



# Frayed Partnership

German public opinion on Russia



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## 1 Introduction

German-Russian relations have been in decline since 2014, not only politically but also in the opinion of the public. Not only has the Russian-Ukrainian conflict dealt a blow to the former “special relationship” between Moscow and Berlin, but there have also been strong misgivings about other issues, such as the growing level of domestic political repression in Russia which was brought to the attention of the German public by the murder of Boris Nemtsov in February 2015, at the latest.

The most recent topic of debate in Germany has certainly been Russia’s role in the conflict in Syria. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict is still an issue, but coverage in the German media of the actual fighting in Donbas has been overshadowed over the last months by the slow pace of reforms and the changes of government due to, firstly, the resignation of the reform-oriented minister of economy, Lithuanian Avaras Abromavičius, and secondly, that of prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, which, in turn, led to minister of finance Natalya Yaresko’s also leaving office. The public, therefore, is less focused on Russia’s role in Ukraine than on Ukrainian internal affairs and challenges. A topic Germans have become much more aware of over recent months is the well-publicized so-called “hybrid war” led by Russia in Ukraine. “Putin’s trolls” and numerous examples of highly biased and propagandist coverage of international affairs by the Russian media have often been highlighted by well-respected commentators, experts, and journalists.<sup>1</sup> Another issue that brought the temper, particularly of Russian-Germans, to a boil was the case of the Russian-German girl Lisa, who had allegedly been raped by a North African refugee. The case was reported by a Russian journalist and made much of by the Russian media. When only a few days later the girl admitted to having made up the entire story, the damage was already done; Russian-Germans, spurred on by the Russian-language media, went to the street to demonstrate for their security, and Germany voiced its anger vis-à-vis Russia’s manipulation of the whole case. The selling of gas storage facilities to Russia was also much debated in Germany and Europe, as was the construction of the Nord Stream II pipeline. And an issue deeply affecting Germany’s neighbor Poland as well as the Baltic States, i.e. whether to establish permanent NATO bases in these countries, which for understandable historical reasons consider Russia a real threat to a much greater degree than Germany, has also sparked debate in Germany.

To what extent do these topics influence Russia’s image in the eyes of Germans? Which aspects provoke criticism in German public opinion? And which do not touch Germans at all? Are Germans “a nation of ‘Russland-Versteher’” – understanding and sympathizing with Russia – as has often been assumed by those in and out of the country who would see more outspoken opposition to Putin and his policies? Do Germans equate “Russia” and “the Russians,” or is there some kind of differentiation?

These questions brought us, the German Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Polish Institute of Public Affairs, to develop and commission a poll to be conducted by TNS EMNID. The poll was conducted amongst a representative group of Germans above the age of 14 between March 4<sup>th</sup> and March

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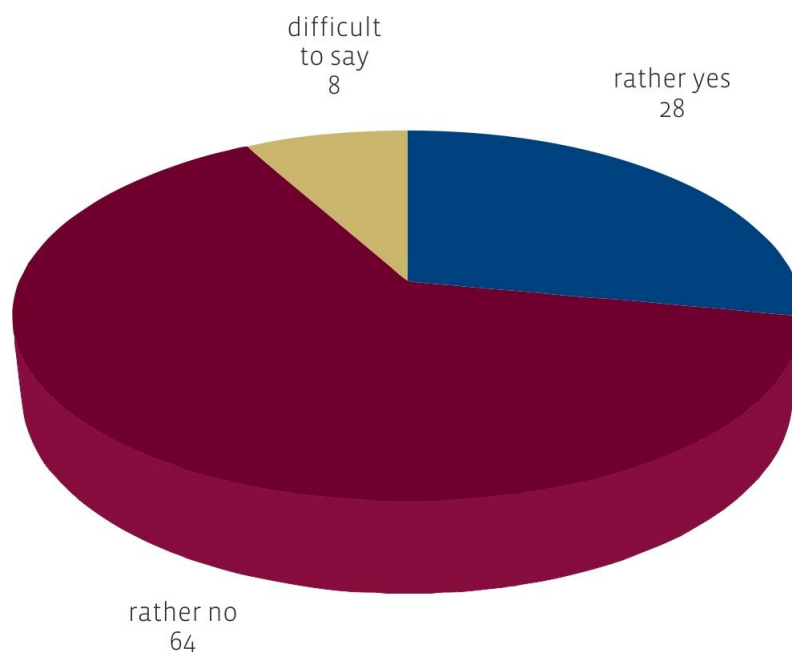
<sup>1</sup> One of the first well-known and respected journalists to speak out openly in Germany about the “information war” forced on journalists by Russia was Golineh Atai, the then Moscow correspondent of Germany’s first channel ARD, in her acceptance speech after being awarded the title of “Journalist of the Year 2014” in February 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQI4mZrRt8k>.

12<sup>th</sup>, 2016, using a face-to-face method. The following publication also cites earlier poll results from 2013 and 2015.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Putin's Russia not a credible partner

The majority of Germans do not see Vladimir Putin's Russia as a credible international partner for Germany (64%). The annexation of Crimea, Russian troops' participation in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, and the suppression of political opposition at home are the likely causes for the declining credibility of the Russian President among the Germans.<sup>3</sup> Russia's military engagement in Syria might have also contributed to this negative view.<sup>4</sup> However, a significant number of Germans continue to express a more positive view of Putin's Russia (28%). The percentage of Germans who think that Putin's Russia is a rather reliable partner is higher in eastern Germany (37% – as opposed to 25% in western Germany).

Figure 1: Is Vladimir Putin's Russia an internationally credible partner for Germany? (in %)



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/Institute of Public Affairs 2016

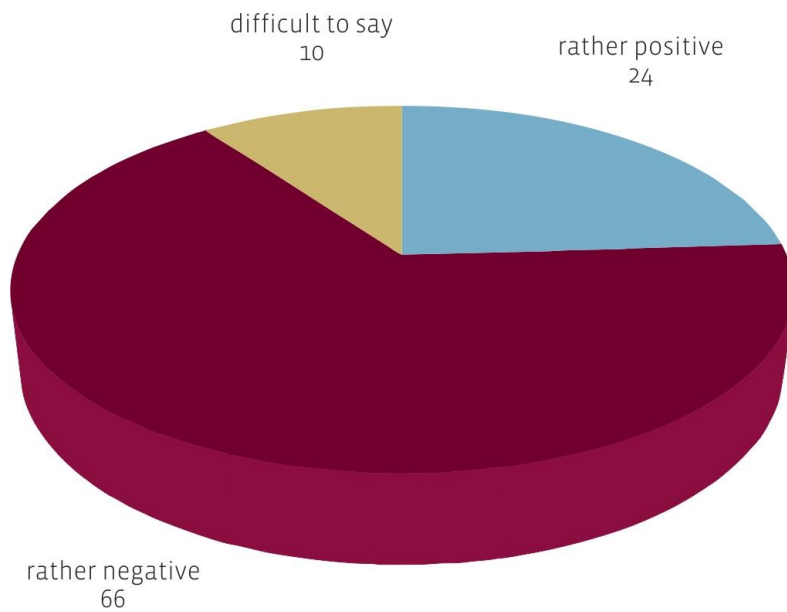
Russian military intervention in the Syrian civil war is viewed negatively by a clear majority (66%) of Germans, whereas a positive opinion of the Russian intervention is expressed by one in four respondents (24%). There are no differences between the residents of the eastern as opposed to the western parts of Germany.

<sup>2</sup> J. Kucharczyk, A. Łada, C. Ochmann, Ł. Wenerski, *Politics and Everyday Life. A German view of Poland and Russia* (2013) and J. Kucharczyk, A. Łada, G. Schöler, Ł. Wenerski *Close together or far apart? Poles, Germans, and Russians on the Russia-Ukraine Crisis* (2015), the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Institute of Public Affairs.

<sup>3</sup> In 2012, 41% of Germans stated that they do not have high trust in Putin; 7% trusted him highly, whereas 46% of Germans did not trust him. ARD-DeutschlandTREND, 02.2012.

<sup>4</sup> The poll was taken prior to the Russian announcement about the withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria.

Figure 2: How do you view Russia’s military engagement in Syria? (in %)



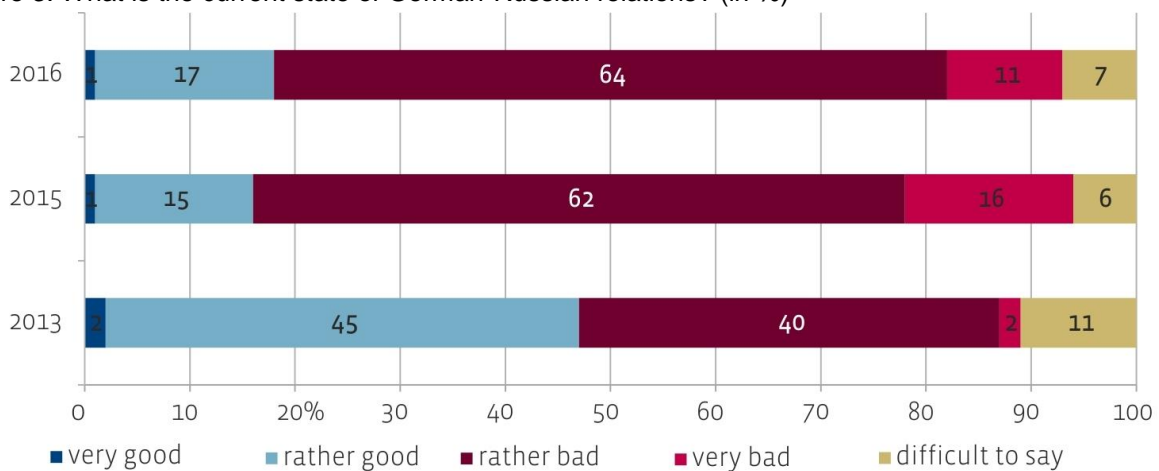
Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/Institute of Public Affairs 2016

### 3 The perceived deterioration of Russian-German relations

The negative views about Vladimir Putin and the Russian policy in Syria go hand in hand with a negative assessment of the state of German-Russian relations. Three-quarters of those polled believe those relations to be “rather bad” or “very bad” (75%), while only 18% believe they are “rather good” or “very good.”

The view of Russia has changed considerably when compared to 2013, when positive views outweighed negative ones. The behavior of Russia on the international stage is likely to be the major cause of such a significant deterioration of the perceptions of Russia and of German-Russian relations. This change was already evident in the opinion survey conducted in 2015, when only 16% of respondents positively rated Germany’s relations with Russia.

Figure 3: What is the current state of German-Russian relations? (in %)



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/Institute of Public Affairs 2013 and 2016

In the surveys from 2013, 2015, and 2016, there were no significant differences of opinion between the residents of the eastern and western parts of Germany.



## 4 Turning Towards European Partners

The negative view of Russian policy corresponds with the fact that Russia is not considered a partner with whom Germany should closely cooperate. Only one in three respondents favor closer cooperation (33%). The support for closer cooperation has fallen, compared to 2013, within the margin of statistical error (2%), but the number of Germans who see no need for close cooperation has risen (from 25% to 31%).

At the same time, the support of the German public for transatlantic cooperation has also decreased by 9 percentage points (from 69% to 60%). This shows that despite declining opinions on Russia, Germans do not, in a kind of counter-movement, want to turn to closer cooperation with the United States. Their assessments on partnership with this country are nevertheless still high, placing the US in the third position of countries with which Germany should closely cooperate. This negative change can be explained by the NSA phone tapping scandal<sup>5</sup> and also by the negative atmosphere surrounding the debate on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership agreement. The support for close cooperation with the US could have also been weakened by the perceptions of the Obama administration's passive attitude to the two most important challenges to European security in the last three years, namely the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the so-called refugee crisis perpetuated by the Syrian civil war.

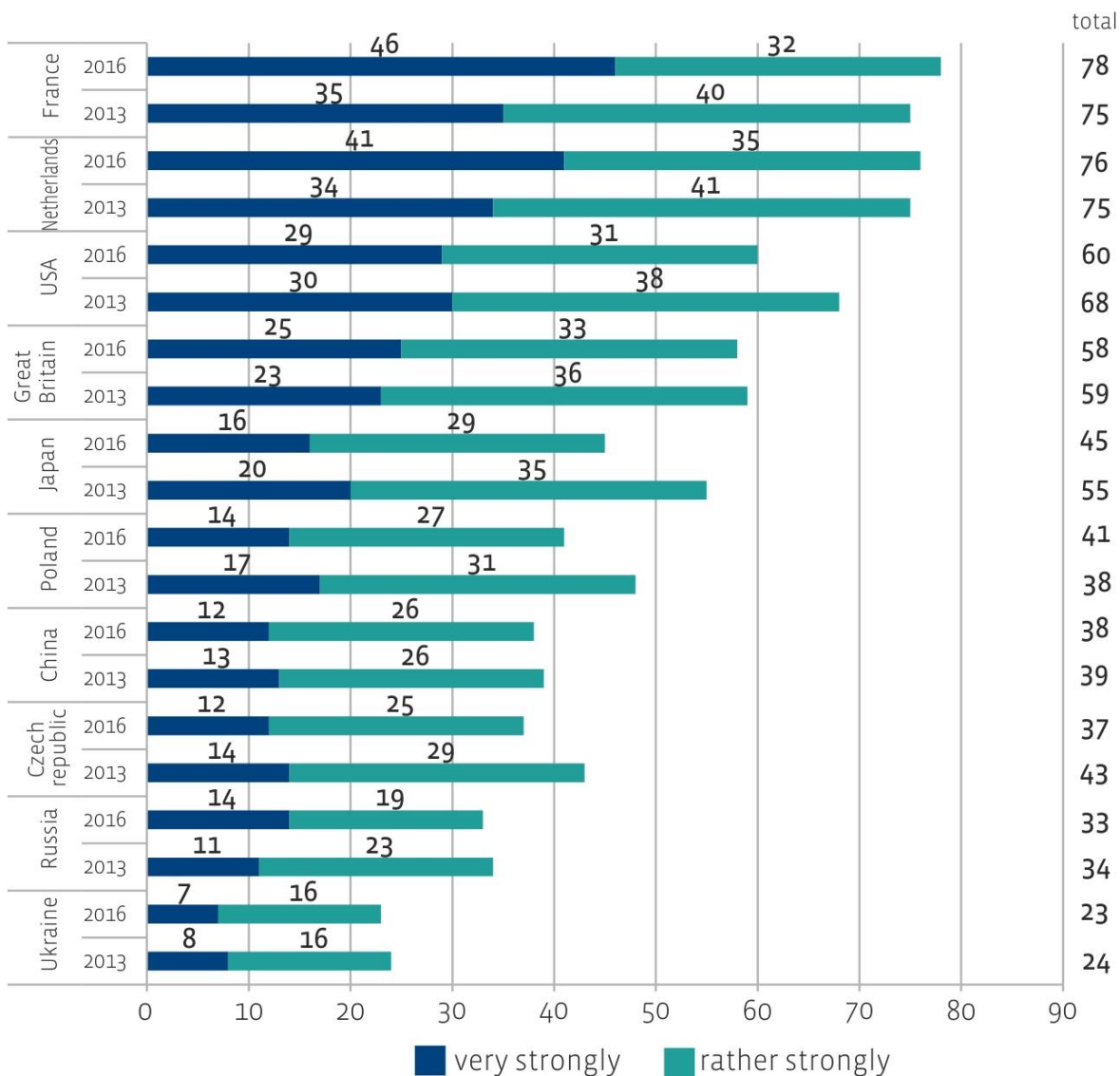
As they have traditionally expressed, Germans continue to believe that the countries with which they ought to work closer are France (78%) and the Netherlands (76%). About three-quarters of respondents continue to support close links with these countries. Even more remarkably, the ratio of those who strongly agree that Germany should closely cooperate with these two countries has risen significantly by more than 10 percentage points over the last three years. Despite a number of disagreements between Berlin and Paris, for example, with regard to the issue of refugees, the anti-European views of the French Front National, and the unstable economic situation in France, Germans continue to view France as the key international partner and put their trust in the German-French tandem team pushing Europe forward.

Great Britain is also considered an important partner (58%), although less so than France, the Netherlands, and the US. The view on the importance of cooperation with the UK has not changed since 2013 despite the heated debate over "Brexit" and the possibility of the British withdrawal from the European Union.

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<sup>5</sup> In 2013, it was revealed that the phones of the most important politicians and state functionaries were tapped by the American intelligence services, along with the phone of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Figure 4: Support for Germany’s cooperation with the following countries (in %)



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/Institute of Public Affairs 2013 and 2016

Respondents were asked to answer the question “How close should German cooperation with the following countries be?” Respondents could answer on a scale of 1-5 with 1-very strong and 5-not at all. The chart sums up the values for answers 1 and 2.

Germany’s Central European neighbors, Poland and the Czech Republic, have found themselves in the second tier of countries with which Germans desire close cooperation. Over the past three years, the overall support for close cooperation with both Poland and the Czech Republic has fallen. This decrease can be explained, first and foremost, by the unwillingness of these countries – as well as other Central European countries – to accept refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, which Germany and other EU members facing the influx of large groups of migrants consider a lack of solidarity. The image of the new Polish government, how it deals with the principles of democracy and the rule of law and the generally euro-sceptic tenor of voices from both Warsaw and Prague are other likely reasons for Germans’ diminishing interest in cooperation with these two countries.

No changes were noted with regard to the results concerning cooperation with Ukraine. The ratio of Germans who support close cooperation with this country is lower than the ratio of people who oppose it. This is the only such case among the countries included in the survey. The support for

close cooperation with Ukraine is weaker by 10 percentage points than the relatively weak support for close cooperation with Russia.

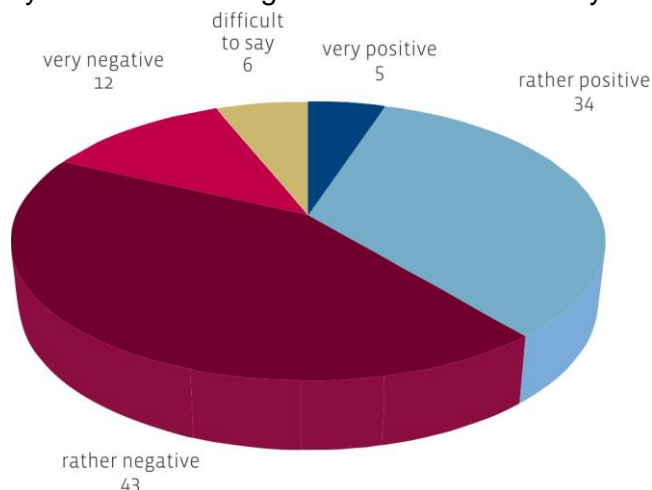
On a more positive side, the fact that the result for Ukraine is similar to that of three years ago can already be assessed as a relative success when taking into consideration the strong Russian propaganda against Ukraine, also active in Germany. The German media, of course, report on the continued existence of corruption and on the slow progress of reforms in Ukraine (as well as about continued fighting in Donbas). All in all, Ukraine seems to be perceived more as a policy problem than as a potential partner for Germany.

In the majority of cases, the view of how close German cooperation with a given country ought to be depends on where the given respondent resides, whether in the east or in western Germany. Statistically, residents of eastern Germany more often favor stronger cooperation with Poland, the Czech Republic, Russia, and Ukraine when compared to those who reside in western Germany. A similar trend was noticeable in 2013. Those from western regions of Germany more often point towards France or the Netherlands (in 2013, the difference was not notable). Differences of opinion due to one's place of residence do not appear with regard to relations with Great Britain and the United States.

## 5 A negative view of Russian energy interdependence

The negative view of cooperation with Russia is likewise noticeable in at least one specific area of economic cooperation. The majority of German society (55%) have a negative view of the fact that German energy is strongly tied to Russia. At the same time, a significant share (39%) of respondents are of the opposite view; they believe the energy ties to be a positive development. The relatively low number of respondents who had no opinion (6%) demonstrates that Germans have an established view on the subject of Germany's energy policy, at least insofar as Russia is concerned.

Figure 5: How do you view the strong connections of Germany to Russian energy? (in %)



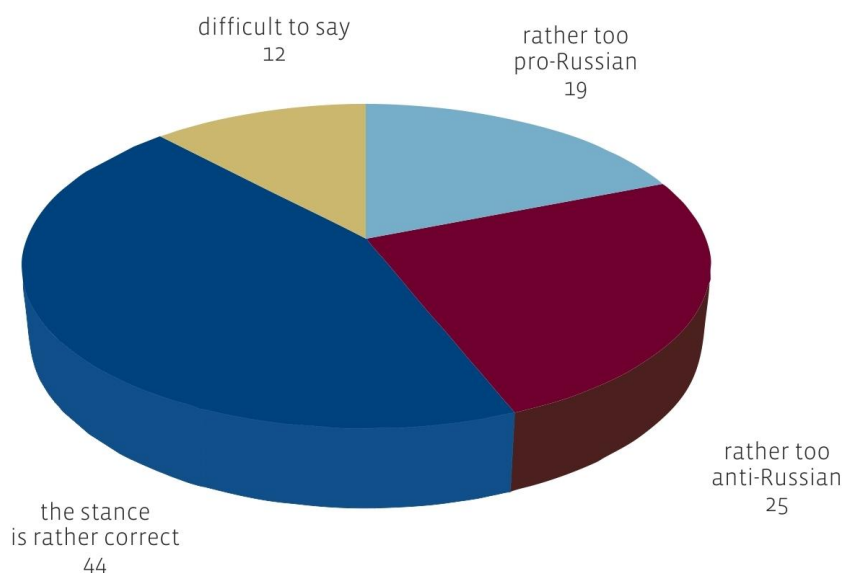
Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/ Institute of Public Affairs 2016

The residents of western Germany have a more critical opinion of German-Russian energy connections (57% vs. only 45% of Germans from the east).

## 6 Divided opinions regarding the policy of the German government towards Moscow

Nearly half of the Germans who participated in the survey have a positive view of the policy of the German government towards Russia with regard to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the annexation of Crimea. Forty-four percent of those polled are of the opinion that the government is acting correctly. One out of four respondents believe that the policy of the German government is too anti-Russian (25%), while 19% believe that the policy is too pro-Russian. One notes a broad level of support for the policies of the current government, although the percentages of people who believe that this policy is either too pro- or too anti-Russian are comparable. This demonstrates significant divisions in German society, reflecting the views expressed in public discussions as well as the views of the elites.

Figure 6: How is the stance of the German government towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the annexation of Crimea by Russia? (in %)



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/Institute of Public Affairs 2016

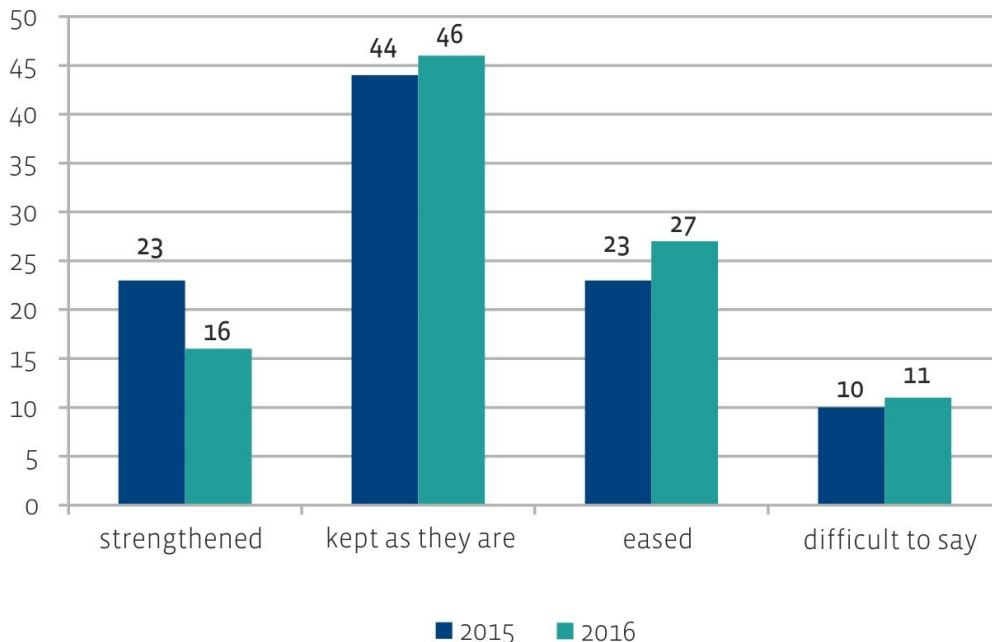
There is a statistically significant difference of opinions between eastern and western Germans about the policy of the German government towards Russia. Residents of eastern Germany think that the policy of Germany is too anti-Russian (38%, as compared to only 22% of western Germans). Western Germans more often think the policy is too friendly towards Russia or just right.

## 7 Support for the sanctions

The German government has strongly supported the policy of sanctions against Russia which were put in place by the European Union in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The German government is still decidedly in favor of extending the sanctions until the Minsk agreements are put into effect. Almost half of Germans questioned, comprising the largest segment of respondents (46%), are of the same opinion – that the sanctions put in place against Russia due to the annexation of Crimea and Russian engagement in the war in Donbas ought to remain in place as they are. One-quarter of those polled believe sanctions should be eased (27%), while 16% believe that sanctions should be intensified. The sum total of those who believe the current sanctions ought to remain in place and those who believe they ought to be intensified demonstrates that the majority

of Germans believe sanctions are, at this stage, an important element of policy towards Russia and must remain in force.

Figure 7: In reaction to the Russian annexation of Crimea and Russian military engagement in eastern Ukraine, the USA and EU put economic and political sanctions in place against Russia. Should the sanctions put on Russia by the EU be...?



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/Institute of Public Affairs 2015 and 2016

Residents of eastern Germany are generally more in favor of easing sanctions, while residents of western Germany are more often in favor of strengthening them or for maintaining them at present levels. Similar tendencies were the norm in 2015.

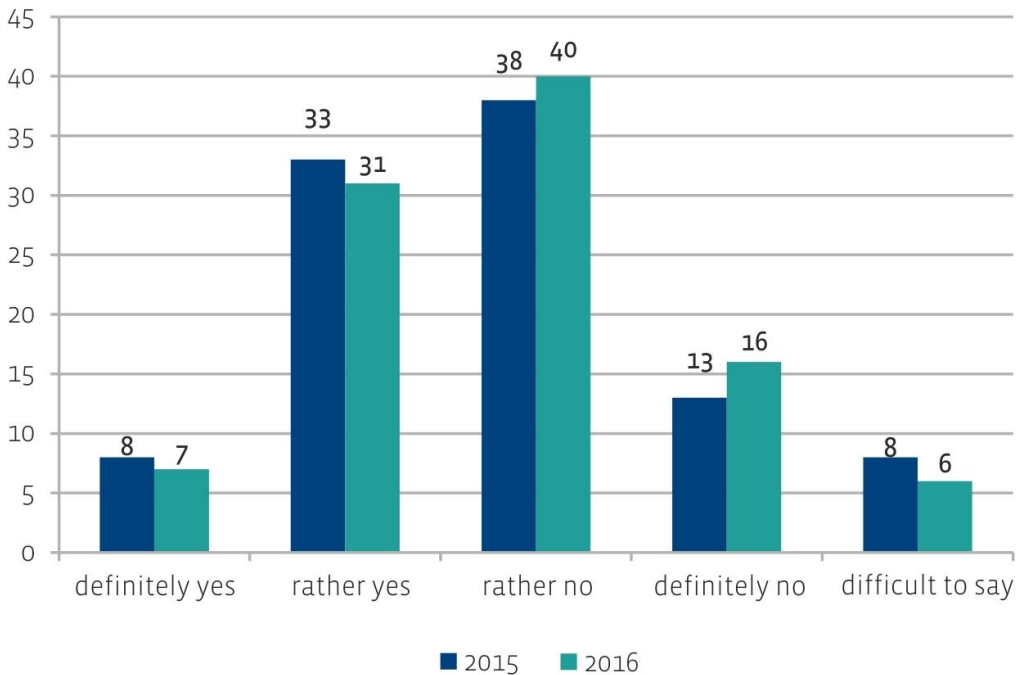
German opinion has not changed very much over the past year. This year, just as last year, the dominant group favors maintaining sanctions (44% in 2015 and 46% in 2016). Some changes have taken place in terms of those who favor “strengthening sanctions” – the percentage of support fell from 23 to 16%. Conversely, the percentage of those who favor “softening sanctions” rose from 23% to 27%. Considering general European trends and the voices of politicians from other countries, as well as those of some representatives of German political or economic elites who favor easing or even lifting of the sanctions, these differences are not very high. There are voices from various sides expressing disagreement with the continuation of sanctions because, in their opinion, the sanctions hurt the EU economy. The case for sanctions is not helped by the growing, albeit still muted, criticism of the actions of Ukraine’s government, which is accused of being too slow in implementing reforms, fighting corruption, or setting up a credible government. This might be contributing to a negative view of Ukraine in German public opinion and overshadowing Russian responsibility for the conflict. It can be assumed that the relative softening of views on sanctions is a consequence of less coverage of current events in eastern Ukraine in the German media, so that the war has largely disappeared from public awareness. Moreover, the war in eastern Ukraine has, after the Minsk agreements, become less important for western media and overshadowed by the pictures and news from Syria and Iraq. In this context, the high overall support for sanctions is quite remarkable. Nonetheless, these results also show how controversial the question of the sanctions is among the German public.

## 8 Divided views on Russia as a military threat

The views on Russia as a military threat to Germany remained practically unchanged over the course of the last year. More than half of those polled (56%) do not fear Russia, whereas 38% of respondents admit that a threat exists.

There are a few reasons why the majority of respondents do not perceive Russia as a military threat. Firstly, Germany is not a direct neighbor of Russia, so the possibility of an attack seems less than in the case of Poland or the Baltic states, where such fears are much higher. Secondly, some Germans may still remember the poor state of the Soviet Army leaving Germany and thus, may not believe such army could pose a real threat. The consequences of the modernization of the Russian army under the Putin administration are only gradually beginning to sink into the German awareness. Finally, Germans do not believe Russia would want to attack them, as they do not see any reasons Moscow would have for doing so. This distinguishes the German way of thinking from that of the Poles or the Balts who do not necessarily see Russia as making rational decisions.

Figure 8: Do you think that Russia is a military threat to Germany? (in %)



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/ Institute of Public Affairs 2015 and 2016

Among both groups – those who see Russia as a military threat and those who do not – there is a plurality of those whose opinions are not definite but “rather yes” and “rather no”.

Residents of western Germany tend to fear Russia more (39%, as compared to 32% of eastern Germans). A similar trend was visible in 2015 when 44% of respondents from western Germany feared Russia as compared to 31% from the eastern lands.

## 9 Reluctance to send soldiers to defend allies

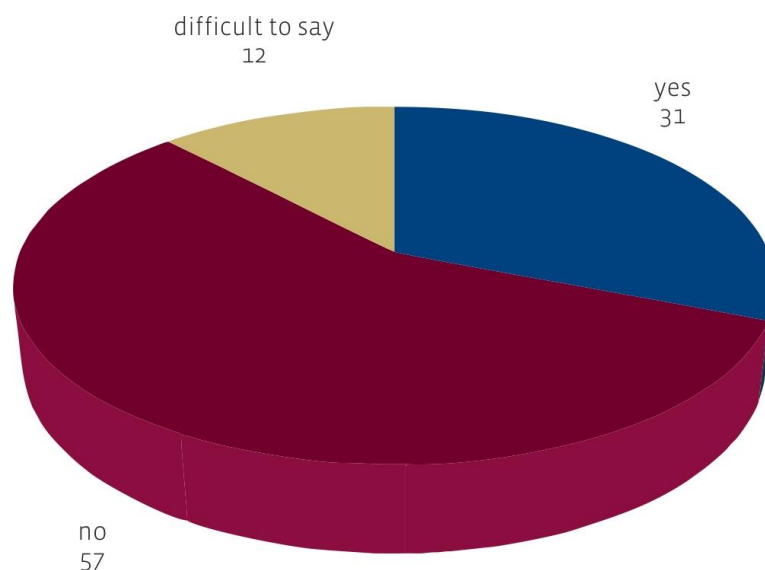
As a member of NATO and the EU, Germany is obliged – just as other allies – to defend its allies in the case of aggression on the part of an outside nation. Despite this obligation, over half of Germans do not support sending their soldiers to defend NATO members such as Poland or the Baltic

states if ever they were attacked by Russia (57%). Only one out of three Germans (31%) believes that if one of those countries were attacked, Germany should fulfill its obligations as a NATO and EU member and stand in defense of the country that was attacked. There are no essential differences in this opinion regarding the defense of Poland and the Baltic states between residents of eastern Germany and western Germany.

The reluctance of a large part of German public to send German soldiers to Poland or the Baltic countries may result from several motives. However, it is most probably not caused by any dislike of these countries nor by a lack of desire to defend them. In fact, a much larger group of Germans (see the next section) favors establishing permanent NATO bases which would increase the security of its eastern allies. What impacts German attitudes regarding the prospect of sending German soldiers is the perception of the threat from Russia. Those who believe that Russia poses a military threat were more likely to support the use of the Bundeswehr in resisting potential Russian attacks.

Above all else, this reluctance to send soldiers is most probably due to German pacifism, which is opposed to any German military engagement outside of the country's borders. Due to past experience, apprehensions about using the German army in areas once attacked and occupied by the German army may be even stronger. Another reason for the reluctance to offer military aid to bolster the eastern flank of NATO in a potential conflict with Russia might be the fear of provoking Moscow if only by contemplating such a scenario.

Figure 9: Should German soldiers stand in defense of NATO members Poland and the Baltic states if they are attacked by Russia?



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/Institute of Public Affairs 2016

German opinion regarding the issue of sending the military to defend their allies in the east has not changed in the last few months. In the spring of 2015,<sup>6</sup> a similar number of respondents – 58% – was against using military force in the case of a Russian attack against a NATO member (only 38% were in favor), which was no different from the general opinion in Italy (51% against, 40% for) and very similar to France (53% against, 47% for), although of the eight different societies polled, Germans were the least inclined to use force.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/10/nato-publics-blame-russia-for-ukrainian-crisis-but-reluctant-to-provide-military-aid/>.

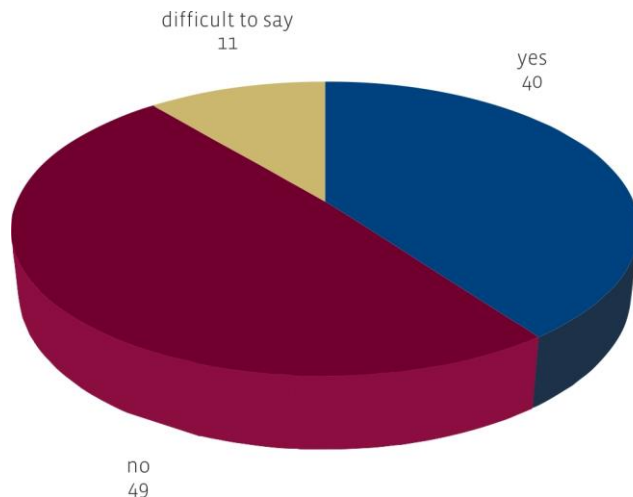
Poles demonstrate a different view. Asked<sup>7</sup> if they were ready to support the Baltic states in the case of Russian military aggression, an overwhelming majority of Poles answered in the affirmative (62%). Only one-fifth of those polled would not provide support (19%).

## 10 Divided opinions with regard to placing NATO bases on the eastern flank of the Alliance

One proposed method for ensuring security for eastern members of the NATO alliance which is preventive in nature is the creation of permanent NATO bases in these countries. In the opinion of politicians from Poland and the Baltic states, such placement of bases would increase the sense of security for citizens because it would show Russia that the Alliance is ready to defend each NATO member.

German society is divided in its opinions about whether or not such bases should be created in the Baltic countries and in Poland. The largest group of respondents (49%) is against the idea. However, the group of Germans who disagree and support permanent bases in NATO's eastern flank region of Eastern Europe is not much smaller (40%). In this case as before, the view of Russian policies impacts opinions. Those who see a military threat from Russia are more often in favor of creating permanent NATO bases in the Baltics and in Poland.

Figure 10: The citizens of Poland and the Baltic states fear potential attack from Russia. They believe that a permanent NATO military presence would increase their sense of security. Do you think NATO should create permanent bases in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states? (in %)



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/Institute of Public Affairs 2016

Residents of western Germany are generally more in favor of creating bases (42% compared to 33% of eastern Germans). The support for NATO bases is lower amongst the more educated respondents. This tendency is all the more interesting because it does not exist with regard to the question of whether Russia is a military threat – in that case the level of a respondent's education had no impact on whether they felt Russia was a threat, nor on whether to send soldiers to defend Poland and the Baltic states. Education has no impact on opinions in these matters.

<sup>7</sup> See: A. Fuksiewicz, A. Łada, *Grupa bałtycka. Polska, Litwa, Łotwa i Estonia*, Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warszawa 2015.



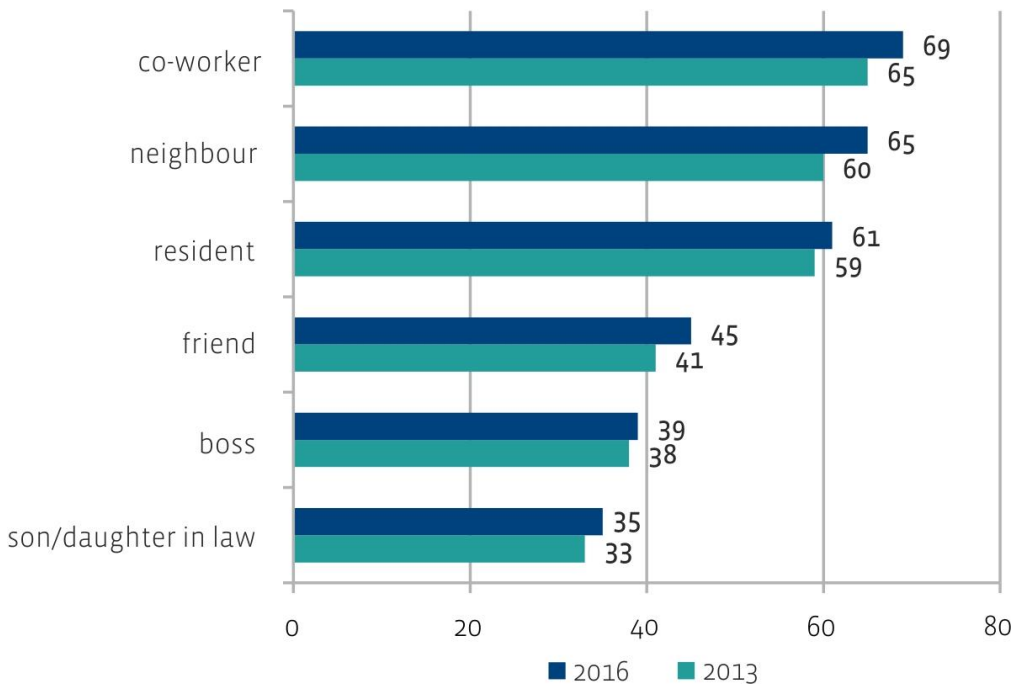
## 11 Acceptance of Russians in various social roles

In contrast to the negative views of the Russian government's policies, Germans hold mostly positive opinions about the place of Russians in German society. Most of the respondents have nothing against the prospect of Russians working alongside them, permanently settling in Germany, or being their neighbors. The acceptance for Russians as co-workers, neighbors or residents is, respectively, 69%, 65% and 61%. Russians are less popular in social roles such as friends (45%), bosses (39%), and son/daughter-in-law (35%), all roles which are more personal and indicate greater fraternity and dependence.

The level of acceptance for Russians in all of the roles analyzed rises with the rise in education of those polled. There are no differences between the views of western and eastern Germans.

Compared to 2013, the level of acceptance has grown by a small amount. In the majority of cases, the changes are within the margin of statistical error (up to 3%), so it is difficult to make definitive claims.

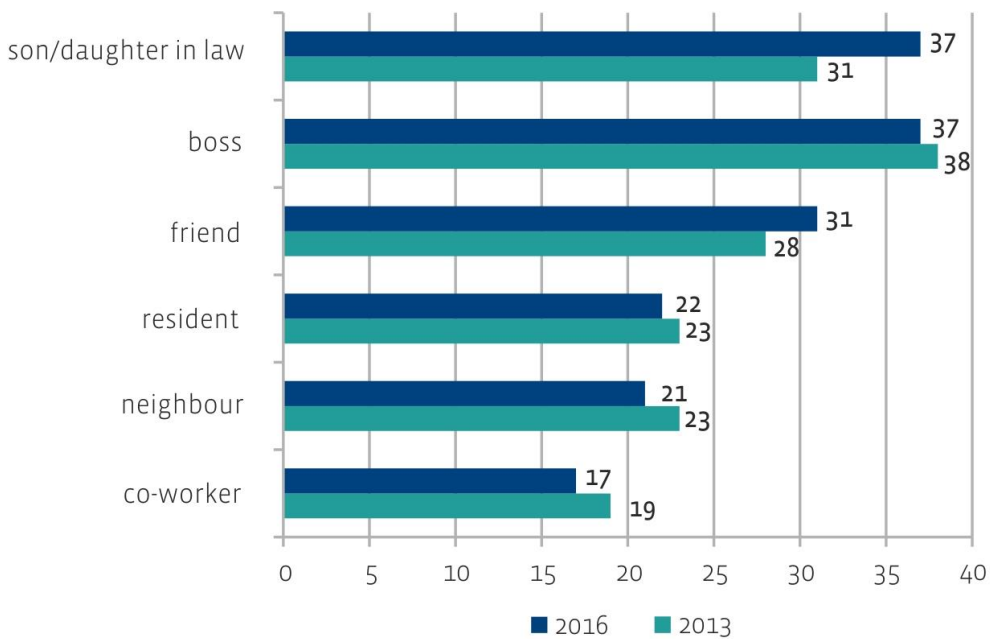
Figure 11: Would you accept a Russian in the following social roles? (in %)



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/Institute of Public Affairs 2013 and 2016

The level of acceptance of Russians in most social roles is higher than the lack of acceptance. Nonetheless, between one in five and one in three respondents would not accept Russians in various societal roles. Germans demonstrate the greatest reluctance in the case of a potential marriage of their children to Russians and to having a Russian boss. The percentage of Germans who disapprove of the prospect of becoming a parent-in-law to a Russian person is higher than those who would approve and has risen significantly in comparison to 2013. In this case, statistical analysis reveals that those who distrust Putin's Russia tend **not** to accept the prospect of Russians' becoming their family members. In this case, one can surmise that negative perception of Putin's policies also has an impact on perceptions of Russians themselves, not just their government.

Figure 12: Would you accept Russians in the following social roles? (negative answers in %)



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung/Institute of Public Affairs 2013 and 2016

## 12 Conclusions

The survey shows that Germans are both critical about Russia under Putin and at the same time rather divided on many relevant issues pertaining to Russian policies. The overall analysis of the responses of the entire German society reveals that there is not a uniform, stable pattern explaining differences of opinions on Russia.

In some, though not all responses, there is a clear difference of opinion between respondents from the east and west of Germany. Education does not have much impact on opinions about German-Russian relations or the credibility of Putin's Russia, nor on opinions about German policy or energy interdependence. Education is also not a factor in opinions about the military threat posed by Russia or about whether or not people support sending soldiers to defend the Baltic States and Poland. It is likewise difficult to see any correlation between level of education and German views regarding cooperation with different countries. Although higher levels of education are correlated to higher levels of support for strengthening cooperation with the Czech Republic, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, and China, in other cases the opinions regarding cooperation do not vary based on education. There are also no uniform tendencies with regard to the age of the respondents. In a few cases, it is possible to notice that younger respondents do not know how to answer certain questions, but this is a standard tendency in opinion polling.

As has been noted, the residents of eastern Germany tend to trust Putin's Russia more than the residents of western regions. In the east, 37% of residents had a positive view of Russian policies, while in western Germany the number was 25%. It should be noted that neither age nor education have been found to determine the composition of this group.

On the whole, those who trust Putin's Russia also tend to deny that it is a military threat to Germany (84% compared to 56% in the general society) and they expect their government to ease the sanctions against Russia (54% as compared to 27%) They are also against NATO bases in central Europe. Amongst this group are people who believe that Russian engagement in Syria has been rather more positive (46%) than negative (42%). They also recognize the benefits of a strong inter-

dependence between Germany and the Russian energy sector. Eighty-nine percent believe that this situation is positive – which is twice the overall societal response (34%).

We would now like to shed some light on the phenomenon of the so-called “Russland-Versteher”<sup>8</sup>. Hardly any term has been so much used and abused over the past two years in the debate on Russia and German-Russian relations. It has been used to describe people who usually support Russia and its government policy, uncritically accept the Kremlin’s point of view on different issues, and claim that Germany, especially in economic terms, should return to business as usual with Moscow.

Our survey shows that the phenomenon of *consistent* “Russland-Versteher” has a relatively small representation within the society at large. This can be demonstrated by looking at the percentage of Germans who consistently responded to the questions in a pro-Russian way. Thus, the percentage of those who at the same time believe that Putin’s Russia is a credible international partner for Germany, do not see Russia as a military threat, and would like the sanctions to be eased is only 13%. If we take into account those who positively view Putin’s intervention in Syria, the number of thus defined “Russland-Versteher” shrinks to 8% of Germans.

As the analysis has shown, about two-thirds of Germans remain rather critical of Putin’s Russia and its policies. At the same time, Germans tend to differentiate between “Putin’s” Russia and “the Russian people,” as the responses to the question about Russians in certain social roles show.

Whatever past relations may have been, Germans today are cautious or pessimistic vis-à-vis Russia under Putin. They are relatively well aware of what can easily be considered potential disadvantages or dangers of Russian policies for the west, e.g. Russia’s involvement in Syria, (too) close energy ties, Russia’s politics in Ukraine, the fears voiced by Poland and the Baltic states vis-à-vis a potential security threat from Russia.

All in all, Germans, even though the Russia-Ukraine conflict has certainly lost the public’s attention over the past months due to the refugee crisis, are relatively well informed and not an easy prey to what has become well-known as Russia’s “hybrid warfare” or “propaganda” even in Germany.

Against this background, the present need in relations with Russia and/or the Russians might above all be communication through different channels. In general, all channels and means ought to be made use of to communicate an unbiased image of Russia and to counter-act Russian propaganda without resorting to “counter-propaganda”, which the EU has rightly rejected.<sup>9</sup>

There will be no foreseeable return to “business as usual” either in economic or in political terms as has been repeatedly made clear by relevant German decision-makers.<sup>10</sup> The study demonstrates

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<sup>8</sup> Literally translated, this expression means “person who understands Russia.” The verb “verstehen” has a dual meaning similarly to the English verb “to understand,” and so implies an understanding of the facts of an issue as well as an “emotional” understanding in the sense of “sympathizing.” The latter sense underlies the idea of “Russland-Versteher”: the term characterizes a person who does not just understand Russia – if ever one can “understand” Russia in the primary meaning of the word – but very clearly supports it.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the FAQs on this issue on the EEAS website [http://eeas.europa.eu/top\\_stories/2015/261115\\_stratcom-east\\_ganda\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2015/261115_stratcom-east_ganda_en.htm) and <http://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/tiny-eu-task-force-set-up-to-counter-russian-propaganda/>

<sup>10</sup> Obviously and understandably, German business is not too happy with the ongoing “ice age” in German-Russian economic relations. On April 11, 2016, a delegation of representatives of the German Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations met with Russian president Vladimir Putin and relevant members of his government in Moscow. While no concrete details of talks were spread, Putin in his speech stressed that “even

that most Germans on a personal or social level appreciate Russians (more than they do Putin's politics), and that forms of personal "face-to-face" interaction ought to be supported and fostered. Numerous organizations, German-Russian societies and unions, and student and scholarly exchanges offer useful forums, mostly on the local level. As long as they are not misused to transport Russian propaganda but are indeed home for interested and even critical circles, these organizations deserve to be supported. Being interested in Russia does not necessarily imply sympathizing with its policy.

Beyond the issue of how to deal with Russia, however, the survey indicates another important fact: the negative perception of Russo-German relations does not result in a German desire for closer cooperation with the United States, for reasons already mentioned. Although almost twice as many Germans want to work closely with the US than with Russia, and Russia as well as the US maintain their respective positions in the ranking of countries with whom Germany ought to cooperate, the US, ranked third, has recorded a much more visible decrease in popularity than Russia, which is ranked ninth.

Germans' preferred partners for closer cooperation continue to be west European countries, foremost among them the more or less traditional partners such as France and the Netherlands. The Brexit debate has obviously not done too much harm to the UK's popularity, whereas the eastern EU member countries' popularity with Germans has suffered from recent political developments and again, not much, but definitely more than has been the case with Russia. This may lead to the conclusion that Germans seem to expect much more from traditional partners such as the US, on the one hand, and from EU partners, on the other hand, than they expect from countries such as Russia (or Ukraine). This further proves that the German public remains in touch with the changing international environment and is on the whole able to adjust its views on the basis of information rather than propaganda.

## 13 About the authors

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