

A Normative Power in Crisis?

How Germany's foreign policy in the Ukraine Crisis risks to undermine its image in the international system

By Angela Mehrer and Florian Wagner

“The EU sanctions are [...] the only peaceful instrument that the international community has in hand to end this terrible war and bring about a sustainable, just peace. [...] The easing of sanctions against Russia would put a knife to the throat of Ukrainians” wrote Ukrainian Ambassador Andrij Melnyk as a [response](#) to the open letter of German CDU Politicians demanding for an ease of the sanctions.

The [official guiding principles](#) for Germany's foreign policy define a clear set of rules, pointing out the importance of “fostering peace and security around the world, the promotion of democracy and human rights [...] and a rules-based international order”. Since the end of WW2 the country has managed to create and sustain increasing trust for its devotedness for multilateralism and peaceful conflict resolution, resulting in the current standing as one of the most prominent [soft-powers](#) in the international system.

In regards to the Crisis in Ukraine, German foreign policy acted within this self-imposed set of normative rules. When the political crisis in Ukraine started to develop after Euromaidan, Germany was among the most important mediators, actively supporting the *Agreement on settlement of political crisis in Ukraine*. However, this compromise was not able to pacify the situation. The events in Kiev were soon followed by the Crimean Crisis and conflicts with pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The German administration continued its strategy of mediation between the conflict parties in order to find a peaceful solution to the conflict and at the same time it emphasized its dedication to a rule-based international order by organizing a common position among EU member states in order to impose sanctions against Russia for violating international law through the annexation of Crimea. Contrary to other European Member States, Germany opposed the idea of sending weapons to Ukraine, adhering to its principles of using soft power instead of hard power instruments and reinforced its role as a normative power in the global system.

With the conflict ongoing, the clear position against Russian aggression seems to diminish. Recently, the conflict in Donbas gets labeled as frozen but the number of [ceasefire violations](#) is continuously high and there are no signs that would allow a positive prediction for a resolution in the near future. Recently, Germany adopted a two-track policy. Strategic and economic interests seem to become more important than protecting the country's reputation as an important normative player within the international system. Is Germany undermining its image due to economic incentives?

Recently, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe decided to restore Russia's voting rights, which had been removed as a reaction to the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. The situation regarding the peninsula has since then not changed and Russia continues to massively support separatist movements in Don-

bas. Regardless of this fact, Germany was one of the [main lobbyist](#) in the Council of Europe for the step towards Russia. This assessment has to be even more critical, as Russia also recently started offering passports to people living in the separatist-controlled region in Eastern Ukraine - an aggressive move by the Kremlin that has so far not sparked substantial criticism. If German foreign policy would adhere to its self-proclaimed principles, more sanctions would have been the logical response and not the restoration of voting rights.

Additionally, economic developments indicate that the relevance of sanctions has decreased. Despite the sanctions, [trade relations](#) have seen a steady increase in the last years. General trade between Russia and Germany has grown by 8.4% in 2018, approaching the record level of 2012 and the German foreign investment in Russia has even more intensified by 26.4% in 2018. Notwithstanding the positive development, some German politicians even [demand](#) to ease or even drop the sanctions. Furthermore, Germany is still holding on to its strong relations with Russia in the energy field, emphasized by the frequently criticized Nord Stream II Project.

This ambiguous foreign policy sheds a negative light on the very image Germany so ambitiously tries to promote around the world. Decision makers have to be aware that a resolute position based on normative principles might consequently have a negative impact on its own interests. Bearing in mind that Germany is clearly not following one line in responding to the crisis in Ukraine, the contradictory actions of acting as a normative power on the one hand and putting economic interests over human rights on the other hand, undermines the credibility of Germany as an impartial arbiter, especially from a Ukrainian perspective. Should the contemporary image, which is the foundation of Germany's reputation in the international system, be preserved, a more resolute position against violations of international law is inevitable.