

## Chapter 6: Germany's "Ostpolitik" until Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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### Abstract

Germany's *Ostpolitik* (Eastern policy) has largely focused on Russia since 1999, not only neglecting relations with the other states of Eastern Europe and East Central Europe, but also the alliance policy in general. Russia's authoritarian regression, which could not be overlooked, and its extensive military preparations for attack were constantly ignored by the German government. Instead, it pursued increased dependence on Russia for natural gas supplies, despite the European Union's decision since 2010 to become less dependent on Russia. Berlin responded to Russian belligerence against Ukraine since 2014 with a policy of appeasement and arms control rhetoric that have cast considerable doubt on the strategic judgment of the last two coalition governments under Angela Merkel's chancellorship. German *Ostpolitik* was guided by an idealization and stylization of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* and an unreflective, revivalist pacifism. It has indirectly contributed to Russia's renewed war against Ukraine because it has facilitated Russia's risk calculus. With an *Ostpolitik* that was firmly anchored in the Western alliance and balanced between Russia's and the Eastern Europeans' concerns, Russia probably would not have launched the war in February 2022.

### Keywords

German foreign policy, German Ostpolitik, Russia, Ukraine, energy policy

### 1 Introduction

Former Ukrainian Ambassador to Germany Andriy Melnyk (2014–2022) drew much negative attention in Germany for criticizing German policy,

both before and after the war began. He blamed the German government for visibly underestimating Russia's aggression, for sticking to its partnership with Moscow (especially with the construction of the two Nord Stream pipelines), for refusing to supply arms and, thereby, undermining Ukraine's position in the dispute with Moscow – thus indirectly contributing to the war. There were many incendiary letters against Melnyk, up to petitions of outraged citizens that the German government should declare him *persona non grata*.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter examines the question to what extent Germany's *Ostpolitik* since 1990 might have worsened the security situation in Ukraine and, hence, contributed to the outbreak of the war. In the following, German *Ostpolitik* is understood as the policy of the German government towards Russia and its direct or indirect neighbors in East-Central Europe as well as in Eastern Europe.

In view of the enormous differences in interests and sometimes open hostilities between Russia and many of its neighboring states, German *Ostpolitik* has always had the character of a *balancing act*. This poses the question: has Berlin understood how to maintain this balance? Or has there been a stronger tendency to one side or the other? In addition, there is another dimension: *Ostpolitik* cannot be pursued without an *alliance* policy. Past experience has shown clearly that a policy towards Russia cannot be pursued without being embedded in the Western alliance and in consensus with the European Union (EU) member states. Therefore, it must also be asked whether German policy has satisfied these alliance policy and European policy aspects. Taken together, German *Ostpolitik* must be questioned as to whether it has succeeded in maintaining a *balance between the triad of Russia policy, policy toward the neighboring states to the east (including Ukraine), and Western ties*. The thesis of Melnyk and many other observers is that this balance has not been maintained, but that Germany has closely aligned itself with Russia. If this thesis proves to be correct, then the next step is to ask whether Germany thus contributed directly or indirectly to the outbreak of war in February 2022.

Roughly speaking, German *Ostpolitik* since 1990/92 can be divided into five phases: (1) the phase of the Christian-Liberal coalition led by Helmut

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1 Tagesspiegel: "Sächsischer CDU-Mann forderte Ausweisung; Vorsitzender Merz will sich nicht zu Affront gegen Melnyk äußern", 30 August 2022; see also Deutschlandkuriere: "Skandal-Botschafter: Altparteien und Medien tanzen nach der Melnyk-Flöte", 7 April 2022.

Kohl (until the end of 1998), (2) the phase of the Red-Green coalition under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, (3) the phase of the grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and SPD under Angela Merkel (2005–2009), (4) the phase of the Christian-Liberal coalition under Angela Merkel's chancellorship (2009–2013), and (5) the renewed phase of the coalition of the CDU/CSU and SPD under Chancellor Angela Merkel (2013–2021). In all five phases, efforts can be identified to maintain the balance between the three concerns mentioned above. However, the respective balance turned out very differently. It can be said that during Chancellor Kohl's term in office (until the end of 1998), a policy was pursued in which relations with Russia and the Eastern European states played an equally important role and in which there was little reason to doubt Germany's anchoring in NATO and the EU. This changed in the era of the Red-Green coalition under Gerhard Schröder (1999–2005), in which the SPD in particular began to prioritize relations with Russia unequivocally and transatlantic and EU anchoring was repeatedly emphasized but hardly practiced. Anyone who had hoped that the coalitions led by Angela Merkel with the SPD (2005–2009, 2013–2021) or the FDP (2009–2013) would change anything about this imbalance was disappointed. The CDU/CSU parties (and, incidentally, the FDP as well) did nothing to counter the SPD's direction regarding its Eastern Policy and the increasingly nebulous and dubious alliance policy. Instead, the focus remained on Russia – even after the Ukraine crisis in 2014 – and the alliance policy ended in disaster.

The question of whether Germany contributed to the outbreak of war must be answered in a discerning manner. There is no doubt that Germany did not directly cause the war, but it did indirectly contribute to influencing Russia's risk calculations at the end of 2021 in such a way that the decision to go to war was made. The last two coalitions of the CDU/CSU and the SPD under Angela Merkel's chancellorship bear particular responsibility for Russia's decision to embark on this war.

## *2 The Years of the Kohl Government (1990–1998)*

Even during the negotiations on German reunification and the challenging years that followed between 1991 and 1997, then-Chancellor Kohl and his foreign ministers from the FDP (Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Klaus Kinkel) were concerned, on the one hand, with maintaining good relations with Moscow and, at the same time, with accommodating their Eastern

European neighbors on the issue of rapprochement with European and transatlantic institutions. This was not easy, as Russia's future orientation was hardly predictable and Russian President Boris Yeltsin was indeed open to suggestions from Bonn. But the domestic political situation in Russia was chaotic, and after the first free Duma elections in December 1993, it was foreseeable that democratic reform of Russia would fail to materialize and that nationalist, imperialist, and revisionist tendencies would gain the upper hand. Nevertheless, the German government's policy remained to support the forces of reason, economic, and political reforms in Russia as much as possible – mostly with capital and ideas. After all, Russian troops were still on the territory of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) until 1994. Germany's policy of caution in foreign deployments (the Bundeswehr did not participate in the liberation of Kuwait in 1991) was also part of this calculation. Toward Poland, Kohl had already initiated the Weimar Triangle in 1991. It was an attempt to establish a Franco-German-Polish consultation format that was intended to give the largest East-Central European state a say in European affairs.

With regard to the wishes of the neighboring Eastern European and East Central European states, it was Chancellor Kohl and the Christian Democratic Defense Minister Volker Rühe who wanted to give at least the states close to Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, a perspective for joining NATO. These countries wanted to join the EU and, above all, the North Atlantic Alliance as soon as possible after the results of the December 1993 Duma elections in Russia, in which nationalist, communist, and proto-fascist parties won a majority. It was also – but by no means solely – thanks to the efforts of the German government that an agreement in principle was reached between NATO and Russia in 1997 to accommodate the interests of Russia (which felt snubbed and potentially threatened by NATO enlargement) and the candidate states. The *NATO-Russia Act* stipulated that NATO could admit new members if it was ensured that no substantial (less than one brigade) foreign military units and no nuclear weapons would be stationed there. Also in effect was the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, which regulated troop levels and the number of weapons systems allowed in all countries and was intended to prevent any state or alliance from acquiring an invasion capability. NATO also unilaterally reduced its troop levels, so that after Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joined, the total number of Western troops in Europe was smaller than before. The NATO-Russia Founding Act also included the creation of the *NATO-Russia Council*. Its purpose was to

create the possibility of continuous communication and contact-building between Russia and the Western alliance. For reasons of symmetry – and because it was not quite known at the time which direction Ukraine would take – a NATO-Ukraine Council was formed in parallel, but it remained without substance.

This agreement paved the way for the membership in NATO of the three aforementioned East-Central European states, and later of the Baltic states, as well as Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, and other Balkan states. Russia has always condemned this, yet a situation never arose in which Russia's security would have been endangered as a result of the enlargement of the alliance. The often invoked "encirclement" of Russia never took place.

In addition to this balanced *Ostpolitik*, the German government pursued an alliance policy that slowly but steadily adjusted to the need to reduce the Bundeswehr (from 650,000 soldiers at the end of 1990 to fewer than 370,000 as required by the Treaty on the Unification of Germany, the Two Plus Four Treaty) on the one hand, but to maintain key capabilities on the other. In this context, the German government sought to maintain alliance defense capabilities while being prepared for the alliance's new tasks, which were moving toward *out-of-area* operations. Under the impact of the liberation of Kuwait from the Iraqi invasion and the wars in the former Yugoslavia, NATO had turned more and more to such missions. In 1995, through a difficult and contradictory process, the Alliance was able to bring itself to intervene militarily in the conflict to enforce a ceasefire (Dayton). In the following years, there were further deployments of this kind, in Kosovo in 1999 and in Afghanistan in early 2002. Until 1995, the German government remained reluctant to participate in such operations, but in 1995 and 1999 it did participate in NATO operations against Serbia.

### 3 The Phase of the Red-Green Coalition (1998–2005)

When the Red-Green coalition under Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (Bündnis 90/Grüne) came to power in December 1998, initially nothing seemed to change. The new federal government took part in NATO's Kosovo mission, and the new foreign minister made a passable

debut by mediating an end to the war.<sup>2</sup> On May 13, 1999, however, Foreign Minister Fischer had to endure an attack by one of his party comrades with a paint bag. When, on September 11, 2001, Islamist terrorists from al-Qaida attacked the *World Trade Center* in New York and the Pentagon near Washington D.C., and hijacked and brought down another airliner, the German government immediately demonstrated solidarity with the United States (U.S.) and even sent German special forces to help the U.S. fight al-Qaida in Afghanistan. The German government's active involvement in bringing about the UN Conference on the Future of Afghanistan in November and December 2001 and Berlin's willingness to participate in a UN-mandated force to protect the reconstruction of Afghanistan (ISAF) also demonstrated a loyalty to the alliance that critics of the SPD and the Greens had not believed these parties capable of.

However, despite these encouraging beginnings in alliance policy at the structural level and at the level of the prevailing narratives, a paradigm shift in German foreign policy (and thus also in its *Ostpolitik* and, in the medium term, its alliance policy) took place with the advent of the Red-Green coalition. Many observers at the time did not expect this shift – which was to point beyond the period of the Red-Green coalition – to occur so radically. This paradigm shift had the following components:

- With the Greens and the SPD, forces came into central foreign policy and security functions that originated from the peace movement and represented an altered narrative of wars and conflicts than the CDU/CSU and the FDP. After the Bundestag's decision in October 1983 to implement the armaments part of the NATO dual decision, it had appeared as if the unworldly and idealistic ideas of the peace movement and the critical peace research that supported it intellectually would dry up. That was not the case. The Greens managed to enter state parliaments and the Bundestag as an unabashedly pacifist party, and in 1983 the SPD abandoned the foreign policy profile of its former chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, and adopted many of the positions that were familiar to the Greens. According to this Red-Green peace narrative, wars and conflicts were not the result of malevolent powers (especially not Russia, if more likely the U.S.), but the result of misunderstanding and mistrust.

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2 Krause, Joachim: Die deutsche Politik in der Kosovo-Krise. In: Krause, Joachim (Ed.): Kosovo. Humanitäre Intervention und kooperative Sicherheit in Europa, Leske und Budrich: Opladen 2000, pp. 103–119.

Both had to be overcome, especially by reducing the perception of threat. Since the perception of threat is aroused by weapons of the opponent, arms possession, arms production, and arms exports were castigated, and deterrence was described as warmongering. Crises and conflicts had to be dealt with politically and psychologically, and "escalation dynamics" had to be prevented (in particular, local wars should not degenerate into "wildfires") and wars could arise by accident. Arms races, which could be prevented by disarmament or arms control, were considered particularly negative. The Western alliance was still accepted by many as necessary to a certain extent, but basically NATO counted for nothing in this situation; the UN and multilateralism, on the other hand, were singled out as being particularly important. Germany was supposed to be a civilian power that served as a model for others and that excelled as an enabler of compromise, especially in multilateral bodies. In this sense, the Foreign Office in particular has been systematically reprogrammed since early 1999. Moreover, such insights gained support in the media (where the party preference of political journalists is most likely to be the Greens and also the SPD)<sup>3</sup> and among educational professions (schools, universities, adult education). The political climate of opinion in Germany has been decisively influenced by this until today – not least because no real counter-positions could be heard from the CDU/CSU and the FDP.

- Within the SPD – but also among the Greens – a revival and reinterpretation of Willy Brandt's and Egon Bahr's *Ostpolitik* began, which moved in the direction of a pro-Russian position and which still guides large parts of the party and its sympathizers today. This revival was built on three assertions made by the main architect of Germany's *Ostpolitik* and then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in a 2008 speech,<sup>4</sup> one of which was half true and the other two of which were simply false. Firstly, Steinmeier said that *Ostpolitik* had made peace more secure under challenging conditions. In principle, that is correct. But it must be added that *Ostpolitik*'s contribution to security in Europe remained modest. Brandt's *Ostpolitik* achieved relief in the human sector (which was important for those affected). It brought about a period of political

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3 Statista Research Department: Parteipräferenz von Politikjournalisten in Deutschland, 19 August 2010.

4 Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Steinmeier at the panel discussion at the Willy Brandt Foundation: "Auf dem Weg zu einer europäischen Ostpolitik", 4 March 2008.

*détente* – unfortunately only temporary – in relations between East and West, but it failed completely when relations deteriorated after 1975. And it had no influence at all on the reduction of military confrontation; instead, its representatives allowed themselves to be more or less instrumentalized by Soviet policy during the period of the debate over NATO's double-track decision in the early 1980s. Secondly, Steinmeier claimed that *Ostpolitik* had opened up new opportunities and freedom for democracy movements in Eastern Europe. This was not true at all. The basic principle of Brandt's and Bahr's *Ostpolitik* was to use the recognition of Russia's supremacy and the Communist parties in the GDR and Poland to bring about certain small and sometimes only climatic changes. Social Democratic politicians in the late 1970s and 1980s (even in 1989) were rather annoyed, even appalled, by the work of democratic opposition in Poland and other countries in the Soviet orbit, and condemned their actions as harmful because it was against the spirit of *détente* to challenge the supremacy of the Soviet Union and the Communist system.<sup>5</sup> This was, in a sense, the "dark" side of Brandt's and Bahr's *Ostpolitik*. Steinmeier's third assertion, according to which *Ostpolitik* played a decisive role in ultimately overcoming the bloc confrontation altogether, is also false. The SPD's *Ostpolitik* did not aim to overcome the East-West division, rather, it wanted to make it more bearable and controllable. That was a perfectly sensible concern in the 1960s and 1970s. At best, it was hoped for a slow process of change through rapprochement, but not for a quick end as it occurred in 1989/90. The end of the East-West conflict did not come about as a result of Willy Brandt's and Egon Bahr's *Ostpolitik*, but because Mikhail Gorbachev, who understood that Russia could no longer afford the East-West conflict economically and socially, was elected as General Secretary of the CPSU. Additionally, the Soviet Union's only trump card – superiority in conventional and nuclear capabilities – no longer held water with the implementation of NATO's rearmament decision for medium-range

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5 Hofmann, Gunter: Polen und Deutsche auf dem Weg zur europäischen Revolution. Suhrkamp: Berlin 2011, pp. 292f.; Krzemiński, Adam: Im Osten viel Neues. Deutsche Ostpolitik aus polnischer Perspektive. In: Zeitschrift für Außen und Sicherheitspolitik, Vol. 8, Issue 1, 2015, pp. 403–425; Urban Thomas: Verstellter Blick. Die deutsche Ostpolitik. edition.fotoTapeta: Berlin 2022.



missiles and the modernization and improvement of U.S. land and air forces (*AirLand Battle, Follow-on Forces Attack*) since the mid-1980s.<sup>6</sup>

In the combination of the two narratives mentioned here, a dangerous mixture of denial of reality, the canonization of a utopian pacifism, and a highly transfigured *Ostpolitik* emerged. This characterized German foreign policy in the years up to the end of the Red-Green coalition in 2005. In addition, the German government decided to phase out nuclear energy in 2001. Even then, it was foreseeable that there would be a combined exit from nuclear energy and coal in response to the climate crisis. This prospect, in turn, prompted important sections of German industry and the energy utilities to increasingly consider sourcing natural gas from Russia with as little disruption as possible. This laid the foundations for an illusory and utopian Russia policy, which was supported by parts of the business community.

One consequence of this slow but steady realignment was the focus of Germany's *Ostpolitik* on Russia at the expense of Poland as well as the other Central Eastern European and Eastern European states (including Ukraine). This policy was intensively pursued by the Chancellery. Its architect was then-Chancellor's office chief Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Chancellor Schröder also developed a friendly relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The latter had been elected to this office in 2000 after earning a reputation as a "doer" during the brutal suppression of the uprising in Chechnya. He was held in high esteem above all by members of the powerful security services, whose thinking was deeply rooted in Great Russian nationalism and imperialism. Putin presented himself as moderate and reform-minded to Schröder, and also impressed the latter with a speech in the German Bundestag in the summer of 2001. In fact, from the very beginning, his agenda was different – to restore Russia's imperial greatness.

In terms of alliance policy, the Red-Green coalition remained on course with the continuation and expansion of the Bundeswehr's involvement in ISAF. But the balance between foreign missions and alliance defense that had been maintained until 1999 was gradually lost. Alliance defense was considered obsolete, and the corresponding capabilities of the Bundeswehr were abandoned or neglected. Politically, the only important thing was to

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6 In a book published in 2013, former NVA Colonel Siegfried Lautsch vividly described how, even before Gorbachev took office, the Warsaw Pact had to change its offensive military concept because this strategy was no longer feasible due to Air-Land Battle and the Follow-on-forces attack. The demonstrations of the peace movement in West Germany obviously had no influence on the military planning of the Warsaw Pact.

maintain a small presence in Afghanistan (never more than 5,000 soldiers). In addition, the Bundeswehr was downsized and savings were made in all areas. Eventually, the German government took a critical course against the Bush administration in Washington on more and more issues.

These tendencies culminated in the controversies over the U.S. government's intention to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq through international military intervention. In the summer of 2002, U.S. President George W. Bush had announced that his administration was determined to overthrow the criminal regime of Saddam Hussein, which was not complying with the conditions imposed by the UN Security Council in 1991 under ceasefire Resolution 687 (April 3, 1991) and other resolutions. The plan was not unwarranted, but the preparation and justification revealed significant shortcomings, and the Bush administration's handling of allies and friends who asked critical questions provided legitimate grounds for criticism.<sup>7</sup> But the way the Red-Green federal government handled the issue also aroused criticism.<sup>8</sup> It would have been enough if the federal government had made its rejection clear and not joined the international coalition. But in view of the upcoming Bundestag elections in September 2002, Chancellor Schröder apparently saw an opportunity to win the elections after all and embarked on a course in which he portrayed himself and the Red-Green federal government as defenders of peace against the "warmonger" George W. Bush. This campaign was accompanied by a wave of anti-Americanism in the German media as well as in the argumentation of the SPD and the Greens.<sup>9</sup> The Social Democratic federal minister Heide Däubler-Gmelin even accused Bush of using methods like Hitler's to distract attention from domestic problems.<sup>10</sup>

The outcome of the Bundestag elections proved Schröder right. With 38.5 percent, the SPD received as many votes as the CDU/CSU, and since the Greens did better than the FDP, the government was able to remain in office. However, the damage to alliance policy was enormous and has strained relations between the U.S. and Germany to this day. The distortions were also evident in *Ostpolitik*. Poland had spoken out in favor of the

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7 Halper, Stefan/Clarke, Jonathan: *America Alone. The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2004, pp. 201–230.

8 Shawcross, William: *Allies. The United States, Britain, Europe and the War in Iraq*. Atlantic Books: London 2003, p. 102ff.

9 On anti-Americanism among the German left, see Diner, Dan: *Feindbild Amerika. Über die Beständigkeit eines Ressentiments*. Propyläen: Berlin 2002, pp. 115ff.

10 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: "Ministerin in Erklärungsnot", 9 September 2002.

Bush administration's policy in the Iraq conflict and supported the invasion in March 2003 with troops.<sup>11</sup> While Chancellor Kohl had established the Weimar Triangle (Germany, France, Poland), Chancellor Schröder, much to the annoyance of the Poles and the Balts, now preferred to meet *à trois* with French President Chirac and Russian President Putin – most recently in East Prussia.<sup>12</sup> In any case, Schröder's relationship with Putin became closer. Against the backdrop of increasingly critical reports about falsifications in the presidential elections in Russia and Putin's blatant interference in the Ukrainian elections (in which the candidate Yushchenko, who did not favor Russia, was poisoned by the Russian secret service), Schröder made the abstruse claim in a television program in November 2004 that Putin was a "flawless democrat" ("*ein lupenreiner Demokrat*")<sup>13</sup> – a claim that he then explicitly confirmed again in 2012 after the obviously manipulated presidential elections in Russia.<sup>14</sup> This commitment was to pay off materially for Schröder. At the end of his term of service, he joined the supervisory board of *Nord Stream AG*. Six months later, he became chairman of the supervisory board of the pipeline consortium *NEGP Company*, a subsidiary of the Russian state-owned *Gazprom*, and two years later he became chairman of the supervisory board of the largely state-owned Russian company *Rosneft*. His combined annual income from these positions was estimated at more than one million euros.

During these years, the conviction emerged in Poland, as well as in most Central Eastern European states and especially in Ukraine, that Germany, together with France, was acting in favor of Russia at their expense. At the center of concerns at that time was the *Nord Stream* pipeline project, which was supposed to connect Russia directly with Germany (bypassing Ukraine and Poland). In light of repeated disputes between Russia and Ukraine over the transfer of Russian natural gas through Ukraine and payment for gas delivered to Ukraine, Russian state-owned *Gazprom* had pitched the idea to German companies. After clear political support from Berlin, the corresponding agreement was signed in September 2005 in the presence of the still incumbent German Chancellor Schröder and the Russian President Putin.

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11 Krzemiński, *Im Osten viel Neues*, 2015.

12 Ludwig, Michael: "Putin, Schröder und Chirac – Zusammenkunft mit Tradition", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3 July 2005.

13 *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 23 November 2004.

14 *Die Welt*: "Schröder verteidigt 'lupenreinen Demokraten' Putin", 7 March 2012.

*Nord Stream* went into operation at the end of 2011 and – as a knowledgeable observer quite rightly noted – this took an important means of pressure out of the Ukrainian government’s hands with which it could defend itself against Russian interference.<sup>15</sup> In February 2014, when President Yanukovych, who was well favored by Moscow, was forced to resign from office due to massive popular protests (the Euromaidan), it became clear what the loss of this leverage meant for Ukraine: Russia occupied and annexed Crimea and staged “civil uprisings” in the Donbas with special forces and free rioters, which then led to the intervention of Russian units to prevent the Ukrainians from retaking the territories. The German *Ostpolitik* of the Schröder government was thus partly responsible for this more or less hybrid attack by Russia on Ukraine.

#### 4 The First Merkel Coalition (2005–2009)

The federal elections of September 18, 2005, resulted in the loss of the governing majority of the SPD and the Greens. Although the CDU/CSU also suffered significant losses, the party still was entitled to the chancellorship because it was able to achieve the highest share of the vote with just 34.2 percent. A coalition with the FDP was not possible, so Angela Merkel’s chancellorship could only be realized through a coalition with the SPD. Those who had hoped that a change in German *Ostpolitik* and alliance policy would take place were soon disappointed. The architect of Schröder’s Russia policy, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, now became foreign minister and used this office to continue shaping relations with Russia, and less so with the other Eastern European states, in the tried and tested manner. Steinmeier’s goal was now to turn relations with Russia into a strategic partnership – something that the Kohl government had already tried to do with Russia under different domestic political conditions. Although Steinmeier repeatedly emphasized that his *Ostpolitik* was embedded in the Western alliance, this was rhetoric. As long as the Bush administration ruled in Washington, nothing changed in the strained German-American relations. German foreign policy focused on Russia, which was to be brought closer

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15 Umland, Andreas: Die friedenspolitische Ambivalenz deutscher Pipelinedeals mit Moskau – eine interdependenztheoretische Erklärung des Russisch-ukrainischen Konfliktes. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 4, Issue 3, 2020, pp. 293–303.

to the Western community through a policy of integration and rapprochement ("Wandel durch Handel").<sup>16</sup>

Steinmeier's policy was supported at the European level by close consultations with France and resulted in a kind of German or Franco-German hegemony within the EU as far as *Ostpolitik* was concerned.<sup>17</sup> Germany's Russia policy also dominated the EU's Russia policy. Among the countries of Eastern Europe and East Central Europe, this development triggered concerns, but these were not heeded in Berlin and Paris. According to a report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, starting in 2005, the Foreign Office was working on a concept for a new Russia policy under the motto "change through interdependence" ("Wandel durch Verflechtung").<sup>18</sup> The planning staff of then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was responsible for this. The Chancellor had been skeptical about the project but had given Steinmeier a free hand. It was striking how little Steinmeier allowed himself to be distracted by reports that referred to the domestic situation in Russia (especially the authoritarian regression and disregard for human rights under Putin, as well as the increasingly recognizable kleptocratic character of the regime) and to Putin's dubious statements on foreign policy. In particular, his statement to the Duma in April 2005, according to which the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest strategic catastrophe of the century,<sup>19</sup> should have made alarm bells ring at the Foreign Office. The same was true of Putin's philippic speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. But Germany's *Ostpolitik* remained fixated on Russia, even if there were repeated attempts of dialogue with Poland, which, however, proved increasingly complicated.

With the election of Dmitry Medvedev as President of Russia in March 2008, the prospect of a lasting strategic partnership seemed to open up for Steinmeier. Medvedev made statements that seemed promising. In fact, he was only a stooge for Putin, who, according to the constitution in force at the time, could not have stood for a third term and who, however,

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16 Adomeit, Hannes: Bilanz der deutschen Russlandpolitik seit 1990. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 4, Issue 3, 2020, pp. 276–292.

17 Siddi, Marco: A Contested Hegemon? Germany's Leadership in EU Relations with Russia. In: German Politics, Vol. 29, Issue 1, 2020, pp. 97–114.

18 Wehner, Markus: "Rechtfertigt Steinmeiers Russland-Politik die Ausladung?", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13 April 2022.

19 Sinyakov, Denis: "Putin: Soviet collapse a 'genuine tragedy'", NBC News, 25 April 2005; Osborn, Andrew: "Putin: Collapse of the Soviet Union was 'catastrophe of the century'", *The Independent*, 26 April 2005.

continued to determine policy as prime minister. Consideration for Russia was at the forefront of German politics. When, in April of the same year, a decision was to be made at the NATO summit in Budapest on the admission of Georgia and Ukraine to the Atlantic Alliance at the request of the Bush administration, this request was rejected by Germany and France with consideration for Russian concerns. Instead, both states were put off to an uncertain future. For both, it meant being thrust into a fatal strategic dark zone where Russia could harass them undisturbed.<sup>20</sup> The consequences of this decision did not seem to worry the chancellor or the foreign minister. Ukraine and Georgia were not of the interest for either of them. But as early as August of that year, Georgian Prime Minister Saakashvili was tempted by South Ossetian separatists to launch a military operation at the same time when a major Russian military exercise was taking place in Georgia's immediate vicinity. It took only a few hours for Russian troops to invade Georgia, resulting in the displacement of many Georgian people from their ancestral homes. Events in Georgia demonstrably had no impact on Germany's policy toward Russia, which continued to emphasize partnership (especially in Russia's modernization) and cooperation in the energy sector. Russia remained the primary partner within the framework of *Ostpolitik*.

One may ask in retrospect: how would Ukraine's situation have developed if it had been admitted to NATO in 2009 or 2010? One should assume that neither the annexation of Crimea nor the hybrid conquests in the Donbas would have taken place, and the attack of February 2022 would probably not have occurred. In the years leading up to 2010, of course, Russia could have tried to annex Crimea or occupy the Donbas. But the war against Georgia had shown clear weaknesses in the Russian military, and at that point Ukraine still had the option of threatening to cut off Russian natural gas supplies. NATO membership for Ukraine would, of course, have led to enormous anger in Russia and would have thwarted all German plans for a modernization partnership. In the event of Ukraine's admission to NATO, Germany's embrace strategy toward Russia would probably have failed. In retrospect, however, that would not have been detrimental, because it later failed miserably anyway. In 2010, Russia was not yet in a position where it could have made as strong military campaign as it did in 2014. But the coalition's preference was for Russia. The prospect for a domestic reform process and a modernization of its economy was

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20 Busse, Nikolas: "Die NATO und die Ukraine – Merckels strategischer Fehler", Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 4 April 2022.

considered superior to all other political goals. That is why Ukraine was denied accession to NATO.

It was astonishing that in the coalition led by Chancellor Merkel, there was no attempt on the part of the CDU/CSU to challenge the two foreign policy narratives of the Red-Green coalition cited above. Neither the utopian pacifism nor the glorified version of Brandt's *Ostpolitik* seemed to make the Union uncomfortable. Apparently, the chancellor was happy to live with it, and those voices in the party that still clung to Kohl-era beliefs were marginalized. Since the beginning of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Union parties had been the parties that stood for Western ties and defense within the framework of the Western alliance, for European policy, and for traditional Western values. In the Merkel era, this tradition largely disappeared from the parties (from the CSU even faster than from the CDU) within a few years, and the Union joined the Red-Green narrative without any criticism. Contributing to this was the fact that this narrative was strongly represented in the media (especially the public television stations). Dissenters were dismissed as "cold warriors" and largely kept out of the public sphere.

An example of this uncritical adoption of the Red-Green narrative is the following quote by former CDU politician Friedbert Pflüger from an open letter to then-Ukrainian Ambassador Melnyk in January 2022:

"As you know, I do not belong to Willy Brandt's party. But I am very glad that he existed and that he broke the escalating spiral of threats and bossiness of the Cold War with his policy. I still remember how Egon Bahr, his negotiator *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union, was attacked for making common cause with the Kremlin. Especially in crisis situations, there is a need for personalities who are also trusted on 'the other side' and who can convey fears, ambitions, and 'red lines' from there. Ah, if only we had an Egon Bahr now!"

Pflüger recommended to Melnyk that he should not focus on deterrence against Russia, but rather encourage a "climate CSCE". Moreover, he elaborated, "Maybe it's better to look for a balance of interests after all, instead of accelerating the existing fires."<sup>21</sup> Other examples of this kind were offered by the Prime Minister of Saxony, Michael Kretschmer, or the Bavarian Prime Minister, Markus Söder, who claimed that Putin was "not an enemy

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21 Pflüger, Friedberg: "Offener Brief an den ukrainischen Botschafter Andrij Melnyk", Cicero, 27 January 2022.



of Europe” just a few days before the Russian invasion began.<sup>22</sup> These years marked the end of the pro-Western foreign policy consensus that had characterized the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany since the late 1950s. The SPD had already abandoned this consensus in the 1980s. Those who had hoped that the CDU/CSU would continue to represent it were now disappointed.

### 5 The Years of the Christian-Liberal Coalition (2009–2013)

In the September 2009 Bundestag elections, the CDU/CSU and FDP received enough votes to form a “bourgeois” coalition. However, there was no real change in Germany’s *Ostpolitik* (toward balanced relations with Russia on the one hand and the Eastern European and East Central European states on the other) and no more alliance-friendly policy. The FDP under its chairman Guido Westerwelle tried to improve relations with Poland, but he had also fully embraced the *Zeitgeist* of utopian pacifism and the glorification of Brandt’s *Ostpolitik*. No significant changes were made in relations with Russia and the other Eastern European states during his term in office, although he had promised to do so. Westerwelle, who had brought his party large electoral gains because he had competence in economic and financial policy, insisted on being given a position in the foreign ministry because he expected this position to boost his popularity. With his demand for the withdrawal of the last American nuclear weapons from German soil, he triggered a transatlantic crisis of confidence. So did his refusal to participate in the NATO operation to protect the people of Libya from Ghaddafi’s marauding troops. At the time, German political scientist Christian Hacke called Westerwelle “the most narrow-minded German foreign minister since Ribbentrop”.<sup>23</sup> But even the chancellor did not use the leeway to break free from the direction set by the SPD. Behind this was consideration for the German economy.

Parts of German industry and, above all, the major energy suppliers had been looking for secure sources of natural gas in view of the looming phase-out of nuclear energy and coal – under the conditions of the Renewable Energy Act. Russia came more and more into focus, and Ger-

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22 Frasch, Timo/Schuller, Konrad: “Markus Söder im Interview: ‘Russland ist kein Feind Europas’”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 January 2022.

23 SPIEGEL: “Kritik an Westerwelle: ‘Borniertester Außenminister seit von Ribbentrop’”, 22 April 2011.



many's *Ostpolitik*, which was fixated on Russia, fitted perfectly into this picture. The accompanying risks, which were clearly apparent in Russia, were ignored by German companies. They believed they could trust the German government, which had an intelligence service at its disposal and many professional diplomats who seemed to know Russia well. Already in the Schröder era, but more and more clearly in the Merkel era, a grand coalition of utopian pacifists, illusion-driven friends of Russia, and industry and energy suppliers emerged in this context. They were united in the naïve assumption that Russia was a reliable strategic partner with whom it was possible to trade, who did not exploit dependencies, and who did not embark on problematic military paths. Under the label "*German Ostpolitik*", a mix of peace policy revivalism, Russia-fixation, and commercial interests emerged, which structured policy in such a lasting way that warning voices from Germany and abroad were wiped away with incredible ignorance.

Incidentally, the alliance policy dimension did not fare much better. It is true that Barack Obama, a Democratic president, took office in January 2009, with whom the German chancellor developed a much better relationship than with his predecessor. But the main instrument of German alliance policy – an operational Bundeswehr – continued to suffer from her neglect. Here, too, the CDU/CSU, which had been the party of the Bundeswehr until the late 1990s, failed. Even the defense minister of the first grand coalition, Franz Josef Jung, no longer had any connection to the Bundeswehr. Under his successor, the media-savvy Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, who was looking toward higher office, the largest and most media-celebrated cuts to the Bundeswehr's operational readiness (including the suspension of conscription) occurred. His successor, Thomas de Maiziere, could not make up for Guttenberg's mistakes. Like Jung and zu Guttenberg, he had come to this office without preparation. Members of the Bundestag from the CDU/CSU faction who were equipped with defense policy expertise were not considered as "ministerable" or were placed in other ministries (like MdB Christian Schmidt, who became agriculture minister). The neglect of the Bundeswehr was viewed with great concern, especially in the U.S. The Chancellor and her responsible departmental ministers apparently did not share this concern.

6 *The Years of the Coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD (2013–2021)*

The outcome of the September 2013 federal election was disastrous for the FDP. It was unable to clear the 5-percent hurdle – not least because of the utter failure of its foreign minister – and Chancellor Merkel had to enter another coalition with the SPD despite her great success (the CDU and CSU received over 40 percent of the votes cast). The architect of Russia-oriented *Ostpolitik*, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, thus took up the post of foreign minister once again. He held this post until January 2017, after which he became Federal President. His successors as foreign minister were Sigmar Gabriel (January 2017 to March 2018) and Heiko Maas (March 2018 to December 2021) – both from the SPD.

At the beginning of the work of the coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD (fewer and fewer people wanted to talk about a “grand” coalition at that time, given the weakness of the SPD), one might have expected a reassessment of Russian policy. Two key developments that could not have been overlooked spoke in favor of this:

- Firstly, the re-election of Vladimir Putin as president of Russia in March 2012 took place under conditions in which it was no longer possible to speak of a fair and free election. There were massive protests in Russia, which were violently suppressed and which showed how repressive the system had become. There were more and more political murders of opposition figures, some of which took place abroad. At this stage, it became apparent that Putin was describing the protests as externally directed and accusing the U.S. and Western powers of trying to threaten Russia with “color revolutions”. The alleged instigation of “color revolutions” by Western forces was even listed in Russian military doctrine as one of the key threats to Russian security and, in turn, led to Russia increasingly attempting to destabilize Western democracies on its part. In 2012, a variety of laws and regulations were enacted that made it more and more difficult for opposition movements to pursue their activities in Russia. They had to register as foreign agents and their work was

obstructed wherever possible. Foreign non-governmental organizations had to leave Russia.<sup>24</sup>

- Secondly, the West became increasingly aware that Russia had embarked on an extensive military modernization program. This was initiated in 2008 after the experience with the war against Georgia. In this context, the State Armament Program for the years 2011 to 2020 was launched in December 2010. According to this program, Russia planned to spend 23 trillion rubles (755 billion dollars according to the exchange rate at that time) on the modernization of the Russian armed forces within the next decade.<sup>25</sup> This program fundamentally changed the reform plans. Whereas, until then, the main goal of modernization had been to ensure the ability to intervene in the area of the Commonwealth of Independent States, this modernization program was directed toward a major war – either against NATO or against Ukraine.<sup>26</sup>

Both developments mentioned above were registered with great concern, especially in Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, Great Britain, and the U.S. An analysis by the National Defense University in Tampere, Finland, concluded as early as 2013 that behind these modernizations was a strategic concept aimed at revising borders and threatening the security of Finland

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24 Adomeit, Hannes: Russland und der Westen. Von "strategischer Partnerschaft" zur strategischen Gegnerschaft. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für strategische Analysen*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2021, p. 114.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

26 Monaghan, Andrew: *Russian State Mobilization: Moving the Country on to a War Footing*. Royal Institute of International Affairs: London 2016; Connolly, Richard/Boulègue, Mathieu: *Russia's New State Armament Programme. Implications for the Russian Armed Forces and Military Capabilities to 2027*. Royal Institute for International Affairs: London 2018; Lavrov, Anton: *Russian Military Reforms from Georgia to Syria*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS): Washington D.C. 2018; Johnson, Dave: General Gerasimov über die Entwicklungslinien der russischen Militärstrategie – Eine Analyse. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, 2019, pp. 255–261; Dick, Charles: *Russian Ground Forces Posture Towards the West*. Royal Institute of International Affairs: London 2019; Muzyka, Konrad: *Russian Forces in the Western Military District*. Center for Naval Analysis (CAN): Washington D.C. 2020; Hackett, James: *Die Modernisierung der russischen Streitkräfte*. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2021, pp. 125–139; Westerlund, Fredrik: *The role of the military in Putin's foreign policy. An overview of current research*. Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI): Stockholm 2021.

and other Eastern European states.<sup>27</sup> The authors pointed to the Russian armed forces' major procurement and munitions program. For the first time since the end of the Soviet Union, they argued, Russia has returned to massive serial production of weapons systems and munitions. Since conscription had not been lifted, the country could draw on a reserve of several million troops in addition to its roughly 700,000 active soldiers. The modernization of the armed forces and their operational-strategic orientation in the Baltic region would indicate a desire to be able to intervene militarily primarily in the neighborhood. The authors criticized that both Paris and Berlin failed to understand the strategic implications of this buildup. Rather, the two governments still regarded Russia as a strategic partner.

In September 2013, Russia and Belarus hosted the quadrennial *Zapad* military exercise. This provided numerous insights into the state of modernization of the Russian armed forces and, above all, into the strategic objective that had been pursued.<sup>28</sup> The stated objective – combating terrorist intruders who controlled entire cities and countryside – was in fact pursued to some extent. In the process, practices of “terrorist infiltrators” were examined and exercise-tested in combat, attempting to destabilize a country by occupying public buildings and news stations in order to then take control. These were the exact methods then used in Ukraine in the spring of 2014 by Russian special forces and “volunteers” in their occupation of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine. As the exercise progressed, however, it became increasingly clear that Russian forces were also practicing combined, cross-strike warfare on a regional stage on a large scale, with the participation of Interior Ministry troops as well as civilian defense forces. Classic conventional warfare exercises were conducted against a well-armed adversary. Maritime and amphibious operations played a major role, as did airborne operations. There were also spectacular tests with the new *Iskander* missile system. *Su-34* aircraft also took part in the exercise for the

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27 Forss, Stefan/Kiianlinna, Lauri/Inkinen, Pertti/Hult, Heikki: The Development of Russian Military Policy and Finland. National Defence University, Research Reports No. 49, Tampere 2013.

28 See Zdanavičius, Liudas/Czekaj, Matthew (Eds.): Russia's Zapad 2013 Military Exercise. Lessons for Baltic Regional Security. Jamestown Foundation/National Defence Academy of Latvia: Washington D.C./Riga 2015.

first time. Unlike the *Zapad 2009* exercise, no nuclear strikes were practiced this time.<sup>29</sup>

These developments were not noticed by the German government or were dismissed as irrelevant. It can be assumed that the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) had pointed out the tightening of domestic politics in Russia and the ambitious Russian arms programs and had come to similar conclusions as the experts from Tampere. Warnings from Poland were also ignored.<sup>30</sup> Obviously, no one in the Chancellery and the Foreign Ministry seemed to care. Undeterred, the German government stuck to its policy of partnership with Russia. By 2013 at the latest, it had become clear that Russia was planning a revisionist confrontational course against the West and Ukraine (as long as the latter continued to move in the direction of the West) and that military means and the use of energy dependencies were to become central instruments of this policy. At this point, a general revision of Germany's policy toward Russia and the Eastern policy should have taken place. It did not come about since German Foreign Minister Steinmeier unwaveringly stuck to his course, because the Chancellor gave him more or less free rein, and because the new Defense Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, set other priorities. For von der Leyen, it was important that soldiers felt comfortable in the barracks and that the Bundeswehr's procurement system could be made more effective. For the latter, millions were spent on consulting services by the firm McKinsey, which in the end had no visible effect. In contrast, little money was allocated for analyses of the strategic situation. *The German government responded to an increasingly dangerous environment with strategic blindness.* In this context, it is hardly reassuring to note that a similar form of strategic blindness prevailed in France and that no impetus came from Paris that could have pointed in a changed direction. Until 2022, French President Macron stubbornly

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29 See Järvenpää, Pauli: ZAPAD 2013 – A View from Helsinki. In: Zdanavičius, Liudas/Czekaj, Matthew (Eds.): Russia's Zapad 2013 Military Exercise. Lessons for Baltic Regional Security, The Jamestown Foundation/National Defense Academy of Latvia: Washington D.C./Riga, 2015, pp. 43–57; Blank, Stephen: What do the Zapad 2013 Exercises Reveal? In: Zdanavičius, Liudas/Czekaj, Matthew (Eds.): Russia's Zapad 2013 Military Exercise. Lessons for Baltic Regional Security, The Jamestown Foundation/National Defense Academy of Latvia: Washington D.C./Riga, 2015, pp. 8–13.

30 Krzemiński 2015.

maintained that the main threat to Europe was Islamist fundamentalism and that Russia was a partner.<sup>31</sup>

The inevitable reality shock hit the German government in February and March 2014, when Russia first occupied Crimea with unmarked special forces (“green men”) and then, again with unmarked special forces and mercenary troops, seized public buildings and television stations in the Donbas and Odesa and proclaimed “people’s republics”. In Odesa, that plan failed with enormous bloodshed; in the Donetsk and Luhansk districts, the Russian irregulars were only able to keep areas under their control through interventions by Russian forces.

The German government responded to the Crimean occupation with attempts at diplomatic intervention in Moscow. These yielded no results. Demands by European states and the U.S. for massive sanctions were rejected by the German government. The main fear in Berlin was that the operation in Crimea was just a trap to induce the Ukrainians to launch a military operation to reclaim Ukraine. From there, the goal was not to influence the Russians, but to persuade the Ukrainians to show restraint.<sup>32</sup> The overriding motto was “de-escalation” – even though there was no evidence that any preparations were being made in Kyiv for military intervention in the direction of Crimea. Through this de-escalation strategy, the German government undermined a unified European Union approach against Russia. Many voices were there, especially among Eastern Europeans, in favor of strong sanctions. The German government prevented all of this. Even after the hybrid aggressions in the Donbas and Ukraine’s desperate attempts to regain control over its territory, the German government, together with the French government, primarily sought a ceasefire (Normandy format). This was appropriate given Ukraine’s difficult situation, but in the course of the process, Germany and France settled on a negotiating framework (Minsk I and Minsk II) in which the fiction was accepted that Russia was not a player in this game, but that it was only about an intra-Ukrainian civil war in which the Russian government (the real instigator) was acting as a mediator (see previous chapter). In addition, a settlement for the occupied territories was agreed upon that was contradictory and unworkable and

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31 E.g. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty: “Macron Says Russia, China Not NATO Allies’ Common Enemies – Terrorism Is”, 28 November 2019.

32 This phase is reviewed in Eitel, Peter: *The Russian Annexation of Crimea 2014: Which Role for Surprise, especially for Germany?* Dissertation of the Christian-Albrechts University of Kiel: Kiel 2021, Chapter III.

ultimately perpetuated Russian annexation. Germany and France, by their participation, more or less tacitly approved the fundamental questioning by Russia of the core norms of the European peace order as well as of the UN Charter.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, Germany's policy at the time was seen as less problematic in academic debates.<sup>34</sup>

The alternative would have been a decisive policy by the Western community to impose massive sanctions on Russia of the kind that did not occur until after February 24, 2022. This approach, favored by many European states and the U.S., failed in the spring of 2014 due to opposition from the German government and France. Only after the downing of a *Malaysia Airlines* passenger plane on July 17, 2014, by Russian irregulars who had "borrowed" an anti-aircraft missile from regular Russian troops, did the German government also move toward imposing sanctions. However, these sanctions remained relatively harmless, since the aim was not to break "the line of communication with Moscow".

Within NATO, too, the German government (mostly in conjunction with France) put the brakes on attempts to build up an effective conventional defense capability against Russia in the Baltics and East Central Europe. Although it was decided at the Wales, Warsaw, and Brussels summits that there should be small, multinational battle groups in the three Baltic states and Poland, these were to be at best battalion-sized.<sup>35</sup> The German government had emphasized that the 1997 NATO-Russia Act would not be violated by NATO under any circumstances. Once again, the otherwise breakable thread of conversation was invoked, even though Russia had already fundamentally violated the core provisions of the Act. The German government was unable to prevent the repeated description of the military threat posed by Russia at the above-mentioned summits and subsequent meetings of foreign and defense ministers. Although the Chancellor, the Foreign Minister,

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33 Essen, Hugo von/Umland, Andreas: Russlands diktierter Nicht-Frieden im Donbas 2014–2022: Warum die Minsker Abkommen von Anbeginn an zum Scheitern verurteilt waren. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für strategische Analysen*, Vol. 6, Issue 3, 2022, pp. 282–292. This article can also be found as chapter five of this anthology.

34 See Siddi, Marco: German Foreign Policy toward Russia in the Aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis: A New Ostpolitik? In: *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 68, Issue 4, 2016, pp. 665–677; Forsberg, Tuomas: From 'Ostpolitik' to 'frostpolitik'? Merkel, Putin and German foreign policy toward Russia. In: *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, Issue 19, 2016, pp. 21–42.

35 Meyer zum Felde, Rainer: Abschreckung und Dialogbereitschaft – der Paradigmenwechsel der NATO seit 2014. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2018, pp. 101–117.

and the Defense Minister signed the documents in question, the relevant formulations were not reflected in their speeches. In fact, they continued to speak in public of the need for *détente*, confidence-building, and de-escalation.

At the summit meetings, the German government had made far-reaching commitments. It was promised, for example, that defense spending would rise from 1.1 percent to 2 percent. In addition, the Army's six brigades were to be made operational, growing to ten brigades by 2030. In the context of NATO's rapid reaction force, the German government promised to continue to maintain a division headquarters, division troops, and two combat brigades capable of deployment, beyond the tank company to be stationed in Lithuania, for the particularly rapidly deployable force (VJTF).<sup>36</sup>

These pledges were largely not kept. Within the federal government – and especially from the SPD parliamentary group – the 2 percent pledge was openly questioned and its implementation blocked.<sup>37</sup> Attempts by the Chancellor or Defense Minister von der Leyen to press for compliance with the pledges could not be observed. This disregard for the Wales and Warsaw agreements led to a profound upset in German-American relations when then-U.S. President Donald Trump criticized Germany's unwillingness and threatened that the United States might withdraw from the NATO treaty. The chancellor's response remained vague. What came to her rescue was the fact that Trump's rude tone turned most observers against him. Merkel was portrayed in the media as a calming factor. In fact, the German government's unwillingness to engage the U.S. (and not only Republicans) was a serious alliance policy shortcoming that raised and still raises considerable doubts about Germany's loyalty to the alliance.

However, a certain change in the German government's policy toward Russia could be observed: whereas Russian arms efforts had been largely ignored or deemed unimportant until 2014, the idea now took hold that Russia was so overwhelmingly militarily strong that it made no sense to help Ukraine arm itself against another Russian attack. Chancellor Merkel repeatedly rejected German arms deliveries to Ukraine because Russia was

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36 Meyer zum Felde, *Abschreckung und Dialogbereitschaft*, 2018, p. 114.

37 Meyer zum Felde, Rainer: *Deutsche Verteidigungspolitik – Versäumnisse und nicht eingehaltene Versprechen*. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 4, Issue 3, 2020, pp. 315–332.



militarily superior anyway and Ukraine could not defend itself.<sup>38</sup> She also said that there were already enough weapons in the region.

In academic discussions – especially among experts on Russia and Eastern Europe – the German government was repeatedly criticized for this policy. But this advice was not heeded. The author of this chapter had a similar experience in 2014, when he made the statement in an article requested by the German Foreign Office for the 2014 *Global Review* that Russia was seeking strategic confrontation with the West. The article was effectively pulled from circulation because it did not reflect the wishful thinking of the foreign minister and his advisers.<sup>39</sup> Rather, advice from peace researchers was listened to, such as the 2017 article by Matthias Dembinski and Hans-Joachim Spanger titled "Plural Peace: Guiding Ideas for a New Russia Policy".<sup>40</sup> In it, they acknowledged Russia's right to turn away from a liberal order which it understood as imperial and to implement its own conception of order in its environment. Their contribution amounted to the acceptance of a Russian zone of influence in Eastern Europe<sup>41</sup> and revealed the "dark" side of Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. This, too, was based on the recognition of a Russian supremacy, and it was Egon Bahr who assumed that only by accepting this supremacy contacts with Moscow could be maintained and diplomatic progress was possible. Under the conditions of the 1970s, when Soviet troops were deep in Europe, this may still have been "realistic", but under the conditions of the 21st century, it amounted to selling out Ukraine and recommending that it submit to Russian will.

The article by Dembinski and Spranger was torn apart by experts,<sup>42</sup> but it pretty much reflected the proto-realism of the coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD led by Angela Merkel. The policy toward Russia became – this was

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38 Heinemann-Grüder, Andreas: Russland-Politik in der Ära Merkel. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 6, Issue 4, 2022, p. 366.

39 Documentation "Global Review 2014: Warnungen vor Russland gab es zu Genüge, sie wurden nur nicht beachtet". In: Sirius – Journal of Strategic Analysis, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2014, p. 227.

40 Dembinski, Matthias/Spanger, Hans-Joachim: Pluraler Frieden. Leitideen für eine neue Russlandpolitik. In: Osteuropa, Vol. 67, Issue 3/4, 2017, pp. 87–96.

41 Heinemann-Grüder, Russland-Politik in der Ära Merkel, 2022, p. 368.

42 Heinemann-Grüder, Andreas: Wider den Sonderfrieden. Eine Replik auf das Konzept vom "Pluralen Frieden". In: Osteuropa, Vol. 67, Issue 3/4, 2017, pp. 103–108; Meister, Stefan: Wasser auf Putin's Mühlen. "Pluralen Frieden" als russlandfixierte Ostpolitik. In: Osteuropa, Vol. 67, Issue 3/4, 2017, pp. 129–133; Sushko, Oleksandr/Umland, Andreas/Weichsel, Volker: Unrealistisches Szenario. Anmerkungen zum "Pluralen Frieden". In: Osteuropa, Vol. 67, Issue 3/4, 2017, pp. 109–120.

particularly evident in the Minsk process – a policy of appeasement, the main goal of which was to satisfy the Russian president so that he would not do more damage. In this context, Russia's arms policy was somehow taken as a given, to which nothing could be done. The pledges made to NATO to reinforce the Bundeswehr were not kept, and thus a military imbalance in Europe that was constantly shifting in Russia's favor was accepted as quasi-natural and unalterable.

Instead, the concept of arms control (which in Cold War times was a tried and tested means of understanding how to manage crises that might arise from armaments) was invoked whenever reference was made to further Russian armament measures. In the middle of the last decade, for example, it became apparent that Russia was building up a considerable arsenal of conventional and nuclear cruise missiles aimed at Europe and permitting pinpoint attacks.<sup>43</sup> This occurred both under the INF Treaty and in circumvention of the treaty. In fact, this buildup should have led to a discussion of countermeasures, or a combination of countermeasures and treaty offers. Instead, the U.S. government was criticized for abandoning one of the most important pillars of the European security architecture.<sup>44</sup> In 2018, the U.S. had terminated the INF Treaty after Russia had continuously breached it since 2013. The Obama administration had been reluctant to take this step out of deference to the German federal government after attempts to clarify the matter in consultations with Russia had failed. The Trump administration, on the other hand, was less reluctant.

Arms control became an ideology whose main purpose was, on the one hand, multilateral activism in the UN regarding future problems<sup>45</sup> and, on the other hand, to appease discussions about Russian arms efforts and, if possible, to blame the U.S. in the process. Its main ideologue was Rolf Mützenich, an SPD member of parliament and, since 2019, also parliamentary group leader, who invoked *détente*, arms control, and “cross-bloc [sic!] *détente*”.<sup>46</sup> But former Foreign Minister and current German President

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43 Brauß, Heinrich/Krause, Joachim: Was will Russland mit den vielen Mittelstreckenwaffen? In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 3, Issue 2, 2019, pp. 154–166.

44 Cf. Auswärtiges Amt: Außenminister Maas zur Ankündigung der USA, sich aus dem INF-Vertrag zurück zu ziehen, 21 October 2018.

45 Krause, Joachim: Deutsche Rüstungskontrollpolitik im strategischen Niemandsland. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2021, pp. 157–164.

46 Mützenich, Rolf: “Für Ignoranz und Ausgrenzung ist Russland zu groß und zu mächtig”, Vorwärts, 20 December 2016; Mützenich, Rolf: “Echte Entspannungspoli-

Frank-Walter Steinmeier also expressed himself in this way. In June 2016, for example, Steinmeier criticized a NATO maneuver in the Baltics that was small in scope as "saber-rattling and warmongering". In this context, he said: "Anyone who believes that symbolic tank parades on the alliance's eastern border will create more security is mistaken. [...] We would be well advised not to provide pretexts for a new, old confrontation free of charge."<sup>47</sup>

The climax of the appeasement policy, however, was the German government's approval of the construction of another *Nord Stream* pipeline (*Nord Stream 2*). This approval was signaled by the German government at the end of 2014, but it always emphasized that the project was a commercial one. Unlike *Nord Stream 1*, this time *Gazprom* was the sole operator of the pipeline construction; *Wintershall Dea* and other companies had participated in financing the pipeline project as lenders. The project was immediately criticized throughout Europe because it ran counter to the European Union's policy, agreed at the beginning of the decade, that member states should become less dependent on Russia.<sup>48</sup> In addition, the German government, where responsibility for energy security rested in the Ministry of Economics, granted the Russian *Gazprom* corporation access rights to gas storage facilities in Germany. Until 2015, the German government even allowed up to 25 percent of Germany's gas storage capacity to belong to subsidiaries of the Russian state-owned *Gazprom*. The last transfer took place in 2015, when the large gas storage facility in Rehden was sold after mediation by former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder with the approval of then Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel. According to *Wirtschaftswoche*, the Germans "gradually and with full awareness put themselves in Moscow's hands".<sup>49</sup>

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tik ist kein Appeasement", 19 January 2015; Mützenich, Rolf: "Entspannungspolitik auf der Höhe der Zeit", IPG, 17 January 2022. In the interview, he actually uttered the sentence: "In the long term, our goal must be a European security order beyond the blocs".

47 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: "Konflikt mit Russland: Steinmeier kritisiert Nato-Manöver in Osteuropa", 18 June 2016.

48 Umbach, Frank: Strategische Irrtümer, Fehler und Fehlannahmen der deutschen Energiepolitik seit 2002. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 6, Issue 4, 2022, p. 378.

49 Güßgen, Florian: Warum gehört Deutschlands größter Gasspeicher Gazprom?, *Wirtschaftswoche*, 28 January 2022.

This dependence on Russian natural gas was definitely in the interest of German energy suppliers and large consumers, who were justifiably concerned about security of supply in terms of electricity supply following the accelerated phase-out of nuclear energy in 2011 and the likewise phase-out of coal-fired power. After all, security of supply was not the focus of energy policy, but rather the high-profile sending of environmental policy signals. However, Russian gas was by no means as cheap as advertised.<sup>50</sup> In order to prevent the German government from entering the global market for liquefied natural gas and building LNG terminals, opinion campaigns against LNG were launched from Russia to suggest that the U.S. wanted to use LNG to sell Germans expensive and dirty gas from fracking production. This disinformation was adopted uncritically by environmental and climate activists and has also influenced the policies of the German government.

The *Nord Stream 2* project once again caused a massive disruption in German-American relations and thus severely damaged the alliance, which was completely unnecessary. Not only the Trump administration in the person of the Ambassador Richard Grenell, but also the Congress was unimpressed by the arguments of the German government and imposed severe sanctions on companies involved in the *Gazprom* project. They, as well as most European governments and the European Parliament, were concerned that Germany was becoming so dependent on Russian state-owned companies for energy supplies (especially natural gas) that it was becoming entirely vulnerable to blackmail. In view of the events of the past two years, it has become clear that this concern was justified. At times, this project was described by the German Chancellor, the Minister of Economics, the Foreign Minister, and other government representatives as an expression of European sovereignty or as a politically insignificant, purely commercial project, which it undoubtedly never was.

## 7 How Much Did Germany Harm Ukraine?

If one summarizes the previous considerations, some assessments can be identified, which point to at least *seven cardinal mistakes* of German *Ostpolitik* since 1998:

1. The cross-party glorification of Brandt's *Ostpolitik* as the alleged cause of the end of the East-West conflict and as the preferred instrument for

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50 Umbach 2022, p. 384.

dealing with Russia, without the *dark side of Ostpolitik* (the recognition of Russian domination over other countries as a starting point for diplomatic relations with Moscow) having been even rudimentarily addressed or problematized.

2. The glorification of disarmament, arms control, multilateralism and "dialogue" as a panacea for solving political problems. Behind this is a revivalist pacifist worldview, according to which conflicts and wars arise solely from misunderstandings and it is necessary to build trust with neighboring states, relying above all on arms control and diplomacy, while deterrence should be rejected.<sup>51</sup>
3. Ignoring Russia's authoritarian regression and the creeping takeover of power by a kleptocratic and criminal power that pursued Great Russian imperialist goals and sought strategic conflict with the West and was therefore not interested in partnership. This policy could no longer be overlooked since 2012, at the latest since 2014, and yet was not perceived by the German government. Such a strategic blindness cannot be found in recent German history (since 1949). If one looks for historical parallels, the years between 1890 and 1914 was also a period during which a similar strategic blindness prevailed.<sup>52</sup>
4. Largely ignoring the re-emergence of a military threat to Europe from Russia, both in the conventional weapons and nuclear sectors.
5. Neglecting and belittling the legitimate concerns of Eastern Europeans, especially their threat fears regarding Russia.
6. The deepening of the energy partnership with Russia, which led to the German supply of natural gas being increasingly in the hands of Russian companies and resulted in a vulnerability that is now costing the Germans and their European neighbors dearly.
7. Germany's refusal to supply Ukraine with weapons with which it could have already protected itself against further aggression by Russia after 2014. Instead, the German government pursued a dialogue diplomacy that effectively served to politically secure Moscow's territorial gains in the 2014 fighting and which must be qualified as an *appeasement policy*.

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51 Adomeit, Hannes/Krause, Joachim: Der neue (Kalte?) Krieg. Das russische Ultimatum vom Dezember 2021 und die Folgen für die westliche Allianz. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2022, p. 140.

52 Krause, Joachim: Strategische Irrtümer deutscher Außenpolitik im Rückblick – die Jahre von 1890 bis 1914. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 6, Issue 4, 2022, pp. 394–414.

In what way did these mistakes harm Ukraine? This question is not so easy to answer. But some statements can certainly be formulated. They concern Moscow's risk calculation, because at the beginning of every war there is a consideration by the aggressor about which risks can be taken and which cannot. What is certain is that Germany's *Ostpolitik* and, in particular, its fixation on partnership with Russia, has influenced Moscow's risk calculus with regard to a full-scale war against Ukraine. The complete dismantling of Ukrainian statehood and an independent nation had been a clear objective in Moscow for many years. From Moscow's perspective, German policy (both *Ostpolitik* as well as alliance and defense policy) probably helped to determine the risk calculus in two respects:

- From a military point of view, the conditions necessary for a full-scale attack had to be in place, in Putin's eyes, when the modernization of Russia's armed forces had progressed to such an extent that a rapid victory over Ukraine was within the realm of possibility. Furthermore, as long as it was ensured that the armed forces of the largest central European state, the Federal Republic of Germany, would be incapable of intervening militarily, if necessary, together with other nations in favor of Ukraine. It was probably assumed by the Federal Government that, for the sake of a speedy peace, it was prepared to accept any kind of ceasefire in Ukraine and would oppose all efforts in the Western world to mount a military response. In fact, the Bundeswehr has been incapable of complex defense operations for many years. It currently stands "blank", as the Inspector of the Army put it in early 2022.<sup>53</sup> With their *de facto* self-disarmament and completely illusory peace policy, the federal governments of the past 23 years have indirectly contributed to Putin's cold-bloodedly calculating challenge to the West today and to his attack on Ukraine in retaliation for the rejection of the December 2021 ultimatum addressed to NATO. If the Bundeswehr had been ready to fight and capable of assuming alliance defense, Putin probably would not have issued the December ultimatum and presumably would not have attacked Ukraine.<sup>54</sup>
- As a result of Germany's high dependence on Russia for gas supplies, it was probably part of the Russian calculation in planning for war to assume that Germany would neither participate in military operations

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53 Thus the Inspector of the Army, Lieutenant General Alfons Mais, on 23 February 2022, quoted here by Christoph Rieke: "Bundeswehr steht mehr oder weniger blank da", Tagesspiegel, 24 February 2022.

54 Adomeit/Krause, Der neue (Kalte?) Krieg, 2022, p. 141.

(including arms deliveries), nor support the expected economic sanctions or would do so only after a long delay.

However, the Russian risk calculation – if it was as presented here – has turned out to be incorrect. Ukraine has not allowed itself to be subjugated, the West is helping Ukraine with weapons (even the Federal Republic of Germany), Germany is supporting the severe sanctions and is currently hastily and completely converting its gas import structure. Nevertheless, the war was started by Russia, therefore the German governments, especially the last two coalitions under Chancellor Merkel, have to accept the reproach that they allowed a situation to arise in which Russia believed it could attack Ukraine – probably in the hope that the takeover would happen quickly and in the belief that an invasion of the Baltic states would be possible afterwards – despite multiple warnings and indications.<sup>55</sup> Europe should be very grateful for the extremely courageous will of the Ukrainians to defend themselves. Had the Russian attack been launched first in the Baltics, NATO defenses would likely have collapsed and NATO would have been faced with two unpleasant alternatives: either accept Russian conquest or initiate a reconquest to which Russia could respond with the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons.<sup>56</sup> After Russia's extensive losses in Ukraine, this option is off the table for now. But the Kremlin's aggressive, revisionist policy will continue in the years ahead.

The last 23 years of *Ostpolitik* represent the darkest and most catastrophic chapter in the otherwise thoroughly commendable foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany. As Nikolas Busse of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) has written, the "GAU" (in German: "der größte annehmbare Unfall" – the largest imaginable catastrophe) of German foreign policy has occurred.<sup>57</sup> The government and the opposition CDU/CSU have undertaken to overcome this catastrophe. It is not yet clear whether they will succeed. What is actually needed is a reappraisal of the mistakes of the recent past described above, which the CDU/CSU and SPD, as well as the FDP and the Greens, have so far avoided. Statements by German

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55 These conclusions must be drawn from Russia's ultimatum to NATO and the USA in December 2021. Cf. *ibid.* p. 130f.

56 Kroenig, Matthew: Russlands Nuklearstrategie gegenüber Europa – wie organisiert man Abschreckung gegen Deeskalation mit nuklearen Schlägen? In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 2, Issue 4, 2018, pp. 323–338.

57 Busse, Nikolas: "Nötig ist eine Zeitenwende im Kopf", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30 March 2022.



politicians to the effect that they made a mistake or were deceived by Putin are not a way of coming to terms with the past, but simply shift responsibility away. The last 23 years of German *Ostpolitik* have made two mistakes clear: the tendency to cling to utopian theoretical concepts even when reality clearly militates against them, and the tendency, despite the emphasis on European and transatlantic solidarity, to ultimately pursue very narrowly defined national interests.<sup>58</sup>

As for the German penchant for utopias, let us add at the end a quote from the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who said:

“Utopias are not there to be realized. They provide images that maintain people’s healthy discontent. Beware of any attempt towards their realization, especially as far as German ideas are concerned. Germany, as the home of Karl Marx, is the greatest export nation for errors that moved the world. [...] Ideas that come from Germany have a dangerous tendency toward realization.”<sup>59</sup>

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58 Dieter, Heribert: Ein schwieriger Partner. Deutschlands eigennützige Außenpolitik. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 4, Issue 3, 2020, pp. 245–257.

59 Neue Züricher Zeitung: “Peter Sloterdijk: ‘Deutschland ist die grösste Exportnation für Irrtümer’”, November 24, 2022.



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