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Russia is driving a wedge into Germany

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Over the past few days, the German Chancellery (GC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have issued statements denying the rumours of a conflict between Angela Merkel and Frank-Walter Steinmeier over the strategy of action to be adopted with regard to Russia. After Merkel's speech in Sydney last week, during which she sharply criticised the Kremlin, the German head of diplomacy, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, expressed a critical opinion about the "escalation of rhetoric" of the conflict (without, though, mentioning any names). Assurances have been made by the German Chancellery and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as by some politicians who Merkel and Steinmeier consult regarding their moves taken with regard to Russia. Nevertheless, the differences in the approaches demonstrated by the two politicians have been revealed so clearly for the first time. The flames were fanned by an interview given by Matthias Platzeck, a former leader of the SPD and the head of the German-Russian Forum, who in fact appealed for the recognition of the annexation of Crimea. The deputy chairman of the CDU/CSU faction in the Bundestag, Andreas Schockenhoff (CDU), demanded that he be dismissed, and the head of the CSU, Horst Seehofer, accused the SPD of conducting a parallel foreign policy. The conflict has turned into a political trial of strength and is unlikely to bring any change in Germany's policy towards Russia. However, it is a symptom of the friction existing within the coalition and above all of a divide among both the German public and politicians over the preferred approach towards Russia. It is worth noting that this divide does not overlap with party membership.

Merkel vs. Steinmeier

On 17 November, when the G20 summit was already over, Angela Merkel gave a speech and took part in a discussion at the Australian think tank, the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney. This was her most strongly-worded speech directed towards Russia since the beginning of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. According to Merkel, the aggression towards Ukraine is Moscow's attempt to rebuild its zone of influence and to oblige the West to accept the rules of the game which applied when the Soviet Union existed. It can be concluded from her speech that Germany still wants the conflict to be resolved by diplomatic means, but it will not accept the Russian *fait accompli* policy. The reason she took such a tough stance on Moscow was the failure of her previous face to face talks with Vladimir Putin, which brought no solutions. Angela Merkel has decided that it has to be made clear to Putin that Berlin does not accept the propaganda messages sent from Russia, and is waiting for the Kremlin to take concrete steps. In turn, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and

Matthias Platzeck believe that it is impossible to force Russia to do anything. Any pressure, in their opinion, will do no more than lead to an increasing sense of threat and thus make its stance more entrenched. The best solution is thus to seek consensus even at the expense of unilateral concessions. One example of this approach may be the proposal to hold a meeting of representatives of the EU and the Eurasian Union in order to build trust (Steinmeier mentioned this at the EU Council on 17 November and earlier in an interview for *Welt am Sonntag*). However, this would mean in fact admitting that there are grounds for the Russian concerns regarding the DCFTA. Another example is the establishment of closer co-operation in the area of security as part of the OSCE (Germany will take over the presidency of this organisation in 2016), and a further one was provided by Steinmeier's statement on 23 November in an interview for *Der Spiegel* that Ukraine's membership in the EU and NATO is ruled out on principle.

The discord existing between Angela Merkel and Frank-Walter Steinmeier does not undermine the guiding principle of Berlin's policy towards Russia. These are merely disagreements over the tactic to be adopted and not the general approach. The paradigm formulated by Angela Merkel in the interview for ARD on 24 August 2014 remains the same: "We are stuck with each other." In practice this means taking actions that will prevent Russia from becoming isolated and that will make it involved in co-operation, especially in the process of building international security (even if it is at least an unpredictable, if not a destructive, partner). This has also been confirmed by the way Frank-Walter Steinmeier's visit to Moscow on 18 November unfolded. He was unexpectedly received by Vladimir Putin and said, among other things, during a joint press conference with Sergey Lavrov that it was time to go beyond thinking only about Ukraine in relations between Germany and Russia. In Steinmeier's opinion, there are a few other threats across the globe which the two countries need to address jointly. However, the difference of opinion between Merkel and Steinmeier (and a section of the SPD), which was laid bare following the G20 summit, reflects the real divide (and the one which is important for Germans) which exists in Germany over the policy towards Russia. When Matthias Platzeck was saying that it was necessary to settle the Crimean issue on the level of international law, he was simply expressing an opinion shared by many people in Germany. According to the most recent opinion poll conducted for the ARD TV station, 39% of Germans want the annexation of Crimea to be recognised, and 48% are opposed to this. In turn, 27% want the sanctions imposed on Russia to be lifted, 19% want tougher sanctions, and 43% are of the opinion that the existing sanctions are sufficient.

The dispute inside the coalition

The discussion concerning the conflict between Merkel and Steinmeier is also present on the lower level of the coalition parties and is turning into a trial of strength between them. The dispute was provoked by the unfortunate (as regards both the content and the timing) statement by Matthias Platzeck. This statement was made immediately after Merkel's speech in Australia (and undermined it), and Platzeck himself, who is privately a close friend of Steinmeier, might be suggesting that the German government was unable to develop a uniform stance on Russia. Horst Seehofer, the chairman of the CSU, used this as a pretext to attack the SPD, accusing the Social Democrats of conducting a parallel foreign policy. In

turn Andreas Schockenhoff, the deputy chairman of the CDU/CSU faction, put forward a draft reform of the Petersburg Dialogue and the German-Russian Forum which envisages the dismissal of Matthias Platzeck. The SPD cannot allow itself to be admonished by a representative of the smallest coalition party. In turn, the problem with the Petersburg Dialogue reform is that the draft has been developed without the involvement of the SPD. Therefore, the SPD cannot accept it. As a consequence, Sigmar Gabriel, the chairman of the SPD, made assurances of his support for Platzeck and downplayed the allegations made by Horst Seehofer.

The divided Germany

It is not clear from the statements heard so far whether Angela Merkel's speech marked a durable change in the tone Germany will be using towards Russia or whether this was simply a warning. Although Merkel reiterated her accusations with regard to Russia during the budget debate in the Bundestag on 26 November, considering the situation in Germany, it cannot be ruled out that Steinmeier's *modus operandi* will win out. Strong factions insisting on softening and not toughening the stance on Russia exist inside all the coalition parties (not to mention the opposition Left Party and Alternative for Germany). Their representatives are arguing, for example, that Germany owes gratitude to Moscow for allowing the country to become united, and believe that the sanctions are an element of the US struggle against Russia in which Germany should take no part. They also use the example of the mythical significance of the Russian market, although the real figures indicate something completely different. In 2013, the Russian Federation was ranked only 11th (behind Poland) among Germany's trade partners, and the trade deficit reached almost 5.5 billion euros (to the benefit of Russia).

The electorates of individual parties are also divided on this issue. 45% of the CDU/CSU supporters view the sanctions as an adequate response to Russia's behaviour, and 45% do not. Supporters of the sanctions (55%) predominate among the SPD's electorate, with 41% of them wanting the sanctions to be lifted. In both cases the coalition parties must deal with an additional factor which causes the adoption of a tough stance on Russia to be unbeneficial for them. On the right side of the political scene, the Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany has been making efforts to attract the disillusioned electorate of the CDU/CSU by playing on pro-Russian slogans, while the post-Communist Left Party has employed even stronger pro-Russian slogans on the left side. Another source of pressure forcing the government to take a conciliatory stance are representatives of companies which have sustained losses as a consequence of the declining trade with Russia. Last but not least, the SPD in the existing situation views the criticism of the foreign policy, which Steinmeier as the foreign minister is the public face of, as an attack on the party he is a representative of. If Steinmeier's concept wins, Germany would return to the tactic of appeasement: the constant renewal of offers and unilateral concessions from the West resulting in a gradual dilution of the sanctions and the creation of new forums of co-operation as an alternative to the existing ones.