

Germany and the crisis in Ukraine: divided over Moscow?

André Härtel | Policy advisor and internal researcher at the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, France) and part-time lecturer in International Relations at Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena (Germany).

Theme

The crisis in Ukraine and the Russian annexation of Crimea are a major challenge to Germany's foreign-policy makers.

Summary

The Maidan revolution in Ukraine and the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea came as a surprise to Germany's foreign-policy makers. Traditionally, Germany and Russia are connected by a special relationship, which has historically resulted in a 'Russia first' policy and in Berlin's lack of a proper design for the entire post-Soviet region. Considering the past and with the SPD again in charge of the Foreign Ministry, one should have expected renewed domestic divisions over Moscow comparable to those of the New Ostpolitik period in the late 1960s and early 70s. Yet while the interests of German industry and a sensitive public opinion are complicating the policy on Russia, no major divisions have emerged between the political elites, but rather a 'reactive division of labour'. The main problem for a more assertive German policy vis-à-vis Moscow is the generally limited space for action and the inapplicability of certain policy options for Berlin's decision-makers.

Analysis

How it used to be: Germany's approach to Russia and the Post-Soviet region

German foreign policy has traditionally rested on three pillars: a strong transatlantic relationship, multilateralism and European integration. It is not without reason that Russia and the post-Soviet region as such hardly fit in: the relationship with Russia has always been a special one due to the strategic significance of Moscow for Berlin, the strong economic ties between both countries and the difficult common history of two major wars. This special relationship, for numeric reasons, was difficult to accommodate with the preferred German method of multilateralism and neither was it very compatible with Berlin's preferred vector of *Westbindung* (through continuing European integration and the commitment to the Western alliance) and thus had to be pursued in a more traditional bilateral way.

Of course, this regularly raised eyebrows not only among the Central East European states formerly part of the Soviet-dominated Eastern bloc, but traditionally also led to quarrels between Berlin and Washington, London or Paris when seeking a unified

position on Moscow. Finally, Germany's tendency to put Russia ahead of its political thinking on the region has led to a certain negligence in relation to the countries in between the EU and Russia, resulting in a lack of a proper German regional design and a recurrent distrust towards Berlin in the various capitals.

Below the strategic level, Berlin's approach to Moscow has traditionally also been complicated by internal divisions on the matter. Before unification, the relationship with Moscow was deeply influenced by the existence of the East German state, the GDR, and the question of how 'German-German relations' could be improved and the East-West divide overcome. While successive CDU chancellors stuck to the so-called Hallstein Doctrine of non-recognition of the GDR and stood firmly beside the Western allies in their political and ideological confrontation with Moscow, the SPD under Chancellor Willy Brandt (1969-72) eventually began to moderate Germany's political approach. The 'New Ostpolitik', still seen as the 'most substantial modification' of Bonn's post-war foreign policy, aimed at a gradual 'change through rapprochement', an improvement in economic ties and security cooperation and at the same time the acceptance of the principle of non-interference.

After unification and until the present crisis, the old divisions between a conservative approach emphasising human rights and necessary democratic changes alongside a strong partnership, and a pragmatic social-democratic policy based on long-term change through uncompromised political and economic ties have persisted. 'Frankness is better than harmony' Angela Merkel said after a 2007 EU-Russia summit, when she postponed a planned EU Cooperation Agreement with the Russians due to Vladimir Putin's criticism of the Central-East European's policies on Moscow and his treatment of the opposition at home. Her then Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, could not have been more furious: he was just about to initiate the so-called 'partnership for modernisation' (2008) with the Russians and was afraid that his diplomatic efforts would be wasted. As late as January 2014, a few months after he became Foreign Minister again and with the Maidan revolution underway, Steinmeier stood firm on his friendly and pragmatic policy on Moscow, commenting that 'we need Russia for the solution of practically all security-related crises and conflicts of our time' and 'it won't work without Russia'.¹

Berlin's Russian policy after the annexation of Crimea: a dual approach?

The Russian's reaction to the Maidan revolution came as a surprise even to experienced international observers and experts, not to speak about the increasingly less foreign-policy educated German political elite. When Vladimir Putin exploited the weakness and lack of control of the new Ukrainian government, together with allegations of a 'fascist' coup in Kiev, to support the pro-Russian elements in the Crimea with armed force –in order to provide the legal basis for the semi-peninsula's incorporation to the Russian Federation and finally for full annexation– Berlin

¹ 'Steinmeier stellt sich gegen Merkel', *Cicero Online*, 29/1/2014.

struggled to find a policy. Despite the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and the subsequent Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, an event the Western elites have tended to deliberately forget ever since, the post-Cold War order in Europe had always been taken for granted by the Germans. The question now is if the watershed event of Crimea's annexation will also influence Germany's Russia policy and its underlying domestic rifts.

A closer look at the decision-making system seems to be justified. Despite some influential figures such as Hans-Dietrich Genscher at the head of the Foreign Ministry, German foreign policy has mostly been dominated by the Chancellor, who supervises his or her own respective structures within the Chancellery. The trend of international politics being pursued increasingly through summits and meetings of heads of state and government during the last decades has also strengthened the Chancellor's position. However, there has been a tendency during the so-called 'grand coalitions' of the two biggest parties (such as at present) to grant the Foreign Minister (usually also the Vice-Chancellor) more autonomy. During the first grand coalition (1966-69), with quarrels on 'Neue Ostpolitik' in full swing, this even led to a 'dualistic foreign policy'.² Could the current crisis therefore lead to a comparable development?

Angela Merkel, in stark contrast to her predecessor Gerhard Schröder, who had developed a close personal relationship with Putin and once infamously called him 'a flawless democrat', has never been close to the Russian President. While some observers do see a connection between Merkel's East-German past and personal experience of dictatorship and hence her strong belief in liberal values (in contrast to the former KGB officer Putin, who was stationed in East Germany at the time of the *Wende*), her sober and analytical approach to policy-making might perhaps be a better explanation. Already during her first chancellorship she had sensed that Putin was far from converting his successful state-building project into a proper democracy and criticised him openly for his approach to human rights. By 2012, when Putin returned for his third term, replacing the 'puppet President' Dmitri Medvedev, and immediately took a hard line against the opposition, she had lost any illusions about the Kremlin leader and the likelihood of a new relationship. Her immediate response to the annexation of Crimea has therefore been straightforward: such a clear violation of international law is unacceptable and Putin must pay a price for his imperialist ambitions, regardless of the effects on the special relationship.³ Yet, it has also become typical of Merkel's style to lay down the broader lines to be followed while leaving room for interpretation and flexible and timely policy responses.

² See especially the publications of Hans W. Maull of Trier University on German foreign-policy making at <http://www.uni-trier.de/index.php?id=18129>.

³ 'CDU-Parteitag: Merkel droht Putin mit Wirtschaftssanktionen', *Spiegel Online*, 5/IV/2014.

This space for interpretation has had to be filled by the Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who is known to have a close working relationship with Merkel and to count on her trust. Steinmeier, who again took the post of Foreign Minister in late 2013, had initially high hopes for a renewal of his earlier 'partnership for modernisation' approach and –as a gesture– appointed Gernot Erler, an expert on Russia known for advocating a policy of 'trying to understand' and engaging with Putin's Russia through dialogue and close cooperation, as his special coordinator for Russia. Accordingly, a cooperative approach towards the Russians dominated Steinmeier's response to the crisis in Ukraine, for instance when he brought the Russians to the table to negotiate an agreement between the then President Yanukovych and the opposition on 21 February or when he first refused to support sanctions against the Russians when the latter were already actively pursuing the annexation of Crimea in mid-March. Even after the annexation and the establishment of a sanctions regime against Russia, Steinmeier repeatedly seemed to be in line with Russian demands when he was cited saying that Ukraine could not be member of NATO and that the West should not impose an ultimate foreign policy choice on Eastern European countries and when he even for some short time flirted with the idea of federalising Ukraine. In response, he was harshly criticised by the CDU's Andreas Schockenhoff, the party's former foreign-policy spokesman, for trying to 'preach that there was a healthy situation (in the region)'.⁴

Nevertheless, although Steinmeier's approach seems to be somewhat at odds with Merkel and her party's clear position, it is difficult to believe that there are major disagreements between the two or that even a 'dual foreign policy' is developing in regard to Russia. First of all, there is a good reason to believe that Merkel and Steinmeier are playing a sort of two level-game, where the former is trying to convince Germany's Western partners of the sincerity of its commitments to the alliance and international law, whereas the latter is trying to preserve an open channel for Moscow, thereby enhancing its scope for manoeuvre and, no less importantly, to please German public opinion (see below). After all, Merkel knows that her options with respect to the Russians are quite limited, especially as the Russian President has militarised the situation and sanctions do not seem to be working. Secondly, Steinmeier's cooperative approach, even if he still cherishes it himself, has come under considerable pressure in the SPD. The Vice-Chancellor, SPD party head and Minister of the Economy, Sigmar Gabriel, has involved himself heavily in the policy on Russia in the past weeks and has repeatedly supported a tougher line on Moscow, including economic sanctions.⁵ The annexation of Crimea was also a turning point for many social-democrats, especially since Germany's firm commitment to international law is still a sacrosanct component of its post-war foreign policy consensus. Finally, Putin's relentless destabilisation of Ukraine and his aggressive, non-cooperative approach to the West are increasingly discrediting Steinmeier's policies and could even weaken his profile as a crisis manager.

⁴ 'CDU-Außenpolitiker kritisiert Steinmeiers Russland-Strategie', *FAZ.NET*, 8/IV/2014.

⁵ 'Gabriel droht Russland mit weiteren Sanktionen', *Reuters Deutschland*, 15/IV/2014.

Hence, while inter-institutional rifts and ideological questions seem to play a minor role in Germany's management of the Ukraine crisis and in its Russia policy, two other factors must also be looked at closely: the influence of economic interests and public opinion.

The German economy: please do not disturb!

The strong German-Russian economic relationship is traditionally one of the key factors when it comes to explaining the special relationship between Berlin and Moscow. The annual trade volume between the two was a nearly balanced €76.5 billion in 2013 and according to Rainer Lindner, Director of the Ostausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft, 300,000 German jobs depend on business with Russia. While Germany is highly dependent on Russian energy deliveries –which account for 37% of its gas and 35% of its oil imports–, Russia is a huge market for the mighty German car industry and for its machine and chemical sectors.⁶

German dependence on Russian energy and especially gas merits special attention. Since the early 1970s the then Soviet Union and later Russia has become Germany's main source for oil and gas and the German political elite is well aware of its limited opportunities to change the picture in the near future. Although Berlin's 2011 decision in favour of *Energiewende* (energy transition) means the deliberate reduction of its future reliance on non-renewable energy sources and the availability of US shale gas and other diversification options can reduce Berlin's dependence on Russian gas, it all seems still a long way off. For the moment and notwithstanding the current crisis, Germany is counting on Russia fulfilling its contracts, admittedly also because of the widespread opinion that the Russian economy would suffer much more from a delivery stand-off.⁷ Furthermore, it must be added that, compared with other EU states, Germany's dependence on Russian gas deliveries is moderate: the Baltics (100%), Bulgaria (89%), Poland (59%) and even the Czech Republic (57%) are still well ahead in this respect.⁸

Considering the strong interdependence between the two economies, it did not really come as a surprise after the annexation of the Crimea that major German CEOs not only rejected economic and other sanctions against Russia but also spoke out in favour of dialogue with Moscow and even expressed some understanding for its position. For instance, the CEO of ThyssenKrupp, Heinrich Hiesinger, was quoted as saying: 'We have a situation here when Russia clearly sees itself pushed into a corner', and Frank Appel, CEO of the Post (German Mail) argued: 'One should think in advance about the results of a policy bringing about political change in the forecourt of a great power'. The high point was reached when

⁶ 'Gas, Öl, Autos, Maschinen: So eng sind Deutschland und Russland verflochten', *Spiegel Online*, 5/III/2014.

⁷ 'Die Deutschen und das russische Gas', *FAZ.NET*, 31/III/2014.

⁸ See the Eurogas 2012 statistics in 'Conscious Uncoupling', *The Economist*, 5/IV/2014.

Siemens CEO Joe Kaeser, without informing the Foreign Ministry, travelled to Moscow to meet Putin privately on 26 March. After Kaeser was quoted saying that his company 'will not let its long-term planning suffer from short-term turbulences', he was criticised by Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel ('I find this visit a little odd'; 'We cannot give the impression that we sell our values... like moneybags').⁹

Kaeser's visit to Moscow had been a challenge first of all to the Foreign Minister, whose 'partnership for modernisation' policy approach had been welcomed by a German economy always wary of 'destructive' policies that focused excessively on human rights and political change. The visit created the impression that business was already in the driving seat of Germany's Russian policy and made Berlin look very bad for a moment. Moreover, the SPD was also painfully reminded of its former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who made the controversial decision of becoming Chairman of the advisory board of North Stream, a Gazprom subsidiary, after his chancellorship in 2005. However, and as yet further evidence of the decreasing role of inter-institutional rifts in Berlin's Russian policy, Steinmeier –like much of the rest of the political spectrum– seemed to be unconcerned about German industry's resistance to a tougher policy including economic sanctions. On 9 April, the Foreign Minister spoke to a gathering of German business leaders who were probably disappointed by his conclusions: 'We should not be mistaken by assuming the existence of an economic world independent of a political one, which (meaning the former) is not concerned by the lack of important conditions for a peaceful order in Europe'.¹⁰

Public opinion: ancient spectres revisited or a painful learning process?

German public opinion surveys regarding the crisis and foreign policy options have revealed surprising attitudes which many observers thought had been overcome over the many years of *Westbindung* (commitment to the West). Contrary to the general rejection of Russia's annexation of Crimea by the German political elite, 33% of Germans believed that the Kremlin had good reasons for doing so and a stunning 54% thought that the West should accept the annexation. Even more worrying, from the point of view of the Western alliance, were the results of a survey on the preferred German position in relation to Russia: while only 45% thought that Germany should be 'firmly bound to the Western alliance', 49% believed it should take a 'middle position between the West and Russia'. Thus, only 20% of Germans support tough sanctions and only 19% favour Russia's expulsion from the G8.

Equally surprising is the relatively sharp difference between East and West Germans, with the former having a much more friendly and cooperative position on Moscow (41% believe Russia has good reasons for the annexation; 60% opt for a middling course). While the results seem to put a question mark on what has so far

⁹ 'Gabriel findet Kaesers Besuch bei Putin schräg', *DIE WELT online*, 30/III/2014.

¹⁰ 'Versuch einer Vereinnahmung', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11/IV/2014, S. 2.

been Berlin's foreign policy consensus, the picture becomes more ambivalent when looking at positions on Ukraine and Russia. While a convincing 72% are in favour of supporting Ukraine economically and 57% believe that the Yanukovych government was the main cause of the crisis, 76% of Germans do think that the relationship with Russia is defective and 55% believe that Russia is a threat.¹¹ What are the reasons for these ambivalent opinions? Why are the Germans so afraid of the Russians and so unsatisfied with the relationship on the one hand, but so eager to appease them even at the expense of international law and alliance-cohesion on the other?

Some observers point to the tragic history of the relationship between Germans and Russians and especially German guilt for the death of millions of Russians (and, although often ignored, of Ukrainians) during WWII. Conflict with the Russians, so the argument goes, can only lead to total destruction and must be avoided at any cost. Moreover, there is a strong element of romanticism in German thinking about Russia, which in its more sentimental version tends to idealise the alleged 'harmony, unity and deepness of the Russian soul' (tempting Germans to take Russian authoritarianism as something natural), while its more aggressive version argues for a spiritual alliance of Germans and Russians against an alien, American-dominated Western 'culture of individualism' and 'materialist obsession'.¹² Nevertheless, although the generalised fear in Germany of war against Russia is undeniable and there is some truth in the claim of anti-Americanism, especially on the extremes of the German political spectrum (ie, Die Linke and AfD), both historical and ideological arguments can be stretched too far.

With a greater likelihood, the ambivalence of many Germans on the Russian question is better understood in a broader and more contemporary context: since the Bosnian war in the mid-1990s a painful learning process has begun, during which the war-averse Germans had to accept taking part in military action in and outside Europe and to live up to alliance commitments. They still prefer to live on the 'peace dividend', looking inwards and focusing on their economic fortunes. Now, with the country's quasi-hegemonic position in the EU states and the de-facto withdrawal of the US security guarantee, they fear that the phase of possible 'self-restraint' is finally over. Furthermore, they might even have to accept leadership being forced on them as a result of the 'primacy of politics', 'normalising' their attitude to security politics (and implying, first of all, investing more in military infrastructure) and relegating their economic objectives (such as in the case of sanctions against Moscow). With the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's gamble, the learning process might have reached a critical phase.

For now, it seems that Russia's bold move in the Crimea has merely aggravated the

¹¹ For poll results see *ARD Deutschlandtrend* for March and April 2014, 'Ein gefährliches Land' (based on an Allensbach survey), *FAZ.NET*, 15/IV/2014, and other surveys by FORSA, TNS and EMNID.

¹² 'How Western is Germany? Russia crisis spurs identity conflict', *Spiegel Online*, English edition, 9/IV/2014.

Germans' fear of their own assertiveness and of the need to become more assertive in their foreign policy. This might in turn be an important reason why some of the German elite and the general public are willing to appease the Russians, to downplay their unjust seizure of Crimea and to 'understand them' from a historical point of view (as shown by the newly coined *Russlandversteh'er*: 'he who understands Russia'). Nevertheless, if the Kremlin continues on its present course, refusing to cooperate with the West and satisfying its territorial ambitions in the Eastern Ukraine, the German debate about a 'more decisive and substantial role in the world' (as demanded by the Federal President Joachim Gauck at the 2014 Munich Security Conference)¹³ might quickly take a new turn.

Conclusion:

The crisis in Ukraine and the Russian annexation of Crimea are a major challenge to Germany's foreign-policy makers. The course of events since the end of November 2013, when the Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, largely came as a surprise to the German political elite, which is still fighting to shrug off its rather reactive role. Developing a more active policy vis-à-vis the Russians is, however, a very difficult task for Berlin, since policy on Russia policy has traditionally been a contested issue between the bigger parties. Three major points have been made here. First, notwithstanding some minor differences, Angela Merkel and her Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier have so far avoided being caught up in the long shadows of the *Neue Ostpolitik* and its respective domestic rifts. Thus, Germany's Russian policy is not as divided as many observers might think. Secondly, German public opinion is going through a critical phase of self-awareness of the country's role in the world. This phase might, depending on the course of events, either lead to even more self-restraint and a more inward-looking orientation or to a final breakthrough in the debate about a bigger role in the world.

Finally, it is clear for the moment that Germany remains constrained in its ability to apply a hard-policy approach. When Ursula von der Leyen, the German Minister of Defence, said in mid-March that NATO should increase its presence on its Eastern borders, she was harshly criticised by the SPD, the Greens and the FDP leadership for 'contributing to an escalation of the situation', whilst even her colleagues from the CDU refused to support her very much.¹⁴ With economic sanctions already unpopular among the influential German industry bosses and the public, this episode reveals that any resort to a hard-power approach (even if only a show of force) to put pressure on Vladimir Putin is unimaginable for Germany's elites. Despite taking part in NATO's out-of-area campaigns for quite some time, Germany is just not yet a 'normal' actor in security policy and still too much used to others ensuring its own peace.

¹³ "Gauck fordert aktivere deutsche Außenpolitik", *Die Welt* (Online), 31.1.14.

¹⁴ "Koalition streitet über NATO-Präsenz im Osten", *Spiegel Online*, 23.3.14.

With such a limited policy space and a lack of a proper design for the development of the Post-Soviet region as such, Germany will therefore be hardly able to develop into a more assertive player in the current crisis, let alone assume a leadership role. That, in turn, will also de-motivate other alliance members from being tougher on the Russians, who will be increasingly pleased by the lack of a clear red line to their expansionist policies in the region.