

## **Zeitenwende: Towards a New German and European Russia Policy**

*Ulrich Speck - Policy Paper - 24 ottobre 2022*

**Germany's decades-long policy of political partnership with Russia is in tatters — instead of a friendly democratic country it got an aggressive dictatorship. To avoid future failures, we need strength and resilience, writes**

Germany's Russia policy of the last decades has failed – it has not only failed to achieve its stated goal of modernizing the country but ended up at the opposite. Instead of becoming a democratic, pluralistic country with a diversified economy, and a constructive international player that seeks “win-win” solutions with others, Russia has turned into an authoritarian state that imposes its rule at home by force and that increasingly defines itself to the outside world as an empire that relies above all on war as a means of domination.

Since the end of the Cold War, Germany has developed a close relationship with Russia. Three chancellors, Helmut Kohl (1982–1998), Gerhard Schröder (1998–2005) and Angela Merkel (2005–2021) have put their hopes on a political partnership with Moscow. The political relationship was underpinned by economic ties, namely in the energy sector. And vice versa, Germany was one of Putin's most important partners for two decades.

In view of this close relationship, Germany must now ask itself what part German policy towards Russia played in the country's development into an authoritarian and aggressive actor that threatens the European peace order — what mistakes were made and what must be done differently in the future. Only when it is clear what went wrong can there be a real new start.

The old paradigm: between the end of the Cold War and the Zeitenwende

The way the Cold War ended has shaped Germany's Russia policy for three decades. That Gorbachev, after long hesitation, was persuaded by Helmut Kohl and George H.W. Bush to accept German unification within Nato, that in the following years the remaining Soviet troops were withdrawn from East Germany as promised, all this led to great relief and gratitude in Germany. One must not forget that the risks of the unification process were enormous, and that a great deal depended on having a partner in Moscow who stuck to his promises.

That Russia proved to be a constructive partner in this process was the formative experience of those years, leading quite organically to a "Russia-first" policy. In the coming decades Germany focused primarily on Russia and mostly ignored the rest of the post-Soviet space. On the one hand, because the German government worried that the relationship with Russia could fall back to a state of hostility. The gains in security since the end of the Cold War depended on Moscow continuing to behave constructively. On the other hand, it was also hoped that Russia would become a responsible player in a new, peaceful world order, as a close partner of Germany and Europe. And last but not least, Russia's economic potential, especially in the energy sector, played a considerable role by underpinning the political relationship with tangible material gains.

All this prepared the ground for Putin to move the relationship to a new level. In his speech in the German Bundestag in September 2001, delivered in German, Putin, who had been stationed in Dresden as a KGB agent from 1985 to 1990, made Germany the offer of a close partnership. Russia "always has special feelings towards Germany", he declared. Europe could only become a "powerful and independent centre of world politics" if it united with the "human, territorial and natural resources" as well as the "economic, cultural and defence potential of Russia". Although we speak of a partnership, Putin added, we have "still not learned to trust each other". But today, "we must declare once and for all: The Cold War is over".

The offer fell on fertile ground. An especially close relationship developed between Putin and the then German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Putin saw the opportunity to build a personal relationship, a "friendship", with Schröder when the German chancellor fell out with Washington over the Iraq war in 2003. For a moment, Schröder stood quite alone on the international stage – until the Russian President jumped to his side and backed him and from then on, in a series of joint meetings with French President Jacques Chirac.

From that moment on, Schröder was closely associated with the Russian leader. Shortly before the 2005 federal election that led to his ouster, Schröder and Putin signed a memorandum of understanding to build a gas pipeline through the North Sea that would directly connect Russia and Germany: Nord Stream 1. After his election defeat, Schröder then became head of the supervisory board of the operating company — a well-paid lobbyist who used his political weight not only for the construction of the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, completed in 2011, but also for the second pipeline, Nord Stream 2.

Angela Merkel, who succeeded Schröder in 2005, did not share Schröder's enthusiasm for Putin. But despite her critical distance from the Kremlin, she did not question the main principles of Germany's Russia policy. Her decision to stick to this policy was also encouraged by Schröder's former closest collaborator, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who twice became foreign minister under Merkel (2005–09 and 2013–17) in a "grand coalition" between Merkel's CDU and SPD. For Steinmeier (SPD), "interweaving" (verflechten) Germany with Russia as an instrument to modernize Russia was his central foreign policy project. Putin received him as a foreign minister personally time and again, and he had regular, trusting exchanges with Sergei Lavrov. Sigmar Gabriel, SPD's party leader from 2009 to 2017 and Minister of Economics and briefly Foreign Affairs under Merkel, was also one of the leading advocates of a close partnership with Moscow; Gabriel was very much engaged in favor of the construction of Nord Stream 2 in the crucial years since 2015.

After Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014 – the annexation of Crimea and covert attack on the Donbas – Merkel was one of the driving forces for Western sanctions against Russia. But she left the paradigm of partnership with Russia untouched. On the one hand, she was putting her hopes on diplomacy with the Kremlin; in numerous talks with Putin in various formats Merkel tried to convince the Russian president that he was on the wrong track. On the other hand, she was not prepared to abandon the idea of ever closer economic interdependence and agreed to the construction of Nord Stream 2.

At least in retrospect, it becomes clear how naive Merkel's hope for a diplomatic solution to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine – the so-called Normandy format – has been. For Putin, the talks were merely an attempt to achieve at lower cost what he was determined to achieve: control over Ukraine, a country that in his view had no right to an independent existence outside the Russian orbit.

While leaders played a crucial role in Germany's Russia policy, business and the broader population largely went along. Until the open attack on Ukraine in February 2022, Germany's policy towards Russia, set on track by Schröders and continued by Merkel, was not very controversial. The mantra that ended almost every debate was that Russia was a difficult but indispensable partner, without whom there would be no solution to the conflicts in and around Europe. Cooperation with the Kremlin was also seen as vital for the fight against climate change. Only among the Greens, who maintained close contacts with East-Central European reformers and Russian dissidents, were there some critical voices.

The instruments Berlin used against Moscow consisted almost exclusively of "carrots", almost never of "sticks", i.e. political or economic pressure. Above all, Berlin was putting its hope on talks with the Kremlin. "Keeping the communication channels open" was another mantra. The more aggressive Russia was behaving – the wars against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014 and the military intervention in Syria since 2015 — the more important it became, in the eyes of leading politicians in Berlin, to talk to Putin. Yet dialogue mostly was a dead end. What appears reasonable in the eyes of a German politician with a socialisation in democratic politics, based on bargaining and the idea "win-win solutions", not necessarily sounds convincing in the ears of a Russian leader who came to power by ruthlessly pushing aside his competitors and was running the country through brute force at home and aggression towards the outside world.

A tougher course towards Russia, as advocated especially by Poland and the Baltic states, was dismissed in Berlin as counterproductive. Instead, the focus remained on "soft" instruments and a partnership with Russia. As foreign minister in 2016, Steinmeier still complained about alleged "sabre rattling" by NATO towards Russia. Also in 2016, after Russia had already bombed civilian targets in Syria, Steinmeier announced in a speech in Yekaterinburg, Russia, that "especially Germany and Russia should work hand in hand" in the reconstruction of Syria.

Yet it also has to be noted that Merkel's support for Ukraine since 2014 was sincere and important; she played a crucial role in pushing through economic sanctions against Russia in Europa. And her sympathy for the opposition in Belarus and Russia was genuine — she helped, for example, save the life of prominent opposition politician Alexei Nawalny by having him brought to a Berlin hospital after his poisoning in Russia in August 2020.

But at the same time, Merkel continued with the Russia policy that had been put on the track by Schröder. Even despite the fact that the gap between the stated goal of Russian modernization – towards democracy and market economy – and the reality of Russian politics was growing wider and wider. At least with the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2014/15, it would have been overdue to establish a new, more robust paradigm for Germany's Russia policy.

## **Paradigm lost: Germany's Russia policy in limbo**

The end of Germany's longtime Russia policy wasn't the result of a strategic decision. True, some in the new government that took office in December 2021 wanted a different, more distanced approach to Russia, namely the Greens. Chancellor Scholz and his party SPD, on the other hand, weren't ready to abandon the long-held principles that were guiding Russia policy since two decades.

It was Putin's open aggression that made the German Russia policy unsustainable: the Russian troop deployment around Ukraine, followed by written ultimatums to the US and to NATO to largely withdraw from the sphere of control claimed by Russia – Eastern Europe and East Central Europe – and finally the open attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

Until the end, Scholz and Macron had put their hopes on talks with Moscow, directly with Putin, but also in the Normandy format (France, Germany, Ukraine, Russia) – hoping that Russia would be interested in some kind of diplomatic compromise. And even in the first days of the war, Scholz was still hesitant to take a new course; he initially continued to refuse to send weapons to Ukraine. Only when the pressure from outside and inside became truly overwhelming did the Chancellor decide to change course.

In a speech in the Bundestag on 27 February, Scholz announced a *Zeitenwende*, the end of the old and the start of a new era. His diagnosis was clear, his language frank: Putin has “cold-bloodedly started a war of aggression” because “the freedom of Ukrainians” is challenging his “own oppressive regime”. Putin is “a warmonger” to whom we must “set limits”. The Kremlin ruler wants to “wipe an independent country off the world map” and “shatters the European security order”. Putin “wants to establish a Russian empire”, he wants to “fundamentally reorder conditions in Europe according to his ideas”. For the “foreseeable future” Putin is endangering security in Europe, which is why Germany must help Ukraine with weapons and seriously invest in its armed forces.

With this speech, the German-Russian partnership that had been promoted by Putin so eloquently in the German Bundestag in 2001, and which had guided German Russia policy ever since, was official declared dead.

But in the following weeks and months, German actions were not as determined and powerful as the Chancellor's words in the *Zeitenwende* speech had sounded. The expectations Scholz had raised with his speech weren't fulfilled. Yes, Germany delivered weapons and ammunition to Ukraine, and it supported Western sanctions against Russia. A policy that was widely supported – opinion polls showed an overwhelming majority in favor of a confrontational course against Russia and massive support for Ukraine, including weapons. Even when it became clear, in late summer, that Russia was trying to weaponize gas deliveries against Germany, support for Ukraine remained unchanged. The solidarity of the German population with the attacked country was and remains great.

Yet when it came to action, the German government remained quite cautious and hesitant. In terms of weapons and ammunition, it was the USA that supplied the lion's share to Ukraine, followed by Poland and other East-Central European countries as well as Great Britain. When domestic criticism over the chancellor's reluctance boiled over, Scholz gave an interview in which he publicly warned about the risk of nuclear war, in order to justify his cautious approach. The tensions between those forces in the government that preferred more decisive support for Ukraine and the chancellery that kept defending its hesitancy remained over the summer and the autumn.

Germany was also putting the brakes on some of the Western sanctions. In particular, Berlin blocked attempts at the EU level to exert massive pressure on Russia through energy sanctions. Worried that the population would not be ready to bear the economic costs of energy sanctions, the German government refrained from using this instrument – and thus left it to Putin to use gas as a weapon. However, the fact that this weapon proved blunt when Moscow increasingly started to use it in the summer was also due to the fact that the German government had worked for months to diminish its energy dependence on Russia.

Unlike Merkel in 2014/15, Scholz did not take a leadership role. Germany was rather on the cautious, slow side, even if it was solidly in the Western mainstream. This rather passive approach was easy for Berlin to take because Washington provided Western leadership on a very professional, strategically sound level. Germany, like other European countries, could easily plug themselves into a strategy that

Washington had conceived, in close consultation with America's key European allies. For Berlin, there was simply no need to make any major strategic decision of its own – only to weigh up which of the proposed measures one wanted to participate in and to what extent, and where one preferred to put on the brakes.

At the same time, competent US leadership made it relatively easy for the Europeans to project the appearance of unity and unity to the outside world. Existing fault lines were largely covered up. For much of Western Europe, namely France, Russia remains an important player in European and global geopolitics – with whom one must sooner or later cooperate again. French president Macron again and again emphasises that peace can only be found in negotiations with the Kremlin. By contrast, in East and Central Europe, in Scandinavia and Great Britain the view is dominant that we need to prepare for a long period of tension with Russia – only if Russia experiences a clear defeat, the country will it give up its imperial ambitions, which fundamentally threaten the European security order. Both of these camps are represented in German politics and the public debate – the European fault lines run right through Germany.

The unity and determined reaction of the West to Russia's war of conquest against Ukraine is mainly the product of US leadership. Yet once the barbaric Russian attacks against Ukraine will be less in the focus, old debates about dealing with Russia might simply return. The old ideas and paradigms are not necessarily dead. If the situation changes, the mood could change again. The old policy has failed, yet a new one does not exist yet.

That is why it is important to build a new Western Russia strategy that takes the *Zeitenwende* seriously and draws the conclusions from the experience of Russia's open, full-scale war against Ukraine. The first step towards a new strategic is to realize the mistakes that have been made in the past.

## **What went wrong?**

The original idea behind Germany's Russia policy remains worthwhile: to try to support Russia's transformation into a liberal democracy and market economy. The conflict between Russia and Europe is not primarily driven by power politics, it is driven by a systemic conflict. If Russia were a democracy, its claim to a sphere of influence would not immediately disappear and conflicts on the level of power politics would not simply vanish. But, as with many other countries that used to be

empires, these conflicts could be contained, other interests would move at the forefront.

In its essence, the conflict of Putin's Russia with the West is systemic, it is driven by the fear of the autocratic Russian elite Putin has built to be toppled by revolution or democratic reform – the fear of so-called “colour revolutions”, which according to Russian propaganda are being undertaken by the West to weaken Russia. This fear very much increases the readiness for conflict with the West.

With a democratic Russia, on the other hand, Germany and the West could cooperate constructively in many fields; the disappearance of the systemic antagonism would enable a mutual opening. At the same time, the threat Russia poses to its neighbours would be significantly reduced, and might even disappear in the longer run. A democratic Russia would far more be ready to recognise the borders of the Russian nation state as its territorial limits and respect the sovereignty of neighbours. In other words: Russia would probably go down the way many empires have gone before it.

The problem with German policy towards Russia in recent decades was thus not the stated goal: to promote Russia's development towards liberal democracy. The problem was that German policy towards Russia hardly pursued this goal seriously. Instead, Berlin has engaged closely with the Kremlin, turning a blind eye as Russia moved towards autocracy and neo-imperialism – instead of focussing on political reform. And in the economic sphere, the talk of modernisation was little more than a fig leaf to create the space for German businesses to pursue their interests with Russia, especially in the area of energy policy.

In particular, German policy towards Russia in the last two decades has made three major mistakes:

**Illusions about Russia.** With Russia's war against Georgia in 2008 and the attack on Ukraine in 2014/15 it should have been clear that Putin was putting the country on a path of renewed imperial aggression, turning Russia into a threat to the European peace order. And at the latest with the “election” of Putin as president in 2012 again, after Medvedev, it should have been clear that Russia was on the road to hard-line autocracy. Yet instead of changing its strategic, Germany largely choose to ignore that Russia was turning away from the modernization agenda.

**Russia first.** For three decades, Germany has focused primarily on Russia and largely ignored Russia's neighbours. A telling example: When the then Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski presented his plans for an “Eastern Partnership” to German Foreign Minister Steinmeier in 2008 and suggested that this initiative to



strengthen EU relations with Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan should be a shared one, Steinmeier waved it off. “Steinmeier put relations with Russia first and saw the Polish proposal more as a threat to German interests in Russia,” [Cornelius Ochmann writes](#).

Sikorski then pushed ahead with his plans together with Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt — while Steinmeier focussed on the “modernisation partnership” with Russia.

What was primarily supported by Germany, but also by the USA, was not the new state system that was emerging in Eastern Europe after the Soviet Union fell apart. Instead, Russia was the privileged partner while Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the South Caucasus were largely ignored. The west was betting on Russia becoming some sort of regional hegemon and ignored the fact that with the “frozen conflicts”, Russia was weakening the sovereignty of many of its neighbors.

**Energy dependence.** Berlin’s inability to impose massive energy sanctions against Russia after the Russian attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 is the consequence of a failed policy of economic engagement. Instead of constraining Russia, what was supposed to work as interdependence in fact turned out to become a one-sided German dependence. In addition to that, the construction of Nord Stream 1 and 2 has led to a massive loss of confidence in Central and Eastern Europe.

## **Towards a new Russia policy**

In view of Russia’s full-scale, open attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the first goal of a new Russia policy must be to contain Russian aggression and consolidate the European peace order in such a way that Russia is permanently deterred from further attacks.

The first, most urgent priority is massive support for Ukraine, militarily, politically and economically. If Ukraine wins, Russia may abandon the costly neo-imperialist path; perhaps liberal democracy will get a second chance.

Secondly, the West must focus on strengthening the sovereignty of the countries of the region, their resilience and their ability to deter Russia militarily. The way to prevent further wars is to consolidate the order that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. The more the countries of the region — inside and outside NATO — are able to secure their sovereignty against an aggressive Russia, the more stable this order will be.

Third, the West can only successfully push back against Russian neo-imperialism if it builds a position of strength. To do this, the Europeans must become independent of Russian energy, invest in their resilience — also by fending off disinformation and propaganda — and in their military capabilities.

Fourth, all this can only work together with Washington. The central role of the USA has become visible again. Not only has the US taken the lead and united the West by building a common strategy. It has also become obvious once more that only the US has the strategic and military capabilities, including in the nuclear arena, to manage such a confrontation with Russia. To maintain American support for European security, Europeans must bear a far greater share of the burden of the joint defense of the west; also with regard to the fact that the US is increasingly engaged in Asia-Pacific.

Fifth, the West should not let its guard down, but should at the same time be prepared for change in Russia and develop a vision of what constructive relations with a different Russia could and should look like. The Western interest in seeing Russia transform itself towards liberal democracy and market economy remains strong; an autocratically run Russia will always pose a major problem for the security and stability in Eastern and East-Central Europe. If Russia embarks on such a path of transformation, the West must offer its support very quickly and decisively – without repeating the mistakes of the past decades.

---

*This paper is part of the project [International Expert Network Russia](#), which is supported by the German Foreign Ministry. The views expressed in the paper are the author's own.*