

REPORT

By Member of the Dissertation Committee on the Dissertation of

Alexandra N. RASTVORTSEVA on the theme:

“Impact of the Crimean Crisis on Russian-German Relations 2014-2021

(Based on the Materials of the German Periodical Press)”

**Submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Academic Degree of
Candidate in Historical Sciences**

Specialisation 5.6.7 – History of International Relations and Foreign Policy

Having read the doctoral dissertation of Alexandra N. RASTVORTSEVA in the English-language version, I am ready to offer a series of observations and draw conclusions concerning the academic quality of the work. The thesis concerns the analysis of the theoretical and practical approaches and effects of a key geopolitical event of the Crimea Crisis on the relations between Germany and Russia, which is monitored via German mass media coverage. The topic is at the intersection of several different academic disciplines, which includes among others international relations, psychology, politics, national and transnational policymaking, public opinion and organised persuasive communication. This thesis is very informative, easy to follow and the text written in an easy to digest and yet engaging format. A very rich set of data from academic and mass media sources are used to illustrate the logic of the changing ‘official’ political narrative on the quality and direction of German-Russian relations.

The thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and bibliography. The format and order of these various parts of the thesis is conducted in a clear, consistent and logical order. In the flow of the appearance of topics and subjects, knowledge and information is appearing in a progressive manner that is conducive for the reader in digesting the evaluations, observations and conclusions of the work in an gradual manner. The articulated academic and practical relevance of the topic are clear as are the purpose and objectives of the thesis and its originality. There is an excellent background and (geo)political context to the change in relations between Germany and Russia through a comprehensive literature overview of academic thinking, statements by politicians, German mass media reports over time.

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There is also evident, a highly consistent and systematic approach to ordering and presenting data, which facilitates enables a comparability perspective for the reader. A remarkably impressive array of various kinds of literature has been consulted and worked into the framework of the thesis. The work is very well researched, written and argued. Observations, interpretations, evaluations and conclusions are well justified and convincing.

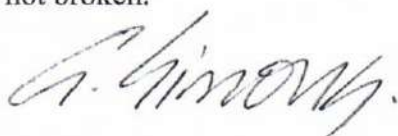
Despite the various noted strengths and many merits of this thesis, there are several academic points that should have been considered for inclusion in the work to further strengthen it. These points vary in nature, where some are relatively minor and should be understood within the spirit of being friendly advice on strengthening an already excellent academic work as well as something to consider in your future works. Other issues are a bit more problematic, affecting the scientific design and perhaps even some possible informational outcomes. There are some additional/alternative theoretical concepts that would have helped to gain deeper insights into some of the data presented in the thesis. I agree with the motivation and selection of the data sources and the method used. However, greater clarity and detail is needed on the motivation and selection of the theory used. Constructivism, which is mentioned in passing, would be an ideal choice, but this needs to be not so ambiguous. This would be even further enhanced through the inclusion of literature of the role of moral panics on public opinion about Russia. Even though there are some periodic hints about it, there could be more literature on the subjective application of public opinion. Because, is public opinion an accurate or approximate measure of what people think on a particular topic or subject at a particular point in time or is it something that they are being groomed to think about? In this line, literature by Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays on the operationalisation of public opinion in a democratic setting as a means to engineer public perception and consent would be very useful.

Other thoughts on useful theoretical concepts and constructs that would provide further and deeper explanatory power in your work include the notion of an iconic event, which is a key and highly mediated moment in history that generates emotionally based associations. In line with this thinking, can Crimea be considered an iconic event moment in German-Russia relations or is it an excuse for an already determined foreign policy agenda? Another point, it would be helpful to engage in more academic literature of the New Cold War construct as this is a contested term.

As some departing points to consider of a lesser urgency, but they are factors that nonetheless subjectively affect German-Russian relations concern the level of sovereignty of Germany and therefore their ability to pursue an independent policy that protects and enhances their interests. Since 1945, Germany has been occupied by American soldiers, subverted by US institutions and NGOs and so forth. Germany is not a free and sovereign state, there is no clearer illustration of this than the current leadership of the German Green Party, which is very pro-war and deeply pro-US, which stands ideologically contra to European leftist politics. Two final points to make on the thesis. I do very much like and appreciate the concept used of 'inattentive blindness.' It is a very actual and useful tool, especially for this work. However, I do not believe that this is accidental or sub-consciously achieved in Germany or Europe as a whole. Rather it is a deliberate policy not to understand Russia's interests or perspectives, otherwise this may incur a sense of empathy by the audience rather than demonisation (moral panic). This is evidenced by the amount of time and effort invested in attacking contra messages and using character assassination on the messengers. This should be emphasized. The final point relates to the necessity to expand the conclusion, which is too brief. This should include analysis based on the theoretical interpretations of of the key empirical findings and conclusions, which should be used to reveal the larger theoretical picture and your original contribution to developing the current state of literature and knowledge on not only the empirical topic but its theoretical meaning and significance to the field of science.

In summary, the thesis covers a rapidly transforming field of academic study in the 21st century of xommunicated international relations, and how this topic is perceived and acted upon theoretically as an object of study and practically through the influence of political and foreign policy discussions in the wake of mediated iconic events at a time of declining public trust in mainstream mass media and the mainstream political establishment in liberal democracies, such as that of Germany. The strengths of the work far outweigh the few minor weaknesses uncovered in the thesis. One of the consistent themes concerning choices refers to the informational and cognitive facades faced by academics and policymakers that require critical examination and interpretation. This work contributes to a deeper conceptual and empirical understanding of the nature and practice of a mediated political agenda and international relations politics with its sets of interpretations and representations, the theoretical concepts, mass media and political processes and the resulting foreign policy outcomes.

The dissertation meets the basic requirements established by Order No. 11181/1 of 19 November 2021, "On the Procedure for Awarding Academic Degrees at Saint Petersburg State University," the candidate Alexandra N. RASTVORTSEVA deserves the award of the scientific degree of Candidate of Political Sciences in the speciality 5.6.7. – History of International Relations and Foreign Policy. Clause 11 of the aforementioned Order by the author of the thesis is not broken.



21.01.2024

Member of the Dissertation Council

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Independent Researcher, Sweden, Associate Professor Greg Simons