

Joint Dissertation Review

Name of the student:	Jonathan Jacobs
Title of the thesis:	Between Westbindung and Ostpolitik: Reconceptualising German-Russian Relations 2014-2017
Reviewer:	Vera Scepanovic

1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

(relevance of the research question, research objective, literature review):

The research question is embedded in broader literature on German foreign policy “exceptionalism” and provides a timely and substantive contribution to understanding its recent evolution – more specifically, the stop-and-go pattern in its criticism of Russia, the ambiguity and even the seeming contradictions (e.g. of criticising Russia’s aggressive stance towards the EaP countries while continuing to do business with it). However, this only becomes obvious once the reader has gone through the literature review and much of the background chapter. In the introduction itself, the research question could have been situated and defended better. While it is clearly stated, it sets up the thesis to be overly descriptive; the author could have made more forcefully the argument that the thesis is not simply adding colour and nuance to our understanding of internal debates behind the German foreign policy, but actually helping us understand better its overall pattern.

This is a pity, because the thesis otherwise displays an impressive knowledge of secondary literature on German foreign policy and indeed identifies an important gap that could help to understand the overall trajectory of the policy better.

2. ANALYSIS

(methodology, argument, theoretical backing, appropriate work with sources):

The sources and the method of analysis are well selected, appropriate to the task, and well justified. The author shows good knowledge and a reflexive approach to the method, and the analysis covers a very substantial body of sources.

However, the way in which the results are presented does not always allow the reader to fully understand how the author arrived at his conclusions. The first “Analysis” chapter (dimensions of German-Russian relations) lists three key dimensions, but it is unclear whether these have been pre-selected by the author based on the review of secondary literature, or whether they emerged from the analysis of documents/speeches. They are also not systematically addressed throughout the analysis of the three periods: the historical dimension is frequently referenced, but the economic one is only addressed in any detail in the third period (and again, it is unclear whether this is something that comes out of the sources – in which case it should have been highlighted as a finding). Much of the explanatory work consists of linking back individual utterances to the larger party traditions of Westbindung or Ostpolitik, but again it could have been shown more clearly whether the speakers do so themselves, or if it is the author who identifies these links (thus possibly introducing some observer bias into the analysis). Much of this could have been cleared up by a different style of referencing: the sources are references in the same way as the secondary literature, and greater reliance on primary quotes could have helped to illustrate the author’s points more clearly. Similarly, while the periodization is useful, the analysis could have been helped by a clearer and more systematic identification of key themes (the uses of history, the role of the economy, the role of the NATO alliance vs. a European security system, the understandings of the meaning of Europe and Russia’s place in it) – at the moment, this is done in a somewhat ad hoc manner, which makes it more difficult to track continuity/discontinuity across all these dimensions.

3. CONCLUSIONS

(persuasiveness, link between data and conclusions, achievement of research objectives):

The thesis effectively answers the overall questions, be it in a somewhat descriptive fashion. It shows how the party discourses about Russia changed, and how despite some convergence significant discrepancies remained in their conceptions of Germany's national role as a foreign policy actor. The thesis is less successful in explaining the changes. This is mainly because the overall analysis shows only minor change: much of the heavy lifting is done by references to the parties' foreign policy traditions, which necessarily emphasises continuity. Again, it would have been helpful to know whether these references are clearly understood and used as such by the actors (there is only one reference to a speaker directly referring to Ostpolitik in explaining the current preferences of SDP) or if this is an extrapolation by the author. If the former, another layer of reflexion might have been necessary to understand how the parties try to keep their policy "brand" even when their objectives change; if the latter, some discussion of the possible alternative explanations (economic ties, constituency preferences etc.) would have been in order. There is only one short reference to voter preferences via an opinion poll (which doesn't distinguish between voters by party affiliation). Similarly some more explanation of the identity of the speakers might have been helpful. They are assumed to all faithfully represent the main party line, but if the question is how party discourse changes changes in personnel, a generational shift, etc. might have helped to understand this process better. Finally, given the impressive scope of the introductory part of the thesis (literature review, background analysis, theory) and the analysis itself, the conclusion seems curiously short and it could have been used more effectively to tie the analysis back to what is actually the main purpose of the thesis: explaining the ambivalent pattern of German foreign policy towards Russia in the observed period. Recognising that the national role conception/key tenets of a country's foreign policy are contested internally is only the first step, the next should have been to give the reader some indication of how they combine to produce the aggregate behaviour of the country on the foreign stage. Was Germany more likely to take definitive policy steps in matters on which both parties agreed, but to muddle and be more inconsistent in those in which they disagreed? Or was it more likely to display a critical side in policy fields of which CDU/CSU ministers were in charge, while being more friendly in those of which SDP ministers headed, thus making it overall inconsistent? Or something else? Using a few examples of actual policy developments and relating them to the discursive battle inside the German parliament/government in this way would have significantly strengthened the conclusion and helped to make a stronger, more general argument about the importance of studying discursive contestation for our understanding of states' behaviour overall.

4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

(appropriate language, adherence to academic standards, citation style, layout):

The thesis is overall well written though it suffers from some repetition. It is clearly laid out and professionally referenced, though references to primary sources should have been marked more clearly (they are indistinguishable from those to secondary literature, which makes it more difficult to understand when the author is conducting primary analysis and when he is using the secondary literature to comment on it). Page numbers would have made commenting easier.

5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

(strong and weak point of the dissertation, other issues)

The thesis shows excellent knowledge of the secondary literature, a reflexive approach to theory and method and good research instincts in identifying and processing the primary sources. It would have needed some more time to digest the primary materials and find a more effective way of presenting them that would take the thesis from a rich description to more structured analysis. The latter would also have allowed the author to zoom out from the immediate concern of the analysis (how has the discourse of the two parties changed) and make a stronger claim about the larger background question: how internal discursive contestation shapes the outward manifestations of German foreign policy.

Grade (A-F):	B (7.7)
Date:	Signature:

3 July 2019	
-------------	--