

Beyond 'Pro' and 'Anti' Putin

Debating Russia Policies in France and Germany

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January 2018

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ISBN: 978-2-36567-828-5

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How to quote this document:

Barbara Kunz, “Beyond ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ Putin: Debating Russia Policies in France and Germany”, *Visions franco-allemandes*, No. 28, Ifri, January 2018.

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Abstract

Attitudes vis-à-vis Russia expressed in the public sphere are heterogeneous, in France more so than in Germany. In both France and Germany, the general public is by and large skeptical of Vladimir Putin and his policies. The picture is more diverse in the political realm. In Germany, there (still) is an approach that might be qualified as “mainstream”. The French debate, in turn, is highly fragmented.

In light of the two countries’ recent electoral campaigns, this study addresses the public debate in France and Germany regarding a number of key issues. It presents both dominant discourses, as well as those challenging them. The study thus offers insights into national debates generally unavailable to readers unfamiliar with the respective country’s political playgrounds or without the necessary language skills.

Overall, foreign-policy discourses seem to be drifting apart in France and Germany. The German political establishment continues to emphasize multilateralism and a rules-based international order. In France, the 2017 presidential campaign has shown considerable differences between – and sometimes even within – political parties. These differences continue to exist, and are even likely to deepen. This development’s consequences for Franco-German dialog thus go beyond the question of how to deal with Russia.

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Introduction

France and Germany, the Western half of the so-called Normandy format,¹ are key in shaping European policies toward Russia. Both countries' Russia policies have undergone major shifts since 2014. These policies are shaped, at least partly, by debates at the national level, with some actors supporting the respective government approaches, while others contest them. Understanding the arguments put forward in these debates is crucial, not only to understanding the ways in which policies may evolve, but also to understanding fundamental differences Berlin and Paris may have to overcome in developing common approaches.

This paper looks at these debates as they are taking place in the public domains in France and Germany and offers insights into national discourses generally unavailable to those who do not have access to sources in French and German and to readers who are not familiar with the respective country's political arena.² What this paper does not intend to do, is to analyze actual French and German policies toward Russia since 2014, as this is a separate matter.³

Attitudes expressed about Russia in public are mixed, more so in France than in Germany. In both countries, the general public is by and large skeptical of Vladimir Putin and his policies.⁴ In both countries, the

1. I.e. France and Germany negotiating with Russia and Ukraine in order to find a solution to the conflict between the two latter countries.

2. The paper takes into consideration both official documents or declarations and statements that challenge these official discourses. The paper is exclusively based on open-access sources, mainly from public government websites, the mainstream media and stakeholders' sites. It deliberately refrains from quoting outlets such as Russia Today and Sputnik News, as well as obscure partisan sources, social media postings etc. When quoting political actors, it does so with the intention of painting the most accurate picture of the debate possible. Actors quoted are therefore selected on the basis of their former or current relevance for that debate, not for political reasons.

3. See e.g. L. Delcour, "Les dilemmes de la politique russe de la France. Une relation à l'épreuve de la crise en Ukraine", *DGAPanalyse*, 4 March 2015, available at: dgap.org; S. Meister, "Thesen für eine neue deutsche Russlandpolitik", *DGAPkompakt* 3, March 2015, available at: dgap.org. See also the two countries' White Papers for official assessments of the relationship with Russia.

4. See e.g. B. Stokes, "Russia, Putin Held in Low Regard around the World", Pew Research Center, 5 August 2015. Moreover, a poll carried out in spring 2017 reveals that only 18% of French respondents and 25% of German respondents have confidence in Putin "to do the right thing in world affairs". See R. Wike, B. Stokes, J. Poushter and J. Fetterolf, "U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump's Leadership", Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 54, available at: www.pewglobal.org. Polls at national level confirm these findings. In France in May 2017, 63% of respondents held "negative views" of Russia; 73% held "negative views" of Vladimir Putin. See J. Alimi, "Pour les Français, Vladimir Poutine plombe l'image de la Russie", *Le Parisien*, 29 May 2017, available at: www.leparisien.fr. In Germany, 64% say "rather no" when asked whether Putin is an "internationally credible partner for Germany". See Bertelsmann Stiftung and Instytut Spraw Publicznych (ISP), "Frayed Partnership: German Public Opinion on Russia", April 2016, p. 3, available at: www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de.

mainstream media generally mirror this skepticism. However, when it comes to the political arena, the views are more diverse. In Germany, there (still) is an approach that could be qualified as “mainstream”. This observation continues to hold true after the 2017 Bundestag elections campaign. The French debate, in turn, is highly fragmented. This fragmentation was underlined by the positions of the eleven presidential candidates in 2017.

Even before the campaign and since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the approach of the socialist Hollande government had been criticized by the Gaullist Les Républicains and other opposition parties.⁵ Electoral campaigns are naturally times in which debates tend to be more polarized, and the relevance of candidates' statements must not be overrated. Moreover, the degree of analytical sophistication in the different electoral programs certainly varied.⁶ Yet, campaigns also produce condensed versions of various discourses. They consequently allow for gauging the limits of what is acceptable to say, based on reactions or the absence thereof. Observers almost unanimously agree that French divides run deep. As it is not sure that France, in the long term, will see a more unified debate on Russia – and foreign policy in general – under the presidency of Emmanuel Macron, it would be insufficient to analyze the official discourse alone. In this sense, the debate on Russia serves as a magnifying glass for the divergent trends in this more general foreign policy debate. The Russian issue perhaps even is the one key indicator that allows for categorizing the “new” French foreign policy debate after the Hollande presidency (which, of course, in fact harkens back to old motives).

The following sections address German and French approaches to a number of key issues as they are being debated publically and present both dominant discourses, as well as those challenging them currently. These sections also analyze how relevant these challenging discourses are and what influence those representing them have on actual policy-making.

5. E.g. Nicolas Sarkozy and François Fillon heavily criticized Hollande for cancelling the Mistral deal, with Fillon accusing him of having taken the decision only “because Mr. Obama or Ms. Merkel asked him to do so”, and judging that France should have an “independent voice” in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Moreover, Thierry Mariani and Gérard Longuet criticized Hollande's decision to decline Putin's invitation to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the victory against Nazi Germany in 2015 (as also Barack Obama and David Cameron had done) (T. Mariani and G. Longuet, “Hollande devrait être à Moscou le 9 mai”, *Le Figaro*, 10 May 2015, available at: www.thierrymariani.com). Sarkozy criticized Putin's cancelled visit to Paris in October 2016 (“Coup de froid diplomatique entre Moscou et Paris”, *La Croix*, 11 October 2016, available at: www.la-croix.com).

6. For example, the (foreign) policy proposals French voters could choose from included France's joining the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (proposal #62 by Jean-Luc Mélenchon) or a rather nontransparent plan to return to the French Franc while still somehow keeping the Euro (Marine Le Pen).

Historical and Ideological Background Noises

In order to understand the current debates in the two countries about the right approach to Moscow, some insight into these debates' ideological and historical background is required. France and Germany share centuries of history with Russia. However, their respective experiences translate rather differently in contemporary discourses on Russia. Points of reference diverge, as well as the events are considered the most decisive in the relationship.

Debates on policies vis-à-vis Russia take place in a much wider context. Arguments about how to address Moscow also serve as concrete illustrations for more general foreign-policy preferences and ideas on the respective country's role in the world. National differences are immediately obvious. In a nutshell, different points of view on Russia the French debate tend to stand for different views on French foreign-policy objectives. In Germany, different views on Russian policy generally stand for diverging interpretations of how the commonly agreed-upon foreign-policy objective can best be achieved. In this sense, the French debate is richer and more intricate than the German one. The following sections briefly sketch how the debate on Russia fits into these larger debates.

Of French "Sovereignists" and "Globalists"

Among the key notions debated during the 2017 presidential election campaign was the distinction between "sovereignists" and "globalists", with the main difference being an emphasis on national sovereignty in various policy fields against international cooperation and open borders. Sovereignists are sometimes also labeled (by themselves or by others) as "Gaullists" or "gaullo-mitterrandéens".⁷ While these terms remain somewhat vague, the main idea includes national sovereignty and independence (including, for some, in monetary terms), political and military strength, and a focus on the national interest. National pride and prestige is also an important part of the equation. This distinction between sovereignists and globalists transcends the traditional dividing lines between left and right, as

7. For an enlightened – and critical – discussion of the use of various labels in the French foreign policy debate, see J. Vaïsse, "Le passé d'un oxymore. Le débat français de politique étrangère", *Esprit*, November 2017, pp. 76-91, available at: www.esprit.presse.fr.

sovereignists occupy both the extreme right and the extreme left and to some extent also the center right.⁸ While Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon clearly belong to the sovereignist camp, François Fillon represents a softer version. Yet a number of his positions and statements suggest he too, is a sovereignist.⁹ With regard to Russia, one correlation (if not a causal link) is obvious: the more sovereignist the general discourse, the more “Russia-friendly” the views expressed. During the 2017 campaign, the two least sovereignist candidates – Emmanuel Macron and Benoît Hamon – were also the most skeptical vis-à-vis Russia, while Le Pen, Mélenchon, and Fillon were the least critical.

Sovereignists’ key ideas include anti-Americanism.¹⁰ Attitudes toward Russian policy are often derived from attitudes toward the United States, as illustrated by a March 2014 statement by the leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who declared that he supported “without sympathy ... the enemy of the United States” – while also accusing Washington of paying people tasked to “destabilize this insurrection [in Crimea]”.¹¹ But anti-Americanism, or at least skepticism toward Washington, as well as positions on Russia rooted in attitudes toward America, are of course not only to be found on the fringes of the political spectrum. Nicolas Sarkozy, for example, stated in early 2015 that “the separation between Europe and Russia is a tragedy. That the Americans want this is their right and it is their problem [...]”.¹² François Fillon, in turn, explained in July 2016 that France should engage in a “dialog with Vladimir Putin that is not distorted by the prism of American or NATO views of the relationship with Russia”.¹³ On the extreme right, a normative dimension moreover enters the picture. In 2011, for example, Marine Le Pen declared that she “admired” Putin,¹⁴ while in 2014, she said she “shared

8. For a concise overview of the five key candidates’ foreign-policy positions in the 2017 presidential election campaign, see T. Gomart and M. Hecker (eds.), “Foreign Policy Challenges for the Next French President”, *Notes de l’Ifri*, 2017, available at www.ifri.org.

9. See his campaign program, and in particular the chapter on foreign policy with the almost impossible-to-translate title “Making sure France again becomes a power of equilibrium and impetus thanks to independent diplomacy [Refaire de la France une puissance d’équilibre et d’entraînement grâce à une diplomatie indépendante]”, available at: www.force-republicaine.fr, electoral program, 2017.

10. For an analysis of anti-Americanism in France, see P. Roger, *L’ennemi américain. Généalogie de l’anti-américanisme français*, Paris, Seuil, 2002.

11. See V. Vergnaud, “Pourquoi ces politiques français soutiennent Poutine”, *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 4 March 2014, available at: www.lejdd.fr.

12. See e.g. B. Vitkine, “Crise ukrainienne: Nicolas Sarkozy reprend la rhétorique du Kremlin”, *Le Monde*, 9 February 2015, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

13. François Fillon on 12 July 2016 during the television show “Télématin – Les 4 vérités” on France 2, available at: www.francetvinfo.fr. The discussion on Russia starts at 2:45. Fillon also explains that the United States and NATO give the impression of not having accepted the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact’s disappearance, as if they were “recreating an enemy, an adversary”.

14. AFP, “Marine Le Pen dit ‘admirer’ Poutine”, *Le Point*, 13 October 2011, available at: www.lepoint.fr.

values” with him regarding the “defense of the European civilization’s Christian heritage”.¹⁵

While historical references are of little relevance in the center-left discourse, things are somewhat different on the other side of the spectrum as well as to the Socialists’ left. On the political right, historical points of reference in debates on relations with Russia tend to be found in the 19th century and onward, starting with the 1892-1917 Franco-Russian alliance against the Triple Alliance of the German Empire, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. In addition to this, there seems to be a lingering sense in a Gaullist tradition of France and Russia being similar in that both nations are “exceptional” and, at least for some, greater than others. France and Russia are said to be linked by special bonds, as is for instance summarized in an almost ideal-typical way in this October 2015 statement by Nicolas Sarkozy:

Some say that Russia is Eurasian; I think that Russia is simply Russian, meaning it cannot be subsumed under any other group of nations. And it is a Frenchman who tells you that. Frenchmen can understand this uniqueness of Russia, which cannot be subsumed neither under Europe, nor under Asia, because Russia has its own destiny, because Russia has its own calling [Passage on Russia’s role in the world and the fact that some have forgotten the country’s relevance – a mistake France did not commit:] because France, like Russia, is proud of its history, proud of its culture, proud of its spirit.¹⁶

During the 2017 presidential campaign, it became apparent that such “Gaullist” discourses on France’s position in the world and related foreign-policy postulates resonate with many politicians and voters. The idea that France is a great power – endowed with nuclear weapons and a permanent seat in the UN Security Council while seeking to preserve its strategic autonomy – constitutes the rhetorical point of departure for reflection on international politics both to the right and to the left of Les Républicains as de Gaulle’s official heirs. Also to the center-left, Emmanuel Macron portrayed France as an “independent power”¹⁷ in his program and stressed France’s great power attributes, while insisting on the need for multilateral cooperation to a much greater degree than almost all of his rivals. In sum, French politicians’ attitudes toward Moscow – especially the positive ones –

15. AFP, “Marine Le Pen assure partager des ‘valeurs communes’ avec Poutine”, *La Chaîne Parlementaire*, 18 May 2014, available at: www.lcp.fr.

16. N. Sarkozy, “Discours de Nicolas Sarkozy à l’Institut des Relations Internationales de Moscou”, 29 October 2015, available at: www.republicains.fr. For an example of a – rare – public positioning of a French business representative arguing along similar lines, see J.-C. Dekonninck, “La Russie, un Eldorado pour nos entreprises, malgré les tensions”, *Le Cercle des Échos*, 13 October 2016, available at: www.lesechos.fr. Dekonninck, for instance, praises the “heroic” convergence between the two countries during the Second World War and warns against judging Russia only on the basis of its “imperfections”.

17. See the chapter on international affairs in Macron’s program, available at: <https://en-marche.fr>.

tend to be embedded in a complex ideological framework and are, for some, anchored in history.¹⁸

The *Ostpolitik* Heritage

In comparison, the German debate is much more straightforward. Sovereignist arguments are almost entirely absent from political debates. Although their adherents exist, they do not have enough influence to shape opinions, let alone policies. German foreign policy discourses consistently commit to multilateralism, cooperation, and European integration. The transatlantic link and close relations with the United States, notably through NATO, are an essential and largely uncontested element of Germany's *raison d'État*.¹⁹ Anti-NATO discourses on the far left stem from antimilitarism and to some extent also anti-Americanism – as opposed to a willingness to establish Germany as a great power (Die Linke, who calls for abolishing NATO, thus opposes all Bundeswehr deployments abroad). Notions of national greatness have disappeared from the vast majority of German political discourses since 1945.

Like in most other fields related to foreign and security policy, the starting point for most Germans' reasoning about Russia is the Second World War.²⁰ Although the War may not be the primary point of reference for most discourses on relations with Russia, it is always there in the background, often due to the fact that the ensuing Cold War and the way it ended shaped most Germans' view not only of Russia, but of international politics as a whole. Yet with regard to Russia, for most Germans, the major point of reference is the *détente* phase during the 1970s and the West German contribution to it: Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Neue Deutsche Ostpolitik*, often simply referred to as *Ostpolitik*.²¹ Its key idea consisted in seeking a dialog with the Soviet Union, instead of confronting it, as

18. For further reading and an in-depth-analysis of French views and mystifying perceptions on Russia, see A. Besançon, *Sainte Russie*, Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 2012. For an excellent dissection of pro-Putin discourses, which obviously goes much further than the present section, see O. Schmitt, *Pourquoi Poutine est notre allié? Anatomie d'une passion française*, Paris: Hikari Éditions, 2017.

19. Angela Merkel's statement on the need for Europe to consider the possibility that the US may no longer be a reliable partner must not be overstated in this context. Although the two matters are difficult to disentangle, this has arguably more to do with Donald Trump's unpopularity than with a true desire for German "emancipation" from the US. Current developments in German security and defense policy show no indication of actual conclusions being drawn from Trump's arrival to power. And also the SPD stated in its June 2017 "government program" that "The United States are and remain Germany's closest partner outside Europe – no matter who governs in the US". See SPD, "Zeit für mehr Gerechtigkeit. Regierungsprogramm für Deutschland", June 2017, p. 107, available at: www.spd.de.

20. See e.g. then Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier's speech at the German-Russian Forum, 30 May 2016, available at: www.auswaertiges-amt.de.

21. The first Social Democratic Chancellor's *Ostpolitik* was new in that Brandt broke with his predecessors' approach to dealing with "the East", hence "*neue Ostpolitik*".

expressed in the formula “Wandel durch Annäherung” (“change through rapprochement”) coined by the policy’s architect Egon Bahr, a fellow politician of Brandt’s in the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The idea that change through rapprochement is possible still resonates strongly with large parts of German society, and in particular within the SPD. At the party’s June 2017 national congress, former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder claimed that the policy belonged “to the German Social Democrats only”, implicitly painting a picture of the SPD as the only party to stand for *détente* as opposed to a policy of “confrontation”.²²

Many of the positions voiced by those (often pejoratively) referred to as *Russlandversteher* (“those who understand Russia”) stem from such convictions rather than from genuine “pro-Putin” attitudes.²³ As a result, much of the debate revolves around the question of what is in the tradition of *Ostpolitik* and what is not, as was the case in an exchange between the SPD politicians Matthias Platzeck and Simon Vaut in *Vorwärts*, the party’s newspaper. Within this context, it is interesting to note that one key aspect of Brandt’s new *Ostpolitik* that has faded away in most people’s memory (or is perhaps omitted on purpose) is the fact that throughout, Brandt’s approach was backed-up by the US nuclear deterrent.

In what may be labeled “establishment discourses”, anti-Americanism arguably plays a comparatively subordinate role.²⁴ “Pacifism”, in turn, resonates more strongly with most German voters than anti-American statements, although there might at times be a very fine line between the two. In the current context, this applies to the debate on NATO’s 2-percent objective (i.e. spending 2 percent of a country’s GDP on defense by 2024 – which would require Germany to almost double its defense budget), which Donald Trump rather vociferously calls for. The SPD and its leader Martin Schulz oppose this objective, arguing that an “armament spiral” would not

22. G. Schröder, “Rede von Gerhard Schröder auf dem außerordentlichen Parteitag der SPD am 25. Juni 2017 in Dortmund”, 25 June 2017, available at: <http://gerhard-schroeder.de>. In the same speech, Schröder also placed his opposition to the 2002 Iraq War in a continuum with the *Ostpolitik* from the 1970s – a move Schulz qualified as a “glorious chapter in the History of Germany [Ruhmesblatt in der Geschichte Deutschlands]”.

23. For an ideal-typical example, see the appeal “War again in Europe? Not in our names” signed by more than sixty German personalities, calling for more dialog with Russia: “Wieder Krieg in Europa? Nicht in unserem Namen!”, 5 December 2014, available at: www.zeit.de. Among its signatories were no active, relevant politicians. The list may, consequently, also suggest that the attitudes expressed are related to generational factors, as the proportion of retired signatories is extremely high.

24. Polls also show that “genuine” and consistent pro-Putin attitudes are scarce within the German population, with only 8% of respondents holding them. See Bertelsmann Stiftung/ISP, “Frayed Partnership”, *op. cit.*

24. According to a 2016 study, about 10% of Germans agree with anti-American statements. See T. Tischendorf, “Studie zum Antiamerikanismus. Fast jeder zehnte Deutsche denkt abfällig über die USA”, Deutschlandfunk, 25 July 2016, available at: www.deutschlandfunk.de.

bring about peace and that the party tradition was “Brandt’s and Schmidt’s policy of disarmament and arms control”.²⁵ It is mainly on the fringes of both the left and the right that outright anti-American statements occur, often to express anti-system attitudes that also imply a strong anti-EU stance.²⁶ As it is unlikely that the parties located at these ends of the political spectrum – the AfD in particular and at least parts of Die Linke, as well as small parties outside the Bundestag – will have any real influence on German foreign policy any time soon, these attitudes are of limited relevance for actual policy-making.

Some change may nevertheless be underway – at least to some observers. Taking a more critical stance vis-à-vis the German consensus, Gustav Gressel noted in July 2017 that “[b]ecause of the still relatively compact German party system, the parties contain diverse ideological perspectives. The German Social Democrats house an anti-Western wing, the Greens are split, and in Merkel’s CDU liberal and conservative wings are divided on many issues, particularly EU integration and refugees. However, the mainstream parties’ ability to host such diverse views is in decline”. Gressel also fears “further fragmentation – and, crucially, the potential for a parliamentary make-up that is friendlier to Russia overall”²⁷ if the AfD and the FDP were to be present in the Bundestag after the September 2017 elections (and their presence is indeed an outcome of the vote). Yet, as of early 2018, the feared fragmentation has arguably not taken place in the German debate despite a number of statements made pointing into that direction.

Finally, the legacy of the German Democratic Republic – after all, a Soviet satellite state and member of the Warsaw Pact – plays a less than marginal role nowadays. Although polls revealed the general population to be slightly more apologetic about the annexation of Crimea (41 percent in the East as opposed to 30 percent in the West thought that there were “good reasons” for Russia’s acts in April 2014),²⁸ as well as higher number of “positive views” of Russian policies (37 percent in the East as opposed to 22 percent in the West),²⁹ official GDR discourses on friendship with the Soviet Union and the like have simply left no trace in contemporary Germany’s political debates. Occasionally, however, gratitude for German

25. M. Schulz, “Rede von Martin Schulz, Parteivorsitzender, auf dem außerordentlichen Parteitag der SPD am 25. Juni 2017 in Dortmund”, 25 June 2017, available at: www.spd.de.

26. For more details, see G. Gressel, “Fellow Travellers: Russia, Anti-Westernism, and Europe’s Political Parties”, ECFR Policy Brief, July 2017, available at: www.ecfr.eu.

27. *Ibid.*

28. R. Köcher, “Ein gefährliches Land”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 April 2014, available at: www.faz.net.

29. Bertelsmann Stiftung/ISP, “Frayed Partnership”, p. 14, *op. cit.*

reunification is palpable, also illustrated by the pop star status that Mikhail Gorbachev (and to a lesser extent Eduard Shevardnadze) once enjoyed, for instance appearing on “Wetten dass...?” (an entirely apolitical Saturday-night game show that used to be a major television event) with his wife Raisa in 1996.

Reasons for Deteriorated Relations between Russia and the West

Complaints about incompatible strategic cultures are as old as Franco-German cooperation. In France and Germany, approaches to reading international politics are therefore not necessarily on par. This again becomes apparent when looking at discourses on the origins and causes of the current crisis in Russia-Western relations. No one contests that there is such a crisis. In both France and Germany, the general assessment is that relations between Russia and the West have suffered from serious setbacks in recent years and have reached a low point. The annexation of Crimea signifies a watershed in both national debates. In the individual discourses, however, the reasons given for these developments differ. Needless to say, different views on the crisis' origins are of course not specific to France and Germany, as numerous academic and more policy-oriented contributions illustrate.³⁰

French Perspectives: was Russia Humiliated or Did It Break the Rules?

Since 2014, the official government position was that the annexation of Crimea is illegal. In line with the official EU stance (which was and of course continues to also be shaped by France), Hollande declared that “the foundations of collective security had been called into question”.³¹ Throughout the 2017 presidential campaign, the two non-sovereignist candidates argued based on this logic: while Emmanuel Macron's center-left program stated that “Vladimir Putin's Russia leads a dangerous foreign policy, which does not refrain from neglecting international law”,³² Socialist Benoît Hamon deemed the annexation “unacceptable”.³³

30. See e.g. J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault”, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014. For different national discourses on Russia-Western relations across the OSCE space, see W. Zellner (ed.), *Security Narratives in Europe – A Wide Range of Views*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2017.

31. See F. Hollande, “Discours d'ouverture du président de la République à l'occasion de la semaine des Ambassadeurs”, Paris, 25 August 2015, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

32. See the chapter on international affairs in Macron's program, *op. cit.*

33. “Grand débat : Poutine et la Russie, le sujet qui rapproche Mélenchon et Fillon”, 21 March 2017, available at: www.lci.fr.

But the idea that it was Western policies that led to the current situation also appears prominently in the debate. Within this line of argument, the deterioration of relations is seen as the result of the West humiliating Russia,³⁴ or at least neglecting Russia's interests.³⁵ Les Républicains presidential candidate François Fillon explained in March 2017 that if Russia "has gone astray," this is because "we've had a bad policy toward Russia in the first place".³⁶ Again, skepticism toward the US matters in this context. As mentioned above, Nicolas Sarkozy stated in early 2015 that it was the US that was working toward the "separation" of Europe and Russia.³⁷

Some – notably within the Front National, but also on the extreme left – go as far as to directly blame the United States: not only had Russia's interests been disregarded, but also France's or perhaps even Europe's. The idea behind statements to that effect is that France's true interest would in fact be close ties with Russia. The EU, too, is considered to have its share of responsibility. Marine Le Pen takes this view the furthest by arguing that the EU's Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Agreement with Ukraine is "in nobody's interest".³⁸

Those who claim that deteriorating relations are (at least to some extent) the West's fault, largely argue that the West has been making use of a great power's temporary weakness and has treated a great country in a way in which great countries should not be treated. Geopolitical dichotomies – the one of the US vs. Russia prevails – also play a considerable role. As the following section illustrates, the German debate tends to run along somewhat different lines.

The German Take: Russia Broke the Rules

From a German perspective, the problem lies primarily in Russia's disrespecting previously agreed-upon rules: Seen from official Berlin, the annexation of Crimea amounts to a broken taboo. Within the grand coalition (CDU/CSU and SPD) in power in 2014, the official position had been that

34. See e.g. French Sénat, "Rapport d'information fait au nom de la commission des affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées par le groupe de travail sur les relations avec la Russie : comment sortir de l'impasse ?", No. 21, Paris, 7 October 2015, available at: www.senat.fr.

35. See e.g. "Discours de Nicolas Sarkozy à l'Institut des Relations Internationales de Moscou", *op. cit.*

36. Fillon during the "La matinale d'Europe 1" radio show on 13 March 2017 (Russia is being discussed starting at about 1:25:00), available at: www.europe1.fr. See also K. Pennetier, "Fillon impute la 'dérive' de la Russie aux sanctions européennes", *Reuters*, 13 March 2017, <http://fr.reuters.com>.

37. See e.g. B. Vitkine, "Crise ukrainienne : Nicolas Sarkozy reprend la rhétorique du Kremlin", *Le Monde*, 9 February 2015, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

38. M. Le Pen, "L'accord de libre-échange avec l'Ukraine n'est dans l'intérêt de personne", 27 June 2014, available at: www.marinelepen.fr.

Russia broke the rules of the cooperative European security order, and that there was no excuse for that. This is the view across the major part of the political spectrum, including the official position of the Liberal (FDP)³⁹ and Green⁴⁰ parties. In the words of Angela Merkel at the 2015 Munich Security Conference, “Russia’s action – first on Crimea, then in Eastern Ukraine – has violated the fundamentals of our living together in Europe. The territorial integrity of Ukraine was disregarded in the same way as its state sovereignty. International law has been broken.”⁴¹

These rules are set forth in the 1990 Paris Charter and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) acquis more broadly, as German officials insist – while emphasizing that Moscow once actively contributed to designing this acquis. In a government declaration prior to NATO’s July 2016 Warsaw Summit, for instance, Merkel set out to quote the final document of the 1990 CSCE summit in Paris, in which the 35 signatory states “... – including the then Soviet Union – commit to the right of states to freely choose their security policy dispositions”.⁴² This illustrates another difference between France and Germany: although both Paris and Berlin agree that Moscow broke international law, the French debate hardly ever refers explicitly to the OSCE; if at all, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum is probably the document most referred to – in other words, great power security assurances rather than the intricacies of a complicated organization, which in large parts serves as a platform for the not-so-great powers.

The German SPD-led foreign ministry’s reading followed the line detailed above. Then foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier repeatedly pointed out that Russia had signed the Paris Charter.⁴³ At times, his statements were not exempt from self-criticism, for instance when he asked whether the West truly understands Russia’s perspective on current events and developments since the Soviet Union’s demise.⁴⁴ His criticism of NATO’s “saber rattling”⁴⁵ may well be interpreted in the same vein. Yet such statements must not serve as a basis for putting Steinmeier in a “pro-

39. See e.g. FDP, “Es geht um die europäische Friedensordnung”, 21 March 2014, available at: www.liberale.de.

40. The German Green Party converged toward this position after a short internal debate. See D. Neuerer, “Grüne zerstreiten sich über ‘gruselige’ Putin-Versteher”, *Handelsblatt*, 18 March 2014, available at: www.handelsblatt.com.

41. A. Merkel, “Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel anlässlich der 51. Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz”, Munich, 7 February 2015, available at: www.bundesregierung.de.

42. “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzlerin Dr. Angela Merkel zum NATO-Gipfel am 8./9. Juli 2016 in Warschau vor dem Deutschen Bundestag”, Berlin, 7 July 2016, available at: www.bundesregierung.de.

43. For instance, in his speech at the Ural Federal University of Yekaterinburg on 15 August 2016, available at: www.germania.diplo.de.

44. *Ibid.*

45. See e.g. “Steinmeier kritisiert Nato-Manöver: ‘Säbelrasseln und Kriegsgeheul’”, *Spiegel Online*, 18 June 2016, available at: www.spiegel.de.

Russian” camp. In none of his public statements has he qualified Russia’s action as legitimate. Steinmeier’s reading of the situation was always commensurate with the official German government discourse. Statements by other high-ranking foreign-ministry officials corroborate this.

In April 2016, then State Secretary to the Federal Foreign Office Markus Ederer gave a keynote speech at a European experts’ conference on EU-Russia relations at the DGAP. At the time he said: “[f]or more than two decades, we worked within the framework of a European security order based on the rules and principles enshrined in the Charter of Paris signed in 1990. Today, however, we are confronted with a Russia that is attempting to use the unpredictability of its foreign-policy actions to assert sovereignty as well as to demonstrate and project strength.”⁴⁶ The SPD’s leader Martin Schulz has also been highly critical of Russia. In October 2016, he declared that “what Russia is doing, is completely unacceptable” and called for the EU to “show rigor” toward Russia.⁴⁷ Throughout the 2017 campaign, he never questioned the Merkel approach and distanced himself from Gerhard Schröder and his links with Rosneft.⁴⁸

Where analyses differ is on the issue of whether there are any excuses for Russia’s disrespecting these rules. While the official discourse is uncompromising, others take a softer stance on Russia and argue that the West is at least partially responsible. It is this approach that is the literal meaning of *Russlandverstehher*. At least in public, as the above-quoted statements illustrate, this logic is not part of the mainstream approach. It is, however, heard from prominent and regular participants in the German television talk-show circuit, such as Gabriele Krone-Schmalz,⁴⁹ General (ret.) Harald Kujat⁵⁰ (often referred to as a “former NATO general”), or Matthias Platzeck.⁵¹ Kujat is also one of the rare public voices in the German

46. German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Rede von Staatssekretär Ederer bei der Konferenz: ‘EU-Russia: in Search of a New Modus Operandi’”, Berlin, 6 April 2016, available at: www.auswaertiges-amt.de.

47. “Martin Schulz: Härte gegen Russland zeigen”, *Deutsche Welle*, 20 October 2016, available at: www.dw.com.

48. See e.g. “Eine Beziehung mit Geschmäckle,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 August 2017, available at: www.faz.net.

49. Gabriele Krone-Schmalz, a historian and former Moscow correspondent for the German public broadcaster ARD, wrote a book entitled *Russland verstehen* (“Understanding Russia”) in which she blames “the West’s arrogance” and the imperialist rhetoric on human rights: G. Krone-Schmalz, *Russland verstehen. Der Kampf um die Ukraine und die Arroganz des Westens*, Munich: C. H. Beck, 2015.

50. Kujat served as Inspector General of the Bundeswehr 2000-2002 (Germany’s highest ranking-soldier) and as head of NATO’s Military Committee 2002-2005. For statements he made during television appearances, see e.g. A. Haneke, “Doch kein Kalter Krieg”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 March 2014, available at: www.faz.net.

51. Matthias Platzeck is a former Minister President of Brandenburg and a former SPD party chairman (2005-2006). He is currently chairman of the German-Russian Forum, see www.deutsch-russisches-forum.de.

debate who establish a link between Syria and Russia.⁵² What is yet important to note is that no active (relevant) political actor can be quoted with statements subsumable under this type of discourse. *Russlandverstehers* present in the public sphere are almost exclusively former politicians, most prominently Gerhard Schröder or the above-mentioned Matthias Platzeck.

In sum, the German debate focuses very much on the question of whether sufficient dialog has taken place: is the current situation due to ill will on Russia's part, with Moscow neglecting the rules it once adhered to – or do the causes lie with a lack of dialog? If it is the former, it could be argued that the West could react firmly, while if it is the latter, the solution should lie in more dialog.

52. See the radio interview "Tagesgespräch mit Harald Kujat: Eskalationsspirale der NATO?", SWR2, 26 October 2016, available at: www.swr.de.

Ukraine: Sanctions and the Minsk Agreement

This section takes a closer look at the conflict in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia.⁵³ In March 2016, the EU – and thus Germany and France – linked its future relations with Russia to the implementation of the Minsk agreements.⁵⁴ A key element of this policy is that the EU will only lift sanctions if there is progress on Minsk 2.⁵⁵ Debates in both countries are characterized by a certain incorrect perception that the sanctions are decided upon by “the EU” rather than in the intergovernmental setting of the Council. In theory, every member state could, of course, veto their extension, causing the current policy to collapse. However, this fact – and especially the political cost at which such a move would come within the EU – is hardly, if at all, part of the debate at national level.

The current policy is of course at times contested within the German and French debates. The primary reasons for criticism are economic interests, in France more so than in Germany. Realities on the ground would in fact suggest the opposite: in terms of sheer numbers, German businesses stand more to lose than their French counterparts do. In 2014, trade between France and Russia amounted to 20 billion US dollars, while German-Russian trade amounted to 67 billion US dollars.⁵⁶ Moreover, according to a CEPII study, Germany absorbed 27 percent of the total cost

53. For details, see European Council, “EU restrictive measures in response to the crisis in Ukraine”, available at: www.consilium.europa.eu.

54. The March 2016 EU Foreign Affairs Council agreed on five principles to guide EU policy toward Russia: (1) implementation of the Minsk agreement as the key condition for any substantial change in the EU’s stance toward Russia; (2) strengthened relations with the EU’s Eastern Partners and other neighbors, in particular in Central Asia; (3) strengthening the resilience of the EU (e.g. with regard to energy security, hybrid threats, and strategic communication); (4) the need for selective engagement with Russia on issues of interest to the EU; (5) the need to engage in people-to-people contacts and support Russian civil society. See Foreign Affairs Council, March 14, 2016, available at: www.consilium.europa.eu.

55. The Minsk 2 agreement was negotiated by France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine in February 2015. Its 13 points *inter alia* foresee short-term measures such as a ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons, as well as longer-term measures such as constitutional reform in Ukraine and decentralization. Its implementation is rocky at best. See e.g. S. Pifer, “Order from Chaos: Minsk II at two Years”, Brookings, 15 February 2017, available at: www.brookings.edu.

56. For details, see The Observatory for Economic Complexity, available at: <https://atlas.media.mit.edu>. Economic relations have been a key component in the French-Russian relationship. Since about 2008 and after years of neglect, the French government as well as French businesses mainly viewed Russia as a promising emerging market, including – but not exclusively – for armament deals (e.g. Mistral). German-Russian relations, although including a considerable economic dimension, traditionally were much broader. See note 3 for further reading.

caused by sanctions, and France only 5.6 percent.⁵⁷ The general population does not necessarily seem impressed by these figures: polls show that a majority of the French and German populations support the sanctions policy.⁵⁸

Closely linked to the sanctions issue is the question of recognizing the annexation of Crimea. While this continues – with some notable exception – to be somewhat of a non-issue in Germany, in France the situation is different, as some statements by presidential candidates in the 2017 elections illustrate. In both countries, much of the debate tends to center on Russia, with Ukraine appearing comparatively less important.

France: Calls for Pragmatism

The official French position as initially defined under François Hollande was clear-cut. President Hollande and other members of the socialist government repeatedly insisted that lifting the sanctions was contingent on applying Minsk 2 and acted accordingly at EU level.⁵⁹ This was also the line that Socialist presidential candidate Benoît Hamon defended, as well as Emmanuel Macron, who already did so when he was minister of economic affairs.⁶⁰

However, the sanctions regime is subject to criticism, primarily on political and economic grounds,⁶¹ and based on the belief that sanctions should be lifted as they do not serve France's national interests. Again, arguments to that effect emanate from the extreme right and left as well as from parts of Les Républicains – the sovereigntist strand in the foreign-policy debate.

57. See M. Crozet and J. Hinz, "Collateral Damage: The Impact of the Russia Sanctions on Sanction Countries' Exports", *CEPII Working Papers* 2016-16, June 2016, available at: www.cepii.fr.

58. According to an October 2016 poll, 61% of French respondents believe that "France was right to sanction Russia" and that the "embargo" should remain in place: Harris Interactive, "Perceptions des priorités de la France dans le monde. Comment les Français perçoivent-ils les priorités et le positionnement de la France dans le monde ?", October 2016, available at: <http://choiseul.info>. In Germany in 2016, 46% of Germans wanted the sanctions to be "kept as they are", while 16% even wanted to "strengthen them" (27% wanting them "eased"). See Bertelsmann Stiftung/ISP, "Frayed Partnership", *op. cit*

59. See e.g. "Ukraine : Merkel et Hollande pour prolonger les sanctions contre la Russie", *Le Figaro*, 13 December 2016, available at: www.lefigaro.fr. See also "Deutschland und Frankreich bestätigen Sanktionen gegen Russland", *Die Zeit*, 28 January 2016, available at: www.zeit.de.

60. See "Emmanuel Macron évoque une levée des sanctions contre la Russie à l'été 2016", *Le Monde*, 24 January 2016, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

61. The debate around the Mistral issue (which did not resurface during the 2017 campaign) may serve as a magnifying glass when studying all these trends and arguments.

This discourse even translated into a (non-binding) National Assembly resolution: in April 2016, the French parliament adopted a text sponsored by Thierry Mariani and other Les Républicains parliamentarians, asking the government not to extend the EU sanctions on the grounds that they were “useless” in solving the Ukraine conflict, that they harmed Russian and French economic interests, and that they stood in the way of closer cooperation between France and Russia in the fight against terrorism.⁶² The circumstances of the resolution’s adoption, which the media qualified as a “surprise,” were somewhat unusual: it took place late at night and only 101 MPs (out of 574) were present.⁶³

Thierry Mariani, said to be close to François Fillon, is known to be a supporter of Putin. He is the co-president of Association Dialogue Franco-Russe, described as “the most effective and visible showcase of Russian soft power in France”.⁶⁴ Mariani also led two parliamentary delegations that traveled to Crimea in 2015 and 2016 respectively, both times facing strong criticism at home. Fillon welcomed the resolution’s adoption, stressing that the fight against ISIS required working with Russia. He also underlined the sanctions’ “disastrous” consequences for French farmers.⁶⁵ Fillon’s communiqué contained no mention whatsoever of the Minsk agreements.

While Fillon’s statements may at times have seemed ambiguous, he clarified a number of issues as election day came closer – adopting positions more in line with the official EU position, i.e. that lifting the sanctions was contingent on the implementation of Minsk. These shifts, which were also noted among French observers,⁶⁶ illustrate how sensitive the issue is internationally and especially in a Franco-German context. When in Berlin in January 2017, Fillon declared that the resolution of the “Ukrainian problem” and “Minsk” was the first step in overcoming the current impasse: “This requires efforts by all concerned parties and concrete progress that

62. Assemblée nationale, “Résolution invitant le gouvernement à ne pas renouveler les mesures restrictives et les sanctions économiques imposées par l’Union européenne à la Fédération de Russie”, Texte No. 721, 28 April 2016, available at: www.assemblee-nationale.fr.

63. See e.g. E. Bastié, “L’Assemblée vote par surprise une résolution pour une levée des sanctions contre la Russie”, *Le Figaro*, 28 April 2016, available at: www.lefigaro.fr. Among the 55 “yes” votes, 44 came from Les Républicains, 2 from the Front National (i.e. all FN members of parliament at the time).

64. N. Hénin, *La France russe. Enquête sur les réseaux Poutine*, Paris, Fayard, 2016, p. 69.

65. F. Fillon, “Communiqué de François Fillon sur l’adoption du projet de résolution en faveur d’une levée des sanctions économique contre la Russie”, 28 April 2016. The text is unfortunately no longer available online.

On a general note, French farmers are said to suffer badly from the Russian ban on European produce and dairy products. The sanctions’ cost for the French agricultural sector is estimated at 400 million Euros. Before the sanctions, 3% of France’s agricultural production were exported to Russia. See G. Woessner, “Les sanctions contre la Russie ont-elles pénalisé les intérêts français ?” *europel.com*, 29 May 2017, available at: www.europel.fr.

66. See in particular B. Guetta, “En politique étrangère, le programme de François Fillon sort de l’ambiguïté”, *Challenges*, 24 January 2017, available at: www.challenges.fr.

allows envisioning a lifting of the sanctions against Russia.”⁶⁷ Some weeks later, however, Fillon claimed that it was the sanctions that “pushed Russia away,” leading to “toughened Russian positions”.⁶⁸ In other words, while Fillon may have toned down his discourse on Russia, perhaps in order to be more compatible with Berlin and less vulnerable to domestic criticism, he was far from taking a tough stance on Moscow.

The position of the business sector with regard to this topic hardly appears in the public sphere. French business representatives basically remain silent on the issue in public and do not participate in the debate. However, business interests do matter, as the parliamentary resolution quoted above illustrates. Fears are not limited to lost business in the Russian market. The perspective of losing market shares to China matters perhaps even more, notably in a global, geopolitical perspective.

Some call for recognizing the annexation of Crimea, others at least do not reject this claim. Rather unsurprisingly, Marine Le Pen wanted to recognize the annexation of Crimea, which she does not consider “illegal”.⁶⁹ In an interview with a Russian newspaper, she also claimed that Crimea never was Ukrainian in the first place and declared that her views on Ukraine coincided with Russia’s.⁷⁰ Closer to the center, former Les Républicains MP Thierry Mariani (who lost his seat in 2017) argued in 2016: “Crimea is Russian. Let’s move on to something else.”⁷¹

During a television debate among presidential candidates in March 2017, Jean-Luc Mélenchon made statements that seemed ambiguous at best, declaring that “we need to talk again about all borders. The border between Russia and Ukraine, is it at the end of Crimea or before? I don’t know. We need to talk about it.”⁷² François Fillon – contrary to Benoît Hamon, who vehemently opposed Mélenchon’s statements – seemed to agree with the idea of renegotiating borders in Europe. He argued that the question needed “to be asked in light of international law and the right to [national] self-determination”, also saying that there were “borders that were drawn under

67. F. Fillon, “Ici, à Berlin, j’appelle à un sursaut européen”, speech at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 23 January 2017, available at: www.republicains.fr.

68. Fillon during the “La matinale d’Europe 1” radio show on 13 March 2017 (Russia is being discussed starting at about 1:25:00), available at: www.europe1.fr. See also M. Pennetier, “Fillon impute la ‘dérive’ de la Russie aux sanctions européennes”, *Reuters*, 13 March 2017, available at: <http://fr.reuters.com>. During the same interview, however, he also insisted on the necessity of progress on Minsk 2 before the sanctions.

69. “Le Pen: l’annexion de la Crimée ‘pas illégale’”, *Le Figaro*, 3 January 2017.

70. See I. Mandraud, “A Moscou, Vladimir Poutine adoube Marine Le Pen”, *Le Monde*, 24 March 2017, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

71. “‘La Crimée est russe. Passons à autre chose.’ (Mariani)”, *Le Figaro*, 31 July 2016, available at: www.lefigaro.fr.

72. “Grand débat : Poutine et la Russie, le sujet qui rapproche Mélenchon et Fillon”, *op. cit.*

conditions nations cannot accept and which separated nations, and this debate, we cannot refuse to see it take place".⁷³

Overall, however, recognizing the annexation of Crimea is not among the defining topics in the French foreign-policy debate, and Mélenchon and Fillon were criticized for their statements the day after.⁷⁴ Still, their statements illustrate that some circles of the French political establishment have a rather relaxed approach to matters related to (smaller states') territorial integrity.

Germany: No alternative to Minsk, No Recognition of New Borders

The German government, with Chancellor Merkel and former foreign minister Steinmeier, was a driving force for EU sanctions ever since the Crimean referendum in March 2014. However, Steinmeier also voiced doubts or warned of the sanctions' "destabilizing Russia", saying that it would be wrong to believe that an economically weakened Russia would increase security in Europe.⁷⁵ Yet again, deducing that Steinmeier would be a "pro-Russian" seems more than far-fetched.

Within the sanctions context, the German Social Democrats more generally have at times been portrayed as a weaker link in the German consensus.⁷⁶ Steinmeier's successor Sigmar Gabriel, while still in his previous post of Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy, was known to have a somewhat softer stance. Arguing that "isolation would lead nowhere", in May 2016 he declared that the EU's policy of "first 100 percent Minsk and then there is 100 percent lifting the sanctions" was not "very smart".⁷⁷ After he became foreign minister in January 2017, he repeatedly affirmed the link between Minsk and lifting sanctions, ensuring continuity with the official

73. For a transcript of the exchange, see "Présidentielle: vif échange entre Mélenchon et Hamon sur la Russie", *France Soir*, available at: www.francesoir.fr.

74. See e.g. the interview with political scientist Frédéric Charillon, "Estimer que la paix passe par la redéfinition des frontières est surprenant", *Le Monde*, 23 March 2017, available at: www.lemonde.fr. See also J.-S. Mongrenier, "Conférence sur les frontières de l'Atlantique à l'Oural: la dangereuse idée de Mélenchon", *Challenges*, 28 March 2017, available at: www.challenges.fr.

75. See e.g. "Steinmeier warnt vor stärkeren Russland-Sanktionen", *Spiegel Online*, 19 December 2014, available at: www.spiegel.de.

76. See e.g. "How very understanding: Germany's ambivalence towards Russia reflects its conflicted identity", *The Economist*, 8 May 2014, available at: www.economist.com; "Steinmeier and Merkel Split on Russia Sanctions", *Handelsblatt*, 1 June 2016. In Paris, some also argue that the mainstream opinion within the SPD, "in reality", would be compatible with Fillon's. While this may to some extent be correct in terms of desired outcomes, motives remain essentially different.

77. "Gabriel fordert schrittweises Ende der Russland-Sanktionen", *Die Zeit*, 25 May 2016, available at: www.zeit.de.

German government discourse.⁷⁸ The SPD 2017 electoral program, in turn, seemed to be closer to Gabriel's initial approach. While the party stated its commitment to the Minsk process, the program also said that "substantial progress in implementing the Minsk agreement would entail a progressive lifting of the sanctions against Russia".⁷⁹ Again, this statement needs to be seen in the context of the *Ostpolitik* tradition: the overall line of argument is the conviction that "peace and security in Europe is only possible with Russia, not without or even against Russia."

Back in 2014, when still president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz had declared that he did not believe in the sanctions' effectiveness.⁸⁰ Moreover, in what may be labeled a populist move, he linked sanctions against Russia to the refugee crisis and the European debate on solidarity:

If some states, who when it comes to the funds for agriculture or to the means for structural support, say 'solidarity, yes please!', who say, when it comes to sanctions against Russia, which they call for because they feel threatened, want solidarity and say 'sanctions, yes please,' but who, when it comes to solidarity with human beings in the field of refugee policy or a clear protection of and commitment to our fundamental values of tolerance, freedom, and the rule of law, say 'no thank you,' then it is necessary to explicitly tell these states, as I have done for years and as, thank God, Emmanuel Macron said: solidarity is not a one-way street!⁸¹

On a general note, it is not surprising that the German Social Democrats cater to their electorate's desire for *Ostpolitik*-inspired rhetoric, especially during an electoral campaign. Whether this really is a (limited) change in the SPD's policy or whether it is a struggling party's attempt to tap into presumed tendencies in public opinion remains to be seen. The result of first talks between the SPD and Merkel's Christian Democrats in any case indicates that there is no major disagreement between the parties as far as Russia is concerned.⁸²

78. E.g. in a statement during his first trip abroad as foreign minister when he met with France's Jean-Marc Ayrault. Both ministers confirmed the official EU approach: "Deutschland und Frankreich bestätigen Sanktionen gegen Russland", *Die Zeit*, 28 January 2016, available at: www.zeit.de.

79. SPD, "Zeit für mehr Gerechtigkeit", p. 10, *op. cit.*

80. F. Willershausen and S. Wettach, "Martin Schulz: Sanktionen bringen nichts", *Wirtschaftswoche*, 8 March 2014, available at: www.wiwo.de.

81. M. Schulz, "Rede von Martin Schulz, Parteivorsitzender, auf dem außerordentlichen Parteitag der SPD am 25. Juni 2017 in Dortmund", *op. cit.*

82. See the final declaration of the first round of talks [Sondierungsgespräche], "Ergebnisse der Sondierungsgespräche von CDU, CSU und SPD," final version, 12 January 2018, available at www.tagesschau.de. Russia is mentioned only once, in the documents introduction where the country's "policies" (alongside the "new focus of the United States" and "China's gain in strength") are said to illustrate the need for Europe to take its fate into its own hands to a larger degree than in the past.

Overall, consensus among the government parties is in any case strong enough to prevent any real debate on sanctions. Those calling for ending sanctions are thus mostly the “usual suspects”: *Russlandversther* like Matthias Platzeck, but also the German Christian Democrat’s Bavarian branch’s former leader Horst Seehofer (who, in German politics, tends to play the role of internal Christian Democratic opposition – with little influence on foreign policy).⁸³ The chairman of the German Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations’ (Ostausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft) chairman, Wolfgang Büchele, argued that a “time for alternatives” had come, notably in light of the high price paid by EU economies.⁸⁴ However, ever since 2014, the Federation of German Industries’ president, Dieter Kempf, although warning against stronger sanctions, has stressed that politics trumps business and that German companies would of course respect this.⁸⁵ And even among the more prominent *Russlandversther* in the German debate, Minsk 2 as such is not at stake. Matthias Platzeck once described the agreement (on purpose or not using one of Angela Merkel’s signature expressions) as “without alternative”.⁸⁶ More recently, the FDP’s vice president Wolfgang Kubicki took a stance against the sanctions right before the beginning of talks between his party, the Greens and the Christian Democrats about a possible coalition were to start following the September 2017 elections.⁸⁷ Kubicki’s statement was widely reported in the media but left even party colleagues surprised, as it is clearly not in line with the FDP’s official position.

The German government clearly rules out the possibility of recognizing Crimea’s annexation. For German diplomacy, it is “out of the question”, as Frank-Walter Steinmeier repeatedly said.⁸⁸ Here again, arguments to the contrary emanate almost exclusively from the fringes and actors without influence on German policy-making. This again includes Matthias Platzeck, who in November 2014 proposed an “a posteriori legalization”.⁸⁹ After strong criticism, including from within his own party, Platzeck toned down

83. See e.g. D. McGuinness, “German Leader Seehofer’s Putin Visit Stokes Outcry in Berlin”, *BBC News*, Inside Europe Blog, 4 February 2016, available at: www.bbc.com.

84. W. Büchele, “Zeit für Alternativen”, *Handelsblatt*, 21 November 2016, available at: www.handelsblatt.com.

85. See e.g. “BDI warnt vor schärferen Sanktionen gegen Russland”, *Tagesspiegel*, 6 July 2014, available at: www.tagesspiegel.de.

86. B. Bidder, M. Schepp, “Platzeck gegen Merkels Russland-Kurs: ‘Die Kanzlerin macht einen Fehler’”, interview with Matthias Platzeck, *Spiegel Online*, 5 June 2015, available at: www.spiegel.de.

87. “FDP-Vize: Kubicki gegen Russlandsanktionen”, *Spiegel Online*, 13 October 2017, available at: www.spiegel.de.

88. See e.g. Frank-Walter Steinmeier’s speech at the German-Russian Forum, 30 May 2016, available at: www.auswaertiges-amt.de.

89. “Affront gegen Merkel: Platzeck: Krim-Annexion nachträglich legalisieren”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 November 2014, available at: www.faz.net.

his proposal, saying that he did not call for recognition, but that an agreement between Moscow and Kyiv based on international law was necessary.⁹⁰ Disagreements occurred also within the left-wing party Die Linke (during the referendum in Crimea, for instance, which Berlin had deemed illegal, two Die Linke members of a regional parliament served as election observers).⁹¹ In 2014, the party leadership condemned the “illegal actions by the Russian Federation in Crimea,” as well as “the military saberrattling by the Russian Federation, the Ukrainian government, and NATO,” insisting on the necessity of a diplomatic solution.⁹² The party’s Bundestag fraction calls for not prolonging the sanctions⁹³. Within the party itself, dividing lines are obvious, with yet an approach prevailing that is softer on Russia⁹⁴. This thus leaves parts of the Linke and the AfD opposing the Merkel line. Its leading figure Alexander Gauland indeed repeatedly declared that Crimea was “Russian territory” that would not be returned to Ukraine.⁹⁵

Statements made by the FDP’s president Christian Lindner – who argued that he was afraid the situation on Crimea had to be seen as a “permanent temporary arrangement” and called for “new relations with Russia” during the campaign – do not fundamentally challenge the observation that the general consensus is deeply rooted in Germany. His statements are in contradiction with his party’s official position. Lindner was heavily criticized, including by SPD and Green politicians⁹⁶ – and it was Lindner who eventually chose to give up on government participation for his party in late 2017 and consequently declined influence on German foreign policy.

90. “SPD-Politiker Platzeck nimmt Aussagen zur Krim zurück”, *Spiegel Online*, 19 November 2014, available at: www.spiegel.de.

91. See e.g. F. Reinbold, “Linkspartei in der Krim-Krise: die Putin-Versteher”, *Spiegel Online*, 17 March 2014, available at: www.spiegel.de.

92. K. Kipping and B. Riexinger, “Machtspiele beenden – Kriegsgefahr stoppen”, press release, Die Linke, 14 March 2014, available at: www.die-linke.de.

93. See e.g. Deutscher Bundestag, “Entspannung mit Russland – Keine Verlängerung der Sanktionen gegen Russland,” Drucksache 19/95, 22 novembre 2017, available at www.bundestag.de.

94. See e.g. debates at the party’s June 2017 congress, “Linke lehnen russland-kritische Anträge ab,” MDR online, 10 June 2017, available at: www.mdr.de.

95. See e.g. “Die Krim ist nun einmal ur-russisches Territorium”, *Die Welt*, 17 June 2017, available at: www.welt.de.

96. See e.g. “FDP-Chef verteidigt Forderung nach neuen Russland-Beziehungen”, *Die Zeit*, 6 August 2017, available at: www.zeit.de. Neither Kubicki nor Lindner are known as foreign policy experts.

Beyond Ukraine: Future Relations with Russia

While the economic sanctions against Russia are tied to the implementation of the Minsk 2 agreement, it seems self-evident that Europeans need to find a new *modus vivendi* with Moscow. Egon Bahr is often quoted as having said that for Germany, the United States were indispensable, while Russia was immovable. Geographic proximity is of course a more salient factor for Berlin than it is for Paris. But pressing issues in global governance and common challenges require at least a certain degree of cooperation between EU members and Moscow. Both sides would obviously benefit from increased economic connectivity. This section therefore provides an overview of the debate on future relations with Russia beyond the Ukraine issue.

France: A Mainly Transactional Approach

The French debate on future relations with Russia oscillates between seeking rapprochement with Russia and maintaining the approach adopted under Hollande and pursued by Macron. Probably for a majority in France, future relations with Russia should first and foremost be determined by French and mutual interests. As a result, a key question in this context is that of the hierarchy of French interests: Does France's key interest lie in a unified approach within the EU, and especially with Germany, or in better relations with Moscow – the two being incompatible at this point?

In much of the French debate, ideological proximity to Putin is of little relevance. Rather, French interests and ideas on France's global position constitute the starting points. The approach is in fact a rather transactional one, based primarily on economic and security factors. Unsurprisingly in the light of the past years, terrorism is the single most important security threat for the French population.⁹⁷ In consequence, an important portion of the debate revolves around the question of whether Moscow can be a partner in tackling Islamist terrorism. In connection to this, Syria is also on top of the

97. A September 2016 poll finds that 97% of respondents say that the risk of an attack is "high". See Ifop, "L'évaluation de la menace terroriste", poll for *Midi Libre* and *La Dépêche*, September 2016, available at: www.ifop.com.

agenda.⁹⁸ In that sense, it is often less attitudes toward Russia as such that shape preferences on relations with Moscow. For Fillon, “Islamic totalitarianism” (an issue he devoted an entire book to in 2016)⁹⁹ is the key challenge Europeans are confronted with. Similar arguments appear throughout the sovereignist camp. Fillon has consistently argued for cooperation with Russia on the matter, including during a speech in Berlin in January 2017.¹⁰⁰ He has also accused European and Western leaders of not having talked to Putin about Syria.¹⁰¹ Addressing a domestic audience, Fillon even resorted to historical comparisons in reaction to Putin’s cancelled visit to Paris in October 2016: “De Gaulle discussed and entered an alliance with Stalin in order to defeat Nazism. Hollande, in turn, dodges Putin whilst everything should be done to stifle Islamic totalitarianism and to find a way out of the war.”¹⁰² During the primaries campaign, Sarkozy and other members of his party argued along similar lines.¹⁰³

For the former Hollande executive, however, Syria and the several UN Security Council resolutions blocked by Russia were the very proof that such cooperation was not possible or at least very difficult. This came as a deception, given that seeking cooperation with Moscow against ISIS had also been part of the government approach immediately after the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, as President Hollande outlined in a speech shortly thereafter.¹⁰⁴ Accordingly, Macron and Hamon were much more careful in their respective electoral programs. Macron argued in favor of a dialog with Russia, at a European level as well as between NATO and Russia, while firmly insisting on human rights and the linkage between Minsk and lifting sanctions.¹⁰⁵ In the future, president Macron may come under pressure from those seeking closer cooperation with Russia when leading his own policy. Those claiming that national interests should prevail, if incompatible with the European approach, perhaps indeed represent a majority position within the wider foreign-policy establishment.

98. For an illustration of the matter’s prominence in the 2017 electoral campaign, see T. Gomart and M. Hecker (eds.), “Foreign Policy Challenges for the Next French President”, *op. cit.*, in particular the table on p. 45 summarizing statements on Russia from the “big five” candidates’ programs.

99. F. Fillon, *Vaincre le totalitarisme islamique*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2016.

100. F. Fillon, “Ici, à Berlin, j’appelle à un sursaut européen”, *op. cit.*

101. T. Quinault-Maupoil, “Syrie : Fillon veut mettre le régime d’Assad autour de la table des négociations”, *Le Figaro*, 15 December 2016, available at: www.lefigaro.fr.

102. See “Syrie : Poutine annule sa visite à Paris”, *Le Parisien*, 11 October 2016, available at: www.leparisien.fr.

103. See e.g. Nicolas Sarkozy reiterating his ambition to “reintegrate” Russia in the alliance against ISIS in an interview with *Europe 1* on 26 September 2016, available at: www.dailymotion.com.

104. F. Hollande, “Discours du Président de la République devant le Parlement réuni en Congrès”, Versailles, 16 November 2015, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

105. See the chapter on international affairs in Macron’s program, *op. cit.*

Germany: Restoring the Norms-Based Order

The German debate about future relations with Russia mainly oscillates between realizing that “business as usual” is not an option and the desire to return to a norms-based order. At the same time, this does not exclude a more transactional approach. As Markus Ederer outlined at the above-mentioned conference on a new *modus operandi* between the EU and Russia: “The title of this conference highlights the fact that we have to seriously reassess previous assumptions about our relations. [...] It has become a commonplace that in this overall situation there can be ‘no business as usual’. As far as I can see, this conclusion is widely accepted, not only within the European Union, but – maybe for different reasons – also in Russia.”¹⁰⁶

At a more general level, in a speech in April 2016, Frank-Walter Steinmeier explained that preconditions for relations with Russia were different today, even “opposite” from those of Brandt’s days, and advocated a “double dialog”: a “dialog over commonalities and possible fields of cooperation. But also a dialog over our differences!” Cooperation should take place “where possible”, with “awareness of differences where necessary”.¹⁰⁷ As Ederer had outlined, the list of topics for such “compartmentalized cooperation” (or selective engagement in EU speech) is long – Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh, but also Syria and the fight against ISIS:

“Other fields might be identified as well. Either thematically such as the fight against organized crime, be it in human trafficking or in cyberspace. Or regionally: What comes to mind immediately is the Iranian nuclear dossier, where we reached a historic agreement [in 2015], but where the monitoring of this agreement’s implementation will take years to come. Other regions of cooperation could be the Arctic or the Baltic Sea Council. Or take Central Asia. I don’t see any competition of integration models between Russia and the EU in this area. What I have in mind are common projects, involving not only Russia and the European Union, but potentially also China whose New Silk Road project is likely to have a lasting impact on the Eurasian space.”¹⁰⁸

106. German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Rede von Staatssekretär Ederer bei der Konferenz: ‘EU-Russia: in Search of a New Modus Operandi’”, Berlin, 6 April 2016, available at: www.auswaertiges-amt.de.

107. German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Rede von Außenminister Frank-Walter Steinmeier beim Egon-Bahr-Symposium”, 21 April 2016, available at: www.auswaertiges-amt.de.

108. German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Rede von Staatssekretär Ederer”, *op. cit.*

In the same vein, Steinmeier, when foreign minister, repeatedly insisted on “reviving” the NATO-Russia Council, for instance with regard to cooperation on Libya and Syria.¹⁰⁹

German national interests are seldom referred to in this debate. Declaring that issues such as the Nord Stream 2 pipeline are not a political matter but a purely economic endeavor of course helps to sustain that discourse.¹¹⁰ The predominant notion in the German debate about future relations with Russia is the return to a “rules-based environment”. The 2016 White Paper defines “maintaining the rules-based international order on the basis of international law” as one of Germany’s key security interests.¹¹¹ Even beyond the narrower OSCE context, references to “Helsinki” and the Paris Charter are frequent in the German debate and constitute the normative starting point. Or, in the words of Frank-Walter Steinmeier: “Our long-term objective remains to get Russia to come back to the rules-based international order on the basis of the CSCE Final Act and the Charter of Paris und to get back to a more comprehensive cooperation.”¹¹² How realistic this objective is remains to be seen. Concrete and practical ideas on how to attain it are still lacking – a conclusion that one may, for example, draw from the German OSCE presidency in 2016 and its outcomes.

109. See e.g. K. Küstner, “NATO-Russland-Rat soll erneut tagen”, *Tagesschau*, 20 May 2016.

110. This approach – contested in Germany and even within the administration – causes severe disagreement at EU level and beyond. Poland, the Baltic states, and Sweden oppose it, as does the United States. Critics argue that it undermines the Merkel government’s Russia policy and heavily damages Germany’s credibility vis-à-vis its immediate Northern and Eastern neighbors. See also J. Dempsey, “The (German) politics of Nord Stream 2”, Carnegie Europe, 3 November 2016, available at: <http://carnegieeurope.eu>.

111. German Government, “White Paper on German security policy and the future of the Bundeswehr”, June 2016, p. 25, available at: www.bmvg.de.

112. German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Rede von Außenminister Frank-Walter Steinmeier beim Egon-Bahr-Symposium”, *op. cit.*

Renegotiating the European Security Order?

While the question of recognizing – or not recognizing – the annexation of Crimea may be considered an isolated matter, it also has implications for the very basis of the European security order. Proposals like Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s to organize security conferences involving all countries “from the Atlantic to the Urals” (besides overlooking the existence of the OSCE) illustrate that at least some of the current debates’ participants are prepared to call into question the existing security architecture. Especially in France, but to a certain extent also in Germany, this question in part boils down to the degree of the US presence in European security. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a significant amount of views and proposals is clearly informed by anti-Americanism, relegating the “Russian factor” to being a dependent variable.

France: From the Atlantic to the Urals

During the 2017 presidential campaign, the European security order was debated on a number of occasions. Among the top five candidates, three made statements in favor of renegotiating the continent’s security architecture: Le Pen, Mélenchon, and Fillon. The issue was never at the heart of the campaign, and it may be tempting to dismiss the statements quoted below as campaign talk. Yet the fact that the issue was brought up at all and that presidential candidates (who, taken together, obtained more than 60 percent of votes during the first round) believed that calling the existing security architecture into question may seduce voters is remarkable.

The topic also came up during the March 2017 televised debate, when Jean-Luc Mélenchon made a proposal already prominent in his program: “In Europe, the first thing to do, that’s a conference on security from the Atlantic to the Ural, because all of the tensions come from the fact that, when the Soviet Empire crumbled, nobody has negotiated borders with anybody.”¹¹³ A key point in Mélenchon’s program was France’s leaving NATO, as the Alliance is said to only serve the purpose of rallying European countries behind the United States. Marine Le Pen was less harsh on NATO, as she merely wanted to leave its integrated command structure. And while she still proposed the creation of a “pan-European Union of sovereign

113. “Grand débat : Poutine et la Russie, le sujet qui rapproche Mélenchon et Fillon”, *op. cit.*

nations” in 2012, which would include Russia (and Switzerland),¹¹⁴ this idea had disappeared from her 2017 program. During her 2017 campaign, she also argued for France’s “equidistance” from the US and Russia.¹¹⁵ Gaullist François Fillon never went that far, promising to be a “loyal and independent ally” to the United States.¹¹⁶ However, he also advocated a security conference on the “new security conditions in Europe”, without specifying these further.¹¹⁷ Interestingly, the OSCE again appeared in none of these proposals on security conferences.

Germany: A Mainstream Consensus

Preserving the current European security order and NATO in particular is a core element of the German *raison d’Etat*. This is the consensus across the political spectrum, with the exceptions mostly situated to the far right and the far left. Within the mainstream debate, remodeling the European security agenda is simply not on the agenda. As Angela Merkel made clear in the Bundestag the day before NATO’s 2016 Warsaw summit, Germany’s contribution to the Alliance’s reassurance measures also serve to make clear that “for us, the basic principles of Europe’s security architecture are valid without any change, even in times of new challenges”. Merkel continued to explain that the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act should remain the “basis for relations between NATO and Russia”, and that “the central place” for dialog between the two “is and remains the NATO-Russia Council”.¹¹⁸

Martin Schulz’ 77-minutes nomination speech as the SPD’s candidate for the Chancellery in March 2017 made no references to NATO, Russia, Ukraine, or Crimea.¹¹⁹ His party’s electoral program adopted in June contained one paragraph on “détente policy, dialog, and clear principles as a sign of strength” (on page 107 out of 116, perhaps illustrating the matter’s relevance). Besides the ideas quoted earlier on, the program stated that the SPD “in the long term strives for an inclusive security architecture for Europe as a whole. The policy of détente must again be strengthened in this

114. M. Le Pen, “Mon projet pour la France et les Français”, electoral program, 2012, p. 15. See also M. Le Pen, “144 engagements présidentiels”, electoral program, 2017, available at: www.marine2017.fr.

115. E.g. during the final televised debate on 3 May, see e.g. V. Mazuir, “Macron-Le Pen, le film d’un débat ultra tendu”, *Les Échos*, 3 May 2017, available at: www.lesechos.fr.

116. F. Fillon, *Mon projet pour la France*, *op. cit.*, chapter on foreign policy.

117. See e.g. “François Fillon plaide pour une ‘alliance européenne de défense’”, *Le Point*, 22 January 2017, available at: www.lepoint.fr.

118. “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzlerin Dr. Angela Merkel zum NATO-Gipfel am 8./9. Juli 2016,” *op. cit.*

119. M. Schulz, “Rede des designierten Kanzlerkandidaten und Parteivorsitzenden der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, Martin Schulz”, Berlin, 19 March 2017, available at: www.spd.de.

sense.”¹²⁰ The program did not give any further details. From the start, it seemed unlikely that Schulz or his party would make the European security architecture a campaign topic in 2017. In hindsight, and as was to be expected, debates in the run-up to the elections were largely centered around the refugee crisis and integration issues.

Further to the left, Die Linke calls for abolishing NATO as “a result of the Cold War”, which should be replaced by a new alliance that would include Russia.¹²¹ Unless a major political earthquake occurs within the SPD, such positions will lead to insurmountable obstacles in any potential future coalition agreements between die Linke and the Social Democrats, in addition to other structural incompatibilities between the two parties and an assumed voters’ skepticism vis-à-vis such a leftist coalition.¹²² The right-wing populist AfD – which does not have any influence on German foreign policy – wants to keep NATO while seeking better relations with Russia.¹²³ Beyond the political parties, it is again rather marginal voices and the “usual suspects” who argue in favor of a revised security architecture. Among the more prominent of these voices is Matthias Platzeck, who in a 2017 article in the SPD’s paper *Vorwärts* argued for a “détente” with Russia, a “pan-European security architecture”, and a “constructive *Ostpolitik*”, for which Willy Brandt’s policies could serve as a model.¹²⁴ However, he was heavily contradicted in the same paper – notably on the grounds that he did not even mention Ukraine.¹²⁵

120. SPD, “Zeit für mehr Gerechtigkeit”, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

121. See “Wahlprogramm der Linkspartei: Absage an NATO und Hartz IV”, *Tagesschau*, 4 April 2017, available at: www.tagesschau.de.

122. One largely shared explanation for the SPD’s being weaker than expected in the March 2017 Saarland regional elections is the party’s flirting with Die Linke throughout the campaign – despite foreign policy not even being relevant at the Länder level.

123. AfD, “Programm für die Wahl zum Deutschen Bundestag am 24. September 2017”, electoral program, 2017, available at: www.afd.de.

124. M. Platzeck, “Platzeck: Ohne Entspannung mit Russland keine Sicherheit in Europa”, *Vorwärts*, 20 February 2017, available at: www.vorwaerts.de. See also Bidder and Schepp, “Platzeck gegen Merkels Russland-Kurs”, *op. cit.*

125. See especially S. Vaut, “Warum Platzeck irrt: über Russland und über Brandts *Ostpolitik*”, *Vorwärts*, 24 February 2017, available at: www.vorwaerts.de.

Conclusions: Foreign Policy Discourses Drifting Apart?

Paris and Berlin have shaped much of the European response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the situation in Eastern Ukraine. Although ideas on priorities and the degree of engagement may at times have varied, the Western part of the Normandy format managed to engineer a consensus that could be extended to all EU member states. A continued common European approach will also largely depend on France and Germany. In order to maintain such a consensus in 2018 and beyond, it is crucial to understand lines of argument, frameworks of analysis, and recurrent themes. Providing deeper insights into these has been the aim of this paper.

In both countries, ideas on Russia policies are not necessarily a matter of where one positions oneself on the political spectrum in terms of left or right. As this paper has shown, the debate's bandwidth is much broader in France than in Germany. In Germany, the debate is organized around a dominant discourse with a number of opposing views that are – at least currently – not very influential. True “pro-Russians” are an extremely scarce phenomenon. The great majority of the so-called *Russlandversteher* do not defend their positions because they adhere to Putin's view of the European order or his values. Rather, they seek closer cooperation with Russia and advocate Western approaches that take (in their view) legitimate Russian interests into account. They could – especially those close to mainstream positions – better be described as “pro-dialog”, rather than “pro-Russian”. While some of the more prominent *Russlandversteher* may at times get considerable media exposure, their influence is limited and the importance of their arguments has steadily decreased since 2014. The vast majority of relevant politicians stand firmly by the official discourse. This is unlikely to change anytime soon.

In France, one of the main conclusions to be drawn from the 2017 presidential elections is that the consensus on the country's foreign policy has eroded. This also translates into highly diverse positions with respect to Russia and policy toward Russia. On the extreme right, the country counts a few genuine supporters of Vladimir Putin. Many more politicians adhere to sovereignist discourses, oftentimes derived from anti-Americanism. Rapprochement with Russia, in this logic, serves France's strategic independence. A much larger number of protagonists than in Germany argue in favor of closer cooperation with Russia on the basis of France's national interest – first and foremost, the fight against Islamist terrorism, but economic considerations also come into play. All of this may not apply to the foreign-

policy apparatus as such. But it clearly applies to the political class, including at the Assemblée Nationale and the Sénat.

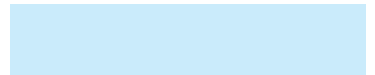
From a French-German perspective, it is first of all interesting to note that the respective debates on Russia have almost no connection with each other. Despite close diplomatic cooperation, the political debate remains almost exclusively confined within national borders and national systems of references.

What is more, foreign-policy discourses in general seem to be drifting apart in France and Germany. The official line in Germany – against the backdrop of the “Munich consensus” on greater German engagement on the international scene and considerable evolutions in the country’s security policy discourse since 2014 – unequivocally continues to emphasize multilateralism and a rules-based international order. Apart from a limited number of exceptions, these basic principles remain uncontested across the political spectrum. In France, however, the 2017 campaign has shown considerable differences between (and sometimes even within) political parties. These differences will continue to exist, and perhaps even deepen – especially at a time when the German chancellor is weakened by her difficulties to form a government and when the debate in France is characterized by strong undertones of “France is back”. At the national level, among the key questions in French politics and the foreign-policy debate is in which direction Les Républicains are headed. François Fillon may have lost the election and more or less withdrawn from politics, but the discourse he stood for is here to stay. Will the party – provided that it survives its electoral defeat – follow the sovereigntist path, or will it opt for an approach to foreign policy that is in line with France’s more recent foreign-policy tradition? Both strands are represented in the party, but Laurent Wauquiez’s victory in the fight for the party presidency in December 2017 clearly points into a more “sovereigntist” direction. Berlin is likely to consider some of the approaches laid out during the French 2017 campaign as going back to conceptions on international relations long thought overcome. Well beyond the Russia question, this is not going to remain without consequences for the Franco-German dialog.

Against this background, Paris and Berlin should use the new momentum in Franco-German relations triggered by Macron’s election not only regarding matters such as the EU’s Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) or Eurozone governance, but also to devise the way forward in EU-Russia relations. This applies in particular to the future of the sanctions regime and the implementation of the Minsk agreement. In light of an ever more unstable consensus within the EU, but also of the risk of a long-term frozen conflict at Europe’s border that sanctions will hardly solve, Paris’ and Berlin’s joint commitment in a Normandy context remains key.

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