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MANOEUVRING ON THREE LEVELS

THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION AND MEDIA FRAMING ON GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY DURING THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE

INTRODUCTION

The Ukrainian crisis is an almost perfect example of Robert Putnam's "two level game" – metaphor, which he developed in his seminal article¹. According to it, governments play on two levels – a domestic one and an international one, and such a game helps them to enlarge their space of manoeuvre and their autonomy with respect to both – external and domestic actors.

Putnam assumed, that "Interpretations cast in terms either of domestic causes and international effects (...) or of international causes and domestic effects (...) would represent merely 'partial equilibrium' analyses and would miss an important part of the story, namely, how the domestic politics of several countries became entangled via an international negotiation. (...) [We] must aim instead for 'general equilibrium' theories that account simultaneously for the interaction of domestic and international factors." Putnam already referred to German politics (during the 80s), but he did so at a moment, when international politics still were the main domain of the nation state and did not require so much coordination and decision making through supranational bodies. His focus was on the link between the international and the domestic level of policy making and politics:

"At the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments. Neither of the two games can be ignored by central decision-makers, so long as their countries remain interdependent, yet sovereign. Each national political leader appears at both game boards. Across the international table sit his foreign counterparts, and at his elbows sit diplomats and other international advisors. Around the domestic table behind him sit party and parliamentary figures, spokespersons for domestic agencies, representatives of key interest groups, and the leader's own political advisors. The unusual complexity of this two-level game is that moves that are rational for a player at one board

¹ R. Putnam, *Diplomacy and Domestic Politics, The Logic of Two-Level Games*, "International Organization" 42, p. 427-460.

(such as raising energy prices, conceding territory, or limiting auto imports) may be impolitic for that same player at the other board. Nevertheless, there are powerful incentives for consistency between the two games. Players (and kibitzers) will tolerate some differences in rhetoric between the two games, but in the end either energy prices rise or they don't. The political complexities for the players in this two-level game are staggering. Any key player at the international table who is dissatisfied with the outcome may upset the game board, and conversely, any leader who fails to satisfy his fellow players at the domestic table risks being evicted from his seat."

But foreign policy is no longer – at least not in Europe – a domain of interstate bargaining connected to domestic negotiations between social groups, lobbies and political parties. One might even question, whether Putnam's two-level game was still applicable to the European Union of the Maastricht Treaty, which is seen as the start of a political union. Back then, foreign policy was still limited to interstate bargaining and decision making based on unanimity. This has now changed with the Lisbon Treaty, which leaves classical foreign policy in the sphere of intergovernmentalism, but requires the involvement of supranational bodies for areas beyond the foreign policy core. Trade policy and matters related to Schengen (with their often strong implications for non-member states) are now in the community domaine, with qualified majority voting, codecision rights for the European Parliament and the control of the European Court of Justice. Sanctions and similar restrictive measures are even more complicated, depending on the policy field, which they affect. Sanction decisions under the Common Foreign and Security Policy require Council regulations and therefore the information of (but no approval by) the European Parliament. An exception is contained in article 75 of the Treaty of the EU with regard to terrorism.² In such cases the Council and the Parliament apply the ordinary legislation procedure of art. 294 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU).³ Travel bans and embargoes belong to the exclusive competence of the Council with the exception of arms embargoes, which are ruled by art. 346 TFEU. In these situations, decision making does not only take place on the domestic and the international level, but also between governments and the supranational institutions of the EU.

Yet more must be added to this picture, to make it complete. As the transnationalist strand of International Relations theory invokes, governments do not only bargain with other governments over outcomes for domestic stakeholders and vice-versa, they are also embedded in a structure of overarching transnational lobbies, which often seek outcomes, which are contrary to the respective government's domestic audience and can trigger cleavages among domestic stakeholders.⁴ As Sikkink, Risse and others

² F. Giumelli, *How EU sanctions work. A new narrative*. "Chaillot Papers" 129/2013, available at www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Chaillot_129.pdf.

³ Together with art. 231 and 238 TFEU.

⁴ Such situations usually occur, when domestic stakeholders with strong interests in foreign countries (for example holding assets there as foreign investors) seek to reconcile their vested domestic and foreign interests through lobbying both – their own and the foreign – government. This frequently takes place in EU anti-dumping decision making when EU based industries with a strong FDI presence in China try to prevent anti-dumping measures, which would be beneficial for their own industry in their country of

have shown⁵, governments also may come under pressure from transnational organizations, which lure governments, who pay lip service to norms and values, which they do not intend to apply into Schimmelpfennig's community trap by invoking strategic litigation and mobilizing domestic and foreign public opinion.⁶

This could be observed during the current crisis in Ukraine albeit not among economic interest groups but between public opinion (as expressed in the media) and popular opinion (as expressed in representative opinion polls) in Germany. This article focuses on Germany's policy toward Russia and Ukraine and the pressure, which the European, international and domestic level exerted on the government. Chancellor Merkel and her minister of foreign affairs, Frank-Walter Steinmeier played on three stages: the world stage, where they were confronted with an increasingly hawkish US government, the European stage, where they had to take into account conflicting member states' interests and their different and diverse links with Russia and last but not least, the domestic theatre, which was divided into elite media, which remained suspicious toward Russia, and an increasingly Russia-friendly public opinion, whose meanders could be observed in opinion polls.

Therefore this study is based on an adopted version of Putnam's model: It uses three levels instead of two and assumes, that Putnam's domestic audience may polarize over foreign policy issues.

During the Ukrainian crisis, which, for the purpose of this article, comprises the time span from November 2013 until the second contact group meeting⁷ in Minsk in December 2014, German public and popular opinion underwent five major shifts, which each exposed serious tensions between the foreign policy of the government, the trends in opinion polls (where strong cleavage evolved) and the dominant strand of media coverage (which will be called "public opinion"). This article's focus will be on these shifts and the relation between public opinion and political decision making in foreign policy. It argues, that Germany, which had gained a leading (if not *the* leading) role in the EU during the crisis of the euro-zone, lost this leadership role to the US

origin. In such a situation, we usually observe a division within the same lobby group with regard to the proposed anti-dumping decision (those with no interest in China supporting anti-dumping and those with FDI in China opposing it).

⁵ K. Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade. How Human Rights Prosecutions are Changing World Politics*. New York, London, W.W. Norton & Co. 2001; K. Sikkink, and E. L. Lutz, *The Justice Cascade. The Evolution and Impact of Foreign Human Rights Trials in Latin America*. "Chicago Journal of International Law" 1 (2001), p. 1-34; T. Risse, S. C. Ropp, K. Sikkink (eds), *The Power of Human Rights. International Norms and Domestic Change*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2002.

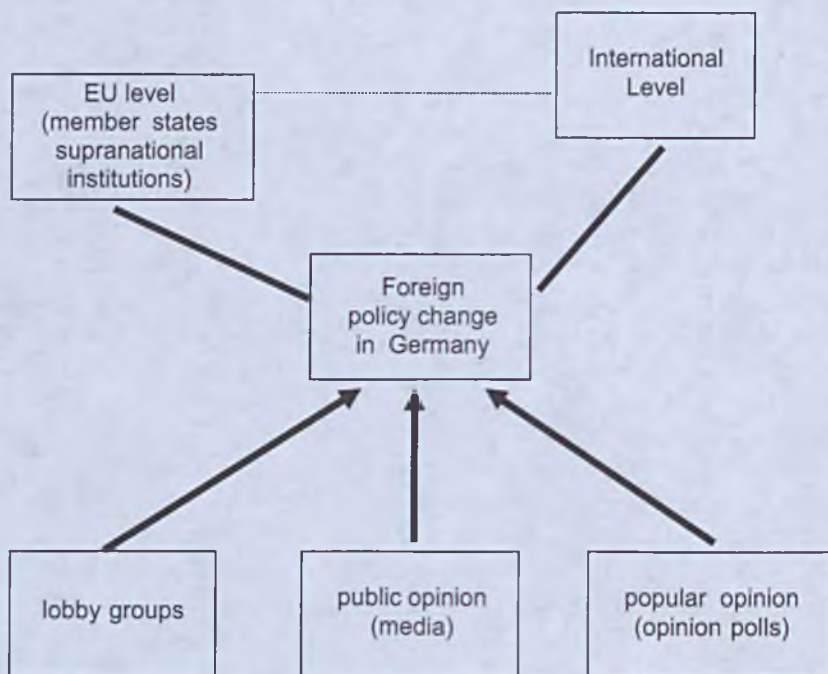
⁶ F. Schimmelpfennig, *The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. "International Organization" 55, 2001, p. 47-80. Schimmelpfennig's concept describes a situation, where a government enters into a commitment on the European level, which enables the other partners to mobilize public opinion for the implementation of the commitment. The latter is finally applied, although its supporters originally acquiesced to it rhetorically in order to prevent implementation. The concept claims to explain, why the EU agreed to subsequent enlargement, which originally no one wanted. But due to its broad expanse, it can also be applied to other situations.

⁷ The contact group comprises Germany, Russia, Ukraine, France and the OSCE.

as a result of bottom-up pressure by popular opinion, which inclined the government to mediate between “the West” and Russia, rather than to represent “the West” against Russia. It also argues, that German foreign policy during the crisis is better explained by the influence of lobbies, media influences and public opinion⁸ than by economic interest and that the government followed public opinion changes rather than shifts in popular opinion when external pressures were weak or counterbalanced each other.⁹

Figure 1

External and domestic influence on foreign policy decisions



The first of these shifts in public opinion occurred with the downfall of the Yanukovich regime on 19 and 20 February 2014, the second was the annexation of Crimea, which followed suit in March, the third came with the armed uprisings in Slovyansk, Luhansk and Donetsk after March and the beginning of what the interim government

⁸ For the purpose of this article, popular opinion means opinion of citizens as measured by opinion polls – as apposed to media interpretations, which very often dramatically differed from the opinion of “the man in the street.”

⁹ External pressure is (for the purpose of this article) regarded as weak, when no major international actor tries to push the German government to a policy shift, or, when such pressures are present, but counterbalance each other, for example when the EU is divided and unable to take a decision or, alternatively, when pressure from one side meets opposing pressure from another side.

in Kiew uses to call an "Anti-Terrorist Operation". The fourth shift was the result of the downing of the Malaysian aircraft on 7 July 2014 over Eastern Ukraine. The fifth took place, when German public opinion and the focus of foreign policy making were diverted from Donbas to Iraq, Syria and radical islamist terrorism as a result of the Islamic State advance in Iraq, the following refugee crisis and the terrorist attacks in Paris.

BACKGROUND: THE DOMESTIC FACTORS DRIVING GERMANY'S FOREIGN POLICY

Economic factors

Already before the crisis started, a strong asymmetry in German public opinion and expertise about Eastern Europe existed. This asymmetry concerned the relation of German elites and media toward Russia and Ukraine. Russia in itself is no important market or sales partner for Germany, at least, it is less important than most medium size or big EU member states, it is an economic dwarf as compared with the US and it has almost no importance if compared with the remaining EU members. However, during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, this did not play out against Russia, but against Ukraine, because Ukraine is an even minor partner in trade and investment for the German industry.

Table 1

Germany's main trading partners as compared to Russia and Ukraine in 2013

	Germany's imports as % of all its imports	Germany's exports as % of all of its exports
France	7,2	8,8
US	5,5	8,1
China	8,6	6,4
Netherlands	8,9	5,8
Russia	2,8	3,5
Ukraine	0,17	0,49

Sources: Observatory of economic complexity (<http://atlas.media.mit.edu/profile/country/deu/> and Statistische Bundesamt, Wiesbaden: Ranking for Germany's main trading partners 2013, at: www.destatis.de

It is not the structure of German-Russian trade links that explain the ambiguous character of German popular opinion and German foreign policy during the crisis, but the structural difference between German investments in Russia at one hand and German investments in Ukraine on the other hand. German business in Russia is driven by big corporations (often even de facto multinationals) like Mercedes, EON, Ruhr-gas, big banking houses and industrial conglomerates with a strong influence on the German government (no matter which coalition actually rules the country), whereas German FDI in Ukraine are driven by medium size and small enterprises, which do

not have much leverage over the ruling establishment in Berlin. When larger corporations invest in Ukraine, the capital they invest tends to be much smaller than in Russia. In both countries, Germany ranks second on the list of FDI providers – but in nominal numbers the difference is huge, because Russia in general attracts much more FDI than Ukraine.

Table 2

German Foreign Direct Investment in Ukraine and Russia 2011 and 2012

	Number of FDI projects	As percent of all FDI in the country	Jobs created by FDI from Germany	Accumulated FDI by the end of 2012
Ukraine (2011)	21	12%	728	23 bln euro
Russia (2012)	28	21,9%	4460	6,6 bln USD

Sources: Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie: <http://www.bmwi.de/DE/Themen/Aussenwirtschaft/laenderinformationen,did=316538.html>

Ostausschuss der deutschen Wirtschaft: <http://www.ost-ausschuss.de/ukraine>

Ernst and Young: European Investment Monitor and Russia 2013, attractiveness survey www.ey.com

The statistics provided above show, that Germany's initial approach to the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, which emphasized the need to accommodate Russia to the detriment of Ukraine, can be explained by the economic and cultural asymmetry between German-Russian as compared to German-Ukrainian relations. But with regard to these numbers, economic interests do not explain the German pro-Russian bias in foreign policy making. Lobbyism, the influence of well-connected and organized industrial stakeholders rather than the economic interest of the country as such was the driving force behind the government's reluctance to support Ukraine.

Cultural factors influencing Germany's foreign policy toward Russia and Ukraine

This economic and lobbyist asymmetry is reinforced by another one, which is much older and has more to do with knowledge production, intellectual traditions and, to some extent, nostalgia. German-Russian relations do have a long history, which dates back centuries and whose most recent apogee took place in the last quarter of the 19. century, when Otto von Bismarck secured Russian support against France. Compared to this, Ukraine is a blind spot on Germany's mind map of Eastern Europe. After World War II, Ukraine as an independent state vanished German collective memory and remained absent even after 1991. German media, German academic institutes, German business groups maintain representations in Moscow, but hardly ever do so in Kiev. Before the police-clampdown on Maidan in November 2013, no single German media had a permanent correspondent in the Ukrainian capital.¹⁰

¹⁰ G. Pörzgen, *Moskau fest im Blick. Die deutschen Medien und die Ukraine*, „Osteuropa“ 64. Jahrgang, Heft 5–6 / 6–7, 2014, p. 295–310.

SHIFT 1: UNITY PREVAILS BETWEEN GERMAN PUBLIC OPINION, POPULAR OPINION AND FOREIGN POLICY MAKING

The first period, which dates from the first violent intervention of the Ukrainian police against peaceful protesters on the Maidan Square at the end of November 2013, German media, politicians and the wider public regarded through a simple and affirmative lens, which inclined them to interpret the events as a democratic, pro-European protest and the protesters as being representative for the whole country and its population. At that stage, events in Ukraine were seen as a purely internal matter, a fight between a democratic, pro-Western population, which wanted to force a corrupt, reluctant and unpredictable dictator to sign the EU Association Agreement, which he had suddenly rejected at the Vilnius summit. Police violence in Kiev transformed the students' protest into an incrementally armed movement involving older people, war veterans and radical political groups and inclined the political opposition in the Verkhovna Rada to support the protesters. Ukraine's Eastern parts were hardly ever mentioned and nobody inquired, how the Maidan protests were perceived there. Nationalism, the problematic symbolics of many Maidan protesters, some of whom brandished UPA flags and hailed Stepan Bandera were ignored or downplayed as marginal. If they became a topic at all, it was because they seemed to counter the Maidan's pro-Western aspirations, not because they were potentially antagonizing for other parts of Ukraine. In this atmosphere, the Steinmeier/Sikorski/Fabius Trojka's initiative to confront Yanukovich and coerce the opposition and the government into a compromise was praised as a courageous and successful step for deescalation and assistance for the opposition. At that point, there was not even a slight difference between the perception of Polish and German public opinion, and there was no cleavage between German public opinion, the media and the government. With the agreement brokered by the three in Kiev, the problem seemed to be solved, because it was regarded as an internal political conflict of Ukraine. The Russian government's reluctance to react and its apparent surprise about the rapidness of the events unfolding was interpreted as Russian *désintéressement*¹¹. From that perspective, Putin had sent his Human Rights ombudsman Vladimir Lukin (who did not sign the agreement) because he had no real dog in the fight and not, because he had already prepared another scenario for the time after Yanukovich.¹² After the negotiations, Steinmeier emphasized

¹¹ M. Gebauer, *Der Marathon Diplomat*. "Spiegel-Online" 22 February 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/steinmeier-in-ukraine-marathon-diplomatie-fuer-kompromiss-a-955029.html>.

¹² As we now know, there apparently was a plan to annex Crimea even before the fall of Yanukovich, as a confidential strategy paper, revealed by the oppositional newspaper "Novaya Gazeta", and research by the German weekly "Die Zeit" has shown. (No author), *Представляется правильным инициировать присоединение восточных областей Украины к России*. "Novaya Gazeta" 2, 2015, available at, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/67389.html>, G. Herwig Höller, *Wann die Krim-Annexion wirklich begann*. "Die Zeit" 16 March 2015 available at, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-03/krim-annexion-leonid-gratsch-putin>; (no author), *Russlands Strategie Papier im Wortlaut*. "Die Zeit" 26.3.2015 available at, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-02/russische-einmischung-ukraine-dokument-gazeta-deutsche-uebersetzung>.

the constructive role of Vladimir Lukin.¹³ Satisfaction prevailed in Germany – among the media just as much as among members of the ruling coalition. Steinmeier's initiative in Kiev was widely praised as a successful attempt to solve the crisis and provide peace to Ukraine. This episode was certainly exhausting and risky for Steinmeier, but it did neither trigger any divisions in German society, nor in public opinion. Neither did it cause a rift between popular opinion and the media. There was harmony between all three levels of foreign policy making and no need for Merkel and Steinmeier to mend conflicts with the US (whose administration had been caught by surprise by the events in Kiev) or on the EU level (support for "the Maidan" was widespread and unanimous). This Arcadian landscape changed after the first dramatic shift in Russian foreign policy, once the conflict was internationalized and militarized. Until then, if there was any pressure on the Merkel government it came from the public and the media and overlapped, pushing the cabinet into the same direction as its international and European partners – to support the allegedly pro-Western and democratic opposition against a ruthless and corrupt strongman.

SHIFT 2: THE CRIMEA CRISIS AND THE FIRST SPLIT BETWEEN PUBLIC AND POPULAR OPINION IN GERMANY

The Maidan protests with their culmination – the fall of Yanukovich – had pushed Ukraine into the center of public interest and made the conflict in Ukraine a major media issue. It had transformed Ukraine from a total non-issue in foreign policy and media awareness to the headlines and onto the top of the political agenda in Germany. The overwhelming part of public opinion had become pro-Maidan and almost every politician was eager either to stress its support for the "the people" in their fight against the "Yanukovich regime". Some even decided to travel to Kiev and make a speech on the Maidan. This changed radically once the separatist tendencies on Crimea unfolded and it became clear, that Russia was about to invade Crimea and was instigating a militarized separatist movement on the peninsula, whose aim was to tear it off Ukraine and unite it with Russia. In Poland, the annexation of Crimea caused outrage and an outcry for sanctions against Russia. In the US, it caused a wave of Republican attacks on the Obama Administration, which inclined the latter to take a firm stance and to impose *de facto* unilateral sanctions.¹⁴ Before Crimea, the Obama administration had made it clear, that it regarded Germany, and specifically Chan-

¹³ RTL, *Umsturz in der Ukraine*, 22 February 2014, <http://www.rtl.de/cms/news/rtl-aktuell/umsturz-in-der-ukraine-die-diktatur-ist-gestuerzt-381b9-51ca-42-1814699.html>; B. Bidder, *Putins Strategie in der Ukraine Krise. Der Undurchschaubare*. „Spiegel-Online” 8 May 2014, <http://ml.spiegel.de/article.do?id=968373>.

¹⁴ Sanctions were negotiated and consulted with the EU, but finally the US imposed some sanctions against selected Russian banks, which were not accompanied by similar ones of the EU. For details about the US debate on Ukraine see, K. Bachmann, I. Lyubashenko (eds), *The Maidan Uprising, Separatism and Foreign Intervention. Ukraine's complex transition*. Frankfurt/M., Peter Lang 2014, especially the chapter written by Thomas Sparrow and the conclusion by the editors.

cellor Merkel as the responsible person in the EU to manage the crisis, and that the crisis was – in line with the Trojka-Initiative in late February – a European matter, not a global problem. Whereas Merkels telephone-diplomacy and her frequent contacts with Vladimir Putin had proven quite successful – or at least impressive – in preventing Russian interference during the Maidan protests, it failed to deliver as the crisis became a military challenge and was no longer a purely political and diplomatic one.¹⁵

Merkel's failure can easily be explained by a number of overlapping factors in domestic politics. First of all, in the light of a looming military conflict between Russia, Ukraine and, potentially, the US, the German public quickly developed its well known (from the Iraq wars) pacifist reflexes, regarding the possible (but far from imminent) start of an escalation from its possible end point. According to this implicit – hardly ever directly mentioned, but overwhelmingly present in the public debate – worst case scenario, any attempt to contain Russia would lead to nuclear war. Next, the asymmetry between German-Russian and German-Ukrainian relations, which was described at the beginning of this article, became apparent.¹⁶ That was the moment, when pro-Russian attitudes of the German public coincided with lobby interests in avoiding sectoral sanctions. From that point onward, German public opinion strongly diverged from US and Polish public opinion (and started to converge with French public opinion). The very character of the conflict in Ukraine now underwent a radical re-interpretation, which led to important implication for foreign policy.

Suddenly, the interim government in Kiev, which had chased away a corrupt dictator (according to the mainstream interpretation of German media and politicians during the Maidan protests), became the foe because of its allegedly “fascist character”. One could read an article in Germany's most influent tabloid “Bild” in which elder statesman and widely admired former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt denied the existence of an Ukrainian nation.¹⁷ In talk-shows on public television, commentators used to claim that “Crimea had always belonged to Russia”, that “Kiev was the origin of the Russian state” and that “Germans owed Russia for its acquiescence to German reunification” equating the USSR with Russia.¹⁸ German media came under

¹⁵ On the US policy toward Ukraine see, T. Sparrow, *From Maidan to Moscow, Washington's response to the crisis in Ukraine*, in: K. Bachmann, I. Lubashenko, *The Maidan Uprising...*, p. 321-348.

¹⁶ One of the most striking features of that asymmetry was the fact, that during the Maidan protests and long after the Crimea annexation German TV correspondents covering Ukraine usually pronounced the Ukrainian cities, places and the names of Ukrainian politicians as if they were Russian (Kharkov rather than Kharkiv) or, in many cases did not even know, how to pronounce it (Danjetsk, Donjetsk, Donetch...)

¹⁷ H. Schmidt, *Ich traue Putin nicht zu, dass er Krieg will*. “Bild” 21 May 2014, <http://www.bild.de/video/clip/helmut-schmidt/helmut-schmidt-ueber-die-europawahl-und-die-ukraine-35991794.bild.html>.

¹⁸ E. Ruge, *Nicht mit zweierlei Maß mesen*. “Die Zeit Online” 7 March 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/2014/11/pro-russische-position-eugen-ruge>; J. Jessen, *Teufelspakt für die Ukraine*, “Die Zeit Online”

8 March 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/2014/14/ukraine-unabhaengigkeit>. The latter article argues (in the subtitle), that “Germany has always supported Ukrainian independence during the World Wars, and that raises suspicion in Russia.” Concerning TV shows see (for example), the Anne Will Show <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4yiJ-iElxI>, Maybritt Illner, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbsUBlpqzLE> and Beckmann, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEuNdnAXFu8>.

huge pressure from many of their readers (some journalists claimed to be victims of a campaign orchestrated by Russian authorities), who rejected their news coverage and op-eds as being biased, anti-Russian and submissive to the US. Leftist politicians condemned Ukraine out of pacifist motives or because of the inclusion of Svoboda-members in the interim government, or because they used to project their nostalgic attitudes regarding the USSR onto Vladimir Putin's Russia. Public TV ran several talkshows about the Ukrainian crisis inviting Russian diplomats and even government sponsored journalists and lobbyists, but refrained from inviting German experts on Ukraine as well as Ukrainian diplomats or experts.¹⁹ Later on, a report drafted on behalf of the non-partisan, but government funded think tank Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung found – opposite to popular opinion – that TV coverage in talkshows between 12 December 2013 and 30 April 2014 had not been anti-Russian, but had largely neglected Ukraine. Whereas the titles of the programs used to have a strong and often emotional wording, the composition of the panels was dominated by participants supporting *détente* rather than containment.²⁰ Often, Russian journalists (usually from the pro-government media), Russian diplomats and Russian experts were dominant, whereas whole talkshows passed without a single Ukrainian representative or expert.²¹

For the government, this sudden shift in public opinion constituted a new challenge. Immediately after the start of the Russian operation on Crimea, Merkel had framed a compromise within the EU, which foresaw a three-level system of sanctions and whose purpose was it, to prevent Russia from further escalating the situation: Diplomatic sanctions were to be followed by personal ones. If those did not contain Russia, sectoral economic and financial sanctions would have to follow. In a first step, the EU had already cancelled the ongoing negotiations about visa-free travel for Russian citizens and about further trade liberalization. During the Crimea crisis, individual sanctions, like travel bans and account freezing against leading Russian businesspeople and politicians and the leaders of the secessionist movement on Crimea were added. Russia's membership in the G8 summits had been suspended. Without "de-escalating steps" undertaken by Russia, sectoral economic sanctions against the Russian economy would have to follow.

¹⁹ More about public TVs bias in K. Bachmann's article *Ekspansja Putina i szpogat Merkel* in "Gazeta Wyborcza" 6 June 2014. http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,138949,16111374,Ekspansja_Putina_i_szpogat_Merkel_Klaus_Bachmann.html as well as in G. Pörzgen, *op. cit.*

²⁰ The notion of *détente* is used here (and in the report quoted in FN 21) in order to describe a set of convictions and concepts, that aims at improving the relationship with Russia rather than contain, punish or sanction it. It is used as the equivalent to the German *Entspannungspolitik*.

²¹ F. Burkhard, *Analyse, Die Ukraine-Krise in den deutschen Talkshows*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 26.6.2014, retrieved from, www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/ukraine/187151/analyse-die-ukraine-krise-in-den-deutschen-talkshows. On the role of experts in the media during the crisis, see also, A. V. Wendtland, *Hilflos im Dunkeln. Experten in der Ukraine-Krise, Eine Polemik*. "Osteuropa" Heft 9-10, September/October 2014, p. 13-34.

The three-level system of sanctions was meant to prevent escalation by threatening with (quite unspecified and unpredictable) consequences after an escalation would take place. As such, it had not much deterrent effect, because the target government had no certainty about the consequences. An efficient system of prevention would have required to apply measures, which would weaken the target country and raise the cost of escalation. But such a system was likely to backlash on the German (and European) economy because of the sanction's backspill for exports to and commodity imports from Russia and because of possible Russian retaliation. In such a case, German economy would pay the price of prevention even before escalation took place. With regard to the above mentioned attitude of many citizens toward Russia, this was a less favorable outcome than was a less efficient, but also less harmful system of post-escalation punishment.

Nevertheless, with the three step sanctions, Merkel and Steinmeier found themselves entrapped in what Schimmelpfennig called the "community trap": they had agreed to a set of measures, which could lead to adverse outcomes, and had, at the same time, created a vehicle, which could be used by others (especially less *détente*-oriented EU members, domestic opponents to the ruling coalition and by the US and the Ukrainian government) in order to coerce them into implementing these measures in the near future by resorting to rhetorical action.²²

But Merkel quickly developed a strategy to escape the "community trap" at least for some time. When the first two steps of sanctions were being applied, public opinion and the media were afraid of a large scale invasion of Russian troops into Eastern Ukraine, a repetition of the Crimea scenario and a full scale Ukrainian-Russian war. NATO urged Russia to withdraw what Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen called a 40 000 soldiers' build-up at Ukraine's Eastern border. Instead, Russia started to send weapons and mercenaries to the insurgent pro-Russian radicals, who had occupied public buildings in Slowiansk, Luhansk, Donetsk and Mariupol, empowering them to shoot down Ukrainian Army airplanes and helicopters. It allowed Russian tanks to cross the border and hosted the political leadership of the Ukrainian separatists (many of whom only held Russian citizenship) for press conferences in Moscow. This, however, was not interpreted as escalation, because if it were, the German government would have had to support sectoral sanctions and accept the backlash for its own economy – including a fierce reaction from a sanction-hostile, war-fearing and strongly divided public opinion. The result was a paradoxical approach. When the conflict suddenly became an international one, both, German popular opinion followed the government and interpreted it as an internal one. This inclined the government to behave as if it was a purely internal conflict between Western-oriented and pro-Russian Ukrainians, who needed to be reconciled. In this situation, the government followed popular rather than public opinion, as most elite and many popular media clearly blamed Russia for the annexation of Crimea and for instigating the armed rebellions in Donbas.

²² F. Schimmelpfennig, *The Community Trap. Liberal norms, rhetorical action and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. "International Organization" 55, 2001, p. 47-80.

SHIFT 3: AFTER CRIMEA FOREIGN POLICY AND POPULAR OPINION CONVERGE

After the Russian intervention on Crimea, avoiding what frequently was called an “escalation of sanctions” became the paramount objective of Merkel, who also came under pressure for her weak stance against NSA-surveillance of public employees and her own mobile phone and Obama’s refusal to negotiate a “no-spy” agreement with Germany.²³ Her social-democratic minister of foreign affairs, Steinmeier, had yet another problem: He was frequently attacked by left wingers, pacifists and anti-American activists as a warmonger – only because he was less critical of the Ukrainian government than the protesters. Avoiding sanctions was an objective, that was being put forward by a strong lobby of German industrial enterprises and supported by popular opinion. The effect of this pressure was reinforced by US-pressure to increase sanctions against Russia. Clamped in this threefold clinch, the German government, started to press the weakest chain element, which was constraining its field of manoeuvre – Ukraine. During the Overlord commemorations in France, Germany and France forged a deal, which foresaw direct negotiations between Kiev and the separatists, despite the fact, that Ukraine was making major progress in disarming them and reconquering occupied territory. By then, it was the Russian government, which accused Ukraine of atrocities and demanded a ceasefire. Even pushing further tanks across the border did not help, since the Ukrainian Army was capable to deploy heavy anti-tank artillery and military aircraft against them. Whereas the US government supported the “anti-terrorist operation” and pushed Kiev forward, the German government, probably fearing more Russian intervention which would then require the application of sectoral sanctions, urged Kiev to negotiate a ceasefire. In Berlin, Fabius and Steinmeier arranged a meeting with Poroshenko and Sergiej Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, in order to convince Poroshenko to their plan. Poroshenko was easy to convince – due to the sore state of the Ukrainian economy and the state budget, he depended on Western aid, which could only come from the US, the IMF and Germany.

The shift in German foreign policy was in line with public opinion and the media mainstream, which – after the armed insurrections in Eastern Ukraine – framed the conflict more and more as an internal one, as a civil war and now saw Ukraine as a failed state, which descended into chaos. By then, it had already become clear, that German society was deeply divided about the conflict: in the media, the almost unanimous interpretation was one about Russia illegally attacking Ukraine, whereas the polls revealed a deep split between supporters and opponents of sanctions against Russia and a firmer NATO stance toward Russia. A clear majority saw Ukraine as the

²³ In July 2014 it became apparent that US secret services had maintained and paid several informers in the Ministry of Defense and the external information service BND (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*), including one, who had been linked to the parliamentary commission investigating the NSA’s electronic spying programs, which had been revealed by former NSA officer Edward Snowden. This inclined the government to expel the highest ranking US diplomat representing the secret services in Germany. It later appeared, that the US spy had even passed a list of several thousand BND-informers to the US authorities.

victim of Russian aggression and supported financial help for the country (58 percent), but also opposed further sanctions against Russia (50 percent against 47 percent who wanted harsher sanctions) and was against the dislocation of more NATO troops to Central and Eastern Europe (53 percent).²⁴

This division started to affect the election campaign to the European Parliament and the long-term geopolitical orientation of Germany. As polls showed, less Germans wanted to strengthen ties with the US and almost a majority saw Germany's place in the world not as firmly rooted in NATO and EU, but as a mediator between "East" and "West".

Table 3

German attitudes toward the geopolitical position of the country

Where should Germany's position be?	
Firmly in the Western alliance?	45 %
In a middle position between the West and Russia	49 %

Source: Deutschlandtrend, 3 April 2014, available at: <http://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend2202.html>

The percentage of those who wanted Germany to be "firmly in the West" increased in April to 60 percent (but at the same time, 48% found Germany should stay aside and 35% demanded "more comprehension for Russia"), but it was quite clear, that German society had become deeply divided over the issue of sanctions and a stronger military engagement in Central and Eastern Europe. Support for financial (but not military) assistance for Ukraine remained high, trust in Russia plummeted to a level never known before, but at the same time the percentage of those respondents increased, who were against a stronger presence of NATO and Germany in countries, which, while being front-line states to Russia, had demanded to strengthen NATO's eastern flank.

Table 4

German attitudes toward increasing NATO's presence in Central and Eastern Europe

	3.4.2014	5.6.2014
In favor of a stronger NATO presence	40%	21%
Against a stronger NATO presence	53%	75%

Source: Deutschlandtrend 3.4. and 5.6.2014, available at: <http://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/>

²⁴ The results stem from two different polls, the first one (58 % for supporting Ukraine financially) comes from the Deutschlandtrend of 6.3.2014, available at, <http://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend2174.html>; the second (53% more NATO presence in the East) comes from the Deutschlandtrend of 3.4.2014, available at, <http://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend2202.html>. The question about extending sanctions was asked in the Deutschlandtrend of September, available at, http://www.infratest-dimap.de/fileadmin/_migrated/content_uploads/dt1409_bericht.pdf.

On the ground, in Eastern Ukraine, the German government applied an OSCE-based strategy, aimed at reconciliation between the government in Kiev and the Eastern regions, which – in the light of that strategy – were alleged to be pro-Russian. Largely ignoring how weak the support for armed separatism in Luhansk and Donetsk was, the German Foreign Office initiated and promoted “round table talks”, organized and chaired by a senior German diplomat at the OSCE. The initiative’s purpose was to impress the German public (and provide an illusion of de-escalation) rather than the stakeholders in the conflict, since the very separatists were excluded from the talks. Their exclusion was a result of pressure from the Ukrainian government, but it also was justified by Wolfgang Ischinger, the OSCE representative at the talks, who expressed comprehension for “excluding those people who carry machine-guns”.²⁵ It remained obscure, what exactly the purpose of these round table talks was. If the aim was, to bring all conflict parties to joint negotiations, it failed, because it excluded the separatists. If the aim was, to isolate the separatists by reconciling representatives of the Eastern territories with Kiev, it was redundant, because there was no major conflict between them. But if the round table talks had soothed tensions between Ukraine’s East and the pro-Maidan regions, they would fail to de-escalate the conflict by leaving aside the armed separatists. For enabling the interim government to carry out legitimate presidential elections, the round table talks were not necessary. Russia was unable or unwilling to prevent them and the separatists could hinder them only in the few towns, which they controlled.

After the presidential elections, which did not trigger major changes in media interpretations or Germany’s foreign policy, the government was busy to downplay the extent of Russian interference in the conflict. Despite confirmed reports about inflowing mercenaries, volunteers and even regular fighters from Russia, bringing in tanks and anti-aircraft weapons, Merkel and Steinmeier denied any need of further sanctions, and usually referred to the initial sanction scale in order to warn, that more interference could lead to sectoral sanctions. But they never did so in order to demand more sanctions. This changed dramatically with the downing of the Malaysian aircraft in July.

SHIFT 4: THE DOWNING OF MH17 – MEDIA AND FOREIGN POLICY CONVERGE AND POPULAR OPINION SPLITS

The time after the downing of MH17 provides a striking example for the impact of emotionalization by and of mass media.²⁶ Probably the best illustration is the shift

²⁵ M. Gathmann, *Runder Tisch in der Ostukraine, Separatisten unerwünscht*. “Spiegel Online” 14 May 2014. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/ukraine-runder-tisch-mit-osze-beginnt-a-969357.html>.

²⁶ MH17 was a regular Malaysian Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, which crashed over Donbas, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew members. Several non-governmental groups, which investigated the downing of MH17, came to the conclusion, that the aircraft had been hit by a BUK anti-aircraft missile system from Russia, which had been under the control of pro-Russian separatists (whose leader had admitted the attack on twitter, and then erased the message, as it became clear, that the aircraft had been a civilian one). Russian government media claimed MH17 to be downed by a air-to-air missile

in Germany's most influent quality-weekly, "Der Spiegel", whose desk decided first to add a subtitle to its cover story (about the come-back of former president Christian Wulff), asking "Who will atone for the downing of MH17?"²⁷ "Der Spiegel" has a long history of pro-Soviet and Russia-focused coverage. But in the next issue, the whole coverpage was dedicated to a shining example of campaign-journalism: on a collage of portrait photos of some of the MH17 victims, who were presented with their names and (always the same) obits, the title, in big red letters against a black background demanded "Stop Putin now."²⁸ But not only for "Der Spiegel", the issue of who was responsible for the almost 300 victims now was clear, although an investigation had not even started. The airplane crash, the first hints pointing to separatists, the separatists' obstruction to an OSCE investigation and their indecent behavior at the crash site had made the mainstream interpretation of German public opinion shift. Suddenly, German speaking Ukrainian diplomats appeared in public TV talk shows, alongside their Russian colleagues, and were applauded by the public. Within the ruling Christian Democrats, policy papers demanding a tougher stance and the imposition of sectoral sanctions on Russia started to circulate. Critical opinions about Russia had existed before, but only after the MH17 downing had they a chance to cause a policy change.²⁹ Since mid-July, the time was rife for it. Although most of the victims had been Dutch citizens (and not Germans) the German government started to support sectoral sanctions, alongside the Dutch and British government. Still, the majority of respondents was against NATO membership and military aid for Ukraine.³⁰

The conflict in Ukraine remained high on the agenda of quality media and public television, but was somehow sidelined by the Israeli invasion of Gaza. Throughout the period between the Maidan Uprising and the downing of MH17, public opinion polls showed a high level of sympathy for Ukraine and very low trust in Russia. But beginning from the annexation of Crimea, a new tendency in popular opinion emerged, which was in stark contrast to the interpretation in the media (in popular media as well as in elite media). Whereas public television news, the big regional and national newspapers and most radio stations presented the conflict as a Russian attempt to grab land in Ukraine in a way, that violated international norms and European values, this new tendency saw the conflict as one triggered by a "fascist junta" in Kiev, who

from an Ukrainian fighter jet. In October, the report of a Dutch investigative council, that had reconstructed the remainders of the aircraft and conducted forensic tests on the bodies of the victims, came to the same conclusion. The report is available on, <http://www.onderzoeksraad.nl/>; the reports from the NGO investigations are available on, <http://www.bellingcat.com/tag/mh17/> and on <http://mh17.correctiv.org/english/>.

²⁷ "Der Spiegel" (Printausgabe Nr. 30), 21 July 2014.

²⁸ "Der Spiegel" (Printausgabe Nr. 31), 28 July 2014. The title in German was *Soppt Putin jetzt!*

²⁹ For the critical opinions about Russia in public opinion polls and government policy see H. Adomeit, *Germany's Russia Policy, Comparative Perspectives and Consequences for Transatlantic Relations*. American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, Publications, <http://www.aicgs.org/publication/germanys-russia-policy-comparative-perspectives-and-consequences-for-transatlantic-relations/>

³⁰ Deutschlandtrend 4 September 2014, available at, <http://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschland-trend/deutschlandtrend-132.html>.

had come to power oppressing Russian speakers in the Ukrainian East and which had been supported by "the West" in order to push the country into NATO and the EU and to isolate Russia. According to this interpretation, Russia's intervention on Crimea and in Donbas had been defensive. Its purpose had been to safeguard vital Russian security interests and to protect "Russians" from oppression by Ukrainian right wing militias. According to this narrative, the government in Kiev was not fighting an armed insurgency in Donbas, which is being supported from outside, but it is bombing its own citizens. This interpretation was promoted in waves of letters to the editor, sent to major news outlets. The authors accused the media of anti-Russian bias and war-mongering. Claims, according to which "the media are lying" became a prominent slogan at the regular Monday-marches of xenophobic demonstrators in Dresden, which soon found imitators in other parts of Germany and became famous under the name of PEGIDA.³¹ Those marches never gathered more than 20 000 participants and remained much weaker in towns other than Dresden, but the negative attitude toward the media percolated in the whole population, as opinion polls show.

Table 5

Institutional trust in Germany 2007-2014 in December 2014

	May 2007	June 2008	March 2009	August 2011	April 2012	February 2012	December 2014
Federal Constitutional Court	71	-	76	75	78	74	70
Federal Government	36	34	45	32	37	43	56
German Bundestag	37	-	48	41	45	46	52
Media	32	-	29	-	40	35	29

Source: Infratest Dimap, available at: <http://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/umfragen/aktuell/mehrheit-hat-kein-vertrauen-in-medien-berichterstattung-zum-ukraine-konflikt/> (the table collapses the percentages of respondents indicating "trust" and "very strong trust").

The table shows a decrease in public trust in the media between 2012 (before the Ukrainian crisis) and December 2014 (when fighting was still going on in Donbas), but it does not yet demonstrate that this decline was triggered by the media coverage about Ukraine and Russia. This can be shown by the following table, which compares trust in media coverage of Ukraine with trust in media coverage about one of the most salient domestic problems in December 2014 – the strike of train drivers of the Deutsche Bahn, which caused major traffic problems for the population.

³¹ PEGIDA is an abbreviation which consists of *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West). The name and the patterns of the movement were adopted in other cities, but failed to obtain a support similar to the one in Dresden.

Table 6

Trust in media coverage concerning international and domestic problems

	very strong trust	strong trust	less trust	no trust at all
Trust in the media coverage about the train driver strike	5	49	33	7
Trust in the media coverage about the war of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria	5	37	42	11
Trust in the media coverage about Ukraine-conflict between Russia and the West	2	31	52	11

Surprisingly, mistrust in the media coverage about the Islamic State was even higher than in the medias' Ukraine coverage, but popular opinion never produced any counter-narrative to the official narrative about the Islamic State's alleged genocide against minorities in Iraq.

Pollsters did not try to deepen the analysis about respondents' motives to reject media coverage about Iraq. They did so, however, with regard to the Ukraine coverage. It turned out, that 31 percent of those, who expressed little or no trust in the media's Ukraine coverage, did so because they regarded it as "biased" and "not objective" followed by 18 percent who thought the media were deliberately misinforming them or lying. Only 9 percent saw media coverage as "influenced by politics". 18 percent were unable or unwilling to indicate the reasons of their lack of trust.

SHIFT 5: THE FOREIGN POLICY AND THE MEDIA CONVERGE

The third question in table 6 already hints at an event, which diverted public opinion and foreign policy away from Ukraine, which pushed Ukraine from the frontpages to the back of newspapers and TV magazines, but did not so much cause shifts in media frames. For mainstream media, Russia remained the foe in the conflict and Ukraine the (somehow helpless) victim. But the whole conflict lost a lot of its salience for public opinion, as media focus shifted from Donbas to Iraq and Syria with the advance of first the Islamic State movement in Iraq. By then, media coverage concentrated on helpless, innocent and desparate Kurdish refugees from the Kurdish part of Iraq, who had escaped to a water- and foodless mountain and (according to the dominant media frame) were waiting there either for help from "the West" or their certain death from the hands of terrorist and bloodthirsty islamists. This became a genocide frame, similar to the one that had triggered the bombing of Yugoslavia subsequent to the fights between Serb forces

in Kosovo and the Kosovo Liberation Army in 1999.³² In order to avoid genocide, the US government started to bomb IS troops advancing on Kurdish territory, and the German government decided to radically change its arms export policy and to allow the delivery of lethal weapons (among them modern anti-tank weaponry) to Kurdish peshmerga units. Sigmar Gabriel, the social democrat vice-chancellor and minister of economy, who had advocated a more restrictive arms export policy, now started to support deliveries to Kurds, although that meant bringing German weapons to an apparent conflict-ridden area.³³ Iraq now started to dominate media coverage and political discourse and pushed Ukraine down the agenda, especially, as Russia withdrew a number of its forces and the Ukrainian government started to implement a negotiated cease-fire with the separatists in Donbas. The ceasefire, together with a far-reaching bill in regional autonomy, turned the Ukrainian advance against the separatists (which had triggered an open incursion of Russian troops into Ukrainian territory on the coast of the Azov-Sea) into a frozen conflict. Freezing the conflict between the separatists and the government in Kiev was not in the best interest of Ukraine (which had been coerced into the cease-fire by the incursion at Novo-Azovsk), but it was an interim solution, which allowed the German government to refrain from further sanctions and to accommodate public opinion. The general focus on Iraq also shifted away attention from Ukraine and enabled the government to show more resolve and action, than it had been willing and able to demonstrate during the Ukrainian crisis. It now could – without risking major repercussions – do something, it had avoided for such a long time during the Ukrainian crisis. It could openly take sides (with the US against IS) and provide arms to one conflict party. This conflict party now was not Ukraine (such a move would have stirred up Russian resistance and resistance by the German public, the left wing of the ruling social democrats and the leftist opposition in the Bundestag), but the Kurdish part of Iraq.

³² As Robinson has shown, media frames focusing on victims of a conflict are more likely to trigger foreign policy change than frames concentrating on potential refugees or presenting the conflict as one between morally equal parties. A specific version of such victim frames are “genocide frames”, which claim the conflict not only to be one between perpetrators and victims, but one that involves the strive of the perpetrators to kill (all) the victims because of their ethnic, racial, national or religious affiliation. “Genocide frames” are more likely than any other victim-centered media frames to trigger foreign policy change and to cause an armed intervention from outside, which is why unwilling governments try to contain such frames, whereas governments willing to intervene emphasize them. See, P. Robinson, *The CNN Effect, The Myth of News Media, Foreign Policy and Intervention*. London, New York, Routledge 2002; P. Robinson, *The CNN effect. Can the news media drive foreign policy? Review of International Studies* 1999, 25, p. 301-309; K. Smith, *Genocide and the Europeans*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2010.

³³ Until then, the policy of the governmental committee for arms exports had always ruled out exports into conflict areas. Before that, the delivery of tanks to Saudi Arabia had been a major bone of contention in the government, with Gabriel opposing such deals.

CONCLUSION

Germany's foreign policy during the Ukrainian crisis provides an almost perfect illustration of a three-level-game, in which domestic public opinion and lobbying by popular and elite pressure groups led to policy outcomes, which drove German politics into a position, where the government started to mediate between an alliance, of which it was a member, and Russia. Public opinion also inclined Merkel to downplay violence in Donbas in order to escape the "community trap" in which she had fallen when promoting the idea of escalating sanctions. Opposite to the US, which imposed an embargo on important Russian banks and armament producers neither the EU nor Germany ever applied sectoral sanctions, which were regarded as more harmful for European enterprises than the US sanctions were expected to backlash on the US economy. The cabinet in Berlin remained stuck between the failure of its sanction strategy (which did not prevent Russia from escalating violence and supporting separatists) and bottom-up pressure from a pacifist public opinion, which pressed for more comprehension for Russia, accused the government of war-mongering and dismissed the official narrative about the conflict as biased and anti-Russian. It was the downing of MH17, which provided the space and opportunity for a policy shift. Afterwards, Merkel could openly take sides within the Transatlantic Alliance and the European Union against Russia. From then onward, the German government urged Russia to withdraw support for separatism threatening with further sanctions, and, at the same time, organized economic and financial support for Ukraine. This was less than the US' sanctions against Russian banks and industrial conglomerates and the surprising signing of the „Ukraine Freedom Support Act" on 18 December 2014 by president Barack Obama, which opened the door for exports of lethal military aid to Ukraine.³⁴ Different from the US, pro-Russian pressure groups were counterweighed by a strong Ukrainian lobby (including the Ukrainian diaspora in the US and Canada), public opinion was less divided and sanctions were unlikely to backlash, the German government was constrained by a pacifist, war-fearing public, an influential industrial lobby with strong ties in Russia and by reluctant EU member states (France, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia) which compensated the more hawkish positions of EU's and NATO's atlanticist frontline states like Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and the United Kingdom (one of the state parties to the Budapest Agreement). German foreign policy at that time was not driven by economic interest per se, since fears of being cut off Russian gas or of economic losses from backfiring sanctions or Russian retorsion were hugely exaggerated, as German FDI and trade statistics demonstrate. By playing on three levels, Merkel managed to convince her public to acquiesce to a strong German component in NATO's so called Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF, a part of the NATO Response Force), whose main task is the defense of front-line countries

³⁴ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Statement by the President on the Ukraine Freedom Support Act, 18 December 2014, retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/18/statement-president-ukraine-freedom-support-act>.

in a case of emergency and which was created during NATO's summit in September 2014 in Wales. Merkel was able to do so, because she could point to the pressure from Eastern member states and the US.³⁵ She also managed to avoid almost any trouble for Germany's economy from sanctions, by pointing to the domestic problems, which her foreign policy would encounter if sanctions were increased. After some initial problems of Russia-focused export-sensitive enterprises in Spring, whose main reason was the decline of the ruble rather than the impact of sanctions, Germany's economy accelerated again, due to a sudden drop of the Euro's external value in January 2015. Merkel and Steinmeier have managed to isolate Germany from the fallout of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine; and their voters remain grateful for that. Opinion polls show a high and stable level of trust in the government and the coalition over time, which remained untainted by the events in the East. Satisfaction with the government's work even slightly increased over time, starting at a level of 60 percent in January 2014 and finishing at more than 75 percent in December.³⁶ Throughout the period, which is under scrutiny here, US pressure to punish Russia remained more or less stable, as did the structure of EU and NATO members' policy preferences³⁷ with respect to Russia and Ukraine. Also elite pressure from intellectuals and lobbyists did not much vary. It was popular opinion, that shifted from a pro-Ukrainian consensus with media coverage and foreign policy during the Maidan Uprising to a pro-Russian stance after the annexation of Crimea. The downing of MH17 had triggered a short-lived shock, which helped to prevent a policy of equi-distance in Germany. Today, MH17 is almost forgotten and Germany's main focus in the East is on de-escalation in order to avoid falling into the "community trap" again. In general, the Ukrainian crisis lost salience and has become sidelined by the fight against IS in Iraq and Syria, and – on the domestic scene – by the tensions caused by the rapid and massive influx of refugees from Syria, Iraq and Northern and Central Africa, the rise of right-wing populism (PEGIDA and AfD)³⁸ and collateral consequences of the assault on Charlie

³⁵ A reason for the relatively strong German component might also have been the assumption, that with more German soldiers more influence over the decision making process during an emergency might rest with Germany. This reason was never mentioned in public, though. Earlier, the US had declared to step up their presence in the Baltic countries and Poland and NATO increased the number of surveillance flights in these countries (which quickly were challenged by Russian airforce). NATO Press Room, 2 December 2014, Statement of Foreign Ministers on the Readiness Action Plan, retrieved from http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_115551.htm?selectedLocale=en.

³⁶ See the trendline of Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, Mannheim, available online at, http://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Umfragen/Politbarometer/Langzeitentwicklung_Themen_im_Ueberblick/Politik_II/#ArbeitReg.

³⁷ Member states' preferences regarding sanctions and assistance to Ukraine did not shift.

³⁸ AfD is the abbreviation for the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*), which was created mostly by academics and banking lobbyists in order to challenge Germany's pro-EU policy and specifically its adherence to the euro-zone and the various bailout program for Greece. After the increase in refugee applications in Germany, it had adopted an anti-refugee stance, too, which in 2015 led to a split within the party leadership. The economically liberal and euro-sceptical leadership left the party, which was taken over by its more xenophobic and nationalist challengers.

Hebdo in France. Recent opinion polls do no longer ask questions about Ukraine and the debate concerning the rift between media and popular opinion has been diverted from Ukraine to the refugee and islam issue. After the Paris assassinations populist media contestors no longer ask, whether media coverage on Russia and Ukraine is trustworthy, they now challenge the media narratives about Islam and Muslims.

As far as we know from sources, no other German chancellor paid as much attention to public opinion and opinion polls, as Angela Merkel. During her recent term as chancellor, Merkel ordered three polls per week on average, a fact, that was revealed, after a Green Party member of parliament, Malte Spitz, had managed to obtain a court order, which forced the chancellory to make the poll results available to the public.³⁹ Her opponents (and many media commentators) criticized her public opinion awareness as populist. But if one observes the shifts in Germany's foreign policy throughout the crisis in Ukraine, a clear pattern emerges, which does not sustain assumption about a foreign policy, which always follows the trend from opinion polls. At various points in time, the German government went against the dominant trend in the opinion polls. It followed popular opinion either when there was unity between public and popular opinion (like during the Maidan protests, when both interpreted the events as a struggle between a democratic and pro-Western society and a pro-Russian and kleptocratic regime) and when popular opinion had a clear direction (like during and after the annexation of Crimea, when a pro-Russian, isolationist and pacifist trend started to prevail in polls). In the latter case, foreign policy also went against the mainstream media coverage (which saw the conflict as international, rather than domestic). While the government tried to broker a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine, it sponsored additional efforts to reconcile the conflict parties in Donbas, conceiving the struggle there as a domestic Ukrainian one. When media and polls converged after the downing of MH17, foreign policy followed suit. But when popular opinion again drifted apart, revealing huge distrust into media coverage about Russia, Iraq and the media itself, government policy followed the media and undertook a major policy shift, sending weapons and instructors into the conflict zone in Iraqi Kurdistan. The above mentioned case study shows, that German foreign policy tends to be in line with media coverage and popular opinion when both converge, but that it uses to follow public opinion rather than popular opinion, when the latter is deeply divided and does not have a clear direction (like after the downing of MH17). Opposite to media claims about Merkel's and Steinmeier's policy during the crisis, the influence of media coverage on foreign policy seems to be stronger than the influence of opinion polls – at least as long as external pressure remains stable.

³⁹ S. Becker, Ch. Elmer, *Wie Merkel die Befindlichkeiten der Deutschen ausforscht*, "Spiegel Online" 9 September 2014, retrieved from, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/umfragen-von-angela-merkels-regierung-a-990296.html>.

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Słowa kluczowe: Niemcy, Rosja, Ukraina, gra na dwóch poziomach, Putnam, Schimmelpfennig, pułapka wspólnotowa, polityka zagraniczna, opinia publiczna, Robinson, efekt CNN

Keywords: Germany, Russia, Ukraine, two-level games, Putnam, Schimmelpfennig, community trap, foreign policy, public opinion, Robinson, CNN-effect

ABSTRACT

German foreign policy during the Ukrainian crisis is best explained as a three level game between a divided public opinion, a hawkish US government and the EU, during which the government of Angela Merkel did its best to avoid sanctions against Russia, because of the anticipated backlash for Germany's economic ties with Russia and for an acquiescent and war-fearing public. During the crisis, several critical moments can be identified, during which public opinion, media coverage and foreign policy changed their mutual relation. First, during the Euromaidan media coverage, policy and public opinion overlapped. This changed dramatically during Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea, when public opinion started to deviate from the media mainstream and Germany's foreign policy. After the downing of the MH17 flight in July 2014, all three started to converge again. However, whereas most Germans agree with the basic lines of Angela Merkel's policy toward Russia and Ukraine, a large minority regards media coverage as biased and anti-Russian and does not support incremental sectorial sanctions against Russia. Based on an adapted three-level model, the article finds that shifts in German foreign policy during the Ukrainian crisis were triggered on the domestic level by shifts in public rather than popular opinion when external pressure was low or external influences counterbalanced each other.