

Transcript of Masthead Conference Call with Uri Friedman, Sept. 18, 2017

Matt Peterson: Alright it's 1:00 so let's get started here. I'm Matt Peterson, editor of the Masthead for the Atlantic. I've got Uri Friedman here on the line as well. Uri, say hi.

Uri Friedman: Hey everyone. Great to be with you.

Matt Peterson: Alright. If you out there are new to these calls we do them every week with an Atlantic writer or editor. Today we're going to Uri Friedman about his members-only feature for us about Germany's response to the rescue crisis. And we will take your questions as always. We won't be able to hear your voices on this call so go ahead and type questions into the Google chat and Caroline will pass them over to me.

Okay so let's get into this. Uri, in about a week, I think it's on Sunday in fact, Germany is going to have an election. The chancellor, Angela Merkel is about to win a fourth term. She's polling pretty strongly. I want you to set the stage for us here by taking us back a couple of years. What was happening in Europe in the middle of 2015?

Uri Friedman: Yeah so if people remember this period, I think of this period as kind of the high-water mark for sympathy for refugees around the world really. In August and September 2015 the Syrian civil war was worsening. The weather was starting to get a little warmer, which often means the refugee flows increase and what was happening is that there were a lot of refugees massing in Hungary. They'd been taking a route through Greece into Hungary, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel faced a choice. She could allow these refugee flows to kind of bottle up in Austria and risk a crisis or she could leave Germany's borders open because they are currently open with Austria because of an EU agreement and allow some of these refugees to come in.

This is a period where there were a lot of news stories coming out there were building up sympathy for refugees. For example, some of you all may recall there was a truck that was found on the border between Hungary and Austria where several migrants were packed inside and they had suffocated to death. There was a lot of, a lot of people will recall, images of a three year old boy who washed up on Turkey's shores who had been trying to flee to Greece with his family and who drowned. His name was Alan Kurdi. People felt that there was a need to do something and what Angela Merkel did is she left open the borders and refugees really heeded that signal. They started into Germany in the tens of thousands. Eventually hundreds of thousands of refugees came in over the course of 2015 into 2016.

Now what I found particularly interesting about this story is that at the very beginning Angela Merkel was really held as a saint. You know she appeared on the cover of the German magazine Der Spiegel looking like Mother Teresa and they called her Mother Merkel. Time named her the "Chancellor of the Free World." There was a lot of applause for her acting as kind of a moral voice on

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the refugee crisis, especially given as we all know the fraught history of the Nazi history of Germany, the fact that this seemed to be any response any kind of message that Germany was a completely new Germany with a leader of moral principles and Western values.

What happened quickly after that though is public opinion turned on her. It started looking like Germany couldn't handle the refugee crisis. There was one famous call that the transcripts later leaked between the Australian leader Malcolm Turnbull and Donald Trump in which they both agreed, I can't believe what Angela Merkel is doing and what a disaster. She has just left open Germany's borders, no way she survives this. What really intrigued me about this story is that she does seem to have survived it. Germany has overcome that refugee crisis, she's currently poised to win the upcoming election. I really wanted to find out why.

Matt Peterson: Right. You mentioned this moment a couple of years ago when she's on the cover of Time, she's being sort of lauded as a saint but what you say in the story is that it's not really as simple as that. She wasn't the sort of ... You know acting purely for altruistic reasons to try to help people. What did you find out about what motivated her about why she did, why she let in all of those refugees?

Uri Friedman: Yeah in part she has ... To her credit on the moral question she has consistently defended her decision by setting certain legal and moral principles. For example, Germany's constitution, postwar constitution has a right of asylum for those fleeing political persecution in the constitution. That's pretty rare for a constitutional document. She has often defended this as saying, look we, Germany values giving people asylum and giving people a place of refuge and that is a moral responsibility. She's also said that there's a legal responsibility both from the constitution and from the European Union and from international law to grant people asylum if they have a legitimate fear of persecution or they're fleeing war. She had defended those principles but I would not say that is the entirety of what motivated her.

Robin Alexander is a German journalist who has done a really great reported book on this subject. And I spoke to him. And he described the situation in which Angela Merkel was being like a politician. You know a politician prone to making calculations based on what's her political advantage and also making mistakes. In the summer and fall of 2015 German public opinion was in favor of opening Germany's borders, or at least keeping them open, as they were because of the... Germany and Austria both members of the European Union so their borders are normally open. And German and public opinion was opposed to shutting them. I think she sensed that. You know there was a YouTube video that went viral just before this big decision, where Angela Merkel was doing a town hall like we always see on CNN, that kind of set up. A Palestinian girl, a Palestinian refugee said, can you ... My family is very worried. We don't know if we can stay in Germany. Can you give us assurances? And she said, I can't. I'm so sorry but if Germany just can't accept all the refugees it wants we can't

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manage to do that. The girl started crying and Angela Merkel like patted her a little bit. It was a very awkward moment and it went everywhere and she got a lot of criticism for that.

I think this is also a decision of saying, I'm going to get in political trouble if I close the borders. Then there's one other thing I would say, which is that she left the borders open and lots of people started streaming in and the way Robin Alexander, this German journalist, explains it, the borders stayed open even as the influx started looking bigger than she had anticipated because no German politician really wanted to take responsibility for closing them. So there were members of her cabinet who said, we really should insert more border controls but no one really wanted to have that responsibility on them so this is also kind of a story about German political figures you know not really wanting to take a strong stand one way or the other. The result of that was just the borders stayed open for a while.

I think what Angela Merkel has done since though is she has realized that German public opinion turned against her, not because she had a welcoming attitude toward immigrants and not because she wanted to address the refugee crisis head on but because there was a widespread feeling like she had lost control of the situation in late 2015, early 2015. As one expert on this told me, Germans like to feel in control, as anyone would about their borders and their country. I think what she has tried to do since, and again this has been politically to her advantage, is to pursue policies that show the German public that she is actually in control of assimilating and integrating refugees and controlling the flow of migrants into the country.

Matt Peterson: I'll just recap here in case anyone is joining us late. I'm Matt Peterson, I'm talking to Uri Friedman about his feature story about German migrants. We'll take your questions and feel free to throw us questions about the wider world. I'm sure Uri and I would happy to talk about other subjects as well too. Let's stay here in Germany for a bit more. Angela Merkel lost control of the migrant story a bit and then has gained it back and this to me is what's so interesting about this story because she's about to face an election and this migrants question is not really at the top of the agenda, is it?

Uri Friedman: No it's not. It's not. It's a factor. There is one party that some listeners may have heard of called the Alternative for Germany, which is a populist far-right party that has some attitudes or policies that kind of resemble Donald Trump's. Alexander Gauland, who is one of the leaders who I spoke to likes to talk about Germany first. They are very much opposed to Merkel's refugee policy and the core of their support, almost entirety of their support is about almost like a protest vote against Merkel's refugee policy.

It is a factor, especially among that group and they're polling at about 10 to 12 percent. Maybe even less by the time the election rolls around. It's not that no one's talking about it but it is not at the top of the agenda. I found that pretty

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interesting too because we've seen in other countries, in the United States, for example, in Britain during the Brexit referendum to leave the European Union, in France during their recent presidential election, immigration has been a really politically explosive issue and in some cases the very top issue. We think about Donald Trump's America First policy. He started his campaign talking about needing to get tough on Mexican immigrants, his talk about the wall. I mean, immigration was a huge issue in the US election. We're not seeing that in Germany and it's for a variety of factors that I think other countries can learn from.

Matt Peterson: Right. Well I'd love to hear those lessons in a second, but I want to first talk a little bit more about what it's doing to politics in Germany because it's not as simple as you know people aren't really talking about it or it's not at the top of the agenda as you're saying. The migration story has changed things for these far right parties, right? How have politics in Germany changed since this issue broke through?

Uri Friedman: Well, as one scholar who studies these issues and the election this year told me, we probably wouldn't have populism in Germany if it wasn't for the refugee crisis. While populism I would say is a muted force relative to countries like France, the Netherlands, the United States, Britain, it is a force and it hasn't been in the past really in Germany, not in the way it is now and I think that's because of the refugee crisis.

What we've seen is part of that I mentioned the Alternative for Germany is pulling about 10 to 12 percent, it is poised to become the first far-right party to enter the general parliament since the end of World War II. And that's a pretty big deal. Not only that but yes Merkel is polling well, but the AfD is currently polling at number three. So it's Merkel's party, a center-left party called the SPD and then AfD is number three. They're a force to be reckoned with in German politics. Alexander Gauland who's one of the main politicians of the party told me you know it's hard to change voting behavior in a matter of months. We don't really know what the lasting impact of the AfD surge is. They're not doing as well as they were about this time last year but over the course of the next four, eight, ten, twelve years they could become a much bigger force in German politics and that would really transform the German political landscape.

What's happening simultaneously to that, that I've found is interesting is that while we're seeing the center kind of collapse in the country like the United States the traditional mainstream Republican party kind of got co-opted by Donald Trump who took the Republican Party in a different direction. Hillary Clinton just didn't do as well as people thought she would because she wasn't really able to hold the center of the Democratic Party together. The center kind of collapsed in the US election, in Germany the center is expanding. There's not a great deal of polarization. What we're actually seeing is people are saying the center left party, which is challenging Angela Merkel and the center right party, which is Angela Merkel's party are almost indistinguishable. It's hard to really

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tell the difference between them. On the one hand, that has increased Merkel's support, on the other hand it has made it more likely for a upstart insurgent protest party like AFD to say hey, these guys are all the same. The elites are all the same. We're a populist, we can really offer something alternative to what these people are offering. In some ways it increases and sharpens the appeal of these populist parties.

For right now I would say the refugee crisis obviously hadn't totally shifted the course of German politics because Angela Merkel is poised to win another term, but what it has done is kind of create new players and those players could morph and change the landscape in really dramatic ways that we haven't yet seen in this election but we could see in future elections.

Matt Peterson: Right. Well let's go to some member questions here. I want to hear a little more about what has actually happened to this million plus people who have come into the country. A lot of them have apparently been integrated reasonably well. V. asks, to what extent does German public sentiment around Muslims play a role in German acceptance of Syrian refugees?

Uri Friedman: Yeah so in terms of views on new Muslim immigrants there is a challenge, a basic and elemental challenge of assimilation here, which is that you know these are largely Muslim refugees coming into a country that is largely Christian. These are largely pious and more religious, migrants who are coming into a place that is largely secular. There are some real tensions there. I think Germany has ... We often think, we don't think of Germany like we do the... Canada, or the United States, where people tend to frame those countries as nations of immigrants. Germany doesn't traditionally think of itself that way but it actually is a real immigration magnet.

The latest statistics show that it is a second the largest destination for immigrants, just below the United States. Which has many more immigrants, but Germany is number two. This is actually a very diverse country that is often not credited as a very diverse country. There's a large consensus around immigration and openness to immigration especially as an economic driver. People tend to think because the birth rate is very low in Germany, because Germany is actually a really strong economy that has a lot of jobs and needs more and wants to be as competitive as possible that people feel that immigrants are actually a great way to turbo charge the German economy. There's been a kind of consensus around more-open immigration policies as a result of that. I think people have actually still adopted that attitude to an extent to refugees, including refugees from the Muslim world.

There's generally, politicians like to talk about how bringing in refugees will benefit everyone, so for example there's investments in public housing and they say investments in public housing, well you know, benefits the entire public, not just those refugees that inhabit it now or training teachers to handle diverse classrooms will help with education as a whole and not just with this influx of

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new migrants from a different part of the world. There are limits to this and I think when you build an almost a consensus around immigration that is economic in focus, the challenge with the refugees is what happens with that economic promise doesn't deliver. A lot of the refugees are coming in from Syria and Iraq and Afghanistan are lower skilled. They don't have the same kind of levels of education that other immigrants to Germany have. Of course, they don't, right? Because if you're a refugee you're not coming in because your skills are perfectly tailored to the economy. You're coming in because you're escaping war or political persecution.

I think that's where they're really running up with the problems and public opinion recognizes that. The integration commissioner for example recently announced that the employment for refugees is currently around 17% and five years from now three quarters of refugees may still be unemployed. That is pretty stark. That means that even though Germany is investing a lot in immigration efforts the integration into the labor force is not going particularly well. I think that could create challenges down the line because if this is consensus is built around migrants being a net benefit for the economy what happens when it's proven that they're not? Can the immigration consensus and the majority of Germans still support this new influx of arrivals into Germany? They are trying to address this, not just through labor reforms but also by making it mandatory for these refugees to learn the German language, to learn German civics.

Angela Merkel likes to talk about multiculturalism as something that has failed. The idea that culture should live side by side without necessarily having similar levels of education. She wants it really focused on integration including integrating these new largely Muslim migrants but you know it's not entirely clear that even though they're making these classes mandatory that that integration is preceding a pace.

Matt Peterson: Yeah I remember when you mentioned those unemployment statistics. I remember seeing American commentators from the Alt-Right seeing those come out and being surprised. I remember specifically somebody saw 17% employment rate and thought, oh 17% unemployment? That's not that bad. Oh wait a minute, it's actually only 17% of people are employed. You tend to misread that statistic because it's so—so far outside of our normal experience. That brings me to one of our listeners questions here who's asking about the far right in Germany. Robert asks, how has Merkel managed the rise of the "Alt-Right in Germany and fake news"? What can the US learn from her success?

Uri Friedman: That's a good question. That was something I was really interested in finding out too. One thing that she and in Germany in particular have done that is different is they—one expert, German expert I spoke to put it this way to me, all the parties being not just from Angela Merkel's party but really all of the mainstream German parties have kind of worked together to shun the AFD, the populist right. There's almost a consensus against their brand of politics.

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Recently the Alexander Gauland, this top AFD leader, made a statement in which he said Germany's integration commissioner should go back to Turkey. She's of Turkish descent. The condemnation was just like instantaneous. I think that is one thing we've seen that's a little different than what you've seen in the country like the US where there have been some parties that have gotten closer to the alt-right than others. That it's entered into mainstream politics more, there's been more of an effort to shun it. I think that has to do largely with Germany's Nazi past. There's just almost like an allergy to this kind of brand of politics and really effort to shut it down.

The one drawback to that is there's not a lot of public discussion and real substantive debate about the refugee crisis because almost no one wants to talk about, it's too explosive of an issue. Then you have probably the biggest public policy issue in the country not being discussed much in public. That is not necessarily a great thing. Sometimes you think it's good to air these big issues but I think that's one reason why it hasn't succeeded so much. Merkel has also kind of taken the approach of I'm kind of the adult in the room. She was at a rally recently and there was a clutch of AFD protestors yelling slogans at her as she was trying to speak. She kind of looked at them with disdain and said something like, you know these guys just yell. That's all they do. I'm trying ... Some people that's all they want to do in politics, I'm trying to find solutions. Because she has been such a confident political operative and policymaker I think she can kind of say that with a certain amount of validity and people really accept that. I think she has managed to frame them as kind of people with no real solutions, just simple solutions and she's managed to effectively do that.

The one other thing I'd say is that there's part of it that has nothing to do with Merkel at all. I think I want to kind of make that clear, I don't want to give her all of the ... lay all of the consequences of the AFD not having a lot of support on her machinations. There's other things going on as well and one thing that I think is important to note is that when Germans look out into the world they see chaos and tempest all around them. As one German put it to me, they feel like a ship of stability in a huge stormy world. They see Donald Trump who is the head of a country that they've had traditionally had a very, very strong alliance with seeming to disdain that alliance and take the United States in a different direction. When they saw Brexit happen they saw a threat to the European Union, which Germans love. They love the European Union, they feel like they benefit from it. When they saw Marine Le Pen in France seemingly having, she ended up not doing particularly well but she was doing very well in the polls for a while. She probably would have taken France out of the European Union and the European Union might have collapsed.

They are very concerned about this, they actually often there's a word Trump and Brexit. They often talk about Trump and Brexit in the same sentence because it's kind of short hand for a chaotic world that is testing the pillars of Germany foreign policy for decades. Merkel is seen as a kind of a way to maintain stability. I think one reason the AFD has also been blunted is because

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people aren't looking for change the way they might be in a country like the United States or in Britain with Brexit. Where people there was a real kind of ground swallow for change and shaking things up.

In Germany, it's the exact opposite. They don't want to ... Most Germans don't want to shake things up, they want to preserve stability in an increasingly chaotic world. I think that's working against the AfD as well. Part of the challenge for someone trying to blunt the far right party is to argue that the status quo is working, to make a strong case for the fact that the status quo is working and also to you know kind of portray themselves as the people can really steer the ship of state as opposed to people who you don't want to give control to. That I think has worked in Merkel's favor as well and in part she's had something to do with that by trying to make German policy a policy of stability but I think also it has nothing to do with her, it's also about surrounding forces that are working in her favor.

Matt Peterson: Right. Let's talk about one of the big things she's done to try to make the world more stable, which is build this relationship with Turkey or mangle the relationship with Turkey however you want to describe it. Larry asked us about President Erdogan, the Turkish president's sort of fight with Merkel about whether or not he can have political rallies in Germany. I wonder if you can talk about that but also put that in the context of this deal that Merkel has had with the Turks to stop refugees from coming over. What's going on between Germany and Turkey right now?

Uri Friedman: It's a very, very complicated relationship. Right now Turkey won ... Just to back up for a second. Turkey has a strong relationship, and a very tight relationship with Germany in part because a lot of Turkish immigrants came to Germany in its last wave of migration, which was in the 60's and 70's there were a lot of what at the time were thought of as temporary Germany guest workers. They ended up a lot of them stayed and had kids and now there are several generations. That is why there's always been a lot of dialogue between the two countries. What's changed recently is in 2016 one of the things Angela Merkel did to kind of get reassert control over the refugee crisis is she inked this very controversial deal with Turkey that essentially paid Turkey to act as a sponge for migrants.

Migrants who tried to make it to Greece would be sent back to Turkey, Turkey would try to stop refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey from getting to Greece. In exchange Germany gave Turkey a lot of money and said they were speak more about visa free travel for Turks in Europe. That was a moment, it was controversial because some people said you know refugees and asylum seekers are not treated well in Turkey, we shouldn't limit their freedom of movement like that. Europe has to take more responsibility for this refugee crisis. It was controversial. What it did do is it kind of played at a pretty good working relationship between Turkey and Germany because they had to, because this was a kind of deal out of necessity. What's changed since is that Turkey won—

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after a coup in 2016, Turkey's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has become more authoritarian, which is you know anytime an authoritarian and democratic government come into contact there's some tension.

Beyond that in as part of his authoritarian kind of growth he has cracked down on political dissent including a German Turkish journalist, who he jailed. And so the relationship has gotten a lot tenser since and also as the listener mentioned Erdogan has tried to like stage rally and build support for him among Turks and people of Turkish descent in Germany. Angela Merkel has kind of because they don't want to be associated with that kind of political mobilization she has tried to crack down on that. We saw the biggest manifestation of that actually this past week or so when Turkey bought a bunch of missile defenses from Russia. This was really a finger in the eye of NATO saying we are not going to go to you our defense, we're going to go to Russia, we're going to turn to the exact enemy of NATO in order to get our security and defense systems.

The relationship has deteriorating very rapidly. It is not yet deteriorated to the point where the EU-Turkey deal is in jeopardy, so we don't expect a huge influx of migrants to result from any kind of deterioration of relations. But it is at a lower point than it has been for a while now. I think it's also actually it's a good win for Merkel politically. I think in Germany it's popular to stand up to Turkey and it's meddling. It's not a ... It's a relatively easy way for her to also win political support is to kind of pick a tough line on Turkey as well. A lot of other politicians from different parties have done so as well.

Matt Peterson: Yes that's right, although she has also been very careful to try to sort of preserve her operating space. She had a debate with her main challenger Martin Schulz a couple of weeks ago and the debate she resisted very strongly the idea of dropping Turkey from this process of negotiation for EU membership in part because she wants to still be able to have carrots and have conversations with Erdogan, right? It's a tricky and delicate balance that she's got to try to strike as someone who needs to be reelected but also needs to work with a country that's very important economically and politically to her neighborhood right?

Uri Friedman: Yeah without a doubt. She does kind of toe the line between those extremes of one, just to kind of acquiescing to what Turkey wants to do and on the other hand completely severing ties with Turkey. It's easier ... We can stand on any kind of election. The incumbent won in office, usually would have to be much more careful with these things than the main challenger. Martin Schulz has also said you know, Germany should ally with other countries that opposed Donald Trump and had said a lot of things about jeopardizing the US-German relationship because he's so opposed to Donald Trump and his policies. Merkel has not done that, right? She's said things that kind of speak to her misgivings about Trump and the German's public misgivings about Trump but has not gone so far. Has constantly stressed that the trans-Atlantic relationship is very important, that we need the United States as a partner.

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Schulz has been much more of a kind of a flamethrower both on Turkey, the United States and foreign policy in general than Merkel has, which is understandable. Not only because the particular policy she has but she's also the one governing and likely to govern in the future and she has to protect those relationships.

Matt Peterson: A very German kind of flamethrower I would say. Watching from him.

Uri Friedman: Yes. That is true. Not a total firebrand, but listen, relative to Merkel he seems like a flamethrower.

Matt Peterson: Yes that her party's big move today was to release a child's ... A photo of her as a cute kid. That's the sort of level that this has degenerated to in Germany right? If you're able to show cute kid pictures on a campaign trail, you're not fighting over uglier things.

Uri Friedman: How can you go wrong that way? It's a good strategy.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. You mentioned Russia here and I want to talk about them for a second. We had a listener who asked if there are any signs of Russia deliberately trying to weaken European integration by promoting these refugee ties? I don't know if there's any evidence on that, that you'd be able to speak to but even more generally how is Germany dealing with Russia in this crisis because they're very heavily involved in Syria right? Not exactly taking refugees themselves.

Uri Friedman: Yeah no they're not. Russia ... I mean there are a couple different ways to think about Russia and the German election. One is, Russia is kind of the dog that didn't bark in terms of cyber attacks. There was a lot of concern during the German election that Russia would do what it said to have done in the United States and what some speculate in for example the French election, which is dump information that is hacked or try to do some kind of really big propaganda campaign and against the political opponent in the German election. We have not seen that.

There was a famous, well-publicized 2015 hack of the German parliament in which emails were still it was like gigabytes and gigabytes of data that had not been released. And when the hack occurred, suspicion that it was done by a hacker with ties to Russian intelligence, potentially the same group of hackers that were involved in the US election. Nothing has been released yet and maybe it's not coming. Maybe it is. The election is still a couple weeks to go. Potentially Russia is not doing an operation because it doesn't feel that it can influence the German election the way it has others, potentially it's changed tactics. It's hard to know exactly what's going on there but that's one area where I think people are on very high alert for something happening and it didn't happen.

In terms of Russia as a policy issue you know Germany has actually had relatively strong closer relations with Russia than a lot of other European

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countries has. Merkel you know and Putin have actually been able to connect and they see to respect one another other than Putin sometimes bringing dogs along to its meetings with Merkel, Merkel is afraid of dogs. That's a whole other thing. Overall they have almost been able to get each other on a different kind of level than a lot of other leaders have with Putin. I think the innovation of the military intervention in Ukraine really changed the dynamics. That was a very concerning development for Germany because of the fact that not only was it Russian aggression but it was changing borders by force, which was such a stark violation of the international architecture that Germany has been central to upholding in recent decades.

There is a lot of concern about that and talk of needing to build up German descents, spending to a degree. Not as much as Donald Trump would like but to a degree to deter all Russian aggression furthermore. There has been talk of that, it hasn't been outright hostility now like what you'd see in the US election. I was watching a recent debate among representatives from the six main political parties, and they were asked who is the closest ally of Germany. It was the United Kingdom, United States—Russia or Turkey, no one mentioned Russia or Turkey. I think that no one considers them an ally just like no one considers Turkey an ally but I think there's a feeling that these are countries with which Germany has serious differences but are kind of essential partners in some of Germany's foreign policy priorities so can't be cut totally adrift. That's a general gist of how Russia is seen on the campaign trail.

Matt Peterson: Alright well I think we can wrap it up there. Thank you very much for walking us through this. If you haven't read the article yet I would encourage everyone to go through it at the atlantic.com/membership or you can find all of the exclusive stuff that we have for all of you Masthead members. Next week we'll be back with another call with Julia Ioffe who, I suspect, we may talk a little bit more about Russia with her. Please come back and join us. Uri Friedman, thanks very much for joining us.

Uri Friedman: Oh thanks. It was a pleasure joining you all.

Matt Peterson: Alright, take care everyone.