

What lessons to learn for intelligence production and use in German foreign policy from ISIS' rise to power and the Russian actions in Ukraine in 2013/2014?

Background

The international environment in which German and European foreign policy is made has become more competitive, hostile, complex and uncertain. These trends can, among others, be attributed to changes in the global order connected to structural changes in the distribution of power, the impact of new technologies, and societal changes within and outside of Europe.

The surprises that German political leaders experienced in the early 2010s were partly symptoms of these underlying changes, but also linked to shortcomings such as limited political receptivity to expert forecasts and warnings. Given their impact, the following crises merit postmortem analyses of strengths and weaknesses in how Germany anticipated and handled them: ISIS' rise to power in Iraq and Syria and an escalation of tensions between Russia and Ukraine, both in 2013-2014. The findings are based on the [INTEL project](#), funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) which investigated how the EU, Germany, and the UK foresaw and responded to various crises and which lessons analysts, policy-planners and decision-makers ought to learn.

Key questions asked from a lesson-learning perspective

1. What was the degree, level and spread of surprise in these two cases?
2. To what extent is the surprise "condonable" given mitigating factors?
3. What were the main underlying reasons for analysts or decision-makers to be surprised?
4. What overall lessons can Germany still learn from these two cases?

The analysis is based on tracing knowledge claims made over time in hundreds of expert open sources and on around 30 interviews with intelligence analysts, external experts and policymakers. In addition, this briefing takes feedback from a workshop in April 2021 with German officials under Chatham House rules into account. The assessments presented below are those of the authors' alone.

ISIS' Rise to Power, 2013-2014

What was surprising?

- **Partial surprise:** The fall of Mosul to ISIS in June 2014, especially the withdrawal of the Iraqi Army, the ease with which ISIS captured Mosul, and ISIS' rapid expansion beyond Mosul.
- **Significant surprise:** Confronted with media coverage of the Sinjar massacre in August 2014, appeals by the Yazidi and Kurdish diasporas as well as a cross-party consensus in the German Bundestag for the protection of Yazidis and support of Kurdistan, German decision-makers experienced surprise that ISIS' expansion affected German interests and that Iraq became a foreign policy priority over the summer of 2014.
- **Partial surprise:** the timing of ISIS' surge into Fallujah and Ramadi, that Fallujah was also targeted, how promptly ISIS exploited Sunni unrest, that Syrian rebels failed to oust ISIS from Raqqa after ISIS had suffered losses there and elsewhere in Syria.

Key diagnostic difficulties

- **Lack of access** (especially Syria, but also some Iraqi towns), including next to no ability to draw on local contacts.
- Challenge of finding **reliable local reports** (e.g. during ISIS' Anbar campaign).
- **Complexity and speed** of parallel developments across Syria and Iraq requiring integrated cross-unit analysis of the interplay of economic, ethnic, ideological, political and military factors.
- High degree of **discontinuity and novelty** with ISIS breaking away from al-Qaeda and preparing for a transnational caliphate, among others through tax and revenue-raising strategies and quick build-up of administrative structures.
- **Limited understanding** of the actual weakness of the Iraqi security forces.
- **Novelty and complexity** of radicalisation processes and of online recruitment and inspiration strategies.
- Difficulty of anticipating **secondary consequences** of relevance to German audiences and interests.

Underlying reasons for performance problems

- ♦ **Lack of enough and sufficiently qualified** (eg Arabic-speaking) staff working on and in the region, especially during early phase of crisis.
- ♦ **Cultural biases** leading to underestimation of structural vulnerabilities in Iraq and Syria.
- ♦ **Limited political receptivity** to early warnings given lack of interest in Iraq until fall of Mosul for reasons going back to 2003.
- ♦ **Limited attention** to the “war within the war” in Syria;
- ♦ Intelligence analysts **struggling to challenge conventional wisdom** among their superiors and explain how German interests would be affected.
- ♦ Substantial reliance on US/UK intelligence assessments with a **positive slant** on Iraq and the Iraqi army.
- ♦ **Distractions** by debate about the use of chemical weapons in Syria.
- ♦ Apparent belief in a **political solution** to the Syrian civil war.
- ♦ The German federal elections in September 2013 leading to a **gap in leadership** at a critical time.
- ♦ The Ukraine conflict creating **agenda competition**.

The case of Ukraine, 2013–2014

What was surprising?

- ♦ **Partial surprise:** Yanukovich’s U-Turn on EU Association Agreement before the Vilnius summit as well as the dynamism, support and impact of the Euromaidan protest.
- ♦ **Significant surprise:** Yanukovich’s narrow domestic support and subsequent flight in February 2014 despite a diplomatic deal.
- ♦ **Near perfect surprise:** Russian military action and outright annexation of Crimea even though Crimea had been known to be of strategic importance and ENP/AA had been recognised as a geopolitical threat to Russia.
- ♦ **Partial surprise:** Russian destabilisation and military intervention in Donbas from spring 2014 onwards.

Key diagnostic difficulties

- ♦ Understanding Ukrainian **two-ways facing negotiation tactics** vis-à-vis EU and Russia.

- Understanding the extent of **local public unhappiness** with Yanukovich regime, the crucial role of oligarchs switching sides and the narrow power basis of the regime.
- Difficulty of penetrating **Putin's inner circle of advisors**, associates and proxies to gauge intentions, resolve, and preparations due to secrecy and senior Russian diplomats being kept out of the loop.
- **Lack of sufficient information** on take-over plans and military preparations.
- Reliance on sources from other member states whose track-record and interests may make them appear **biased** (cry-wolf);
- **Susceptibility to Russian propaganda**/lies on Crimea operation; overestimated readiness of Ukrainian armed forces to resist take-over in Crimea.

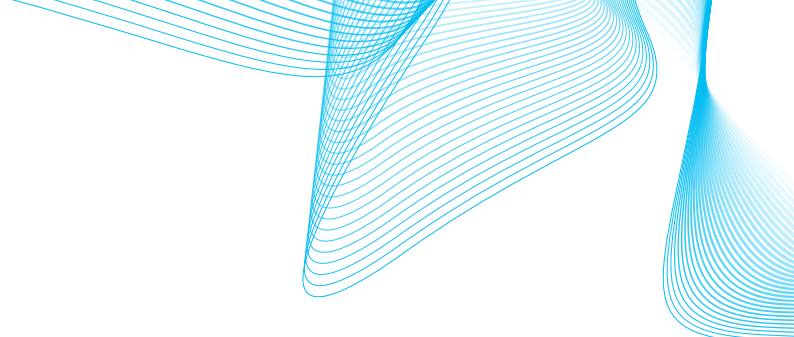
Underlying reasons for performance problems

- **Lack of systematic contingency**/scenario planning and surprise-sensitive forecasting in advance or after the Vilnius summit;
- **Problematic division of labour** in EU external action with EU member states paying insufficient attention to the geopolitical aspects of ENP/enlargement led by the EU Commission;
- **Lack of HUMINT/SIGINT** on Russian military plans at both EU and member state level;
- **Forgotten lessons** from USSR era about manoeuvres and deception;
- Not enough **country expertise** on Ukraine;
- In-built tendency to **discount rather than discuss** warnings from frontline Northern and Eastern European states (e.g. Poland/Sweden) because of high and asymmetric politicisation of Russia dossier.

Lessons learning in Germany since 2014

Germany has recently attempted to learn some lessons through a) the 2014 Foreign Office Review b) the 2016 Ministry of Defence Whitebook c) the 2017 Government/Foreign Office Guidelines on Civilian Conflict Prevention and a March 2021 Implementation Report. These led to substantial budget increases for conflict prevention, stabilisation, defence and intelligence. These changes enabled the recruitment of more experts and beefed-up coordination, advisory and research structures in crisis prevention/stability (eg unit S within the foreign ministry, cross-governmental working groups on early anticipation and prevention of crises; funding for conflict research, external advisory board for civilian crisis prevention). Evaluation practice and strategic foresight appears to have improved (Guideline Implementation 2021).

INTEL endorses these changes and the lessons underpinning them, provides additional nuance, and highlights problems and lessons that have been missed.



However, some lessons from previous cases such as Afghanistan have either not been correctly identified or not learned. Others have been missed or learned only by certain ministries, but not across government, parliament and public.

Good intelligence requires ready access to a healthy mix of more junior and senior country and regional specialists with access to local open sources and complementary networks of informants. Moreover, a mix of disciplinary backgrounds, such as history, defence/security, area studies/anthropology and economics, is needed, which could be generated by stronger collaboration across ministries/resorts in country or regional taskforces. Such expertise should be cultivated, incentivised and preserved, for instance, through a dedicated career-track for diplomats and high-quality handovers when staff leave positions.

The risk of “going native” and losing sensitivity to change should be balanced through input by experts from other European nations, quantitative/indicator-based approaches and other kinds of intelligence such as SIGINT/GEOINT, etc. For less prominent countries and given budget limitations, pooling resources with the EEAS and other partners could create a critical mass of country expertise relating to Europe’s Eastern and Southern neighbourhood. For the case of Russia, pooling of expertise is crucial and should go beyond disinformation and cyber.

In early crisis situations or ahead of major decisions, Germany needs to surge regional expertise from inside and outside of government to provide holistic assessments and test competing explanations of actors’ intentions and resolve, potentially using scenario work and war-gaming exercises. For each country, leading external experts should be identified and ideally obtain security clearance before a crisis escalates. Universities should be incentivised, for instance, through extra-funding for teaching replacements to free-up time for experts who volunteer in crisis situations.

Germany needs to further improve technical capabilities for monitoring and analysing the content and effects of social media as well as other open sources (eg [Preview tool](#)), if necessary in collaboration with external partners

OSINT needs to pay special attention to reliable, specific, and nuanced information from local sources given the prevalence of disinformation. This would involve investment for the collection and analysis of open sources in embassies and missions as well as selective cooperation with NGOs.

All analysts and team-leaders need to be given training in recognising and compensating for key cognitive, motivational and professional-cultural biases that are known to affect accuracy and timeliness. Examples are undue focus on state institutions and official actors despite the real power lying elsewhere. Another bias concerns mirror imaging rooted in rationality assumptions and real risk calculus of foreign actors for whom not just loss of power but survival may be at stake and their readiness to use extreme measures. Further examples are blind-spots relating to the analysis of conflict actors and dynamics cross state borders, failures to appreciate the local effects of violence and terror, or the subtle influence of existing policy consensus or government agendas.

Consumers of intelligence should be given training in how their leadership may encourage or discourage analytical dissent and surprise-sensitive forecasting. This could be normalised through the standard consideration of “wildcards” and by creating dissent channels for junior officials whose analytical conclusions challenge policy consensus and conventional wisdom.

Strategic lessons

Intelligence production needs better strategic direction of where to look and what is most relevant to German foreign policy interests. A comprehensive security strategy could help but only if it considers that German engagement is often the result of requests by partner countries and international organisations, media coverage of mass atrocities and diasporic advocacy, rather than conventional strategic and economic interests. Appointing a Director of Intelligence and a National Security Council could help improve mutual understanding between knowledge producers and users about which threats and opportunities to prioritise. This could also play a crucial role in overcoming cacophony in knowledge production arising from the “resort-principle” in German law.

Germany needs to design and use better mechanisms for systematic and transparent lesson learning after experiencing surprise in foreign policy crises given the lack of rigorous, independent and public facing inquiries into past surprises in foreign affairs. Existing instruments such as parliamentary inquiries, Enquete and Expert Commissions are either too party-political and accountability focused to be useful or have hardly been used in foreign policy matters. Much could be learned from reviews organised by the UK House of Lords, parliamentary committees, or indeed statutory inquiries under the inquiry act, let alone Royal Commissions. We recommend a mixture of parliamentary led inquiries on specific cases (such as Afghanistan, Ukraine), coupled with a cross-cutting inquiry focused on German intelligence and foreign policy through an Independent Expert Commission with the right to access documents and to call witnesses. Most hearings should be public.

The EU, and particularly the European Commission and the EEAS, need Germany as a more critical friend that helps to drive reform, highlights problem areas, and supports a beefed-up EU assessment and intelligence function, particularly in the context of the current Conference on the Future of Europe. Germany should support amending the security exclusion article in the Treaties and creating a mandate for intelligence collection in key areas. It should also support consensus reporting from EU delegations and efforts to enhance and formalise intelligence sharing with the EEAS.



Acknowledgements

The support of the UK Economic and Social Research Council (Grant ES/R004331/1 INTEL) is gratefully acknowledged.

About the authors

Christoph Meyer is a Professor of European and International Politics at King's College London and Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. He has worked extensively on European foreign and security policy and is the author of *The Question for European Strategic Culture* (Palgrave, 2006) and the lead author of *Warning about War: Conflict, Persuasion and Foreign Policy* (CUP, 2020) – winner of the ISA and ISA-ICOMM Best Book Awards for 2021.

Eva Michaels is a Researcher at the Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI) and a Visiting Research Fellow at King's College London. Her research focuses on the theory and practice of European foreign policy, with an emphasis on responses to violent conflict and political leadership in European security policy. Eva holds a PhD in War Studies from KCL.

Aviva Guttman is a Marie Curie Senior Research Fellow at the Center for War Studies at Southern Denmark University (SDU) and a Visiting Fellow at King's College London (KCL). Aviva's research focuses on the international relations of intelligence agencies and security cooperation. She is the author of *The Origins of International Counterterrorism* (2018) and contributed to refereed academic journals of history, intelligence, and security.

Ana Maria Albulescu holds a PhD in War Studies from King's College London, focusing on the consolidation of post-conflict political orders in contexts of incomplete secession across the post-Soviet space. She is the author of *Incomplete secession after unresolved conflict: Political order and escalation in the post-Soviet space* (forthcoming Routledge).



The Policy Institute

The Policy Institute at King's College London works to solve society's challenges with evidence and expertise.

We combine the rigour of academia with the agility of a consultancy and the connectedness of a think tank.

Our research draws on many disciplines and methods, making use of the skills, expertise and resources of not only the institute, but the university and its wider network too.

Connect with us

 [@policyatkings](https://twitter.com/policyatkings)  kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute

