

Reporting on the Minsk II Agreement: the Effect of Russian Narratives in French and German Media

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Introduction

After the summer of increased flare-ups and casualties from the war in Ukraine, the month of September has witnessed fresh discussions about the revival of the Minsk II agreement.¹ The French and German foreign ministers recently visited Ukraine, including its eastern conflict-ridden regions, 'to shore up a 2015 peace deal that has foundered amid continuing fighting in eastern Ukraine' (PressTV, 2016). Despite the increased attention to the Minsk II agreement, there is still a gap in the different interpretations of the agreement and its implementation.²

The interpretation of Minsk II is important, particularly within the EU Member States which hold sway over the decision as to whether to continue sanctions against Russia. This Policy Brief analyses the narratives presented in the web-based news articles that are published by outlets supported by the Russian government – i.e. Russia Today Deutsch, Russia Today en Français and Sputnik News DE, Sputnik France. The analysis compares these narratives to national ones in France and Germany (e.g. Le Monde, Libération, Le Figaro, Bildt, Die Welt, Die Zeit, Deutsche Welle, FAZ). In total, seventy-five articles were analysed on the topic featuring the 'Minsk II agreement', 'Russia' and/or 'Ukraine'. The timespan of the analysis focuses on late December 2015 and January, February and early March 2016, since the discussion was particularly acute in light of the one-year anniversary of the Minsk II agreement. The Policy Brief further triangulates this data with the literature on German and French relations with Russia and Ukraine. The research focuses on Germany and France in the light of their position as leading EU Member States who are part of the 'Normandy Group' involved in mediating between Ukraine and Russia.

This Policy Brief is the second in a two-part feature that examines Russia's ability to influence French and German narratives on the Minsk II agreement and Ukraine's evolving position in the international system. While the first Policy Brief analysed the gap between Ukrainian-Russian interpretations of the Minsk II agreement, this Brief traces how these narratives are contextualised in French and German media landscapes. The research concludes that while there is a consistent presence of Russian narratives in public discourse in these countries, they had limited impact on their public opinion. The German/French news coverage of the Minsk II agreement as well as the role of Russia and Ukraine in its implementation differs from Russian-sponsored news. The Brief analyzes the wider diplomatic relations between Germany, France and Russia, particularly focusing on the deteriorating relations before the Ukraine crisis.

An analysis of the main narratives on Ukraine and Minsk II agreement featured in mainstream French and German media suggests that Russia's influence to affect public discourse in these two powerful member states is rather limited. The French and German governments continue to support the current sanctions regime and their public opinions are broadly supportive of that policy. However, there has been a concerted effort by the Russian government to promote its narratives through (1) Russia-owned news outlets (such as Russia Today, Sputnik); (2) interviews and quotes of Russian officials appearing in the national news; (3) supporting those French and German

'indigenous' narratives that already feature Russia-friendly narratives and themes about the Minsk process or Ukraine. The discourses, however, are not limited to these topics but focus on wider topics that amplify signs of discontent with the European integration project, refugee policies and anti-terrorist efforts. Such narratives resonate with far-right and far-left groups that increasingly tap into support from the mainstream voters.

Media Narratives

What are the main narratives in the Russian-sponsored news?

When analysing narratives concerning Ukraine and the Minsk II agreement there are several arguments that consistently appear in both French and German versions of Russia Today and Sputnik. These narratives are also fed by Russian government officials that are interviewed by the Western press.

One such dominant narrative is that Russia is not a party to Minsk II. Ukraine is to blame for the lack of progress in the implementation of the agreement. As President Putin said in his interview directed to the German audience: 'anything that is missing in the implementation of the Minsk agreement is [...] up to the Kiev central government of Ukraine...' (Bild, 2016, also see RT DE 2015). In his view, the most important aspect [of Minsk] is constitutional reform under Point 11 of the agreement (ibid.). This position is echoed in the French Russia Beyond Headlines (RBTH) which further argues that the 'resumption of hostilities might benefit Kiev' since intensified conflict can distract Ukrainians from their difficult economic situation and provide a basis for continued sanctions (RBTH, 2015, also see RT DE, 2016m).

Russia – depicted as being sincerely interested in realising Minsk II because it wishes to cease conflict with the West (the EU and the US) – hopes that the West, in turn, will exercise greater pressure on Kyiv on the status of Donbas (ibid., RBTH, 2016a). Russian media particularly cites the arguments of the German and French foreign ministers that Ukraine needs to do more to implement Minsk II (Sputnik DE, 2016g; Sputnik DE, 2016i; RT DE, 2016m).

The Ukrainian government is portrayed as 'illegitimate' and lacking popular support (RT, 2016e, 2016g). The financing provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is described as the only lifeline that barely sustains the life of the 'extremely fragile' and 'corrupt' Kyiv government, according to the German and French RT and Sputnik. Other articles further state that the IMF threatens to stop financing Ukraine if it does not implement reforms (RT, 2016j) and that without the IMF's support Ukraine would fail (RT, 2016k). According to Russia Today, the Ukrainian government may eventually disintegrate (RT, 2016h) as there is a vicious circle between 'revolution-deception-stagnation' (Sputnik France, 2016c).

Overall, the Ukrainian government is depicted as a 'puppet' of the West – especially the US – and the oligarchs (RT, 2016f). The Russian media at times quote Western media when these themes resonate. For instance, Sputnik mentioned that the 'Financial Times says efforts of Ukraine are in vain' (ibid.). The narrative of the Ukrainian government being 'illegitimate' is accompanied with a portrait of Russian actions in Crimea as legitimate. For instance, in the interview with a German popular newspaper, Putin stated that 'the nationalists' coup in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev in February 2014 has hugely scared 2.5 million Russian people living on Crimea. [...] Our soldiers have merely prevented the Ukrainian troops on Crimea from impeding the freedom of expression of the people' (Bild, 2016). The understanding of the German context – in this case of the German insistence on the need to respect norms – have made Putin's narrative particularly appealing to this context.

To reinforce the narrative that places blame for the crisis in Ukraine on the West, Putin also treated the war in Ukraine as just a symptom of the crisis of faith in the global order; an order with the European security architecture at its core. In Putin's words, '[...] 25 years ago, the Berlin Wall fell, but invisible walls were moved to the East of Europe. This has led to mutual misunderstanding and assignments of guilt...'. This reading is coupled with an accusation of the West, which could also have 'abstained from an expansion to the east' (Bild, 2016). By widening the discussion nets to include the past, Russian narratives zoom out of the ongoing details of the war in Ukraine and divert the debate to other issues.

Russia is depicted as not being a party to the conflict in Ukraine, but as a diplomatic mediator alongside Germany and France. Accordingly, Putin and Merkel both pursue the common objective of promoting a ceasefire in Ukraine while stressing the importance of respecting the Minsk agreement (SF, 2016a). The consistent theme is that Russia wants to have good relations with the US and the EU based on an equal footing. Hence, according to Dmitri Medvedev, those responsible for destabilising relations (notably the EU and the US) should be held responsible for mending them (RT, 2016d). Thus, the common narrative that is reinforced is that the 'ball is in the West's court' (SF, 2016f).

Not only is Russia portrayed as ready to improve relations, but also as a necessary partner for the West to tackle its problems. While NATO is depicted as hostile, Russia is portrayed as ready to share information and collaborate with the West (RT, 2016d). Numerous articles stress that Russia is a Western strategic partner sharing *realpolitik* objectives. Ukraine is listed as one of these objectives, alongside the fight against terrorism, settlement in Syria, the nuclear deal in Iran and climate change (see for instance, RBTH, 2016b). The *realpolitik* approach includes the bundling together of several issues and making an argument that progress on some issues (e.g. Syria) implores the West to make other concessions, for instance on Ukraine.

The sanctions are portrayed not just as ineffective, but as positive for Russia's economic development (RT, 2016d). For instance, it is argued that the economy became 'healthier' and less dependent on the West since sanctions took hold (*ibid.*). In turn, Russian-sponsored media portray the impact on the West as dire. Thus, the dominant narrative is that lifting sanctions is in the interest of EU politicians (RT, 2016k; RT, 2016l).

Moreover, sanctions are regarded as part of the US' 'hidden agenda to weaken Russia' (SF, 2016d) on the grounds that different actors within the US would financially benefit from 'fighting Russian aggression' (SF, 2016d; SF 2016e). Although such thoughts contradict the narrative that Russia is interested in cooperation with the US, the victimisation and anti-American theme resonates with Russian-sponsored news in both Germany and France. The narrative also resonates with

far-right and far-left anti-establishment and anti-Western discourses, in both Germany and France.

Narratives in the German and French press

The German and French news coverage of the Minsk II agreement, as well as the role of Russia and Ukraine in its implementation, differs sharply from the Russian-sponsored news. Russia is depicted not as a mediator, but as a party to the conflict that has 'hidden agendas' in Ukraine (Le Monde, 2015a). Accordingly, Russia is depicted as trying to put the blame on Ukraine in order to cover its own responsibility in sponsoring the separatists. This narrative also describes Russia's strategy as keeping 'the situation tense in Ukraine' in order to distract the people from the needed reforms (*ibid.*). Hence, some French experts suggest to the press that 'the status quo' in Ukraine 'is in the interest of Russia' (RFI, 2016b).

However, both French and German media provides a diversity of arguments, including arguments sympathetic to the Russian position. For instance, it was reported that considering the progress with Minsk II, both the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and the French Minister of the Economy, Emmanuel Macron, seemed to agree on the lifting of sanctions on Russia (Le Monde, 2016a).

These newspapers tend to draw on a variety of sources, ranging from Russian to Ukrainian ones. Hence, other stories included arguments that 'Moscow does not respect Minsk' (Le Figaro, 2016a). The articles stressed that both the French President, Francois Hollande, and German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, argued for the need to respect the Minsk II agreement and made the lifting of sanctions as dependent upon its implementation (Le Vif, 2016).

In the German news coverage, the press at times blames the separatists without always stressing the Russian support they receive. However, some articles placed the blame for the failure of Minsk II on Russia (Die Welt, 2015). German domestic coverage also includes the discussion of Ukraine's struggles to realise the reforms and at times link them to the Minsk II agreement (Die Welt, 2016a). Unlike Russian coverage, the German press stressed that the foreign ministers call on (and

not blame) Ukraine to do more to implement the agreement in order to avoid further Russian aggression (Die Zeit, 2016a).

The analysis of public opinion, as well as the wider context of political relations between these countries, further illuminates a sharper divide in the attitudes towards Russia in Germany and France.

Public opinion in Germany and France regarding Ukraine and Russia

While the Russian narrative resonates with certain segments of the German and French population, public opinion is divided in both countries. The majority of respondents to a recent Pew Survey still place the blame for the Ukraine crisis on Russia and/or Russia-supported separatists (2015 Pew Research Center Survey). Accordingly, when asked 'who is to blame for the violence in eastern Ukraine', in Germany 54% blamed 'pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine' and Russia (25% and 29%, respectively); and only 9% answered that the Ukrainian government is responsible (12% Western countries and 17% answered that they did not know). In France, the same question received the following results: 74% blamed 'pro-Russian separatists' and Russia (30% and 44%, respectively), 14% blamed the Ukrainian government, and 9% blamed Western countries, with a 2% answering 'don't know'.

Both, Germany and France, have witnessed some of the strongest growth in negative perceptions of Russia in 2014: 79% in Germany and 73% in France (see Missiroli et al., 2016). According to the 2014 Pew Research Center, when asked the question 'how much confidence do you have in Russian President Putin to do the right thing regarding world affairs?' in France, 85% of respondents and 77% in Germany answered to have 'no confidence' (respectively against a mere 16% and 22% who answered positively).

The influence of Russian narratives on the critical minority of respondents should however not be underestimated. Narratives that promote beliefs in a 'decadent West', anti-refugee sentiments, a gloomy outlook on the economy, belief in conspiracy theories and lack of faith in political leaders and the transatlantic alliance, have a consistent audience and can be crucial in the election debates in Germany and France, as well as other EU Member States. However, considering the resources that

Russia devotes to promoting its narratives abroad, what helps explain the fairly negative public opinion of its policies?

The role of the 'Ukraine crisis' in Russian relations with Germany and France

The war in Ukraine and the sequencing of the Minsk agreement can be overall regarded as the main drivers of change in Germany's and France's relationship with Russia. But has the 'Ukraine crisis' been the main turning point in these relations?

While both Germany and France are considered to be supporters of Russian engagement in the European security architecture, their relationship with Russia had begun to deteriorate well before the Ukrainian crisis erupted. For instance, a report written by members of the French Senate 'Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Armed Forces Committee', which assesses the evolution of France-Russia and EU-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War, argues that deteriorating relations depends on different reasons, 'including missed opportunities for cooperation and diverging foreign policy visions.' (Del Picchia et al., 2015). Other authors underlined that the Ukrainian crisis has been a 'watershed' moment that has worsened a deteriorating climate triggered by Russia's scanty democracy and human rights record (Mendras, 2013; Litra et al., 2016).

A similar narrative is echoed in Germany. As Forsberg concludes, 'Merkel's attitude towards Moscow has already soured in September of the previous year when Putin announced that he and Medvedev were going to swap jobs and he intended to make a renewed bid for the presidency' (2016: 26). Human rights and democratic reasons – including the imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the members of the Pussy Riot band – have contributed to this change. The 2012 Bundestag resolution underlined the authoritarian turn triggered by President Vladimir Putin's return to office and expressed concerns on measures which combine 'increasing control over active citizens, criminalizing critical engagement and creating a confrontation course against government critics' (quoted in Forsberg, 2016: 26).

At the same time, Russia's aggression in Ukraine has facilitated an important debate within these countries' societies. According to the April 2014 Allensbach Institute survey, over 50% of Germans 'considered Russia as a threat to Germany' (Siddi,

2016: 669). Before the Ukraine crisis, only one third of respondents considered Russia as a threat. Russian actions in Syria have also contributed to its negative perception. While there have been divergent views on Russia among the 'tougher' Christian Democrats and the 'softer' Social Democrats, most of them continue to support a critical stance on Russia with regard to its advances in Ukraine.

The Russian emphasis on having spheres of influence does not resonate with many ruling elites in both Germany and France. For instance, even though Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has promoted lifting sanctions and had a 'softer' line towards Russia, his own stance has been fairly critical of Russia's 'limited sovereignty politics' towards its neighbours. In his December 2014 speech in Yekaterinburg (Russia), he argued, '... In the 18th century, German and Russian rulers divided the territory of Poland amongst themselves three times, until there was nothing left of Poland. [...] We must also be aware of how these historical experiences still cause our neighbours to worry today' (quoted in Getmanchuk and Solodkyy, 2016: 11).

At the same time, negative views on Russia do not translate into a positive image for Ukraine. In fact, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, both Germany and France viewed Ukraine as well as other post-Soviet non-EU countries through its 'Russia first' policy (see Getmanchuk and Solodkyy, 2016; Litra et al., 2016). While the war has heightened the attention on Ukraine, the image of corruption and nepotism among the Ukrainian elites dominate the perception. Russian narratives only reinforce this perception. Thus there is no 'black and white' vision in France and Germany, proving that the narratives that both Russia and Ukraine project only partially influence the domestic context of Germany and France.

The calls for cooperation with Russia do not seem to imply a return to relations of trust, but rather the need for damage control – at least from the points of view of the German and French elites. According to such reasoning, having Russia as part of the dialogue is one way to try to avoid further escalation of tensions. Public opinion, including Germany's preoccupation with refugee policy and French worries about terrorism, adds another layer of complexity to the unified EU policy towards Russia. The extent to which the realpolitik approach sets its tone in Germany and France is yet to be seen.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that although Russian narratives are reported in the French and German press, they overall do not dominate the discussion. Russian sources are quoted alongside experts and Ukrainian sources. While this research included only a limited 'snapshot' of articles in the German and French press, focusing primarily on the timing of the one-year anniversary of the Minsk II agreement, more thorough research could reveal greater divides in the coverage. While noting that the French media has been sympathetic to Ukraine (in particular 'Le Monde, Libération or La Croix), some authors (Litra et al. 2016) also noted that '... the right-wing newspaper Le Figaro is more critical and regularly leaning towards pro-Kremlin views, as such right-wing weekly magazines L'Express or Le Poin'. A similar situation is likely to apply to Germany.

Regardless of the worrying internal divisions within Germany and France, the Ukraine crisis has reinforced important ties between Germany and France. Both countries have experienced divergent priorities, including refugees for one and the terrorist threat for the other (Techau, 2016). Despite this, the leaders of both countries have managed to keep 'a critical mass within the EU in favour of the unified policy' (Speck, 2016). Nevertheless, the future position of Germany and France should not be taken for granted. While there is a high percentage of those (including the general population and the elites) who are willing to pursue the Minsk implementation, including its security component, internal challenges may fuel a softer stance on Russia. While democratic institutions, including a vibrant media space, allow for greater debate and critical reading of the Russian-sponsored narrative, democratic resilience may be weakened by greater internal concerns. The support for initiatives that promote media literacy and grant support to independent journalists can be seen as ways to address these challenges.

Footnotes

¹ The Minsk II agreement was concluded on 12 February 2015, building on the Minsk Protocol of 5 September 2014. Minsk II includes a package of measures for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, which is available at: <http://www.osce.org/cio/140156>

² This gap in interpretation was analyzed in a previous IES Policy brief: <http://www.ies.be/policy-brief/mind-gap-interpreting-minsk-ii-agreement>.

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