means by which the goal or problem is addressed, and to some extent it was also a 'problem/goal change', where 'the initial problem that the policy addresses is replaced', in the sense that values rather than economic interests came to shape the policy response and define the goals. To some extent the long-term vision of integrating Russia in European and global structures was also altered, but partnership was still supported as a desired goal, at least rhetorically. As Foreign Minister Steinmeier insisted, 'the DNA of German foreign policy' has remained constant: the cornerstones of European integration and transatlantic relations and a commitment to a just, peaceful and resilient international order have not been challenged, although Germany is assuming greater

⁹⁴ Joschka Fischer, 'Angela Merkel's moment of truth', *Project Syndicate*, 25 Feb. 2015, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/merkel-greece-ukraine-crises-by-joschka-fischer-2015-02>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁹⁵ Sebastian Harnisch, 'Change and continuity in post-unification German foreign policy', *German Politics* 10: 1, 2001, pp. 35–60; Volker Rittberger and Wolfgang Wagner, 'German foreign policy since unification: theories meet reality', in Volker Rittberger, ed., *German foreign policy since unification: theories and case studies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 299–325.

⁹⁶ Kjell Goldmann, *Change and stability in foreign policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Charles F. Hermann, 'Changing course: when governments choose to redirect foreign policy', *International Studies Quarterly* 34: 1, 1990, pp. 3–21; Spyros Blavoukos and Dimitris Bourantonis, 'Identifying parameters of foreign policy change: an eclectic approach', *Cooperation and Conflict* 49: 4, 2014, pp. 483–500.

⁹⁷ Gunther Hellmann, 'Fatal attraction? German foreign policy and IR/foreign policy theory', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 12: 3, 2009, pp. 257–92.

responsibility in international crisis management.⁹⁸ In essence, the change in German foreign policy was more than a mere ‘adjustment’ but less than an ‘international orientation change’.⁹⁹

The theorists of foreign policy change have conceptualized the potential sources of change in roughly comparable terms without, however, spelling out clearly which of the sources is most likely to cause change and when. In Hermann’s view there are four change agents, which he sees driven by leadership, bureaucratic advocacy, domestic restructuring and external shock.¹⁰⁰ Kjell Goldmann, for his part, distinguishes between external conditions, learning based on negative feedback and a somewhat unclear category of residual factors that includes changes in the leadership and its composition.¹⁰¹ In the following paragraphs, I discuss three broad categories of explanations for foreign policy change: power politics, domestic politics and interaction dynamics.

Power-political or realist explanations would expect German policy towards Russia to depend largely on the changes in the power relations between the two states. The standard form of this explanation, however, would expect German foreign policy to change towards a more accommodating position when facing a stronger and more assertive Russia. Yet the general picture is that Germany criticized the assertive Russia more than before, not less. We can modify this view to focus more on the threat posed by Russia, and Germany’s policy as a response to that threat; but in that case German foreign policy should have changed after the war in Georgia in 2008 and not in 2012–13, unless some additional factors are marshalled to explain the delay, such as bureaucratic inertia. However, the key concerns for Germany in the latter period were Russia’s domestic politics and human rights record, not its external behaviour or its rising defence budget.

A second set of explanations is related to domestic politics in Germany. There are three strands in this thread: government and leadership, interest groups and public opinion. First, we can look at the formation of German foreign policy in terms of the leadership and government coalitions.¹⁰² Here the standard assumption is that the Social Democrats are more willing to follow the cooperative *Ostpolitik* tradition in German foreign policy than the Christian Democrats. Indeed, the Social Democrats were inclined to downplay criticism of Russia and seek a more accommodating line before the Ukrainian crisis; but the change in the domestic coalition in 2014 does not explain why Germany’s policy, including the position of the Social Democrats, was more critical towards Russia than might have been expected.

A second variant of the domestic political explanations is to look at the effects of interest groups, particularly the business lobbies of Germany’s leading indus-

⁹⁸ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, ‘The DNA of German foreign policy’, *Project Syndicate*, 25 Feb. 2015, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/german-foreign-policy-european-union-by-frank-walter-steinmeier-2015-02>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

⁹⁹ Hermann, ‘Changing course’, pp. 5–6.

¹⁰⁰ Hermann, ‘Changing course’.

¹⁰¹ Goldmann, *Change and stability*, pp. 13–15.

¹⁰² See e.g. Joe Hagan, ‘Domestic political regime change and foreign policy restructuring: a framework for comparative analysis’, in Jerel Rosati, Joe Hagan and Martin Sampson III, eds, *Foreign policy restructuring: how governments respond to global change* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 138–63.

trial sectors and how they define Germany's national interest. The importance of the Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft in this regard is paramount. For Szabo, 'German business remains the key driver of German policy towards Russia'.¹⁰³ In the event, though, the influence of the industrial lobby turned out to be less decisive than expected. In particular, the German car industry, which had a strong interest in preserving stable cooperative relations with Russia, seemed to be powerful when Russia was not a priority for the political leadership, but could not steer the key decisions when relations with Russia topped the political agenda. During the Ukraine crisis, the business lobby first resisted the sanctions but then accepted them, albeit with a reminder of their negative consequences for the German economy and hopes for their swift end.

A third domestic political approach is to look at the role of public opinion.¹⁰⁴ German public opinion, with its alleged anti-American undercurrents, has been suggested as an explanation of why Germany has been conducting a cooperative policy towards Russia; but in fact before the Ukrainian crisis it was often more critical than Germany's political leaders towards Russia and Putin. In general, public opinion towards Russia can be seen as changing in much the same way as German policy has changed. In 2003, 75 per cent of Germans had confidence in Putin's handling of world affairs—the same level as among the Russians themselves—but in 2007 this proportion had shrunk to 32 per cent while in Russia it had risen to 84 per cent.¹⁰⁵ However, there is less evidence that public opinion drove the change in German foreign policy. In 2012–13, for example, when criticism of Russia started to grow in Berlin, there was no comparable change in public opinion. Moreover, while German public opinion has been critical of the Russian leadership, it has approved the condition of German–Russian relations: although more than half of Germans judged Putin's role as prime minister of Russia negatively, a similar proportion took a positive view of his role in fostering German–Russian relations.¹⁰⁶

Foreign policy change can also be seen as driven by the dynamics of interaction between state leaders and foreign policy elites. This explanation puts emphasis on the beliefs that leaders have about each other, the principles and strategies that guide their policies, and how these beliefs, principles and strategies change on the basis of the interaction and feedback they gather on the effectiveness or normative appropriateness of their policies. In Stefan Meister's view, 'Germany's complete loss of trust in the current Russian leadership, especially the decline in personal relations between Merkel and Putin', greatly damaged bilateral relations between the two states.¹⁰⁷ This kind of explanation would assume that German

¹⁰³ Szabo, *Germany, Russia and the rise of geo-economics*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁴ Gunther Hellmann, Rainer Baumann and Wolfgang Wagner, *Deutsche Außenpolitik: eine Einführung* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2014), ch. 10.

¹⁰⁵ *Global unease with major world powers*, Pew Global Attitudes Survey (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2007), p. 63.

¹⁰⁶ 'N24-Emnid-Umfrage zur Russland-Wahl: Deutsche stellen Putin ein schlechtes Zeugnis aus', *N24*, 2 March 2012, <http://www.presseportal.de/pm/13399/2209198>.

¹⁰⁷ Stefan Meister, 'How Russia lost Germany: and how it can win it back', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 19 March 2015, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/How-Russia-Lost-Germany-17365>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

policy towards Russia changed because its leaders, Merkel and Steinmeier, became disappointed and no longer believed that the established set of practices could be continued. The development of Russia's domestic politics and its democracy certainly took a direction contrary to German hopes and wishes. Here the first key event was Putin's decision to stand for Russia's presidency again and his re-election. The second decisive turning point in German–Russian relations came when Merkel and Steinmeier felt that Putin and Lavrov had lied to them directly, once in February 2014 with the affirmation that the land borders of Ukraine would be respected, and again when Putin later assured Merkel that there were no regular Russian soldiers active in Crimea.¹⁰⁸ Merkel's policy was shaped by her feeling that it was impossible to have a frank dialogue with Putin; indeed, she is reported to have said that Putin was out of touch with reality.¹⁰⁹ The *Financial Times*, for example, reported that:

Ms Merkel used to see Mr Putin as a difficult partner, but one who she could do business with. But the Ukraine crisis has changed her mind. She realised Mr Putin was not telling the truth in their conversations—for example, in his denials that Russian troops were directly involved in the takeover of Crimea and, later, in eastern Ukraine. In public, Ms Merkel has not said Mr Putin has lied, but she has in private. “He’s lying,” that’s what she says to all the other leaders,’ says the EU diplomat.¹¹⁰

Germany's reaction to the annexation of Crimea was thus more robust than expected, not only because Russia had broken the norm of territorial integrity fundamental to the European security order, but also because Putin had personally deceived Merkel, and Lavrov his counterpart Steinmeier. These disappointments were strengthened when Putin failed to take responsibility for clearing up the questions surrounding the loss of the Malaysian aircraft.

The change in German foreign policy towards Russia also merits analysis within the framework of David Welch's theory of foreign policy change.¹¹¹ Welch argues that foreign policy change is less frequent in bureaucratic and democratic states such as Germany, which would explain the endurance of the *Ostpolitik* tradition irrespective of changes in the government coalition. Welch also argues that foreign policy change is more likely to come about when the existing policy has failed catastrophically or repeatedly: in the case of German *Ostpolitik* it was the latter—a process of 'arduous learning' as Wolfgang Seibel called it¹¹²—although the inability to prevent the Ukrainian crisis from escalating could be interpreted

¹⁰⁸ Andreas Rinke, 'How Putin lost Berlin: Moscow's annexation of Crimea has transformed Germany's Russia policy', *IP Journal*, 29 Sept. 2014, <https://zeitschrift-ip.dgap.org/en/ip-journal/topics/how-putin-lost-berlin>, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

¹⁰⁹ 'Ukraine crisis: Vladimir Putin has lost the plot, says German chancellor', *Guardian*, 3 March 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/03/ukraine-vladimir-putin-angela-merkel-russian>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

¹¹⁰ FT reporters, 'Battle for Ukraine: how the West lost Putin', *Financial Times*, 2 Feb. 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/e3ace220-a252-11e4-9630-00144feab7de.html#axzz3ig8yxHDV>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015. See also e.g. Dietmar Hawranek, Christiane Hoffmann, Peter Müller, Ralf Neukirch, Christian Reiermann, Gordon Repinski and Gregor-Peter Schmitz, 'Die mit dem Bären tanzt', *Der Spiegel*, 24 March 2014.

¹¹¹ David Welch, *Painful choices: a theory of foreign policy change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹¹² Seibel, 'Arduous learning or new uncertainties?'

as a major failure.¹¹³ Welch also argues that foreign policy change is more likely in the domain of losses—in other words, when the situation is getting worse—which was clearly the case in respect of *Ostpolitik*, defined as an attempt to bring Russia closer to the rest of Europe while preserving the agreed fundamentals of the European security order.

The theoretical approaches that lay primary emphasis on continuity in German foreign policy are not entirely wrong. They can explain very well why German policy on Russia did not change completely. Germany has not rejected the role model of civilian power, and that—along with Chancellor Merkel's belief-system—explains why Germany has categorically ruled out military solutions to the Ukrainian crisis and insisted on negotiations.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, the role conception of Germany as a close partner of Russia was no longer dominant; or rather, it persisted to the extent that Germany regarded its role as an interlocutor, but not so strongly as to prevent Germany from advocating sanctions. It is noteworthy that the older generation of foreign policy-makers appealed to the partnership model independently of party background, in contrast to those currently in power. Moreover, during the Ukrainian crisis Germany was willing to assume the much debated role of an active player, showing more leadership and responsibility in foreign and security policy than before.¹¹⁵

Conclusions

Germany's policy towards Russia has been of crucial importance during the Ukrainian crisis. Germany has defended sanctions against Russia but has also mediated attempted solutions to the conflict. Some researchers and observers have suggested that Germany has fundamentally changed its foreign policy towards Russia, jettisoning the old, cooperative *Ostpolitik*, while others have feared that Germany is actually leaning towards Russia and loosening its Cold War ties with the West.

In this article, the focus has been first on the descriptive task of judging whether German policy towards Russia has changed over the past years and, if it has, how much and in what respects. It has concluded that it is more reasonable to contrast Germany's present policy towards Russia with the post-Cold War approach rather than with the Cold War *Ostpolitik*. Contrary to those who expected German foreign policy to change very little, or to be driven primarily by commercial interests, it is clear that the old practices of post-Cold War *Ostpolitik* no longer apply. Germany is not shy of criticizing Russia sharply, and it is willing to bear the economic cost of imposing sanctions on Russia in retaliation for breaches of international law. On the other hand, the change in Germany's policy towards Russia is not total; partnership and cooperation are still seen as desirable and as

¹¹³ Spiegel staff, 'Summit of failure: how the EU lost Russia over Ukraine', *Spiegel Online*, 24 Nov. 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/war-in-ukraine-a-result-of-misunderstandings-between-europe-and-russia-a-1004706.html>, accessed 6 Nov. 2015.

¹¹⁴ Hanns W. Maull and Sebastian Harnisch, *Germany as a civilian power?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

¹¹⁵ Elizabeth Pond, 'Merkel's leadership in the Ukraine crisis', American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 24 June 2014.

the key principles of the relationship to which the countries should return in the longer run.

Second, the article set out to explain the change that has taken place, drawing on theoretical approaches to foreign policy analysis in general, and those used to explain German foreign policy in particular. Theories of change relating to power relations and domestic political factors were not particularly helpful in understanding the timing and the nature of the change. Rather, German foreign policy changed in response to Russian behaviour, as the old policy did not work and a change of policy was needed to signal to Russia that it cannot break international law with impunity. This view of the sources of the change may sound trivial, but it chimes with the idea that foreign policy change requires some kind of clear disappointment with an earlier approach, and is often not the result of a calculation of how existing foreign policies could be improved if they already fulfil their basic function.

In this article, I have not tried to address and answer the normative question of what German policy towards Russia should be like. The German approach to Russia and the Ukrainian crisis appeals to those who think that Russia should not be rewarded for its expansionist policy but who also think that military escalation should be avoided. Germany's approach has gathered a considerable degree of acceptance among the EU member states and their foreign policy elites. Whether that policy is successful in terms of bringing about a satisfactory outcome to the Ukrainian crisis is a question that can only be answered much later.