



The Budapest Memorandum (1994) stipulated that Ukraine should hand over its strategic nuclear weapons to the Russian Federation under the proviso that Russia would guarantee Ukraine's territorial integrity. Ever since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO officials have argued that the Russian authorities have seriously violated these international agreements. This picture from March 2014 shows people in Saint Petersburg supporting Russia's annexation of Crimea (photo: PeterSVETphoto / Shutterstock.com)

A FINAL OBSERVATION

All in all, it must be concluded that both in the sensitive NATO-Russian relationship and in his own convictions that have led to serious over-estimation of his own and Russia's potential, Putin may have seen a geopolitical window of opportunity to launch a massive attack on Ukraine. Besides, NATO is still licking its wounds after the hasty and chaotic evacuation from Afghanistan and not very keen to get involved in a conflict with Russia. What is more, US President Biden has not been very successful in the past year and, with US mid-term elections pending, cannot afford to put a foot wrong. As for Europe's dominant powers, in Germany a newly formed coalition government has just taken office and in France, currently chairing the EU, President Macron, treading cautiously with French elections looming, has so far hardly been successful in his diplomatic efforts to make Putin see sense. So, indeed, there is a lot to occupy Putin's mind. Among other things, he persistently believes that an armed attack is the only possible solution to keep Ukraine, especially its government, in check and, at the same time, NATO and the EU at bay. The world must therefore be unanimous in strongly condemning Putin's attack on Ukraine. As a conflict like this only has losers the only way out is the willingness on both sides to commence negotiations at very short notice. NATO and the EU have indeed come under severe pressure, so their member states must cooperate and be on their guard against being played off by Putin and, above all, show grit and determination.

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The Kyiv moment: how Germany changed course over one weekend

Sarah Pagung

Driven by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the German government made a fundamental turn in its foreign and security policy. Berlin finally fulfilled long-voiced demands including those for increased defense spending and weapons deliveries to Ukraine. However, the decision only conceals persisting conflicts within Germany's Russia and defense policy. Moreover, the policy turn will cause further discord among the governing parties.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 changed Germany's security and Russia policy dramatically. Over just one weekend, Berlin overhauled its foreign policy to a degree that hasn't been seen since 1990. The German government agreed to unprecedented EU sanctions against Russia. These include blocking sanctions against the Russian Central Bank as well as an exclusion from SWIFT for several Russian banks such as VTB, VEB and Rossiya. Moreover, the EU closed its airspace to Russian operated carriers, implemented targeted sanctions against roughly 360 Russian individuals and prohibited RT broadcasting in the EU.

The scope of Berlin's turnaround is even more visible in policy areas not targeting Russia directly. Firstly, Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a 100bn EUR special asset for defense. He also vowed to finally spend 2% of Germany's GDP on its armed forces. Despite agreeing to this objective at a NATO summit in 2014, Germany never met this goal and showed no ambition to achieve it in the future either. Repeated demands by the US and eastern NATO members were simply shrugged off in Berlin. Secondly, the German government finally agreed to deliver weapons to Ukraine. On February 26th, Berlin announced it would supply anti-tank missiles and 500 Stinger surface-to-air missiles. Until then, Berlin had not only been refusing to

deliver lethal weapons to Kyiv, but also prevented common efforts of NATO. However, the decision illustrated the grave consequences of Germany's limited defense budget and the lack of reform of its armed forces. Initially, Berlin wanted to deliver 2700 Strela anti-aircraft missiles but had to revisit this announcement. Too many of the Strela systems, former Eastern German missile systems that were officially decommissioned in 2014, were no longer operational. The poor state of equipment of the German Bundeswehr became painfully visible.

Germany ignored the reality of Europe's state of security. Chancellor Scholz justified Berlin's policy turn by calling the Russian invasion a "Zeitenwende" – a turn of an era – in his speech to the parliament.¹ German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock also alluded to the war as a fundamental shift: "If our world is a different one, then our policy must also be different."² Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine is indeed a watershed for Europe. However, the statements also illustrate Berlin's refusal to acknowledge the reality of Europe's security prior to Russia's invasion. Germany chose to ignore previous warning signs, such as Russia's war in Georgia 2008, the Crimean annexation or the numerous assassination attempts in EU countries. Instead, the incoming governing coalition in Berlin and its chancellor Scholz stumbled into the on-



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with Russian President Putin in the Kremlin on February 15, in an attempt to prevent war in Ukraine. Pictured are both leaders during a press conference after they talked for four hours (photo: Sergey Guneev / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY 4.0)

going crisis without a clear compass. The reason for this lies not only in the heightening crisis and Russia's troop deployment at Ukraine's borders since October 2021. It is also caused by a strategic gap vis-à-vis Russia that was visible well before the current war as well as a fundamental disagreement within Berlin's in-coming government on how to approach Russia.

Germany's *Ostpolitik* with its concept of rapprochement through trade had already failed in the 2000s. Moscow was simply not interested in any transfer of Western values. It focused strictly on the transmission of economic know how and foreign investment. Berlin refused to acknowledge this reality. To the contrary, there is a certain degree of bafflement about why the numerous attempts to relaunch *Ostpolitik* have failed. Expected political spill-over effects from economic cooperation did not occur. Neither Germany's *partnership for modernization* nor the EU's four *Common Spaces* achieved any success. A new strategic approach did not take shape due to a lack of ideas but even more so due to differing attitudes towards Russia among German decision makers. Instead,

Germany was moving forward without a clear strategy: It followed a dual-track approach of containing Russia by sanctions and initiating dialogue, such as the structured dialogue within the OSCE. Simultaneously, Berlin weakened Ukraine by supporting Nord Stream 2 and mitigating Western deterrence by falling short on its promises to increase its defense budget.

Under Germany's new chancellor Olaf Scholz and his coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP) this absence of strategy was embarrassingly evident early on. Former Chancellor Angela Merkel was able to cover up Berlin's strategy gap by means of her personal gravitas and experience. Scholz, however, lacked the understanding for Eastern Europe that distinguished Merkel from most state leaders. Moreover, his coalition partners were in conflict over Berlin's approach towards Moscow. While the SPD still favored a policy guided by *Ostpolitik*, the Greens pushed for a tougher approach towards Moscow. For the Greens, the conflict with Russia is part of a greater confrontation between democratic and authoritarian systems. This strate-

gic gap as well as the disagreement within the governing coalition became unmissable against the backdrop of Russia's military buildup.

GERMANY'S GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC ABANDONED LONG-HELD CONVICTIONS

With his announcement of heavy sanctions, increased defense spending and weapons deliveries, Scholz overcame this strategic dead end. The German reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine appears like a liberation from its previous unwillingness to accept European realities. This was possible only because the governing parties threw long-held convictions overboard. The SPD broke with its Ostpolitik paradigm, opting for cutting political, economic and societal ties through sanctions. The Greens, growing out of the peace movement of the 1980s, supported weapons deliveries and increasing the defense budget. More importantly, the Greens seem willing to make compromises in prolonging the use of Germany's coal power plants to facilitate the exit from Russian gas. FDP finance minister Christian Lindner had to create the 100bn EUR special asset. The FDP is an advocate of a conservative budget policy limiting state expenditures. However, the bar for the liberal party seems to be lower than for the SPD and Greens. By creating a special asset within the German constitution, the extra expenses will not weigh on the federal budget.

This turn is supported by a comprehensive change of public opinion in Germany, towards Russia and Ukraine as well as security policy. In early March 2022 61% of Germans support weapons deliveries to Ukraine. In February, only 21% endorsed this. 82% of Germans back an exclusion of Russian banks from SWIFT and 67% favor stopping Nord Stream 2. In February only 29% wanted to see a halt of the pipeline project. German attitudes regarding security and defense policy also changed. 65% support the idea of the 100bn EUR special defense asset, 68% endorse German troop deployment in eastern NATO members and a whole 83% acknowledge the crucial role of NATO in ensuring peace in Europe.³ Just as with many German politicians, the Russian invasion presents a wake-up call for average Germans that finally made them acknowledge the harsh realities of Europe's security.

GERMANY'S LITMUS TEST IS STILL PENDING

It is hard to make any prognosis on the future of Ukraine, but one thing seems certain: There will be no short or even midterm solution. The crucial question is whether Berlin will stick to this track when sanctions take their toll and when public attention for the war and its atrocities slowly fades. While there is no stepping back from the agreed sanctions and the 100bn EUR special asset,

the devil will be in the details: Will there be a serious reform of the Bundeswehr? How much money will be spent on defense beyond the special asset? Will the German government at some point be willing to negotiate the fate of Ukraine with Russia? Is Germany able to eliminate the mistrust in Poland, the Baltics and Ukraine?

As deep and comprehensive as this turn is, these questions will be the true litmus test for the seriousness of Germany's policy change. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine changed Germany's foreign and defense policy, it did not make conflicting interests disappear. The reasons for Germany's reluctance will likely come back to the surface of Germany's foreign policy debate. These reasons are threefold: Germany's mediating role among its allies, conflicting interests among its coalition partners and public opinion.

Berlin always considered itself a mediator not only between the West and Russia but even more so among its allies. Indeed, Germany played a crucial role in forming and upholding EU consensus on sanctions against Russia after 2014. Berlin brokered compromises between states that demanded a tougher approach towards Moscow, such as Poland and the Baltics, and those who opposed this course, as Austria and Hungary did. But Germany's reluctance to take decisive action before Russia's invasion massively damaged its credibility as a mediator. The current crisis only conceals the harm that has been done to Berlin's image in Central and Eastern Europe. Neither Ukraine nor EU's eastern members will forget that Chancellor Scholz refused to spell out sanctions and stop Nord Stream 2 until Russia acknowledged the Donbass separatist republics. When pictures of Ukrainian cities being bombed flooded the news, it took Berlin three days to agree to sanctions, weapons deliveries and an increased defense budget. This will be remembered in Kyiv, Warsaw and the Baltic capitals. Berlin's reluctance to act as well as the pro-Russia advocacy of public figures like former chancellor Gerhard Schröder harms Germany's position.

GERMANY'S DEFENSE BUDGET: A PERSISTENT BONE OF CONTENTION

One reason why it took Berlin so long to agree on its foreign and defense policy change was that the governing coalition partners had to stretch to support this turn. The compromises that had to be made will not be without consequences. Rather, they will stir heated debates within the parties and Germany's public. These are already visible but are still under the radar due to a public debate that is dominated by the pictures of war in Ukraine. But they will certainly come back.



Russia's troop deployment at the Ukraine border brought the differences back into the spotlight. Depicted are Ukrainian armoured personnel carriers riding on a winter road as Ukraine prepared to defend its territory from a possible Russian invasion (photo: Seneline/ Shutterstock.com)

Increasing the defense budget is unpopular among the left wings of both SPD and the Greens. Their party members are generally skeptical towards military buildup. An increased defense budget will fuel a debate that has been dominating German defense policy for years: The perceived zero-sum game of defense and social budgets. For many, every Euro that flows into the German armed forces is a Euro that is taken from social expenditures.

Green party members and voters tend to extend this logic to expenses for Germany's green energy transition. Germany's government will have to take hard decisions to compensate for the exit from Russian gas. Going back to nuclear energy seems not feasible because the exit is already too far advanced, as Robert Habeck, minister for economy and climate stated.⁴ This leaves a prolongation of Germany's use of coal-power plants, but a faster exit from coal was a core demand of the Greens for which they fought heavily in the coalition agreement, in particular against the FDP.

BERLIN HAS TO MANAGE THE REPERCUSSIONS OF WAR

The debate will be linked to the increasing gas and oil prices. Prices for heating and fuel are already skyrocketing, putting in particular lower- and middle-class households under stress. The German government has already agreed to governmental support such as the increase of the *Pendlerpauschale*, a fiscal relief for commuting, effectively decreasing the tax burden especially (but not exclusively) for drivers. However, this won't be enough. But additional expenditures will be hard to swallow for the FDP, who keeps an eye on a balanced German budget and is not an advocate of a strong social welfare state. Managing the exit from gas, implementing Germany's energy transition and limiting social consequences while keeping an eye on the budget will cause conflict among the coalition partners.

Within the SPD, it is not clear whether the idea of *Ostpolitik* is gone. Ralf Stegner, deputy head of the party, does not tire of pointing out that neither Germany's approach of dialogue nor its approach of deterrence pre-

vented the war – ignoring the fact that Germany actually refused a true policy of deterrence. Stegner’s comments are reflective of the objective of a common European security architecture including Russia. This attitude is not shared anymore by most of the party’s leading figures, but it expresses the opinion of many average party members. While it is not clear whether the Ostpolitik paradigm will dominate the party’s approach towards Russia again, we should be cautious in considering it to be dead. Ostpolitik has repeatedly arisen from the grave – after Russia’s Georgia war, its authoritarian turn in 2012, the Crimean annexation and Russia’s war in Syria. It will be decisive, if Germany is capable of formulating a new foreign policy narrative beyond its approach of political, cultural and in particular economic interdependence.



Berlin’s reluctance to act as well as the pro-Russia advocacy of public figures like former chancellor Gerhard Schröder harm Germany’s position. Pictured here is Schröder (left) at Putin’s inauguration with Dmitry Medvedev and Patriarch Kirill on May 7, 2018 (photo: Kremlin / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY 4.0)

Last but not least, Germany will face a massive refugee influx. Public support for taking in refugees from Ukraine is astonishingly high among the population. Voters of SPD, CDU/CSU, FDP, Greens and Linke support this by more than 90%. Interestingly even 68% of voters of the right-wing AfD are ready to take refugees.⁵ However, Germany also welcomed refugees in 2015 but faced a heated debate and the further rise of the AfD with its anti-migrant policies in the following years. When attention for the war in Ukraine fades and the Germany will be occupied in managing the fallout from the war, public opinion might shift again.

At present, it is not clear which of these rifts will come back and to what extent. But it seems unlikely that all of these conflicts will just disappear. Rather they are concealed by the shock of war, the solidarity that swept across Germany and the astonishment over the government’s courage in formulating its policy turn. But all three factors will lose ground making way for these discords.

GERMANY: A TROUBLED LEADER

Germany overcame its lack of actorness in its policy towards Russia. However, the conflicting lines that shaped Berlin’s Russia and defense policy did not disappear. Moreover, the far-reaching decisions that have been made will cause conflict within and among the governing parties. The German government will need to focus on implementing its decisions while preventing intra-party conflict and disappointed voters. Additionally, Scholz will

be driven by a search for common ground among his coalition partners and with German public attitudes, while his credibility as a broker among European allies has been damaged. By definition, this can be a policy of only small steps. The leadership vacuum in Europe’s Russia policy is here to stay.

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