

Russia's Information War in Germany: How Moscow is Changing German Minds

"I am not fond of the Germans by any means but, at the present time, it is more advantageous to use them than to challenge them... Everything teaches us to look upon Germany as our most reliable ally."

V.I. Leninⁱ

At the beginning of May 2014, the former Federal Chancellor of Germany, Gerhard Schroeder, celebrated his 70th birthday at a lavish party in Saint Petersburg. Schroeder, who has obtained several lucrative positions in the commercial world since leaving office, perhaps did not appreciate the significance of the location of the party, which was held in the Yusupov Palace, former home of the immensely wealthy Prince Felix Yusupov, one of the group of conspirators who murdered the monk Rasputin in the palace in 1916.

Yusupov and his co-conspirators, who included the Grand Duke Dmitri and Vladimir Purishkevich, a reactionary member of the Duma, had treated Rasputin to wine and cakes laced with poison. When they grew tired of waiting for the poison to work, they shot the monk, as he tried to crawl through a door into the main hall where, almost one hundred years later, Schroeder would receive his guests.

The reason Prince Yusupov and his friends were so keen to rid the world of "the blackest devil in Russian history," as one of the conspirators called him,ⁱⁱ was because they suspected that he was pro-German and part of an organised group of sympathisers and enemy agents, who had been trying to persuade the German-born Tsarina to use her influence to cause Russia to withdraw from the allied Entente against Germany. They hoped that the murder of Rasputin would be a strategic counter-stroke, which would send a clear signal that Russia was not about to change course.

Schroeder may not have appreciated the significance of the location but there can be little doubt that his chief guest did. Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, native of Saint Petersburg and former KGB officer, no doubt appreciated the irony of the choice of location as he feted the man on whom he fancied he could rely to continue to do so much to reshape Germany's strategic course, to ensure that it grew less dependent on the United States and that it remained ready to listen to the concerns of Russia.

When pictures of the party, which showed a glowing Schroeder gleefully embracing the Russian President, appeared in the German newspapers, there was widespread outrage. The party was held at a moment of supreme tension between Germany and Russia over the crisis in Ukraine. The West's hesitant response to Putin's invasion of Crimea had led to growing aggression by pro-Russian militia in eastern Ukraine and, only a few days earlier, four German members of an OSCE monitoring mission had been taken hostage. There was now an embarrassing diplomatic stand-off, with Putin publicly disclaiming any responsibility, as the leader of the pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's

Donetsk region announced plans for the creation of a breakaway 'Donbass People's Republic' and demanded an exchange of the "NATO spies" for captured Russian fighters. ⁱⁱⁱ

Schroeder's successor as Chancellor, Angela Merkel, was furious that her predecessor was flouting convention and, in doing so, clearly allowing himself to be used as a tool of Russian propaganda. Her anger and disdain for him were widely shared in the German media. The respected news magazine, *Der Spiegel*, accused Schroeder of "making a mockery of Berlin's foreign policy":

"There's nothing you can do about your relatives," the magazine's editorial commented, "but you certainly have a choice when it comes to picking your friends. This sage wisdom also applies to Gerhard Schroeder, the former German leader and confidant of Russian President Vladimir Putin. He himself can decide whom to embrace and with whom to celebrate his 70th birthday – after all, true friends stick together, even in the toughest of times. Normally one would call this strength of character.

"But when it comes to Schroeder and Putin in the context of the Ukraine crisis, things are a little more complicated. Gerhard Schroeder ought to know better. If the former German chancellor believes he can continue with his friendship as if nothing has happened, it's a mistake. Schroeder's own centre-left Social Democratic Party is currently the junior coalition partner in Chancellor Angela Merkel's government, which is frantically trying to prevent his friend Vladimir from carrying out the policies of a power-drunk hegemon in Eastern Europe. In difficult times like these, a former German leader should, at least publicly, keep a safe distance from Putin."

Schroeder, a long-standing apologist for Putin who once even spoke of his friend as a "flawless democrat"^{iv}, certainly handed the Russian leader a useful propaganda gift with his birthday photographs. They helped to divert attention from Putin's proxy war in Ukraine and create the impression that the Ukrainian crisis was just a hiccup, largely the concern of others and not something that should be allowed to interfere in the naturally good relations between Germany and Russia. Mr Schroeder had said as much only a couple of months earlier, claiming that Russia had some justifiable "fears about being encircled", referring to "unhappy developments" on the fringes of what was once the Soviet Union and even comparing the Kremlin's action in Crimea to his own government's support for NATO's bombing of Serbian targets during the Kosovo crisis in 1999.

"We sent our planes to Serbia and, together with the rest of NATO, they bombed a sovereign state without any UN Security Council backing," he insisted. His comments quickly drew an icy response from Chancellor Merkel, who described them as "shameful."

Yet Gerhard Schroeder's remarks and, indeed his **understanding** for Putin, are far from unique in Germany. They have found an echo across much of the political spectrum, in many sectors and often in the most surprising quarters. **Sometimes this echo can be heard in remarks made by people who genuinely believe them, more often by people who have been compromised or those who should simply know better.**

The reasons why the Kremlin is able to draw on such a significant reservoir of support in Germany are many and complicated. What is clear, however, is that Mr Putin and his advisors have long calculated that it would be well worth taking a serious interest in public opinion in Germany.

What Germany is facing now is not an ideological conflict but it does involve ideas and, as one of its most obvious casualties is the truth, it provides an object lesson in the extent of the damage that can be inflicted merely by the repetition of demonstrable falsehoods and distorted facts. The political damage that has already been done is significant. During the course of the next year, however, the effect of Moscow's information campaign is likely to be severe.

How and why German opinion is being influenced by Moscow is the subject of this paper. It is not easy to follow the traces of a determined information warfare campaign, organised by one state in order to weaken or compromise another, but, in the case of Russia's campaign to influence German opinion, it is possible, to glimpse the bacillus travelling through the body politic, weakening resolve and undermining confidence at critical moments. The campaign has been so successful that it has already secured some of its strategic objectives. These include strengthening support for the idea of a 'special relationship' between Germany and Russia, undermining the position of the United States and re-establishing the concept of special Russian regional interests, which must be respected, ultimately allowing for a Russian veto on issues of European security. The campaign now threatens to undermine Germany's strategic position at the heart of the western alliance.

However, before looking at how Moscow's information campaign has worked, it is first of all necessary to understand why Russia attaches such importance to influencing German public opinion. In doing so, it is important to understand the problem in its historical context.

History

Gerhard Schroeder was not wrong when he said that Russia's actions in the Crimea and eastern Ukraine must be understood within the context of history. Any analysis of the Kremlin's motives for its actions must draw on history. Arguments, such as the one put forward by Schroeder – that the Kremlin has a legitimate fear of encirclement – are superficially attractive, not only because they appear to offer a spurious justification to charges of breaking international law and binding treaties, but also because they use history to appeal to a German audience likely to respond in a particularly emotional way. Russia's understanding of history and Germany's wishful thinking about Russia, which is rooted in the past, have both played their role in creating a fertile seed bed for an information war campaign.

Moscow has a long view of history and a keen understanding of the uses to which it can be put. In its management of information, the Kremlin has found history a useful commodity. It is malleable and capable of being moulded to suit contemporary realities; it establishes a narrative; it creates a legend; it offers useful lessons; it provides the gullible with a seemingly convincing justification and, above all, if actual history does not fit the contemporary political requirement, it can be rearranged until it does. Fiction can be just as good as fact; what matters is simply the appeal to the past.

Putin's information warriors have become very proficient at twisting history into the service of the Kremlin's contemporary political objectives, which are varied and often opaque but certainly include acceptance of Moscow's 'legitimate' interests in parts of Eastern Europe and an end to the EU sanctions regime. The creation and development of 'Novorossiya' to provide a historical justification for Putin's designs on Ukrainian territory is a case in point.

“The new Russia doesn’t just deal in the petty disinformation, forgeries, lies, leaks, and cyber-sabotage usually associated with information warfare” says analyst Peter Pomerantsev. “It reinvents reality, creating mass hallucinations that then translate into political action. Take Novorossiia, the name Vladimir Putin has given to the huge wedge of south-eastern Ukraine he might, or might not, consider annexing. The term is plucked from tsarist history, when it represented a different geographical space. Nobody who lives in that part of the world today ever thought of themselves as living in Novorossiia and bearing allegiance to it—at least until several months ago. Now, Novorossiia is being imagined into being: Russian media are showing maps of its ‘geography,’ while Kremlin-backed politicians are writing its ‘history’ into school textbooks. There’s a flag and even a news agency (in English and Russian). There are several Twitter feeds. It’s like something out of a Borges story—except for the very real casualties of the war conducted in its name.”

Unfortunately, not everyone is so meticulous about insisting on historical accuracy. Many leading figures in Germany are now quite willing to **use dubious versions of history to justify Mr Putin’s ambitions.**

First though, let us begin with the narrative. It is important to know this tale and to understand it because it explains much that follows. The Russian narrative about Germany is the key to understanding Moscow’s objectives and, therefore, both the reason Germany has become such a significant front in its global information war and the methods and messages it has used.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Russia interfered in German politics only in order to keep the German states divided and out of the hands of enemies, such as Sweden and France. With the arrival of Otto von Bismarck as Chancellor of Prussia, Russia was persuaded to accept a new dynamic. Bismarck was a Russophile, who had served as Prussian Ambassador in Saint Petersburg and even wore a ring inscribed with the word ‘*nichevo*’ as a token of his admiration for the laconic stoicism of the Russians. He persuaded the Russians to accept the unification of Germany and created the ‘*Dreikaiserbund*,’ the League of the Three Emperors, with its secret protocols, which bound Russia, Austria-Hungary and Germany in an alliance of Europe’s most conservative powers.

The League of the Three Emperors was underpinned by an understanding of the immense economic opportunity for all three countries offered by a closer partnership. Russia would benefit from German investment and technology, whilst for Germany and Austria access would be opened to Russia’s seemingly limitless supplies of raw materials. For many in Russia, such as the statesman Count Witte, the German alliance was the bedrock not only of peace in Europe, but also of Russian prosperity and development. When he was removed as Prime Minister by Nicholas II, who was determined to create an alliance with republican France, Witte was outraged and conspired against his sovereign from the moment of his dismissal until his death shortly after the outbreak of the First World War.

Witte, however, represented a strand of Russian political thinking, which endures to this day and to which President Putin may be said to subscribe. It is not ‘slavophile’ in the sense of the old, intellectual conflict in Russia between so-called ‘westernisers’ and ‘slavophiles’. If anything, it represents one side of the divided westernising wing of Russian thought. In essence, it believes that Russia must be open to western influences but must divide ‘the West’, in order to secure its position and influence. In the nineteenth century, the goal of Russian and German statesmen, from Bismarck to Witte, was to strengthen the alliance between Russia and Germany, in order to exclude France

and Britain. Specifically, it was a means to enable the division of Eastern Europe into separate spheres of influence, in which the three powers could each exercise control. Under President Putin, Russian policy has been similar: it has sought to co-opt first Europe and, more recently, when that attempt failed, Germany into a separate arrangement, in order to by-pass the United States, to reduce its influence in Europe and to give Russia the scope to define its “legitimate” spheres of influence.

President Putin is comfortable with this nineteenth century view of the world. It is based on the notion of a ‘special relationship’ between Russia and Germany and it has long roots, which lie underneath much of the past one hundred and fifty years of European history. It is an idea that this was somehow in the natural order of things and was cruelly disrupted by the foolishness of Tsar Nicholas II or the machinations of the French or any number of conspiracy theories. The point, in the opinion of those who subscribe to this view, however, is to get back to the *status quo ante* – the cosy atmosphere of political *Gemueticlichkeit* in which Romanov Grand Dukes married Hessian princesses, Russian scientists and philosophers read German and raw materials from Siberia flooded into the factories of the Reich. It is an idea of Europe as eastward-leaning and dominated by an unbreakable partnership between Russia and Germany. It has formed a *Leitmotif*, whose echo can be heard from Bismarck to Gerhard Schroeder.

The idea was so strong at the beginning of the First World War, and the lobby committed to it so powerful, that Kaiser Wilhelm fancied that sufficient pressure might be brought to bear on his cousin “Nicky” to break the Entente. For the first two years of the war, the “dark forces”, lurking in the shadows around the Tsarina at the court in Petrograd and maintaining their links to Berlin through back channels in the Scandinavian capitals, were considered to be on the point of forcing Nicholas to desert his French and British allies. It was only in 1916 that the German High Command (OHL) grew tired of the various cack-handed attempts to reason with Nicholas and decided instead to support revolution in Russia.

When the OHL sent Lenin back to Petrograd in a sealed train, they did so in the knowledge that he was a loyal agent, well financed and supported by a network controlled from the Wilhelmstrasse. He delivered a revolution, exactly as Brockdorff-Rantzau, Maltzahn and the other architects of Imperial Germany’s new policy of support for Bolshevism had intended. With Lenin in power, Germany gained the opportunity not only to occupy the rich lands of western Ukraine without opposition, but also to withdraw several army corps from the eastern front for use in Hindenburg’s spring offensive in Flanders in 1918. A German-sponsored revolution in Russia was almost enough to deliver victory before American troops began to deploy in France.

When Germany’s new republican Government was forced to sign the humiliating Treaty of Versailles, punitive reparations followed in its wake. Germany was soon able to turn to Russia, however, for assistance in breaking the allies’ stranglehold. The Foreign Minister of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, Chicherin, signed the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922 with his German counterpart, Walter Rathenau. It was a remarkable agreement; within the space of only four years, supposedly bitter enemies had become partners and the two Governments were agreeing “to cooperate in a spirit of mutual goodwill in meeting the economic needs of both countries.” Germany was freed from its financial obligations to Russia, allowing it to begin reconstruction. Soon, with Soviet assistance, it was able to begin rearmament too. The year after the signing of the Treaty of

Rapallo, the Red Army and the Reichswehr “held a series of secret summits, during which they crafted the framework for military cooperation.”^v A concessionary system allowed German firms to take over shipyards, military factories and other critical facilities. Secret bases were established too inside Soviet territory, where new models of tanks and aeroplanes were tested, senior officers trained together and tried out the latest innovations in military tactics and technology. With the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the German navy was even granted permission to open a secret base near Murmansk “to interdict British shipping and assist in the invasion of Norway.”^{vi}

Cooperation between Berlin and Moscow had become so deeply entrenched and intense that Stalin was initially unable to comprehend that, with Operation Barbarossa in 1941, his “ally” had turned against him.

With the Soviet victory in 1945, Moscow’s influence in Germany became more pervasive than ever. In the east of the divided country, the Kremlin’s ‘marionettes’ held power under Russian tutelage; in the west, there was a fearful respect for Soviet power and even, once Adenauer had secured the release of the last German prisoners of war, a grudging admiration for Moscow’s role in the defeat of Nazism. The peculiarity of Germany’s political position, as a divided country, ultimately led to ‘*Ostpolitik*,’ which in turn helped to create a new period of ‘detente’ between East and West. As the Cold War came to an end, Germany was once again at the heart of Europe and an important piece on the chessboard.

At this point in the narrative, history becomes more than just a *Leitmotif*. The narrative becomes a powerful political legend and a significant element in Russia’s presentation of itself, its interests and its objectives to a German audience.

The Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev gave his consent to German re-unification, just as his nineteenth century predecessors had assented to Bismarck’s unification of the country. However, in the eyes of the contemporary Kremlin establishment, re-unification came at a price. The price was a promise and the promise has been broken. It is a legend as powerful and seductive as Germany’s own earlier *Dolchstosslegende* and it has been used to justify external aggression. Just as the ‘stab in the back’ legend was readily accepted by many Germans after the First World War and ultimately helped bring Hitler to power, so too Moscow’s contemporary tale of the ‘broken promise’ has also found a receptive audience in Germany. The ‘broken promise’ has become Russia’s own ‘stab in the back’ and it is a tale told repeatedly in Germany by friends of the Kremlin. It is, however, demonstrably false: there was never any promise to break.

The Stab in the Back

In November 2009, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* was granted an interview with the Russian President, Dmitriy Medvedev, at his official country residence outside Moscow. The interview was wide-ranging, covering topics from the recent Russian attack on Georgia to the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Medvedev lamented the West’s failure to establish an acceptable basis for its relations with Russia since the end of the Soviet Union and expressed the view that Moscow had been deceived.

"It has not been possible to redefine Russia's place in Europe," he said. "After the disappearance of the Warsaw Pact, we were hoping for a higher degree of integration. But what have we received? None of the things that we were assured, namely that NATO would not expand endlessly eastwards and our interests would be continuously taken into consideration. NATO remains a military bloc whose missiles are pointed towards Russian territory. By contrast, we would like to see a new European security order.... I don't want this to be a counterweight to NATO. But we need a universal mechanism to resolve differences of opinion within Europe. The conflict with Georgia showed how fragile our security is. This was a European conflict." ^{vii}

Medvedev's remarks are interesting not only because they show the 'broken promise' legend being advanced at the highest level of the Russian state, but also because they specifically link it to Moscow's wish to "see a new European security order."

The Georgian war was Moscow's first major overt attempt to re-assert its "legitimate" spheres of interest in the 'near abroad' and to check the ambitions of former Soviet countries on Russia's periphery, which were now seeking closer ties with the West. The 'broken promise' legend was an important political weapon in the Kremlin's armoury.

Gorbachev himself had dutifully rehearsed the official position earlier in 2009. The state-owned RIA-Novosti news agency reported that "former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has criticised NATO's eastward expansion and the failure by Western powers to keep their promise not to deploy military bases near Russia's borders." The agency had seized on remarks Gorbachev had made in an interview with Germany's Bild newspaper in which he had said that 'the United States and other powers had pledged after Germany's reunification in 1990 that "NATO would not move a centimetre to the east."' He accused the Americans of failing to fulfil their promise and claimed the Germans had turned a blind eye.

"They probably rubbed their hands rejoicing at having played a trick on the Russians," he said, adding that this had led to Russia's disillusionment with post-Cold War relations with the West. ^{viii}

Yet NATO never made any promise not to expand eastwards in return for a Soviet commitment to allow German reunification.

"Western leaders never pledged not to enlarge NATO," says former US diplomat, Steven Pifer. "What the Germans, Americans, British and French did agree to in 1990 was that there would be no deployment of non-German NATO forces on the territory of the former GDR. I was a deputy director on the State Department's Soviet desk at the time, and that was certainly the point of Secretary James Baker's discussions with Gorbachev and his foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze. In 1990, few gave the possibility of a broader NATO enlargement to the east any serious thought." ^{ix}

Analyst Mark Kramer has pointed out that "much of the controversy about this issue stems from a few conversations held in the first half of February 1990, just after the collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe... Of particular relevance are the conversations between Baker and Mikhail Gorbachev on February 9 1990 and a conversation between West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Gorbachev the following day. Also of great importance are the talks between Kohl and Gorbachev in Moscow and Stavropol in July 1990.

Fortunately, with the passage of time, the American, German and Russian records from these, as well as other talks and meetings pertaining to German unification, have become available. The recent declassification of crucial archival materials in Germany, Russia, the United States, and numerous other European countries finally allows for clarification on the basis of contemporaneous records. The documents.... undermine the notion that the United States or other Western countries ever pledged not to expand NATO beyond Germany. The British, French, US and West German governments did make certain commitments in 1990 about NATO's role in eastern Germany, commitments that are all laid out in the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, but no Western leader ever offered any "pledge" or "commitment" or "categorical assurances" about NATO's role vis-a-vis the rest of the Warsaw Pact countries. Indeed, the issue never came up during the negotiations on German reunification, and Soviet leaders at the time never claimed that it did."^x

Mikhail Gorbachev himself has recently confirmed that a NATO pledge not to expand eastwards was never on the agenda.

"The topic of "NATO expansion" was not discussed at all, and it wasn't brought up in those years," he said in interview with 'Russia Beyond the Headlines' in 2014. "I say this with full responsibility. Not a single Eastern European country raised the issue, not even after the Warsaw Pact ceased to exist in 1991. Western leaders didn't bring it up, either. Another issue we brought up was discussed: making sure that NATO's military structures would not advance and that additional armed forces from the alliance would not be deployed on the territory of the then-GDR after German reunification. Baker's statement... was made in that context. Kohl and [German Vice Chancellor Hans-Dietrich] Genscher talked about it.

"Everything that could have been and needed to be done to solidify that political obligation was done. And fulfilled. The agreement on a final settlement with Germany said that no new military structures would be created in the eastern part of the country; no additional troops would be deployed; no weapons of mass destruction would be placed there. It has been observed all these years. So don't portray Gorbachev and the then-Soviet authorities as naïve people who were wrapped around the West's finger. If there was naïveté, it was later, when the issue arose. Russia at first did not object."^{xi}

Gorbachev could not have been clearer. His version of what happened in his own negotiations is not shared by Vladimir Putin, though. The Russian President has repeatedly endorsed and promulgated the 'broken promise' legend. He has been particularly keen to advance it in Germany.

"I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe," he told the Munich Security Conference in 2007. "On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them. But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that: "the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee". Where are these guarantees?"^{xii}

Putin's use of a quotation from Manfred Woerner's speech was mischievous. The sentence was taken out of context and clearly referred to NATO forces in the eastern part of Germany, rather than giving a firm commitment not to expand the western alliance.^{xiii}

Putin has returned to the theme of the supposed deception of Russia on numerous occasions. Clearly, it is a particularly useful 'riff' for a German audience.

"From the beginning," he told journalists from Bild Newspaper in January 2016, "we failed to overcome Europe's division. 25 years ago, the Berlin Wall fell, but invisible walls were moved to the East of Europe. This has led to mutual misunderstandings and assignments of guilt. They are the cause of all crises ever since... Back in 2007, many people criticised me for my talk at the Munich Security Conference. But what did I say there? I merely pointed out that the former NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner had guaranteed that NATO would not expand eastwards after the fall of the Wall. Many German politicians had also warned about such a step, for instance Egon Bahr."^{xiv}

The 'broken promise' legend, like the *Dolchstosslegende* before it, serves a purpose. It is to legitimise certain actions. In Putin's case, it is clear that the legend is part of a continuing attempt to place a distorted version of history in the service of his political agenda. Why else would he persist in disseminating a demonstrable falsehood? When he famously called the break-up of the Soviet Union "the greatest catastrophe since the Second World War," he was not simply making a casual observation. He regards much of the old Soviet space as disputed territory and history is a particularly useful weapon in an information war aimed at taking it back.

The legend has been repeated often enough and there are now many leading figures in Germany – politicians, academics, journalists and business people - who continue to repeat it without a second thought. They even subscribe to Putin's view of the tragedy of the break-up of the Soviet Union, castigate a generation of western leaders for wasting the opportunity to build better relations with Russia and hark back wistfully to the days of Bismarck, '*Ostpolitik*' or *Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft*. Such nostalgia conveniently ignores the many peoples on Russia's periphery, who seek simply to be masters of their own destiny. Ignoring them, however, means that they are conveniently open to being swallowed into the 'legitimate' spheres of their more powerful neighbours.

***Russlandversteher* and 'Disappointed Hopes – Wasted Chances'**

The German word, *Russlandversteher*, is difficult to translate; much depends on the context within which it is used. It can mean someone who understands Russia but also someone who is an apologist for it. It includes those who are ideologically or emotionally committed, those who are compromised and those who are simply naïve. Whether and how it applies to any particular person is, perhaps, for the reader to decide.

"When Germans add the word *Versteher* (one who understands) to a term, they generally mix flattery with irony," the Economist observed recently. "So a *Frauenversteher* (one who understands women) is usually a man who boasts excessively about his knowledge of the opposite sex. The label is now being attached to so-called *Russlandversteher* or *Putinversteher*: members of the elite or intelligentsia who gush with empathy for Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, on talk shows, in

journals and at dinner parties. They include two former Social Democratic chancellors. In the newspaper *Die Zeit*, Helmut Schmidt said Mr Putin's annexation of Crimea was not quite "legitimate" but certainly "understandable".^{xv}

Gabriele Krone-Schmalz unhesitatingly describes herself as a *Russlandversteh*er. She is a professor of Journalism and a former Moscow correspondent of the ARD television network. Her background in reporting on Russia has given her an understanding of the country but she is also an apologist for it. Her latest book 'Understanding Russia' was published last year and is already in its thirteenth edition. The book's subtitle is 'The Battle for Ukraine and the Arrogance of the West' and it sets out to offer information about Russian interests and perspectives, so that German readers may gain a better understanding.

"How can it be in order in the political culture of a land for a term like "*Russlandversteh*er" to be suitable for stigmatisation and ostracism? Shouldn't one first understand something before one can judge it? Understanding something doesn't mean automatically finding it good. Someone who understands something comprehends correlations, knows background and has, on this basis the chance to explain what is going on and why."

'Understanding Russia' is an attempt to present a Russian perspective on recent events and it offers a fairly comprehensive selection of the key moments in the West's relations with Russia during the course of the past three decades. The arguments that it presents are those used often by *Russlandversteh*er in politics, the media and business but here they are clearly set out, openly and unashamedly sympathetic to the Kremlin's position.

A key argument, which flows from some of the historical positions outlined above, is that Germany and the West have missed a huge opportunity to engage with Russia. If only, so the argument goes, we had sought properly to engage Russia in building new European security architecture, rather than seeking to take advantage of her when she was weak, all would have been well and we would not have the appalling crisis presently confronting us.

"If we look back from today, isn't it revealing that we speak of disintegration instead of reorganisation? Wouldn't it have been easier to deal with Moscow, if this slice of history had not been associated just with loss – territorial, emotional, prestige – but with profit from opportunities?"

"It was a masterful political achievement to break up the Soviet Union essentially without bloodshed. But instead of accompanying this process supportively, this part of the earth was treated as a loser. It was no secret that the USA's enthusiasm for a common European house, in which all Europe, including Russia, would settle, was limited."^{xvi}

It is not a bad point and there is, indeed, much in the West's handling of Russia during the course of the past three decades to criticise. There have, undoubtedly, been "disappointed hopes, wasted chances" – the title of a chapter in Krone-Schmalz's book and one of the key messages of *Russlandversteh*er. Moscow could certainly have been handled more intelligently, more sensitively or even, at times, more sympathetically. However, Krone-Schmalz, Gerhard Schroeder and other *Russlandversteh*er move quickly from this one simple premise to a more general tendency to excuse Moscow and blame the West.

The historian Heinrich August Winkler and the eastern Europe expert Karl Schloegel are both *Russlandversteher*, but in a different sense. After years of research and study, they know and understand Russia as well as anyone in Germany but have little sympathy for Vladimir Putin and his aggressive foreign policy towards the nations on Russia's periphery.

Winkler sees those Germans who leap to the defence of the Russian President, the so-called '*Putin-versteher*,' as being part of a tradition of right-wing ideology going back to Weimar and the Nazi period. In an essay for *Der Spiegel*, he traced a line of "right-wing politicians, military people and intellectuals" from the Weimar period, through Goebbels to the modern champions of a German-Russian special relationship. "Putin's German defenders do not know the tradition they are part of," he wrote. Whilst he advises against allowing Ukraine to join NATO because "the inclusion of this former Soviet republic, which has always been closely linked to Russia, would be bound to be seen as 'encirclement' by Russia," he nevertheless rejects the way in which Moscow's propaganda is too often carelessly repeated by people who should know better.

"The assertion that NATO broke its promise not to expand eastwards, which has been repeated often recently and was set out by Putin, is a historical legend."

"Putin is not limiting himself to opposing NATO membership for former Soviet republics. His Eurasian Union project is an expression of neo-imperialism. The states which attach themselves to this structure will have to subject themselves economically and politically to the will of the leading power, Russia. The West has no occasion to accompany such aspirations with sympathy, as German *Russlandversteher* do..."

"There are many indications that Putin's expansive nationalism is an attempt to distract from the incalculable weakness of the economy, with its dependence on the export of raw materials. Neither external expansion, nor internal repression, however, are a suitable way of permanently weakening the attraction, which western ideas of human rights, the rule of law and pluralistic democracy have for parts of the Russian population. Eventually, the success Putin believes he has achieved by the incorporation of Crimea, which has been costly in every respect, will prove to be a Pyrrhic victory."^{xvii}

Karl Schloegel sees "intellectual attacks" as part of Putin's plan, in which the West is challenged - and possibly even overwhelmed - not simply by an act of military aggression in Europe, but also "by Putin's information war which threatens to destroy the basis of Thought as such." What he means is that Russian information warfare is so sophisticated and formulated in such a way that it even undermines concepts that we might previously have taken for granted.

"For a long time, it has not been about propaganda and counter-propaganda," he says, "but about the dispute over whether there is still any difference between *facts* and *fiction* at all. Facts are becoming a question of interpretation, according to the motto: everything is a lie but everything is true just the same." It is an idea already well established in the classical world and known to Thucydides and Cicero, among others, but Schloegel believes that Russia is now fighting an information war, which "helps itself virtuously to the post-modern rhetoric of multiple perspectives and sees everything as relative."

Querfront: the "Cross Front" and its key themes

The scale and scope of Moscow's information warfare in Germany is at once impressive and alarming. It has seized the opportunity offered by new technology and other recent developments in communications and the media. It has adapted traditional concepts of propaganda and psychological operations to the new information age. The campaign's clear objective is to change political opinion and thus to affect Germany's position in important areas of its foreign policy. So far, it has managed, without attracting undue attention, to encompass a broad spectrum of political support and to build an effective cross-party lobby for a radically different approach to German-Russian relations.

Its key messages have been:

- Germany and Russia had a 'special relationship' in the past and should return to it
- Germany's war guilt means that it should be particularly careful and respectful in dealing with Russia
- Russia has legitimate interests and the West should respect them
- Russia must have a voice in determining Europe's future security architecture; there can be no security without Russia and no security against Russia
- The West deceived Russia over the expansion of NATO and by stationing rockets in parts of the former Soviet empire
- 'Wikileaks' and Snowden show that the West has not been open in its dealings with Germany and is trying to control German citizens with new methods of surveillance
- Putin was right to clamp down on western NGOs because they are often controlled by Washington
- The Georgian crisis was not Putin's fault but the result of Georgian aggression
- Ukraine should be a 'bridge' between the EU and Russia; it should not have been offered a binary choice between a customs union with Russia and an association agreement with the EU
- Russia has a legitimate claim to the Crimea
- Putin may have been wrong in taking military action but what he did was no different to what NATO did in Kosovo
- Western leaders should be tried for the NATO attack on Belgrade, which was carried out simply because of US hostility to Russian interests
- The referendum in Crimea was as valid as the vote in Kosovo on separation from Serbia
- The Ukrainian revolution was actually a coup d'état
- The Ukrainian revolution was controlled or hijacked by extreme nationalists and fascists, who now run the regime in Kiev
- Ukraine is a failed state
- Ukraine is divided; Eastern Ukraine is really Russian and should be granted autonomy / independence
- President Poroschenko is an 'oligarch' and should not be received by Chancellor Merkel
- The West never consulted Russia and pursued a deliberately confrontational course of action in Ukraine
- Sanctions against Russia are counter-productive and will damage German business and the German economy
- The Syrian crisis cannot be solved without Putin and Russian support for Assad has been instrumental in stopping the spread of ISIS

These key messages have been promoted at various times by an extraordinary coalition of political and commercial interests. The so called *Querfront* or 'Cross Front' of apologists for Putin has drawn in leading figures from both the left and the right, as well as commentators (so-called 'Russia experts'), business leaders and academics. It has included, at various important moments, two former chancellors – the late Helmut Schmidt, who was occasionally uncharacteristically naive about modern Russia, and Gerhard Schroeder, who now has significant commercial interests in the country. As a lobby, the Cross Front has been remarkably successful, with its arguments trumpeted by eager supporters across the political spectrum, including powerful figures in the CDU and the SPD parties, as well as groups on the hard left and the extreme right. Its breadth of support and its ability to deploy its messages in political and commercial circles, as well as in the media, make even the US Israeli lobby in its heyday look comparatively amateurish.

One political commentator observed that "the long line of general forgiveness (for Russia's invasion of Crimea) extends from Philipp Missfelder, the foreign affairs spokesman for the parliamentary group of Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives, to German feminist intellectual leader Alice Schwarzer, from the left-wing to conservative households and even deep into the conservative camp. Be they people who simply romanticise Russia, those with a penchant for realpolitik, those nostalgic for the Soviet Union or just armchair leftists, there are so many people seemingly sympathetic to the annexation that many are scratching their heads and asking if Germany is a country of Russia apologists."^{xviii}

In March 2014, the former Mayor of Hamburg, Klaus von Dohnanyi, who is one of the Social Democratic Party's most respected elder statesmen, appeared on German television's main political talk show, the Anna Will programme, together with another leading '*Russlandversteh'er*,' Professor Dr Gabriele Krone-Schmalz, the CDU's foreign affairs spokesman in the Bundestag, Philipp Missfelder, and a Ukrainian journalist, Natalia Fiebrig. The show was extraordinarily one-sided and provided an opportunity for the Cross Front to argue Moscow's case almost uninterrupted on prime time television. Missfelder, an up-and-coming CDU politician, who was soon to be severely criticised by both the media and his own party for joining the celebrations of Schroeder's birthday in Saint Petersburg with Vladimir Putin, was uncharacteristically pedestrian and "did not seem exactly fully rested."^{xix}

Dohnanyi and Krone-Schmalz, who is frequently invited to air her views on German television, were able to deploy a succession of Moscow's favourite themes. These included casting doubt on the possible involvement of Russian special forces among the snipers shooting unarmed civilians on Kiev's Maidan, emphasising the "failure" of the German media to highlight the presence of the supposedly right-wing Swoboda Party in Ukraine's transitional government, stirring up fears of war with Russia and, above all, stressing the overriding importance of trying to appreciate the Russian perspective on events.

Reviewing the programme, the newspaper Die Welt commented that Krone-Schmalz's words "I take the Russian position" were "symptomatic of the entire broadcast." The need to take Russia's interests into account was emphasised so often, particularly by Dohnanyi, according to Die Welt, that "it seemed like sucking up to the Kremlin."^{xx}

When the Ukrainian journalist, Natalia Fiebrig, objected to Dohnanyi's remarks, telling him that he spoke about Ukraine "as though the country didn't even exist," he replied with one of the Kremlin's core messages. "You can't simply remove yourselves from a zone of influence," he said loftily.^{xxi}

The Left of the Cross Front

Klaus von Dohnanyi is an elder statesman of the SPD and a former Mayor of Hamburg – a city which seems almost to have become a '*place d'armes*' for Germany's *Russlandversteher*. Often seen as the embodiment of the centre in German politics and respected in CDU circles as much as in his own party, Dohnanyi is motivated by the belief that the West must show proper respect for Russia ("who could govern this country much differently than Putin does?") and by an odd notion that the Americans are also to blame. "The Americans often don't have a sense of diplomacy and for Europe's geopolitical problems."^{xxii}

Underpinning his approach is a strong belief in *Ostpolitik*, which dominates the thinking of many older Social Democrats, as they consider how to approach Russia today. Often their view now is the same as it was in the nineteen eighties – that rapprochement and confidence-building work better than confrontation.

Ostpolitik provides an ideological basis for cooperation with Moscow even at the most difficult times. Several important *Russlandversteher* with a background in the SPD also have their own more personal reasons for taking up Russia's cause, however. Of these, the most prominent example is Gerhard Schroeder, who began his *Russlandverstehen* with the SPD's old ideological preference for cooperation, rather than confrontation, but has since moved to a position in which his motives are widely questioned and he is assumed to have been compromised by his proximity to Putin and the lucrative business interests he has developed in Russia since leaving the Chancellery. Schroeder joined the board of Nord Stream AG, a position for which he was recommended by the Russian gas company, Gazprom, shortly after the Government of which he was Chancellor agreed to guarantee a loan to the value of 1 billion dollars, should Gazprom default. His high-level political interests also helped to secure him an invitation to join the board of TNK-BP, a joint venture company in the Russian oil and gas sector.

He has repeatedly championed Russian interests in Germany at important moments. In 2007, for example, when the Estonian Government decided to remove a Soviet war memorial from the centre of Tallinn to a military cemetery and Russia responded with orchestrated cyber-attacks on Estonian targets, Schroeder did not hesitate to take Moscow's side, rather than that of a fellow member of the European Union under attack from a new form of online warfare. As gangs of thugs blockaded Estonia's embassy in Moscow, threatening to dismantle it, Schroeder insisted that the tiny Baltic republic had contradicted "every form of civilised behaviour."^{xxiii}

He took the Kremlin's side too when Russian troops entered the sovereign territory of the Republic of Georgia the following year, even laying the blame for the Russian intervention squarely on the West and the Georgian President, Mikhail Saakashvili, and refusing to attach any blame to Moscow.

"The hostilities undoubtedly have their historic causes... and the conflict has had several historic precursors," he said. "But the moment that triggered the current armed hostilities was the Georgian

invasion of South Ossetia. This should not be glossed over... In my view, there have indeed been serious mistakes made by the West in its policy toward Russia. Can we conclude that this bears some relationship to the recent events in the Caucasus, as Russia's response, so to speak, to the Georgian provocation?"^{xxiv}

After Putin's annexation of the Crimea, Schroeder was on hand to speak up for his friend once again. Although, unlike other *Putin-versteher*, such as Gabriele Krone-Schmalz, he admitted that the invasion was a breach of international law, he helpfully compared it to NATO's intervention in Kosovo. "I can only imagine what is driving him," he said, explaining that, as someone conscious of history, Putin was troubled by "fears of encirclement" after "unpleasant developments" on the fringes of the former Soviet Union and was really only interested in consolidating Russia, developing its economy and "keeping it big and strong – so that it can look the USA in the eye." In a reference to German participation in the NATO action in Kosovo against Serbia during his period in office, he cautioned against pointing the finger at Putin "because I myself have done the same (!)" Both cases involved a breach of the United Nations charter, he claimed.^{xxv} He even compared the referendum organised by the new regime in occupied Crimea to Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia.^{xxvi}

Schroeder's role with Gazprom and his position on the boards of Nord Stream and other companies have made him a champion of important Russo-German infrastructure projects in the energy sector and, thus, an ideal spokesman for the idea of a 'special relationship.' In the eyes of many observers, he has become little more than a lobbyist for Moscow. The journalist and author Boris Reitschuster, a former Moscow correspondent of Focus magazine, claimed that Russian opponents of Putin's regime regarded Schroeder as "Putin's agent of influence in Europe" and "the Kremlin's most important lobbyist."^{xxvii} On the 4 March 2014, when Schroeder joined Eckard Cordes, President of the Ost-Ausschuss der deutschen Wirtschaft (the Eastern Commission of German Industry) and self-styled Russia-expert Alexander Rahr, who is also a lobbyist for Wintershall, for a meeting at the Russian embassy in Berlin about the possible creation of a "German-Russian economic area," one observer, the German MEP Werner Schulz, commented that Schroeder was "wholly a lobbyist. And other lobbyists like Alexander Rahr – they're real Kremlin propagandists."^{xxviii} Rahr eagerly leapt to the defence of the former Chancellor: "This great proximity to Putin, and not just to Putin but to the Russian leadership elite, is worth its weight in gold in these difficult times. He is the first and perhaps the only German, and maybe the only European, who has got such access to Putin."^{xxix}

The former Chancellor's enthusiasm for Russia did not simply develop when he left office as Chancellor and acquired his lucrative portfolio of commercial interests. During his period as Chancellor, Schroeder established an **unusual** organisation, the *Petersburger Dialog*, which has acted as a standard-bearer, and a particularly useful platform, for Germany's Russia lobby. The organisation, which is described in more detail below, brings together politicians, academics and leading business people with an interest in Russia.

Whilst widespread disquiet greeted Schroeder's decision to accept positions on the boards of Russian companies, with even his biographer admitting that nothing had tarnished his reputation as much as his "*Gazpromisierung*," senior figures in the current leadership of the SPD have continued to echo his arguments. In spite of its position in the German Government as a partner in the current coalition, the SPD leadership has taken a markedly softer line than Chancellor Merkel towards Russia

over Ukraine. The current leader, Sigmar Gabriel, who is also Vice-Chancellor and Minister for the Economy, has been a determined advocate of easing sanctions and not 'isolating' Russia.

In October 2015, Gabriel travelled to Russia for a meeting with Putin at the President's country residence at Novo-Ogaryovo. Thanking Putin for making the time to see him, he said "you have got a lot to do these days, particularly with the conflict in Syria (!)" He agreed with Putin that only the implementation of the Minsk Agreement would bring peace to Ukraine and, according to the Kremlin's account of the meeting, helpfully pointed out that there are "groups in Europe and the USA who are profiting from the conflict continuing."^{xxx}

Reporting on the meeting, the German language service of 'Russia Today,' the Russian state-owned broadcaster and news agency, said that the discussions focussed on economic and energy questions "and a possible end of sanctions." The agency re-released statistics produced by the Ost-Ausschuss der deutschen Wirtschaft, showing that "German-Russian economic relations have been declining since 2013. German exports to Russia have declined by 31% in the first half of 2015. The Ostausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft estimates that trade this year will only be half what it was in 2012. That would mean a deficit in bilateral trade of 10 billion euros. The volume of bilateral trade in 2014 reached 67.7 billion euros."^{xxxi}

Gabriel was planning another meeting with Putin in June but it was called off at the last minute, ostensibly "because of Brexit," according to Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov.^{xxxii} A more likely reason is that the SPD was under pressure in Berlin to curtail its overtures to Putin. Gabriel's party colleague, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German Foreign Minister, had made an ill-judged comment to journalists in which he had suggested that "what we should not do is to heat up the situation even more by loud sabre-rattling and war cries." The remark was taken as criticism of NATO's planned exercise 'Anaconda' in Poland, causing irritation not only to the SPD's partners in government but also in western capitals. As Steinmeier struggled to reassure reporters that he was fully supportive of the NATO exercise, the last thing the SPD needed was a photo-opportunity for its leader with Putin.

Shortly after an uncomfortable press conference in which Steinmeier's Foreign Ministry press spokesman, Martin Schaefer, was forced to reassure reporters of the Minister's support for the NATO exercise in front of Chancellor Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert, Gabriel's visit to Putin was postponed. Seibert emphasised that NATO's manoeuvres were "good, right and important" and the two spokesmen made clear that there was "not a hint" of difference between the positions of the Foreign Minister and the Chancellor.^{xxxiii}

The trouble was that Steinmeier did not just make an injudicious remark about "sabre-rattling." He was also very specific about the supposed danger of provoking the Kremlin by conducting a military exercise on Russia's borders:

"Whoever believes you can create more security by symbolic parades of tanks on the eastern frontier of the Alliance is mistaken. We would be well advised not to provide a pretext for a new, old confrontation."^{xxxiv}

In spite of the high-level insistence that Steinmeier was fully in line with agreed Government policy,^{xxxv} his coalition partners were horrified at the Foreign Minister's attitude. Norbert Roettgen, the CDU Chairman of the Bundestag's Foreign Affairs Committee described his remarks as "a monstrous accusation." In Moscow, however, there was ill-concealed glee. Alexei Puchkov, the Chairman of the Duma's Foreign Affairs Committee, said that "individual voices of reason" could now be heard "behind the curtain of threats and hysteria."^{xxxvi}

In spite of the loud protestations about the SPD's continuing commitment to the coalition's agreed line, with Germany heading into federal elections next year, it is clear that, were the SPD to emerge victorious from the campaign, the position of the German Government, particularly over sanctions, could change rapidly and significantly. The reason for this is not the naivete of certain leading figures, nor a habitual tendency to see relations with modern Russia through the rose-tinted lens of twentieth century *Ostpolitik*. It is that the party has become intrinsically linked to powerful interests determined to bring about an end to sanctions as soon as possible.

Schroeder's commercial interests are a symptom of this but they are far from the only manifestation of the links forged by leading *Russlandversteher* with organisations with significant interests in Russia. The Voscherau brothers are an interesting case study. Eggert Voscherau sits on the supervisory board of BASF, the world's largest chemical producer with headquarters in Ludwigshafen, which owns the oil and gas company Wintershall.^{xxxvii} He was a member of two major government commissions in the Schroeder era – Hartz and Ruerup – which drew up plans for labour market and social security reform. He was also a member of the advisory board of Deutsche Bahn AG, whose Chairman at the time was Hartmut Mehdorn, a leading businessman previously active in Hamburg, who subsequently became a member of the advisory board of RZD, the state-owned Russian railway company. From 2006 – 2009, Eggert was a member of the supervisory board of Nord Stream AG (earlier NEGP), which Schroeder joined. His brother Henning, a lawyer and the former Mayor of Hamburg, an SPD stronghold, became the Chairman of South Stream AG, a joint venture between Gazprom and the Italian energy giant ENI, in which Wintershall had a 15% stake.

Announcing Henning Voscherau's appointment, Gazprom boss Alexei Miller said "We are convinced that the experience and authority of Henning Voscherau will help this strategically important project to be completed successfully and on time."^{xxxviii}

At the time, the appointment was controversial because the European Union, nervous about the political consequences of Europe's potential dependency on Russian gas, was pushing the Nabucco pipeline as an alternative to South Stream. With a planned capacity of 63 billion cubic metres a year, South Stream would have enabled Russia to supply about 35% of Europe's total demand for gas, giving it an unprecedented level of political leverage.

When 'Bild,' the mass circulation daily newspaper, questioned him about his appointment, Henning glibly reassured readers about the issue of dependency on Russian gas: "People are always talking about a great dependency. I must tell you: I would rather be dependent on the Russians than on the Islamists."^{xxxix}

Another senior SPD figure, who has been actively involved in business with Russia since leaving office, is the former Federal Economy Minister and Ex-Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia, Wolfgang Clement, who became an adviser to the Russian oil and gas consultancy, Energy Consulting. With over 700 employees, the firm has offices in Duesseldorf and 5 Russian cities.

Even Klaus von Dohnanyi has taken on a role with a strong Russian connection at the media and consulting firm Wegweiser GmbH. Wegweiser is composed of two main businesses – Wegweiser GmbH Berlin Research and Strategy and Wegweiser GmbH Media and Conferences Berlin – both of which are overseen by advisory councils headed by Dohnanyi. The latter company is a PR and advertising agency and a conference organiser. It has organised several major conferences on Russia, including the German-Russian Entrepreneurs' conference 2013. In 2012, the company organised the annual conference 'Russland 2012' in partnership with the 'Association of the Russian Economy in Germany,' to which Gazprom Germania GmbH belongs. Such conferences have provided Dohnanyi,

who is described as a “consultant on development in the East,” with a useful platform and an influential audience.^{xi}

Given the extent to which sympathy for the Kremlin has worked its way into the highest reaches of the SPD, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Chairman of one of Germany’s most active networks of ‘*Russlandversteher*’, the German-Russian Forum (see below), is a former senior SPD politician. Matthias Platzeck, is a former Chairman of the party and served as Minister-President of Brandenburg from 2002 – 2013. He has been openly critical of the German Government’s response to Putin’s annexation of Crimea and told Der Spiegel in 2015 that he shared Moscow’s “incomprehension” at Merkel’s view that Russia should be excluded from the G7 Summit at Elmau and from similar meetings of the group of leading industrial nations for the foreseeable future.

“The Federal Chancellor is making a mistake,” he said. “Putin belongs at Elmau. In 25 years of conflict management, I have learnt one thing: finding a compromise only happens when people talk to each other. Of course, when the sky is blue, you can have a barbecue and talk about life. But when thunder and lightning close in, dialogue becomes existential.”^{xli}

The pro-Moscow line of so many leading figures in the SPD has shocked many ordinary members of the party, however. A new party working group has now been formed to combat what its members see as “concrete *Ostpolitik*.” The group’s founders include Jan Behrends, an East European expert from the Centre for Contemporary Research, the lawyer Martin Luthle and businessman Joachim Schaller.

“Our aim,” says Behrends, “is to distance social democracy from the aggressive politics of the Kremlin, which is against international law, and to emphasise our solidarity with our neighbours and allies in Eastern Europe.... The pro-Moscow connection inside the party must be worked on. *Ostpolitik* must not just be Russia-politik, it must be Ukraine-politik too.”^{xlii}

As Germany heads towards federal elections in 2017, relations with Russia are likely to have a major impact on the outcome. Contributions to campaign funds will be well worth watching.

Further to the left of Germany’s political spectrum is *Die Linke* (the Left), a party with its origins in the ruins of the old East German ruling party, the SED (*sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*). Led by the East German lawyer Gregor Gysi, the Left is essentially a rebranding of the SED for a new era, which has brought together a diverse mixture of former communists, left-wing green activists, well meaning liberals tired of the SPD, anti-globalisation campaigners and ex-Stasi agents. It is characterised by a habitual anti-Americanism, which has manifested itself in opposition to NATO and, predictably, in loyal support for Moscow. The vocal support its leaders have given to the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine gives the lie to its claims to be concerned about human rights and international law in other areas.

Its leader, Gregor Gysi, has staunchly defended the Kremlin whenever the need has arisen. A lawyer in the old German Democratic Republic and now the subject of repeated allegations concerning alleged links to the Stasi, Gysi is a seasoned critic of NATO and a reliable player of Moscow’s tune. His speeches often reflect the Kremlin’s position and are a guide to Moscow’s latest line. A speech he made in the Bundestag on 13 March 2014 in response to a statement by Chancellor Merkel on the situation in Ukraine, following the Russian annexation of Crimea, is a good example.

The speech contains a number of Moscow’s favourite themes: what Putin is doing in Crimea may be bad but it’s no worse than what the West has done (“It is the same thinking that prevailed in the

West, and still prevails, with Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya”); although Putin may have done wrong, the real problem has been the reaction of NATO and the EU (“Even when one judges Putin’s actions, one must see how the whole intensification and confrontation came about. I tell you quite clearly – everything that NATO and the EU could have done wrong, they have done wrong.”); it’s really all NATO’s fault because it rejected Gorbachev’s concept of ‘common security’, broke its promise not to expand eastwards and stationed rockets in the Czech Republic and Poland (“At the time of German unification, the US Secretary of State, our foreign minister at the time, Genscher, and other foreign ministers, stated to Gorbachev that there would be no eastward expansion of NATO. This promise has been broken. There has been a determined expansion of NATO in the direction of Russia.”); NATO set a bad example with Kosovo and it cannot complain if Putin follows it (“Serbia had not attacked another state and there had been no decision by the UN Security Council. It was bombed, however, with German participation for the first time since 1945... I severely criticised the breach of international law and I told you: you are opening a Pandora’s box in Kosovo. If you allow it in Kosovo, you will have to allow it in other regions too.”); Both the EU and Russia were wrong to offer Ukraine a binary choice between a customs union with Russia or an association agreement with the EU because Ukraine should be a bridge between the two (“Both thought and negotiated in the same way on the basis of an alternative. That was a major error on both sides.”); Nobody in the West bothered to listen to Russia’s concerns (“Not a single EU foreign minister tried to contact the Russian Government and to take Russia’s legitimate security interests into account”); Ukraine is deeply divided (“Ukrainian society is deeply split... Eastern Ukraine tends towards Russia, western Ukraine tends towards western Europe”).^{xliii}

The most obvious pieces of Russian propaganda in Gysi’s speech, however, are his references to Maidan and elements in the Ukrainian opposition to Yanukovich, together with his central conclusion, widely shared by *Russlandversteher* across the political spectrum, that Russia must be a partner in determining the future shape of European security.

Sarah Wagenknecht is another leading figure in the Linke parliamentary group, who has actively championed Russia’s interests, even calling for Germany to leave NATO. In July, she spoke in a debate in the Bundestag on a Government statement on the NATO Summit in Warsaw:

“75 years after the start of Germany’s war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, military exercises with German participation are again taking place on the Russian border. US nuclear weapons are being modernised – not decommissioned, Frau Merkel: modernised – and rocket bases are being built all over Europe.... But who, during the last two decades, has carried on pushing their borders further forward? Russia in the direction of NATO? Or was it the other way round? The USA invested 5 billion dollars in regime change in Ukraine. The result is a divided country with marauding fascist gangs...”^{xliv}

Bizarrely, even the extra-parliamentary left has nurtured a core of hardened *Russlandversteher* too. The so-called ‘Antiimperialistische Aktionsgruppe,’ for example, which has a close cooperation with ANNA News, a Russian propaganda TV channel, actively supported President Bashir Assad during the early days of the Syrian war. Known as the “anti-imps” in Germany, they are anti-American and anti-Semitic with a fondness for conspiracy theories and regimes opposed to the United States and Israel. They have recently embraced the cause of ‘Novorossiya’ and organised demonstrations in support of

it in several German cities. They also produced a film, 'the truth about Euro-Maidan' and broadcast it to European audiences.^{xlv}

The Right of the 'Cross Front' - 'The Union' (CDU / CSU) and the AfD

When Angela Merkel became Germany's first ever female Federal Chancellor in 2005, following the victory of the Christian Democrats at the general election, it seemed as though the guiding principles of *Ostpolitik* in its post-Cold War form would remain at the heart of German policy towards Russia. The main idea behind *Ostpolitik* was to achieve positive change through rapprochement (*Wandel durch Annäherung*). The original concept had been created by the SPD Chancellor Willy Brandt's political secretary, Egon Bahr, and it had involved engagement through cooperation in important areas, such as energy supply. It had survived the end of the Cold War and the turbulence that followed it, adapting itself to the realities of the post-Soviet world and the need for a new understanding of Germany's relationship with Russia. 'Positive change through rapprochement' became 'partnership for modernisation' and it seemed unlikely that there would be much deviation from *Ostpolitik* at the heart of a stable relationship between Russia and Germany.

As one analyst recalls "the key principles of Ostpolitik seemed to remain intact when Angela Merkel of the Christian Democrats became federal chancellor in 2005. There were many who believed that Merkel's relationship with Moscow was going to be less friendly, given her background in the dissident movement of the former German Democratic Republic. However, while Merkel did not form a close personal relationship with President Putin, no major changes in Germany's policy towards Russia followed. Germany remained Russia's key partner in Europe and a 'modernisation partnership', designed to intensify cooperation in various fields, was formed when Dmitri Medvedev became president of Russia. The Russo-German partnership, though not immensely successful in political terms, seemed as stable as ever."^{xlvi}

In November 2013, Germany's two centre-right parties, the CDU and its Bavarian sister, the CSU, formed the present Government with the SPD and it seemed as though *Ostpolitik* might be given a new stimulus. The agreement creating the so-called "Grand Coalition" ("*Grosse Koalition*" or "*GroKo*") even contained a substantial reference to relations with Russia. A 300-word chapter entitled "Open dialogue and broader cooperation with Russia" emphasised the new Government's willingness to cooperate, in order to strengthen European security, and to extend the partnership of modernisation. It stressed, however, that Berlin planned to "talk openly with the Russian leadership about different ideas of modernisation," a phrase interpreted by one commentator as "German diplomatic jargon for open display of criticism."^{xlvii}

The devotion of a whole chapter of the agreement to relations with Russia was a demonstration of the importance of the issue for Chancellor Merkel's Social Democrat coalition partners. The SPD, however, was not the only party keen to make better relations with Russia a priority for the new Government. It was also a matter of great importance to the CSU, largely because Bavarian industry was keen to take advantage of new opportunities offered by the partnership of modernisation.

The compromise, which the coalition agreement represented between those seeking closer ties, or even a strategic partnership, with Russia and those wary of uncritical engagement was soon

shattered by President Putin's invasion of Crimea. Chancellor Merkel joined other western leaders in supporting the imposition of sanctions and other retaliatory measures designed to isolate the Russian leadership.

In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, CDU MPs called for a tough response. In April 2014, Andreas Schockenhoff, formerly the Chancellor's Coordinator for relations with Russia, made a speech in the Bundestag in which he warned against "an attempt at wishful thinking." His remarks were interpreted as a criticism of the Chancellor's willingness to stand by her SPD foreign minister and his cautious reaction to events in Ukraine. The mood among members of the Bundestag was now "blowing against Russia" and in favour of a "fundamental redefinition" of relations.^{xlviii}

CDU MPs began to call for tougher sanctions and the deployment of NATO troops in Eastern Europe. After years of trying to engage Russia, it now seemed "as though we are travelling on one steamboat and Putin is on another."^{xlix} Even some of those who might have been seen earlier as unduly sympathetic to Moscow joined the chorus calling for a more forthright response. Karl-Georg Wellmann, a CDU foreign policy expert and the Chairman of the German-Ukrainian parliamentary group, told the Bundestag that, although he wanted to see Russia play "a constructive role in Europe", the fact was that "an asymmetrical war" was now taking place in Ukraine, with Russian special forces in the east of the country. He admitted that he was surprised at "the extent of chauvinism, nationalism and arrogance" and "the massive anti-western propaganda of the Russian elite." Well-connected in both Russia and Ukraine, Wellmann accused the Russian Government of championing a new set of conservative values – "orthodoxy, great power chauvinism and, unfortunately, imperial and populist elements too." His speech culminated in a stinging rebuke. "Russia," he said, "is once again a country which spreads anxiety and fear."^l

Although the Government has remained firm in its determination to join Germany's NATO allies in standing up to Russian aggression (Mrs Merkel recently declared that she saw no prospect for an early end to sanctions^{li}), with the passage of time, memories of the invasion have begun to fade and the voice of the Cross Front, expressing sympathy for Russia's position, has begun to grow louder and more vehement in the Chancellor's own party.

The fact that Chancellor Merkel's 'Union' is itself an alliance of two separate political parties, the CDU and the CSU, perhaps suggests that rigid party discipline and adherence to a strict party line have not always been of paramount importance on Germany's centre-right. There has always been a degree of tolerance of opposing views within what is, by any reckoning, a very broad church. This tolerance, coupled with a desire for better relations with Russia, if not a special relationship, has led to some curious episodes since the invasion of Crimea. In other countries, the fact that the ruling party has been prepared to put up with the eccentricities of some of its senior politicians on issues affecting European security might have been considered odd, if not even a little negligent. Still more odd perhaps is that the CDU has indulged this behaviour at a time when the party's own foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, has repeatedly been put under pressure by Putin's henchmen in Moscow.

The most notable example of this eccentric behaviour, perhaps, came from the late Philipp Missfelder, the talented young foreign affairs spokesman of the CDU parliamentary group. He travelled to Saint Petersburg for Gerhard Schroeder's birthday celebrations in the Yusupoff palace, where he spoke to Vladimir Putin. The visit, which caused outrage and managed to dent the CDU's

own criticism of Schroeder, came at a time when Bundeswehr soldiers were still being held hostage in eastern Ukraine by Russian-backed forces. Missfelder had informed neither Chancellor Merkel's office, nor the leader of the CDU parliamentary group, Volker Kauder. Defending his visit, he said that such opportunities should be used and that both the atmosphere and the discussion with Putin had been "very serious." He insisted lamely that "facts are being demonised, which with a little more reason could be evaluated differently."^{lii}

One of the most prominent 'Putin-versteher' in CDU circles is the former MdB Willy Wimmer. Outspoken and renowned for his fondness for anti-American conspiracy theories (as a State Secretary, he is reputed to have asked visitors to his office to place their mobile telephones inside a refrigerator – so that the CIA could not hear their conversation^{liii}), Wimmer has become a prominent apologist for Moscow, appearing regularly on Russia Today and rarely hesitating to take a line that is strictly 'Kremlin-treu'. Although he left the Bundestag in 2009, as a former State Secretary for defence and a former Vice-President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, he has the credibility of a CDU elder statesman and lends an air of respectability to what would otherwise be seen as the crudest form of Russian propaganda.

Wimmer is a frequent guest on the Kremlin's state-owned TV channel Russia Today and his pro-Russian pronouncements are so many and so frequent that it is hardly worth quoting them *in extenso*. They range from support for the Kremlin's attacks on western NGO's – "internal political attack formations under the cover of so-called 'non-governmental organisations' directed by Washington"^{liv} to calling for western leaders who supported NATO's attack on Belgrade to be prosecuted by the international criminal court in the Hague - "where they all belong for this simple war of aggression against a founding member of the UN, which they initiated because of American interests against Russia."^{lv}

It is little wonder that Wimmer is seen by the Kremlin as so loyal and '*linientreu*' that he was recently accorded the dubious honour of having Putin himself act as his interpreter during a meeting with 500 journalists in Saint Petersburg to discuss "Russian mass media and the information war."

"I had an excellent young interpreter with me... but the President announced that he himself would translate my words in this great forum," he recalled breathlessly. "This then happened and in a very accurate and elegant way... Vladimir Putin added to my contribution about my own observations on the question of Russian values. His remarks about patriotism, as opposed to nationalism, made a great impression."^{lvi}

Sympathy for Putin in the CDU is not, however, confined to eccentric, attention-seeking ex-politicians, such as Wimmer. The Vice-Chairman of the party, Armin Laschet, has also defended the Russian leader, arguing that Russian interests should be taken properly into account and emphasising the importance to German industry of trade with Russia. He criticised Germany's supposedly "widespread anti-Putin populism" and said that western governments' opinions about Russia were based on a lack of knowledge. Furthermore, the deterioration in relations with Russia was largely the result of the West's own mistakes: "The demonisation of Putin is not a policy but an alibi for the failure of one."^{lvii} Shortly after the Kremlin-sponsored plebiscite in Crimea, Laschet said that, even if the referendum and Moscow's policy towards Crimea were "clearly against international law", it was important to see things from Russia's position if "one wants to cultivate a foreign policy relationship."^{lviii}

His use of the economic argument for largely ignoring Russian aggression has been heavily influenced by the position of energy companies in his home state of North Rhine–Westphalia. He has pointed out that in that state alone 1200 companies are trading with Russia or investing there. “And 40 per cent of the gas that we need for our modern gas-fired power stations, so that the energy revolution succeeds, comes from Russia.”^{lix}

The most significant boost for the pro-Russian lobby inside the ‘Union’, however, has come from the leadership of the CDU’s sister party, the CSU. In February 2016, the leader of the CSU, Horst Seehofer, who is also the Minister-President of Bavaria, travelled to Moscow for meetings with Putin, the Mayor of Moscow and various ministers of the Russian Government. The visit took place barely a week after Chancellor Merkel had stressed that she saw no prospect of an imminent lifting of sanctions without the implementation of the Minsk Agreement. “Unfortunately, we are not there yet,” she had told the Ukrainian President, Petro Poroschenko.^{lx}

In Moscow, however, Seehofer, who was accompanied by his predecessor Edmund Stoiber, the former Minister-President of Bavaria and Union Chancellor candidate, called for an easing of sanctions “in a clear timeframe.” He even told Putin that it would have to be seen whether the EU’s punishment measures could be removed “in stages or all at once.”^{lxi}

“In difficult political circumstances, we want to make our contribution with an honest heart, so that we can create a bit of trust and normality,” Seehofer said at talks in Putin’s official residence. Putin, who was photographed smiling warmly at his Bavarian guest, replied that “today’s problems affect us all.” He also told his visitor that “we know about your position and your willingness to do a lot to bring about a normalisation.”^{lxii}

The last remark was certainly true, as Seehofer has been sceptical about sanctions for a long time. His scepticism is largely a result of losses shown by Bavarian companies as a result of sanctions. During his flight to Moscow, he told journalists that there would have to be changes to the sanctions regime “in a clear timeframe”, as it was in the interests of both sides, and “that is what I will campaign for.”^{lxiii}

Merkel’s political position has been challenged from the far right too and, indeed, the challenge has become so significant that Alternative fuer Deutschland (AfD), more or less the German equivalent of Britain’s UKIP, recently obtained a bigger share of the vote than the CDU in regional elections in the Chancellor’s home state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.

Many of AfD’s leading figures are ‘*Russlandversteher*’, who rarely mute their sympathy for the Kremlin. Often they unquestioningly echo Moscow’s favourite themes. Here, for example, is Bjoern Hoecke, the Chairman of the AFD group in the state assembly of Thuringia:

“A lasting peace in Europe is not possible against Russia, but only with Russia. And I say to you categorically: sanctions against Russia are not in the German national interest, dear friends.”^{lxiv}

In 2015, he was a keynote speaker at a conference organised by the ‘Institute for State Politics’ (Institut fuer Staatspolitik) at the Rittergut Schnellroda. The Institute is reported to cooperate with the ‘Centre for Continental Cooperation’, an organisation based in Munich, which is run by Yuri Kofner. Its Moscow office is registered at the “Eurasian Club” of the Moscow State Institute of

International Relations (MGIMO), an academic institution run by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where Kofner is a visiting lecturer.^{lxv}

Hoecke is “one of the biggest Russia-sympathisers in the party”, a man who believes in “recognising the annexation of Crimea, lifting sanctions and leaving the American-driven NATO.”^{lxvi} He is not, however, by any means unique.

The AfD has sought to make contact with Russia at an official level since its earliest days. In 2014, two senior party officials, the press spokesman Christian Lueth and board member Georg Pazderski, were entertained to a “relaxed and friendly” tea at the Russian embassy in Berlin. Other meetings followed and the party’s Vice Chairman, Alexander Gauland, **a former CDU MdB** and state secretary, was soon visiting Russian diplomats at the Soviet-era, neo-classical building too.

Gauland is the main architect of AfD’s pro-Russian policy. In the autumn of 2013, he wrote a position paper for the party leadership in which he not only called for the West to take a more moderate position towards Russia, but also praised Otto von Bismarck’s nineteenth century “reinsurance policy”. The reference to Bismarck’s secret diplomacy seemed **too** many to be a call for Germany to abandon its traditional ‘*Westbindung*’ in NATO – something Gauland himself denies.^{lxvii}

In 2015, together with other AfD politicians, Gauland travelled to Saint Petersburg at the invitation of the Russian charity, the Saint Basil the Great Foundation. During his visit, he met a senior member of Putin’s ‘United Russia’ party and Andrei Klimkov, the Vice-Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Duma.^{lxviii} He is also reported to have held talks with a “personal representative of Putin” and with the ideologue, Alexander Dugin, one of the architects of “Novorossiia” and a man whose extremist views on matters ranging from homosexuality to expanding Russia’s borders into a new strategic sphere of influence in “Eurasia” are known to have influenced Putin.^{lxix}

Interestingly, the Russian charity which arranged Gauland’s visit to Saint Petersburg was established by the oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev, who was identified by the European Council as being “closely linked to... separatists in eastern Ukraine and Crimea” and made the subject of a European Council sanctions resolution.^{lxx} Malofeyev’s links were, in fact, so close that, at one time, he had even employed the so-called “Prime Minister” of the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” as a PR consultant. He was also allegedly one of the authors of a plan produced for the Kremlin before the annexation of Crimea, which set out a strategy for annexing parts of eastern Ukraine.^{lxxi}

The AfD has been accused of accepting funding from sources connected to the Kremlin – an allegation recently made by the **CDU foreign policy spokesman, Roderich Kiesewetter**, and promptly vehemently denied. AfD’s Co-Chairman said that he could provide a categorical assurance that the party had not accepted any funding from the Kremlin either directly or indirectly and he described the allegation as “conspiracy theory mischief.” Whatever the truth about possible Russian financing of the AfD, however, it is clear that Gauland’s host in Saint Petersburg, Konstantin Malofeyev, whose firm Marshall Capital Partners is one of Russia’s biggest investment funds with interests in telecommunications, media and technology, has played a role in building links with right-wing and populist organisations in several European countries – possibly part of a Kremlin plan to encourage the growth of an international, ‘conservative’ equivalent of the Comintern. A self-described “Orthodox monarchist”, he has established a right-wing TV channel “Tsargrad” and in 2014 hosted a meeting in Vienna for representatives of far-right parties including the French Front National,

Bulgaria's Ataka Party and Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ)^{lxxii}. Malofeyev's co-host at the meeting, which was addressed by FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache, was the Kremlin's favourite ideologue Alexander Dugin.^{lxxiii}

AfD's links with Russia have now become so close and so unashamedly overt that the party's youth organisation, Junge Alternative (JA) recently agreed to a formal alliance with the 'Young Guard', the youth wing of Putin's 'United Russia'. The Chairman of JA, Markus Frohnmaier, said:

"All over the European continent, Eurosceptic and pro-sovereignty movements are growing stronger" and, therefore, it made sense for the JA "of course, to bundle these activities together in one new youth network. Russia shouldn't be excluded from it."^{lxxiv}

With the CDU weakened by Germany's migration crisis, which has given extra fuel to populist right-wing sentiment, contributing not only to the rise of AfD but also to the 'anti-Islamisation' group PEGIDA, AfD is well placed to advance in next year's federal elections. As the elections may well result in yet another coalition government, AfD's '*Russlandpolitik*' may soon be on the agenda for discussion.

Although it is not a political party and has no formal links with AfD, PEGIDA is worth a mention in the context of Russia's campaign to win support on the right of Germany's political spectrum. The organisation has been at the forefront of the campaign against Chancellor Merkel's decision to allow refugees from Syria into Germany. Its heartland is around the former East German city of Dresden and its 'Monday Demonstrations', at which some protesters have been known to carry Russian flags and even signs saying 'Merkel for Siberia, Putin for Berlin' or 'Putin, Help Us', have been enthusiastically reported by the official Russian media as proof of Germany's "disintegration". In fact, Russian enthusiasm for PEGIDA has been so enthusiastic that there have even been attempts to force German media to give the 'Monday demonstrations' more coverage (see below).

Others in the 'Cross Front'

The leadership of Germany's Green Party, Bündnis 90 Die Grünen, has been sharply critical of Putin. Party spokesmen have also spoken out in favour of European solidarity with Ukraine and against those who sought to appease Russia following the annexation of Crimea. The party's representative on the Petersburger Dialog, Marieluise Beck, has been particularly critical (see below).

As with the CDU, however, there are those who take a different line to the leadership. In June 2016, Ludger Volmer, the former minister of state in the Foreign Ministry, who served under Joschka Fischer, the Greens' former leader and foreign minister, sent an open letter to the leadership attacking party policy on Russia. He accused the Greens of trying to demonise Putin and of being ready to justify the West's action against Russia. "Putin is no role model for a libertarian democracy but he is no warmonger either," he said.^{lxxv}

The FDP, Germany's Liberals, failed to reach the threshold to gain an automatic allocation of seats in the Bundestag at the last election. They may make a comeback at the federal elections next year, however. In the political wilderness for the time being, senior figures in the party have taken sharply

differing positions towards Russia. Christian Lindner, the party leader, has been forthright in his criticism of Putin, whom he describes as being “clearly no longer interested in the interests of his people but in those of his ruling clique.” Lindner has accused Putin of wanting to “break up the EU, which is why he is supporting right-wing populist forces throughout Europe”, called for a strengthening of NATO and said that “it is time to start to talk again about a European defence community.”^{lxxvi}

The FDP’s Deputy Chairman, however, has taken a very different line to his party leader. Three days after Lindner had made his remarks criticising Putin in an interview with Die Welt, Wolfgang Kubicki attacked the Federal Government’s “confrontational” foreign and security policy, saying that “if the FDP was in Government, we would be massively against sending NATO troops to Poland’s eastern border.” He insisted that this would not be seen by Russia as a peacebuilding action. “Sanctions are sharpening the position in Russia. The security situation is not improving but rather the opposite is the case.” He called for Germany to pursue a policy of de-escalation.^{lxxvii}

The Russian Lobby – Organisations (Petersburger Dialog, the German-Russian Forum, Ost-Ausschuss and others)

Germany has several prominent organisations, officially devoted to promoting dialogue and improved relations with Russia, which have often played a leading role recently in advancing Moscow’s information aims.

Perhaps the most significant platform for Germany’s pro-Russia lobby in recent years has been the ‘Petersburger Dialog’. This powerful organisation, which was “designed to foster open dialogue between German and Russian civil society groups” has actually acted as a networking group for influential Russophiles and often as a sort of intellectual rallying point for sympathetic figures in politics, the media, business and academia. **Chaired from 2001 – 2009 by Mikhail Gorbachev and since 2010 by Viktor Zubkov, Russia’s First Deputy Prime Minister, the organisation, which meets annually as a full conference but hosts regular ‘working groups’ on key issues, has become, for some of its participants, a useful forum within which to test, develop and promulgate Moscow’s key messages.**

Founded in 2001 at the initiative of President Putin and Chancellor Schroeder, it sees itself as an “open forum” to develop German-Russian relations but, increasingly, it has become focussed on the idea of a special relationship. Officially, its main priorities are “increasing mutual understanding between Germany and Russia”, “developing mutual cooperation in all social spheres” and “broadening contacts between the two **nations.**”

By bringing together political ‘*Russlandversteher*’ with leading businessmen, academics and media folk, however, the Petersburger Dialog has become a powerful lobby for the ‘special relationship’, as well as for **misconceived notions, such as that, by criticising Russian aggression, Germany is wasting the chance to take advantage of the immense opportunity for its industry presented by improved relations with Russia.**

The organisation has been severely criticised for its **“lack of independence and for allegedly preventing voices critical of Russia from being heard”.**^{lxxviii} Msizier After its 2014 conference was

cancelled, following the Russian annexation of Ukraine, some German members of the organisation called for its urgent reform, saying that, whilst it was intended to be a forum for dialogue between Russia and Germany, a genuine exchange of views between civil society organisations in the two countries was hardly taking place at all. The organisation's internal critics, who included the MdBs Andreas Schockenhoff (CDU) and Marieluise Beck (die Gruenen / Buendnis 90), together with representatives of the Konrad Adenauer and Heinrich Boell Foundations, presented a paper calling for "the active participation of civil society players involved in Russia" and "room for criticism of Russian policy."^{lxxix}

The critics claimed that the Chairman of Petersburger Dialog at the time, Lothar de Maiziere, "blocked any criticism of the organisation, which he characterised as offensive to German-Russian relations." Schockenhoff severely criticised de Maiziere, who had been the last Minister-President of the GDR but was a CDU colleague, and called for his resignation. He said that the Petersburger Dialog was "very, very narrowly led" by a small group, which regularly rejected the participation of civil society organisations if they were seen as likely to be too critical. **Before the organisation's meeting in Sochi,** "a whole lot of German non-governmental organisations refused to participate" because of pressure on them and their Russian partners.^{lxxx}

A major component of the reformers' agenda was to decouple the Petersburger Dialog from its close association with the German-Russian Forum. The two organisations were, at one point, so close that they shared a Chief Executive – Martin Hoffmann. The German-Russian Forum is largely dominated by industrial and financial interests and many of its members are also members of the Petersburger Dialog. The fact that the Petersburger Dialog's Russian Chairman, in addition to being a former Deputy Prime Minister, is also the Chairman of the Supervisory Board of Gazprom, has no doubt been a particular attraction. However, the reformers were even more unhappy about the role of the former SPD Minister President of Brandenburg, Matthias Platzeck, as Chairman of the German-Russian Forum after he announced that Russia's annexation of the Crimea should be accepted.

"These two organisations were first founded, in order to develop dialogue between civil society in both countries," says Stefan Meister, East European expert of the European Council on Foreign Relations. "The aim was also to impart Western values like democracy, transparency and the rule of law. In the intervening period, however, the organisations were misused to do lobbying work for industrial interests and to present a positive image of Russia to the German public."^{lxxxi}

The management of the German-Russian Forum is dominated by industrial interests. The board, for example, includes Michael Sasse, who is the Communications Director of the Kassel-based oil and gas giant Wintershall. A subsidiary of BASF, Wintershall has been working closely with Gazprom since the early nineties, providing trading services and storage, winning exploration business in Russia in return.

The German-Russian Forum's "research director" is also connected to Wintershall and to the Petersburger Dialog too. He is the well-known '*Russlandversteher*' and self-proclaimed "expert on Russia", Alexander Rahr. He has held his post of "senior adviser" to Wintershall since 2012. Fluent in both Russian and German, owing to his Russian-German father Gleb, Rahr has become a frequent guest on political talk shows; his positions with the German-Russian Forum and as a member of the steering committee of the Petersburger Dialog lend him an air of authority. A former director of the Berthold Beitz Centre at the German Society for Foreign Policy, where he was succeeded by Ewald

Boehlke, Rahr “needs platforms like the Petersburger Dialog and the German-Russian Forum, in order not to lose his influence.”^{lxxxii}

With a direct connection to Putin (who is supposed to have restored his father’s Russian citizenship after hearing his story), Rahr has been severely criticised by leading CDU and Green politicians in the European Parliament. Elmar Brok of the CDU said that organisations, such as the Petersburger Dialog and the German-Russian Forum, “should not be infiltrated by people like Rahr.” Werner Schulz of the Greens was even more explicit: “Mr Rahr operates in Germany as a sort of agent of influence of the Kremlin.”^{lxxxiii}

There have been claims too that officials of the old East German communist regime and former Stasi agents have found their way into the higher reaches of both the German-Russian Forum and the Petersburger Dialog. Hans-Joachim Gornig, a former Deputy Minister of Coal and Energy of the GDR and, more recently, the boss of Gazprom Germany, was a former President of the Board of Trustees of the German-Russian Forum. So was Lothar de Maiziere, East Germany’s last Minister-President, who also served on the steering committee of the Petersburger Dialog. He has been accused of being a Stasi agent (inoffizielle Mitarbeiter) with the codename “Czerny,” a claim he denies. Andre Brie, also member of Petersburger Dialog’s steering committee, worked for the Stasi for almost twenty years under the codename “Peter Scholz”.

Interestingly, in 1992, Brie’s brother Michael, allegedly another former Stasi agent, co-authored a book entitled ‘Russia again in the Dark’ with Rahr’s successor at the Berthold Beitz Centre, Ewald Boehlke. After studying philosophy at East Berlin’s Humboldt University in 1989, he suddenly joined Daimler AG in 1995 and became known as an “expert on Russia”. During the early days of the crisis in Ukraine, Rahr appeared on the ZDF television channel’s “Morgenmagazin” programme on a Wednesday morning and was followed on Thursday by “Russia expert” Boehlke, who used exactly the same arguments. “What a coincidence,” as one newspaper observed.^{lxxxiv}

The Petersburger Dialog and the German-Russian Forum exert a significant degree of influence on the ‘Ost-Ausschuss der deutschen Wirtschaft’ (the Eastern Commission of German Industry), which in turn is well placed to influence the Government. The Ost-Ausschuss represents Germany’s leading companies with an interest in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet countries. 130 companies are members of the organisation and it is supported by important trade associations, including the Confederation of German Industry (BDI) and the Confederation of German Banks. Its board includes representatives of Siemens, Deutsche Bank and BASF.

Leading members of the Ost-Ausschuss have been worried about the effect of sanctions since their imposition and Russian state-controlled media have given their expressions of concern particular emphasis. In June 2015, for example, Russia Today gave prominence to a report of a speech at the German Society for Foreign Policy by Eckhard Cordes, who at the time was Chairman of the Ost-Ausschuss:

“The head of the Eastern Commission of German Industry (OA), Eckhard Cordes, criticised the West’s politically motivated trade war against Russia at the German Society for Foreign Policy in Berlin on Tuesday. Moreover, the representative of business warned of an escalation of the conflict, which could lead to a rupture in the relationship and have particularly negative consequences for

Germany.... Cordes believes that a stable and prosperous Europe is only possible with Russia, “against Russia it is practically impossible”.^{”lxxxv}

Cordes, who remains on the board of the Ost-Ausschuss, despite having stepped down as Chairman in 2015, has been a vocal opponent of sanctions. In 2014 he warned that “it is possible that, by the end of the year, we could have a fall in our exports to Russia of between 20 and 25%. This would put about 50,000 jobs in Germany in danger.”^{”lxxxvi} In 2015, again warning of the prospect of major job losses, he proposed that there should be a free trade zone of the EU, Russia and neighbouring countries. Arguing for Ukraine to be a bridge between West and East, an old favourite of *Russlandverstehers*, he said “We are campaigning for direct talks between the European Commission and the Eurasian Economic Commission about a common economic architecture, so about a common free trade zone in which Ukraine can also take part.”^{”lxxxvii}

Although some of Cordes’ colleagues disagreed with his views (the BDI President, Ulrich Grillo, said that “the long-term security of the rule of law is more important than short-term success in business”^{”lxxxviii}) and in spite of some speculation that the Ost-Ausschuss would be less sympathetic to Moscow under its new Chairman, Wolfgang Buechele, the organisation has continued to push for an easing of sanctions. A recent call for a softer EU sanctions regime led to a strong protest from Ukraine’s ambassador to Berlin, Andrij Melnyk.

“Such demands are totally counter-productive and pointless,” he said. “On the contrary, they only strengthen the Kremlin in its perfidious strategy to date of delivering nothing in the Minsk Peace Process and, instead, playing for time.”^{”lxxxix}

Germany is not short of organisations ready to argue Moscow’s case or to provide a platform for supportive speakers. From the ‘Berlin Friends of Russia’ to the ‘Potsdam Meetings’, annual two-day conferences sponsored by Wintershall, which aim to bring public figures from Russia and Germany together to “deepen understanding for each other”, there are plenty of groups, organisations and meetings, which help to promote the cause of lifting sanctions and creating a ‘special relationship’. New groups are even created by *Russlandverstehers* already active in some of the existing groups. ‘Russlandkontrovers.de’, for example, an online discussion forum, offers participants “a variety of expert opinions and background information about contemporary issues, giving the online public the chance to get a multi-dimensional picture and to take part in topical discussions, adding their own comments.”^{”xc} Martin Hoffmann (of the German-Russian Forum and the Petersburger Dialog) appears prominently as one of the organisation’s “experts”, together with Gabriele Krone-Schmalz, whose columns are currently the only ones to appear on the site for discussion.

One new pro-Russian organisation, which has raised a few eyebrows recently, is the “Dialogue for Civilisations Research Institute”. Originally established in Vienna and the organiser of annual conferences on the island of Rhodes, the Institute has now opened a large and well-funded office in Berlin. It is the brainchild of the former head of Russian Railways, Vladimir Yakunin, who left his job after the railways sank deeper into the red, while he grew richer. Now he has pledged 25 million Euros for the Institute’s 5-year start-up period.

His 25 million Euros will ensure that the Institute has a permanent staff of 20 employees and support from other patrons will enable the organisation to pay for a regular flow of contributions from respected academics, analysts and commentators. Its supervisory board includes a former ambassador to Moscow, Hans-Friedrich von Ploetz, and the retired General, Harald Kujat.

“It is the beginning of a high-flying plan, with which the Kremlin wants to change political opinion in the West,” notes the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Small wonder then that such an ambitious

scheme should have been entrusted to one of Putin's closest confidantes, a man who spent 22 years in the KGB and its successor foreign intelligence service, the SVR, before becoming a railwayman.^{xci}

"In Russia's information war, it is not just about broadcasters, news portals or troll factories, which swamp Internet sites with fake comments," the Frankfurter Allgemeine observed. "It is also about seemingly independent scientific institutes, financed by a seemingly independent entrepreneur. When it is about Russian influence, about the soft power of the Kremlin, the sharpest weapons are the advocates of Russian policy in Germany itself. Here Yakunin and his comrades can count on their greatest successes."^{xcii}

Operations and Methods

Modern Russian information warfare, in the form of systematic psychological and propaganda operations or so-called '*spetspropaganda*', was created in the Soviet Union under Stalin in 1942. Since then, as Jolanta Darczewska of the Centre for Eastern Studies in Warsaw has pointed out in '*The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare*', her study of the "Crimean Operation", apart from a short period after the fall of the Soviet Union, its development has been continuous. It has repeatedly taken advantage of both new political situations and advances in technology. Its main elements, which go far beyond traditional propaganda and constitute the new methods of Russian info-war are:

- "social control" (influence on society)
- "social manoeuvring" (the targeted control of public opinion)
- "manipulation of information" (the presentation of genuine facts in a way which distorts their meaning)
- "disinformation" (the spreading of fabricated and manipulated information)
- other means, such as lobbying and blackmail.

It is clear that Germany has been, and continues to be, the victim of all these various forms of information warfare. The combination of lobbying and media activity is having an effect: it has begun to alter German minds and to change preconceptions. A broad front of opinion in favour of lifting the EU's sanctions on Moscow has been created and there is now a fertile seed bed ready to be sown with other ideas, such as the ending of Germany's *Westbindung* and the development of a 'special relationship' with Russia.

The cultivation of influential figures from across the political spectrum has been reinforced by a media campaign, which has focussed, above all, on the opportunities offered by the Internet to build and shape opinion. The use of new media helps to bolster the impression of widespread sympathy for the position of the various '*Russlandversteher*' spread across the political parties. It creates the impression of a solid body of support and becomes self-reinforcing, encouraging the mainstream media to give weight to opinions that might otherwise be dismissed as too marginal or too extreme. It feeds off the mainstream media too, ensuring a flow of comments, tweets, re-tweets and links, steadily moulding public opinion and building pressure for political changes as soon as they become realisable.

The extent of Russian efforts to influence opinion in Europe's mainstream media has been well documented. False accounts on Facebook and Twitter have been used to spread approved versions of leading stories and supportive opinions. So-called 'troll farms' have been set up, which are staffed by dozens, even hundreds, of employees, whose job is to invade the mainstream media, producing a tide of supportive opinion in newspaper comment sections and creating so-called "shitstorms", which descend around the heads of journalists who oppose the Kremlin's line. There are "scores" of troll farms around Russia but perhaps the most notorious is the so-called 'Internet Research Agency', which, according to one account, "industrialised the art of trolling" and was until recently located at 55 Savushkina Street in Saint Petersburg. At one point, it employed over 400 people and its management was "obsessed with statistics – page views, numbers of posts and a blog's place on Live Journal's traffic charts – and team leaders compelled hard work through a system of bonuses and fines."^{xciii}

The tactic is not new – the Israelis developed a sophisticated operation, using trolls, to counter pro-Palestinian coverage in European media – but it has been refined and developed by the Russians to the point that thousands of people are now estimated to work in the industry.^{xciv} Whilst pro-Kremlin trolling began at the turn of the decade in response to the growth of Russia's tech-savvy opposition and the street protests it organised against electoral fraud, it has now expanded dramatically to a stage at which, in the view of one commentator, "Russia's information war might be thought of as the biggest trolling operation in history, and its target is nothing less than the utility of the Internet as a democratic space."^{xcv}

President Putin famously said that he regarded the Internet as "a CIA project" and one German analyst thinks that one small part of it – social media - has now become "central" to Russia's propaganda campaign. "Altogether social media play a central role in the dissemination of propaganda. With the help of social 'bots', or directed robot-profiles in social networks, false news and internet memes are spread. The flooding of reader forums on international media sites with pro-Kremlin comment is part of this."^{xcvi}

The information campaign has not simply involved the deployment of armies of pro-Kremlin trolls to offer supportive comment but often the creation and dissemination of sophisticated false or distorted news stories, designed to discredit opponents. The campaign is now well established in the German language sphere.

"Since the Russian occupation of Crimea, a new type of opinion war has been raging in German-speaking internet media too, above all in social networks," Die Welt reported. "These are increasingly a substitute for conventional media and they form opinion, so they are the preferred point of interception for the new Russian methods of propaganda. It is already well known that Russia is practically ruled internally by the secret services, who penetrated the freedom movement in Ukraine from the very beginning. That they are now doing it in the Western media to this extent is new."^{xcvii}

Ingo Mannteufel, the editor of Deutsche Welle's Russia service has experienced numerous 'shitstorms' around his channel's reports about the conflict in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. A major target has been Deutsche Welle's Russian-language Facebook pages, which have been repeatedly attacked.

“They are partly empty insults about German politicians or particularly about the Federal Chancellor too, often with anti-Semitic undertones or anti-American undertones and then they go for the regime in Kiev,” he says, recalling ‘shitstorms’ about his service’s radio broadcasts. Visitors to the broadcaster’s website used insults like “Journalists for Sale!” and “Fascist Overlords!” Mannteufel was surprised by their hate-filled tone but what made him most suspicious were their concealed identities.

“If you look at the Facebook page of such a person, you see straight away that he has just appeared shortly beforehand or a few days earlier, that there are very few details about the person on the page. Few photos, few details about background or likes. Moreover, one has the impression that the photos, if there are photos, are not real photos but something put together from the Internet.”^{xcviii}

A former Moscow correspondent of Germany’s ‘Focus’ magazine, Boris Reitschuster, reported something very similar when he was the subject of mysterious attacks by Internet users.

“Coincidences are, for example, that the argumentation is very, very strongly repetitive – even to the point that errors of grammar and syntax are identical. And when one then deletes someone, they’re back again in the shortest possible time. This is also a reliable indication that the whole thing is directed.”^{xcix}

There is evidence that ‘shitstorms’ are being deliberately created, in order to intimidate journalists and bring about changes in coverage. In the spring of 2014, a fake Facebook group called openly for a ‘shitstorm’ against German media, which the organisers claimed were not giving enough coverage to PEGIDA’s ‘Monday demonstrations’ against asylum-seekers. At the demonstrations, right-wingers also protested against any criticism of Putin. The Facebook group called for German radio to be flooded with online attacks. “Bomb the media with opinions,” supporters were told.

Ingo Mannteufel has no doubt about what is happening in Germany and why. “The Kremlin is using media it controls as an instrument of an aggressive foreign policy,” he says. “It’s called ‘hybrid warfare’. The methods of this targeted disinformation and manipulation of public opinion were first used in Russia to secure President Putin’s power. In the conflict in Ukraine, Russian propaganda has reached a new level: through distortions, half-truths and completely untrue stories, ‘the Ukrainians’ have been continually denigrated as ‘fascists’.

“For some time now, Germany has moved into the cross-hairs of this disinformation – presumably because Chancellor Angela Merkel succeeded in keeping the EU together over the question of sanctions against Moscow. The calculation is probably that if Merkel falls because of the refugee crisis and if Germany then becomes weaker in Europe, the alliance for sanctions against Russia will crumble.”^c

Moscow has been particularly active in using the refugee crisis to stir up online hostility both to migrants and, through their presence in Germany, to Chancellor Merkel. Earlier this year, the Russian scandal-sheet ‘Sovershenno Sekretno’, for example, carried the headline “Russian Germans raid Refugee Hostel in Germany”. The story reported that around 400 ethnic Russian men had been forced to defend themselves against refugees and roughed up a hostel in Bruchsal near Karlsruhe with baseball bats. It was a complete fabrication and, according to the local police, all that happened was that 4 men smashed the window of some refugee accommodation in the nearby village of Karlsdorff-Neuthard.

The story was typical, however, of coverage in mainstream Russian media. Since the attacks on women in Koeln on New Year's Eve, there has been a determined effort to portray German society as on the brink of collapse and on the point of being overrun by migrants. "The events in Koeln have split society," reported the Russian TV channel Rossiya24. "Fewer and fewer people believe that the migrants don't represent a threat."^{ci}

Perhaps even more shameless was Moscow's use of the case of Lisa, a thirteen-year-old girl in Berlin who was reported missing. Russia's TV news programme 'Vesti' reported that she had been abducted by refugees and raped. The story created a storm in the Internet and was, no doubt, very helpful to those in organisations, such as PEGIDA and the AfD, who have campaigned against Chancellor Merkel's decision to provide asylum for refugees from Syria and elsewhere. The Berlin police told reporters that "the fact is that – according to investigations by our Regional Crime Department, there was neither an abduction, nor a rape."^{cii} By that time, however, the story had got its boots on.

An important factor in the dissemination of these various distortions and untruths has been Germany's large Russian-speaking community (almost 2.3 million, according to some estimates). They have roots in the former Soviet Union and many still watch Russian TV, listen to the radio or read newspapers. They often share stories on the Internet and, wittingly or unwittingly, help to spread Moscow's distorted versions of current events. "Some contributions act as if they are trying to stir up a pogrom mood among Russian Germans," commented one German newspaper.^{ciii}

What this process of distortion and dissemination of stories and rumours amounts to is a highly sophisticated, insidious and very well resourced form of information warfare. "At its core," says Ingo Mannteufel, "it's about the targeted use of information, in order to distort the perception of reality and produce a desired reaction in the recipient of the disinformation: in Russian textbooks, these techniques are called 'reflexive control.'

One major objective is often to produce an information storm, in which the ordinary citizen becomes disoriented and confused by conflicting versions of a story. Ingo Mannteufel explains:

"Outside Russia, propaganda aims to increase anxieties and destabilise societies. A first means of influencing public opinion is the maximum increase in news, so that the recipients, faced with a mass of unproven, frightening and thoroughly contradictory information will be overwhelmed: loss of orientation and clarity are the consequences of this 'information noise.'"^{civ}

False or distorted stories on Russia's official media, helpful comments, speeches and articles by well-placed '*Putin-versteher*' and blogs, tweets or comments on the Internet all help to create the Kremlin's 'information noise' and undermine arguments for German solidarity with NATO and the EU.

"Alongside the official media – in Russia those from the Kremlin-controlled broadcaster, abroad Russia Today and Sputnik – the Russian propaganda-apparatus is using the Internet very cleverly for this. A relatively unknown website or a blog publishes a report, which is then repeated by other dubious websites. Then a bigger, better known Russian media outlet steps in and, with a reference to supposed 'sources,' brings the report into the net. It is now so presentable that it does the rounds of the media. Questions about the truth or empirically verifiable facts play no role."^{cv}

Several of the campaign's major objectives have already been achieved. It helped to blunt Europe's response to Russian aggression in Crimea. It has undermined many Germans' feelings of solidarity with NATO and spread anti-Americanism. Above all though, it has helped to weaken the position of Chancellor Merkel ahead of next year's federal elections.

There can be little doubt about the objectives of the campaign, nor about the methods it employs, nor, ultimately, about the source of much of it. The Russian Foreign Ministry made the mistake of publishing on the internet its message asking supporters to "please praise this good analysis (in *Der Spiegel*) on Facebook and Twitter reserved". The request was widely understood to be an instruction to the Kremlin's army of "trolls" to spread the article and comment positively on it. It was evidence of Moscow's understanding of how the modern media is shaped and influenced.

The Kremlin's objectives are nothing short of changing Germany in Putin's image says one commentator, the Russian sociologist, Igor Eidman, who now lives in Leipzig. A cousin of the murdered liberal politician Boris Nemtsov, Eidman worked for a while in PR and understands how a combination of pressure and information management helped to undermine opponents of Putin in the Duma. Now he says that the same thing is happening in Germany.

"The use of false information, the defaming of political opponents, the spreading of provocative rumours and the incitement of envy and hatred – all this was applied in an information war by Russian experts in our own country, then expanded into (Eastern) Ukraine and now is being tried in Germany too. A while ago, I was able to speak with a colleague from my time at the Duma, who was also involved in political consultancy. He said that the big Russian PR budgets would be flowing to Europe, to Germany at present: 'We are working with the system critical elites there, with the general public.'"^{cvii}

One Russian state organisation, which is clearly heavily involved in the information campaign in Germany and elsewhere is Rossotrudnichestvo. A department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it has offices in Berlin and also run the 'Russian House' – the large cultural and conference centre on the city's Friedrichstrasse.

In 2014, shortly after the invasion of Crimea, I met an old friend in Berlin. He was working in a senior position for a 'Rossotrudnichestvo'. Originally responsible for relations with Russians abroad, the organisation subsequently appeared to morph into something akin to the Goethe Institut or the British Council. Now, however, it has taken on a very different role. It is at the forefront of Russia's information campaign and my friend had just learned about a meeting in the *Russisches Haus*, which was attended by the organisation's heads in several European countries. Those invited discussed media strategy and, in particular, the use of social media – something at which, he boasted, they were now becoming very good. At the end of the meeting, they were addressed by President Putin himself, who appeared on a large screen at the end of the boardroom via satellite link from Moscow.^{cvii}

The importance Putin clearly attaches to the activities of Rossotrudnichestvo can perhaps best be understood in the light of an explanation given by the organisation's national president, Konstantin Kosachev, about Russia's need to project 'soft power,' rather than to use traditional propaganda. In an interview with Russia Direct, he said:

“In my view, the soft power of any country is represented by people abroad who adequately perceive this country, understand all the advantages of cooperation with this country and who are ready to contribute to this cooperation.

“And so, if you take a look at social networks, the online environment and the attitude of ordinary people around the world to what is happening in Ukraine, it is far less categorical than the attitude of Western politicians. Sometimes, it even contradicts the latter. For politicians, everything is black and white (or rather black): ‘We do not recognise Crimea as part of Russia! We support Maidan! We must isolate Moscow!’ This view is being imposed in an attempt to fuel tensions in public opinion and force Russia to reconsider its actions. It’s a struggle.... There are attempts to destroy Russia’s image at a well-orchestrated level in a radical way. It’s because this image is presented on Western TV and in some newspapers in a very negative way. And we clearly see it....

Our task is not to justify Russia’s actions. Our task is to withstand the information campaign aimed at the discrediting of Russia and disseminate worldwide what really happened in Ukraine and Crimea... Propaganda is a tool of direct influence in people’s consciousness. For propaganda, we have specially set up institutions, primarily, governmental ones, and many know about them. Soft power is a different thing. It’s about people’s own convictions that must come as a result of personal choice, not imposed in any way by means of propaganda. It’s not enough for the presence of government to make soft power more effective. Moreover, there should be less government, at least outwardly.

“In the frontline, there should be activity of civil society, public organisations and people who, even being in the minority, would not feel themselves outsiders and social outcasts under the pressure of a powerful government propaganda machine working abroad. And the number of such people is increasing now, not decreasing.”^{CVIII}

The website of Rossotrudnichestvo in Germany gives few clues to this aspect of the organisation’s mandate. It is full of reassuring news about forthcoming concerts and exhibitions – a performance of ‘Pinocchio’ by Berlin’s Russian-speaking theatre company ‘Telekompaschka’ and a concert by the Mussorgsky Conservatory of the Urals. Perhaps an indication of its true nature and the task it has been set by the Kremlin to coordinate Russia’s ‘soft power’ offensive is, however, given by a look at the type of person the organisation employs.

In Berlin, Rossotrudnichestvo’s Deputy Director is Alexander Anisimov. He is someone with a great deal of experience outside the field of cultural exchange. He is a public relations and communications specialist, even what Russians refer to as a “political technologist.” Educated at the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, **he worked for Remova (Afro-Asia)** Group and for the Gazprom-linked oil and gas company ITERA, where he ran the Government Relations and PR Department from 2003 – 2009. He is a high-flyer who has also worked as an aide to Mikhail Gorbachev, as an international affairs adviser to both the Duma and the Russian Government and, interestingly, as the Executive Secretary of Petersburger Dialog.

Clearly, he and his colleagues may be doing a lot more in Berlin than simply promoting children’s productions of ‘Pinocchio.’

Official Responses

German officialdom appears only recently to have begun to appreciate the extent of the problem the country faces. Whilst the mainstream media have focussed some attention on Russian attempts to influence opinion in Germany – the ‘Lisa affair’ was, for many, a real eye-opener – Government departments and agencies have been slow to address the problem, their task made all the more difficult by the extent to which parts of the political establishment have already been compromised.

Now, however, officials are starting to speak openly about their suspicions that Russia is “trying to stir up trouble, with a view to weakening Chancellor Angela Merkel.”^{cxix} They believe that Moscow has been trying to erode public confidence in Merkel by using immigration, an issue which has both damaged her opinion poll ratings and divided European governments.

“There is a Russian attempt to strengthen disunity in the EU and to work with anti-European, right-wing populist parties...,” a senior official told Reuters. “The aim is to weaken the EU. Moscow is targeting the strongest, most stable country – Germany. Of course, it is in the interest of this Russian government to weaken Merkel as the leader of this country.” Another senior official added “the EU cannot allow third parties to split the union.”^{cx}

Germany’s equivalent of MI5, the **Bundesamt fuer Verfassungsschutz** (BfV), has given a clear and open warning about the cyber threat from Moscow. “Germany is the focus for foreign intelligence services,” said a recent report by the agency. “Our geo-strategic position in the centre of Europe, our influence in the EU, our membership of NATO, the strength of our economy with many innovative companies and the worldwide recognition of German scientific and research services in both the public and private sectors are moving the Federal Republic into the centre of intelligence agencies’ information aspirations.

“Russian intelligence agency electronic attacks against German targets are, for the most part, long-term, internationally directed cyber-espionage operations in the framework of a comprehensive extraction of strategic information... Many of these attacks show similarities to each other, for instance in malicious software families and infrastructure, which are important indications of the same authorship... It can be assumed from this that both the Russian internal intelligence agency, the FSB, and the external military intelligence agency, the GRU, are conducting cyber operations.”^{cx}

The BfV’s Director, Hans-Georg Maassen, has warned that “cyber-space is a place of hybrid warfare,” which opens up “new theatres of operations for espionage and sabotage.” As a consequence, Germany’s government, administration, economy, science and research are “permanently under threat.”^{cxii} The BfV has openly laid the blame for ‘Pawn Storm’, a cyber-attack on the Bundestag in 2015, on Moscow. In April 2016, the IT security firm Trend-Micro revealed that a sophisticated ‘phishing’ attack on the headquarters of the CDU, which involved the creation of a fake server in Latvia to imitate the CDU’s own webmail server, was related to ‘Pawn Storm’ and organised by Russian hackers. Their target seems to have been critics of the Russian Government.^{cxiii}

Whilst Germany, along with other European countries, is still in the process of establishing an EU structure for collective defence against cyber-attacks – the so-called “EU Hybrid Fusion Cell” in the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (INTCEN) – and to coordinate this with NATO, an immediate concern is the potential threat to next year’s Federal elections. Both Britain and France experienced attempts to hack important targets ahead of their elections and it is possible that Germany could be

similarly targeted. With the stakes now so high in Russia's continuing information war, the possibility of cyber-attacks designed to influence the result of the election certainly cannot be excluded.

Schlussfolgerung

Deutschland ist Ziel einer kontinuierlichen Informationskriegskampagne, die bereits seit langer Zeit akribisch geplant wird. Für diese Kampagne werden komplizierte Waffen entwickelt und nützliche Bündnisse geschmiedet. Strategie und Taktik dieser Kampagne basieren auf Konzepten und der Informationskriegsführung. Its strategy and tactics are based on concepts and doctrines of information warfare refined for the Internet era. It has carefully chosen targets and clear objectives. It is well aware of the weaknesses of Germany's democratic system, its system of oversight and the susceptibility of politicians and the public to cleverly formulated messages, designed to confuse as much as to convince.

The campaign has numerous strands but the most important are to secure the support of influential people and organisations, and to ensure a consistent concentration of information, so that opinions are gradually changed, opponents are undermined and support for policies more favourable to the Kremlin is increased. So far, it has focussed on cultivating influential supporters across the political spectrum and on using the Internet and social media to disseminate supportive messages or to pressurise and harass opponents.

Whilst the campaign is still in its early stages, it is clear that it has already achieved many of its objectives and that it has managed, at the very least, to confuse opinion, to undermine support for firm action against Russia over its aggression towards its neighbours and even, on occasion, significantly to weaken German resolve to stand in solidarity with NATO and the EU. It is clear too that an important stage in the campaign will be next year's federal elections and that the intensity of the information war will increase over the next twelve months. It is not simply the truth that will be a casualty of Moscow's information war.

Left unchecked, the consequences of a continuing Russian information campaign in Germany could be very serious for the West. The campaign is not simply about securing an easing of sanctions, a comparatively easy goal, which is simply one planned stop on the road to another destination. Putin's fundamental aim is to draw Germany into a 'special relationship' with Russia and to encourage an acceptance of the idea of new spheres of interest in Eastern Europe. The corollary of such a relationship would be an end to Germany's *'Westbindung'*, a severe blow to NATO and the transformation of the European Union into an eastward-, as opposed to westward, leaning bloc. It would mean, effectively, an acceptance of a Russian veto on European security.

What is remarkable is that all this could be achieved without a shot being fired. ^{CXIV}

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^v Ian Johnson, 'Sowing the Wind: the First Soviet-German Military Pact and the Origins of World War II,' 'warontherocks.com'

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^{viii} 'Gorbachev Blasts NATO Eastward Expansion', *Bild Newspapers Interview with Mikhail Gorbachev*, reported by RIA-Novosti, April 2 2009.

^{ix} Steven Pifer, 'Did NATO Promise Not to Enlarge? Gorbachev Says "No"', *Brookings*, Nov 6 2014

^x Mark Kramer, 'The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,' *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Spring 2009

^{xi} Mikhail Gorbachev, 'I Am Against All Walls,' Interview with 'Russia Beyond the Headlines,' October 16, 2014. In the interview, Gorbachev explains his view that NATO's decision to expand eastwards was taken in 1993 and that this violated the spirit, but not the letter, of his agreement: "The decision for the U.S. and its allies to expand NATO into the east was decisively made in 1993. I called this a big mistake from the very beginning. It was definitely a violation of the spirit of the statements and assurances made to us in 1990. With regards to Germany, they were legally enshrined and are being observed."

^{xii} Vladimir Putin, Speech to the Munich Conference on Security Policy, March 10 2007

^{xiii} Manfred Woerner, 'The Atlantic Alliance and European Security in the 1990s,' Address to the Bremer Tabaks Collegium, 17 May 1990

^{xiv} 'For me, it is not Borders that Matter,' Interview with Vladimir Putin, *Bild*, 11 January 2016

^{xv} 'How very understanding: Germany's ambivalence towards Russia reflects its confused identity,' *The Economist*, 10 May 2014

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^{xvii} 'Die Spuren schrecken: Putins deutsche Verteidiger wissen nicht, in welcher Tradition sie stehen', Heinrich August Winkler, *Der Spiegel*, 14 April 2014

^{xviii} 'The sympathy problem: Is Germany a country of Russia apologists?' Ralf Neukirch, *Der Spiegel*, 31 March 2014

^{xix} *Die Welt*, 'Zwei Putin-Versteher buersten gegen den Strich,' 13 March 2014

^{xx} *Ibid*

^{xxi} *Der Spiegel*, 'The sympathy problem...' op. cit.

^{xxii} *Ibid*

^{xxiii} *The Economist*, 'How to Fight Back: Responding to Moscow's Inept Bullying,' May 10, 2007

^{xxiv} *Der Spiegel*, 'Interview with Gerhard Schroeder: Serious Mistakes by the West,' August 18, 2008

^{xxv} *Die Zeit*, 'Putin Verstehen mit Gerhard Schroeder,' 9 March 2014

^{xxvi} *Ibid*

^{xxvii} Boris Reitschuster, 'Putins verdeckter Krieg: Wie Moskau den Westen destabilisiert,' Ullstein Verlag, Berlin 2016

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- xxx^v 'Russlandbeauftragter warnt vor Eskalation "bis hin zum Krieg,"' Die Welt, 23 June 2016. The Government's official 'Russlandbeauftragter', Gernot Erler, insisted that his fellow SPD politician Steinmeier had "made a good point" and had merely warned of a "spiral of escalation" between NATO and Russia, which "could lead to war."
- xxx^{vi} 'Saebbelrassel-Aussage', op. cit.
- xxx^{vii} BASF has an interesting history. In 1925, it merged with Hoechst, Bayer and three other companies to form IG Farbenindustrie, which from 1933 to 1945 played a central role in the economy of the Third Reich. Its products included Zyklon B, the gas which was used to exterminate prisoners in the Nazis' concentration camps. IG Farben was broken up after the war and several of its directors were tried for crimes against humanity. BASF was re-founded in 1952.
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