Leadership Revised

How Did the Ukraine Crisis and the Annexation of Crimea Affirm Germany's Leading Role in EU Foreign Policy?

Wolfgang Koeth*

The Annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 and Russia's destabilizing role in eastern Ukraine have put an end to the EU's illusion that Europe had for good arrived in the post-modern world, where military conflicts and territorial conquests would belong only to history books. For the last decade, the EU had built its foreign policy on the assumption that, in the absence of classical military threats, security challenges would stem from non-state actors: terrorism, failed states, organized crime and Balkan-style regional conflicts.[1] Brussels generally assumed that, in the twenty-first century, foreign policy was based on the projection of norms and values abroad rather than on military strength.[2] The belief that this post-modern policy approach would have the power also to transform former Soviet republics into modern European states was the main driver behind the association agreements signed between the EU and Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in 2014.

In line with its post-war pacifist traditions, Germany has been a strong promoter of a rules-based multilateral foreign policy.[3] Its own foreign policy has been characterized by its role as a civilian power and its *Ostpolitik* or special relationship with the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Also, the German-Russian relationship had been significant for Germany not only in economic terms, but also in political terms, as it raised Berlin's significance in both EU and NATO. Therefore, the annexation of Crimea and Moscow's thinly disguised military aggression in Eastern Ukraine had a strong impact on German foreign policy, which not only prompted Berlin to reconsider the nature of its relations with Moscow, but also changed the dynamics in the European Union, where Germany saw its leadership

*Wolfgang Koeth is Senior Lecturer, European Institute of Public Administration, Maastricht, Netherlands.

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role strengthened, although rather by accident than by design. This emancipation of Germany as an active player in EU foreign policy already became visible in Kosovo and in Afghanistan, after the Kohl government had been replaced by a Red-Green coalition in 1998. While not seeking out a leadership role, Berlin would also no longer avoid such a role, thus finding itself in a position of accidental leadership.[4]

This article analyses how Germany, in particular through the Ukraine crisis starting in 2014, affirmed itself—although reluctantly—as a nexus of decision making in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and became the de facto leading nation for defining the EU's response towards Russia. The article points out the internal and external consequences of this new role, also with regards to other policy fields, and, more in particular, for the Baltic States. For this, we first need to take a closer look at the tenets of German foreign policy and at the specificity of German-Russian relations.

German Foreign Policy: Coming in from the Cold (War)

For the casual observer, it might sometimes be difficult to understand the policy drivers behind German foreign policy. Whereas most countries see foreign policy as an instrument to defend their political and economic interest abroad by influencing other countries to behave in a certain manner, attempts to use foreign policy as a means to gain influence have been, for decades, a taboo for post-war Germany.[5] Although in the first twenty years of the FRG's existence revisionist tendencies were still present in the country, the total rejection of the nationalistic ideology was one of the founding pillars of post-war Western German identity.[6] This new approach to foreign policy, partly driven by a sense of guilt and shame about the Nazi past, partly driven by fear of the spread of communism, eradicated the concepts of "national interest" and identity from the mainstream political vocabulary.

Germany's uneasy relationship with its past, its reliance on its Western allies and its need to redefine its place in Europe and the World made the country a champion of European integration. The process of European integration allowed the Federal Republic to assume a new role among the civilized nations that would be compatible with its economic interests (access for its industrial products to the common market). This desire was perfectly compatible with the desire of Germany's neighbours to keep Germany in check through supranational cooperation mechanisms that would prevent it from again going its own *Sonderweg* (special path), while allowing them to benefit from the dynamism of the German industry. Thus, the FRG became the poster boy of European integration: a positive and

productive role for Germany in international politics existed only in and through Europe.

Whereas Germany's Euro-Atlantic integration proved to be a win-win situation for both Germany and its allies, it was the relations with the Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern bloc that became, in the 1960s and 1970s, the litmus test of West German foreign policy. The geopolitical situation of Germany demanded a degree of pragmatism: the division of Germany, family ties of many Germans behind the Iron Curtain, and the question of West Berlin (a Western enclave within the GDR) made reasonable working relations mandatory. The *Ostpolitik* of chancellor Brandt in the early 1970s—symbolized by the famous *Kniefall* (genuflection)—towards the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1970) had the triple benefit of facilitating human exchanges, opening markets for the (West) German industry and allowing the FRG to occupy the "moral high ground" vis-a-vis Eastern Germany, since it assumed the responsibility for its past.

The possibility to promote freedom and democracy not only on behalf of itself, but on behalf of the whole Western world, helped Germany even more to reinforce its new post-modern identity based on multilateralism and "soft power", which is still the driving force of German policy today. When the GDR collapsed in 1989, the magnetic attraction of the West German model combining economic wealth with democracy and the rule of law, moral superiority and a positive international reputation became thus irresistible for Eastern Germans.

Germany and the CFSP

The Slow Emancipation of Germany's Foreign Policy in a European Context

The "2+4" agreement of 1990 finally put an end to the old cold war order and restored Germany's sovereignty in foreign policy as well. Initial fears among its Western partners about the hegemony of a united Germany in Europe—in particular after Germany's uncoordinated recognition of Croatia and Slovenia in 1991—resulted in the setting up of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) with the 1993 Maastricht Treaty. The CFSP was defined as a greater diplomatic operation and balance of power exercise in which the Member States sought to firmly embed an enlarged German State in a stronger European entity.[7] Also, in this period of major geopolitical changes, in which Europe had suffered a loss of face during the Gulf and Yugoslav crises, CFSP was seen as a tool to strengthen European identity.[8]

Tellingly, during the design phase of the Maastricht treaty, Germany was among the states that advocated a more supranational CFSP, including decisions made by qualified majority voting (which would have abandoned national veto

rights) and a greater involvement of the European Parliament—proposals that were strongly rejected by two other major foreign policy players, the UK and France. From an outside view, it could seem that Germany allowed its policy space in foreign policy to be reduced through its integration into the CFSP. However, it was the "uploading" of its foreign policy into the CFSP that enabled Germany to emancipate itself as a foreign policy actor within the EU framework.

But being a part of a European policy framework also made it more difficult for Germany to pursue its former policy of avoiding political responsibility by the means of *Scheckbuchdiplomatie* (cheque-book diplomacy) which consisted in financially contributing to policies implemented by its partners while staying itself out of the limelight. Taking political responsibility required Germany to overcome its patterns of avoidance and of military non-engagement (as in the 1991 Gulf war or in the first two Balkan wars).

This was not uncontroversial: when German troops started to participate in international peacekeeping missions in the 1990s, parts of the German political spectrum warned of an infamous return to a militaristic tradition that would fuel fears about a new German hegemony and imperialism: fears, that were, in general, more voiced within Germany itself than outside the country. It was in Kosovo in 1999 when Germany definitively managed to move beyond its history and accepted that its own military intervention was justified—as part of an US-led coalition—in order to honor its post-war commitment to the slogan of "never again" with regards to genocides and concentration camps.

With hindsight, the fear of Germany abandoning the European project in favor of a *Sonderweg* proved unjustified: the Kohl government, dominated by a generation of politicians that were still traumatized by the experience of fascism and WWII, were still wholeheartedly committed to the European project and had a natural dislike of any German attempts of domination. Instead, its economic power, demography and geographical position made Germany gravitate towards the power center of Europe. This role, which became very obvious with the financial crisis from 2008 on, was not only accepted, but actively supported by many of its central and eastern European neighbors. The attitude of these countries was best expressed by Polish foreign minister Sikorski when he publicly stated in 2011 that—within the context of the Euro crisis—"I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity."[9]

Within the EU, Germany's close partnership with France had allowed the country to stay out of the limelight while still actively shaping EU policies in line with its own interests. Major initiatives (as the economic and monetary union) were prepared in close cooperation and then proposed as a joint endeavor: this matched the desire of France to *increase* and of Germany to *decrease* its profile as

driving force behind shaping the European policy agenda. But not always did the interests of Berlin and Paris match: the enlargement process, which started in the second half of the 1990s (and culminated with the accession of ten mainly central and eastern European states in 2004) was, above all, driven by Germany striving to export stability to its Eastern neighbors while expanding the EUs single market eastwards. Paris saw enlargement rather as a threat to a closer political union and as a weakening of the French/German leadership in the EU.

Within the CFSP, the special relationship with Russia proved to be significant for Germany, not only in economic, but also in political terms. First of all, this relationship was highly symbolic, Russia being the country that had suffered most from German atrocities in WWII. Good relations with Russia served Germany as a way to exhort its militaristic past. Also, the privileged relationship gave Germany additional significance within the EU and NATO, thus compensating for a lack of military power. Therefore, Europe quite naturally started looking at Germany—which had already taken on a leadership role in the post 2008 Euro crisis—after the annexation of Crimea by Russia. Again, in order to properly assess Berlin's attitude in the Ukraine crisis, one would have to look at the history of German-Russian relations.

The Specificity of German-Russian Relations

Through the centuries, Germany and Russia have always played a key role for each other in their respective foreign policies. Both countries share many similarities: neither country has natural borders; both have historically expanded at the expense of their neighbor's liberty and sovereignty in an attempt to increase their influence and power,[10] and both countries have repeatedly cooperated in this regard, as in Rapallo or with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In the twentieth century, both countries justified imperialist tendencies with ideology—and both found their imperial ambitions defeated by history. For both countries, the redefinition of their national identity can be explained by their past. Whereas Germany managed to acquire a new post-modern identity through a complete break with its past, Russia went the opposite way: trying to reconnect with the past by reclaiming its former glory.

The combination of historical guilt, the gratitude to Russia for having enabled German unification and the departure of Soviet troops, combined with its economic interests, may explain why Germany counted as one of the most fervent supporters of Russia in the early 1990s. At this time, Russia—as were the other successor states of the Soviet Union—was faced with a profound economic and social crisis. For Germany, the demise of the Soviet Union and the emancipation

of Central and Eastern European nations were seen as the confirmation of Francis Fukuyama's "End of History", in which European values like democracy and human rights were shared from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

But Germany underestimated the sense of humiliation of many Russians, who were more likely to suffer the dramatic fall of standards of living than to profit from the geopolitical benefits brought about by the end of the Cold War. The mismatch of perceptions was symbolized in the figure of Michael Gorbachev, who enjoyed pop star status in Germany,[11] but who was despised in Russia for bringing down living standards and for humiliating a nation that had been transformed in less than one decade from a fear-inspiring superpower to a pity inspiring recipient of humanitarian assistance.[12]

The ascendance of Vladimir Putin, a young KGB official in Dresden at the time when the GDR imploded, to the Russian Presidency in 2000, coincided with a period of rising commodity prices, in particular for gas and oil it exported, which boosted standards of living to previously unknown levels. The enlargement of NATO and the EU in 2004 was grudgingly accepted by Russia, which did not have the means to prevent it, since it was still tied up with the second Chechnya war and other internal challenges. Russia also did not respond to the EU's initiative of a "European Neighborhood Policy" regrouping all of the enlarged EU's neighbors in 2004, as it refused to be reduced to the role of a mere object of EU foreign policy.

Putin never dissimulated his disregard for the EU and his preference for a "divide-and rule" approach which consisted in exploiting potential divisions between member states. In particular, Putin reminded Germany that Russia had been supportive and had enabled the process of German unification against the resistance from France and the UK. In this regard, the building of the North Stream pipeline bringing Russian gas directly to Germany, while bypassing the Baltic States and Poland, was a main strategic achievement of Russia.

When Angela Merkel replaced Gerhard Schroeder in 2005 as chancellor of Germany, the relation between the two leaders drastically changed. Schroeder, who had qualified Putin as a crystal-clear democrat, had developed a strong *Männerfreundschaft* (male bond) with Putin. Merkel, socialized in the former GDR and knowing the mechanisms of authoritarian power from the inside, was much less susceptible than Schroeder to the wooing of Putin. Still, being one of Germany's major trade partners,[13] and in line of German traditions of economic diplomacy, Russia remained an important building block of Germany's foreign policy. This reflects the continuity of Germany's policy of *Wandel durch Annäherung* (change through rapprochement or détente) with the Eastern bloc through a

bottom-up small scale cooperation which would ease the tensions, introduced by former chancellor Willy Brand in the late 1960s.

Throughout the building up of the Ukraine crisis Merkel had sought a close cooperation with her European partners. While firmly rejecting any calls for an accession perspective for Ukraine (highly unpopular on the political agenda), Germany strongly supported the EU association agreement with Ukraine as a basis for closer integration. For the EU—and for Germany—the association agreements had been designed as an instrument to export European norms and values, such as democracy, the rule of law and a free market economy, to its partner states. This approach had been perceived as uncontroversial, since it presupposed the will and the ability of every partner state to make sovereign policy choices.

But, born in a time where the EU was the sole integration model on the European continent, this approach now collided with Russia's plans to set up a Eurasian (Customs) Union. Therefore, the simple fact that another state could not only oppose its plans, but also openly try to challenge them, not shying away from a military conflict, had been unimaginable before March 2014. But unlike the EU, Russia has not yet arrived in a post-modern world: it rather sees its interest through the prism of the first-half of the twentieth century *zerosum realpolitik*, where geopolitical influence comes as a result of military and economic power. This was already apparent with Russia's military incursion into Georgia in 2008, although not widely acknowledged at the time. Thus, Russia interpreted the signing of the Association Agreement as a direct challenge to its geopolitical aspirations, which demanded a harsh response.

Whereas Russia had, until 2008, presented itself as the paragon of the inviolability of borders and national sovereignty,[14] it had started shedding these principles already in 2008 in Northern Ossetia and Abkhazia, where it operated a dramatic rhetoric U-turn. Abandoning all references to territorial integrity and inviolability of borders, it cited the unilateral declaration of Kosovo—recognized by Germany and 23 other EU member states—as a precedent and militarily supported the secession of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia, referring to the right of citizens to self-determination and alleged human rights violations, of which Russian speakers were the victims.

The lack of reaction from the EU to the de-facto annexation of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia in 2008—except for a few diplomatic protest notes from the EU and the MS—and the fact that business in Berlin and in Brussels went quickly back to normal also gave the impression to Putin that the West would not dare to confront Russia by intervening in what it still considered as its "*bližnij zarubež*" or "near abroad."

German Reactions to the "Euromajdan" and to the Annexation of Crimea

German chancellor Merkel has never been known for bold politics. Her profound dislike of taking risks and her avoidance of decisive action had over one decade of being at the helm of the German government, become something of a trademark.[15] Politically, her wait-and-see approach paid off, since she has hit record high ratings in the polls and has been re-elected twice. Staying out of the limelight in political controversies allowed the chancellor to foster her image of "mother of the nation."

Nevertheless, during the *Euromajdan* which started in late 2013 and culminated in the fleeing of president Yanukovich and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014, Merkel issued a number of stern statements that in other European capitals were perceived as a sign that Germany might be willing to assert its resolve and leadership. The Russian state media were quick to exploit German support for the *Euromajdan* for their own purposes, presenting their leaders to the domestic audiences as fascists and not refraining from drawing parallels between the fate of Russians in Ukraine and the fate of Jews in Nazi Germany.

In particular the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 sent a shock wave through Berlin: Russia, by annexing Crimea, had thrown overboard the post-cold war consensus based upon the respect of national sovereignty and democratic process, thus turning the clock back to nineteenth-century policy of territorial conquest by power. Merkel immediately reacted by condemning the annexation as illegal, later even qualifying it as "criminal."[16] While calling for a strategic rethink of Germany's and the EU's energy dependence upon Russia and favoring further sanctions (and thus risking to alienate her support base among the German industry), she also insisted on dialogue and cooperation.[17] Merkel had spoken to Putin almost daily during the build-up of the Ukraine crisis and even after since the Russian leader sent troops into Crimea.

It was only after the shooting down of civil aircraft MH17 in July 2014 that an increasingly frustrated Germany went beyond rhetorical condemnation of Russia. Although not itself a strong proponent of harsh sanctions, Germany took a clear lead in consolidating a common sanctions policy.[18] Still, Berlin constantly reminded its partners that the door towards a peaceful solution must be kept open and that emotions should not be allowed to be a policy driver.[19] Germany also took its role as broker—together with France—of the Minsk II ceasefire agreement very serious, even as other states started losing their faith in this process.

Berlin was so keen to avoid a rhetorical escalation that, in spite of its high level of indignation, it specifically rejected any use of historical parallels: a number

of German observers pointed out that, ironically, the annexation of Crimea had taken place on the template of the annexation of the Sudentenland by Nazi Germany in 1938.[20] But when German minister of finance Wolfgang Schäuble (because of his age and reputation the most outspoken government member) openly pointed out the Sudetenland analogy, the reactions back home were unforgiving:[21] even an indirect comparison of a European leader with Adolf Hitler was seen as a step too far, as it could serve to banalize the Nazi regime through means of historic comparison. Merkel, short of reprimanding her minister, immediately took her distances from him, declaring that the annexation of Crimea was a *sui generis* case.

The Sudentenland comparison highlighted the sensitivity of German-Russian relations in Germany's internal debate. Even if the annexation of Crimea was condemned by virtually the entire political class, there is still a strong opposition to being confrontational with Russia. Opposition comes not only from the far left side of the political spectrum, as from *Die Linke* party descending from former East German communists with a still strong anti-American and anti-NATO bias. Additionally, parts of the Social Democrats, such as former chancellors Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Schmidt, have come out with statements condemning the harsh approach towards Russia.[22] These members of the intelligentsia expressing empathy for Russia and Putin are often referred to by the rather sarcastic term of *Russlandversteher* ("those who understand Russia" or Russia apologists). But by no means are the *Russlandversteher* confined to the political left: on the far right, Putin enjoys a degree of sympathy among the populist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), and board members of some of Germany's large companies have been heavily lobbying against the impositions of sanctions.[23] However, the Green Party, in spite of its pacifist origins, is strongly favoring a tougher line towards Moscow.

As a Social Democrat and former protégé of then-chancellor Schröder, Foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was also politically closer to the *Russlandversteher*. But Putin's blunt and undiplomatic behavior during the crisis made it easier for Steinmeier—and, at a later stage, for Merkel—to shed their reluctance, as any attempts to revive the more cooperative *Ostpolitik* approach of the 1970s in the present context would have looked naive and would have risked undermining Germany's standing among its transatlantic and European partners.

Assuming that most countries see the relations with Russia through the lens of their own individual history, experience and interests, Germany is not different from the other EU Member States. The particular sensitiveness of German-Russian relations can explain why Germany has, from the beginning, taken a cautious and even ambiguous position. Whereas the UK, Poland, the Baltic and

the Scandinavian states followed a rather US-like confrontational approach, most of the Southern and South-East European members are—for economic reasons or fear of harming energy supplies—loathe to see relations with Russia souring over Ukraine. In this context, the question is how a common EU position can be more than the lowest common denominator of 28 individual national positions? This is where the question of leadership comes into play.

The Impact of the Ukrainian Crisis on Germany's Leadership Role in the EU

In January 2014, beyond the background of the *Euromajdan*, German President Joachim Gauck pleaded at the Munich security conference for a new German foreign policy strategy based on more active engagement on the international stage, and embedded into the EU framework. Although as a president Gauck has a mere ceremonial role, his speech hit a nerve among German politicians born after the war. A number of government ministers, including foreign minister Steinmeier, openly acclaimed Gauck, even if this could be seen as an open challenge of the chancellor. In fact, this statement was not only intended as a signal to Germany's European partners. It was also meant as a "wake-up-call" for Merkel, seen as lacking resolve not only in foreign policy matters.[24] According to Gauck (who, in his inauguration speech, had defended the German culture of military restraint), Germany should get rid of its habit of "looking the other way" when facing an international crisis.[25]

The home-grown drive for a more active role of Germany coincided with an obvious lack of political leadership not only within the CFSP, but also globally: entangled in their own internal problems, the United States were not ready to assume a leadership role; unlike the Bush administration, Barack Obama does not feel a specific responsibility of the United States for Europe. He expects Europeans to take the lead with regards to crises on their own continent. Given the inability of the EU to speak with one voice, the EU institutions were also unable to take on any leading role. The other potential leaders at the European level, the UK and France, were too entangled by their own domestic problems. Whereas Britain, with its double identity crisis highlighted by the Scottish referendum and the uncertainty of its European future, has retreated into "unsplendid isolation,"[26] France is on a nearly permanent basis absorbed by its own economic and political woes.

The annexation of Crimea had challenged German foreign policy in several regards. Germany is a strong supporter of a common EU foreign policy, since the EU, like Germany, has consistently favored norms and rules over power in inter-

national relations. Also, the German-Russian relationship has been significant for Germany not only in economic terms, but also politically, as a source of Berlin's significance in the EU and NATO.[27] With these elements of its foreign policy being challenged, and the United States standing with Europe but not taking the lead, all eyes were turned towards Berlin to coordinate the EU's response.

Still, it was only after the shooting down of flight MH17 in July 2014—allegedly by Russian supported separatists—that Merkel fully assumed the role the rest of Europe was expecting from her. Although not itself a strong proponent of harsh sanctions, Germany became the clear leader in consolidating a common sanctions policy in the second half of 2014.[28]

It was not the first time that Berlin found itself, without France as a co-pilot, in the EU's driver's seat. With the economic and financial crisis that started in 2007/2008 the political center of gravity within the EU has shifted from Brussels towards the capitals of the EU member states. In particular, the crucial role played by Berlin in the Eurozone's sovereign debt crisis (and Germany's economic strength in general) shifted Germany towards the nexus of EU decision making. As in the Euro crisis, Germany found itself at the top of EU foreign policy in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, not by design, but rather as consequence of the vacuum of leadership within and beyond the EU.

Germany's restraint in terms of foreign policy has always been more prominent than in other policy fields. It was only gradually, at the turn of the century, that the country began to act like a "normal" foreign policy actor and gradually shed its "leadership avoidance reflex"[29] by assuming responsibilities in Kosovo and Afghanistan. But assuming a leadership role meant also taking a risk, since the fear of being accused of hegemony was always present in Berlin. With a reason, as in particular, any unilateral moves towards Moscow were met with suspicion in the "new" EU member states. In April 2006 Radosław Sikorski, then Poland's defense minister, compared the North-Stream gas pipeline project between Russia and Germany that would bypass the Baltic States and Poland to the infamous 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the USSR and Nazi Germany.[30]

Although most member states see the Ukraine conflict through the lenses of their own experiences and interests, in practice most EU members generally closely align themselves with Germany's position. This informal acceptance of German leadership is partly due to Berlin's combined advantage of sufficient diplomatic capacities and privileged access to information, which significantly enhances its authority among its peers. But it is even more due to the European credentials of Germany, which is generally perceived as less self-interested and more sensitive with regards to the positions of the smaller countries than the other big EU member states.

In addition, the practice of "informal governance", where key decisions are hammered out in informal meetings between the EU leaders before they are formalized in an official way, and the strong bonds between Berlin and Warsaw, helped to reassure Germany's partners to accept German leadership in order to realize the EU's shared foreign policy ambitions: to stop Moscow from pushing back EU and NATO and from regaining control over what Putin still considers its "near abroad."

On the Russian side, given Putin's obsession with status and prestige, it is also unlikely that Moscow would have accepted to deal in substance with a less "heavyweight" interlocutor than Germany, since both France and the UK were unable or unwilling to fulfill this role. The choice of key interlocutor is supported by the personal relations between Merkel and Putin, who speak each other's language. Furthermore, Moscow is aware that Germany, due to the weight of history and of its economic stakes in Russia, is less keen on damaging bilateral relation and therefore likely to adapt a more moderate approach. Thus, it can be concluded that Russia, through the annexation of Crimea, its military intervention in Eastern Ukraine and its clear preference for a dialogue with Berlin rather than with Brussels, indirectly promoted Germany as a key player in the EU's foreign policy.

What does this mean from a Baltic perspective? For Russia, with a worsening economic situation, the defense of its citizens against perceived outside enemies (which includes the Baltics) has replaced economic wellbeing as a source of legitimacy. By escalating tensions, Putin can deflect public anger about falling living standards and direct them against the West. Although sheltered against a direct military aggression from Russia through their NATO membership, as direct neighbors, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are among the first to suffer from the political and economic fallout. Seen from Vilnius, Riga or Tallinn, Germany's moderating influence on Russia might look as an indicator of lacking firmness. However, any further rhetorical escalation would only contribute to strengthening the Putin system, as it would allow the Kremlin to further justify the increasing hardship of ordinary Russian citizens while fighting off internal opposition.

Conclusion

The three successive crises—Euro, Ukraine, and refugees—that shook the EU in just a few years have exposed wide rifts among its member States and put into question some basic assumptions about the EU's internal cohesion. In all three crises, Germany found itself in the driver's seat, first reluctantly, but with increasing comfort. The Euro crisis exposed the objective need for a strong leadership, and this leadership went to Berlin as a default solution. Boosted by the

mainly positive reception of its new role by most of its partners, and in view of another leadership gap during the Ukraine crisis, Germany grew more assertive also in the field of foreign policy—much facilitated by Russia's increasing hubris and gross violation of both European core values and international law.

Seen from Vilnius, Riga or Tallinn, the specter of a possible German hegemony in Europe currently looks like the "least worst option." As the EU's resistance to its leading role faded away, Berlin saw its approach of uploading its foreign policy to the EU vindicated, as it had managed to conciliate the defense of its own interests with strengthening its image as a value-driven society, upholding the EU's norms and values.

Beyond this background, Berlin's role in the third European crisis—the 2015 refugee crisis—might seem illogical, given that Germany, by opening its borders widely to Muslim refugees from Syria and other war-torn regions, took the risk of alienating its European partners and of undermining its leadership acceptance. However, a second look reveals some logic behind Berlin's attitude. The policy space of post-war Germany is today bigger than ever, as its leadership role is now widely accepted externally, and given that internally there is no destructive populist opposition strong enough to seriously harm the government. As a result, Berlin can therefore afford the "luxury" to implement a value-driven policy to an extreme by opening its borders to Muslim refugees.

Berlin hopes that the short-term negative impacts and the unpopularity of this measure at home and abroad is likely to be outweighed by the long-term benefits in terms of perception management and economic growth. At a time where nationalism, populism and religious intolerance are making a forceful global comeback, Germany's reputation as a value-driven, open and tolerant nation is likely to stand out brighter than ever, making its brand name increasingly attractive on the global markets. When it comes to "Made in Germany," values and interests are never far apart.

For Berlin, the preferred option would certainly be to "upload" its refugee policy to the EU—thus sharing both the risks and the opportunities that come with this approach. But the present political climate in the EU does not support such hopes. In the end, German leadership risks being weakened and centrifugal forces in the EU strengthened as a consequence. This is a perspective which, bearing the alternatives in mind, does not look attractive neither to Berlin and Brussels, nor to Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn.

Notes

1. "European Security Strategy - A Secure Europe in a Better World - EU Global Strategy—European Commission," (Brussels: EU Global Strategy, 2003), https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/european-security-strategy-secure-europe-better-world.

2. For the EU, these norms and values are defined in art. 2 of the EU Lisbon Treaty: "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail." European Union, *Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community*, 13 December 2007, 2007/C 306/01.

3. In this article, "Germany" and "German Foreign Policy" refer, for the period 1949-1989, to Western Germany (the FRG), which became the template for the foreign policy of unified Germany after 1990. In the former GDR, the space for an autonomous foreign policy was strongly limited and defined by the USSR.

4. Nicolas Wright, "Germany and the CFSP: The accidental leader?," paper prepared for the 37th Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of German Politics, London, 16-17 May 2011.

5. Lisbeth Aggestam, "Germany," in ed. Ian Manners and Richard Whitman, *The Foreign Policies of European Union Member States* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 71.

6. The other two pillars being Euroatlantic integration and its redefinition of patriotism as *Verfassungspatriotismus* or constitutional patriotism, where the allegiance moved from the ethnic nation state towards a value system, expressed in the *Grundgesetz* (basic law).

7. Stephan Keukeleire and Tom Delreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 46.

8. Ibid, 47.

9. Radek Sikorski, "I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity," *Financial Times*, 28 November 2011.

10. Angela Stent, *Russia and Germany Reborn: Unification, the Soviet Collapse, and the New Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

11. But for different reasons: whereas many on the German left saw him as a reformer of socialism, those on the right (and in Eastern Germany) cheered him for bringing down the Soviet Union and for enabling German unification.

12. The agenda of the EC's Maastricht Summit of December 1991, where the Member States discuss the Maastricht Treaty that would two years later give birth to the EU, also features the issue of the food supply situation in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

13. Russia is Germany's 11th biggest trading partner. In 2013, Germany exported goods and services worth € 23 billion to Russia.

14. These principles were frequently quoted by Russia for refusing to endorse in 2007 the UN-led Ahtissari plan to settle the Kosovo status, since it would encroach upon Serbia's sovereign rights and territorial integrity.

15. Even adding a new entry into the German dictionary: "merkeln," meaning to be unable to take decisions or give your own opinions.

16. "Merkel nennt Annexion der Krim 'verbrecherisch,'" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 5 October 2015, http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/70-jahre-kriegsende/gedenken-in-moskau-merkel-nennt-annexionder-krim-verbrecherisch-13585275.html

17. "Kanzlerin Merkel droht Russland mit Sanktionen," *Deutscher Bundestag*, 13 March 2014, https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2014/49865952_kw11_de_regierungserklaerung_ukraine/216288.

18. ECFR foreign policy scorecard 2015, www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2015.

19. Walter Steinmeier, "Wut und Empörung dürfen in der Ukraine-Krise nicht das letzte Wort sein," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 8 March 2014.

20. A part of Czechoslovakia bordering Germany with an ethnic German majority until their expulsion in 1947. The Sudentenland was annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938. This was motivated by Hitler with the alleged oppression of ethnic Germans by the Czechoslovak authorities and by their desire to live within the borders of the German Reich.

21. "Ärger um Schäuble: Merkel distanziert sich von Putin-Hitler-Vergleich," *Der Spiegel*, 31 March 2014.

22. "Helmut Schmidt hat Verständnis für Putins Krim-Politik," *Zeit Online*, 26 March 2014, http://www.zeit.de/politik/2014-03/schmidt-krim-putin.

23. "Deutsche Wirtschaft fordert sofortigen Stopp der Russland-Sanktionen," *Deutsche Wirtschafts Nachrichten*, 26 June 2015, http://deutsche-wirtschafts-nachrichten.de/2015/06/26/deutsche-wirtschaft-fordert-sofortigen-stopp-der-russland-sanktionen/.

24. In particular under Steinmeier's predecessor at the ministry of foreign affairs, Guido Westerwelle, the MFA was perceived as being non-relevant.

25. Joachim Gauck, inauguration speech at the 50th Munich security conference, 31 January 2014.

26. Philip Norton, *Opt-out: Britain's Unsplendid Isolation. In European Disunion: between Sovereignty and Solidarity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

27. Joseph Janning, "German foreign policy and the EU: Leader by default?," *ECFR commentary*, 2 May 2015.

28. ECFR foreign policy scorecard 2015.

29. Charlie Jeffery and William E. Paterson, "Germany and European Integration: A Shifting of Tectonic Plates," *West European Politics* 26, no. 4 (2003): 59-75.

30. Von Hans Michael Kloth, "Polnischer Minister poltert gegen Schröder und Merkel," *Spiegel Online*, 30 March 2016, http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/indirekter-hitler-vergleich-polnischer-minister-poltert-gegen-schroeder-und-merkel-a-413931.html