

Communicating the Near Eastern Neighbourhood: Media Frames and Images of External EU Relations

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Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz
Department of Political Science
Chair of International Relations

Georg Forster-Building
D-55099 Mainz
Phone: +49 (0)6131-39-21051
Fax: +49 (0)6131-39-27109
E-mail: mpiep@uni-mainz.de
<http://international.politics.uni-mainz.de/>

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Katharina Kleinschnitger is researcher and lecturer at the Technical University of Darmstadt, kleinschnitger@pg.tu-darmstadt.de

Communicating the Near Eastern Neighbourhood: Media Frames and Images of External EU Relations

Katharina Kleinschnitger

Abstract

The European Union (EU) aims to develop “special relations” with the eastern and southern neighbourhood of the enlarged EU. What exactly these privileged and special relations entail is still not clear, and the tailored Action Plans do little to clarify this point. Almost fourteen years after launching the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), it is time to take stock of the relations between the EU and its target countries. “One size fits all” is old news. Focusing on the eastern dimension of the ENP, this paper examines Germany’s internal media perception of individual EU relations with the “near” neighbours of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The key questions of this paper are the following: How are the relations between the EU and the eastern EaP countries, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, framed and communicated by leading German press outlets and what do these frames and images mean for the EU’s outlook towards the eastern neighbours?

1. Introduction¹

During the Eastern Partnership (EaP) ministerial meeting on 19 June 2017, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Frederica Mogherini, stated the following: “I have seen a certain degree of unity, strong dedication and we will continue our works now with our six partners. With each of them we have a differentiated approach but with all of them bilaterally and all together things are moving in a very good way”². The EaP as one dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) aims to develop “privileged” and “special” relations with eastern near and far neighbourhood countries of the enlarged EU to support stability, security and prosperity within the EU’s neighbourhood. Focusing upon the relationship between the EU and “near” EaP countries, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus, the aim of this contribution is to identify, understand and compare the perception of these three relations in German news media. Germany can be considered as one of the most influential countries within the European Union and is the key driver behind European integration, whereas German press has a high potential to influence politics at the European level. The central questions are as follows: How are the relations between the EU and the EaP countries framed by leading German media? What are the differences? What (changing) images are communicated by influential German press when it focuses on individual EU relations with the neighbours to the East? How can possible variations be explained? The study combines qualitative and quantitative content analysis of influential German press from 2009 to 2015.

I then introduce the theoretical considerations (ch. 2) and the methodological framework (ch. 3) followed by a short introduction of the Eastern Partnership and the three selected countries within this partnership (ch. 4). The following section presents comparative empirical findings on how EU relations with each of the three eastern EaP countries are framed in German media (ch. 5). Finally, this contribution concludes with an outline of the asymmetric perceptions and images of EU-EaP relations and what these frames mean for the EU’s outlook towards its eastern neighbours (ch. 6).

2. Theoretical Considerations: Cascading Activation Framing Theory

Theoretically, this research case study is grounded within the framework of interpretative constructivism – an approach that emphasizes that “international reality is not merely the product of physical forces and material power, whether military and economic, but it is a phenomenon socially constructed through discursive power [...]” (Chaban and Holland 2008: 6). Within this approach, the analysis of this paper is informed by theoretical models of image and framing theories. Within the latter, the “cascading activation framing theory” (Entman 2003; Entman 2004) provides us with an operational definition of “framing” commonly accepted within the relevant literature (i.e., Herrmann 2013):

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. (Entman 1993: 52)

The former set of concepts, within IR’s image theory, assumes that images of international actors are “constellations of meanings”; which – as a complex concept often considered in EU external perceptions studies (Chaban and Holland 2014; Chaban and Holland 2015; Elgström and Chaban

¹ I would like to thank Michèle Knodt for fruitful conceptual elaborations of this paper. Furthermore, I would like to thank Niclas Wenz and Maximilian Zoll for valuable discussions and for helpful editing and formatting work. This working paper was created as part of the project “Crisis, Conflict and Critical Diplomacy: EU Perceptions in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine (C3EU)” co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union.

² Frederica Mogherini, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2017/11/24/>, last accessed 2 July 2017).

2015) – is interpreted by, first, the interactions between perceived relative capabilities of an actor; second, by the perceived threat (or opportunity) represented by the actor; and third, the perceived culture of that actor (Herrmann et al. 1997). The conditions under which these “constellations of meanings” may “take off” is overlooked in relevant IR research, leaving open a question about the scope condition for a more substantial impact of external actors’ images in a given society. As part of the “image theory” tradition, Herrmann emphasized emotive charge as one key condition for images of “Others” to leave a deeper imprint (Herrmann 2013). Following Elgström and Chaban (2014), I argue two more conditions – visibility and local resonance – to assess a potential and lasting effect of an image (Elgström and Chaban 2014: 171f.). These conditions are also singled out by the theoretical model of “cascading activation framing” (Entman 2003; Entman 2004). This theoretical synergy between image and cascading activation framing theories is an innovative contribution to the EU external perception studies.

The “cascading model” originates from communication studies to explain how ideas about foreign policy issues, as well as actors, are spread within given societies. Central to the model is the notion of framing – the central process by which government officials and journalists exercise political influence over each other and over the public (Entman 2003: 417). Accordingly, powerful ideas spread from one level of the domestic network to another, typically from national administration, down to other elites (including media elites and journalists), to news images and finally to the general public. It is important to note that the ability to promote the spreading of ideas on foreign policy is not the same at each level. Entman notes that ideas that start at the top level, the national administration, are the strongest followed by national elite networks and journalists (Entman 2003: 419). As in a real cascade, the flow is easier from top to bottom than in reverse: Entman argues that “spreading ideas higher, from lower levels to upper requires extra energy” (Entman 2003: 420). Therefore, the flow of ideas on foreign policy from the public “upwards” is argued by Entman to be weak. However, the public still can occasionally provide feedback to influence elites on external policies, and mainly through the media. Entman reasons that “successful political communication requires the framing of events, issues, and actors in ways that promote perceptions and interpretations that benefit one side while hindering the other” (Entman 2003: 417). Each level in the metaphorical “cascade” contributes to the mix and flow of ideas. Nevertheless, irrespective of levels, frames and subsequent “selective framed communicative highlights” possess varying capability to spread and activate ideas. Rendering Entman, only those frames that possess visibility (i.e., of magnitude and repetition), cognitive and cultural resonance with local audiences and emotive charge are predicted to be “capable”. Respectively, this analysis explores which frames were the most *visible*, *locally resonant* and *emotively charged* on the influencing level within the cascade-leading news media. This conceptual paradigm has been successfully tested in research on EU external perceptions and media images by Chaban et al. (2017), and Knodt et al. (2017).

The “cascading activation” model enhances the key role of the (press) media in the spreading of ideas on foreign policy, in this specific case on EU foreign policy, both up and down the cascade. For spreading ideas downwards, the media function as an important connection between elites and journalists. For spreading ideas upwards, the media support the public to provide and “pump” feedback to the elites and administration level (Entman 2003: 420). If the media create the impression that an idea enjoys noticeable public support, it “can affect leaders’ strategic calculations and activities” (Entman 2003: 420). The model treats certain media sources as more capable in creating and spreading frames. Those are usually national, prestigious sources in a position to influence news making in other regional and local sources, as Knodt et al. (2017) explain in detail. Moreover, international observers follow them as “voices of the nation” and “main opinion formers”; journalists and editors of those sources are usually among top national elites (Knodt et al. 2017). Such outlets are at the centre of the upcoming analysis.

3. Methodological Framework: Content Analysis of German News Media

The contribution focusses on German media. There are no comparable “European” media. The European journal *Politico* would not have provided enough analysis material. In place of that, I had to look at the member state level and chose Germany to determine how EU relations are viewed from the internal EU perspective. I selected Germany as one of the most influential countries within the EU. Moreover, Germany has played a special role for the eastern states, through its history as a divided state and the reunification in 1990, and, additionally, it is one of the key drivers behind European integration (Semetko et al. 2000: 122). Germany’s economic strength and size emphasize its relevance within the EU, so it can be argued that the German leading press has the potential to influence public and political discourses of one of the main players of the EU – and thus the politics at the European level. Within the broad range of media in general and in Germany specifically, the focus of this paper’s study is on print media.

I selected influential German press outlets, namely, *Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, *Handelsblatt* and *Der Spiegel*. All four media outlets are characterized by high-quality journalism and are often used as credible references by political elites and by the public in Germany and the EU. Additionally, they reflect a range of attitudes and political stances within the German media landscape. *SZ* and *FAZ* are the two daily newspapers with the highest circulation in Germany, *Handelsblatt* is the business daily newspaper, and *Der Spiegel* is an influential opinion-shaping weekly magazine.

The period of observation is seven years: from 2009 until 2015. The year 2009 was chosen as a starting point as it marked the launching of the EU’s Eastern Partnership, a milestone in EU relations with its eastern neighbours. During 2015, an important Eastern Partnership summit occurred following the Russia-Ukraine crisis (the most recent EaP summit in November 2017 in Brussels is not included in this analysis). My focus is news coverage during the specific period around the biennial EaP summit. I observe the EaP summit coverage and relevant reports one week before and three days after each summit.³ In total, almost seven weeks of news media coverage were analysed. This seven-year period allows us to examine possible changes and variations in the images of EU-EaP relations. My expectation was that this period featured a higher volume of reports in which the three EaP countries appeared in interaction with the EU.

I used the following key words to collect the news items: “EU, Moldau/Moldawien”, “EU, Ukraine” and “EU, Weißrussland/Belarus”.⁴ For the datasets on the images of the EU-EaP relations, the used key search terms for the EU were “European Union”/“EU”, “European Commission”/“EC”, “European Parliament”/“EP”, “European Central Bank”/“ECB”, “European Court of Justice”/“ECJ”, “EU Presidency” and “EU Council” in the German language. The newspaper articles entered the sample if they contained any one of the listed terms and mentioned one of the three EaP countries. In total, 141 news items were collected with any of these items mentioning the EU, one of its institutions, and at least one of the EaP states named. Thus, three different datasets (EU-Belarus; EU-Moldova; EU-Ukraine) were created, each containing a different number of news items: the EU-Belarus dataset containing 36 articles, the EU-Moldova dataset consisting of 45 news items and the EU-Ukraine dataset with 137 identified media articles. Bearing in mind that some articles mentioned two or all three analysed EU-EaP relations, these newspaper articles have undergone multiple evaluations, resulting in a total of 218 coded articles.

³ The periods of media observation are as follows: Prague summit (7 May 2009), 30.04.–10.05.2009; Warsaw summit (29–30 September 2011), 22.09.–03.10.2011; Vilnius summit (28–29 November 2013), 21.11.–02.12.2013; Riga summit (21–22 May 2015), 14.05.–25.05.2015.

⁴ Please note that in German language, there are different versions of the names of those three countries, and all of them were used as search terms.

Informed by previous research on EU media images (Chaban et al. 2017; Knodt et al. 2017; Chaban 2016), I measure *visibility* through the volume (number of articles) and the degree of centrality of the representation of the EU-EaP relations within respective articles (Table 1).⁵ The *local resonance* category evaluates the representation of actors and thematic frames featuring (or not) local (i.e., EU-specific) links (e.g., local actors, local happenings). I identified five thematic frames: *politics, economy, energy, migration/mobility*, and *good governance*. They are reflective of the ENP's subject areas. Within the category *local resonance*, I also account for the interactions of the EU with the respective EaP country. I distinguish and code for different modes of interactions to evaluate the framing of the relation between the EU and the EaP countries. Among those are *conflict* and *cooperation* as well as *interdependent* and *value-based*. I also account for the cases of *no interaction*, the code for when the actors do not interact in any way, and *comparison*, which is the code for when the actors are compared in a rather neutral manner, which can be on different issues such as economy, politics, energy, and migration. I also considered that a pure description of facts is always influenced by the one presenting it. *Cooperation* is defined as interacting together within win-win situations. *Conflict* on the other side refers to a situation where I observe conflicting interest within asymmetrical profit (Bendel 2010: 512). *Value-based* interaction classifies a situation where at least one of the actors represents its normative ideas and values to influence its partners. Interactions were coded as *interdependent* if both interaction partners were presented as dependent on each other, with their actions having mutual positive or negative outcomes for the other (Zangl 2010: 417). Regarding *emotional charge*, I define the evaluation in the media article of the illustrated EU-EaP relation from negative to positive with the characteristics listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of analysis and their operationalizations

Visibility		Local resonance			Emotional charge
<i>Volume</i>	<i>Degree of centrality</i>	<i>Actors</i>	<i>Thematic frames</i>	<i>Interactions</i>	<i>Evaluation</i>
Number of news items	Minor	EU	Politics	Conflict	Positive
	Secondary	EaP states	Economy	Cooperation	Neutral-to-positive
	Major	Other	Energy	Interdependent	Neutral
			Migration/mobility	Value-based	Neutral-to-negative
			Good governance	No interaction	Negative
			Other	Comparison	
				Others	

Source: compiled by the author, based on Chaban (2016: 105ff.).

4. The EU and the “Near” Eastern Partnership: EU relations to Belarus, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine

The Formally, the EU's relations with the three countries of eastern Europe were established in the early 1990s in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In July 1991, the European Council laid the foundations for the well-known Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent

⁵ Operationalization of these categories has been presented in relevant literature – see Chaban et al. (2017) and Knodt et al. (2017).

States (TACIS) programme to promote the transition of the countries to democracy and a free market economy. By the end of 2006, TACIS was the general (financial) framework for relations with all states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a loose alliance of twelve former Soviet republics and originally founded by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. In 1995, Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine were signed and entered into force in 1998. The PCA with Belarus, which was also signed in 1995, has not yet entered into force. Since 2004, the three eastern European countries have been partner countries of the ENP, which has integrated the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) since 2007 and replaced TACIS from that point onwards (Knodt and Urdze 2017; Urdze and Knodt 2017).

In 2009, the Eastern Partnership was inaugurated at the Prague summit. The EaP aims to bring the relationship between the EU and the three countries of eastern Europe, which are the key focus of this study, as well as the South Caucasus countries of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, to a new level. The EaP is divided into a bilateral and, to strengthen the relations among the states, a multilateral dimension, which – similar to the subject areas of the ENP – is based on four platforms: “politics”, “economy including energy”, “mobility” and “good governance”. Belarus is the only EaP country that has participated in the multilateral dimension from the outset, while the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia reached the next important stage in their relationship with the EU in June 2014 by signing Association Agreements (AA) with Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) included.

Looking from the EU perspective, the Republic of Moldova has been described as the “best pupil in the class” (Gromadzki 2015: 14). However, the EU is still gravely concerned about the prevailing domestic conflicts of interest, leading to a slowdown in reforms in Moldova in recent years. The Moldavian elections of the last years show the political and social polarization and cleavage formation in two camps, pro-European versus pro-Russian, which could lead to a rapid destabilization of EU-Moldova relations (Gromadzki 2015: 14f.). The EU-Moldova relationship was formally established with the signature of the PCA. The next stage of the relationship was the ENP Action Plan, adopted on 22 February 2005, which was set up for an initial period of three years and then passed through annual implementation plans (Nervi Christensen 2011; Buscaneanu 2015). On 27 June 2014, the EU and the Republic of Moldova signed an AA, which launched a new stage of political and economic cooperation and has been provisionally applied since 1 September 2014. The AA with the included DCFTA aims to further strengthen political and economic relations.⁶ During the implementation, the EU assists Moldova to promote further reforms of the public administrative structure – with the “key priority” of the agreement remaining, however: the development of joint trade relations (Bendiek 2008).⁷ Another important dimension of the EaP negotiations on EU-Moldova relations are the Visa Liberalisation Dialogues and the attached Visa Liberalisation Action Plans (VLAP), which benchmark further steps regarding the mobility of people and the negotiation of visa facilitation. Based on the fifth Progress Report of the VLAP, the European Commission proposed the abolishment of visa requirements for Moldavian citizens (European Commission 2013). Approved by the European Parliament and adopted by the Council of the EU, since 28 April 2014, citizens of the Republic of Moldova – as the first of the EaP states – can travel to the Schengen area of the EU for up to 90 days without a visa.

Turning to EU-Ukraine relations, Ukraine is a central state of the ENP and has been described by academics as the “driving force” for relations with the EU within the framework (Trabandt 2012: 78). This finding can be explained not only by its geographical size but also the high status of economic relations with the EU and because of its significance in normative and geopolitical relations with Russia. The institutionalization of the relations between Ukraine and the EU began with the signature of the PCA on 14 June 1994, which was ratified in March 1998. Subsequently, in February 2005, the EU and Ukraine adopted the EU-Ukraine Action Plan, which entailed political reforms and

⁶ See http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/docs/eu-moldova_en.pdf (accessed 12 July 2018).

⁷ See http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Laenderinfos/01-Nodes_Uebersichtsseiten/Moldau_node.html (accessed 4 July 2018).

visa facilitation as a conditional basis for further trade relations. The tailor-made Action Plan represented a subsequent step in the formalization of EU-Ukraine relations and has been extended by implementation plans after three years' validity.

From 2007 to 2011, the EU and Ukraine were negotiating an AA, which should have included an in-depth DCFTA and aimed to further develop trade relations. When Viktor Yanukovych, however, won the presidential election in February 2010, two prominent events led to stagnated development of the relations between the two parties in the following years. On the one hand, there were the ongoing negotiations on association, complicated by the imprisonment of former opposition Presidential candidate Tymoshenko and, on the other hand, the failure to reach agreements on the bilateral EU-Ukraine association in November 2013. Soon after, before the Vilnius summit in 2013, Yanukovych surprisingly refused to sign the negotiated AA (Gromadzki 2015: 13). The non-signing by the president resulted in the so-called pro-European Euromaidan movements, which attracted many civil society actors to protest for the European agreement and against corruption, as well as Russian influence, which ultimately transpired in February 2014. At the same time, military conflicts broke out in the eastern Ukraine, which were connected with the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russian forces in March 2014. Since then, a vicious conflict has been fought in the eastern part of Ukraine.

Despite this troublesome domestic situation, on 21 March 2014 – under the three-month transitional presidency of Oleksandr Turchynov – Ukraine signed the political part of the AA with the EU. Subsequently, on 27 June 2014, under the new, democratically elected President Petro Poroshenko, the economic part of the agreement was signed (Gromadzki 2015: 12). It, however, was suspended until 31 December 2015 to find a settlement with Russia regarding compatibility with the DCFTA free trade agreement. The ratification by the Ukrainian parliament of the Joint AA on 16 September 2014 marked the next, vital stage in cooperation and, as such, constitutes the new foundation of EU-Ukraine relations. From a political point of view, it contains an ambitious reform agenda that includes reforms of the country's public administration and judicial sector. Regarding mobility, the EU-Ukraine visa facilitation agreement and readmission agreement have been in force since June 2007, and an amended version of the Agreement on Visa Reduction has been in force since 2013. The VLAP has been agreed upon within the framework of the visa liberalization dialogues that led to the sixth final Progress Report in December 2015 and the assessment by the Commission "to transfer Ukraine to the list of third countries whose nationals are exempt from visa requirement" (European Commission 2015a). Since 11 June 2017, Ukrainian citizens have been allowed to travel to the Schengen area of the EU for a short stay without visa requirements.

The EU and Belarus were negotiating the joint PCA project until 1995. Although the negotiations were allegedly concluded, the agreement was ultimately not ratified, mainly because of Alexander Lukashenko's "authoritarian policy style" (Trabandt 2012: 55). Due to manipulated presidential elections, the EU imposed sanctions such as trade, entry and financial restrictions on Belarus in 2004 and 2006. The violation of democratic principles and the lack of recognition of human rights burden the EU-Belarus relationship enormously (Bendiek 2008: 22). The bilateral relationship has not yet developed any infrastructure; there has never been a ratified PCA, an ENP Action Plan or any annual progress reports. In 2014, there was a gradual rapprochement between Belarus and the EU. After Belarus played a committed role as "mediator" in the agreement to curb the Ukraine war in the Minsk peace protocol and released political prisoners, the EU facilitated its previously imposed restrictive measures (Gromadzki 2015: 18). The EaP summit meeting in Riga in May 2015 even approved the progress of EU-Belarus relations on the issue of mobility, which launched negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreement in 2014, and the opening of dialogue on the mobility partnership since 2015. Despite all the EU's efforts, Russia remains Belarus' economic and political "key partner", which was strengthened by Belarus' accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a further developed form of the Customs Union, on 1 January 2015.

From March to July 2015, the EU carried out a review including public consultation of its ENP to find new approaches and ways of working with its neighbouring countries as well as re-prioritizing its policy. On 18 November 2015, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security

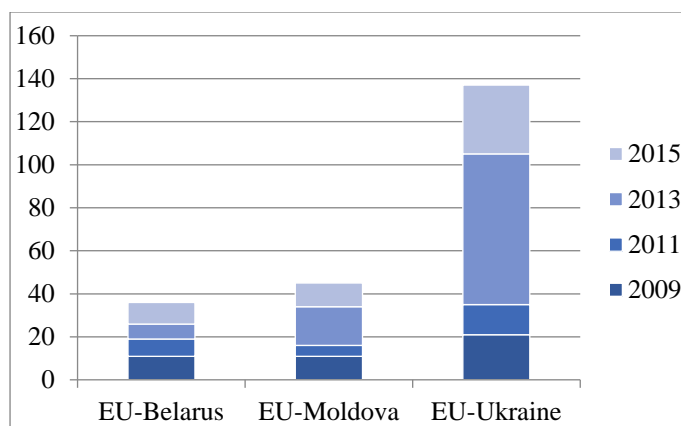
Policy and the European Commission presented the outcome of this process and laid out the main lines of review of the ENP (European Commission 2015b; Cianciara 2017). The main change of the image was a turn to more flexibility and cooperation, which symbolized a turn in the ENP. In the same way, the EU Global Strategy (EUGS 2017: 1) introduced the principled pragmatism that showed a new realism in the EU's foreign policy since 2016, especially in its neighbourhood policy, which focuses on security, hard power and interests. The new approach will most likely bring a change towards a more differentiated bilateralism among the EU, its member states, and, in this case, the three "near" EaP states – Belarus, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. To assess which kind of shift is to be found, it is important to analyse and to compare media perceptions of external EU relations with the three EaP states. In that regard, the following section compares empirical findings on how EU relations with each of the three eastern EaP countries are framed in German media.

5. Analysing German Media Frames and Images of External EU Relations to the Eastern Neighbourhood

As mentioned above, in this research case, German media were observed over seven years (2009–2015), near the period of the EaP summits. Looking at the data volume by outlets over time, nearly half the whole dataset cumulates in the year 2013, whereas 2011 represents the smallest volume of published newspaper articles. Overall, the dataset incorporates 68 articles of the *FAZ*, followed by 47 articles of the *SZ*. The *Handelsblatt* published only 20 relevant articles, and *Der Spiegel* published only 6 articles. Thus, the *FAZ* is the dominant source for the data over time, followed closely by the *SZ*.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 represent the *visibility* of the respective EaP country in the selected German press during the period of observation. Looking at the volume of media articles by country, Ukraine is outstanding. The disproportional volume of EU-Ukraine data not only can be attributed to the crisis year 2013 but can be found in all of the periods under review. Thus, compared to the whole EU-respective EaP country relation, the EU-Ukraine relation is addressed most frequently in German media.

Figure 1: Volume of articles on EU relations by countries and years



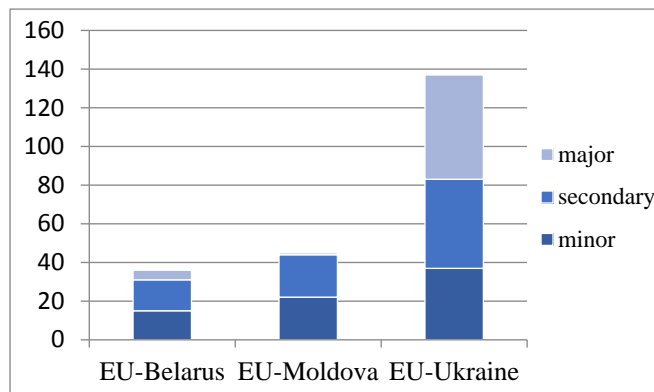
Source: ENPerceptions, TU Darmstadt, 2016.

In the case of EU-Belarus, I witness a regular but low-level *visibility* of the EU-Belarus relations through the years. The volume of reports on EU-Republic of Moldova relations is also low but does not show any kind of regularity. German news clearly situates EU-Ukraine relations in the centre

of the published articles in 2013. Most coverage was related to Viktor Yanukovych's decree not to sign the AA (58 EU-Ukraine articles that year).

One important indication for pronounced *visibility* is a high volume in combination with a high degree of centrality. The three cases differ considerably according to the centrality within the observed German media (Figure 2). EU-Republic of Moldova and EU-Belarus relations – compared to EU-Ukraine relations – were in the centre of the news coverage very seldom. EU-Moldova relations received the lowest value of major centrality. In contrast, the EU-Ukraine relations on the other side were profiled as central in 49% of the coverage and were reported with high degree of centrality in most media articles and with the fewest articles where these relations were presented with a lower degree of centrality if compared to the relationship between the EU and the Republic of Moldova. The degree of centrality of EU-Belarus relations is between these two cases.

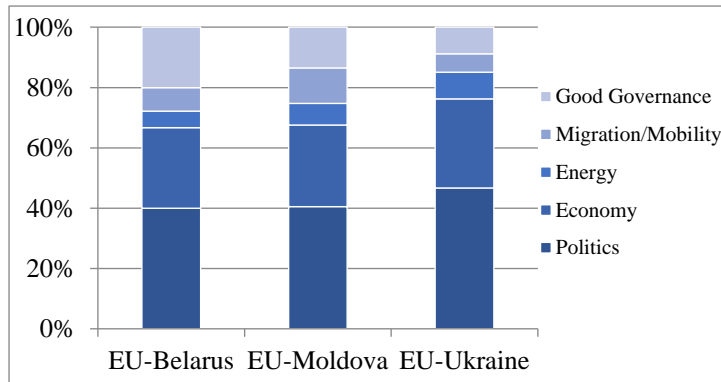
Figure 2: Degree of centrality



Source: ENPerceptions, TU Darmstadt, 2016.

Turning to the question of how the EU-EaP relations were framed in the media with respect to thematic frames, such as *politics*, *economy*, *energy*, *migration/mobility* and *good governance* (Figure 3), the frames of *politics* and *economy* were found within 50% of the coverage. It seems that the influential German press delivers a strong message that the EU relationship towards the EaP countries focuses on *economic* and *political* issues. In the reportage of EU-Ukraine relations, these two frames accounted for nearly 75% of the EU-Ukraine sample. The frames of *energy* and *migration/mobility* were low in visibility in the three country-specific datasets, with a somewhat stronger representation of the *energy* frame in the EU-Ukraine dataset. This higher visibility reflected the status of Ukraine as a transit country for Russian gas. The frame *migration/mobility* showed higher visibility in the EU-Moldova dataset. This can be explained by the ongoing theme of a no-visa regime for the Republic of Moldova. The country was a pilot for visa facilitation and mobility partnership; it was the first EaP state of the three in this analysis that entered the visa-free zone in 2014. Coverage of EU-Belarus relations showed a remarkably high percentage of *good governance* frame. This particular thematic priority was given due to Lukashenko's authoritarian policy style and several human rights violations induced by the Belarusian president.

Figure 3: Thematic frames



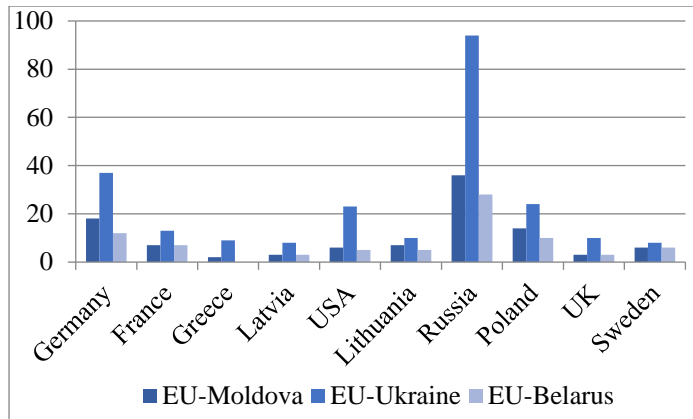
Source: ENPerceptions, TU Darmstadt, 2016.

Looking at the actors mentioned within the articles (Figure 4), in addition to the actor from the EU and three EaP countries, I also accounted for such actors as EU member states and other countries, if they were presented to play a role in the EU's respective relations with the three eastern states. Regarding member states, Germany, Poland and to some extent Lithuania were reported as dominant European state actors in interactions with the three EaP neighbours. Germany was the most visible. This is, of course, due to my selection bias of focusing on German media, but not exclusively. Germany (as well as France) was involved in the Minsk peace processes as the Normandy contact group to mitigate the persistent war in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine since 2014. In addition, similar to Poland, Germany demonstrates a strong economic and political interest towards these eastern neighbours (Böttger 2016). In 2008, Poland together with Sweden initiated the foundation of the EaP with the so-called Polish-Swedish draft, which explains their interest and strong perception within the media coverage. If I disaggregate the data by summits, it is obvious that Lithuania in 2013 was the most visible EU member state – this is the year when the country held both the Council presidency and the summit. In addition, the Baltic countries were reported to be interested in former Soviet countries. This was presented to be the case due to their common Russian-dominated history. In contrast, France was mentioned often as an EU member state that had favoured the southern dimension of the ENP.

Regarding other countries, I expected that Russia will be cast to playing the most important role, especially in Ukraine. Indeed, Russia was second in terms of the number of references in the EU-Moldova dataset and the third most visible in the case of EU-Belarus. In the EU-Ukraine dataset, in 94 articles out of 137, Russia was mentioned. This shows that the leading German newspapers attribute a strong role to Russia when the EU-Ukraine relationship is communicated to the German readers. This is foremost due to the military conflicts in East Ukraine.

Looking at the most visible political figure, Russian president Vladimir Putin was highly visible in all three datasets followed by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov.

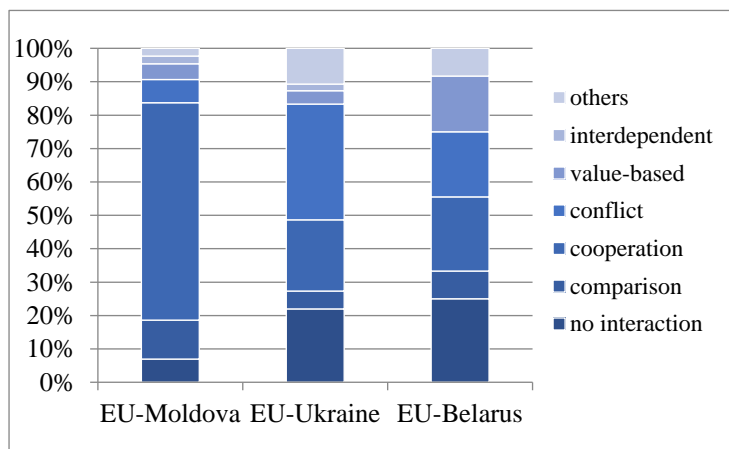
Figure 4: State actors



Source: ENPerceptions, TU Darmstadt, 2016.

Looking at the patterns of interactions in the three cases (Figure 5), German press under observation delivered a visible message of the perceived strong *cooperative* relation between the EU and the Republic of Moldova. Compared to the framing of the EU-Ukraine or EU-Belarus relations, 65% of *cooperative* relations in this case is three times higher than in the other two cases. At the same time, the interaction mode of *conflict* shows the lowest rate, only counting 7%.

Figure 5: Patterns of interaction



Source: ENPerceptions, TU Darmstadt, 2016.

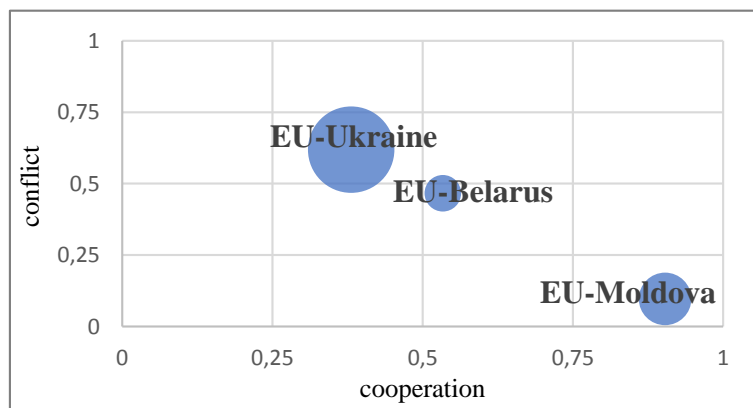
In the case of the EU-Ukraine relationship, framing of the relations in terms of *conflict* was found in 35% of the articles vis-a-vis 22% of *cooperation*. Similar to EU-Ukraine relations, the framing of *cooperation* in the EU-Belarus relationship shows the same rates with 22% and the framing of *conflict* in the EU-Belarus relations was found in 20% of the articles of the EU-Belarus sample. In comparison to EU-Moldova and EU-Ukraine relations, the relationship between EU and Belarus has the highest *no interaction* percentage.

The fact that the framing of the EU-Ukraine relation showed high levels of *conflict* and has a similar *cooperation* rate as EU-Belarus (Figure 6) needs additional insight because, unlike Belarus, Ukraine finally concluded an AA with the EU. On these grounds, Ukraine and EU have closer formal relations with each other, which would suggest a higher share of reports framing EU-Ukraine relations in *cooperation* terms. Within the EU-Ukraine relationship, the highest *conflict* percentages appeared in 2011 and 2013. In 2011, news coverage in this category was dominated by news of the

former Prime Minister of Ukraine, Yulija Tymoshenko, who was arrested due to accusations of alleged abuse of administrative authority and did not receive a legal criminal trial. This case was criticized strongly within the EU and especially in Germany.⁸ The year 2013 marked the beginning of the Maidan movement. The protest was provoked by the decision of president Yanukovych not to sign the AA with the EU.⁹ In contrast, 2015 was the year with the highest share of reports framing the EU-Ukraine relationship in terms of *cooperation*. At this time, new Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko finally signed the AA with the EU – an initiative that marked a change of the relationship towards more *cooperative* modes of interaction.

The theme of enhanced *cooperation* could also be witnessed in framing the EU-Belarus relationship. Through the release of arrested political opposition members and his role as a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Belarus' president Lukashenko opened the country somewhat towards the EU. In return, the EU partially suspended its sanctions against Belarus.¹⁰ Nevertheless, as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union since the beginning of 2015, Belarus does not pursue a deeper relationship with the EU and participates only in the multilateral part of the EaP. In addition, the Belarusian president strongly rejects European values and the EU's democratization efforts. The latter may explain the high percentage of *value-based* interactions – 17% – within the reportage of the EU-Belarus relationship. Compared to Belarus, I find only 5% of *value-based* interactions in the EU-Moldova case and 3% in the EU-Ukraine case (Figure 5).

Figure 6: Patterns of interaction (conflict v. cooperation) vis-à-vis volume



Source: ENPerceptions, TU Darmstadt, 2016.

The rejection of European democratic and constitutional principles on the part of Belarus is clearly reflected in the *evaluation* of the depicted relationship with the EU. The relationship is presented mostly in a *negative* light: 76% of the articles reporting EU-Belarus relations reflect on the relationship from *negative* to *negative/neutral* perspective, and none presents a *positive* picture. In contrast, reports of the EU-Moldova relationship profile only 5% *negative* vs. 60% *positive* to *positive/neutral* resonances (Figure 7). The evaluation of the relationship between the EU and Ukraine is in-between but tends to be more *negative* than *positive*, yet with more positive values attached

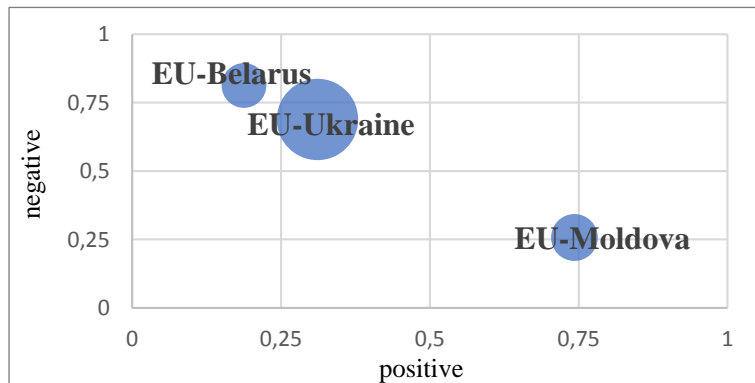
⁸ see among others Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), *Sieben Jahre für Timoschenko* (28 September 2011); Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), *Timoschenko freisprechen* (29 September 2011); Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), *EU streitet mit der Ukraine und Weißrussland: Merkel trifft Lukaschenka-Gegner auf Gipfeltreffen der „Östlichen Partnerschaft“* (1 October 2011); Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), *Sieben Jahre Haft gefordert: Anklage: Timoschenko ist eine gefährliche Verbrecherin* (28 September 2011).

⁹ see among others Der Spiegel, *Geplatzte Verlobung* (25 November 2013); Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), *Ukraine stoppt Vorbereitungen für Assoziierungsabkommen mit der EU* (11 November 2013); Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), *Ukraine stellt den Westen auf die Probe: Präsident Janukowitsch ist derzeit nicht bereit, dass Assoziierungsabkommen mit der EU zu unterzeichnen* (21 November 2013); Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), *Ukraine stoppt Abkommen mit EU: Kiew strebt ein engeres Verhältnis zu Russland an* (22 November 2013); Handelsblatt, *Ukraine sagt dem Westen ab – Erfolg für Moskau: Kiew verfolgt* (22 November 2013).

¹⁰ Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), *Geschichte schreiben: Beim Gipfel in Riga wollen die Staats- und Regierungschefs der EU unter Beweis stellen, dass ihre Ostpolitik nicht gescheitert ist: trotz Krim-Annexion und Ukraine-Krieg* (21 May 2015).

than the depiction of EU-Belarus relation. Importantly, the comparison between 2013 and 2015 points to a trend in framing towards reporting a more *positive* and more *cooperative* relationship between the EU and Ukraine, although both conflicts within this relationship and domestic conflicts in Ukraine play a very important role in EU-Ukraine relations.

Figure 7: Emotional charge (negative v. positive) vis-a-vis volume



Source: ENPerceptions, TU Darmstadt, 2016.

6. Conclusions

The strategy of the EaP as part of the ENP is to develop “privileged” relations with eastern neighbourhood countries of the EU. The aim of this contribution was to identify, compare and explain different frames of German media perceptions of EU relations with the three “near” neighbours of the EU, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. The study combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis of German press media, which have a high potential to influence politics at the European level. The analysis reaches from 2009, the launching of the EaP, to 2015, the year of the latest EaP summit, except for the recent EaP summit in November 2017 in Brussels.

The comparison of the three cases of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus showed that the visibility of the perceived relations between the EU and each EaP country differs widely. The EU-Ukraine relations count for the largest volume in this paper’s research. It is the most visible relation among the three cases, whereas the EU-Moldova relation counts remarkably lower. In the case of EU-Belarus relations, I do witness the lowest volume but with a regular level of visibility through the years. Thematically, in all three cases, the relationships are framed mostly as politics and economy, which underlines the importance of the EaP countries for political and economic purposes rather than focusing on civil society issues. The thematic frames energy and migration/mobility are quite low in all three datasets, with a stronger representation of the energy frame in the EU-Ukraine relation due to the transit-country status of Ukraine for Russian gas. Focusing on the actors, the dominant international state actors in the reportage of the three EU-EaP relations are Russia, Germany and Poland, which shows the perceived influential role these states have on the relationship between the EU and the selected eastern European countries.

The analysis of how the interactions between the EU, its organs, institutions or particular politicians and the three EaP states were reported by the influential German media shows strongly differing frames of interaction: whereas EU-Moldova relations were portrayed with the highest interaction rate while drawing the most cooperative picture constantly from 2009 to 2015, EU-Ukraine relations were presented with a lower interaction rate and are perceived as the most confrontational relation. However, in reference to the development over time, there is a significant trend to a more cooperative interaction mode in EU-Ukraine relations, especially when comparing 2013 and 2015. In the case of the relationship between the EU and Belarus, the value-based interaction between the two parties is striking, especially in 2011. The EU-Belarus relation in 2013 is

characterized by a framing of primarily no interaction and neutral comparison. In addition, the framing of the relations between the EU and the three EaP countries was characterized by a mix of moral evaluations, with a strong negative tendency. In this context, the EU-Belarus relation is communicated as the most negative, while the EU-Moldova relation was given the most positive evaluation in the observed media.

When the EU reviewed its ENP in 2015, the High Representative and Vice President of the Commission Frederica Mogherini spelled out the main change of the ENP's image: "We should switch from the idea that the European Union is at the centre, surrounded by the neighbouring countries, to the idea of a new partnership based on cooperation" (European Commission 2015c: 2). The new ENP highlights that future cooperation must be more "flexible" and characterized by "mutual ownership" (European Commission 2015b: 2). Within its communication, the Commission elaborated that "ownership by both partners and EU Member States needs to be stepped up; that cooperation should be given a tighter, more relevant focus; and that greater flexibility must be sought to enable the EU and its partners to respond to ever changing needs and circumstances" (European Commission 2015b: 2). In addition, it stresses that the EU commits itself and its member states to reinforcing cooperation with neighbours when it is in the parties' (EU, the three EAP countries and member states) interest. The new EU Global Strategy (EUGS) from 2016 expressed the same vision of a flexible and "principled pragmatism" as the reviewed ENP.

Tellingly, the analysis of German news media shows very distinctive asymmetric patterns of media framing regarding the relations between the EU and the three EaP countries. The Republic of Moldova is presented as the "best pupil in the class" and the most diligent. However, at the same time, EU-Moldova relations are almost invisible in German influential press. In contrast, Ukraine is highly visible and was always described as the "driving force" within the EaP. However, the EU-Ukraine relationship is presented as ridden with conflicts – Ukraine is framed as a rebellious partner. Finally, Belarus is depicted as the "bad boy" who participates only in the multilateral track of the EaP. German leading press paints the EU-Belarus relation in the most negative light of the three observed cases.

This paper has focused on one EU member state's media and thus does not allow a conclusion about the media perception of member states in general. Nevertheless, my conclusions of quite different perceptions of the three EaP states Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus regarding the identified negative tendency of moral evaluations and the predominant conflict interactions, especially between the EU and Ukraine and the EU and Belarus, contrast with the official rhetoric of EU representatives. As quoted the High Representative, Frederica Mogherini, in the introduction of this paper, that the EU stresses unity and strong dedication as well as a positive direction of development of all EaP countries, the perception analysis shows a highly asymmetric grading of the three countries. This may lead to a "two-class EaP" in future EU policy. The strengthening of the bilateral versus multilateral regional approach within the EaP will enforce this process. The more asymmetric the picture of the countries and the more differentiated approaches the EU follows in the sense of its new flexibility and "principled pragmatism", the higher the possibility of a division in winners and losers within the EaP. This development will be enhanced with a more prominent role of the member states as partners, such as Germany, within the region. In consequence, this effect might lead Moldova and, in the latest development, also Ukraine to move closer to possible EU membership – even if the EU continues to assert that this is not on the agenda – than Belarus.

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