



CONFRONTATION AND COOPERATION

1000 YEARS OF POLISH–GERMAN–RUSSIAN RELATIONS

VOL. II/2015: 22–26

DOI: 10.1515/conc-2015-0009

Piotr Madajczyk
Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland

Germany Towards the Crisis in Ukraine

Key words: German – Russian relations, trade relations, Partnership Instrument, annexation of Crimea

Introduction

The history of Russian – German relations differs from the Russian – Polish one – despite the Second World War it is less encumbered with distrust. In Germany, Russia is identified with the USSR, and good relations with it are treated as an indicator of successful reconciliation after Second World War. Therefore the attitude towards Russia has been positive for years, additionally strengthened by “Gorbachevmania” and the conviction (in the 21st century) that Germany will play a particular role in Partnership Instrument, meant to lead Russia to western standards and values.

Pro-Russian or anti-Russian?

In Germany the image of Russia was shaped to perceive it as a part, according to terminology by Karl Deutsch, continued by Alexander Wendt, of pluralistic commonwealth of security. There are conflicts in it, but a war is not the rightful way of solving them. Such an attitude resulted in liquidating numerous German science posts dealing with East Europe. They seemed pointless in the 21st century.

The Russian – Georgian war in 2008 had not breached this image significantly, however afterwards there followed signals changing the attitude of the German public towards the policy of the Russian authorities: the attitude towards non – government institutions, the issues of Pussy Riot and Greenpeace. In 2014 the protests in Kiev were observed with friendly attitude. They got positive publicity in German media as the Ukrainian democratic movement. German public was friendly towards peace demonstrations, suiting the German ideal of peaceful transformation. This atmosphere, however, started to change when barricades, burning tyres, and violence appeared also on the side of the demonstrators. The same mechanism was put into motion that made the Germans perceive “Solidarity” not as the pursuit for freedom but the threat for peace and wellbeing of Europe.

However, the accusations for fascism and anti-Semitism as well as the descriptions of the Right Sector were not prevailing in German media, even though the negative side of Maidan was presented there as well. In “Der Spiegel” on 20th March 2014 it was stated quite rightly, that the German society was not outraged with the annexation of Crimea, the reaction was more like a shrug. According to the TNS

survey from March 2014, 54% of Germans supported the approval of the annexation of Crimea by the West, 55% expressed the understanding for Putin for the fact that he treats Ukraine and Crimea as the part of the Russian zone of influence, and 60% considered the reactions of the West as appropriate. It was because of the anxiety connected with the potential negative influence of sanctions on the German economy and unemployment.

The feeling prevailing among the German society at that time could be described as insecurity. In a survey commissioned by ARD and "Welt" it was noted that the number of people perceiving Germany in a new role as an intermediary between NATO and Russia, as if Germany had not been the part of NATO, was increasing. This tendency was especially strong in eastern lands, where such a role was supported by 60% of respondents. It was also accompanied with the desire of deepening the European integration (65%), connected with the conviction that the expansion of the EU eastwards was a mistake (38%). Finally, it was completed with the increasing lack of trust towards Russia: 76% stated that the Russian – German relation is negative; around one – third presented the opinion that it is worth keeping good relations with Russia; the majority had negative connotations connected with it. Even if the surveys were not fully representative they confirmed the confusion of the German society.

This atmosphere was reflected in mass media. A certain group of eminent personalities was invited, whereas politicians and journalists expressing critical views towards Russia were unwelcome. At the same time the opinion was present (it is difficult to state whether it was created on purpose) that German media present a hostile attitude towards Russia, or even accused of Russian – phobia. It is worth noticing in this context that, according to the analysis including the period of time till the end of April 2014, personalities from Ukraine appeared in discussions twice less often than the ones from Russia. Ukrainian diplomats were absent in them. The analyzed programs were not of anti – Russian character, on the contrary, the tone of looking for the consent was prevailing. However, in September 2014 the Board of Supervisors of the public TV station ARD accused it of "anti-Russian" tendencies. It came as a surprise also to many German commentators.

German interest in Russia

In such an atmosphere the pressure put by business circles was of great significance, which had undoubtedly had influence on the reticence of German politicians in their actions. In Russian – German contacts these were energetic resources and Gazprom that played the most significant role. Especially since the Nord Stream was completed, which connected Germany with Russia. It's second line started to work at the end of 2012, providing it with the capacity of 55 billion m³. The shareholders are the owners of two German energy concerns E.ON SE as well as Wintershall Holding GmbH, possessing 15.5% of shares.

Business matters ought to be taken into consideration especially due to the crisis that has been present for a few years. Yet, they should not be overestimated and mistaking the reality with the image created by pressures of companies. In the EU scale the investments in Russia make merely 1%. However, the strength of pressure is understandable, even if we apply a superficial perspective to look at German investors in Russia: concern Metro with the network of Cash&Carry and Media Markt, Fraport having shares in airports, Siemens planning 2.5 billion worth investments, Continental producing tyres, Adidas, Henkel, BMW, Daimler, BASF, E.ON, Deutsche Bank, Deutsche Post, etc. All in all, around 6 thousand companies and 20 billion euro worth investment!

Germany has weaker financial links with Russia than France, Austria, Italy or Cyprus. On the other hand, 30% of Union's export to Russia is attributable to Germany, therefore particular sensitivity to potential complications. Germany might be the main exporter to the Russian market, yet its trade with Russia makes only 3 – 4% of its foreign trade. About 10% of German export companies participate in export, whereas merely around 1% in import. It is estimated then that with the forecasted increase of 2% of GNP in Germany, sanctions could decrease it by half percent. No doubt the sanctions are quite a nuisance for the part of German economy. The export to Russia decreased by almost 17% during the first eight months of 2014, the trend getting stronger in August.

Gerhard Schröder, the former Chancellor, presented opinion against sanctions, so did professor Alexander Rahr, active on the border of economy and politics, and Eckhard Cordes managing "Ost-Ausschuss", an organization representing the interests of the associations of German industrialists active in East Europe. The argu-

ments are not surprising: sanctions will be harmful for European economy, which will also affect Ukraine; Russia will turn towards China and seek for markets there; Germany ought to act as an intermediary and prevent the escalation of the conflict. The anxieties of companies were even more understandable since the German – Russian economic cooperation had weakened before the Ukrainian crisis. It was vivid in worsening prognosis for the economic development in Russia as well as in the stagnation of German export to East Europe, including Russian – German trade exchange. In 2013 there was a decrease in German investments in Russia, the outflow of German capital had got stronger even before the annexation of Crimea, at the beginning of 2014.

After the annexation, companies started to postpone the realization of the planned projects. They feared Russian counter – sanctions, there appeared difficulties in financing projects resulting from the lowering of Russia's rating. A part of companies started to withdraw their capital, especially the profit gathered in previous years in Russian branches. Companies selling merchandise to Russia began to experience the effects of the decreasing value of Russian currency. Russian companies started to be cautious in contacts with German ones. Western banks began to withdraw from the Russian market without renegotiating the deadlines of loan payments but demanding them to be paid.

Should the eastern NATO flank be strengthened up?

The text above presents the conditions, the ambiguous social attitude and the pressure of economic circles, in which the government of Angela Merkel had to work. It is most likely that psychological factor was of significance as well, since the minister of foreign affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier had been involved in Partnership Instrument a couple of years before. The Russian policy towards Ukraine confirmed the futility of his former concepts of foreign policy.

Chancellor Merkel was trying to preserve moderation, was emphasising the necessity of gradual introduction of the sanctions and providing Moscow with enough time to change its policy. She also accentuated the need for the cooperation with the USA and the partners from the Union, especially with Poland. This policy suited the attitude of German publics, however it meant, and Germany was not an exception here, the actual approval of the annexation of Crimea.

Pacifist attitudes, as well as the conviction dominant in Germany that any use of force implies militarism and reference to the darkest German traditions, were the key reference points. Therefore, Jürgen Trüttin, the head politician of the Green Party called the appeals to strengthen the eastern NATO flank “wielding the saber”. The idea of new NATO units stationing in Poland increased opposition as well as the comments of the NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen on expanding NATO eastwards. The slogan *soft power* was prevailing as the key tool of the EU foreign policy.

Such attitudes, dominant in the society, meant the marginal role of the option critical towards Russia in the initial phase of the crisis. At this critical point the fate of Crimea had confirmed the negative experience of the unsuccessful Partnership Instrument. There were no signs of Russia adjusting to western standards; instead there was aggressive policy. The possibility of dialogue and consensus should not be abandoned, yet the western policy ought to be more cautious, foreseeing the likelihood of the escalation of the conflict in the future.

This option was represented by the German minister of defense Ursula von der Leyen. Her speeches concerning the necessity of strengthening the eastern NATO flank caused such a strong public opposition that she had practically resigned from presenting in public her opinion on Ukraine. People perceiving Russian policy like her could be found in other parties. In CDU it was Wolfgang Schäuble comparing the annexation of the Sudetes by Hitler with the one of Crimea by Putin, which resulted in protests of, among the others, former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and the Chancellor Merkel. At the same time strong voices supporting this comparison could be found in social – democratic “Die Zeit”.

People sharing these views, although in opposition, were also amongst the Green Party, however it is versatile. The head of the party Simone Peter was repeating spells about diplomatic actions in order to prevent the further escalation of the conflict. According to her, the suggestions forwarded by von der Leyen were made without careful thinking; according to Trüttin it was “a carefree blabbering”. On the other hand, Rebecca Harms claimed that Schröder should be forbidden to express any views on Russia. The last tendency was to be supported for internal – political reasons by the right wing of the Green Party focused around Cem Özdemir, and in “Linke” party by the fundamental wing.

Putin's policy was strongly supported, although in a more balanced way than by the radical right or left

wing, by other option, which can be referred to as pro-Russian *Realpolitik*. Its main assumptions were well described by Helmut Schmidt, most openly expressing his opinions. He comprehends Putin's actions and criticizes the standpoint of the West. Economic sanctions will not bring expected results, they are of symbolic nature and will affect the West as much as Russia. Excluding Russia from G8 is harmful merely for the dialogue. The involvement of Union in Ukraine and Georgia is a mistake, since Union has nothing to search for there and Ukrainian nation does not exist.

Arguments of Schmidt remind of the ones of Schröder. Actions taken by Russia were against the rules of international law, however the European Union underestimated the divisions in Ukraine. Putin's policy is motivated by the fear of Russia being surrounded, the pursuit to consolidate it and rebuild it economically in order to be treated as the equal partner of the USA. What caused the crisis around Crimea and Ukraine is the misunderstanding of the situation in Ukraine – the fact that it is culturally divided into European and Russian parts. Thus letting it face the alternative: either joining the Union or integration with the Russian area of influence, was a mistake. Moreover, it was not Russia that was first to break international law, but NATO during its intervention in the Balkans against Serbia, since it had not got the mandate of the UN Security Council.

The last option was the most decisive: we do not accept the annexation of Crimea, but we do understand the motifs of Russia. Further cooperation with Russia, as well as the dialogue with it, are the priorities. This option is strongly supported by the left wing (most of all "Linke"), applying the accusations of Ukraine for violence and fascism, and considering the western policy to be the equal reason for the conflict. This option is represented by Sahra Wagenknecht and Gregor Gysi, claiming that both sides are to be blamed, and the sanctions against Russia are pointless, like "wielding the saber" by NATO at the Russian border. For the sake of Russia Ukraine ought to remain beyond the western structures.

Sometimes there appeared on the left wing (not including social – democrats) attempts to take a different view on the conflict in the East. In his article in "Neues Deutschland" Holger Politt pointed at the Polish support for Ukrainian membership in the EU, asking then about the Russian zone of influence, and the relation between recognizing it and the right of the states that had been established after the USSR collapsed, or the

necessity "to understand" in Germany not only Russia, but also Ukraine. So far such opinions have been of marginal importance.

Critical standpoint of post-communist left wing converges with the analogical one of the extreme right wing. The common ideological foundation is made by the contempt towards the European Union, NATO and the United States. Also anti-European "Alternative für Deutschland" opted against the sanctions. In this case it is difficult to say about unanimous attitude towards Russia, yet the strong emphasis of its interests is clearly visible, as well as treating Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia or Moldavia as de facto the parts of Russia. The concepts of this party are rooted in a broader trend of the European extreme right wing's support for the Russian actions.

The hardening

The opinions of Chancellor Merkel about Putin living in a different world imply that at the beginning even she could not comprehend the Russian difference of perspective and projected western values on it. She was not able to explain this policy in a rational way. Like many western politicians she had been thinking for a long time that the crisis stemmed from the lack of proper communication with Russia, and the agreement with Moscow was indispensable for the stabilization of Eastern Europe. The lack of proper communication was not defined as the misunderstanding of Russia in Germany, but as the inability to make it aware of the aims of the West and benefits for Russia resulting from it.

Merkel's position had been confronted since May 2014 with the growing pressure that stronger policy was necessary. More severe sanctions and the increased presence of NATO in the East should be taken into consideration. The speech of vice-chairman of CDU/CSU fraction, Andreas Schockenhoff, critical towards the policy of Steinmeier may be reminded here. He was joined by Karl-Georg Wellmann from CDU, strongly criticizing Russian policy, nationalism, arrogance and anti-western propaganda. Wellmann, the Christian-democrats' specialist in eastern issues, is a balanced politician, previously skeptical when it came to the sanctions, appealing for diplomatic actions and rescuing Russian-European relations. The changing atmosphere is well illustrated by critical articles on the situation in Russia or Russian cultural policy in German press.

In German policy the tendency to cease searching for the reasons for the conflict in improper communication was vivid. Now, they began to be set in the internal – political conflict. Seen like that, frustrated Russia, not being treated as an equal partner by the USA and the Union, had started the expansion of its Euro-Asian influence zone since 2011. Russia would have been there a hegemon. This project was not perceived as aggressive, but rather as one of possibilities of establishing Russian zone of influence between highly developed Union and dynamic China. However, as early as on the turn of 2011 and 2012 Moscow was confronted with the deepening crisis. It resulted, among the others, in the increasing influence of the extreme right wing, out of the Kremlin control.

In such a situation, Putin supported a group in the authorities focused on the mobilization of the society basing on the nationalistic slogans. The program included actions against liberal demonstrations, non-government organizations and homosexuals. In the fall of 2012 Putin lingered towards the idea of integrating the society by economic development. In the internal policy it was the time of liberalization. However, instead of stable economic growth the inflation darted. Thus, facing the crisis in Ukraine at the beginning of 2014 Russia returned to the policy of power and nationalistic slogans. It was this narration that Putin referred to after the annexation of Crimea, applying the elements of rhetoric of the extreme right wing. It means that in the nearest future Russian policy will be unpredictable, and the West will have little influence on it.

Such an assessment of the situation meant the hardening of the German policy towards Russia, although it still involves diplomatic attempts aiming at pacifying the conflict. Chancellor Merkel was clearly distancing from the pressure of business circle, emphasising the will to introduce further sanctions if necessary. There appeared opinions in articles on “a deep crisis of trust” and doubts concerning Russia’s interest in the cooperation with Europe. The extent of propaganda war and miss-information performed by Kremlin had finally been noticed.

Also the election of Petro Poroschenko for the president of Ukraine, well received in Germany, was of importance. The difficult situation he was in was noticed, especially the fact that the support for him was actually weaker than what the result of elections could suggest. However, the opportunity for starting reforms was emphasised if he could take advantage of the EU support as well as social initiatives. His peace plan was well re-

ceived. The assessment of October parliamentary elections was dominating as the victory of the pro-European liberal option.

The voice of those who opted for the more conciliatory policy towards Russia became less audible, although in an October interview Matthias Platzeck was consistently considering the sanctions to be a mistake, escalating the conflict and harmful for Germany. There were still plenty of medial conflicts between the ones who understood Putin (Putin – *Versteher*) and the ones fiercely attacking him (Putin – *Basher*).

New situation was described by a SPD politician, Karsten D. Vogt as follows: the long-term objective is still all European peace order with Russia as its part. However, authoritarian tendencies in Russian internal policy, turning of Russian elites back from Europe, the annexation of Crimea, and the situation in the eastern Ukraine fundamentally change the conditioning of this policy. It means the beginning of a new phase of German eastern policy and its policy towards Russia. As Vogt emphasised, eastern policy, unlike the policy in Bismark’s times, does not equal the policy towards Russia. It also takes into account the interests of East and South -East Europe. Russian policy not only had breached international rules but also undermined the trust of the West towards Russia as its partner. Rebuilding the trust will take a long time. The cooperation with Russia should be resumed only in the areas in which it brings results. In other areas it is necessary to prevent risk and danger.

What worries, however, is the fact that the change of German policy is set in an extremely unstable social context. There is no doubt that Russia has lost the friendly attitude of the majority of German society, although the negative image of this country does not prevail. There is, however, no trust towards it. The majority of Germans considers Russia to be a superpower. The same number claims that it is necessary to cooperate with it and the USA. Does it imply splitting up with the United States?

What is more, Germany is divided into eastern and western parts. In the western one the support for the sanctions is much stronger, whereas in the eastern the opinion that it is the Russian – Ukrainian conflict of no significance for the West.

Prof. Piotr Madajczyk, Ph.D. – Polish Academy of Sciences (Poland), Institute of Political Studies, Department of German Studies. E-mail: pmada@isppan.waw.pl.