

# EU MEMBER STATES AND RUSSIA

NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN DEBATES  
IN AN EVOLVING INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

**Marco Siddi** *(ed.)*



**FIIA**  
REPORT

MARCH 2018

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**Marco Siddi**



# INTRODUCTION

The year 2014 marked a watershed in relations between Russia and the European Union (EU). Although tensions between Brussels and Moscow had been mounting for several years,<sup>1</sup> Russia's annexation of Crimea and decisive support of the anti-Maidan insurgency in Eastern Ukraine turned disagreements with the EU into an overt political crisis. The EU took a diametrically opposed stance in the crisis: it supported the Euro-maidan protests, the ensuing new Ukrainian government, and continued to pursue its policy of partnerships and economic agreements with other post-Soviet countries (most notably Georgia and Moldova). In response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, the EU imposed a set of targeted, diplomatic and – most significantly – economic sanctions against Moscow.<sup>2</sup> Russia reciprocated with sanctions that affected the EU's food exports in particular. EU sanctions and Russian countersanctions hit one of the main components of the EU-Russia relationship – trade. The combined effect of sanctions and the drop in the oil price, which had significant repercussions for the Russian economy, considerably diminished the EU-Russia economic partnership. In the field of security, debates about potential cooperation swiftly left room for mutual threat perceptions and overt confrontation.

At the same time, however, Russia remained a crucial actor for the European Union. It retained its role as the main energy provider to Europe, thanks also to the fact that EU-Russia interdependency in this area left

1 See Hiski Haukkala and Tuomas Forsberg (2016), *The European Union and Russia*, London: Palgrave, 3.

2 Kristi Raik, Niklas Helwig and Juha Jokela (2014), 'EU sanctions against Russia: Europe brings a hard edge to its economic power', FIIA Briefing Paper 162, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

little or no alternative, and the energy sector was largely left out of the sanctions policy.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps even more significantly, after 2014 Russia has in some respects become a more important security and political actor, especially from the perspective of some EU member states. On the one hand, politicians and the public opinion in East-Central member states saw their long-standing fears about Russia confirmed by its use of military force in Ukraine. On the other hand, Moscow's increasing involvement in Mediterranean politics through its direct intervention in the Syrian civil war, its political involvement in Libya and tightening relations with regional powers such as Egypt and Turkey increased its significance for Southern EU member states. This scenario was compounded by a set of other crises affecting the EU – most notably the refugee crisis, Brexit, terrorism, the weakening of the transatlantic alliance after Donald Trump's election and the political and economic fragility of several member states – which repeatedly reshuffled the EU's priorities and indirectly influenced relations with Russia.

Confronted with this diverse set of challenges, the debate on Russia took on different nuances and articulations in EU member states, even while they maintained a common official policy on sanctions. The different nature of bilateral relations between individual member states and Russia, distinct national identities and historical factors also played a role in this regard.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, while in 2014 the Ukraine crisis appeared to be the most urgent issue from an EU perspective, the subsequent emergence of the multiple crises mentioned above posed other formidable external and domestic challenges. This report investigates how selected EU member states viewed and debated their relations with Russia in this complex context. It intends to corroborate and complement existing analyses of post-2014 European-Russian relations, which have focused mostly on the joint EU-level response to the crisis with Russia, and thus somewhat neglected the different national positions and debates within member states.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the main research questions are: How have international developments since 2014 affected bilateral relations between Russia and EU member states? How have domestic debates on Russia in EU member states evolved, and who are the main actors in these debates? What are

3 Marco Siddi (2017a), 'The EU's gas relationship with Russia: solving current disputes and strengthening energy security', *Asia Europe Journal* 15(1), 107–117.

4 Marco Siddi (2017b), *National Identities and Foreign Policy in the European Union: The Russia Policy of Germany, Poland and Finland*, Colchester: ECPR Press, 41–66. For a pre-Ukraine crisis analysis of bilateral relations between EU member states and Russia, see Maxine David, Jackie Gower and Hiski Haukkala, eds. (2013), *National perspectives on Russia: European foreign policy in the making?* London: Routledge.

5 Among the policy studies on EU–Russia relations produced after 2014, the Dahrendorf Forum's Special Report is noteworthy for the large number of contributions and different perspectives. See Cristian Nitoiu, ed. (2016), *Avoiding a New 'Cold War': The future of EU–Russia relations in the context of the Ukraine crisis*, Berlin and London: Dahrendorf Forum.

the foreign policy priorities of each member state vis-à-vis Russia, and what role do they play at the EU level?

The report thus aims at mapping bilateral relations and the evolution of debates on Russia. In so doing, it also attempts to establish whether national debates have become Europeanised: has there been a convergence of national foreign policy narratives on Russia towards shared themes and stances? Or are national debates isolated from each other, and do they respond to different sets of issues and priorities? The focus is primarily on debates between 2014 and 2017. However, in order to contextualise the analysis, the main long-term aspects of each bilateral relationship are summarised too. The member states under investigation have been selected on the basis of several criteria, most notably their size, influence and activeness in shaping the EU's Russia policy, and their representativeness of the main stances towards Russia within the EU. Undoubtedly, this is a selection that omits many other member states and factors that may play an important role in the future of EU-Russia relations. Nevertheless, this report intends to provide one of the first, tentative studies on how national debates on and relations with Russia have evolved since 2014. By doing so, it also aims to contribute to an understanding of the relevant EU-level debates, which are inevitably influenced by national positions.

## **NATIONAL CASE STUDIES: LONG-TERM FACTORS AND CURRENT DEBATES**

Germany, France, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom are the EU member states selected for deeper analysis. The case studies are investigated in separate chapters, each outlining the main long-term trends and actors in the bilateral relationship, and then focusing on recent developments and debates. Germany has arguably been the most influential member state in shaping relations with Russia in recent years, and particularly since the onset of the Ukraine crisis.<sup>6</sup> Before 2014, Berlin had been among the main advocates of cooperation and partnership with Russia, for instance by initiating a bilateral Partnership for Modernisation with Moscow (in 2008) that was later extended to the EU level (in 2010). Since 2014, the German leadership has been pivotal in coordinating EU sanctions and European diplomatic efforts to address the Ukraine crisis. At the same time, Germany has preserved some aspects of its long-standing partnership with Russia, most notably the energy trade, which may even be boosted

6 See chapters 5, 6 and 7 in Niklas Helwig, ed. (2016), *Europe's New Political Engine: Germany's role in the EU's foreign and security policy*, FIIA Report 44, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

in the near future by the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline (a gas pipeline connecting Russia and Germany via the Black Sea).<sup>7</sup>

After Germany, France has been the most active member state in seeking a resolution of the Ukraine conflict. Having played the role of mediator after the 2008 Russian–Georgian war, under the leadership of Nicolas Sarkozy, Paris was once again involved in the decisive negotiations that led to the Minsk–2 agreement in February 2015.<sup>8</sup> In the timeframe under analysis, relations between France and Russia were complicated by their different approaches to the post–Arab Spring Middle East, as well as by allegations of Russian interference in the 2017 French presidential elections. At the same time, however, some sector-specific positive developments should also be noted, such as the resilience of economic relations and the strategic cooperation between French and Russian energy companies in Arctic projects. The shared terrorist threat, particularly after the November 2015 attacks in Paris, has offered some tentative prospects for cooperation in the fight against Islamic fundamentalism, but serious disagreements about the Ukraine and Syrian crises have so far posed an obstacle to further engagement.

Formerly one of Russia’s closest partners in the EU, Italy has endorsed the EU sanctions and diplomatic measures against Moscow.<sup>9</sup> However, the economic consequences of both the EU sanctions and the Russian countersanctions have seriously eroded domestic support for the current policy line. Many mainstream political parties would like to improve relations with Russia, while the public opinion advocates cooperation in the fight against terrorism. Italy remains the second largest importer of Russian energy in the EU after Germany. Most significantly, Italian foreign policy is permeated by the idea that European security can only be achieved with Russia’s participation, and not through its exclusion or marginalisation. This belief has been reinforced by Russia’s growing role in the Mediterranean region, Italy’s most immediate neighbourhood. Confronted with instability in North Africa, a steady humanitarian and refugee crisis at its borders and economic stagnation at home, the incentives for Italy to re-engage Russia in several policy fields have been increasing.

At the other end of the spectrum, Poland has been the harshest critic of Russia among the countries under investigation. While the Polish governments led by Donald Tusk (2007–2014) had attempted to improve rela-

7 Jekaterina Grigorjeva and Marco Siddi (2016), ‘Nord Stream-2: Opportunities and Dilemmas of a New Gas Supply Route for the EU’, Berlin: Jacques Delors Institute.

8 David Cadier (2016), ‘Detour or direction? The Europeanisation of France’s policies towards Russia’, FIIA Briefing Paper 195, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

9 Marco Siddi (2016), ‘Privileged partners? Italy should use its leverage for constructive policies towards Russia’, FIIA Briefing Paper 197, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

tions with Moscow, at least until the Kremlin took an aggressive stance in Ukraine, the post-2014 political leadership has largely reverted to negative and even orientalist depictions of Russia. Polish–Russian relations are further complicated by outstanding disagreements about history and the attempts of the current right-wing Polish government to use the ‘Russia factor’ in domestic politics. Most notably, the current Polish leadership has accused both Russia and the domestic political opposition of being responsible for the Smolensk plane crash of April 2010, in which right-wing Polish President Lech Kaczyński died.<sup>10</sup> The growing confrontation between the current Polish government and the EU institutions over the rule of law in Poland and EU plans for the relocation of refugees further complicate the Polish domestic debate, where state-controlled media increasingly portray not just Russia, but also the EU, in negative terms. The inclusion of Poland in the report is significant also in terms of providing the perspective of the largest Eastern member state. While having its own national specificities, Warsaw’s stance is representative of the traditionally more critical East–Central European approach to Russia.

Among the larger member states, the United Kingdom (UK) was the most critical of Russia in the 2000s and early 2010s. This was partly due to some bilateral issues, such as the Litvinenko affair, and to the closer alignment of UK foreign policy with that of Washington in the 2000s, particularly on issues such as NATO’s Eastern enlargement and the Iraq war (both of which were opposed by Russia).<sup>11</sup> London maintained its critical stance in the context of the Ukraine and Syrian crises, but domestic developments and the British reluctance to take the lead within EU policy frameworks have led to a certain marginalisation of the UK within the context of EU–Russia relations. Hence, contrary to Germany and France, the UK played no role in the Minsk negotiations. It also saw its proposal to impose sanctions on Russia over the Syrian crisis vetoed by Italy and other member states. Most importantly, in domestic politics, the Brexit debate has largely overshadowed Russia and other foreign policy issues.

## **RUSSIAN AGENCY IN THE CRISIS WITH THE EU AND THE WEST**

While developments in Russia are not under scrutiny in this report, a few considerations should be made in order to contextualise the analysis. As

10 Christian Davies (2016), ‘The conspiracy theorists who have taken over Poland’, *The Guardian*, 16 February, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/16/conspiracy-theorists-who-have-taken-over-poland>, accessed 9 January 2018.

11 Maxine David (2013), ‘Ireland and the United Kingdom’, in M. David et al., *National perspectives on Russia: European foreign policy in the making?* Abingdon: Routledge, 54–58.

stated previously, Russia's agency played an important role in the deterioration of EU–Russia relations. Arguably, the crisis in the relationship began well before the annexation of Crimea.<sup>12</sup> The first signals emerged in the late 2000s when Russia was at odds with the West over issues such as the independence of Kosovo and the future European security architecture. Between 2006 and 2009, there were moments of tensions between Russia and the EU due to disruptions in the transit of Russian gas exports to the EU via Ukraine, as well as between Russia and individual member states (most notably Poland and Estonia) over trade and historical issues. The August 2008 war marked a peak in tensions and showed that Russia was willing to use force in order to defend its interests in the post-Soviet space and stem the expansion of NATO. The subsequent Russian proposal for a new European security architecture met with cautious or negative responses in the West, which appeared satisfied with the existing set-up and continued to develop new transatlantic defence systems, such as NATO's ballistic missile defence.

The reset of US–Russia relations under the leadership of Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, as well as the EU–Russia Partnership for Modernisation, led to a temporary improvement in West–Russia relations. However, the situation took a turn for the worse in the 2010s. Domestic developments in Russia played an important role too. The Kremlin's authoritarian response to the mass demonstrations in Russian cities in the winter of 2011–12, as well as the numerous reports of fraud during the vote, highlighted the persistence of grave rule of law and human rights issues in Russia.<sup>13</sup> This challenged the European assumption that increased economic relations would result in the approximation of political and normative systems. From the perspective of the Russian establishment, the protests emphasised the need to renew its base of support. In order to do this, in the years that followed, the Kremlin adopted a more nationalistic and conservative narrative, which rallied its audience against presumed external threats (most notably the United States and the West) and selected domestic groups, such as NGOs with foreign sources of funding, sexual minorities and the non-systemic political opposition.<sup>14</sup> The government also tightened its relationship with the Orthodox Church and promoted a patriotic narrative celebrating selected episodes of Soviet

12 Forsberg and Haukkala (2016), 1–43.

13 Graeme Robertson 2013, 'Protesting Putinism. The election protests of 2011–2012 in broader perspective', *Problems of Post-Communism* 60(2), 11–23.

14 See also Veera Laine (2016), 'State-led Nationalism in Today's Russia: Uniting the people with conservative values?', FIIA Working Paper 92, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

and Tsarist history (such as victory in the Second World War and in the war against Napoleon).<sup>15</sup>

From a Russian perspective, the EU's unity in applying sanctions following the annexation of Crimea may have been unexpected. The domestic economic crisis of the winter of 2014–15 and the serious contraction of the Russian GDP further raised the stakes for the Kremlin, which responded with hybrid measures (such as interference in elections) against some EU and Western countries. It also attempted to break the diplomatic isolation into which it had plunged itself during 2014. Russia's bold moves and active diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa have largely succeeded in profiling the country as an important international player even outside the post-Soviet space. On the other hand, the structure of Russia's economy and political geography makes the relationship with the West, and particularly the European Union, an inescapable necessity for Moscow. While the Russian leadership may no longer be interested in adopting Western political systems and societal structures,<sup>16</sup> Russia's economy remains highly dependent on trade with the West. Trade and political cooperation with China have increased, but they cannot replace the relationship with the EU in the short and medium term, and involve numerous other challenges and dilemmas for Moscow. This may explain why Russian leaders appear keen to avoid the further deterioration of economic relations with the EU, and have applauded the increase in trade that occurred in 2017. Russia has a particular interest in preserving relations with the larger member states (Germany, France, Italy), which are Moscow's main European trade partners and have traditionally been more open to heeding Russian political and security concerns.

## **THE COMPLEX INTERNATIONAL SCENARIO AND ITS EFFECTS ON EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS**

Between 2014 and 2017, EU–Russia relations had to navigate through several crises and significant broader international developments. This section provides a very brief overview of the main events that shaped or influenced the relationship. As argued, the Ukraine conflict was the crisis with the most direct impact on EU–Russia relations. It escalated following Russia's annexation of Crimea in February–March 2014, and

15 Veera Laine and Iiris Saarelainen (2017), 'Spirituality as a political instrument: The Church, the Kremlin, and the creation of the 'Russian World'', FIIA Working Paper 98, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs; Olga Malinova (2017), 'Political uses of the great patriotic war in post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin', in J. Fedor et al. (eds.), *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

16 See Arkady Moshes (2016), 'Moscow's European project is closed', FIIA Comment 15, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

kept growing in intensity with the military clashes in Donbas and the downing of the Malaysia Airlines MH17 flight in July 2014. Following the MH17 tragedy, the EU imposed extensive sectoral sanctions on Russia (in addition to the Crimea-specific sanctions and the diplomatic measures it had already imposed in early spring 2014). Another escalation took place in the autumn and winter of 2014–5, with large-scale fighting in Donbas. Thanks to the mediation of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande, a ceasefire was achieved in mid-February 2015, known as Minsk-2. Although clashes and casualties continued to occur after that, large-scale fighting ended and a broader conflict between Russia and the West was averted. However, the Russian and Ukrainian failure to agree on the implementation of many provisions of Minsk-2 turned Donbas into a situation resembling a frozen conflict, with meagre prospects for a full resolution in the foreseeable future. For this reason, the EU has upheld the sanctions against Russia, linking their lifting to the full implementation of Minsk-2.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, as the case studies show, the lack of progress has led to a certain fatigue with the confrontation with Russia in some member states, such as Italy. Other members have attempted to compartmentalise the crisis and resume cooperation with Moscow in some sectors (such as Germany in the energy sphere), while still others (particularly Poland and the Baltic states) have advocated an even harsher EU stance vis-à-vis Russia.<sup>18</sup>

In the summer of 2015, the attention in many European capitals began shifting away from Ukraine towards other crises. As a result of the civil wars in Syria and Libya, as well as other crises in Africa and Asia, thousands of migrants attempted to reach EU territory on a daily basis.<sup>19</sup> This led to a humanitarian crisis and thousands of casualties at the Union's borders, and to tensions among and within EU member states concerning how to deal with the emergency. In Southern European members such as Italy, the refugee crisis and civil wars in North Africa and the Middle East became by far the most pressing concern for both policymakers and the public opinion, thus relegating Russia to a less prominent role in foreign policy debates. Europe's difficulty in tackling the refugee crisis also led to the rise in popularity of right-wing and xenophobic political parties, which opposed both the EU's mantra of multicultural societies and the

17 For a detailed description of the Ukraine conflict, see Richard Sakwa (2015) *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, London: I. B. Tauris; and Andrew Wilson (2014), *Ukraine Crisis: What it means for the West*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

18 Richard Youngs (2017), *Europe's Eastern crisis: the geopolitics of asymmetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 92–100.

19 For the European dimension of the refugee crisis and debates in EU member states, see Melani Barlai et al., eds. (2017), *The Migrant Crisis: European Perspectives and National Discourses*, Vienna: LIT.

very idea of European integration.<sup>20</sup> The scenario was complicated further by an increase in terrorist attacks in Europe during the autumn of 2015 and 2016. Multiple terrorist attacks orchestrated by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) killed 137 people in Paris in November 2015. Ever since, several deadly terror attacks have occurred in European cities, including Brussels (March 2016), Nice (July 2016), Berlin (December 2016), Stockholm (April 2017), Manchester (May 2017), London (June 2017) and Barcelona (August 2017). This has made terrorism, and particularly Islamic terrorism, a prominent domestic and foreign policy issue for the EU.

These crises did not directly relate to EU-Russia relations. However, Russia played or sought a role in some of them, which also had implications for its relations with the EU and its member states. Russia's military intervention in Syria since September 2015 constitutes the most evident Russian involvement in the events cited above.<sup>21</sup> The Russian leadership and some European politicians initially saw it as an opportunity to restart West-Russian cooperation with a focus on anti-terrorism, following the cooperative spirit that had characterised negotiations concerning the Iranian nuclear programme and the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons. Terrorism indeed constitutes a shared concern for Russia and the West, as Russia has also been a frequent target of Islamic terrorism. However, diverging views on the Syrian conflict and the casualties caused by the Russian bombing of Damascus have largely prevented cooperation for the time being. Conversely, in the crisis-ridden atmosphere of EU-Russia relations, claims have been made according to which Russia may exploit the humanitarian crisis and the subsequent migrations to Europe in order to destabilise the EU. These claims may be far-fetched and neglect the fact that, if migration is perceived as destabilising for Europe, the causes should be sought primarily in domestic xenophobia, rather than in Russia's actions. At the same time, Russian politicians have established contacts with representatives of European far-right parties, while Russian media have given them considerable airtime and even positive coverage (both in Russian and other languages).<sup>22</sup> This has bolstered accusations that Russia is interfering in European and Western elections. Several unexpected electoral outcomes in Europe and the US provided fertile ground for this reasoning, even though their causes are far more entrenched and complex than (hypothetical or real) Russian interference.

20 For deeper analysis, see Gabriella Lazaridis and Giovanna Campani, eds. (2017), *Understanding the Populist Shift: Othering in a Europe in Crisis*, London: Routledge.

21 For a recent overview of Russia's policies in Syria and the Middle East, see Dmitri Trenin (2018), *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

22 On the relationship between Russia and the European far right, see Marlene Laruelle, ed. (2015), *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship*, London: Lexington Books.

In June 2016, the victory of opponents of EU membership in the Brexit referendum was the first of these critical outcomes. Russia played little or no role in the pre-referendum debate. However, the UK's exit from the EU was seen as having consequences also for EU-Russia relations, as it weakened the Union (most notably its security dimension) and shifted the attention of policymakers in Brussels towards the ensuing negotiations with London. In November 2016, Donald Trump's election to the presidency of the United States had even greater consequences. Trump has at times questioned the US commitment to NATO, harshly criticised the EU and pursued an erratic foreign policy that has weakened the transatlantic bond. The coordination between US and EU policies vis-à-vis Russia (and other scenarios, such as Iran) has been negatively affected. Significantly, in the summer of 2017 the US imposed additional unilateral sanctions on Russia, some of which had an extraterritorial dimension that may affect EU companies; this led to tensions between Washington, Brussels and several large EU member states.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the contacts between Trump's close associates and Russian officials during the 2016 election campaign have led to extensive media debate and an investigation concerning Russia's interference in the American presidential election. In the EU, these developments increased concerns about Russia's role in upcoming elections, particularly the French 2017 presidential election and the German 2017 parliamentary election (see the respective country chapters in this report).

As this brief overview suggests, in the years 2014–2017 Russia became a much more important factor in European domestic debates. Compared to Russia's earlier post-Soviet experience, its role as an international actor has become more significant, both as a result of its policies and of the vacuum created by multiple political crises in the West. Moscow's key role in the current negotiations concerning the Syrian crisis, and its enhanced status and growing political and economic penetration in the Middle East and North Africa highlight that the EU and its member states will also have to address the "Russia factor" far from the traditional post-Soviet sphere. Based on the analysis of recent and current domestic debates in the selected member states, this report contributes to understanding the prospects for national and European stances vis-à-vis Russia in the evolving international scenario.

23 Gernot Heller and Alissa de Carbonnel (2017), 'Germany threatens retaliation if U.S. sanctions harm its firms', Reuters, 16 June, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-sanctions-germany/germany-threatens-retaliation-if-u-s-sanctions-harm-its-firms-idUSKBN197156>, accessed 10 January 2018.









# 1. GERMANY: THE LEADER OF THE EU'S RUSSIA POLICY

Marco Siddi

## INTRODUCTION

Germany is considered an increasingly essential driver of European foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true of the EU's relationship with Russia, in which Berlin has long played an important role. Before the Ukraine crisis, the German government attempted to upload its policy of economic co-operation and dialogue with Russia (generally referred to as *Ostpolitik*) to the EU level. The EU–Russia Partnership for Modernisation, launched in 2010 and based on a similar German–Russian partnership established in 2008, was the most tangible outcome of this approach.<sup>2</sup> After the Ukraine crisis, Germany continued to play a leading role in the EU's policy towards Russia, but with a different stance. Russia's annexation of Crimea and support of the separatist fighters in Donbas convinced policymakers in Berlin that a firm response at the EU level was necessary. Hence, German leaders – particularly Chancellor Angela Merkel – coordinated the imposition of EU sanctions against Russia, while at the same time they spearheaded diplomatic endeavours to resolve the crisis through peaceful means.

Several factors induced Germany to revise its stance vis-à-vis Russia and assume a leading position in the EU's policy towards the Ukraine crisis. The main factor was ideational and reflected widely held views about international politics and law among both German leaders and in German society. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the military escalation

1 See Niklas Helwig, ed. (2016), *Europe's New Political Engine: Germany's role in the EU's foreign and security policy*, FIIA Report 44, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

2 Andrey Makarychev and Stefan Meister (2015), 'The Modernisation Debate and Russian–German Normative Cleavages', *European Politics and Society* 16(1), 85.

in Donbas were perceived as a threat to peace and security in Europe, and as major infringements of international law. These events were at odds with many of the principles that the Federal Republic had cherished since the end of the Second World War: multilateralism, European integration and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the belief that Russia was an essential player in European security, as well as a key supplier of energy to the EU, urged the German government to seek a peaceful solution through negotiations with Russian and Ukrainian policymakers; military intervention was categorically ruled out.

In the negotiations, German policymakers could rely on the political capital built up during decades of *Ostpolitik* diplomacy and on Germany's economic leverage with Russia. Germany was (and remains) Russia's main economic partner in Europe. Moreover, Germany's economic pre-eminence within the EU made Berlin a particularly suitable candidate for leadership in the Union's response to the Ukraine crisis, especially as the EU's preferred course of action focused on economic sanctions against Russia and financial aid to Ukraine. The ability of German policymakers to coordinate their diplomacy with transatlantic partners was another important facilitator of German leadership.

Between 2014 and 2017, the Ukraine crisis and relations with Russia were the subject of controversial and at times tense debates within Germany. While public opinion for the most part seemed to endorse the country's official stance, large and influential opposing minorities existed. The business community reluctantly supported the sanctions against Russia in 2014, and repeatedly criticised them thereafter. Several political parties and politicians on the right, left and centre of the political spectrum have called for a different approach towards Moscow. As perceived Russian attempts to influence the German domestic debate increased, and as the 2017 national elections approached, relations with Russia became a widely discussed and highly controversial topic in Germany. The Kremlin's military intervention in the Syrian crisis and the simultaneous arrival of thousands of Syrian refugees in Germany highlighted the necessity of reckoning with Russia. At the same time, the concomitance of other serious crises – the Eurozone crisis, Brexit, terrorism, tensions with Turkey and the uneasy relationship with the Trump administration in the US – have served as a reminder that Russia is not the only source of concern for German leaders.

The following sections investigate Germany's stance towards Russia in this evolving scenario, with particular attention to German leadership in the EU's foreign policy towards Russia. First, the background and

3 Marco Siddi (2016), 'German Foreign Policy towards Russia in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis: A new *Ostpolitik*?', *Europe-Asia Studies* 68(4), 666–67.

long-term factors of the German approach are reviewed. The main domestic actors and power centres of Germany's Russia policy are introduced briefly. The core of this chapter then focuses on the domestic debates and official responses to Russia's foreign policy in Europe and in neighbouring regions. The main argument is that Germany's policy of economic sanctions and diplomatic engagement, as well as the ensuing leadership in the EU's (and the West's) approach to Russia, were the result of a constellation of compelling domestic and international factors. While this policy line has proved remarkably resilient, it has recently been challenged by both domestic developments and, most significantly, weakening coordination within the transatlantic alliance.

## OSTPOLITIK: PAST AND PRESENT

The term *Ostpolitik* originally referred to the cooperative foreign policy of West Germany towards the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries during the Cold War, beginning in the late 1960s.<sup>4</sup> This policy was initiated by Chancellor Willy Brandt and his political advisor Egon Bahr. The main idea was to pursue positive change in bilateral relations 'through rapprochement' (*Wandel durch Annäherung*). The rapprochement had both a political and an economic dimension. The political dialogue led to a series of bilateral treaties enshrining the mutual recognition of existing borders and the renunciation of the use of force. Political reconciliation was also driven by Brandt's official recognition of German responsibility and apologies for Second World War crimes in Eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the economic dialogue paved the way for the growth of bilateral trade and for the emergence of an energy partnership between West Germany and the Soviet Union. The *Ostpolitik* approach became entrenched in German foreign policy and was upheld by the subsequent governments in Bonn, despite US scepticism and the ideological and military confrontation of the late Cold War years.<sup>6</sup> According to an interpretation that is widely shared in German foreign policy circles, *Ostpolitik* contributed to creating the conditions and political atmosphere under which German reunification could take place. In this view, dialogue and enhanced contacts, rather

4 Tuomas Forsberg (2016), 'From Ostpolitik to 'frostpolitik'? Merkel, Putin and German foreign policy towards Russia', *International Affairs* 92 (1), 21–2.

5 Marco Siddi (2017), 'An evolving Other: German national identity and constructions of Russia', *Politics*, online first, 6–7.

6 See also Matthias Schulz and Thomas A. Schwartz, eds. (2009), *The Strained Alliance: US-European Relations from Nixon to Carter*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

than Ronald Reagan's arms race, led to the peaceful end of the Cold War and to the rebirth of a unitary German state.

The *Ostpolitik* concept remained influential in the post-Cold War years. German reunification and Russia's apparent transition to a democratic system ushered in a new era of positive bilateral relations. Especially in the 2000s, commerce and energy trade between Germany and post-Soviet Russia continued to grow. The close relationship between successive German and Russian leaders (first between Helmut Kohl and Mikhail Gorbachev, and then between Gerhard Schröder and Vladimir Putin) contributed to the positive atmosphere. However, the assumption that post-Soviet Russia was on a teleological path towards democratisation reduced the focus on the normative aspect of the relationship. This began to re-emerge forcefully in German official discourse only after 2012, following large civil society protests in the main Russian cities, and particularly with the onset of the Ukraine crisis.<sup>7</sup> Up to the early 2010s, however, the focus remained on expanding economic contacts. While positive in terms of economic turnout, this approach overlooked the deteriorating security situation in Eastern Europe, as well as calls for substantial dialogue on the future of Europe's security architecture.

Germany's stance in the main developments concerning EU-Russia relations between 2007 and 2010 reflects this issue. Despite substantial disagreements between Russia and the West concerning the future configuration of European security, which culminated in the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008, German and EU policy continued to concentrate primarily on economic partnership. The German-Russian Partnership for Modernisation, launched in 2008 and uploaded to the EU level in 2010 (as an EU-Russia policy framework), also included a civil society component. However, its main endeavours remained confined to the economic sphere due to both the pre-eminence of business interests on the EU/German side and to the dominant Russian understanding of the partnership as an opportunity for technology transfers from the West.<sup>8</sup> Despite their urgency, security issues were given secondary importance, or referred to other venues and actors (such as NATO and the OSCE, or they were simply subordinated to the goals of US foreign policy<sup>9</sup>). The temporary improvement in West-Russia relations, following the election

7 Jennifer Yoder (2015), 'From Amity to Enmity: German-Russian Relations in the Post Cold War Period', *German Politics and Society* 33(3), 56-60; Marco Siddi (2017) *National Identities and Foreign Policy in the European Union: The Russia Policy of Germany, Poland and Finland*, Colchester: ECPR Press, 121-127.

8 Makarychev and Meister (2015), 87.

9 The deployment of a ballistic missile shield in East-Central Europe provides an example in this respect. The US argued for the deployment of the shield to neutralise a potential Iranian threat; however, given its location, it fuelled Russian suspicions and contributed to the erosion of security relations in Europe. See also Stephen Pullinger et al. (2007), 'Missile Defense and European Security', European Parliament, 24-26.

of apparently reform-oriented Dmitry Medvedev, and Barack Obama's attempt to 'reset' US-Russia relations, suggested that disagreements could be overcome through cooperation in other fields.

In Germany, a network of political and business actors supported the economic partnership with Russia and the ensuing foreign policy stance. Business groups such as the Federation of German Industries and the Committee for Eastern European Economic Relations (*Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft*) were influential players. A preference for this approach also existed in forums including participants from both the economic community and civil society, such as the German-Russian Forum and the Petersburg Dialogue.<sup>10</sup> A majority of political parties supported this stance, too. This included not only the Social Democratic Party (SPD), whose historic leaders had crafted the *Ostpolitik*, but also Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU), the Christian Socials (CSU) and the Liberal Party (hence, all the governing parties since 2005). The opposition parties did not oppose this stance either. The Left Party had, in fact, a more pro-Russian approach (particularly due to scepticism towards the transatlantic alliance), whereas the Green Party tended to underplay foreign policy topics. Dissenting voices existed in each party, particularly among the Green Party, and paid more attention to Russia's lack of progress in terms of the rule of law. However, growing trade and a relatively problem-free bilateral relationship ensured the prevalence of the economic partnership approach.

Between 2000 and 2011, trade between Germany and Russia increased from around 13 billion euros to a record high of 75 billion euros, thereby making Russia one of the main expanding markets for German goods.<sup>11</sup> At the onset of the Ukraine crisis, 6,000 German firms were active in the Russian market, and 350,000 jobs depended on their activities in Russia.<sup>12</sup> The economic partnership was (and is) particularly strategic in the energy field. Russia is an important supplier of oil and gas to Germany, which is the main market (and thus a key source of revenues) for Russian energy exports. Between 2005 and 2012, Germany, Russia and a group of Western European countries (most notably France and the Netherlands) supported the construction of the Nord Stream pipeline. The pipeline created a direct link for the export of Russian gas to Germany via the Baltic Sea, with a capacity of 55 billion cubic metres per year (bcm/y). In 2015, despite

10 Jennifer Yoder (2017), 'Dialogues, Trialogues and Triangles: The Geometry of Germany's Foreign Policy of Trust-Building', *German Politics* 26(2), 199–206.

11 Hannes Adomeit (2012), 'German-Russia Relations: Balance sheet since 2000 and perspectives until 2025', Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 14.

12 Hannes Adomeit (2015), 'German-Russian Relations: Change of Paradigm versus "Business as Usual"', Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 16.

the political tensions in EU–Russia relations, plans were initiated for the construction of a second set of pipelines, Nord Stream 2, which would double the capacity to 110 bcm/y (covering nearly two-thirds of Russia’s current gas exports to Europe).

Despite the considerable trade turnout and the continuation of the energy partnership, several key German actors in relations with Russia have changed their stance since the Ukraine crisis. The government coalition of Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Christian Social has put on hold the cooperative *Ostpolitik* and supported economic sanctions against Russia. The Green Party and the Liberal Party largely endorsed this line too. On the other hand, the Left Party and the newly founded, right-wing Alternative for Germany have criticised the government’s stance and the sanctions. In 2014, after initial hesitation, the main representatives of German businesses accepted the sanctions policy. Markus Kerber, director general of the Federation of German Industries, argued that peace and freedom stood above economic interests.<sup>13</sup> However, other prominent business groups, most notably the *Ost-Ausschuss*, have since criticised the sanctions and demanded that they be scaled back. A heated debate took place in the German public opinion. Although the topic remains contested and divisive, not least due to the widespread aversion to confrontational foreign policy among Germans, views of Russia have generally become more critical.<sup>14</sup> As we shall see below, the debate remains fluid: while the government has upheld the sanctions policy, several mainstream politicians have expressed dissenting views and, most significantly, many tenets of the cooperative *Ostpolitik* (such as the energy partnership) remain influential in mainstream policy circles.

## GERMAN DEBATES AND POLICIES ON RUSSIA, 2014–2017

### The Ukraine crisis

On the eve of the Ukraine crisis, in late 2013, the recently elected German government still hoped for a partnership with Russia. The coalition agreement between the CDU, CSU and SPD, signed in December 2013, advocated ‘open dialogue and broader cooperation with Russia’, including the extension of the Partnership for Modernisation ‘to additional areas’.<sup>15</sup> The agreement also highlighted the commitment of German leaders to pursue a new EU–Russia partnership agreement and to strengthen cooperation in

13 Forsberg, 34.

14 See for instance FAZ–Monatsberichte, “Zunehmende Entfremdung”, 16 April 2014. [http://www.ifd-allensbach.de/uploads/tx\\_reportsndocs/FAZ\\_April\\_2014\\_Russland.pdf](http://www.ifd-allensbach.de/uploads/tx_reportsndocs/FAZ_April_2014_Russland.pdf), accessed 11 January 2018.

15 Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD. 2013. Rheinbach: Union Betriebs–GmbH, 118.

foreign and security policy. However, only a few weeks after the signing of the coalition agreement, most of the stated objectives concerning the policy towards Russia appeared unattainable, and the rhetoric of German leaders changed drastically.

A few days after the Russian takeover of Crimea, Chancellor Angela Merkel gave a speech in the German Parliament in which she blamed Russia for pursuing ‘one-sided geopolitical interests’ in neighbouring countries and for the ‘violation of fundamental principles of international law’.<sup>16</sup> Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier echoed these views a few days later in a speech delivered at the German-Russian forum, in which he argued that ‘the attempt to redraw borders seven decades after the end of the Second World War [was] in violation of international law’ and awakened negative memories of the past.<sup>17</sup> As it appears from these statements, German leaders believed that Russian actions were in conflict with several fundamental tenets of German foreign policy: the non-use of force, the settlement of international disputes through peaceful means and multilateral forums, as well as the rejection of the geopolitical mentality and power politics that had characterised European history in the past. Russian actions also led to the erosion of trust between the Russian and German leadership, particularly between Merkel and Putin. Under these circumstances, the cooperative *Ostpolitik* could not continue and was replaced by a tougher policy line, including sanctions. Simultaneously, German leaders argued that there could not be a military solution to the Ukraine crisis and supported diplomatic negotiations.

Between March and April 2014, a vibrant debate took place in German civil society concerning responsibilities for the Ukraine crisis and Germany’s role in addressing it. While many intellectuals and politicians, including former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and former foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, criticised the West’s policy and sanctions, public opinion largely turned supportive of the government’s line. Even business organisations reluctantly agreed to the sanctions. However, at the same time, most Germans opposed military assistance to Ukraine and wanted to see their country in the role of mediator, rather than as a party to the crisis.<sup>18</sup> This view seemed to consolidate itself after the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, on 17 July 2014, over territory controlled by the

16 Policy statement by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel on the situation in Ukraine, German Bundestag, 13 March 2014, [https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Reden/2014/2014-03-13-regierungserklaerung-ukraine\\_en.html](https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Reden/2014/2014-03-13-regierungserklaerung-ukraine_en.html), accessed 11 January 2018.

17 Speech by Foreign Minister Steinmeier at the meeting of members of the German-Russian Forum, Berlin, 19 March 2014, [http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/sid\\_5CBD3126C1316C2257B01B73C1899D36/EN/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2014/140319-BM\\_dtrus-Forum.html](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/sid_5CBD3126C1316C2257B01B73C1899D36/EN/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2014/140319-BM_dtrus-Forum.html), accessed 11 January 2018.

18 For additional details on this and German leaders’ statements and policies in 2014, see Forsberg, 31–36.

pro-Russian separatists in Donbas. After this tragedy, Germany and the EU decided to impose deeper, sectoral sanctions against the Russian economy.

Throughout the rest of 2014, the German leadership remained in regular contact with Russia's and Ukraine's top policymakers. From June 2014, meetings and negotiations began to take place in the Normandy format, including the leaders of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine. After the collapse of the ceasefire achieved in Minsk in September 2014 and the resumption of large-scale fighting in Donbas the following winter, Merkel decided to take the lead in the negotiations for a more stable agreement, together with her French counterpart François Hollande. Being Russia's main commercial partner in Europe, and boasting a decades-long tradition of *Ostpolitik* cooperation and diplomatic contacts with Moscow, Germany appeared to be particularly suited to the role of lead negotiator. Russian leaders also accepted their German and French counterparts as appropriate interlocutors. Significantly, a tacit agreement was achieved with the Obama administration in Washington, which essentially delegated Western leadership in negotiations on the Ukraine crisis to Merkel.

With this clout, in February 2015, Merkel and Hollande were able to negotiate the Minsk-2 agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. Although the conflicting parties have repeatedly violated or refused to implement many of its provisions, the Minsk-2 agreement succeeded in de-escalating the conflict and in providing a basis for subsequent negotiations. An extension of the conflict was avoided and Western efforts continued to focus on diplomacy, as advocated by Germany and most other European governments, rather than on a military solution. Despite its flaws, Minsk-2 can thus be considered an important achievement of Franco-German (and European) diplomacy, particularly if the tense and polarised circumstances under which it was negotiated are taken into account.<sup>19</sup>

### **Crisis and engagement: Nord Stream 2, the Lisa case and Syria**

While fighting and casualties continued to occur in Donbas, a partial relaxation of tensions between Germany and Russia took place. Merkel combined the condemnation of Russia's violation of international law and the policy of sanctions with a rhetoric of engagement. In February 2015, at the Munich Security Conference, she argued that Russia's actions in Ukraine violated the CSCE Final Act, the Budapest Memorandum and 'the principles of Europe's peaceful order'. At the same time, however, she stated that Germany wanted to 'work with, not against Russia, in shaping

19 See also Pernille Rieker and Kristian Lundby Gjerde, 'The EU, Russia and the potential for dialogue – different readings of the crisis in Ukraine', *European Security* 25(3), 315–16.

security in Europe'.<sup>20</sup> She also stated that Germany was 'very interested in advancing towards the long-term goal of a common economic space from Vladivostok to Lisbon and Vancouver'. In an attempt to sustain dialogue and the policy of historical reconciliation with Russia, Merkel travelled to Moscow and met Putin for the celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. While she refused to attend the traditional military parade in Red Square on 9 May, she held a commemorative meeting with the Russian president the day after.

As tensions diminished, the business sector attempted to reboot cooperation in some strategic areas, most notably energy trade. In September 2015, German energy companies E.ON and Wintershall (together with Royal Dutch Shell, the French ENGIE and the Austrian ÖMV) signed a shareholders' agreement with Gazprom for the construction of Nord Stream 2. German officials argued that the project was a commercial initiative and would contribute to European energy security. In October 2015, Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel reiterated the commercial benefits of the pipeline for Germany and the EU during an official visit to Putin in Moscow.<sup>21</sup> Merkel has also argued that Nord Stream 2 should be regarded as a commercial endeavour. Germany's renewed push for energy cooperation with Russia stems from two main factors. Firstly, Berlin may need additional imports of gas as it continues to phase out nuclear power plants and to pursue emission reduction goals. As a less polluting fossil fuel than coal and oil, gas is seen as an appropriate energy source during the transition to a low carbon economy. Based on decades of energy partnership and cooperation, German leaders and businesses consider Russian gas imports reliable and relatively cheap. Moreover, energy cooperation has long been part of the *Ostpolitik* approach, and is thus seen as a soft power instrument to improve the bilateral relationship with Russia.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, deeper improvements in German-Russian bilateral relations were prevented by the continuation of small-scale fighting in Donbas and the continuation of reciprocal economic sanctions. Between 2013 and 2016, bilateral trade decreased by 40% due to falling oil prices, the devaluation of the rouble and the effects of sanctions and counter-sanctions.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, in January 2016, another bilateral crisis occurred

20 Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel at the 51st Munich Security Conference, 7 February 2015, [https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Reden/2015/2015-02-07-merkel-sicherheitskonferenz\\_en.html](https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Reden/2015/2015-02-07-merkel-sicherheitskonferenz_en.html), accessed 11 January 2018.

21 Transcript of Sigmar Gabriel's meeting with Vladimir Putin, 25 October 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50582>, accessed 11 January 2018.

22 This stance has been criticised in several East-Central European EU member states, where dependence on Russian gas is perceived as a security issue. For a deeper analysis, see Marco Siddi (2017), 'EU-Russia Energy Relations: From a Liberal to a Realist Paradigm?', *Russian Politics* 2, 364-381.

23 See website of the German Foreign Office, [http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Laenderinfos/RussischeFoederation/Bilateral\\_node.html](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Laenderinfos/RussischeFoederation/Bilateral_node.html), accessed 7 October 2017.

due to the intervention of Russian officials and the media in a German domestic debate concerning the alleged rape by immigrants of an ethnic Russian girl living in Berlin. The girl, a 13-year-old known only as ‘Lisa F.’, later admitted to having made up the story. However, before she did, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov accused the German authorities of concealing the truth. Russian state media and Russian TV’s German channel, RT (RT Deutsch), covered the story extensively, claiming that the girl had been treated as a ‘sex slave’, which led to anti-government demonstrations by the sizeable Russian-speaking community in Germany. The incident occurred at a particularly critical time for the German government, which was facing domestic criticism for the decision to welcome hundreds of thousands of refugees during the previous months. This political climate also resulted in the rise in popularity of the far-right, anti-EU and anti-immigrant party Alternative for Germany. Hence, foreign minister Steinmeier accused Russia of politicising the ‘Lisa case’. Moreover, prominent Russia experts in Berlin depicted the affair as a Russian disinformation campaign targeting Germany with the connivance of top Russian officials.<sup>24</sup>

In the months that followed, German leaders and policy documents kept the door open for dialogue and reconciliation with Russia, while simultaneously recognising the security implications of Moscow’s policies. German leaders advocated the resumption of consultations in the NATO–Russia Council. In June 2016, Steinmeier argued that the large NATO military exercises that were taking place in Poland and the Baltic states might worsen tensions with Russia and thus weaken European security.<sup>25</sup> However, at the July 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, Germany agreed to participate in the NATO rotational contingents deployed in the Baltic region. Furthermore, the White Paper on German Security Policy published by the German government in July 2016 argued that ‘without a fundamental change in policy, Russia will constitute a challenge to the security of our continent in the foreseeable future’.<sup>26</sup> This criticism was toned down by an emphasis on the ‘broad range of common interests’ and the recognition that ‘sustainable security and prosperity in and for Europe cannot be ensured without strong cooperation with Russia’. Hence, it appeared

24 Stefan Meister (2016), The “Lisa case”: Germany as a target of Russian disinformation, *NATO Review Magazine*, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/lisa-case-germany-target-russian-disinformation/EN/index.htm>, accessed 11 January 2018.

25 ‘Steinmeier kritisiert Nato-Militärübung’, *ZEIT Online*, 18 June 2016, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-06/frank-walter-steinmeier-nato-manoever-russland-abruestung>, accessed 11 January 2018.

26 German Federal Government (2016), White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr, 13 July, 32.

that while the cooperative logic of *Ostpolitik* continued to be influential, German leaders had grown more wary of Russia's intentions and policy.

This also emerged from Germany's stance towards the Syrian crisis. Initially, German politicians such as Steinmeier saw Russia's engagement in the crisis as a potential opportunity for cooperation with the West in fighting terrorism. However, as the Russian military involvement increased, differences of interests and humanitarian considerations hardened the Western and German stance towards Moscow. Key disagreements concerned the definition of terrorist groups and the role of Bashar al-Assad's regime, whom Moscow considered an ally and legitimate ruler, and the West a war criminal. During the Russian bombing of Aleppo in October 2016, which caused numerous civilian casualties, Merkel and other senior officials in the German government appeared supportive of imposing new sanctions on Russia. However, the decision seems to have been divisive within the German government (where the Social Democrats reportedly advocated a softer stance) and was eventually vetoed by other member states led by Italy.<sup>27</sup>

### **Trump's election and other challenges to Berlin's Russia policy**

In 2017, new systemic challenges arose in relation to Germany's stance towards Russia. These were mostly the result of changed external circumstances, as Berlin's policies have been consistent with the line taken since 2014 (combining sanctions and containment with dialogue and sectoral cooperation). Firstly, Germany's energy cooperation with Russia was increasingly criticised by some Eastern European governments, which saw the Nord Stream 2 project as a threat to their energy security. Poland, where a right-wing populist government was elected to power in the autumn of 2015, was particularly critical of Germany's stance towards Russia and of its role in European politics in general.

Most significantly, the election of Donald Trump as US president seriously damaged transatlantic relations, and US-German relations in particular. As argued, consensus between Washington and Berlin had been essential in order to coordinate a joint Western response to the Ukraine crisis in 2014-2016. Shortly after the beginning of his presidency, Trump began aiming his rhetorical jabs at the EU, casting doubts on the future of European integration and on the motivations of German leaders in European politics. Trump's protectionist economic policies posed a threat to the strongly export-oriented German economy. Most importantly for the theme of this study, the US diminished coordination with the

27 'Rapprochement or Penalties? Germany Struggles to Find United Stance on Russia', Spiegel Online, 18 October 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-political-leaders-divided-on-approach-to-russia-a-1116979.html>, accessed 11 January 2018.

EU and Germany concerning their policies towards Russia. On the one hand, Trump voiced his intention of lifting the sanctions against Russia and seeking cooperation with Moscow in Syria, which raised speculations that he would also pursue a ‘grand bargain’ to settle the Ukraine crisis.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, due to domestic considerations and the willingness to limit Trump’s room for manoeuvre in relations with Moscow, the US Congress passed a new set of sanctions against Russia without prior consultation with the EU. The decision by the US Congress to impose sanctions on Russia without coordination with the EU was unprecedented in the post-Ukraine crisis context. From the German and EU perspective, it was aggravated by the inclusion of extraterritorial sanctions that might affect European companies involved in energy cooperation with Russia. The unilateral US sanctions were deeply unpopular among the German public; a survey revealed that 83% of Germans opposed them.<sup>29</sup> Hence, the leaders of Germany, Austria, France and top EU officials vociferously criticised the sanctions bill, and launched negotiations with the US to tone down the parts that had repercussions for the EU.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Germany’s bilateral relations with Russia continued to be fraught, alternating between attempts at reconciliation and new tensions. In the early months of 2017, German-Russian bilateral trade grew considerably (by 37% in January–February, compared to 2016), after several years of drastic decrease. In May 2017, Merkel went on a state visit to Russia and met Putin in Sochi. Many observers considered the trip a gesture of goodwill; it was the first time the two leaders had met on Russian soil since 2015. In Sochi, Merkel stated that she did not consider the possibility of Russia’s interference in the upcoming German parliamentary election as an issue of concern.<sup>31</sup> However, differences of opinion were reiterated on the Ukrainian and Syrian crises, as well as on

28 Ken Dilanian, ‘Former Diplomats: Trump Team Sought to Lift Sanctions on Russia’, NBC News, 1 June 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/former-diplomats-trump-team-sought-lift-sanctions-russia-n767406>, accessed 11 January 2018.

29 Spiegel Online, 29 July 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/unternehmen/russland-sanktionen-83-prozent-der-deutschen-gegen-alleingang-der-usa-a-1160159.html>, accessed 11 January 2018.

30 Jim Brunsten and Courtney Weaver, ‘EU ready to retaliate against US sanctions on Russia’, *Financial Times*, 23 July 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/211de800-6fbc-11e7-aca6-c6bd07df1a3c>, accessed 11 January 2018; German Foreign Ministry, ‘Außenminister Gabriel und der österreichische Bundeskanzler Kern zu den Russland-Sanktionen durch den US-Senat’, 15 June 2017, [http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Meldungen/2017/170615\\_Kern\\_Russland.html](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Meldungen/2017/170615_Kern_Russland.html), accessed 11 January 2018; ‘France says U.S. sanctions on Iran, Russia look illegal’, Reuters, 26 July 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-russia-france-idUSKBN1AB1MS>, accessed 11 January 2018.

31 Merkel’s comment referred primarily to Russian media’s alleged support for the far-right party Alternative for Germany in the upcoming national elections. See Henry Meyer, ‘Putin Has a Really Big Trojan Horse in Germany’, Bloomberg, 2 May 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-05-02/putin-s-trojan-horse-for-merkel-is-packed-with-russian-tv-fans>, accessed 11 January 2018. For a different take, see ‘Ethnic Germans from Russia in open letter: ‘We are not the AfD’’, Deutsche Welle, 17 September 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/ethnic-germans-from-russia-in-open-letter-we-are-not-the-afd/a-40549269>, accessed 11 January 2018.

the rule of law in Russia.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, sanctions remained a contentious bilateral issue. This emerged with particular clarity in July 2017, when the prominent German company Siemens suspended deliveries of power generation equipment to Russian state-controlled customers, arguing that four Siemens gas turbines meant for use on Russian territory had been modified and moved to Crimea, in violation of EU sanctions.<sup>33</sup>

In the fall of 2017, a few domestic developments took place that may have an impact on the German foreign policy posture and the future development of German–Russian relations. At the September 2017 elections, Merkel’s CDU–CSU and the Social Democrats obtained their worst result ever since 1945, while the far-right Alternative for Germany received 12.6% of the votes and seats in parliament for the first time. The outcome of the election complicated coalition negotiations and raised the prospect of political instability, which could also affect German leadership in EU relations with Russia and in EU politics more in general. Furthermore, a survey commissioned by the prominent Körber Foundation and carried out in October 2017 revealed how the important international developments of the previous years were affecting German public opinion.<sup>34</sup> Only 8% of Germans saw Russia as the greatest challenge for German foreign policy, following the refugee crisis (26%), relations with the US (19%), with Turkey (17%) and North Korea (10%). Surprisingly, 78% of the interviewees believed that Germany should cooperate more with Russia (only France obtained a better score, with 90% of respondents calling for more cooperation). At the same time, 46% of respondents were in favour of maintaining or tightening sanctions on Russia, while 45% wanted to see them lifted or relaxed.

## CONCLUSIONS

Germany has become an essential actor in EU foreign policy towards Russia. In the late 2000s, Berlin began to advocate its position more assertively within the Union, most notably through the promotion of a ‘European *Ostpolitik*’. The clearest success of this approach was the uploading of the Partnership for Modernisation, initially a German–Russian bilateral

32 André Ballin, ‘Germany and Russia – An uneasy partnership’, *Handelsblatt Global*, 2 May 2017, <https://global.handelsblatt.com/politics/germany-and-russia-an-uneasy-partnership-758648>, accessed 11 January 2018.

33 ‘Siemens to exit Russian power joint venture’, *BBC News*, 21 July 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-40680004>, accessed 11 January 2018.

34 See The Berlin Pulse. German Foreign Policy in Perspective. Körber Stiftung, November 2017, 33–40, [https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/koerber-stiftung/redaktion/berliner-forum-aussenpolitik/pdf/2017/The-Berlin-Pulse.pdf](https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/koerber-stiftung/redaktion/berliner-forum-aussenpolitik/pdf/2017/The-Berlin-Pulse.pdf), accessed 11 January 2018.

initiative, to the EU level. However, as Russia's domestic order increasingly differentiated itself from the Western liberal model, German- and EU-Russia relations deteriorated. Russia's annexation of Crimea and support of the separatist militias in Donbas since 2014 marked a key negative turning point. Tensions between Germany and the EU, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, escalated into a full-blown crisis and the mutual imposition of sanctions.

In this context, Germany continued to be a leader in EU policymaking, but with a different stance. The rhetoric about partnership was put on hold and replaced by a policy line combining sanctions and containment with dialogue and sectoral cooperation (for instance, in the energy field or in negotiations concerning the Iranian nuclear programme). Coordination between German policymakers and the Obama administration, as well as with the French government, were important facilitators of German leadership in European policies towards Russia since 2014. The EU's policy of sanctions, the quest for a diplomatic (rather than military) solution to the Ukraine crisis and the Minsk-2 agreement were the main outcomes of Berlin's leadership.

Despite a lively and at times heated domestic debate, Germany's policy towards Russia has been consistent and is unlikely to change substantially immediately after the 2017 national elections. Nonetheless, several challenges have emerged in relation to Berlin's policy and particularly to its leading role in the European and Western posture towards Moscow. The deterioration in transatlantic relations and the unpredictability of US policy towards Russia following Trump's election constitute the main challenge. As the US has made several unilateral moves towards Russia, the transatlantic coordination that was instrumental to German leadership in Western policy towards Moscow may be weakened. A further issue stems from divisions within the EU, where Germany's stance vis-à-vis Russia is questioned by some East-Central European member states. Domestic political instability and shifts in the public opinion following the multiple international crises in 2015-2017 could also influence Germany's stance on Russia.

Most importantly, the future of Germany's posture towards Russia will largely depend on the evolution of Russian domestic and foreign policy. If the situation in Donbas remains unchanged, Berlin will most likely continue its combined policy of sanctions and diplomatic engagement. Partnership with Russia remains a long-term goal of German policy. However, current realities have limited cooperation to a few selected areas, such as energy trade and international negotiations where Germany and Russia have mutual concerns. While German policymakers have

stressed that a solid European security system is possible only with, and not against Russia, Moscow's current foreign policy posture is predominantly perceived as a challenge to Europe's post-Cold War order. From the German perspective, a comprehensive and lasting improvement in relations with Russia can only be achieved if Moscow consistently works for the restoration of international law, peace and cooperation in Europe.



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## 2. FRANCE'S RUSSIA POLICY FROM EUROPEANISATION TO MACRONISATION

David Cadier

### INTRODUCTION

On 29 May 2017, the new French President, Emmanuel Macron, hosted his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, for a symbolic and carefully staged bilateral meeting at the Palace of Versailles. The occasion was the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Peter the Great's visit to the Court of Versailles, which had marked the beginning of diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of France and the Russian empire. The Tsar had been touring Europe seeking inspiration for his own domestic projects and reforms, but France had refused to receive him until then, for diplomatic reasons. It eventually altered its stance, however, as it started seeing in the Russian empire a potential ally against the Habsburgs, and in Peter the Great a ruler influenced by the ideas of France's *Grand Siècle*. The May 2017 meeting was not grounded in similar hopes or comparable calculations: Paris's assessment of the evolution and direction of Russia's contemporary foreign policy has not fundamentally changed under the new French President. Nevertheless, this initiative does denote an inflexion in France's diplomatic approach: it contrasts, if anything, with François Hollande's refusal to grant Putin a full-fledged state visit in October 2016. More than forging a new overarching alliance, the Versailles meeting aimed at re-establishing the basis for a political dialogue – some described it as an attempt to 'reset' the bilateral relationship. Grasping Macron's underlying objectives and assessing the reach of this new approach calls for consideration of the broader evolutions in France's Russia policies, as well as the changing domestic and international contexts in which they are formulated.

Since the late 2000s, structural evolutions in the foreign policies of Russia and France have progressively led the two countries to regard their partnership as less useful in the realisation of their respective goals and, contingently, to the deterioration of the bilateral relationship. Russia's return to power politics – that is, its pursuit of a more coercive and increasingly militarised foreign policy in the common neighbourhood – increasingly set it on a collision course with NATO and the EU, two structures in which France was trying to strengthen its own leadership following the shift in US geopolitical priorities away from Europe. These trends culminated in – and were confirmed during – the Ukraine crisis, which attested, at the same time, to Russia's assertive turn, the loss of political substance in the Franco-Russian bilateral relationship, and the growing Europeanisation of France's Russia policies.<sup>1</sup> Europeanisation refers here to the influence of the EU context on the formulation and implementation of national foreign policy. It designates the influence of EU-level calculations, collective dynamics and common positions in shaping France's response to the Ukraine crisis, as well as the fact that this response was, to a significant extent, pursued in coordination with other EU member states.<sup>2</sup>

In foreign policy, Europeanisation is neither totally fixed nor necessarily all-encompassing, however. In the case of France's Russia policy, two recent developments have called this dynamic into question. The first are the terrorist attacks of January and November 2015, to which France responded by reinforcing its bilateral strategic ties with the US, but also by envisaging greater cooperation with Russia, which has emerged as a key player in Syria. The second is the French presidential elections and their outcome. The Russia question featured prominently in campaign debates and almost all candidates were rather critical of Hollande's policies in that regard. Three of the four major candidates openly castigated his response to the Ukraine crisis, accusing him of being subservient to Brussels and Washington in his policy decisions and of having thereby somehow relinquished France's independence. The fourth candidate, Emmanuel Macron, who was elected by contrast on a decisively pro-European platform, has at the same time adopted Gaullist posturing since he took office, emphasising France's strategic autonomy and political

1 David Cadier (2016), 'Detour or Direction? The Europeanisation of France's Policies towards Russia', FIIA Briefing Paper 195, Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

2 Europeanisation may be the result of bottom-up ('uploading') or top-down ('downloading') processes: it may reflect the successful projection and integration of France's policy preferences at the EU level or the concrete impact of EU collective policy-making structures on France's policy decisions. The objective here is not to unveil how (and which of) these processes have driven the (partial) Europeanisation of France's Russia policies in the context of the Ukraine crisis. The concept is used rather to *characterise* these policies. For a theoretical discussion on the concept of Europeanisation, see: Reuben Wong and Christopher Hill (2012), 'Introduction', in Reuben Wong and Christopher Hill, eds., *National and European Foreign Policies: Towards Europeanization*, London: Routledge, 1–18.

independence in his foreign policy discourses. This raises questions about the future direction of France's Russia policies.

This chapter will consider these different sequences and developments in turn, with a view to shedding light on the basis and evolutions of France's Russia policy. The objective is less to study the Franco-Russian bilateral relationship as a dynamic in itself than to reflect on the determinants and priorities driving France's policy choices towards Russia. Identifying these factors appears relevant not just in anticipating the potential course of French foreign policy, but also of EU policies towards Russia, as France is playing an increasingly prominent role in this context.

## **BACKGROUND AND EVOLUTION: FRANCE'S RUSSIA POLICY SINCE THE END OF THE COLD WAR**

EU member states' individual positions on Russia are often caricatured and reduced to one single determinant. As is the case for Germany or Italy, France's policies towards Russia are regularly portrayed as proceeding simply and strictly from its economic interests.<sup>3</sup> Yet there seems to be no correlation between the evolutions of the political and of the economic components of the Franco-Russian bilateral relationship: the once privileged political relationship gradually deteriorated, while the previously modest economic ties gained in substance.

The political dimension of France's policies towards Russia has largely been a function of its broader strategic outlook. Throughout the 1990s and most of the 2000s, Russia was regarded in Paris as a like-minded country when it came to international and European security. As permanent members, both countries had an interest in maintaining the UN Security Council as the locus of power in international affairs. In its objective of promoting a strong and independent Europe, France also saw the partnership with Moscow as a way to balance US influence on the continent. More profoundly, French decision-makers were driven by the conviction that Europe's stability can only be ensured provided that Russia is firmly anchored to the continental security architecture. As such, Paris endeavoured to create links between Moscow and NATO and opposed, inside the alliance, pushes to engage in a geopolitical struggle with Russia over the common neighbourhood. This general policy line was most clearly incarnated under the Chirac presidency and materialised notably in France's role in bringing about the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the

<sup>3</sup> This was the case, for instance, in the debates around Europe's reactions to the new sanctions imposed on Russia by the US Congress. See, for instance, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, 'Transatlantic fallout over Russian sanctions is dangerous', *Financial Times*, 27 July 2017.

NATO–Russia Council,<sup>4</sup> as well as in Paris’s opposition to granting Ukraine and Georgia NATO Membership Action Plans.

Evolutions in the international environment and in Russia’s foreign policy progressively led France to amend its strategy, however. The partial re-balancing of US geopolitical priorities away from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region – a zone that remains crucial to French security interests – was regarded in Paris as creating a dangerous void in a context where regional crises were multiplying. The contrast with the times of the Franco–American rift over the 2003 Iraq war is both salient and didactic. In the early 2000s, an overly powerful US acting unilaterally and using force without regard for the complexities of local situations was seen as perilous. Since the early 2010s (or at least until the election of Donald Trump), the prospect of US strategic absence in a context of regional tensions, state failures, terrorism and other new security threats has been regarded as dangerous. In response, France reinforced its bilateral security cooperation with Washington and engaged in joint operations in the Middle East and Africa, but also sought to re-invest in NATO and the EU in an endeavour to be in a better position to shape their course in this new context.<sup>5</sup> Combined with Russia’s assertive turn in the same period, this meant that the ‘special relationship’ with Moscow became both less productive and more costly for Paris.

The militarisation of Russia’s foreign policy and the mounting tensions with NATO and the EU put France’s privileged partnership with Moscow and its leadership goals in the two latter organisations at odds. Even before the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, the divergence in strategic outlooks and objectives between France and Russia was already salient in their antagonistic readings of – and reactions to – the Arab Spring, as exemplified by the case of Libya. Moscow regarded political changes brought about by the protest movements as a security liability and the regime as a guarantor of stability. Conversely, Paris considered that, once started, these movements had to be supported and that their repression by autocratic regimes such as Gaddafi’s would result in humanitarian catastrophes and deeper conflicts. France was at the forefront of NATO’s intervention in Libya, which was particularly resented by Russia for going beyond its original UN mandate of establishing a no-fly zone, and leading to the toppling of Gaddafi.

4 Jean-Christophe Romer (2007), ‘Les relations franco-russes de 2000 à 2006. Entre bilatéral et multilatéral’, *Annuaire Français des Relations Internationales* 8, 415–27.

5 Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer and Olivier Schmitt, ‘Frogs of War: Explaining the New French Military Interventionism’, *War on the Rocks*, 14 October 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/10/frogs-of-war-explaining-the-new-french-military-interventionism/>, accessed 30 January 2018.

In contrast to their political relations, France's economic ties with Russia went from being much less substantial than Germany's or Italy's to developing continuously and proving to be resistant even to the EU sanctions regime. In the 1990s, exchanges with Russia represented on average only 1% of French external trade. Between 2000 and 2013, however, French exports to the country increased fourfold (from 1.8 to 7.7 billions euros).<sup>6</sup> EU sanctions, Moscow's countersanctions, and Russia's economic downturn following the fall in oil prices have put a stop to this dynamic, yet without overriding it. The total volume of exchange between the two countries diminished by 42% between 2013 and 2016,<sup>7</sup> but it is worth noting that, for the first time since the imposition of sanctions, French exports to Russia have started rising again since 2016 (+8% in 2016 and +15% from December 2016 to November 2017).<sup>8</sup> Most crucially, in economic terms, Russia matters less as a trading partner than as a market for France. In 2016, as in 2015, France was the leading provider of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Russia, and the French retail company Auchan was the biggest foreign employer in the country.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to some of their German counterparts, large French companies chose to remain in Russia despite the sanctions. They have been actively lobbying the French government for the lifting of EU sanctions, less for their impediments to trade than for their constraints on French companies' ability to raise money for business projects they wish to develop in Russia or with Russian companies. Several big French companies are, for instance, engaged in (or contemplating) cooperation projects in the energy sector. Total owns 20% of the Yamal LNG gas project, while Engie has declared its interest in financing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, on the eve of the Ukraine crisis, France regarded Russia as a more difficult and less valuable political partner, but as an important and promising market. Paris was thus actively engaging Russia through the channels of its revamped economic diplomacy.

6 'La France et La Russie', webpage of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/russie/la-france-et-la-russie/>, accessed 15 November 2017.

7 'Les Chiffres Clés Des Échanges Bilatéraux et Dispositif de Soutien Aux Entreprises Françaises En Russie', webpage of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/diplomatie-economique-et-commerce-exterieur/la-france-et-ses-partenaires-economiques-pays-par-pays/europe/article/russie>, accessed 15 November 2017.

8 'Russie', Les Chiffres du Commerce Extérieur, Ministère de l'Action et des Comptes Publics, [http://lekiosque.finances.gouv.fr/site\\_fr/A129/data\\_brutes.asp?id=P10RU\\_Z1120](http://lekiosque.finances.gouv.fr/site_fr/A129/data_brutes.asp?id=P10RU_Z1120), accessed 30 January 2018.

9 Benjamin Quenelle, 'France-Russie: les relations économiques et culturelles résistent à la crise', *Les Echos*, May 28, 2017, [https://www.lesechos.fr/28/05/2017/lesechos.fr/030355740985\\_france-russie--les-relations-economiques-et-culturelles-resistent-a-la-crise.htm](https://www.lesechos.fr/28/05/2017/lesechos.fr/030355740985_france-russie--les-relations-economiques-et-culturelles-resistent-a-la-crise.htm), accessed 30 January 2018.

10 Henry Foy, 'Russia's Yamal Gas Project Navigates Ice and Sanctions', *Financial Times*, 20 October 2017; Veronique Le Billon, 'Le projet de gazoduc Nord Stream 2 relancé', *lesechos.fr*, 24 April 2017.

## FRANCE'S POLICIES TOWARDS RUSSIA, 2014–2017

### Europeanisation: France's response to the Ukraine crisis

France's reaction to the Ukraine crisis confirmed and accentuated the shift in its policies towards Russia. Paris played an active role in the mediation and conflict resolution efforts over Ukraine, even though the region has never really counted among its top geostrategic priorities. France has also progressively emerged as a steady and decisive supporter of the EU sanctions regime, in spite of the new dynamism and future promises of its economic relationship with Russia. It has eventually cancelled the sale of its Mistral warships to Russia, although such a decision entailed political and financial costs. While they have been to a large extent contingent on the magnitude of the Ukraine crisis and on Moscow's actions in this context, these decisions are also indicative of an increased Europeanisation of France's Russia policy.<sup>11</sup> What is meant here is not that Paris has delegated the conduct of its policy to EU institutions or has allowed its choices to be dictated by the European mainstream but rather that, in the context of the Ukraine crisis, French decision-makers have to a large extent "conceptualised their notions of interest and identity in European terms".<sup>12</sup>

France's involvement in mediation and conflict resolution efforts in Ukraine has consisted, first, of Fabius's participation in the negotiations held by the foreign ministers of the Weimar Triangle in Kyiv on 21 February 2014 (together with his German and Polish counterparts) and, more acutely, of France's co-leadership with Germany of the so-called Minsk process. In the framework of the Minsk process, conflict resolution agreements for Donbas have been negotiated. France's decision to get involved in this intricate and lengthy process has been underpinned by considerations related to its bilateral relationship with Germany and to EU-level leadership dynamics. It was also the result of a direct demand from Berlin. Germany was reluctant to lead alone on this dossier and France, in light of its diplomatic experience, resources, and of the two countries' deep intergovernmental links, appeared to be a natural partner in this regard. Paris's contribution was also grounded in the traditional French vision of Europe as a strong and coherent foreign policy actor, as well as of its own role within Europe – as one French diplomat put it, "a

11 For a more detailed development of this argument, see Cadier (2016).

12 This is another definition of Europeanisation offered by Christopher Hill (1998), 'Convergence, Divergence and Dialectics: National Foreign Policy and the CFSP', in Jan Zielonka, ed., *Paradoxes of European Foreign Policy*, The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 39.

crisis that implicates the EU implicates France”.<sup>13</sup> Taking on co-leadership of the mediation efforts has also been a way to be at the core of the European response and thus to contribute to shaping it. Paris considers, for instance, that the EU ought to put pressure on Russia to withdraw its support for armed factions in Eastern Ukraine, but also that sliding into a permanent conflict with Russia would be detrimental to European security and French interests. It could notably lock NATO and EU strategic assets on the Eastern flank, while Paris wishes to see them mobilise to confront threats emanating from the South.

Similar rationales have underpinned France’s continuous backing of the EU sanctions regime. In the first months of the Ukraine crisis, France was, like Germany, rather opposed to imposing sanctions on Russia, hoping that a solution could be found via mediation instead.<sup>14</sup> The French executive – notably the President and Minister of Foreign Affairs – eventually came to support this option and to uphold it in the face of domestic political opposition. In justifying this resorting to coercive measures, policymakers most often invoke the annexation of Crimea as a grave violation of international norms and as setting a dangerous precedent of modifying borders by force.<sup>15</sup> According to one of his advisers, the then Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius, reacted to briefings on the annexation of Crimea by asking, “What will the implications be for the South China Sea?” (that is, for the resilience of international norms in the context of other territorial disputes).<sup>16</sup> Contrary to some of its European partners bordering Russia, France’s concerns have thus not lain with Russian power as such, but with how it has been wielded by Moscow and the consequences it bears for the European security order. Hence, rather than as a means of weakening Russia, France insists on sanctions being strictly contingent and instrumental, that is on being meant to be lifted as soon as Russia complies with the Minsk agreement. Even if they have failed, thus far, to bring about such a result, France remains opposed to their lifting, as doing so without having obtained anything in return would risk discrediting sanctions as a foreign policy tool for the EU.

Finally, the cancellation of the delivery of the Mistral warships to Russia was probably the one decision where France had to balance its eco-

13 Several analysts have noted that, in the French foreign policy discourse, Europe is often conceptualised as a scene where France acts as a multiplier of French power on the global stage, or even as an extension of France. See for instance: Ole Waever (2005), ‘European Integration and Security: Analysing French and German Discourses on State, Nation, and Europe’, in David Howarth and Jacob Torfing, eds., *Discourse Theory in European Politics*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 33–67.

14 Andrew Rettman, ‘EU Not Expected to Impose Tough Sanctions on Russia’, EuObserver, 3 June 2014, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/123374>, accessed 30 January 2018.

15 See for instance: François Hollande, ‘Voeux Du Président de La République’, French Presidency, 12 January 2017, <http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/exl-doc/EPJ00669101.pdf>, accessed 30 November 2017.

16 Interview with a French diplomat, Paris, March 2016.

conomic interests and bilateral relationship with Russia on the one hand, and its political interests and alliance dynamics inside the EU and NATO on the other. Some of its allies were, indeed, pressuring Paris to cancel the deal. Many domestic actors were, by contrast, insisting on proceeding with the sale, on which hundreds of jobs depended as well as a financial revenue of 1.2 billion euros. President Hollande eventually decided to suspend the sale in early September 2014 and, after negotiating the modalities with Russia in the first half of 2015, the contract was definitively cancelled in August 2015. Some of the costs were mitigated by the fact that Russia accepted resolving the matter through negotiations and that France managed to find another buyer (namely Egypt). Paris nevertheless took a landmark decision on the Mistral dossier, one that was mainly motivated by considerations related to its European interests. French policymakers were of the opinion that the delivery would be too detrimental to their country's position in the EU and NATO.

France's reaction to the Ukraine crisis confirmed that it has progressively departed from the paradigm that had guided its Russia policy since the end of the Cold War; a new paradigm or guiding principle has not yet emerged, however.<sup>17</sup> The Europeanisation pattern highlighted above does not really serve this function as it is, in essence, fluctuating and issue-specific. In other segments of its foreign policy, France has responded to EU-level constraints and opportunities through a mix of tactical adaptations and reluctant adjustments, depending on the prevailing context and on the matter at hand.<sup>18</sup> The partial Europeanisation of its Russia policy during the Ukraine crisis has been contingent on the nature of the crisis and on EU-level parameters, but also on the configuration of the French domestic context. In that sense, the escalation of the Syria-related security situation and the presidential electoral cycle had the potential to call this dynamic into question.

### **Securitisation: terrorist attacks and the war in Syria**

For France, the conflict in Ukraine constitutes a security liability to the extent that it weakens the European security order, creates a pocket of instability on the continent, and calls for EU and NATO responses that might limit Paris's ability to act in other strategic theatres. However, it does not represent a direct threat to French national security, as the war

17 Anne de Tinguy (2017), 'Russie: La France En Quête de Paradigme', Les Dossiers du CERI, Paris: CERI Sciences Po, <http://sciencespo.fr/ceri/en/content/russie-la-france-en-quete-de-paradigme>, accessed 30 January 2018.

18 With reference to France's foreign policy towards the Middle East, Patrick Müller finds that Paris has responded to EU-level incentives by alternating between four strategies: leadership, facilitation, fence-sitting and resistance. Patrick Müller (2013), 'The Europeanization of France's Foreign Policy towards the Middle East Conflict – from Leadership to EU-Accommodation', *European Security* 22(1), 113–28.

in Syria does. The psychological shock and political repercussions of the Paris attacks of November 2015, which can be directly traced back to the conflict in Syria in terms of instigators and perpetrators, cannot be overstated. In their immediate aftermath, two kinds of impacts were notable on the security and counter-terrorist policies of the Hollande government. First, the terrorist attacks pushed French strategic and political elites to seek even deeper bilateral operational ties with the US and fed, at the same time, a certain mistrust towards the EU when it comes to counter-terrorism strategy (especially in the realm of intelligence).<sup>19</sup> Second, they have led the French government to envisage greater cooperation with Russia in the fight against terrorism, as it is confronted with the same security risk of seeing its nationals fighting in jihadi groups in Syria return to the homeland. Moreover, Russia has emerged as a key player in the Syrian conflict, and thus as an important interlocutor for France.

Two weeks after the Paris attacks, President Hollande travelled to Moscow to meet with Vladimir Putin and discuss the modalities of co-operation, as well as the idea of a 'Grand Coalition' in Syria. France had initially rejected the idea of such a Grand Coalition when Putin had presented it at the UN General Assembly a few months earlier, since it saw it as a way for Russia to keep Bashar al-Assad in power. After the Paris terrorist attacks, the Chiefs of Staff of the French and Russian armies also held three official conversations (two phone calls and one meeting in Moscow) in one month, while they had suspended all contacts after the annexation of Crimea. President Hollande even evoked the possibility of 'coordinated strikes'.<sup>20</sup>

The prospects of joint strikes and of a new Franco-Russian alliance over Syria soon faded, however, as the two countries' positions on and in the conflict remained too antagonistic. While Paris and Moscow had a common enemy in Daesh, they had no common ally on the ground. In addition, they have had profoundly divergent readings of the root causes of the conflict: France sees it as a civil war rooted in the cruelty and repression inflicted by the Assad regime, while Russia interprets it as a degenerated attempt by the Sunni powers to topple this regime through jihadist proxies. Most acutely, they were profoundly at odds not just on the role Assad should play in a future political transition, but also on his regime's potential contribution to the fight against terrorism – France regards Assad as being part of the problem, while Russia sees him as part of the solution.

19 Pointing to these dynamics, Christian Lequesne speaks of the partial 'de-Europeanisation' of France's security policies. Christian Lequesne (2016), 'French Foreign and Security Challenges after the Paris Terrorist Attacks', *Contemporary Security Policy* 37(2), 306–18.

20 'La France et la Russie conviennent d'une coopération militaire plus étroite', *Le Monde*, 19 November 2015.

Relations between Paris and Moscow deteriorated significantly in autumn 2016 during the heavy Russian–Syrian bombings over Aleppo: France vocally condemned the bombings, both out of “moral considerations” and for security reasons, as the “crushing of Aleppo risked radicalising the opposition and pushing them into the arms of Daesh or Al–Nosra”.<sup>21</sup> At a time when it was trying to regain the diplomatic initiative on the Syria dossier, and when the humanitarian situation in Aleppo was catastrophic, Paris was frustrated by Russia’s obstructive attitude at the UN Security Council and its vetoing of French–sponsored ceasefire resolutions. It was in this context that Hollande announced his refusal to participate in the inauguration of the new Russian cultural and religious centre in Paris alongside Vladimir Putin, who in turn decided to cancel his visit to France.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, the dramatic humanitarian situation in Aleppo and lasting divergences on the fate of Assad killed off the Hollande government’s initial impetus for a rapprochement with Russia on Syria. It did not, however, prevent politicians from advocating such a rapprochement during the presidential campaign and from blaming Hollande for having failed to bring it about.

### **Politicisation: Russia in the French presidential campaign**

For the first time since the end of the Cold War, Russia featured as a prominent topic in the 2017 presidential elections. It appears necessary, however, to distinguish between the foreign policy debate and the political debate.

In recent years, the French foreign policy debate has become polarised around two positions.<sup>23</sup> The first is articulated around France’s belonging to the West as a community of values. Its proponents, who are traditionally designated as “Atlanticists” (or, negatively, as “neo-cons”), tend to advocate close strategic and political links with the US, stress the importance of the EU and NATO, and believe that the West has a special responsibility in defending certain values at the international level. The second places the emphasis on France’s independence and exceptionalism instead. Its advocates, who present themselves as “Gaullo–Mediterranean”,<sup>24</sup> are critical of the strengthening of the alliance with the US, of

21 *Entretien de M. Jean–Marc Ayrault, ministre des affaires étrangères et du développement international, avec le quotidien «Ouest France»*, Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of France, Paris, 10 October 2016.

22 On this sequence, see: David Cadier (2016), ‘Russia and France’s Right’, *Foreign Affairs*, 31 October, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/france/2016-10-31/russia-and-frances-right>, accessed 30 January 2018.

23 For a more detailed analysis of the French foreign policy debate, see: Thierry de Montbrial and Thomas Gomart, eds. (2017), *Notre intérêt national: Quelle politique étrangère pour la France ?*, Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob.

24 This is because they refer to the legacies of Presidents Charles de Gaulle and François Mitterrand and oppose the Atlanticist tendencies that have prevailed, in their view, under Sarkozy and Hollande.

military interventions in the name of normative considerations, and of France's Middle Eastern policies in recent years (all of which combine in their denunciation, *a posteriori*, of the Libya intervention). In reality, the terms “neo-cons” and “Gaullo-Miterrandian” are incriminating labels rather than operational concepts clearly delimiting alternative practices in French foreign policy.<sup>25</sup> What matters here is that the two groups advocate opposite positions on Russia: the second pleads for greater engagement with Russia (partly blaming the Ukraine crisis on the EU, NATO and the US), while the first categorically rejects such a prospect (arguing that the nature and actions of the Putin regime preclude it).<sup>26</sup>

Although some of the elements of this polarisation permeated the discussions during the presidential campaign, the political debate on Russia is overall much more grounded in political ideology and political opportunism than in foreign policy strategising. This was especially true of the populist candidates who called into question France's membership of NATO and the EU. The Far Right's Marine Le Pen has, for instance, openly expressed her ideological affinity with – and admiration for – Putin, his political regime and his foreign policy. The Russian President received her in the Kremlin in March 2017 (i.e. at the height of the French presidential campaign) and her party was granted a loan from the Moscow-based First Czech–Russian Bank in 2014.<sup>27</sup> These endorsements should be regarded less as the consequence of Moscow's financial backing than as its cause; it is because the FN sees in the Putin regime a model and natural ally that it receives its support. The Far Left's Jean-Luc Mélenchon does not have similar affinities with Putin's domestic policies and has, in fact, criticised them on several occasions. However, his anti-Americanism and negative opinion towards the enlarged EU have led some of his views – particularly on Ukraine and Syria – to coincide with those of the Kremlin. He went as far as to castigate the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as a “war-mongering enterprise” that is “directed against Russia”,<sup>28</sup> and

25 On this point, see Duclos, ‘Gaullo-Miterrandisme Contre Néo-Conservateurs À La Française – Un Vrai-Faux Débat ?’, Institut Montaigne, 3 August 2017, <http://www.institutmontaigne.org/blog/2017/08/03/Gaullo-Miterrandisme-contre-neo-conservateurs-a-la-francaise--un-vrai-faux-debat>, accessed 30 January 2018.

26 Compare, for instance, Le Club des Vingt, ‘Engager La Russie’, Boulevard Extérieur, 30 October 2014, <https://www.boulevard-exterieur.com/Engager-la-Russie.html>, accessed 30 January 2018; and Bruno Tertrais et al., ‘S’allier Avec La Russie Serait Contraire À Nos Intérêts’, *Le Huffington Post*, 25 November 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/bruno-tertrais/russie-francois-fillon-allier-serait-contre-a-nos-interets\\_a\\_21614021/](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/bruno-tertrais/russie-francois-fillon-allier-serait-contre-a-nos-interets_a_21614021/), accessed 30 January 2018.

27 Gabriel Gatehouse, ‘Who's Funding France's Far Right?’, BBC News, 3 April 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39478066>, accessed 30 January 2018.

28 “Mélenchon contre une Europe de la défense,” *Le Figaro*, 6 March 2017, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2017/03/06/97001-20170306FILWWW00317-melenchon-contre-une-europe-de-la-defense.php>, accessed 30 January 2018.

advocated, in his electoral programme, leaving the IMF and joining the BRICS Development Bank instead.

The positioning of the mainstream opposition party, Les Républicains (LR, Conservative), during the campaign appeared more distinctive, particularly when viewed from a broader European perspective. The party's candidate, François Fillon, made a rapprochement with Russia one of the centrepieces of his foreign policy programme: he notably called for an alliance with Moscow in the fight against what he refers to as “Islamic totalitarianism”, which in his view should be France's primary and priority struggle.<sup>29</sup> More profoundly, appealing to some of the deeper beliefs and most Conservative factions of his party, he often presented Russia as a potential saviour of Middle Eastern Christians, as a bastion defending traditional values and as a counterweight to Washington.<sup>30</sup> Finally, Fillon, who was said to have the support of French businesses, also regularly called for the lifting of EU sanctions against Russia. His rather sceptical attitude towards European integration meant that he did not regard the potential consequences of such a move in terms of EU solidarity and credibility as an issue. Overall, contrary to some media accounts, Fillon's stance on Russia was more grounded in the conservative and traditionalist ideology of the French Right than in a consistently and strictly pro-Russian foreign policy agenda. Had he been elected, he would have been likely to put off the further Europeanisation of France's Russia policy, yet without necessarily prompting a radical U-turn, as this would have undermined the bilateral relationship with Berlin (to which he was said to attach cardinal importance).<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION: MACRONISATION?

Among the leading candidates during the presidential campaign, Emmanuel Macron was the one closest to the diplomatic line pursued by the Hollande government.<sup>32</sup> This was true to a large extent on the topics of Ukraine and Russia, with Macron voicing his support for the EU sanctions regime, for instance, and running more generally on a decisively

29 François Fillon (2016), *Vaincre le totalitarisme islamique*, Paris: Albin Michel.

30 David Cadier, ‘Would a Fillon Presidency Overturn France's Russia Policy?’, *The National Interest*, 2 January 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/would-fillon-presidency-overturn-frances-russia-policy-18899>, accessed 30 January 2018.

31 François Heisbourg, ‘François Fillon and the Danger of Dancing with the Russian Bear’, *Financial Times*, 27 November 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/8832b0ea-b33b-11e6-9c37-5787335499a0>, accessed 30 January 2018.

32 Manuel Lafont Rapnouil and Jeremy Shapiro, ‘Macron's Foreign Policy: Claiming the tradition’, European Council on Foreign Relations, 5 May 2017, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_macrons\\_foreign\\_policy\\_claiming\\_the\\_tradition\\_7285](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_macrons_foreign_policy_claiming_the_tradition_7285), accessed 30 January 2018.

pro-European platform. At the same time, however, he sought to distance himself rhetorically and diplomatically from Hollande's foreign policy legacy. Referring to the terms of the debate presented above, he criticised the "neoconservative tendencies" of the "last ten years" and vowed to return, instead, to a "Gaullo-Miterrandian filiation".<sup>33</sup> This raises questions about the future direction of his Russia policy and whether the Europeanisation dynamic that had emerged during the Ukraine crisis is likely to infuse this policy.

It is obviously too soon to provide a definitive answer to these questions, but Macron's first months in office do give some initial indications. This is especially true, in terms of diplomatic approach, of his reception of Vladimir Putin in Versailles. Choosing to host the Russian President in this symbolic venue rather than at the Élysée Palace allowed the emphasis to be placed on shared historical and cultural legacies despite current political disagreements. The pompous setting and careful staging of the meeting were also purported to celebrate France and Russia's past and parallel 'greatness' – and hence to showcase France's 'return' as a leading diplomatic power and flatter Russia's national pride. All in all, the meeting was arranged so as to create the conditions for a renewed political dialogue between Paris and Moscow, as did some of the initiatives agreed upon on this occasion, such as the creation of a French-Russian civil society forum.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, however, President Macron did not hesitate, during his joint press conference with Putin, to bring up the issue of minority rights in Russia and to denounce RT and Sputnik – which had conducted a smear campaign against him during the campaign – as "instruments of influence and propaganda" that have "interfered in the French presidential elections by spreading fake news".<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, both sides of the French foreign policy debate have praised the meeting: some appreciated his strong words on Russian disinformation, while others welcomed his open hand and marks of respect towards Russia.

Macron's political engagement of Russia is primarily related to, and made possible by, the evolution of the situation in Syria. While the domes-

33 'Emmanuel Macron. Battré Le Pen, et ensuite?', Mediapart, May 5, 2017, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/050517/emmanuel-macron-battré-le-pen-et-ensuite>, accessed 30 January 2018.

34 The French foreign minister described the future forum as a platform meant to foster exchange between young people and civil society figures from the two countries with a view to overcoming potential misunderstandings. 'Russia - Visit by Jean-Yves Le Drian', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France, 8 September 2017, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/russia/events/article/russia-visit-by-jean-yves-le-drian-08-09-17>, accessed 30 January 2018. A similar forum exists between Germany and Russia (the Petersburg Dialogue).

35 The full transcript of the press conference is available at <http://www.elysee.fr/videos/conference-de-presse-conjointe-avec-m-vladimir-poutine/>, accessed 30 January 2018. In February 2016, Macron's campaign team had denounced the smear campaign conducted by these media, who spread unfounded allegations about the candidate's private life, and also reported cyber attacks against its website emanating from Russia. See Richard Ferrand, 'Ne laissons pas la Russie déstabiliser la présidentielle en France!', *Le Monde*, 14 February 2017.

tic politics dynamics that prevailed during the presidential campaign are likely to fade, the importance of the Syria variable for the Franco-Russian equation has been confirmed and is increasing under the new president. One of the top priorities in the first months of Macron's foreign policy has been to gain a seat at the Syria negotiating table. He wants to avoid seeing the future political transition defined by military victories on the ground, and to ensure that France and Europe – which have been exposed to the externalities of this war both in terms of terrorist activities and refugee waves – are represented in the process. A rapprochement with Russia could serve this purpose, and Macron's relaxation of France's previous position on the fate of the Assad regime,<sup>36</sup> which has been one of the most salient foreign policy inflexions of his term so far, could facilitate such a rapprochement.

While under Macron a shift in France's diplomatic approach towards Russia is already apparent, Paris's reading of the evolution and drivers of Russia's international behaviour has not changed, and nor have France's broader foreign policy objectives. Macron is likely to continue to prioritise the EU and NATO and avoid taking decisions on Russia that would irremediably affect France's position in these structures.

Nevertheless, the Europeanisation pattern that characterised France's Russia policy in the first years of the Ukraine crisis is unlikely to prevail in the same way as it did then. This is not just due to the Syria variable or Macron's diplomatic posture, but also, and more profoundly, to changing conditions in the transatlantic and European contexts. Washington's Russia policy appears, on the one hand, to be paralysed by the ongoing investigation and internal domestic struggles over the suspicions of Russian interference in the American elections. On the other hand, it is characterised by a greater unilateral orientation, as testified by the new round of unilateral US sanctions against Russia as well as by recent declarations over providing lethal weapons to Ukraine, both of which were criticised by Paris and Berlin. The UK and Poland, which had been the most influential of the hawkish EU member states towards Russia, are, for one thing, on the way out and, for another, increasingly isolated inside the EU. The latter has also found itself directly at odds with France, which has notably been frustrated with Warsaw's lack of reciprocity in terms of

36 Angélique Chrisafis, 'Exclusive: Macron Pledges Pragmatism and Cooperation with Post-Brexit Britain', *The Guardian*, 21 June 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/21/exclusive-macron-pledges-pragmatism-and-cooperation-with-post-brexit-britain>, accessed 30 January 2018.

strategic solidarity.<sup>37</sup> Thus far, Berlin's post-2014 position on Russia has been marked by continuity, however, and the Franco-German dynamic seems bound to be even more central to Macron's foreign policy. In other words, the bilateral, diplomatic dimension of France's Russia policies is being progressively revived under Macron, but their overall strategic direction will also continue to be influenced by the evolution of Russia's foreign policy, Germany's position and, more broadly, the European and transatlantic contexts.

37 In part to encourage France to cancel the delivery of the Mistral warships and help its defence industry recover the loss, Warsaw had decided to buy Caracal Airbus helicopters. Breaking with diplomatic and commercial protocol, the new Polish government decided to abruptly scrap the contract and alienated Paris for the manner in which it did so. Later on, when France activated the EU Defence clause following the Paris attacks of 2015, Poland's response was one of the slowest and least substantial. All of this is significant if we consider that Paris's reaction to the Ukraine crisis was in part informed by calculations related to its position in the EU context, and to considerations related to Central European member states' strategic sensitivities.







### 3. ITALY: THE ADVOCATE OF COOPERATION

Marco Siddi<sup>1</sup>

#### INTRODUCTION

Italy has a long tradition of positive relations with Russia. The seeds of Italian–Russian cooperation were already sown in the Cold War period, when key Italian companies (ENI, FIAT) began to import Soviet oil and gas and opened factories in the USSR.<sup>2</sup> While being firmly anchored in the Western world through its membership of NATO and the European Economic Community, Italy maintained a good working relationship with the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War provided Rome with an opportunity to expand contacts and develop a full-fledged partnership with post-Soviet Russia. Italian politicians were among the most ardent supporters of Russia’s integration in Western structures. Whenever relations between the Kremlin and the West became tenser, as during NATO’s Eastern enlargement or the 2008 Russian–Georgian war, Italian politicians attempted to mediate and preserve the partnership with Russia.<sup>3</sup> When NATO’s Eastern enlargement was decided, Italy qualified its support with the request for a simultaneous upgrade of the Alliance’s relationship with Russia, which led to the establishment of the NATO–Russia Council in 2002. Rome also supported the prompt resumption of relations between

1 I would like to thank Carolina de Stefano and Cono Giardullo for their comments on this chapter.

2 Marco Siddi (2016a), ‘Privileged partners? Italy should use its leverage for constructive policies towards Russia’, FIIA Briefing Paper 197, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

3 Analyses of Italian prime ministers’ and foreign ministers’ inaugural speeches have highlighted how the belief that Italy should play a mediating role between Russia and the West has been a constant factor since the early 2000s. See Anna Caffarena and Giuseppe Gabusi, ‘Making sense of a changing world: foreign policy ideas and Italy’s national role conceptions after 9/11’, *Italian Political Science Review* 47(2), 138.

the EU, NATO and Russia in the months after the August 2008 war in the Caucasus.<sup>4</sup>

Italy's friendly stance towards Russia is partly due to their significant trade and energy relations. These are complemented by the deep-rooted belief among Italian policymakers that European security can only be achieved with the inclusion and active participation of Russia. Since 2014, however, Russia's actions in the Ukraine crisis have posed a serious challenge to both Italy's cooperative approach and its preference for *détente* in Western relations with Moscow. Italy has condemned the annexation of Crimea and voted in favour of EU sanctions against Russia. It also contributed to recent NATO troop deployments in the Baltic states, in response to pleas by its transatlantic allies.

Nevertheless, the push for partnership with Russia has remained strong in Italy. To this end, the sanctions policy has come under growing criticism. As the country struggled to recover from the post-2008 economic crisis, numerous economic actors and political forces lamented the weakening of lucrative commercial ties with Russia. After 2014, the refugee crisis, the civil war in Libya, the rise in terrorism and instability in the broader Mediterranean region highlighted how Italy's geopolitical priorities lay in the Southern neighbourhood. Moreover, Russia's increasing involvement in Mediterranean politics (its military intervention in Syria, contacts with key actors in the Libyan civil war and stronger ties with Egypt and Algeria) suggested that Rome should revive cooperation with Russia. Accordingly, the Italian government has opposed the imposition of new EU sanctions on Russia concerning the Syrian crisis, and proposed having more frequent EU-level political discussions concerning the extension of sanctions related to the Ukraine crisis.<sup>5</sup>

The following sections analyse the long-term factors of Italy's Russia policy and the main developments in the relevant domestic debate after the onset of the Ukraine crisis. Italy's cooperative stance towards Russia is discussed with reference to the broader international challenges that Rome is currently facing. It is argued that the Italian government sees the current level of confrontation with Moscow as undesirable, particularly in the light of the urgent security and humanitarian crises in Italy's immediate neighbourhood. While Italy has adhered to EU and NATO measures to counter Russia after the Ukraine crisis, this policy line has faced growing

4 Riccardo Alcaro (2013), 'Italy', in M. David et al., *National Perspectives on Russia: European Foreign Policy in the Making?*, Abingdon: Routledge, 71. See also Serena Giusti (2009), 'Le relazioni Italia-Russia: una partnership strategica', in G. Bonvicini and A. Colombo, eds. *La politica estera dell'Italia*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 121-131.

5 See Marco Siddi (2016b) 'Understanding Italy's Russia dilemma', Russia Direct, 24 October, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/italys-russia-dilemma>, accessed 17 January 2018; Hans von der Burchard and Florian Eder (2015), 'Renzi blocks smooth extension of Russia sanctions', Politico, 12 October, <https://www.politico.eu/article/renzi-blocks-extension-russia-sanctions/>, accessed 17 January 2018.

domestic scepticism. The lack of solidarity from Italy's European partners in contexts that are particularly urgent for Rome, such as the refugee crisis, has contributed to this scepticism.

## ITALY'S FOREIGN POLICY AND STANCE ON RUSSIA IN CONTEXT

Italy's post-Cold War foreign policy has revolved around three main pillars: European integration, the transatlantic alliance and multilateral action. Italy has been among the staunchest supporters of European economic and political integration. Since the 2000s, Rome has made significant contributions to UN and NATO missions. For instance, it is among the largest contributors to the United Nation's UNIFIL mission in Lebanon and to NATO's ISAF and Resolute Support missions in Afghanistan. In Europe, Italy has been a strong advocate of cooperative security within the framework of the OSCE, of which it is taking over the Chairmanship in 2018. Moreover, the Italian stance towards European and world affairs has been deeply influenced by the concept of 'middle power' (*media potenza*), which has been influential among Italian policymakers since the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> According to this concept, Italy is a middle-ranking power with limited natural and military resources that can achieve its foreign policy goals by expanding its influence in international organisations and through bilateral relations with larger powers. Within this context, Russia is seen as one of the larger powers with which Rome has solid economic and political contacts, which can prove useful in serving the national interest.<sup>7</sup>

Economic and energy relations provide the main foundation for Italian-Russian cooperation. Bilateral trade increased considerably during the 2000s and early 2010s, peaking at over 30 billion euros in 2013 (including 10.7 billion euros worth of Italian exports). Despite the decrease in trade that occurred after 2013, Italy remains the sixth largest commercial partner of Russia worldwide and the second largest in the EU (after Germany).<sup>8</sup> Around 500 Italian firms operate in Russia, including most notably Finmeccanica (active in the aerospace and telecommunications sectors), ENEL (power generation) and other large companies producing

6 For a critical assessment of the 'middle power' concept, see Federico Romero (2016), 'Rethinking Italy's shrinking place in the international arena', *The International Spectator* 51(1), 1–12. For a broader discussion of challenges facing Italy's post-Cold War foreign policy, see Pierangelo Isernia and Francesca Longo (2017), 'The Italian foreign policy: challenges and continuities', *Italian Political Science Review* 47(2), 107–124.

7 See also Alcaro (2013), 7.

8 Info Mercati Esteri, Russia, Scambi commerciali, 31–32, [http://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/rapporti/r\\_88\\_russia.pdf](http://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/rapporti/r_88_russia.pdf), accessed 17 January 2018.

electrical appliances, foodstuffs and machinery.<sup>9</sup> By the same token, the Russian economic presence in the Italian market has increased too. Russian tourist flows to Italy nearly doubled between 2008 and 2013 and have remained substantial thereafter, despite the economic crisis in Russia.<sup>10</sup>

While Italy exports machinery, products of the clothing and chemical industries and other manufactured goods to Russia, fossil fuels and energy products make up the largest share of its imports.<sup>11</sup> Italy acquires approximately 15% of its oil and over 30% of its gas from Russia, and is thus the second largest importer of Russian energy in the EU after Germany. This reflects the interdependent nature of the bilateral trade and the long-standing energy relationship between Rome and Moscow. During the Cold War, Italy was one of the first Western European countries to sign long-term energy supply contracts with the Soviet Union. After the fall of the USSR, the Italian energy company ENI developed a close partnership with the Russian state company Gazprom. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, ENI cooperated with Gazprom in the construction of the Blue Stream pipeline between Russia and Turkey. In 2006, the two companies extended long-term contracts for the supply of Russian gas to Italy until 2035. Although another major joint pipeline project, South Stream, was cancelled following the Ukraine crisis, ENI and Gazprom have maintained cooperation and recently (in March 2017) renewed their interest in building a southern corridor for the export of Russian gas to the EU.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in 2012 ENI began cooperating with Rosneft (another large Russian state energy company) on upstream projects in the Barents Sea and the Black Sea. This cooperation was later extended to the Eastern Mediterranean. In December 2016, Rosneft acquired a 30% stake in ENI's recently discovered Zohr giant gas field off the Egyptian coast.<sup>13</sup>

The important energy and commercial partnership between Rome and Moscow has also influenced Italian political debates on Russia. The absence of serious historical or political disputes in bilateral relations allowed Italian leaders to address their Russian counterparts in pragmatic and cooperative terms. This stance was maintained regardless of the political orientation of Italian governments, as it was broadly perceived to match the national interest. Silvio Berlusconi (Italy's prime minister in 1994–5,

9 Ambasciata d'Italia a Mosca, Cooperazione economica, [http://www.ambmosca.esteri.it/ambasciata\\_mosca/it/i\\_rapporti\\_bilateriali/cooperazione\\_economica](http://www.ambmosca.esteri.it/ambasciata_mosca/it/i_rapporti_bilateriali/cooperazione_economica), accessed 17 January 2018.

10 Info Mercati Esteri, Russia, Flussi turistici, 40.

11 See footnote 8.

12 Eni signs MoU with Gazprom, 21 March 2017, [https://www.eni.com/en\\_IT/media/2017/03/eni-signs-mou-with-gazprom](https://www.eni.com/en_IT/media/2017/03/eni-signs-mou-with-gazprom), accessed 17 January 2018.

13 See [https://www.eni.com/en\\_RU/eni-russia/partners-projects/rosneft/rosneft.shtml](https://www.eni.com/en_RU/eni-russia/partners-projects/rosneft/rosneft.shtml) and [https://www.eni.com/en\\_IT/operations/upstream/exploration-model/zohr-egypt.page](https://www.eni.com/en_IT/operations/upstream/exploration-model/zohr-egypt.page), accessed 17 January 2018.

2001–2006 and 2008–2011) personalised the relationship by developing a close friendship with Vladimir Putin. However, relations were also good under the centre–left government of Romano Prodi (2006–2008) and during the premierships of Mario Monti (2011–2013), Enrico Letta (2013–2014) and Matteo Renzi (2014–2016). The current government of Paolo Gentiloni has followed the same approach and even attempted to intensify dialogue through several official meetings with the Russian leadership during 2017.

Despite the continuity of the Italian approach to Russia, the relevant domestic debate has become more heated in recent years. This is due to several factors, including the negative economic consequences of the crisis in West–Russia relations, the emergence of new political forces in the Italian political scene and the rise of other foreign policy and security challenges in Italy’s Southern neighbourhood, which public opinion broadly perceives as being more urgent. Recent studies have shown that neither Italian political elites nor the broader public consider Russia a major threat.<sup>14</sup> According to a survey conducted in October 2017, a majority of Italians tend to be sceptical about the current EU sanctions towards Russia: 53% of the interviewees believe they should either be softened or lifted, whereas 38% think they should be kept as they are, and another 9% want tougher sanctions. On the other hand, 77% believe that Italy should cooperate with Russia on fighting terrorism.<sup>15</sup> Prominent critics of the sanctions against Russia include the General Confederation of Italian Industry (Confindustria), the nationwide farmers’ association Coldiretti, and the General Confederation of Craft (Confartigianato).

None of the main Italian political parties has taken an anti–Russian stance. The governing Democratic Party and its smaller centrist allies have adhered to the EU’s sanctions policy in the context of the Ukraine crisis. However, they have voiced reservations about the automatic extension of the sanctions that takes place at the EU level every six months (delaying it on one occasion, in late 2015), and have argued that a deeper European political debate is necessary. The official line of the governing coalition, as articulated by foreign minister Angelino Alfano, highlights that engagement with Russia is the right path, not confrontation.<sup>16</sup> Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, the largest centre–right party, has explicitly

14 See Francesco Olmastroni (2017), ‘The alleged consensus: Italian elites and publics on foreign policy’, *Italian Political Science Review* 47(2), 160–161. Both among public opinion and elites, Russia ranked last among perceived threats to Italy, after international terrorism, global warming, the economic crisis, transnational crime, human rights violations in foreign countries and immigration.

15 Gli italiani e la politica estera, 2017, [http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/laps-iai\\_2017.pdf](http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/laps-iai_2017.pdf), accessed 17 January 2018.

16 Riccardo Alcaro (2017), ‘Germany’s Ostpolitik. An Italian perspective’, IAI Working Paper 17/22, 7–8.

called for the withdrawal of EU sanctions against Russia.<sup>17</sup> Significantly, while Berlusconi no longer dominates Italian politics as in the 2000s, he may play a key role in the formation of the next Italian government after the spring 2018 elections, either in a grand coalition with Renzi's Democratic Party or together with the far right. In either case, Berlusconi (who has maintained good relations with Putin throughout the Ukraine crisis, and even visited Crimea in September 2015) would most likely advocate the removal of sanctions and a return to 'business as usual' with Russia.

The main opposition party, the Five Star Movement, seems to have taken a Russia-friendly stance, but different views exist within the party. Initially, in 2014, the Movement criticised Russia's actions in Ukraine and the business links between Italy and Russia. Subsequently, however, it shifted its position and opposed the EU's sanctions against Moscow. The Movement argues that the Italian government is too subservient to its European and NATO allies and neglects the national interest.<sup>18</sup> Some of its members – such as Manlio Di Stefano, who plays a role in defining the party's foreign policy programme – have established links with Putin's United Russia party and called for the normalisation of relations with Moscow. On the other hand, the candidate for the post of prime minister in the 2018 elections, Luigi di Maio, has openly supported Italy's alliance with the United States, arguing that it takes priority over relations with Russia.<sup>19</sup> The Five Stars have been accused of disseminating (and being manipulated by) Russian propaganda.<sup>20</sup> Practically, however, the Movement's stance on Russia is not very different from that of most other Italian parties. Rather than by ideological affinities, its rapprochement with the Kremlin may be explained by instrumental and contextual factors. The construction of the Movement as a threatening populist party among mainstream national and European politics has probably been an important factor pushing the Five Stars to seek partners in Russia.

On the other hand, the vocally pro-Russian stance of the Northern League can be seen as part of the European far right's alignment with the Kremlin. The shared backlash against liberal values, criticism of the EU and of its handling of the refugee crisis, as well as the claim of purport-

17 Sergio Rame (2015), 'Forza Italia sfida il governo: "Ora via le sanzioni alla Russia"', *Il Giornale*, 11 June, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/forza-italia-sfida-governo-ora-sanzioni-russia-1139526.html>, accessed 17 January 2018.

18 'Di Battista e la politica estera del M5s di governo: né con Putin né con Trump', *La Repubblica*, 18 April 2017, [http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/04/18/news/di\\_battista\\_e\\_la\\_politica\\_estera\\_m5s\\_ne\\_con\\_putin\\_ne\\_con\\_trump-163313013/](http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/04/18/news/di_battista_e_la_politica_estera_m5s_ne_con_putin_ne_con_trump-163313013/), accessed 17 January 2018.

19 Ilaria Lombardo, 'Di Maio vola a Washington: "Fedeli agli Usa, non a Mosca"', *La Stampa*, 30 November 2017, <http://www.lastampa.it/2017/11/14/italia/cronache/di-maio-vola-a-washington-fedeli-agli-usa-non-a-mosca-WlF12mUaKeqjm8P3nibE7J/pagina.html>, accessed 17 January 2018.

20 Jacopo Iacoboni (2016), 'L'abbraccio dei Cinquestelle con i due emissari di Putin', *La Stampa*, 5 November, <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/11/05/italia/politica/labbraccio-dei-cinquestelle-con-i-due-emissari-di-putin-17G0E54oaCbpgn9gUqrjN/pagina.html>, accessed 17 January 2018.

edly being the ‘defenders of Christian Europe’, constitute the ideological foundations of this alignment.<sup>21</sup> For the Northern League, ideological affinities are intensified by economic factors. The Northern regions of Veneto, Lombardy and Emilia Romagna – the party’s main reservoir of votes – have been the hardest hit by the effects of EU sanctions and Russian countersanctions, accounting for over 72% of the decline in Italian exports to Russia.<sup>22</sup> In this context, in May 2016, the region of Veneto (which is governed by the Northern League together with Forza Italia) passed a resolution in which it recognised Russia’s annexation of Crimea and called for the removal of sanctions. The resolution had no practical effect, as foreign policy is a prerogative of the central government.

## **ITALY’S POST-2014 APPROACH TO RUSSIA: BETWEEN CRISIS AND PARTNERSHIP**

### **The Ukraine crisis and sanctions**

In late February 2014, as Russian troops took control of Crimea, Matteo Renzi had just replaced Enrico Letta as Italy’s prime minister. Renzi swiftly joined other EU heads of state and government in condemning Russia’s annexation of Crimea. As emerged during Renzi’s first official visit to Angela Merkel in Berlin, in mid-March 2014, Italy’s and Germany’s positions were closely aligned. Both Renzi and Merkel hoped to resolve the crisis through negotiations, thereby avoiding a protracted international crisis. When a diplomatic solution proved impossible, Italy agreed to the imposition of EU sanctions on Russia.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Renzi and foreign minister Federica Mogherini stressed that the sanctions were a reversible measure intended to bring Russia to the negotiating table. In June, Italian leaders welcomed the beginning of negotiations in the Normandy Four format, including Germany and France as mediators (which were perceived as having a similar stance to Italy in the crisis). In addition, Italy kept bilateral communication channels with the Kremlin open. Despite the escalation of hostilities in Donbas and the imposition of EU sectoral sanctions during the summer, Renzi and Italian president of the republic Giorgio Napolitano held talks with Putin at the margins of the Asia Europe

21 Max Seddon and James Politi (2017), ‘Putin’s party signs deal with Italy’s far-right Lega Nord’, *Financial Times*, 6 March, <https://www.ft.com/content/0d33d22c-0280-11e7-ace0-1ce02ef0def9>, accessed 17 January 2018.

22 ‘Sanzioni ed embargo, la Russia è costata all’Italia 3,6 miliardi’, *La Repubblica*, 26 March 2016, [http://www.repubblica.it/economia/2016/03/26/news/export\\_russia\\_sanzioni\\_embargo-136323510/](http://www.repubblica.it/economia/2016/03/26/news/export_russia_sanzioni_embargo-136323510/), accessed 17 January 2018.

23 ‘Crimea, arrivano sanzioni da Usa e Ue’, 17 March, <http://www.lastampa.it/2014/03/17/esteri/la-crimea-sceglie-la-russia-di-s-mosca-gi-al-lavoro-per-lannessione-6L88uWoZ1cDQyY8EOzSZEM/pagina.html>, accessed 17 January 2018.

Summit, which took place in Milan in October 2014. In March 2015, a few weeks after the signing of the Minsk-2 agreement, Renzi was the first European leader to visit the Kremlin after the annexation of Crimea.<sup>24</sup>

However, these diplomatic contacts could not prevent the deterioration of economic relations. In 2015, Italian exports to Russia fell to 7.1 billion euros, a drop of 34% compared to 2013. The biggest losses occurred in the manufacturing sector (machinery, textiles, clothes, furniture, electrical appliances); food exports decreased by nearly 40% as a result of the Russian countersanctions.<sup>25</sup> In late 2014, due to the political crisis in EU-Russia relations and pressure from the European Commission, Italian leaders ceased to support the South Stream pipeline project, which they had previously regarded as strategic.<sup>26</sup> Shortly thereafter, Putin announced the cancellation of the project. As a result, ENI (owner of a 20% stake in the project) incurred serious losses, while Italy remained fully reliant on Ukrainian transit pipelines for its large imports of Russian gas. It is important to note that the disruption of commercial relations with Russia occurred while Italy was reeling from several years of economic recession and stagnation. The reputable financial daily *Il Sole 24 Ore* calculated that trade sanctions with Russia had led to the loss of 80,000 jobs in Italy. In this context, domestic support for the sanctions quickly waned.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, Italian leaders and public opinion began to realize that the most vocally anti-Russian EU member states in East-Central Europe were not willing to reciprocate Italy's solidarity in other (more urgent, from an Italian perspective) policy areas, most notably the refugee crisis. Nearly 154,000 migrants arrived in Italy via the Mediterranean in 2015 and over 181,000 in 2016, but only a fraction were relocated to other EU member states; some members, such as Poland and Hungary, have refused to implement the EU's relocation plans altogether.<sup>28</sup> While Renzi clashed with the EU's Eastern European members over the relocation of refugees, Italy was receiving requests to contribute to the strengthening of the NATO deterrent in Poland and the Baltic states. Despite considerable domestic

24 Alcaro (2017), 4; Siddi (2016a), 6.

25 See footnote 22.

26 'Italy: South Stream pipeline is no longer a priority', Euractiv, 19 November 2014, <http://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/italy-south-stream-pipeline-is-no-longer-a-priority/>, accessed 17 January 2018.

27 Laura Cavestri, 'Russian sanctions have cost Italy €4 billion', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, <http://www.italy24.ilsole24ore.com/art/business-and-economy/2017-02-07/russian-sanctions-have-cost-italy-4-billion-135157.php?uuid=AEjvD4P>, accessed 17 January 2018.

28 See International Organization for Migration, 1 June 2017, <https://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-top-363348-2016-deaths-sea-5079> and European Commission press release 16 May 2017, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-17-1302\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-1302_en.htm), accessed 17 January 2018.

opposition, the Italian government decided to comply with the request and deployed 140 soldiers within a larger NATO force in Latvia.<sup>29</sup>

Another contentious issue in relations with EU partners emerged in the context of energy policy. Italian leaders accused Germany of applying double standards in energy relations with Russia. While Italy had been pressured to abandon the South Stream project, Berlin defended plans to double the capacity of the Nord Stream pipelines (connecting Germany and Russia).<sup>30</sup> Italian officials feared that Italy might become dependent on the Nord Stream pipelines and Germany (an industrial competitor) for its imports of Russian gas, and end up paying higher prices. Confronted with the erosion of intra-EU solidarity, the worsening of the refugee and security crises in the Mediterranean and the growing involvement of Russia in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, Italy intensified diplomatic talks with the Kremlin.

### **The civil war in Libya and Russia's turn to the Mediterranean**

The Libyan civil war was one of the main topics addressed by Renzi during his talks with Putin in March 2015. Renzi asked Putin to help resolve the Libyan crisis, citing Russia's influence in the UN Security Council.<sup>31</sup> Together with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, Russia was considered one of the main supporters of General Khalifa Haftar and of the Tobruk-based government, two influential actors in the Libyan crisis. Haftar's subsequent meetings with Russian officials in Moscow and his visit onboard the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov in the central Mediterranean confirmed the Italian perception of Russia's growing involvement in Libya. The Kremlin also upheld contacts with the UN-backed government of Fayez al-Sarraj based in Tripoli, possibly with the aim of profiling itself as a mediator in the Libyan civil war.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, Moscow consolidated its partnership with Egypt, an important regional player and key supporter of Haftar. This was highlighted

29 See 'Italy's PM Renzi calls for funding cuts for EU states which refuse to take in refugees', Deutsche Welle, 12 October 2016 <http://www.dw.com/en/italys-pm-renzi-calls-for-funding-cuts-for-eu-states-which-refuse-to-take-in-refugees/a-36026000>, accessed 17 January 2018; Siddi (2016b).

30 Marco Siddi (2016c), 'Italy at loggerheads with the European Commission and Germany', FIIA Comment 7/2016, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

31 James Politi and Kathrine Hille (2015), 'Renzi appeals to Putin for Russian help to stabilise Libya', *Financial Times*, 5 March, <https://www.ft.com/content/c1ef0ec4-c35e-11e4-9c27-00144feab7de>, accessed 17 January 2018.

32 'East Libya strongman visits Russian aircraft carrier in Mediterranean', Reuters, 11 January 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-russia-haftar/east-libya-strongman-visits-russian-aircraft-carrier-in-mediterranean-ria-idUSKBN14V1T2>, accessed 17 January 2018. See also Yuri Barmin (2017), 'Russia weighs its role as arbiter in Libya', *Al-Monitor*, 22 August, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/russia-role-libya-arbiter-hifter-moscow-libyan-national-army.html> and Nikolay Kozhanov (2017), 'Moscow's Presence in Libya Is a New Challenge for the West', Chatham House, 30 May, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/moscow-s-presence-libya-new-challenge-west>, accessed 17 January 2018.

by the Russian–Egyptian \$3.5 billion arms deal signed in 2014 and the two–day visit which Putin, foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and a delegation of Russian businessmen paid to Cairo in February 2015. Under these circumstances, the Italian government was eager to include Lavrov in the international talks on Libya that took place in Rome in December 2015. Before the Rome conference, international talks on Libya had taken place without Russian participation in the P3+5 format, including France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, Italy, Spain, the EU and the UN.<sup>33</sup>

Russia’s military intervention in the Syrian civil war was a major turning point marking its growing involvement in the Mediterranean.<sup>34</sup> While Libya has been the main focus of Italian foreign policy, the Syrian crisis is seen as a partly related issue within the broader framework of Mediterranean politics. Rome would like to avoid the extension of the confrontation with Russia to Mediterranean politics and would rather maintain a positive working relationship with the Kremlin in this area. This helps explain why, in October 2016, Italy and a few other EU member states opposed plans to impose new EU sanctions on Russia regarding the Syrian crisis. Italian opposition was also motivated by the perception that some of the advocates of the sanctions, most notably the UK, had previously objected to seeking a greater political role for the EU in the Syrian crisis and were simply pursuing a bilateral agenda.<sup>35</sup>

### **Towards the resumption of cooperation?**

By late 2016, political and economic pressure was mounting on the Italian government to improve relations with Russia. In December 2016, Italian farmers’ association Coldiretti estimated that EU sanctions and Russian countersanctions had cost Italy 10 billion euros in lost revenue.<sup>36</sup> It was argued that losses would continue to grow as Russia focused on import substitution and Russian domestic producers began to imitate ‘Made in Italy’ products, thereby taking over their market shares permanently. As discussed earlier, Italian public opinion increasingly saw Russia as a partner in the fight against terrorism, particularly as it successfully tilted the balance of forces in the Syrian civil war and sidelined the West in the

33 Siddi (2016a), 6–7.

34 For an analysis of Russia’s relations with countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, see Tobias Schumacher and Cristian Nitoiu (2015), ‘Russia’s Foreign Policy Towards North Africa in the Wake of the Arab Spring’, *Mediterranean Politics* 20(1), 97–104.

35 Interview with Italian diplomat at the Italian embassy in Moscow, 28 October 2016. See also Siddi 2016b.

36 Luigi Grassia (2016), ‘Sanzioni alla Russia, per l’Italia il costo è di 10 miliardi (finora)’, *La Stampa*, 19 December, <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/12/19/economia/sanzioni-alla-russia-per-litalia-il-costo-di-miliardi-per-ora-xRlUMsidrta8C0inDj80huO/pagina.html>, accessed 17 January 2018.

subsequent peace negotiations.<sup>37</sup> The disengagement of Italy's Western allies from the Libyan crisis, as well as negative perceptions of newly elected American President Donald Trump,<sup>38</sup> may have influenced Italian strategic thinking too. On the other hand, suspected Russian hacking attacks on Italy's political institutions and the growing contacts between Russian officials and the main Italian opposition parties increased the perceived cost of confrontation with Moscow for the Italian government.<sup>39</sup>

Under the leadership of Paolo Gentiloni, who replaced Renzi as prime minister in December 2016, Italy has continued to adhere to the EU's sanctions policy towards Russia. Simultaneously, however, relations between Rome and Moscow have warmed up. After three years of drastic decline, bilateral trade has experienced remarkable growth. In the first seven months of 2017, Italian exports to Russia grew by nearly 23% compared to 2016 (from 3.7 to 4.5 billion euros), while imports from Russia increased by nearly 18% (from approximately 6.3 to 7.4 billion euros).<sup>40</sup> Following a strategy that has been adopted successfully by many German businesses, Italian companies are trying to develop joint ventures with Russian counterparts in order to produce on Russian territory some of the goods that were previously manufactured in Italy and then exported to Russia.<sup>41</sup> The rise in the oil price and economic recovery in Italy and Russia certainly influenced the growth in trade. However, the improved political atmosphere in bilateral relations and several high-level official meetings in 2017 may have contributed too.

In April 2017, Italian President of the republic Sergio Mattarella met with both Putin and Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev in Moscow. On this occasion, he stressed that Russia is a 'strategic partner' for Italy and called for increased cooperation in economic relations and the fight against terrorism.<sup>42</sup> In May, Gentiloni met with Putin in Sochi. Here, he praised the revival of economic relations and argued that Italy and Russia 'can and should cooperate in Libya, Syria and Afghanistan'. Significant-

37 See also Wolfgang Mühlberger (2017), 'Astana's Syria Conference: Musical chairs on Moscow's terms', FIIA Comment 4/2017.

38 'Trump spaventa gli italiani: addio sogno americano', *Il Messaggero*, 22 June 2017, [http://www.ilmessaggero.it/primopiano/esteri/usa\\_trump\\_sondaggio\\_italiani\\_sogno\\_americano\\_addio-2519483.html](http://www.ilmessaggero.it/primopiano/esteri/usa_trump_sondaggio_italiani_sogno_americano_addio-2519483.html), accessed 17 January 2018.

39 See Stephanie Kirchgaessner (2017), 'Russia suspected over hacking attack on Italian foreign ministry', *The Guardian*, 10 February, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/10/russia-suspected-over-hacking-attack-on-italian-foreign-ministry>, accessed 17 January 2018.

40 *Info Mercati Esteri, Russia, Scambi commerciali*, 31-32.

41 'Made in Italy' is thus being replaced with 'Made with Italy'; see Andrea Carli (2017), 'Forte interesse dei russi a nuovi rapporti commerciali con le aziende italiane', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 7 November, <http://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/notizie/2017-11-07/forte-interesse-russi-nuovi-rapporti-commerciali-le-aziende-italiane--133952.shtml?uuid=AERQBJ5C>, accessed 17 January 2018.

42 Antonella De Gregorio (2017), 'Mattarella in visita a Mosca. Putin: «Superare le difficoltà»', 11 April, [http://www.corriere.it/esteri/17\\_aprile\\_11/mattarella-mosca-putin-la-nostra-amicizia-solida-b818cd7c-1e97-11e7-a4c9-e9dd4941c19e.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/esteri/17_aprile_11/mattarella-mosca-putin-la-nostra-amicizia-solida-b818cd7c-1e97-11e7-a4c9-e9dd4941c19e.shtml), accessed 17 January 2018.

ly, he stressed that the [Italian–Russian] ‘strategic partnership should not be suspended because of the crisis involving Ukraine’.<sup>43</sup> Gentiloni’s statements reflected the Italian fatigue with the West’s confrontation with Russia. However, they should not be interpreted as a sign that his government wanted to break ranks with EU partners. They were rather an attempt to compartmentalise the Ukraine crisis (where Italy continues to support the Minsk–2 agreement and does not recognize Russia’s annexation of Crimea) and promote cooperation in other fields. The Italian government also promoted this approach during the G7 summit of foreign ministers in Lucca (Italy) in April 2017; the joint final communiqué of the summit recognised Russia’s importance as an international actor and advocated cooperation in areas of shared interest (including terrorism, migration, nuclear proliferation and climate change).<sup>44</sup>

In Sochi, Putin and Gentiloni witnessed the signing of several agreements between large Italian and Russian companies, most notably in the energy and infrastructural sectors. Moreover, a large Italian delegation including Minister for Economic Development Carlo Calenda and the directors of major Italian companies attended the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2017. In the energy sector, ENI and Gazprom have renewed cooperation on a range of issues including the modernisation of gas supply agreements, potential partnerships in the liquefied natural gas (LNG) sector and the construction of a Russian gas corridor in Southern Europe.<sup>45</sup> While the value of bilateral trade is still far from the pre-crisis level, Italian businesses and politics are striving for a cooperative *modus vivendi* in the current difficult context.

## CONCLUSION: ITALY AS A BRIDGE BUILDER?

Italy is one of the main advocates of dialogue and cooperation with Russia in the EU. Its stance is influenced by Russia’s importance as an energy and economic partner and the belief that no stable European security system is possible without Russia’s participation. Russia’s increased political and military presence in the Mediterranean region, Italy’s most immediate neighbourhood, has only reinforced this view. Rome has supported the

43 See Gentiloni’s and Putin’s press statements in Sochi, 17 May 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54511>, accessed 17 January 2018.

44 Riunione dei Ministri degli Esteri del G7, Lucca, 10–11 aprile 2017, Comunicato congiunto, [http://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/04/g7incontroministri\\_itaupdated11-04\\_ita.pdf](http://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/04/g7incontroministri_itaupdated11-04_ita.pdf), accessed 17 January 2018. See also Carolina de Stefano, ‘Dialogo con la Russia: Italia meno sola in Europa’, *MondoDem*, 15 June 2017, <https://www.mondodem.it/uncategorized/litalia-meno-sola-nel-cercare-il-dialogo-con-la-russia/>, accessed 17 January 2018.

45 ‘Eni signs MoU with Gazprom’, 21 March 2017, [https://www.eni.com/en\\_IT/media/2017/03/eni-signs-mou-with-gazprom](https://www.eni.com/en_IT/media/2017/03/eni-signs-mou-with-gazprom), accessed 17 January 2018.

EU's sanctions policy against Russia in the context of the Ukraine crisis. It has condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine, and contributed to NATO's defence posture in Eastern Europe. At the same time, Italian officials have continued to stress that the crisis can only be resolved through dialogue, rather than confrontation.

Rome is keen to compartmentalise the crisis with Russia over Ukraine, so as not to extend confrontation to other geographical areas and policy contexts. This explains why Italy opposed a new round of sanctions against Russia for its military campaign in Syria. From an Italian perspective, Russian help or consent may be necessary to resolve crises in the Southern neighbourhood, particularly the civil war in Libya. The weakening of the transatlantic relationship after Trump's election and the lack of solidarity of many of Italy's European partners during the refugee crisis have probably influenced recent Italian attempts to revive cooperation with other long-standing partners, including Russia. Domestic public opinion also seems to favour this posture, particularly on issues such as the fight against terrorism.

Several opposition parties, ranging from the Northern League to Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the Five Star Movement, have called for the lifting of EU sanctions against Russia. The question remains as to whether they would maintain this stance once in power and advocate it at the EU level. Most importantly, based on current polls (conducted in late autumn 2017), none of the main parties and coalitions seems to have sufficient support to govern alone after the parliamentary elections in the spring of 2018.<sup>46</sup> This suggests that the next government may be the outcome of another precarious compromise among political forces, and will not make radical changes to Italy's foreign policy. The main focus will be on domestic politics and on sustaining the modest economic recovery that Italy has experienced in 2017, after years of recession and stagnation.

On the other hand, in 2018 Italy has taken up important foreign policy responsibilities, most notably the chairmanship of the OSCE. Italian political leaders have already declared that they would like to use the Chairmanship to recapture the 'authentic spirit of Helsinki' (a reference to the 1975 Helsinki accords) through dialogue and co-operation.<sup>47</sup> Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni has announced that the Ukraine crisis and the protracted conflicts in the OSCE area will be at the core of the Italian agenda, together with the refugee crisis and Mediterranean politics.<sup>48</sup> For

46 'Le intenzioni di voto degli italiani dopo le elezioni in Sicilia', Corriere della Sera, 11 November 2017, [http://www.corriere.it/politica/17\\_novembre\\_11/intenzioni-voto-italiani-le-elezioni-sicilia-1360674a-c6a8-11e7-99d7-14600f2d5761.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/politica/17_novembre_11/intenzioni-voto-italiani-le-elezioni-sicilia-1360674a-c6a8-11e7-99d7-14600f2d5761.shtml), accessed 17 January 2018.

47 See <http://www.osce.org/chairmanship/330701>, accessed 17 January 2018.

48 See <http://www.osce.org/cio/257036>, accessed 17 January 2018.

relations with Russia, this means that Italy will try to encourage dialogue and cooperation. The success of this approach will, however, depend on numerous factors that remain largely outside Italy's influence, most notably the willingness of the various parties in the post-Soviet conflicts to find a compromise. It is unlikely that Italy will seek or achieve a significant role in the Syrian conflict. Most likely, Rome will continue to concentrate its efforts towards the resolution of the Libyan crisis and seek the cooperation of influential interlocutors, including Russia.





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## 4. POLAND: LEADING CRITIC OR MARGINALISED HAWK?

Monika Sus

### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Poland and Russia has been entangled and turbulent historically. Several wars over the centuries, coupled with tsarist control and Soviet tutelage over Poland after the Second World War significantly marred the bilateral interaction and made it prone to deeply rooted mutual stereotypes. After the end of the Cold War, Polish-Russian relations became one of the major factors affecting security on the European continent. Given its geographical location as the most populous EU and NATO member bordering Russia, Poland is, on the one hand, greatly exposed to Russian foreign policy and, on the other, pre-determined to cooperate with its eastern neighbour. Since the 1990s, the logic of cooperation in predominantly technical and operational but also a few politically essential issues has been intertwined with the logic of conflict. In the opinion of the vast majority of Polish decision-makers, Russia wishes to revise the post-Cold War settlement and, through its attempts to preserve its influence over former Soviet republics, rejects the doctrine of the equality of nations.<sup>1</sup>

Before 2013, despite tensions over gas and trade issues and Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, Poland's wary stance towards Moscow was not shared by the majority of Western states. In fact, as will be argued below, between 2008 and 2013 even the Polish position towards Russia became

1 According to the doctrine, all states must remain equal before the law in such matters as jurisdiction, proprietary rights and diplomatic privileges For more see: S.W. Armstrong (1920), 'The Doctrine of the Equality of Nations in International Law and the Relation of the Doctrine to the Treaty of Versailles', *American Journal of International Law* 14(4), 1920, 540-564.

more moderate. The game changer was the Russian destabilisation of the Eastern part of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in early 2014. It became evident that Russia is on a collision course with the West with regard to the foundations of the international order and that there is a fundamental conflict of interest between Western partners and Moscow. Russia's policy towards Ukraine strengthened the Polish atavistic, historically rooted vision of its biggest neighbour as an undemocratic, aggressive and oppressive country that should be isolated by the international community.<sup>2</sup>

Since the end of 2013, this vision has taken precedence over the logic of cooperation. Particularly after the elections in 2015, it led to a deadlock in the bilateral relationship, which is also burdened by the domestic political ramifications of the Smolensk plane crash. In April 2010, a Polish plane with top officials, including the then President Lech Kaczyński, crashed near Smolensk in Russia. The delegation was on its way to the seventieth anniversary of the Katyn massacre, in which Stalin's secret police had executed thousands of Polish officers and members of the intelligentsia in April and May 1940. In 2012, 68% of Poles accused Russia of impeding the investigation (this opinion was shared by 91% of the supporters of Law and Justice, PiS, which has governed since 2015).<sup>3</sup>

This chapter investigates the Polish–Russian relationship, with a focus on how the Ukraine crisis and Russia's assertiveness in other foreign policy scenarios have affected it between 2014 and 2017. The paper proceeds as follows: the next section briefly describes the background to the main aspects of the bilateral relationship and introduces the key Polish domestic actors that matter in relations with Russia. The subsequent section analyses the dominant topics in the Polish debate on Russia after 2013 and examines the impact of Warsaw's priorities and position on the EU policy towards Moscow. The concluding section reflects on the outlook for the bilateral relationship.

2 Katarzyna Pelczyńska-Nalecz, 'Dyplomacja romantyczna. Oto siedem mitów, które paraliżują polską politykę wobec Rosji', *Polityka*, 1 November 2016, <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/1681052,1,stosunki-polska-rosja-obalamy-7-mitow.read>, accessed 1 October 2017; Tomasz Zarycki (2004), 'Uses of Russia: The Role of Russia in the Modern Polish National Identity', *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures* 18(4), 595–627.

3 Public Opinion Research Center, CBOS, 'Katastrofa pod Smolenskiem. Kto wierzy w teorie zamachu, BS/85/, June 2012, [http://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2012/K\\_085\\_12.PDF](http://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2012/K_085_12.PDF), accessed 10 October 2017.

## FUNDAMENTAL CONSTITUENTS AND DOMESTIC ACTORS VIS-À-VIS POLAND'S RUSSIA POLICY

The underlying belief that determines Polish policy towards Russia is that Moscow aims to revise the post-Cold War order in Europe and undermine security on the continent. This opinion is commonly shared among political and economic elites as well as a large segment of the Polish public. In 2009, 60% of Poles claimed that Russia is trying to regain its power over Central and Eastern Europe,<sup>4</sup> while in 2014 36% of respondents considered the Russian proactive policy towards former USSR countries to pose the biggest external threat to Polish security.<sup>5</sup> In the Polish view, Moscow disregards the role of NATO and strives for the fragmentation and destabilisation of Eastern Europe. The permanence of Russian troops in Transnistria since 1992, the war in Georgia in 2008 and Russian actions in Ukraine since 2014 serve to illustrate the Kremlin's policy. Thus, the belief that Moscow is on a fundamental collision course with Polish and Western security interests shapes the bilateral relationship. It helps to explain the attitude shared by a significant proportion of Polish political elites that any political cooperation with Russia automatically means acting against the 'raison d'état'.<sup>6</sup>

Closely linked with the perception of a revisionist Russia is another key concept that has dominated the Polish stance for at least two centuries: the fear of being marginalised and of becoming the subject of a political game between Russia and the West, particularly Germany. The slogan 'not above our heads' has often been repeated by various political actors from left to right with regard to different issues concerning the bilateral relationship with Russia. A case in point is offered by Radosław Sikorski's statement, made in May 2006, comparing the Nord Stream pipeline to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which in the Polish view epitomises German-Russian collaboration to the detriment of Poland.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Sikorski was then a member of the government led by the conservative-nationalist Law and Justice, and later became Foreign Minister in the government led by the centre-right Civic Platform (PO), shows how the fear of Poland's marginalisation by Russia and Germany is shared across the political spectrum. This fear is based not only on historical events but

4 Public Opinion Research Center, CBOS, 'Ocena stosunków Polski z Rosją, Ukrainą i Niemcami', July 2009, 4, [http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2009/K\\_097\\_09.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2009/K_097_09.PDF), accessed 18 September 2017.

5 Public Opinion Research Center, CBOS, 'Opinie o bezpieczeństwie narodowym', 48/14, February 2014, 4, [http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K\\_018\\_14.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K_018_14.PDF), accessed 18 September 2017.

6 Pelezyńska-Nalecz (2016).

7 Andrzej Turkowski, 'The Polish-German Tandem', 17 November 2011, *Carnegie Moscow Centre*, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/11/17/polish-german-tandem-pub-46059>, accessed 19 January 2018.

also on material factors, such as Poland's smaller economy, raw material resources and military power.

### **Civic Platform's Russia policy**

The fear of Russia as a security actor and of Poland's marginalisation in great power politics profoundly influences the positions of Polish domestic actors. Political parties largely share reluctance and caution in dealing with Russia. However, a brief examination of the positions of the two main parties reveals considerable differences between Law and Justice (PiS), which governed between 2005 and 2007 and came to power again in October 2015, and Civic Platform (PO), which governed between 2007 and 2015. Despite a number of tensions linked to the Nord Stream pipeline for instance, the Russian-Georgian war and Russia's disapproval of the Eastern Partnership, Civic Platform tried to cooperate with Moscow on technical and operational issues and attempted to reach out to liberal Russian intellectuals.

Unexpectedly, in the first months after the Smolensk plane crash, the shared mourning and empathising attitude of the Russian authorities facilitated the opening of a new chapter in the bilateral relations. The rapprochement that had been characterised by caution since PO came to power in 2007 duly accelerated<sup>8</sup> and the hawkish and identity politics-driven approach to Russia promoted by the PiS government started to fade away. Parallel Polish and Russian dialogue centres were created, thereby offering a platform for collaboration between academic institutions and non-governmental organisations from both countries. The Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Matters, set up in 2002 but largely inactive, was reactivated. Under the chairmanship of former Polish Foreign Minister Adam Daniel Rotfeld and Russian scholar Anatoly Torkunov, the group stayed out of the political spotlight and focused on de-mythologising and clarifying historical issues that negatively affected bilateral relations, such as the Katyn massacre.<sup>9</sup> The outcome of its work was published first in Polish and Russian and then translated into English, offering a prime example of successful collaboration between neighbours on the clarification of historical controversies.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the memorial complexes at Katyn and Mednoye (the two execution sites where Soviet secret police

8 Interview with Irina Kobrinskaya, 'Russia and Poland: overcoming 20 years of distrust', *RT online*, 28 October 2010, <https://www.rt.com/politics/russia-poland-relations-kobrinskaya/>, accessed 19 January 2018; Judy Dempsey, 'Grounded: Poland-Russia Relations', *Carnegie Europe*, 13 April 2015, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=59752>, accessed 19 January 2018; Adam Easton, 'Russia-Poland thaw grows from tragedy', *BBC News*, 12 April 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8615945.stm>, accessed 19 January 2018.

9 'Interview with Adam D. Rotfeld', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe*, vol. 1, 2015, 19-22.

10 Adam D. Rotfeld & Anatoly V. Torkunov (2015), *White Spots - Black Spots. Difficult Matters in Polish-Russian Relations, 1918-2008*, Pittsburgh University Press, Pittsburgh.

murdered captive Polish officers in 1940) were opened, and Russian state television showed Andrzej Wajda's film about the Katyn massacre.

At the same time, Polish exports to Russia grew due to the better investment climate, and reached a peak in 2013.<sup>11</sup> Warsaw pleaded for a new opening in the relationship between Brussels and Moscow. Foreign Minister Sikorski came up with a proposal concerning visa-free travel between the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and the adjacent Polish region, which was endorsed by the EU.<sup>12</sup> Together with his German counterpart Guido Westerwelle, Sikorski issued an open letter claiming that Russia belongs to the 'European family of nations' and should find an appropriate place in a democratic Europe of shared freedom and prosperity.<sup>13</sup>

Eventually, however, the misunderstandings and haziness concerning the investigation into the Smolensk plane crash and the reluctance on the Russian side to return the plane wreckage overshadowed the rapprochement. The policy towards Russia became an instrument of political contention between PO and PiS. The opposition headed by Jarosław Kaczyński, the twin brother of former President Lech Kaczyński (who died in the Smolensk crash), propagated anti-Russian conspiracy theories and induced the government to take a harder stance towards Russia and abandon the policy of rapprochement. Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the resultant mutual sanctions between Brussels and Moscow further emasculated the reconciliation process.

### **PiS 2015 electoral victory and its impact on relations with Russia**

After PiS won the elections in autumn 2015, reconciliation with Russia was off the table. The new government declared a substantial change in Polish foreign policy, subsumed under the slogan "Poland rising from its knees". This referred to the willingness to pursue an assertive foreign policy by defending Polish national interests, combined with a nationalist narrative.<sup>14</sup> The Polish vision of international relations started to be dominated by geopolitical categories.<sup>15</sup> In this vein, Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski, referring to the Minsk agreements between Russia and Ukraine and Germany's role in this process, claimed that "Russia and

11 Trading Economics, 'Polish export to Russia', <https://tradingeconomics.com/poland/exports/russia>, accessed 2 October 2017.

12 Judy Dempsey (2015); European Commission, 'Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EC) no. 1931/2006 as regards the inclusion of the Kaliningrad area and certain Polish administrative districts in the eligible border area', *COM (2011)461 final*, 27 July 2011.

13 Turkowski (2011).

14 Adam Balcer et al. (2016), 'Change in Poland, but what change? Assumptions of Law and Justice party foreign policy', *Stefan Batory Foundation*, 2.

15 See also Balcer et al. (2016).

Germany create a distinctive concert of powers over the head of Poland”.<sup>16</sup> Despite Waszczykowski’s declared wish to have pragmatic relations with Russia, the growing suspicion towards the eastern neighbour, fuelled by the critical opinion of the ruling party concerning the investigation of the Smolensk plane crash,<sup>17</sup> de facto froze bilateral cooperation.

The visa-free travel between Russia’s Kaliningrad region and the adjoining Polish territories was suspended in connection with the preparations for the NATO summit in July 2016. A similar decision was taken with regard to Polish-Ukrainian border traffic, but here the visa-free regime was reinstated after the summit, whereas the suspension concerning the Kaliningrad region is still in place.<sup>18</sup> Government officials claim that the suspension is due to a presumed “risk linked to national security”, which remains undefined, however.<sup>19</sup> Their stance met with protests from other political parties, which call for reinstating the visa-free regime and point to the growth in cross-border trade while it was in force.<sup>20</sup> Pawel Adamowicz, PO politician and mayor of the city of Gdańsk, argued that the suspension has clear adverse effects: “For the Polish border regions, maintaining such restrictions can mean the loss of nearly 75 million euros per year. And that would be the least of the losses. With the lifting of local border traffic we all lose something very valuable – mutual contacts, still so fragile after years of alienation and the difficult heritage of the post-Soviet bloc”.<sup>21</sup> His opinion is shared by the agrarian and Christian-Democratic Polish People’s Party (PSL), whose leaders also pointed out the decrease in the unemployment rate on the Polish side of the border thanks to the commercial exchanges enabled by the visa-free regime.<sup>22</sup> The leader of the non-parliamentary Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) has

16 Fronda.pl, ‘Potrzeba mężów stanu, a nie politycznych gier’, <http://www.fronda.pl/a/witold-waszczykowski-dla-frondapl-potrzeba-mezow-stanu-a-nie-politycznych-gierek,47653.html>, accessed 1 October 2017.

17 Prominent PiS officials have stated that the former Polish government cooperated with the Russians in bringing down the President’s plane near Smolensk. It is hard to say whether PiS politicians treat these opinions instrumentally to retain the political support of their voters or whether this is what they actually believe.

18 Paulina Siegier et al., ‘Maly mur graniczny’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 4 August 2016, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,20496308,maly-mur-graniczny.html>, accessed 29 November 2017.

19 Tomasz Modzelewski, ‘Zawieszenie malego ruchu granicznego z Rosja ma charakter polityczny – przyznaje PiS’, *Dziennik Bałtycki*, 8 August 2016, <http://www.dziennikbaltycki.pl/wiadomosci/a/zawieszenie-malego-ruchu-granicznego-z-rosja-ma-charakter-polityczny-przyznaje-pis,10492902/>, accessed 29 November 2017.

20 Pawel Adamowicz, We need to unfreeze traffic between Poland and Kaliningrad, *Huffington Post*, 31 October 2017, <[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/pawel-adamowicz/we-need-to-unfreeze-traff\\_b\\_11471786.html?ncid=engmodushpimg00000004](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/pawel-adamowicz/we-need-to-unfreeze-traff_b_11471786.html?ncid=engmodushpimg00000004)>, accessed 29 November 2017.

21 Ibid.

22 PSL, ‘Przywrocmy maly ruch graniczny z Rosja’, 10 October 2017, <http://www.psl.pl/przywrocmy-maly-ruch-graniczny-rosja/>, accessed 29 November 2017.

argued along the same lines<sup>23</sup> and highlighted that his party calls for a general improvement in the Polish–Russian relationship, which should be based on “economic interest and cultural exchange”.<sup>24</sup>

Recently, in the light of the renewed pragmatic engagement in the bilateral relations between several EU countries and Moscow,<sup>25</sup> Warsaw declared its willingness to revive the bilateral relationship with the Kremlin. Yet Waszczykowski continues to reiterate that there is no reciprocity and readiness for dialogue on the Russian side and that the key to the rapprochement lies in Moscow.<sup>26</sup> In this way, the Polish government put itself in the position of a passive bystander, which hardly seems to be an effective strategy if one wants to avoid being marginalised. At the same time, such an approach avoids exposure to the accusations that PiS officials made against the former government, according to which reconciliation with Russia would mean betraying Polish national interests. Hence, the foreign policy stance of the current government seems to be trapped between the declared readiness for cooperation and deep reluctance in practice.

## **POLISH FOREIGN POLICY DEBATES ON RUSSIA SINCE 2014**

Between 2014 and 2017, the Polish foreign policy debate regarding Russia was dominated by three main interlinked topics. First, there was a focus on the Kremlin’s increasingly imperialistic policy, and how this poses an existential threat to Poland. Second, attention was paid to the discrepancies between Warsaw and other EU governments regarding the approach to Russia; this debate focuses on the Polish strategy of promoting its interests at the EU level in the light of the resumption of pragmatic engagement between European capitals and Moscow. Third, the Smolensk plane crash still remains a key topic, as well as a politically sensitive issue that influences bilateral relations with Russia. The dominance of these threads and the almost complete absence of issues of greater international

23 W. Kaleta, ‘Zawieszenie handlu przygranicznego z Rosją: “To głupota, skandal i zaślepienie polityczne”’, *Parlamentarny.pl*, <http://www.portalsamorzadowy.pl/rozmowa-tygodnia/zawieszenie-handlu-przygranicznego-z-rosja-quot-to-glupota-skandal-i-zaslepienie-polityczne-quot,83363.html>, accessed 10 October 2017.

24 SLD, ‘Przywrómy normalność. Godne życie, sprawiedliwa i normalna Polska Program Sojuszu Lewicy Demokratycznej’, 2017, [http://www.sld.org.pl/public/ckfinder/userfiles/files/SLD\\_program\\_Przywrócimy\\_Normalność.pdf](http://www.sld.org.pl/public/ckfinder/userfiles/files/SLD_program_Przywrócimy_Normalność.pdf), accessed 29 November 2017.

25 Włodzimierz Gorecki, ‘Macron meets Putin: Russia returns to the game’, *OSW Analyses*, 31 May 2017; Justyna Gotkowska, ‘Sweden unfreezes relations with Russia’, *OSW Analyses*, 1 March 2017; Mateusz Seroka, ‘Slovenian president’s visit to Moscow’, *OSW Analyses*, 15 February 2017.

26 ‘Poland ready to work with Russia despite difficulties’, *FM Polskie Radio dla Zagranicy*, 7 August 2017.

relevance, such as Russia's intervention in Syria, distinguishes the Polish debate from those in France and Germany.

### **Russia as a security threat to Poland**

The Polish stance towards Moscow is shaped by widely shared views regarding the imperial ambitions of the “newly resurgent Russia” and its interference in the internal affairs of neighbouring states.<sup>27</sup> As presented in the previous section, views of post-Soviet Russia as an imperialistic and revisionist country have been rooted in Poland for two decades. Since the end of 2013, this narrative has gained momentum. Due to the growing military expenditure of the Kremlin and intensified military exercises close to the Polish border,<sup>28</sup> the threat to Polish security started to be perceived as real and has constantly dictated the debate.<sup>29</sup> According to the data polled by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in 2016, Russia had the third largest military budget worldwide after the US and China, having spent 69.2 billion US dollars. Its military expenditure has grown by 87% compared with 2007.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the Polish defence budget for 2016 was 9.7 billion US dollars. A comparison between the Zapad military exercises in 2013 and in 2017 reveals that Russia's military strength in the Western Military District has doubled in size.<sup>31</sup> Andrzej Wilk, an expert at the leading Polish think tank Centre for Eastern Studies, claimed that Russian armed forces have reached a level of performance that would allow the relatively smooth implementation of any military operation in the area of the former Soviet Union.<sup>32</sup>

Against this backdrop, NATO is seen as the only security guarantee for Poland in a potential confrontation with Russia. Thus, since 2014, Poland has argued for the strengthening of the Alliance's strategic posture on its Eastern flank. At the Warsaw summit of July 2016, despite the cautious stance of some key member states such as Germany, France and Italy,<sup>33</sup>

27 Witold Waszczykowski, 'Speech at the V4-Western Balkans plenary session "Secure Central Europe and the Western Balkans in an increasingly insecure world. How to meet the new challenges"?', 29 November 2016, [http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/ministry/minister/speeches/speech\\_at\\_the\\_v4\\_western\\_balkans\\_plenary\\_session\\_secure\\_central\\_europe\\_and\\_the\\_western\\_balkans\\_in\\_an\\_increasingly\\_insecure\\_world\\_how\\_to\\_meet\\_the\\_new\\_challenges\\_](http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/ministry/minister/speeches/speech_at_the_v4_western_balkans_plenary_session_secure_central_europe_and_the_western_balkans_in_an_increasingly_insecure_world_how_to_meet_the_new_challenges_);jsessionid=35D4F07E4C9317FA26C8B8527D09F78F.cmsap1p, accessed 19 January 2018.

28 Andrzej Wilk, 'The Zapad-2017 exercises: the information war (for now)', *OSW Commentary*, 4 September 2017; Andrew Michta, 'Moscow's Zapad-17 Raises the Stakes for NATO', *Carnegie Europe*, 14 September 2017, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/73103>, accessed 19 January 2018.

29 Piotr Buras & Adam Balcer, 'An unpredictable Russia: the impact on Poland', *ECFR Commentary*, 15 July 2016, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_an\\_unpredictable\\_russia\\_the\\_impact\\_on\\_poland](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_an_unpredictable_russia_the_impact_on_poland), accessed 19 January 2018.

30 Nan Tian et al. (2016), 'Trends in World Military Expenditure 2016', *SIPRI Factsheet*, April 2017, 2-6.

31 Wilk (2017).

32 Ibid.

33 See the respective chapters in this report for the security considerations and threat perceptions that motivate the German, French and Italian positions.

NATO agreed to enhance its presence in the East. A shift from a policy of reassurance to one of deterrence against Russia was agreed upon.<sup>34</sup> The decision to place four battalion-sized battlegroups in Poland and in the Baltic states was warmly welcomed by the Polish government and its implementation was celebrated as a success. Polish President Andrzej Duda called the arrival of NATO forces a historic moment that had been waited for by generations.<sup>35</sup> Four battalions would not be sufficient to ensure the defence of Poland in the event of a Russian attack. However, if the battlegroups were attacked by the Russian military, the fighting would most likely trigger further engagement by the Alliance.

### **Promoting Poland's stance in the EU: Nord Stream 2 and sanctions**

The second, multifaceted topic in the Polish debate concerns how Warsaw can promote its stance towards Russia within the EU, and to what extent it should run its policy towards Moscow through the European Union. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline and the sanctions against Russia are the two most widely discussed topics within this context. The debate about Nord Stream 2, which would carry Russian gas across the Baltic Sea directly to Germany, is very heated. Warsaw argues that the project undermines European solidarity and the Energy Union by increasing the dependency of the European gas market on Russian resources. According to the Polish Minister for European Affairs, Konrad Szymanski, “by supporting Nord Stream 2, the EU in effect gives succour to a regime whose aggression it seeks to punish through sanctions”.<sup>36</sup> In the same vein, Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydlo labelled the new pipeline a geopolitical and not an economic project, contrary to the claims of its backers.<sup>37</sup> Since the pipeline will bypass Ukraine, it will have a negative impact on its economy. According to the Polish government, Nord Stream 2 can be used by the Kremlin to maintain control of its neighbourhood (particularly Ukraine) in the future. In the ongoing battle between the EU countries, which are divided into detractors and supporters of the project,<sup>38</sup> Poland fosters the opinion that the mandate to negotiate with Russia should be granted to

34 Justyna Gotkowska, 'NATO's Eastern Flank - a new paradigm', *OSW Analyses*, 13 July 2016.

35 President.pl, 'President Andrzej Duda welcomes NATO troops', 13 April 2017, <http://www.president.pl/en/news/art,401,president-andrzej-duda-welcomes-nato-troops.html>, accessed 10 October 2017.

36 Konrad Szymanski, 'Russia's gas pipeline threatens European unity', *Financial Times*, 21 October 2016.

37 Robbie Gramer, 'Is Europe caving to Russia on Pipeline?', *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/08/is-europe-caving-to-russia-on-pipeline-politics-european-union-nord-stream-two-gas-oil-energy-germany-baltic-poland/>, accessed 19 January 2018.

38 Anca Gurzu, 'Nord Stream 2 fight set to heat up as countries show their cards', *Politico*, 9 August 2017.

the European Commission.<sup>39</sup> Warsaw counts on the Commission's commitment to the Energy Union and thus on its opposition to the pipeline.

With regard to the EU sanctions against Russia, one should note that Warsaw's stance on this issue stems from both the Polish support for the democratisation and Europeanisation of Ukraine and Warsaw's geo-strategic calculations. An expression of this Polish attitude was the Polish-Swedish idea of the Eastern Partnership, aimed at the deepening and strengthening of relations between the EU, Ukraine and five other post-Soviet countries (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus and Moldova). Hence, Russia's escalating pressure on Kiev, capped off by the annexation of Crimea, was directly opposed to Polish security and political interests. For Warsaw, a democratic, well-governed Ukraine that is associated with the EU would be an important ally and would positively change the balance of power in the region, whereas "a weak or failed Ukraine is more than just an invitation for Russia to continue its aggressive policy".<sup>40</sup> Hence, Poland belongs to the main supporters of the restrictive measures that were progressively introduced by the EU in 2014 in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its role in the destabilisation of Donbas.

Warsaw backs the extension of the sanctions by linking it to the EU's credibility vis-à-vis Russia and by making the future of the Union dependent on successfully influencing the Kremlin.<sup>41</sup> There is a closely-knit and silent consensus among all major political forces in Poland that sanctions should not be lifted, despite their damaging effect on the Polish agriculture.<sup>42</sup> The Polish People's Party (PSL) represents the only exception. In April 2016, PSL adopted a resolution calling for the lifting of the sanctions, pointing to the losses suffered by Polish producers and the supposed limited effectiveness of the sanctions.<sup>43</sup> The PSL stance is motivated by the fact that Polish companies, mainly in the agri-food sector, lost an estimated three billion euros due to EU sanctions against Russia

39 PAP, 'Polska przedstawiła na forum UE opinię prawną w sprawie Nord Stream 2', *Plus Biznesu*, 12 October 2017.

40 Buras & Balcer (2016).

41 Wiktor Szary & Paweł Sobczak, 'Poland says lifting Russia sanctions now would weaken EU authority', *Reuters online*, 31 May 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-poland/poland-says-lifting-russia-sanctions-now-would-weaken-eu-authority-idUSKCN0YM10S>, accessed 11 October 2017.

42 The support for sanctions is clearly expressed by politicians from PiS and PO. The other parties do not refer to the sanction regime in a direct way in their programs, yet during the parliamentary debates the unity with regard to the support for sustaining sanctions is highly visible, see Chancellery of the Sejm, 'Pelen zapis przebiegu posiedzenia Komisji do Spraw Zagranicznych', 7 January 2016.

43 PSL, 'Rosyjskie embargo rujnuje polskich przedsiębiorców', 16 February 2017, <http://www.psl.pl/embargo-rujnuje-przedsiębiorców/>, accessed 9 October 2017; PSL, 'Sankcje wobec Rosji podtrzymane. Tracimy miliardy', 3 July 2017, <http://www.psl.pl/sankcje-rosja-podtrzymane/>, accessed 9 October 2017.

and Russian countersanctions.<sup>44</sup> However, since the influence of the PSL on the Polish political debate is limited – the party received 5.1% of the votes in the last elections and barely made it to the Parliament – its views can be regarded as marginal.

Importantly, Warsaw's efforts to promote its national interests at the EU level (with regard to Nord Stream 2, sanctions and other issues) are questioned by the frayed credibility of Poland as a successful example of democratic transformation. The democratic backsliding of Poland, embodied by the current government's policies against the independence of the judiciary and the free press,<sup>45</sup> as well as the lack of Polish solidarity towards EU partners in the refugee crisis, have prompted growing distance and distrust from other EU countries. As a result, the Polish government is both alienating key allies such as Germany and undermining the image of Poland as a reference for the Europeanisation of Eastern Europe.<sup>46</sup>

### **The debate on the Smolensk plane crash**

The Smolensk plane crash continues to be a highly discussed topic in Poland and influences the country's stance on Russia. Although there are no new developments in the investigation, which has been reopened by the PiS government, the topic continues to pervade the debate. The issue is highly politicised. The leaders of the governing party, particularly Jarosław Kaczyński, use monthly gatherings in memory of the victims ('Miesięcznice smoleńskie') for attacking their political opponents and for spreading anti-Russian conspiracy theories. Polish society is deeply divided with respect to the investigation and the causes of the crash. In spring 2016, six years after the event, 29% of Poles claimed that the reasons for the plane crash have been fully clarified, whereas 30% of respondents believed that they have not been sufficiently investigated.<sup>47</sup> Another 30% argued that nothing has been explained so far.<sup>48</sup> The most contentious issue relates to the question of the plane wreckage, which Russia has not returned to Poland as yet. At the beginning of 2017, Minister Waszczykowski reiterated the expectation that the wreckage would be returned to Poland and announced the possibility of initiating a lawsuit

44 Business Insider Polska, 'Ekonomiści policzyli, ile Polska i UE straciły na sankcjach wobec Rosji', 9 October 2017, <https://businessinsider.com.pl/finanse/handel/sankcje-ue-wobec-rosji-jak-wplynely-na-eksport-z-polski/mpnpksn>, accessed 27 November 2017.

45 Paulina Pacula, 'Poland's 'July coup' and what it means for the judiciary', *EUobserver*, 19 July 2017, <https://euobserver.com/justice/138567>, accessed 27 November 2017.

46 Balcer et al. (2016), 15.

47 Public Opinion Research Center, CBOS, 'Polacy o wyjaśnianiu katastrofy smoleńskiej w przeddzień jej szóstej rocznicy', no. 52/2016, Warsaw, 8.

48 *Ibid.*

regarding the Russian investigation of the plane crash at the International Court of Justice.<sup>49</sup>

## CONCLUSION

While Russia has been seen as a challenge in a majority of European countries since 2014, in Poland it has been perceived as a threat, even more dangerous than ISIS.<sup>50</sup> Taking into account the historical resentments, the geographical location of Poland, the gap in military potential between the two neighbours and the increasingly aggressive policy of Russia during this decade, the threat perception is explicable. At the same time, Warsaw seems to be trapped between the historically rooted fear of being marginalised by the West and Russia and the inability to establish effective channels of communication with Moscow. The image of Poland as “Rusophobic” undermines the credibility of the Polish policy towards the Kremlin. While several member states have resumed bilateral contacts at the highest level and pragmatic engagement with Russia, the deadlock in relations between Warsaw and Moscow weakens the Polish position within the European Union. European governments are interested in cooperation with Moscow on issues such as terrorism, energy security and the refugee crisis, notwithstanding the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The Polish stance towards the Kremlin is not perceived by other countries as a barrier to developing their own bilateral relations with Russia. Thus, by pursuing a policy of non-cooperation with Russia, Poland weakens its bargaining power in the Union.

Moreover, since Poland’s ability to successfully counterbalance Russia’s aggressive policy depends predominantly on its capacity to build coalitions in the EU, its growing isolation within the Union makes it more vulnerable to the potential Russian threat. The current PiS government has alienated France and Germany and is now subject to an infringement procedure launched by the European Commission over its measures undermining the independence of the judiciary.<sup>51</sup> The government’s policy within the EU has focused on the promotion of the so-called ‘Trimarium’ (also called the ‘Three Seas Initiative’), an initiative to strengthen the

49 Witold Waszczykowski, ‘Information of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on Polish foreign policy tasks in 2017’, Warsaw, 9 February 2017, [http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/ministry/minister/speeches/information\\_of\\_the\\_minister\\_of\\_foreign\\_affairs\\_on\\_polish\\_foreign\\_policy\\_tasks\\_in\\_2017](http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/ministry/minister/speeches/information_of_the_minister_of_foreign_affairs_on_polish_foreign_policy_tasks_in_2017), accessed 1 October 2017.

50 Reuters, ‘Russia is more dangerous than Isis, says Polish foreign minister’, 15 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/15/russia-more-dangerous-isis-polish-foreign-minister-witold-waszczykowski>, accessed 1 October 2017.

51 European Commission, ‘Press release. European Commission launches infringement against Poland over measures affecting the judiciary’, Brussels, 29 July 2017, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-17-2205\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-2205_en.htm), accessed 1 October 2017.

regional integration in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.<sup>52</sup> This concept is an attempt to balance the influence of Germany and Russia through an alliance of in-between countries.<sup>53</sup> However, there is little doubt that the European Union at large, rather than a ‘Trimarium’ alliance, will determine the European policy towards Russia.

Thus, without the willingness to foster bilateral relations with Russia and to take part in the development of a constructive policy towards the Kremlin at the EU level, Poland is driving itself towards the very isolation that it fears so much. The Normandy format (France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia) set up to find a solution to the conflict between Kiev and Moscow offers an illustration of this trend. Both Sikorski and Tusk were actively involved in the negotiations on Ukraine from the beginning of the conflict but, subsequently, Polish representatives were left out of the talks.<sup>54</sup> Despite this, the Polish stance on Russia remains an important factor in the broader political scenario. Back in 2009, Ivan Krastev claimed that “it was the French-German rapprochement that made the post-war Western Europe. It will not be an exaggeration to assert that Russian-Polish rapprochement will make or unmake post-Cold War Europe”.<sup>55</sup> At present, any chances of reconciliation between the two countries are not on the near horizon.

52 Grzegorz Lewicki, ‘The Three Seas Initiative will strengthen Europe’, *Visegrad Insight*, 3 July 2017, <http://visegradinsight.eu/the-three-seas-initiative-will-strengthen-europe/>, accessed 19 January 2018.

53 Balcer et al. (2016), 3.

54 Piotr Buras, Has Germany sidelined Poland in Ukraine crisis negotiations? ECFR Comments, 27 August 2014, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_has\\_germany\\_sidelined\\_poland\\_in\\_ukraine\\_crisis\\_negotiations301](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_has_germany_sidelined_poland_in_ukraine_crisis_negotiations301), accessed 25 November 2017; Adam Kowalczyk, ‘Polityka Polski wobec Ukrainy w 2014 roku – próba bilansu’, *Bulletin FAE* 3, 2015, 9–11, <http://fae.pl/biuletynopiniefapukraina2014.pdf>, accessed 27 November 2017.

55 Ivan Krastev, ‘The First Days of Post-American Europe are ahead’, *Kultura Liberalna*, no. 34/2009.







## 5. THE UNITED KINGDOM: FROM PRAGMATISM TO CONFLICT?

Cristian Nitoiu

### INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the Ukraine crisis, relations between the United Kingdom (UK) and Russia seem to have reached the most tense point since the end of the Cold War. A certain degree of competition and even conflict has always coexisted with economic cooperation and close cultural ties between Moscow and London.<sup>1</sup> However, Russia's actions in Ukraine or Syria, coupled with the West's tough stance against the Kremlin, have made both London and Moscow deeply distrustful of each other. The West within which the UK is firmly rooted has experienced what for many is a very dangerous standoff and the most significant crisis of European security since the end of the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> The Brexit referendum and subsequent negotiations have complicated the situation even further. On the British side, Brexit seems, according to the rhetoric of the government, to herald the age of a new 'Global Britain' with a greater role for the country in world politics.<sup>3</sup> In practice, the Brexit negotiations have only cast a shadow of doubt over the UK's own future economic situation, and have brought even more uncertainty rather than positive prospects regarding the country's future role in world politics.

The Kremlin has sent mixed messages regarding its attitude to Brexit. Part of Moscow's broader strategy in Europe has been to support extreme

- 1 Maxine David (2011), 'A Less than Special Relationship: The UK's Russia Experience', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 19(2), 201–12; Tracey German (2016), 'UK–Russia Relations and the Brexit Debate: Advancing Integration or Mutual Mistrust?', *Global Affairs* 2(5), 503–11; Mark Leonard and Nicu Popescu (2008), *A Power Audit of EU–Russia Relations*, London: European Council for Foreign Relations; Cristian Nitoiu (2015), *The EU Foreign Policy Analysis: Democratic Legitimacy, Media, and Climate Change*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2 J. L. Black and Michael Johns, eds. (2016), *The Return of the Cold War: Ukraine, The West and Russia*, London; New York, NY: Routledge; Robert Legvold (2016), 'Imperial Gamble: Putin, Ukraine, and the New Cold War', *Foreign Affairs*.
- 3 Shawn Donnan, 'Trade Truths for Theresa May's Vision of a 'Global Britain'', *Financial Times*, 18 January 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/65322fbc-dd34-11e6-9d7c-be108f1c1dce?mhq5j=e7.>, accessed 16 January 2018.

right and Eurosceptic parties, in a bid to weaken European coherence on the continent and damage the legitimacy of the EU.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the Kremlin officially argued that a united EU could make a much better and stable trading partner for Russia, and that it considered that the UK was losing its international stature through Brexit.<sup>5</sup> The current context is also compounded by Donald Trump's presidency, which has created considerable uncertainty regarding the future of American foreign policy or the breadth of transatlantic relations. All of these aspects make UK-Russia relations more tense than ever in the post-Cold war period, but also more complex and shrouded in uncertainty. This chapter thus highlights the fact that British-Russian relations have moved from a rather pragmatic and neutral stance to a deeply conflictual atmosphere. In the following sections, the chapter will provide a brief discussion of UK-Russia relations since Vladimir Putin came to power at the beginning of the century, followed in the second part by an analysis of key developments in the bilateral relationship since the start of the Ukraine crisis. Although Russian perspectives are also mentioned when useful to provide context and clarity, the focus will primarily be on British policy and political debates.

## BACKGROUND TO UK-RUSSIA RELATIONS

### British-Russian relations in perspective

Traditional relations between the UK and Russia should be understood through the prism of EU-Russia relations or broader relations between the West and Russia. To a large extent, in the post-Cold War period the UK has generally followed the foreign policy agreed upon at the EU level when it comes to Russia. The dichotomy between conflict and cooperation that is found in EU-Russia relations is also present in British-Russian interactions.<sup>6</sup> Although there is a tendency to cooperate on both sides, in practice they very often end up criticising and blaming each other. While they share a certain degree of admiration for each other's cultural values, Britain tends to criticise Russia's human rights record or rule of law standards, which is perceived by the Kremlin as an infringement of its sovereignty. The UK has constantly had one of the lowest trade exchanges

4 Anton Shekhovtsov (2017), *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge; Stefano Braghiroli and Andrey Makarychev (2016), 'Russia and Its Supporters in Europe: Trans-Ideology à La Carte?', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 1–21.

5 'Putin on Brexit: No One Wants to Support Weak Economies', *RT International*, <https://www.rt.com/news/348201-putin-brexit-weak-economies/>, accessed 16 January 2018.

6 Cristian Nitoiu (2016), 'Towards Conflict or Cooperation? The Ukraine Crisis and EU-Russia Relations', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16(3), 375–90.

with Russia among the member states of the EU.<sup>7</sup> This has allowed it to be rather more critical than other EU member states towards the Kremlin. Moreover, energy imports from Russia play a marginal role in the UK's energy mix for now. Nevertheless, the UK is one of the most important foreign investors in Russia, although to a significantly lesser extent in comparison to Germany.

Due to the important Russian investment in the UK (particularly in the city of London), the UK has refrained from consistently advocating a conflictual approach towards Russia within the EU. This was more apparent before the Ukraine crisis, when the UK abstained from criticising other member states such as Germany or Italy for establishing special relationships with Moscow (especially in the area of energy supply). Nevertheless, the member states from Central and Eastern Europe (such as Poland or the Baltic countries) that feared a Russian resurgence have seen an ally in Britain. While countries like Germany were seen to push for a so-called 'Russia-first approach' EU foreign policy, the UK was seen as a counterbalance.<sup>8</sup> However, with the Ukraine crisis and the sanctions against Russia spearheaded by Germany, Britain's position as balancer has become virtually irrelevant.

The evolution of British-Russian relations since Putin came to power has followed the trend of relations between the West and Russia. During his first term, Putin saw willingness to integrate Russia into the international community and the liberal world order as a way of modernising the country, as well as gaining recognition from the West for a higher status in world politics. The first major disappointment on the Russian side came with the intervention in Iraq led by US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister (PM) Tony Blair. This marked the beginning of a rift caused by the fact that Putin realised that the West would not take Russia's views into account as an equal, and would seek to intervene in other states in order to promote an agenda declaredly based on democracy promotion.<sup>9</sup> During the next four to five years, in the wake of the colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space, Putin increasingly focused on rebuilding the foreign policy of the country and shifting it away from the West. Neither the US, the EU nor Britain took this process into account properly, as they were still operating under the assumption that Russia was very much willing to integrate into the liberal world order.<sup>10</sup> What followed was the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, which came as a surprise

7 David, 'A Less than Special Relationship'; German, 'UK-Russia Relations and the Brexit Debate.'

8 Cristian Nitoiu, 'Towards Conflict or Cooperation?'

9 Roy Allison (2013), *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

10 Cristian Nitoiu (2017), 'Still Entrenched in the Conflict/Cooperation Dichotomy? EU-Russia Relations and the Ukraine Crisis', *European Politics and Society* 18(2), 148-65.

to the West, with Britain trying to play a key role in its resolution<sup>11</sup> (former French president Nicolas Sarkozy spearheaded the ceasefire agreement).

### **Domestic actors in the Russia debate**

Even though most voices in the British establishment have generally been critical of Russia's human rights record or its policies towards its smaller neighbours, there is a group of individuals both in the public and political sphere who defend the Kremlin's point of view.<sup>12</sup> The Russian-sponsored TV channel RT has been one of the main actors in promoting pro-Russian views and attitudes in the UK. In the political sphere, some have criticised Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party for allegedly adopting a rather inactive stance on Russia's involvement in Ukraine or the Kremlin's human rights record.<sup>13</sup> Conservative leaders tend to portray Corbyn as a weak leader who would not be able to stand up to Putin. These allegations largely contributed to Corbyn's image in the media of being a Putin apologist, and some media even drew questionable parallels with Trump.<sup>14</sup> Former Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon argued that Putin would be happy to deal with a weak and feeble PM such as Corbyn and that the Labour leader would make NATO almost irrelevant.<sup>15</sup> These claims referred to the fact that Corbyn was against the deployment of troops on the eastern border of NATO, preferring de-escalation and demilitarisation.<sup>16</sup>

There have also been allegations of Putin apologists in the ranks of the Tory party who advocated improving relations between the West and Russia. For example, Conservative Daniel Kawczynski was critical of the NATO military build-up on the Eastern flank, arguing that it would inevitably lead to an east-west military confrontation.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in 2014 David Cameron was also under pressure to clarify links between a lobbying firm with Russian ties and its involvement with the Conservative

11 Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (2009), *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, London: M.E. Sharpe.

12 German, 'UK-Russia Relations and the Brexit Debate.'

13 Richard Heller, 'Digging into Corbyn's silence on Putin', 9 October 2017, <http://www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2017/10/09/digging-into-corbyn-s-silence-on-putin>, accessed 16 January 2018

14 Kenneth Rapoza, 'U.K. Labor Leader Corbyn And Trump Have Something In Common: Russia', 9 June 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2017/06/09/u-k-labor-leader-corbyn-and-trump-have-something-in-common-russia/#e0c96ef56f91>, accessed 16 January 2018.

15 Ben Farmer, 'Putin would welcome Labour victory because Jeremy Corbyn is 'gutless' on defence, Michael Fallon says', 20 April 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/20/putin-would-welcome-labour-victory-jeremy-corbyn-gutless-defence/>, accessed 16 January 2018.

16 Rowena Mason and Heather Stewart, 'Army minister accuses Corbyn of siding with Russia against Nato', 12 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jan/12/army-minister-accuses-corbyn-of-siding-with-russia-against-nato>, accessed 16 January 2018.

17 Nick Gutteridge, 'Tory MP calls for easing of hostility with Putin over spiralling crisis', 27 January 2017, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/759706/Vladimir-Putin-Tory-MP-Daniel-Kawczynski-Britain-detente-Russia-Kaliningrad>, accessed 16 January 2018.

Party.<sup>18</sup> Boris Johnson's (the current Tory Foreign Secretary) approach towards Russia has been ambiguous, at times pointing out the need to engage with Russia and identify issues of common interest, while at other times decrying Russia's aggression in Ukraine or Moscow's war crimes in Syria. Moreover, as a leading figure for the Leave campaign, Johnson often argued that the EU's pretentious security policy was responsible for the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

British public discourse has always been rather anti-Russian. Recently, it has followed discourse in the US and continental Europe, vilifying President Putin and not seeing Russia as a trustworthy partner. The British media has also been generally fascinated by the various antagonistic nuances of Russian society and culture.<sup>19</sup> One of the most important topics that have been on the mind of the British media is the presence of Russian oligarchs in London and the huge amount of capital that they bring to the United Kingdom.<sup>20</sup> Public debate in Britain has focused on a series of key events in relations between the West and Moscow and between Russia and the UK. For example, the Russian-Georgian war, the Russian intervention in Ukraine, as well as the one more recently in Syria are usually presented in the British media as examples of Moscow encroaching upon the West and trying to change the rules of the world order. The Kremlin does not really receive much good publicity in the UK. Cases such as the assassination of former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006, which according to the British investigation was orchestrated by Russian officials, have had a negative effect on the British public's view of Russia.<sup>21</sup> Not only have episodes such as the Litvinenko assassination been seen as undermining British culture and values, but also as unwelcome direct Russian intervention in British internal affairs.

Hence, in the British public discourse, vilifying Russia and presenting a negative view of the Kremlin is very often the approach preferred by politicians and journalists; no one really wins popularity points by harbouring a favourable attitude towards Russia. The high level of mutual animosity between the two countries presented in the media landscape does not really match the rather successful cooperation they have achieved when

18 Oliver Wright, 'Tories under fire for links to pro-Russia lobbyists', 3 October 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/exclusive-tories-under-fire-for-links-to-pro-russia-lobbyists-9583023.html>, accessed 16 January 2018.

19 Ibid.; Cristian Nitoiu (2014), 'British Press Attitudes towards the EU's Global Presence: From the Russian-Georgian War to the 2009 Copenhagen Summit', *Comparative European Politics*.

20 Orysia Lutsevych (2016), 'Agents of the Russian World Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood', London: Chatham House, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/agents-russian-world-proxy-groups-contested-neighbourhood>, accessed 16 January 2018.

21 Cristian Nitoiu, 'What Does the Litvinenko Ruling Mean for Relations between Russia and the West?', *EUROPP*, 22 January 2016, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/01/22/what-does-the-litvinenko-ruling-mean-for-relations-between-russia-and-the-west/>, accessed 16 January 2018.

it comes to several security issues. Particularly in the area of counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing, there has been a significant degree of willingness to cooperate on both sides. Moreover, in the negotiations for the Iran nuclear deal or in the NATO–Russia Council, as well as the United Nations Security Council, the UK and Russia have often found common ground in the past.<sup>22</sup>

## UK–RUSSIA RELATIONS FOLLOWING THE UKRAINE CRISIS

### **The impact of the Ukraine crisis on security and economic relations**

Since the start of the Ukraine crisis, the UK has been a key advocate of imposing harsh terms on the Kremlin. Nevertheless, in the last two years there have been numerous debates in policy and academic circles regarding the possibility of dropping the sanctions regime against Russia.<sup>23</sup> The general consensus is that the annexation of Crimea cannot be accepted by Britain as a signatory of the Budapest memorandum, which guaranteed Ukraine’s territorial integrity in exchange for Kyiv giving up nuclear weapons, and that sanctions related to this issue should be maintained even at a symbolic level. However, the recent House of Commons<sup>24</sup> report also points out that if there is progress on the implementation of the Minsk agreement and Russia withdraws its troops from eastern Ukraine, then the UK and the West should consider relaxing or even dropping the sanctions regime. Various British businesses that operate or do deals with Russian counterparts have been affected by the sanctions and have complained about the sanctions regime. However, both in Britain and other EU member states sanctions have been more of a political and ideological issue which has trumped economic concerns. It is very probable that the UK will not unilaterally remove sanctions against Russia, but will continue to coordinate with its EU partners on this matter.<sup>25</sup>

In the initial phases of the Ukraine crisis and in the build-up to the Brexit vote, former PM David Cameron aimed to spearhead NATO’s efforts to deter Russia. He was keen to argue that Britain’s potential withdrawal from the EU would not affect the UK’s tough stance on Russia. Cameron was an advocate of aiding Kyiv’s military and helping it to modernise, with the UK sending military trainers to Ukraine, convinced of the fact that Europe had to prepare to ‘settle in for a long and determined position’

22 Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention*.

23 GOV.UK, ‘Doing Business in Russia and Ukraine: Sanctions Latest – GOV.UK’, 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/doing-business-in-russia-and-ukraine-sanctions-latest>, accessed 16 January 2018.

24 House of Commons, ‘The United Kingdom’s Relations with Russia’.

25 Ben Smith, ‘UK Relations with Russia 2016’.

against Russia.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Cameron was criticised domestically for not having a strong response to Russia during the initial phases of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and for not upholding Britain's commitments to Ukraine's territorial integrity.

After taking office in the summer of 2016, Theresa May was hopeful about the prospect of building good relations with Russia in spite of the countries' different approaches to the Ukraine crisis and the conflict in Syria. However, in the autumn of 2017, she strengthened her criticism and resolve towards Russia. On the one hand, May maintained Britain's view regarding the illegal annexation of Crimea and the assertive actions of Moscow. On the other hand, she reinforced Britain's resilience towards any sort of challenges coming from Russia, in the context of the allegation of Russian interference in Brexit and the 2017 election campaigns. She highlighted that Russia's main aim was to undermine Western liberal and democratic institutions.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Theresa May has increasingly been scrutinised domestically for painting Russia as a key threat in order to deflect public opinion away from domestic issues, such as the UK's worsening economic outlook.<sup>28</sup>

In the midst of the Ukraine crisis, Britain hosted the NATO summit in Wales which, to a large extent, spelled the resurrection of the organisation.<sup>29</sup> If before the Ukraine crisis NATO was highly inactive when it came to the post-Soviet space or European security issues, Russia's actions have prompted the member states to seek to reinforce the organisation and to send a message to the Kremlin that any future aggression would be countered. Britain has also been a key advocate of providing more (defensive) weapons for the Ukrainian government and helping to develop its army. Despite its decreasing influence and activism in world politics, the UK has tried to stay involved especially when it comes to military operations. This means that, at least discursively, Britain is also committed to helping Ukraine with various forms of military aid in dealing with Russia.<sup>30</sup>

26 Steven Swinford, 'David Cameron: Britain could take Russia sanctions to 'whole different level'', 5 March 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/11453232/David-Cameron-Britain-could-take-Russia-sanctions-to-whole-different-level.html>, accessed 16 January 2018.

27 Rowena Mason, 'Theresa May accuses Russia of interfering in elections and fake news', November 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/nov/13/theresa-may-accuses-russia-of-interfering-in-elections-and-fake-news>, accessed 16 January 2018.

28 Rod Liddle, 'Russian fake news is to blame for problems in the UK? Pull the other one, Theresa May', 15 November 2017, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4923569/russian-fake-news-theresa-may-hackers-brexit/>, accessed 16 January 2018.

29 NATO, 'Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales', [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm), accessed 16 January 2018.

30 Linda Yueh (2017), 'Realising the Aims of 'Global Britain'', *London School of Economics and Political Science*, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/research/updates/global-britain.aspx>, accessed 16 January 2018.

In terms of security, the Kremlin sees NATO countries (including the UK) as no more than pawns in the American strategy to dominate the European continent.<sup>31</sup> Hence, for Russia, British military aid of any sort for the Ukrainian army is merely the result of transatlantic relations, rather than independent British action. The same could be argued about Russian views regarding Britain's overall approach towards Ukraine, where the UK is seen as closely following the line agreed at the NATO and EU level. That said, among EU member states, Britain was one of the least interested in pushing the European integration agenda on Kiev.<sup>32</sup> The British government again closely followed the leadership of the EU, especially Germany and the European Commission, in negotiating the Association Agreement with Ukraine and in pushing for various economic and political reforms in the country.

In 2016, primarily due to the Western sanctions regime and the Russian countersanctions, trade levels decreased by almost 15% in relation to the previous year.<sup>33</sup> This highlights the deep impact that the current crisis in relations between the West and Russia is having on trade. However, the EU referendum might have also made Russian businesses more wary of engaging with those from the UK. In the same year, 2016, the Russo-British Chamber of Commerce, which promotes business links between the two countries, celebrated its centenary, marking the historical salience of trade ties. In spite of the sanctions regime, British investment in Russia has continued, albeit at a much lower level, with BP and Anglo-Swedish pharmaceuticals giant AstraZeneca starting up new operations in the last two years.<sup>34</sup> However, if the political situation does not see a significant improvement in the near future, it is hard to imagine that British companies will continue similar levels of investment. Brexit, on the other hand, does complicate the situation, as Russia might try to secure a special type of agreement with Britain, which would insulate trade relations against political tensions. Russian investment in the UK has also dropped since the start of the Ukraine crisis, partly as a result of the fall in global oil prices, the economic downturn in Russia, but also the perception that the British government is trying to shun Russian investors.

31 Alexander Korolev (2015), 'Bringing Geopolitics Back In: Russia's Foreign Policy and Its Relations with the Post-Soviet Space', *International Studies Review* 17(2), 298-312.

32 Dorina Baltag and Michael Smith (2015), 'EU and Member State Diplomacies in Moldova and Ukraine: Examining EU Diplomatic Performance Post-Lisbon', *European Integration Online Papers (EIoP)* 19(1), 1-25.

33 Nicholas Cobb, 'Official UK-Russia Trade Figures 2015-2016', *Westminster Russia Forum*, 24 April 2017, <http://westminster-russia.org.uk/official-uk-russia-trade-figures-2015-2016/>, accessed 16 January 2018.

34 German, 'UK-Russia Relations and the Brexit Debate.'

## **The Trump factor and Russia's renewed activism in the Mediterranean**

Besides the Ukraine crisis, one of the most important developments that has affected UK–Russia relations is the election of Donald Trump in the US. This has created a large degree of uncertainty both in transatlantic relations, as well as in the way the West is set to develop its foreign policy towards Russia. During the presidential campaign, Trump often argued that the US and the West should revise their policy towards Russia. However, while in office, Trump has not really moved significantly in terms of repairing the relationship with Russia. In fact, there has been even more antagonising discourse on the part of the US establishment, which increasingly vilifies Putin and the Kremlin. Allegations of Russian tampering in the US elections have not helped Trump in his quest for a renewed relationship with Moscow. Consequently, we now find ourselves at probably the most tense juncture in relations between the West and Russia since the end of the Cold War.

With the looming prospect of Trump disengaging the US from European security and the considerable sense of uncertainty that it causes, the British government has aimed to advocate a stronger American presence in Europe, as well as in terms of reinforcing NATO.<sup>35</sup> From the Russian perspective, Washington's possible disengagement may give rise to a breach between the US and its European partners regarding security on the European continent. On the other hand, the uncertainty caused by Trump also prompts some cooperation between Russia and the UK, as neither can count on the predictability in international relations that has characterised American leadership in the post-cold War period. An example in which both Russia and the UK disagree with Trump is the Iran nuclear deal,<sup>36</sup> where both countries have been working together for almost a decade. It is clear that this instance of cooperation and other shared security concerns (such as terrorism) between Britain and Russia will continue notwithstanding the nature of American–Russian relations.

In accordance with its strong transatlantic partnership, the UK has declared its support for democratic regime change in countries such as Iraq, North Africa and Ukraine. This goes against the principle of sovereignty, which is a key declared aspect of Russian foreign policy. Consequently, the UK and Russia have often collided when it comes to intervention in

35 Sky News, 'Theresa May 'Committed to Security of Europe' as She Meets Merkel', *Sky News*, 29 September 2017, <http://news.sky.com/story/theresa-may-set-for-brex-it-focused-meeting-with-angela-merkel-11058390>, accessed 16 January 2018.

36 Patrick Wintour and Julian Borger, 'Tensions Surface between UK and US over Iran Nuclear Deal', *The Guardian*, 14 September 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/14/tensions-surface-uk-us-iran-nuclear-deal-rohingya>, accessed 16 January 2018.

other countries in order to promote democratic change.<sup>37</sup> Moscow has vigorously argued that sovereignty should not be breached by the international community. Most recently in the case of Libya and Syria, Russian and British views on sovereignty and international intervention have again clashed. In the case of Libya, the UK was a prime supporter of the need to back the opposition to Muammar Gaddafi and of the airstrikes.<sup>38</sup> In Syria, alongside the US and some other European partners, it supported and armed anti-governmental opposition, as well as sanctions against Russia for its intervention in Syria. Britain has also been engaged in fighting terrorism in the Middle East as well as promoting regime change and democracy. In terms of the latter, the UK and Russia have generally not found common ground, but when it comes to terrorism there is increasing willingness and commitment to work with each other.

Russia's continued support for the Syrian government and its subsequent military intervention in the country have antagonised the UK, the West and its allies. Having strongly supported and provided military aid to the Syrian opposition, Britain is increasingly being forced to acknowledge that the Assad regime will continue to survive. While Russians see this as a major victory for the country's foreign policy and its involvement in various important issues on the international agenda, from the perspective of Britain and the US this is a sign that Moscow is prepared to go outside of its neighbourhood and disturb the liberal world order. Over the last year, Russia has also made important progress in order to establish an alliance with military commander Khalifa Haftar in the Libyan Civil War, prompting criticism from the UK government. In spite of this, Britain seems both unable and unwilling to mount increasing pressure and opposition towards Russia in Libya and Syria.<sup>39</sup>

### **Russian authoritarianism, Brexit and their effects on the bilateral relationship**

Britain's PM Theresa May is a harsh critic of Russia's human rights record and rule of law situation. Putin has been particularly criticised for his turn towards conservative and nationalist policies and for not protecting the rights of sexual minorities.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, he has been accused

37 Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention*.

38 Cristian Nitoiu (2017), 'Russia's Geopolitical PR Campaign Finds a Perfect Opening in North Africa', *The Conversation*, <http://theconversation.com/russias-geopolitical-pr-campaign-finds-a-perfect-opening-in-north-africa-78712>, accessed 16 January 2018.

39 Tobias Schumacher and Cristian Nitoiu (2015), 'Russia's Foreign Policy Towards North Africa in the Wake of the Arab Spring', *Mediterranean Politics* 20(1), 97–104.

40 Carol Morello and Griff Witte, 'British Prime Minister Theresa May Warns Trump He Cannot Trust Putin', *Washington Post*, 26 January 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/british-prime-minister-theresa-may-warns-trump-he-cannot-trust-putin/2017/01/26/e62000c4-e403-11e6-a453-19ec4b3d09ba\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/british-prime-minister-theresa-may-warns-trump-he-cannot-trust-putin/2017/01/26/e62000c4-e403-11e6-a453-19ec4b3d09ba_story.html), accessed 16 January 2018.

of stifling the Russian opposition, especially through the tough protest laws that were put in place following the 2012 mass protests. Britain frequently criticises the current crackdown on the Russian opposition and the fact that any kind of dissent against the current regime can easily be deemed illegal. The Kremlin dismisses accusations coming from the West and slates both the UK and the West for being degenerate models of Europe, with Russia being the true centre of European values.<sup>41</sup> In practical terms, British discourse about human rights and the rule of law situation in Russia does not have too much power to shape the way the political system and society in Russia are currently developing.

Since the Brexit vote there have been debates in the British government and public sphere regarding the use of propaganda and hybrid warfare by Russia on the territory of Britain.<sup>42</sup> According to Tracey German,<sup>43</sup> in various European countries Russia has supported individuals and groups that have the ability to influence the positions of their countries. It has sought to create disunity among the EU member states and promote Eurosceptic views; hence, the EU referendum provided a prime opportunity for Moscow's tactics. The Kremlin argued that allegations regarding Russian interference have no basis and the outcome of the vote was different from the one that Russia desired.<sup>44</sup> This point of view is also reinforced by figures in the Leave campaign, who claim that Russia could not have influenced the EU referendum, as the key reasons for people voting to leave had nothing to do with Moscow (migration from Eastern Europe and the UK recovering lost sovereignty).<sup>45</sup>

To some extent, Brexit has been welcomed and generally supported by Russia. This fits into the broader Russian strategy of supporting Eurosceptic and far-right parties in a bid to weaken the EU.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, official views from the Kremlin following the Brexit vote and the current negotiations have argued that Russia wishes to see both a strong Britain as well as a strong EU, as it desires to have resilient and predictable partners. Without a doubt, Brexit gives more ammunition to those voices in Russia

41 Sergey Lavrov, 'Russia's Foreign Policy: Historical Background', Russia in Global Affairs, 3 March 2016 [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkrE02Bw/content/id/2124391](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkrE02Bw/content/id/2124391), accessed 16 January 2018.

42 Deborah Haynes, 'Russia waging cyberwar against Britain', *The Times*, 17 December 2016, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russia-threat-to-britain-gpd98bz83>, accessed 16 January 2018.

43 Tracey German, 'UK-Russia Relations and the Brexit Debate', 504.

44 Patrick Christys, 'Putin wants Russia and Britain to be FRIENDS after pledging to get along with Theresa May', *The Express*, 14 July 2016, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/689290/Vladimir-Putin-Theresa-May-friends-politics-new-Prime-Minister-David-Cameron>, accessed 16 January 2018.

45 Matthew Goodwin, 'Oh please, Brexit really was not a Russian plot', *The Telegraph*, 18 November 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/18/oh-please-brexit-really-not-russian-plot/>, accessed 16 January 2018.

46 Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*.

that are convinced that the EU will disintegrate sooner rather than later. In fact, there is a feeling among Russians that both Russia and the EU are on a downward spiral. Their hope is that Russia will manage to prevail longer than the EU.<sup>47</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Following the Ukraine crisis, Britain has shifted from a pragmatic yet critical approach towards Moscow to a more confrontational stance. In spite of this, UK-based companies have continued to invest in Russia (for example BP). If political tensions are set to continue, it is highly likely that British investment will decrease. The same can be said of British–Russian trade relations, in that prior to the Ukraine crisis they were on an upward trend, but since the annexation of Crimea there has been a steady decrease of about 15% per year. The British government continues to be very critical regarding Russia’s human rights record. As Russia regards these accusations as direct interference in its internal affairs, British criticism is bound to create increasing tension in the future. However, in the face of antagonistic discourse on both sides, there is still willingness to cooperate when it comes to issues like Iran, terrorism or intelligence sharing.

Post–Brexit, the UK is likely to continue its broad critical stance on Russia when it comes to Moscow’s actions in Ukraine or its domestic human rights abuses. Current trends highlight that Britain will try to reinforce NATO and strengthen the alliance’s military presence on the Eastern flank. However, the UK’s withdrawal will probably weaken the EU’s overall clout in world politics, and leave it more vulnerable in its neighbourhood. This is of concern as British embassies in the eastern neighbourhood countries have been shown to have significant expertise in the region, sharing it with EEAS or other member states.<sup>48</sup> It remains to be seen what kind of deal in terms of trade, security and migration the UK will seek to establish with Russia. At this point, it is highly likely that the agreement will closely follow the pattern of the EU’s own approach to Russia.

The nature of UK–Russia relations will also be shaped by the strength of Britain’s transatlantic partnership and America’s approach towards the Kremlin during the evolution of Trump’s unpredictable presidency. Trump’s election in the US has brought about a large degree of uncer-

47 LSE Blogs, ‘Views on the UK’s Renegotiation: Russia, Ukraine and Turkey’, *LSE BREXIT*, 4 December 2015, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2015/12/04/views-on-the-uks-renegotiation-russia-ukraine-and-turkey/>, accessed 16 January 2018.

48 Dorina Baltag and Michael Smith, ‘EU and Member State’.

tainty in world politics. Firstly, in relation to American commitments to European security and its transatlantic partnership, where Trump seems to be advocating a more disengaged US. Secondly, American foreign policy towards Russia is at best divided and rather schizophrenic, as Trump seems to favour a rapprochement with Moscow, while the whole US foreign policy establishment is increasingly returning to the old and cosy Cold War rhetoric of vilifying Russia. This has encouraged Britain to lobby in Washington for increased assurance over American involvement in European security. The strengthening of NATO and a ramping-up of moves to counter Russia on the so-called 'Eastern flank' have also been on the UK's agenda as a result of the US's rather bipolar approach to Moscow.







# CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

The numerous international crises that affected Europe between 2014 and 2017 have had important repercussions for relations between the EU, its member states and Russia. EU–Russia relations deteriorated dramatically in 2014, in the context of the Ukraine crisis. From an EU perspective, in 2014 and early 2015 the Ukraine conflict emerged as the most urgent issue on the agenda, notwithstanding the fact that several other crises (the risk of “Grexit”, the rising numbers of refugees) were already posing additional challenges at that time – a hint of what was soon to come. It seemed that the ongoing crises were distinct and disconnected from each other, and that the confrontation with Russia was and would remain focused on the Ukraine conflict and the ensuing punitive measures (sanctions and countersanctions).

From late summer 2015, however, the international environment became much more complex for Europe, with the emergence of new crises and growing interconnections across them. Civil wars in North Africa and the Middle East and the growing number of migrants highlighted that instability in the EU’s Southern neighbourhood could swiftly become an even greater concern than events in Ukraine for many EU member states. New international challenges compounded external crises. In late 2015 and in 2016, the rising number of terror attacks and the UK’s decision to exit the European Union fuelled a sense of insecurity and political uncertainty in the EU. Moreover, the election of Donald Trump to President of the United States called into question the continuation of the transatlantic alliance.

In this quickly evolving context, Russia was a far from passive actor. In February 2015, the signing of the Minsk-2 agreement allowed a partial de-escalation of the conflict in Ukraine and the cessation of large-scale fighting, even though the crisis remained unresolved and casualties continued to occur. This, together with the emergence of the multiple crises mentioned above, largely shifted the EU's attention towards other scenarios. However, the "Russia factor" re-emerged in many of these. Russia was rarely a decisive actor, let alone a root cause of the new crises that engulfed the EU from 2015 onwards – the Syrian conflict arguably being the main exception, as Russian direct military intervention was indeed a game changer in this context. Nevertheless, Russia did seek a role in these scenarios too, with a broad range of objectives. In autumn 2015, Russian leaders launched the idea of an anti-terrorism coalition with the West, arguably in an attempt to sideline the Ukraine conflict and pursue a comprehensive geopolitical deal with the West, or simply a tentative rapprochement.<sup>1</sup> They reiterated this proposal after the Paris terror attacks of November 2015, suggesting that Russia and the West could unite forces in the fight against Daesh in the Middle East.

When cooperation failed to materialise due to divergent views, Russia reverted to a more confrontational approach. In late 2015 and the first half of 2016, terror attacks, the refugee crisis, the rise of European far-right parties and Brexit suggested that the EU was in a deep internal crisis, perhaps even a terminal one. This apparently conveyed to Moscow the idea that the crisis in EU- and West-Russia relations could be resolved on favourable terms for the Kremlin following a change of leadership in the West.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, this was the reasoning behind Russian support for anti-establishment and far-right candidates in the US and French presidential elections in 2016 and 2017. The desire to reciprocate (perceived and real) Western interference in past Russian elections and attempts to weaken Russian society through economic sanctions may have been an additional reason. However, the success of anti-establishment leaders in Western elections was only partial and confined to Trump's election in the US, whereas Emmanuel Macron and later Angela Merkel won key elections in France and Germany. Hence, there was no resetting of West-Russia relations based on leadership change in the West. Conversely, Russia's support of, or proximity to anti-establishment candidates took the debate

1 See for instance Putin's speech at the UN General Assembly, 28 September 2015. Text available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/28/read-putins-u-n-general-assembly-speech/?utm\\_term=.85acb435d449](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/28/read-putins-u-n-general-assembly-speech/?utm_term=.85acb435d449), accessed 24 January 2018.

2 Andrey Kortunov, "Russia's Changing Relations with the West: Prospects for a New Hybrid System", Russian International Affairs Council, 19 January 2018, <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-s-changing-relations-with-the-west-prospects-for-a-new-hybrid-system/>, accessed 24 January 2018.

about confrontation with Moscow to the level of domestic politics, with particularly tense consequences in the United States.

This report has highlighted that EU member states were affected differently by the multiple international crises, and often reacted to them in different ways. National perceptions of Russia's role in the crises also differed, which at times complicated or even prevented a shared European stance. In 2014, Russia's annexation of Crimea and use of force in the Ukraine crisis led to the convergence of EU member states towards a policy combining sanctions and diplomatic engagement. As shown, Germany's political leadership was essential in this process. It was supported by French co-leadership in crisis negotiations and was endorsed by member states that traditionally had a privileged relationship with Russia, such as Italy, but recognised the profound security implications of Moscow's use of force. Convergence was also possible with more hawkish member states vis-à-vis Russia, such as the UK and especially Poland, which were largely satisfied with the EU's sanctions policy.

National positions increasingly took on different nuances in 2015, under the combined effect of other international crises and the cessation of large-scale fighting in Donbas. Criticism towards the policy of sanctions gained momentum in Italy, where the ensuing losses compounded the fragile post-financial-crisis economic situation. In the second half of 2015, the push for resuming cooperation became stronger in some sectors of the German economy as well, most notably in the field of energy, where German business argued in favour of the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. At the end of 2015, following the Paris terror attacks, military contacts between France and Russia intensified in view of potential cooperation in the fight against terrorism. A common trait of the German, French and Italian positions was the idea that relations with Russia could be compartmentalised: the Ukraine crisis would be "isolated" and cooperation could continue in other areas.

On the other hand, the Polish government was wary of any engagement with Russia. Its position became even more rigid following the electoral victory of the right-wing and anti-Russian Law and Justice party in autumn 2015. Reversing the attempts of the Tusk governments to take a more pragmatic stance towards Moscow, Law and Justice leaders portrayed Russia as Poland's archenemy, 'more dangerous than ISIS'.<sup>3</sup> The continuing debate on the Smolensk plane crash (in which Law and Justice leader Lech Kaczyński died, among many others) and Russia's decision not to return the plane wreckage to Poland fuelled tensions further.

3 "Russia is more dangerous than Isis, says Polish foreign minister", *The Guardian*, 15 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/15/russia-more-dangerous-isis-polish-foreign-minister-witold-waszczykowski>, accessed 25 January 2018.

While endorsing a hard line towards Moscow, the British position was not particularly influential in the making of EU policy. Despite being regarded as one of the 'Big Three' in the EU (along with Germany and France), especially in the field of foreign and security policy, British leaders were absent from both the Normandy format of negotiations over the Ukraine crisis and the Minsk-2 diplomacy. The UK's limited influence in the European diplomacy towards Russia can be partly explained by the growing focus on domestic issues back in 2014-2015 – first the Scottish independence referendum and then, more significantly, the EU referendum. British reluctance to take on foreign policy leadership via the EU's framework (as Germany and France did) may have played a role too.

German, French and Italian attempts to restart sectoral cooperation with Russia in 2015-16 had very limited success. Despite the growing Italian unease with the sanctions, they stayed in place, and Rome continued to support them. Franco-Russian attempts to cooperate in Syria soon floundered due to different views of the crisis. Germany's attempts to revive the energy partnership proceeded slowly, partly due to the opposition of East-Central European member states and part of the EU establishment. Moreover, in early 2016, the 'Lisa case' and the intervention of Russian high officials in the related German domestic debate led to renewed bilateral tensions. The 'Lisa case' and the contacts between Russian officials and representatives of the European far right (particularly the National Front in France, the Northern League in Italy and Alternative for Germany) increased fears of Russian interference in the upcoming elections in France, Germany and other member states. These domestic factors, combined with the lack of progress in the Ukraine conflict and the military escalation in Syria, prevented any substantial rapprochement.

However, while maintaining a common stance on the Ukraine crisis, national debates on Russia continued to take different perspectives or focus on distinct issues. In Germany, the belief that some degree of engagement with Russia was necessary motivated the continued pursuit of the Nord Stream 2 project, which also met the interests of prominent German companies. Poland took a diametrically opposed stance on the issue, partly for fear that the influx of more Russian gas would make its diversification projects uncompetitive, and partly due to long-standing suspicions about German-Russian strategic cooperation. The Polish right-wing government securitised other aspects of its relations with Russia too, for instance the visa-free border traffic agreement between Kaliningrad and the Gdansk region (effective since 2012). The government suspended the agreement in mid-2016 and, despite the protests of local adminis-

trations (notably the mayor of Gdansk), it refused to lift the suspension thereafter, citing security reasons.

Meanwhile, Russia's growing involvement in Mediterranean politics affected Italy's strategic perspective. Besides intervening militarily in Syria, Moscow intensified its relationship with Egypt and other key regional powers, and profiled itself as an influential actor in the Libyan crisis. As instability in Libya and the refugee crisis were Italy's foreign policy priorities, Rome responded to Russian activeness by trying to include Russian officials in existing negotiation formats. Italy's invitation of Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov to the international talks on Libya in Rome, in December 2015, epitomises the Italian approach. Moreover, the Italian government attempted to avoid the extension of the EU's confrontation with Russia to Mediterranean politics, most notably by vetoing the proposal of new sanctions against Moscow concerning the Syrian crisis (in October 2016). This highlighted the different intra-EU views on how to approach Russia in the Mediterranean, which pitted Italy (and a few other member states) against the proponents of the sanctions, first and foremost British Prime Minister Theresa May and French President François Hollande.

The year 2017 had important implications for the development of EU-Russia relations. Despite the internal crisis caused by Brexit and Trump's anti-EU statements, the electoral victories of Macron in France and Merkel in Germany (albeit with fewer votes than in the past in the latter case) attested to the resilience of the European Union. The political circumstances and a modest economic growth revived the debate on the renewal of the European project, even if without the UK's participation and with different levels of integration among member states. Unlike in the US and the UK, in Germany and France the far right remained confined to oppositional and marginal roles in the political process, a fact which has clear implications for the Russian approach to the EU and its member states. The prospect of differentiated integration also suggests that some member states with radical positions vis-à-vis Russia – both pro-Russian members, such as Hungary, and anti-Russian ones, such as Poland – may end up losing influence within the EU.

If Russian leaders do not ignore these developments, they will come to the conclusion that Russia needs to find a better working relationship with the present leaders of core Europe.<sup>4</sup> Despite the prevailing confrontational logic, events in 2017 highlighted that this is in Russia's interests. Together with the rise in the oil price, economic growth in the EU played a role in the increase in bilateral trade, after three years of drastic decline. More-

4 See also Kortunov (2018).

over, under certain circumstances (see below), pragmatic engagement and even a gradual rapprochement between Moscow and key European leaders is possible. As the case study on France has shown, President Macron has combined his criticism of Russian electoral interference with a symbolic reception of Putin in Versailles and some diplomatic openings concerning Syria. A new German grand coalition government would still be influenced by the logic of *Ostpolitik*, and thus it will be interested in potential engagement with Russia.

Most significantly, the analysis has highlighted that mainstream politicians in Germany, France and Italy believe that a stable European security system can only be achieved with Russia's inclusion in it. Their views on what such a system would entail currently diverge from those of the Russian leadership, but the willingness to seek a mutually acceptable solution provides the basis for any enduring and peaceful settlement. In the current circumstances, it seems that the approach of the Franco-German duo – combining a norms-based diplomacy with selective engagement – will largely shape the EU's stance vis-à-vis Russia. The marginalisation of the more hawkish large member states, particularly the UK and Poland, corroborates this perspective. At the same time, the power vacuum left by the US and disagreements with the current US leaders may also induce the EU and Russia to talk to each other: from the EU's perspective because US leadership under Trump has lost influence and credibility in several international crises (i.e. Ukraine, Iran, Syria); from the Russian perspective because the prospect of resetting West-Russia relations through a deal with Trump has clearly vanished.

Undoubtedly, any progress in EU-Russia relations will largely depend on Russian actions. The termination of hybrid measures, most notably a clear distancing of the Kremlin from European far-right parties, would contribute to restoring trust. In the international arena, given the current deadlock in the Ukraine crisis, selective engagement and cooperation seem to be possible only in areas of mutual interest, such as negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme (especially in the light of Trump's disengagement), energy trade, Arctic and environmental issues, the fight against terrorism and potentially the stabilisation of Syria and other crises in the MENA region. Even in these fields, cooperation requires some convergence of views, the willingness to compromise and the avoidance of new conflictual escalations. A full reset of relations based on new 'grand alliances' against terrorism is highly unlikely, as long as other fundamental disagreements remain unresolved.

For deeper cooperation to take place, progress would be necessary in the context where the profound crisis in EU-Russia relations started:

Ukraine. According to some Western analysts, a window of opportunity might be emerging to make progress in the negotiations concerning Donbas.<sup>5</sup> The impossibility of either side achieving military victory, the cost of the conflict for Russia and the significant internal challenges confronting the Ukrainian government may induce both sides to seek a compromise. According to this line of thought, progress could be made – for example – through an adaptation and enhancement of Putin’s proposal, made in September 2017, of a UN peacekeeping force in Donbas. If the peacekeeping force is deployed throughout the territory of the Donbas conflict and has a robust mandate and timeline, it could make an important contribution to resolving the conflict.<sup>6</sup> This, however, presupposes that Russia accepts a UN mission with a broad mandate, and that both Moscow and Kiev are willing to break the current deadlock. The task of negotiating the details would be daunting, but European diplomacy under the Franco-German leadership would likely be supportive and make a valuable contribution. The greatest incentive would come from the positive effects of an agreement: the substantial improvement of relations between the EU and Russia and the end of Europe’s deepest security crisis since the 1990s.

5 See Elizabeth Pond (2017–18), ‘War in Ukraine: Is this the way it ends?’, *Survival* 59(6), December 2017–January 2018, 143–156. See also Jamie Sherr, ‘Donbas Peacekeepers Proposal a Classic Putin Gambit’, Chatham House, 16 October 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/donbas-peacekeepers-proposal-classic-putin-gambit>, accessed 25 January 2018.

6 See Steven Pifer, ‘Test Putin’s proposal for U.N. peacekeepers’, Brookings, 13 September 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/13/test-putins-proposal-for-u-n-peacekeepers/>, accessed 25 January 2018.



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As the number of people with a disability increases, the need for accessible information and services also increases.

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# EU MEMBER STATES AND RUSSIA

## NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN DEBATES IN AN EVOLVING INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

In March 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, relations between Moscow and the European Union precipitated into their deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War. Throughout 2014 and early 2015, the Ukraine crisis made headlines and emerged as the most urgent security challenge for the EU and its member states.

Between 2015 and 2017, however, the international scenario became even more complex, with significant repercussions for Europe–Russia relations. The refugee crisis, escalating civil wars in Syria and Libya, terrorist attacks, Brexit and the weakening of the transatlantic alliance following Donald Trump’s election posed new formidable challenges for the EU. Russia sought a role in many of these crises, for instance by proposing an anti-terrorism coalition with the West in the Middle East or by reportedly intervening in some Western election campaigns.

This report zooms in on the debates on Russia in several EU member states that play a key role in the Union’s relations with Moscow. It reveals how national perspectives evolved and sometimes diverged due to different assessments of the crises and of Russia’s role in them. /