

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dead or dormant? German *Ostpolitik* after Ukraine

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Abstract

Germany's 2022 *Zeitenwende* (watershed) has been widely interpreted as a break with Berlin's decades-long attempts to offer security 'with rather than against Russia'. In the 1970s, West Germany's social democrat-led government had embarked on *Ostpolitik* (Eastern policy) as a way of normalising relations with the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and other Soviet satellites by fostering closer economic ties with Moscow. This policy was extended by subsequent governments and even endured, though in new form, after the fall of the Berlin wall. *Ostpolitik* is now commonly seen to have culminated in a Kremlin-friendly political landscape and an economy dependent on Russian gas. More than two years after *Zeitenwende*, the jury is still out as to whether *Ostpolitik* has been dismantled or simply remains on hold. This article shows that although German politics has experienced a seismic shift since the invasion, forces of continuity remain in operation. *Ostpolitik* was always in part the symptom of a desire to do realpolitik in Europe. This urge is unlikely to disappear.

Keywords: geopolitics; Germany; *Ostpolitik*; Russia; Ukraine; war

Cartographic ambiguities

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine is a reminder that cartography is a political business. Maps published by the Russian regime are notorious for their imperial semantics and outright distortions. It is perhaps no surprise that the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Russian Geographical Society is none other than President Vladimir Putin.¹ But Russian maps are not the only controversial ones. German map-makers too have been called out for displaying Ukrainian territory in ambiguous ways. Not only is it common for German maps to use Russian place names, but they also often depict Crimea, and sometimes Donbas, as disputed, or indeed as Russian territory. Some maps even show a land bridge to mainland Russia and none to the rest of Ukraine (Figure 1). Indeed, one recent investigation revealed that only 10 per cent of educational maps available on the German market showed Ukraine in its borders of 1991.²

Territorially ambivalent maps are no novelty to the Federal Republic. Until the 1970s, it was common to find weather maps, as well as home or school atlases, still depicting the German territories lost to Poland and the Soviet Union after the Potsdam Conference of 1945. This resulted in fantasy maps which featured both the German Reich, which ceased to exist in 1945, and the state of Israel, founded in 1948 (Figure 2). Whilst Poland's western expansion was thus not visually represented, the Soviet Union's post-Potsdam annexations were usually depicted, with the notable

¹Vlad Mykhnenko, 'Thermodynamic imperialism: the Kremlin's wet dreams of ejecting chaos and unbounding space', *Geographica Helvetica*, 78 (2023), pp.439–442.

²Elina Beketova, 'Behind the lines: "Mapaganda" and the cartographic war on Ukraine', *CEPA* (11 January 2024), available at: <https://cepa.org/article/behind-the-lines-mapaganda-and-the-cartographic-war-on-ukraine/>.



Figure 1. World map, Stiefel, 2015.



Figure 2. Home atlas, Bertelsmann, 1960.

exception of Kaliningrad. This left Poland as a rump state, albeit one that included the long obsolete ‘Polish corridor’ by Gdańsk. It was not until 1970, when the Bonn Republic under Chancellor Willy Brandt recognised Europe’s post-war borders, that such maps gradually began to disappear from German schools and television screens. As late as 1973, German state TV still showed the 1937 Eastern border alongside the post-1945 borders when reporting on political events that had nothing to do with Germany’s territoriality.³

The recognition of the Oder–Neiße line, which separates Poland and Germany today, was a crucial dimension of *Ostpolitik*, sometimes *Neue Ostpolitik* (new Eastern policy), a social-democrat policy which had first been outlined in the 1960s by Egon Bahr (1922–2015), minister under and advisor to West German Chancellor Willy Brandt and later party grandee. Its key aim was

³‘Die Sendung vom 5. September 1973’, *Heute Nachrichten*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTf84-PnahY&t=32s>.

to overcome West Germany's 1955 Hallstein doctrine, which had sought to isolate the German Democratic Republic (GDR) by non-recognition. It is often remembered as *Entspannungspolitik*, a West German version of détente. And indeed, it was first eyed with suspicion, then tolerated, and later endorsed by American foreign policymakers, chiefly Henry Kissinger, who would become a supporter and friend of Egon Bahr's. By 1973, the American press was referring to Bahr as 'Brandt's Kissinger',⁴ though Brandt himself preferred to call him 'my little Metternich'.⁵ Ultimately, the overlaps between Bahr's and Kissinger's version of détente 'turned out to be stronger than the frictions between them'.⁶

Ostpolitik's vectors differed from détente. The question of arms control, for instance, was absent from the West German policy. Instead, economic incentives were crucial, as its slogan *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade) illustrates. *Ostpolitik*, for which Willy Brandt would receive a Nobel Peace Prize in 1971, did not conclude with his chancellorship in 1974, nor did it end when the fall of the Berlin wall made its core rationale obsolete. It was extended to post-Soviet Russia by social-democrat and conservative-led coalitions. In the 1990s, key *Ostpolitiker* positioned themselves against NATO enlargement and later against US unilateralism. By the 2000s, it was defined by something which had initially been a sideshow, the collaboration with Moscow in the energy sector.

On 24 February 2022, when Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, Germany could hardly have looked less prepared. The country was the biggest European consumer of Russian gas and reliant on Russia for an estimated 55 per cent of its gas.⁷ It had no liquified natural gas terminal; a major German football team was sponsored by state-owned Russian gas giant Gazprom; and three out of five Germans did not want their government to deliver military aid to Ukraine.⁸ Not only was Berlin's defence spending low, but the chief of Germany's foreign intelligence service got caught by surprise and had to be evacuated from Kyiv.⁹ Three days after the invasion began, Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz, a social democrat, called for a *Zeitenwende* (literally a 'turn of eras' but better translated as 'turning point' or 'watershed'). A new foreign policy was needed for a time in which the Kremlin was trying to 'turn back the clock to the nineteenth century and the age of great powers'.¹⁰ Soon a search for domestic culprits began. It was swiftly found in *Ostpolitik's* fixation on Russia and its unwillingness to recognise Ukraine as an independent subject. Whilst *Süddeutsche Zeitung* bemoaned 'the price of misapprehension', *Deutsche Welle* lamented 'the shambles of *Ostpolitik*'.¹¹ Key figures within the Social Democratic Party (SPD) sought to salvage from

⁴Brandt's Kissinger', *New York Post* (10 October 1973).

⁵Interview with Gert Weisskirchen, July 2024

⁶Stephan Kieninger, 'A preponderance of stability: Henry Kissinger's concern over the dynamics of *Ostpolitik*', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 17 (2019), pp. 42–60 (p. 55).

⁷'Deutschlands riskante Abhängigkeit von Putins Gas', *Deutsche Welle* (27 January 2022), available at: {<https://www.dw.com/de/deutschlands-riskante-abha%CC%88ngigkeit-von-putins-gas/a-60553019>}.

⁸'Knapp drei von vier Deutschen befürchten Auswirkungen auf Deutschland durch einen russischen Angriff', *YouGov* (18 February 2022), available at: {<https://yougov.de/politics/articles/41115-knapp-drei-von-vier-deutschen-befurchten-auswirkung>}.

⁹'BND-Chef von Spezialeinheit aus der Ukraine gerettet', *Focus Online* (25 February 2025), available at: {https://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/ukraine-krise/praesident-des-bundesnachrichtendienstes-wurde-aus-hoechster-not-aus-der-ukraine-gerettet_id_59192174.html}.

¹⁰Bundesregierung, 'Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin', available at: {<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>}.

¹¹'Der Preis des Irrtums', *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (6 March 2023), available at: {<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/spd-ostpolitik-willy-brandt-egon-bahr-rolf-muetzenich-1.5763651>}; 'Scherbenhaufen *Ostpolitik*', *Deutsche Welle* (21 March 2022), available at: {<https://www.dw.com/de/russland-und-die-spd-scherbenhaufen-der-ostpolitik/a-61204291>}.

Bahr and Brandt what they could.¹² But to little avail. In October 2022, *Tagesspiegel* concluded that ‘Willy Brandt was yesterday’.¹³

Whilst the historic significance of *Ostpolitik* was debated amongst scholars in the 1990s,¹⁴ only few questioned its premises and politics. This began to change in the aftermath of Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia.¹⁵ After February 2022, *Ostpolitik* retained few supporters. Indeed, the lack of Western resolve it signalled was now sometimes seen to have laid the groundwork for Russia’s invasion.¹⁶ Whilst Serhii Plokhly accused Germany of ‘appeasement’, Timothy Snyder in an interview with *Die Zeit* attested *Ostpolitik* a colonial attitude towards Ukraine.¹⁷ The ‘dark side of *Ostpolitik*’, another critic held, was always to think in terms of spheres of influence, and thus to allow for great powers to erode the sovereignty of minor powers, but to hide this under an unreflective pacifism.¹⁸ Those who argued that *Ostpolitik* needed to be reignited were in the minority.¹⁹

But although there is some agreement that *Ostpolitik* has failed, it is less clear whether it has been abandoned. Bernhard Blumenau writes that Germany’s Atlanticism has been lastingly rebuilt.²⁰ Kotkin sees permanent change, too. Russia will no longer get Germany to play the role of its advocate ‘without fundamental altering its own political behaviour, and maybe its political system.’²¹ Others have questioned whether Berlin is following up on its *Zeitenwende* promises.²² Angela Stent writes that ‘Germany is unlikely to fully jettison its ties to Russia – ties that have been widely shaped by geography and history, particularly German responsibility for 26 million Soviet deaths during the Second World War and gratitude for the USSR having allowed Germany to reunite peacefully.’²³

This paper argues that whilst Germany’s Atlanticist revival has been significantly more robust since 2022 than in the period after the annexation of Crimea, there remain political forces that seek to reignite *Ostpolitik*. Not only has the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) promoted a return to *Ostpolitik*, but so has a new party, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), which combines traditional left socio-economic policies and anti-immigration sentiments with a hardline

¹²Michael Roth, ‘Michael Roth: SPD muss Egon Bahrs Ostpolitik weiterentwickeln’, available at: {<https://vorwaerts.de/international/michael-roth-spd-muss-egon-bahrs-ostpolitik-weiterentwickeln>}; ‘Das (wieder) umstrittene Erbe von Willy Brandts Ostpolitik’, *Willy Brandt Stiftung* (24 October 2022), available at: {<https://willy-brandt.de/aktuelles/audio-video/das-wieder-umstrittene-erbe-von-willy-brandts-ostpolitik-3/>}.

¹³‘Willy Brandt war gestern’, *Tagesspiegel* (19 October 2022), available at: {<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/meinung/willy-brandt-war-gestern-die-spd-setzt-auf-eine-neue-russlandpolitik-das-wird-der-partei-weh-tun-8771563.html>}.

¹⁴Gordon A. Craig, ‘Did Ostpolitik work? The path to German reunification’, *Foreign Affairs*, 73 (1994), pp. 162–7.

¹⁵Constanze Stelzenmüller, ‘Germany’s Russia question: A new Ostpolitik for Europe’, *Foreign Affairs*, 88 (2009), pp. 89–100.

¹⁶Franziska Davies, ‘Ende der Ostpolitik? Zur historischen Dimension der “Zeitenwende”’, BPB (6 March 2023) available at: {<https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/krieg-in-der-ukraine-2023/518833/ende-der-ostpolitik/>} Joachim Krause, ‘Germany’s “Ostpolitik” until Russia’s invasion of Ukraine’, in Stefan Hansen, Olha Husieva, and Kira Frankenthal (eds), *Russia’s War of Aggression against Ukraine: “Zeitenwende” for German Security Policy* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2023), pp. 199–154; Stefan Meister and Wilfried Jilge, ‘After Ostpolitik: A new Russia and Eastern Europe policy based on lessons from the past’, *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik* (April 2023), available at: {https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/DGAP_Analyse_2023_EN-02-After%20Ostpolitik_0.pdf}; Andreas Umland, ‘Germany’s Russia policy in light of the Ukraine conflict: Interdependence theory and Ostpolitik’, *Orbis*, 66 (2022), pp. 78–94.

¹⁷Serhii Plokhly, *The Russo-Ukrainian War* (London: Penguin, 2023), p. 146; ‘Die Ukrainer mussten immer wieder beweisen, dass sie eine Nation sind’, *Die Zeit* (3 March 2024), available at: {<https://www.zeit.de/2024/10/timothy-snyder-historiker-ukraine-geschichte-russland/komplettansicht>}.

¹⁸Krause, ‘Germany’s “Ostpolitik”’, pp. 119, 143.

¹⁹Hans Kundnani, ‘Why Ostpolitik is needed right now’ (11 July 2024), available at: {<https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/why-ostpolitik-is-needed-right-now-7645/>}.

²⁰Bernhard Blumenau, ‘Breaking with convention: *Zeitenwende* and the traditional pillars of German foreign policy’, *International Affairs*, 98 (2022), pp. 1895–1913 (p. 1900).

²¹Stephen Kotkin, ‘Five futures for Russia: And how America can prepare for whatever comes next’, *Foreign Affairs*, 103 (2024), pp. 64–83.

²²Peter Rough, ‘Germany’s new resolve on Russia is already flagging’, *Foreign Policy* (16 June 2022) available at: {<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/16/germany-scholz-zeitenwende-russia-ukraine-war-defense-security-bundeswehr-nato-military/>}.

²³Angela Stent, ‘Germany and Russia: Farewell to Ostpolitik?’, *Survival*, 64 (2022), pp. 27–38 (p. 28).

pro-Kremlin position. Even amongst some social democrats, Bahr's approach continues to resonate. But rather than gratitude for the removal of Soviet troops from East Germany in the early 1990s, it is the appeal of anti-Atlanticist realpolitik, rooted in the Cold War era but boosted by Germany's no to the 2003 Iraq War, which continues to attract Germans to *Ostpolitik*.

Methodologically, this paper draws on a survey of the German press (newspapers, popular books, and podcasts) in the period from February 2022 to November 2024 as well as interviews with a small number of key German politicians, particularly social democrats, conducted in Berlin in the summer of 2024.²⁴ The paper proceeds as follows. The next section explores the historic roots and trajectory of *Ostpolitik* and unpacks its relationship to great power politics. The following sections examine what happened since the rupture of 2022. I begin by discussing defence spending, military aid, and the end of Germany's energy dependence before moving on to the way in which the German political system has shifted since 2022. Here, I examine how political parties have repositioned themselves, how industry has reacted, and how the media and think-tank landscape have responded. Finally, I take stock of the remnants of *Ostpolitik* and its support amongst oppositional parties and the wider media sphere. I conclude that *Ostpolitik* is unlikely to disappear entirely as it expresses Berlin's long-standing desire (a) to engage with other major powers directly without having to consider the concerns of smaller powers, (b) to secure natural resources without moral constraints, and (c) to do so independently from Washington. Whilst *Ostpolitik* is not reducible to this geopolitical impulse, not least because it has transformed significantly over the last six decades, geopolitics played a defining role.

From *Ostpolitik* to *Zeitenwende*

Before 1945, German geopolitics was marked both by militarism and by the narrow pursuit of the national interest. But during the Cold War, when Germany was divided, these agendas split. Atlanticism, formulated most clearly by conservative Chancellor Konrad Adenauer as an unconditional alignment with the Atlantic alliance (also known as *Westbindung*), emerged first in the Federal Republic. Whilst Atlanticism allowed Germany to build up a large standing army and host NATO nuclear weapons on its territory, it did so precisely by denying a fully autonomous national interest. The social-democrat *Ostpolitik*, however, pursued a form of realpolitik in the 1970s which sought to establish a degree of independence from the Western alliance, but which also promoted de-escalation and de-securitisation (though without ever fully questioning NATO's deterrence posture). As ways of dealing with Moscow, they have constituted for decades the main poles of public and policy debate.²⁵

The roots of *Ostpolitik* can be found in a famous 1963 speech by Egon Bahr at Tutzing. Bahr had been driven by the realisation that although the ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU) was committed to reunification via a preamble in the German constitution, it had in fact resigned itself to permanent division.²⁶ He certainly realised that the Hallstein doctrine and any strategy of regime change in East Berlin were ineffectual. 'If it is true, and I believe it is true, that the zone cannot be wrested from the Soviet sphere of influence, then it follows that any policy aimed at directly overthrowing the regime there is hopeless.'²⁷ This was not the last time that Bahr would

²⁴ Interviews were conducted primarily with those who had direct contact with *Ostpolitik*. This group includes Wolfgang Thierse (SPD), Gert Weisskirchen (SPD), Markus Meckel (SPD), Petra Schwermann (Deutsch-Russisches Forum), Martin Hoffmann (formerly Petersburger Dialog). I also spoke to the foreign political speaker of the AfD Matthias Moosdorf and approached several politicians from Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, but to no avail. I am grateful for a brief exchange with Peter Brandt, son of Willy Brandt. I also spoke to one of Germany's most well-known critics of *Ostpolitik*, Marieluise Beck (Greens). Translations from German are mine.

²⁵ Jamie Gaskarth and Kai Oppermann, 'Clashing traditions: German foreign policy in a new era', *International Studies Perspectives*, 22 (2021), pp. 84–105 (p. 91).

²⁶ Egon Bahr, 'Das musst du erzählen': *Erinnerungen an Willy Brandt* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2013), p. 15.

²⁷ Egon Bahr, 'Wandel durch Annäherung', *Evangelische Akademie Tutzing* (15 July 1963), available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20110727071904/http://www.fes.de/archiv/adsd_neu/inhalt/stichwort/tutzing_rede.pdf.

speak of spheres of influences. The message of his talk was clear: it was high time for Bonn to normalise relations with the GDR and the wider East block by recognising the territorial settlement of 1945. Bahr believed that the key to such a normalisation lay in Moscow, which controlled the status of its satellites, particularly that of East Germany. Bahr did not speak of ‘change through trade’ yet but of ‘change through rapprochement’ (*Wandel durch Annäherung*). Trade was nonetheless present as an incentive with which he hoped to motivate Moscow. Although it was motivated by the German–German question, the mechanism through which *Ostpolitik* sought to achieve this thus rendered from its inception a ‘Kremlin first’ policy. It was also an attempt to develop independence from Bonn’s powerful ally in Washington, and an effort to use the Federal Republic’s economic power to promote political change at a time when Bonn’s political influence was restricted.

Bahr got a chance to put his ideas into practice when Willy Brandt became Chancellor in 1969. Within the span of a few years, the two men had enshrined *Ostpolitik* in a series of landmark treaties which established relations with the GDR, eased travel restrictions, and accepted the territorial settlement of Potsdam – without fully recognising the GDR. These treaties contributed to détente and thus to the conditions for the non-binding Helsinki Accords, commonly seen to have enabled political change in the Soviet bloc. Brandt, who had endured national socialism in exile, famously sunk to his knees in 1970 at the memorial to the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This was widely interpreted as a sign of German collective responsibility for the crimes of national socialism, although it was later noted that there should have been a gesture to the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, too. Bahr had not been the first to formulate an *Ostpolitik*. Conservative governments after 1945 too had tried to formulate an Eastern policy but had been too half-hearted, held back by the non-recognition of the GDR and Adenauer’s hardline anti-communism.

Although *Ostpolitik*’s main aim was to overcome the impasse of the Hallstein doctrine, it was the collaboration in the energy sector which proved its most lasting legacy. Its roots lie in the 1970 *Erdgas-Röhren-Vertrag* (gas pipeline contract), under which German companies such as Thyssen or Mannesmann delivered steel pipelines to the Soviet Union. The new infrastructure was financed by German banks and then repaid by the Soviet Union via the supply of cheap energy. After 1991, the rationale for *Ostpolitik* changed. Now, the idea was to use collaboration in the gas sector to encourage Russian democratisation and pacification, and thus a zone of peace and prosperity from Lisbon to Vladivostok. Bahr and Brandt were never able to demonstrate definitively that their policy had helped to end the Cold War. But the pipeline infrastructure built in the name of *Ostpolitik* proved a tangible legacy.

Bahr remained a fixture in German politics after his time in government; he was often interviewed by newspapers and public broadcasters and treated, much like his friend Henry Kissinger and the second SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (neither of whom were notable supporters of Ukraine), as an elder statesman and geopolitical oracle. Bahr was revered in his own party. Even after 1990, he retained an office in the SPD’s Willy-Brandt Haus where he, according to one MP, ‘indoctrinated every party leader’ via frequent meetings which Bahr was at liberty to request and in which he won over his interlocutors with his sharp intellect.²⁸ Indeed, erstwhile Foreign Minister and later President Frank-Walter Steinmeier has stated that he often met Bahr for a cigarette and sought his counsel.²⁹ For Steinmeier and many others in the party, Bahr became ‘Brandt’s voice from heaven.’³⁰

Bahr also continued to publish a series of best-selling books which sought to update *Ostpolitik* after the end of the Cold War. He argued in his 1998 *Deutsche Interessen* (German interests) that Germany should no longer act as Washington’s vassal state and pursue its national interest, in this case by vetoing NATO’s Eastern enlargement. He did not seem to contemplate that Russia might

²⁸ Interview with Markus Meckel, July 2024

²⁹ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, ‘Er war ein wahrer Friedenspolitiker’, in Peter Brandt, Hans-Joachim Gießmann, and Götz Neuneck (eds), ‘...aber eine Chance haben wir: Zum 100. Geburtstag von Egon Bahr (Bonn: Dietz, 2022 [2015]), pp. 21–6.

³⁰ Interview with Markus Meckel, July 2024.

constitute a threat to its neighbours, speaking of Moscow as a 'patron' in the post-Soviet space.³¹ Underneath *Ostpolitik's* loftier aim of a pan-European geopolitics, a cruder logic persisted. There was certainly never any 'principled rejection of spheres of influence' amongst the proponents of *Ostpolitik*.³² Five years later, Bahr risked a conflict with his friend Kissinger when he wrote another book, this time in support of Gerhard Schröder's *Nein* to the 2003 Iraq War. Now in a more confident tone, Bahr argued for a further 'emancipation' from the 'hegemon'. Russia, Bahr wrote, was 'needed' for the war on terror, at the time a mainstream view, and as a mediator, particularly in the Middle East and Central Asia. It was important, moreover, that 'Russia does not feel pushed away, is not neglected, and ... is welcome in Europe.'³³ It is difficult to overstate the extent to which the Schröder SPD's response to the Iraq crisis also vindicated other aspects of its foreign policy agenda such as the 'Russia first' policy. Iraq reinforced an unusual mix of hard-nosed realpolitik and doveishness which found expression in foreign minister Steinmeier's attempt in 2008 to hammer out a 'European *Ostpolitik*'.³⁴

Atlanticism had long been institutionalised in Germany via Cold War-era institutions like the Atlantik-Brücke or the German Marshall Fund. After the Cold War, *Ostpolitik* too found expression in networks such as the 1993 Deutsch-Russisches Forum and the 2001 Petersburger Dialog, the latter an influential lobby group set up by Schröder and Putin. The leader of Deutsch-Russisches Forum was SPD party grandee Matthias Platzeck, an ardent proponent of *Ostpolitik* and advocate of fully recognising Crimea as Russian.³⁵ *Ostpolitik* was also supported by the powerful Ost-Ausschuss der deutschen Wirtschaft (the German Eastern Business Association), which represents major German cooperation with business interests in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. By the 2000s, an influential network of politicians, business leaders, former Stasi spies, and advisors had emerged, who were benefiting personally from the business opportunities that had arisen from *Ostpolitik*. The key figure in this 'Moscow connection' was former Chancellor turned lobbyist Schröder.³⁶ Controversially, he had in 2005 accepted a post with Nord Stream AG, of which the Russian state-owned company Gazprom was the majority stakeholder, soon after losing the federal election to Angela Merkel. The former Chancellor wrote in his memoirs that 'Europe's hunger for energy cannot be satisfied without Russia's energy riches.'³⁷ Although the fact that Schröder was effectively on the Kremlin payroll harmed the image of *Ostpolitik*, it was nonetheless continued. Even the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine did not lead to a fundamental change of course.³⁸

Bahr never changed his views in light of Russia's assertiveness. Shortly before his death in 2015, he travelled to Moscow to argue for lenience towards Putin and for Germany to play a mediating role between East and West. He dismissed the critics of Putin's increasingly autocratic rule by stating that democracy was simply not a Russian tradition.³⁹ When Bahr died in 2015, Schröder took

³¹Egon Bahr, *Deutsche Interessen: Streitschrift zu Macht, Sicherheit und Außenpolitik* (Munich: Karl Blessing Verlag, 1998), p. 109.

³²Liana Fix, 'Between guilt and responsibility: The legacy of spheres in Germany', *The Washington Quarterly*, 45 (2022), pp. 75–92 (p. 81).

³³Egon Bahr, *Der deutsche Weg: Selbstverständlich und normal* (Munich: Karl Blessing Verlag, 2003), p. 144.

³⁴'Auf dem Weg zu einer europäischen Ostpolitik: Rede von Bundesaußenminister Steinmeier anlässlich einer Podiumsdiskussion bei der Willy-Brandt-Stiftung', Auswärtiges Amt (4 March 2008), available at: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/080304-bm-ostpolitik/219748>.

³⁵Matthias Platzeck, *Wir brauchen eine neue Ostpolitik: Russland als Partner* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2020).

³⁶Reinhard Bingener and Markus Wehner, *Die Moskauer-Netzwerk und Deutschlands Weg in die Abhängigkeit* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2023).

³⁷Gerhard Schröder, *Entscheidungen: Mein Leben in der Politik* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2007), p. 463.

³⁸Tuomas Forsberg, 'From Ostpolitik to "frostpolitik"? Merkel, Putin and German foreign policy towards Russia', *International Affairs*, 92 (2016), pp. 21–42; Marco Siddi, 'German foreign policy towards Russia in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis: A new Ostpolitik?', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68 (2016), pp. 665–77.

³⁹Bahr und Gorbatschow fordern deutsche Eisbrecher-Mission, *Der Spiegel* (22 July 2015), available at: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/russland-egon-bahr-und-mikhail-gorbatschow-fordern-neue-ostpolitik-a-1044774.html>.

to the pages of the country's leading tabloid to call Bahr a visionary who had advised him through-out his years in office.⁴⁰ By the 2020s, Schröder's efforts had resulted in the construction of Nord Stream 2, a second controversial gas pipeline which connected Russia and Germany via the Baltic, again bypassing Poland and Ukraine.

Ostpolitik always had its critics. In earlier years, these included conservatives who wanted Bonn to retain the Hallstein doctrine. Journalists too posed difficult questions, with Brandt being confronted in 1973 about a growing dependence on Soviet energy.⁴¹ In the 1980s, *Ostpolitik* fell into disrepute when leading social democrats sided with the Jaruzelski regime rather than with the Polish trade union movement Solidarność.⁴² They wanted stability in the Soviet sphere of influence. But this did not harm the larger project, with large parts of the West German media landscape continuing to support the social democrat policy. This was the case even after both Brandt and Bahr proved to be initial sceptics of reunification when its prospect finally arrived in 1989. Germans continued to see *Ostpolitik* as a crucial step towards reunification, political change in Moscow, and thus even the end of the Cold War.

In the 2000s voices grew louder which saw in Schröder's Nord Stream project a powerful tool for Moscow to blackmail former Soviet satellites and republics, chiefly Poland and Ukraine. And yet Schröder's successor Angela Merkel left the pipelines untouched, allowing German industry to reap the benefits of cheap Russian energy. Ultimately, *Ostpolitik* was still regarded as a success story, and the political establishment held on to *Wandel durch Handel*, even though parts of the German press and think-tank landscape had begun to change their tune on Russia.⁴³ Even the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine did not bring fundamental change at the political level. Rather than a comprehensive sanctions package or significant military aid to Ukraine, Berlin pursued diplomacy with Russia. Like other leading politicians, Angela Merkel repeated Bahr's famous mantra that 'security in Europe was only possible with, not without Russia.'⁴⁴ The Minsk agreement may have failed, but domestic audiences were swayed. In 2021, the conservative daily *Die Welt* applauded Merkel for continuing in the tradition of *Ostpolitik*, which the newspaper celebrated as a German version of Henry Kissinger's realpolitik.⁴⁵

It was in this context, then, that Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech of 27 February 2022 appeared to offer the very thing which it proclaimed, a turning of eras. Scholz reiterated not just Germany's support for a far-reaching sanctions package but promised the purchase of new military equipment at a cost of over €100bn, bringing Berlin in line, for the foreseeable future at least, with its pledge, made at a NATO summit in Wales in 2014, to raise military spending above 2 per cent of GDP. 'President Putin should not underestimate our resolve to defend every square metre of NATO territory together with our allies!', Scholz exclaimed.⁴⁶ Germany would soon announce the delivery of heavy arms to Ukraine and support for an European Union ban on Russian oil. The country had already suspended the contentious Nord Stream 2 pipeline on the eve of the invasion.

⁴⁰ Gerhard Schröder, 'Egon Bahr war ein Visionär wie Willy Brandt', *Bild* (21 August 2015), available at: {<https://www.bild.de/politik/inland/egon-bahr/altkanzler-schroeder-zum-tod-der-spd-legende-42262708.bild.html>}.

⁴¹ Interview: Ich hoffe, wir bekommen mehr Erdgas und Öl, *Der Spiegel* (27 May 1973), available at: {<https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ich-hoffe-wir-bekommen-mehr-erdgas-und-oel-a-11956035-0002-0001-0000-000041986672?context=issue>}.

⁴² Solidarity faults a visit by Brandt', *New York Times* (10 December 1985); Thomas Urban, *Verstelter Blick: Die deutsche Ostpolitik* (Berlin: editionFoto.Tapeta, 2022).

⁴³ Felix Ciutã and Ian Klinke, 'Lost in conceptualization: Reading the "new Cold War" with critical geopolitics', *Political Geography*, 29 (2010), pp. 323–32.

⁴⁴ 'Merkel gibt Russland Schuld an Nato-Aufrüstung', *Die Welt* (7 July 2016), available at: {<https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article156868637/Merkel-gibt-Russland-Schuld-an-Nato-Aufruestung.html>}.

⁴⁵ 'Merkel befolgt die Regeln der brandtschen Ostpolitik – und hat Erfolg', *Die Welt* (18 November 2021), available at: {<https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article235141258/Belarus-Krise-Merkel-befolgt-die-Regeln-der-brandtschen-Ostpolitik.html>}.

⁴⁶ Bundesregierung, 'Policy statement by Olaf Scholz'.

Germany's new stance on Russia found itself on the cover of *Time* magazine, *The Economist*, and other international media outlets. *Zeitenwende* was voted 'word of the year' in December 2022.⁴⁷

Atlanticist reformation

In the months and years that followed Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech, Germany became a major hub for over 1 million Ukrainian refugees. Whilst Deutsch-Russisches Forum lost its *Ostpolitiker* Matthias Platzeck and promised to depoliticise its activities, Schröder and Putin's flagship project Petersburger Dialog came under such public pressure that it was wound up.⁴⁸ Berlin also became a major donor of military hardware to Kyiv. By August 2024, it had given 10.6 billion euros to Ukraine, which made it the second-largest donor after the United States.⁴⁹ Public opinion, long an obstacle for a more hard-nosed policy on Ukraine, proved malleable. Whereas only 31 per cent of the German population backed the delivery of heavy military aid to Kyiv in March 2022, 56 per cent supported it only one month later.⁵⁰ Germany's 2023 security strategy calls Russia 'the most significant threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area.'⁵¹ In June 2023, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius announced that Berlin would place 4,000 soldiers in Lithuania to boost NATO deterrence and defence, the first permanent troop presence in Eastern Europe since the Second World War. In August 2024, construction on the new German base began.⁵²

The German economy also managed to wean itself off Russian gas with the help of a gigantic Energy Act, which cost 200 billion euros in compensation to businesses and consumers (and which dwarfed the military aid to Ukraine). A Liquefied Natural Gas terminal was completed at Wilhelmshaven; Gazprom Germania was nationalised. Even when investigative journalists found evidence that the sabotage of the (part-German tax money-funded) Nord Stream pipeline network in September 2022 may have been orchestrated by Ukraine,⁵³ the German government did not change its approach. Scholz simply noted that 'we have learned our lesson': Germany should have diversified its energy supply a long time ago.⁵⁴ The German Eastern Business Association froze relations with Russia and supported the sanction regime. Its new chairwoman Cathrina Claas-Mühlhäuser emphasised that Poland and the Czech Republic were now more important trade partners than Russia, and that even Ukraine was an 'attractive market.'⁵⁵

A glance at the party landscape reveals the degree to which *Zeitenwende* has been supported by the country's major parties, at least those parties with roots in Cold War West Germany. Key politicians in the ruling SPD, such as party co-leader Lars Klingbeil and Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee Michael Roth have backed *Zeitenwende*. Even President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a

⁴⁷GfDS wählt "Zeitenwende" zum Wort des Jahres 2022, *GfDS* (9 December 2022), available at: {<https://gfds.de/wort-des-jahres-2022/>}.

⁴⁸Interviews with Petra Schwermann and Martin Hoffmann, July 2024.

⁴⁹Ukraine support tracker, *IfW Kiel*, available at (accessed 15 August 2024): {<https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>}.

⁵⁰Mehrheit unterstützt Lieferung schwerer Waffen an Ukraine / In der Krise: Viel Zustimmung für Baerbock und Habeck, *ZDF Politbarometer* (29 April 2022), available at: {<https://presseportal.zdf.de/pressemitteilung/zdf-politbarometer-april-ii-2022>}.

⁵¹The Federal Government, Integrated Security for Germany, National Security Strategy, available at {<https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf>}, p. 22.

⁵²Lithuania begins construction of base for German troops near Russian border, *Euractiv* (20 August 2024), available at: {<https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/lithuania-begins-construction-of-base-for-german-troops-near-russian-border/>}.

⁵³All the evidence points to Kyiv, *Der Spiegel* (26 August 2023), available at: {<https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/investigating-the-attack-on-nord-stream-all-the-clues-point-toward-kyiv-a-124838c7-992a-4d0e-9894-942d4a665778>}.

⁵⁴Olaf Scholz, 'The global Zeitenwende: How to avoid a new Cold War in a multipolar era', *Foreign Affairs* (Jan./Feb. 2023), pp. 22–38 (p. 31).

⁵⁵Neue Ost-Ausschuss-Chefin: "Russland zu Nordkorea zu machen wäre nicht im europäischen Interesse", *Der Spiegel* (8 March 2024), available at: {<https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/ost-ausschuss-neue-chefin-ueber-einen-eu-beitritt-der-ukraine-wiederaufbau-und-russland-a-338b9021-2618-4228-87a0-264255b4cfbc>}.

vocal proponent of *Ostpolitik* who was much criticised for a photo which showed him physically close with Russian foreign minister Lavrov at the Munich Security Conference in 2016, has apologised for his misapprehension of the Ukraine question.⁵⁶ Chancellor Scholz has stuck to *Zeitenwende*, citing Timothy Snyder in a 2024 piece in *The Economist* and promising to ‘turn the Bundeswehr into Europe’s strongest conventional force’.⁵⁷ His defence minister Boris Pistorius has remained a vocal Ukraine hawk, admired by Germany’s Atlanticist think-tankers. But as we will see in the following section, there are remnants of *Ostpolitik* in the SPD, subject of much criticism from the three main Atlanticist parties.

The Greens, the Free Democrats, and the Christian Democrats are almost unequivocally Atlanticist on the matter of Ukraine. It is in their ranks that Germany’s loudest Ukraine hawks can be found, MPs such as Anton Hofreiter (Greens), Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann (Free Democrats), and Roderich Kiesewetter (CDU). Indeed, the Greens had their *Zeitenwende* not in 2022 but in 1999 when they abandoned pacifism over the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia. By the mid-2000s, then in opposition, the party had begun to form an opposition to *Ostpolitik* on ethical grounds. The Free Democrats too have remembered their Cold War Atlanticist roots, despite a small number of senior doubters in their ranks. Green and FDP parliamentarians have taken to the Ukrainian press to demand direct involvement of NATO forces in Ukraine.⁵⁸ Key Kremlin-friendly politicians in the CDU such as Willy Wimmer, Lothar de Maizière, and Peter Gauweiler have retired from parliamentary politics. Others, such as Markus Söder, have changed their line or, like Michael Kretschmer, have been sidelined in the national party. After a moment of ambivalence in which he had opposed the SWIFT ban against Russian banks,⁵⁹ current conservative party leader and possible Chancellor in 2025 Friedrich Merz has established himself firmly in the Atlanticist camp.

Whereas different medial interpretations on the annexation of Crimea had circulated in 2014, the German newspaper landscape was almost unanimous in 2022: major newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Bild*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Die Zeit*, as well as popular news programmes *Tagesschau*, *ZDF Heute*, and *RTL Aktuell* all blamed Russia alone for the war. As a study of the media coverage during the crucial months of February through May 2024 has shown, there was also broad agreement on the need for sanctions over diplomacy, with *Der Spiegel* – long a bastion of *Ostpolitik* – the only slight outlier amongst the major outlets.⁶⁰ Little changed in 2023 and 2024.

In the 2010s and arguably even until the 2022 invasion, Germany’s wider media landscape had been populated, if never entirely dominated, by what are known as *Putin-Versteher* (Putin apologists). Amongst the most notorious *Putin-Versteher* were the journalist Gabriele Krone-Schmalz, author of best-selling books such as the 2017 *Ice Age: Why Russia Is Being Demonised and Why This Is So Dangerous*, and the think-tanker turned energy lobbyist Alexander Rahr, who had written a Putin biography so flattering that he received an invitation to the Kremlin.⁶¹ In November 2023, it was revealed that Hubert Seipel, another Putin biographer, and author of the 2021 *Putin’s*

⁵⁶ Frank-Walter Steinmeier räumt Fehler in seiner Russland-Politik ein, *Die Zeit* (4 April 2022), available at: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2022-04/frank-walter-steinmeier-fehler-russland-ukraine>.

⁵⁷ Olaf Scholz on why Vladimir Putin’s brutal imperialism will fail, *The Economist* (23 May 2023), available at: <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2024/05/23/olaf-scholz-on-why-vladimir-putins-brutal-imperialism-will-fail>.

⁵⁸ German politicians suggest NATO shoot down Russian drones over Ukraine, *Euromaidanpress* (11 May 2024), available at: <https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/05/11/german-politicians-suggests-nato-shoot-down-russian-drones-over-ukraine/>.

⁵⁹ Merz: Swift-Ausschluss Russlands wäre eine Atombombe für Kapitalmärkte, *Handelsblatt* (16 January 2022), available at: <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/zahlungssystem-merz-swift-ausschluss-russlands-waere-eine-atombombe-fuer-kapitalmaerkte/27979250.html>.

⁶⁰ Marcus Maurer, Jörg Häföler, and Pablo Jost, ‘Analyse: Die Qualität der Medienberichterstattung über Russlands Krieg gegen die Ukraine’, BPB (5 October 2023), available at: <https://www.bpb.de/themen/europa/ukraine-analysen/nr-289/541402/analyse-die-qualitaet-der-medienberichterstattung-ueber-russlands-krieg-gegen-die-ukraine/>.

⁶¹ Gabriele Krone-Schmalz, *Eiszeit: Wie Russland dämonisiert wird und warum das so gefährlich ist* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2017); Alexander Rahr, *Vladimir Putin: Der “Deutsche” im Kreml* (Munich: Universitas, 2000).

Macht: Warum Europa Russland braucht (Putin's power: Why Europe needs Russia), had received full access to Putin and €600,000 from Moscow.⁶² He joined a long list of Germans whom one international news outlet noted had been 'played by Moscow'.⁶³ Many of the key intellectuals and politicians who have propagated a cruder *Ostpolitik*, one that demands the ceasing of military aid to Ukraine and the reinstatement of Nord Stream, have disappeared from German political talk shows, with the notable exception of Sahra Wagenknecht.

In the late 2000s, it had been people like Rahr who had given the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), arguably Germany's foremost foreign policy think-tank, the nickname 'Rapallo-Fraktion'.⁶⁴ Today, DGAP has a more firmly Atlanticist image which it carefully curates. In 2022, it launched a new 'action group *Zeitenwende*', a vocal advocacy group for higher defence spending and military aid to Ukraine. The Munich Security Conference too, currently chaired by Angela Merkel's former foreign policy lead Christopher Heusgen, launched a '*Zeitenwende* on tour' series of events in 2022, which aims to promote the new policy to Germany's civic society.⁶⁵ DGAP's English-language *Berlinsideout* is one of a whole range of Atlanticist podcasts to have emerged since the invasion began. Others include the ironically named *Ostauschuss der Salonkolumnisten* and the weekly magazine Stern's *Ukraine, die Lage*. Two public broadcasters, NDR and MDR, host similar podcasts, *Streitkräfte und Strategien*, and *Was tun Herr General?*. There are more.

This new Atlanticist landscape serves as an exact inversion of the discourses of the *Putin-Versteher* which dominated the German media for so long. It is not uncommon to hear a Reaganite interpretation of the end of the Cold War, previously confined to the fringes of the German political debate, a call for direct NATO engagement on the battlefield in Ukraine, or a passionate endorsement of cluster munitions. Russia's war is typically framed as genocidal and not infrequently compared to the Nazi invasions of Czechoslovakia or Poland. The world is seen as a binary struggle between the forces of democracy and autocracy. The threat of nuclear escalation is habitually played down in this discursive formation. NATO should offer membership to Ukraine sooner rather than later. Scholz's SPD, though not its coalition partners, is criticised for continuing *Ostpolitik* by other means. Counterpositions are discussed and called out, but those who promote such views do not appear on the podcasts themselves. In this, then, the new digital Atlanticism mimics the debate on X (formerly Twitter), where Atlanticists have dominated German coverage of the war. But it also has undeniable neoconservative undertones.

The popular non-fiction book market too has seen a flurry of Atlanticist books on the Ukraine war (Figure 3). Defence expert Carlo Masala, a vocal promoter of higher defence spending on the nation's talk shows, argues in a 2023 book that the *Bundeswehr* needs to be 'woke und wehrhaft' (woke and able to resist), a motto which also finds itself on T-shirts sold by the German tank museum in Munster.⁶⁶ The problem with Schröder's *Ostpolitik*, he is never too tired to emphasise, is that it abandoned deterrence. The journalist Sabine Adler writes, echoing Timothy Snyder, that the social democrats suffered from a colonial attitude towards Ukraine in the years before the war.⁶⁷ She too emphasises that the soft power of *Ostpolitik* was only ever possible because of

⁶²Hubert Seipel, *Putin's Macht: Warum Europa Russland braucht* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2021); 'Top German journalist received €600,000 from Putin ally, leak reveals', *The Guardian* (14 November 2023), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/14/german-journalist-putin-hubert-seipel>).

⁶³'12 Germans who got played by Putin', *Politico* (5 May 2022), available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/blame-germany-russia-policy/>).

⁶⁴Interview with anonymous DGAP employee, 2009

⁶⁵'Zeitenwende on tour', *Munich Security Conference*, available at: <https://securityconference.org/zeitenwende/alle-events/>).

⁶⁶Carlo Masala, *Bedingt abwehrbereit: Deutschlands Schwäche in der Zeitenwende* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2023); 'T-shirt "woke und wehrhaft", kobalt blau, unisex', *Deutsches Panzermuseum Munster*, available at: <https://merchandise.daspanzermuseum.de/t-shirts/t-shirt-woke-wehrhaft-kobalt-blau-unisex.html>).

⁶⁷Sabine Adler, *Die Ukraine und wir: Deutschlands Versagen und die Lehren für die Zukunft* (München: Ch. Links, 2022), p. 105.



Figure 3. Key Atlanticist books published in 2022/3.

credible deterrence, reflected in West German defence spending, which was over 3 per cent of GDP under Brandt. It is surprising, she writes, that a post-war generation of German politicians ‘only seem to remember [Germany’s] guilt towards Moscow’, not towards Ukraine or Poland.⁶⁸ The legacy of Rapallo and Ribbentrop are deliberately ignored, she suggests. Here, too, she lashes out at Bahr:

Bahr’s words make it clear that Putin is not the only one who remains attached to spheres of influence thinking. The additional secret protocol of the Hitler–Stalin Pact, which only became known after the fall of the Iron Curtain, spoke of ‘spheres of interest’. Are those who criticise NATO’s eastward expansion today, who do not want to allow sovereign states to freely choose their alliance, actually aware that they are still stuck in this totalitarian thinking in spheres of interest?⁶⁹

Like the other Atlanticists, Sabine Fischer, Senior Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), argues in her book for the complete liberation of Ukraine’s territory, including Crimea. She too finds German memory work too focused on the Nazi crimes in Russia rather than those committed in Ukraine.⁷⁰

Politicians too have chimed in on the book market. The conservative parliamentarian Norbert Röttgen argues for a new Marshall Plan for Ukraine.⁷¹ Free democrat Marie-Agnes Strack Zimmermann wants Germany to be woken from its post-geopolitical slumber to a struggle between democracy and autocracy.⁷² Stefanie Babst, who has worked in leading positions at NATO,

⁶⁸ Adler, *Die Ukraine und wir*, p. 102.

⁶⁹ Adler, *Die Ukraine und wir*, p. 111.

⁷⁰ Sabine Fischer, *Die chauvinistische Bedrohung: Russlands Kriege und Europas Antworten* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2023), p. 228.

⁷¹ Norbert Röttgen, *Nie wieder hilflos! Ein Manifest in Zeiten des Krieges* (Munich: DTV, 2022), p. 102.

⁷² Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, *Streitbar: Was Deutschland jetzt lernen muss* (Munich: DTV, 2022).

too evokes such a global ideological struggle when she calls for a new strategy of ‘roll back’.⁷³ ‘It obviously never occurred to anyone’, she writes, ‘that the idea of “change through trade”, formulated by Egon Bahr in 1963 as part of détente, never met any fertile ground in Putin’s Russia.’⁷⁴

Many of the books that have appeared since the invasion have didactic titles which emphasise Germany’s ‘failure’ and ‘weakness’. Berlin must learn if it does not want to look as ‘helpless’, as it did in 2022. The covers of many of these books feature the authors’ faces, a practice commonplace when the author is a media personality. But there is clearly an affective politics at work here too, with many an author looking solemnly and perhaps a little accusingly at the reader. The new Atlanticists are finding receptive audiences in Germany. When Lithuanian warnings that Russia may be looking to invade an Eastern NATO member in the near to mid-future were reported in November 2023,⁷⁵ leading German think-tanks soon aired similar fears.⁷⁶ Ultimately, the story was picked up by the minister of defence,⁷⁷ even though other experts questioned the validity of the claims made. This highlights that the geopolitical threat perception of Germany’s Eastern NATO allies is no longer downplayed or ignored, at least in some corners of Berlin.

Many of the claims made and analogies used in the new Atlanticist discourse would have seemed out of place in the pre-2022 German media landscape. And it is not just that the political landscape has shifted in its entirety since the Russian invasion but rather that this seismic shift has been accompanied by a polarisation of the debate. Although Chancellor Scholz has at times sought to find a middle ground on Ukraine, there are few others in the political and media landscape who hold a centre position, thus rendering him a constant target of criticism from both sides. This becomes clearer when we examine the discourse of those who hope to revive *Ostpolitik*.

The counter-reformation

Ukraine hardliners have bemoaned that Germany’s Atlanticist moment was too fleeting and that Olaf Scholz’s government only ever moved under pressure from key NATO allies. Not only did Berlin deliver Leopard tanks only once Washington agreed to send its own main battle tanks, it refused to send any Taurus cruise missiles. Thus far, there has not been enough political will to exempt the defence budget from the debt break (*Schuldenbremse*), which re-districts budget deficits. Most crucially, perhaps, Scholz did not commit to a Ukrainian victory on the battlefield, preferring instead a more defensive posture, namely that Russia *should not win*.⁷⁸ Not only has the Chancellor opposed the use of NATO-donated missile systems inside Russian territory, Scholz was also in November 2024 the first Western leader in two years to speak to Putin over the phone. Whatever may have motivated the Chancellor in this reluctance to fully embrace the Atlanticist position, it is mirrored by those parts of the political spectrum which have been reluctant to move since February 2022 or which have outright refused to do so.

Although it is correct that Germany’s main news outlets are more firmly Atlanticist than they were after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, some newspapers have remained NATO-sceptic and Kremlin-friendly. These include new right newspapers such as *Junge Freiheit* or *Preußische Allgemeine Zeitung*, and former East German dailies *Berliner Zeitung* and *Neues*

⁷³Stefanie Babst, *Sehenden Auges: Mut zum strategischen Kurswechsel* (Munich: DTV, 2023), p. 242.

⁷⁴Babst, *Sehenden Auges*, p. 143.

⁷⁵Lithuanian FM says Russia will attack Europe “maybe in 10 years, maybe in five”, *LRT* (21 November 2023), available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2129855/lithuanian-fm-says-russia-will-attack-europe-maybe-in-10-years-maybe-in-five>).

⁷⁶Christian Mölling and Torben Schütz, ‘Preventing the next war’, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik (17 November 2023), available at: <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/preventing-next-war-edina-iii>).

⁷⁷Verteidigungsminister Pistorius warnt vor Putins Angriff: Wir haben “fünf bis acht Jahre”, *Bild Online* (17 December 2023), available at: <https://www.bild.de/politik/inland/politik-inland/verteidigungsminister-pistorius-warnt-vor-putins-angriff-wir-haben-fuenf-bis-ach-86458222.bild.html>).

⁷⁸Benjamin Tallis and Julian Stöckle, ‘Who’s afraid of (Ukraine’s) victory?’, *Internationale Politik Quarterly* (26 May 2023), available at: <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/whos-afraid-ukraines-victory>).

Deutschland, the latter the erstwhile mouthpiece of the East German Communist Party. Further NATO-sceptic publications are the gender critical feminist magazine *Emma* and the conspiracy theory magazine *Compact*. It has proven difficult, moreover, to restrict access to Kremlin-funded *RT* and *Sputnik* news websites.⁷⁹ A new network, the Eurasien Gesellschaft, has emerged since the invasion to provide a hub for Kremlin-friendly views and events that have become difficult to articulate within established organisations and media outlets. Deutsch-Russisches Forum remains active, though with significant budget restraints.⁸⁰

Whilst it is not easy to ascertain the support that *Ostpolitik* still retains in military circles, it is noteworthy that there are vocal critics of Atlanticism amongst high-ranking former military officers. This includes Vice-Admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach, now also a politician for a new right-wing party called Werteunion, and the retired General Harald Kujat, former Chief of Staff of the German Armed Forces and Chairman of NATO Military Committee. Amongst German intellectuals who have spoken out against military aid and for peace talks with Putin are the prominent feminist Alice Schwarzer and the novelist Juli Zeh. The Frankfurt School philosopher Jürgen Habermas and the filmmaker Werner Herzog too have expressed their ambivalence about the Atlanticist storyline. Not all post-2022 books on German foreign policy are Atlanticist. Those actively involved in German diplomacy during the Merkel years penned more nuanced books which sought, for obvious reasons, to deflect blame for Germany's Russia policy.⁸¹ Of course, books appeared too – even after February 2022 – that supported the old *Ostpolitik* line.⁸² But these were working very much against the grain of a new consensus.

Those who continue with *Ostpolitik* today hold on to the idea that *Ostpolitik* and Gorbachev's reforms brought the Cold War to an end. They reject all direct NATO involvement and are often opposed to military aid, too. Whilst some see the war as co-produced by Russia and NATO, others view it as provoked by NATO. *Zeitenwende*, in their view, amounts to virtue signalling which overlooks the danger of nuclear escalation. Here, too, historical analogies taken from the repertoire of German history are at play.⁸³ Three oppositional parties are opposed to *Zeitenwende*, though to varying degrees. Founded in January 2024, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) has risen on a platform of offering a nation-based and anti-immigration socialism. It is also sought to appeal to East Germany's Russophile electorate. Like the vast majority of AfD MPs, BSW boycotted Volodymyr Zelenskyy's June 2024 speech in the Bundestag. BSW is now the most obvious heir to *Ostpolitik*. To quote from its party manifesto:

Our foreign policy follows in the tradition of Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who opposed thinking and acting in the logic of the Cold War with a policy of détente, balancing interests and international cooperation.⁸⁴

Party executive and foreign political lead Michael Lüders applauds Bahr's *Ostpolitik* in a recent book precisely for its political pragmatism, its willingness to separate out ethical considerations from questions of interest.⁸⁵ He blames NATO for the war and describes the invasion as Washington's

⁷⁹ 'YouTube und TikTok sperren weitere Accounts russischer Staatsmedien', *RND* (7 March 2024), available at: <https://www.rnd.de/politik/youtube-und-tiktok-sperren-weitere-accounts-russischer-staatsmedien-IHSHEIQWWVCQJOLAZO766N7HN4.html>.

⁸⁰ Interview with Martin Hoffmann, July 2024.

⁸¹ Christoph Heusgen, *Führung und Verantwortung: Angela Merkels Außenpolitik und Deutschlands künftige Rolle* (Munich: Siedler, 2023); Rüdiger von Fritsch, *Zeitenwende: Putins Krieg und die Folgen* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2022).

⁸² Daniela Dahn, *Im Krieg verlieren auch die Sieger: Nur Frieden kann gewonnen werden* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2022); Michael Lüders, *Moral über alles? Warum sich Werte und nationale Interessen selten vertragen* (Leipzig: Goldmann, 2023).

⁸³ Maximilian Tkocz and Holger Stritzel, 'Articulating change and responsibility: Identity, memory, and the use of historical narratives in German parliamentary debates on Russia's invasion of Ukraine', *German Politics* [online first], available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2023.2252765>.

⁸⁴ 'Unser Parteiprogramm', Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (2024), available at: https://bsw-vg.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/BSW_Partieprogramm.pdf.

⁸⁵ Lüders, *Moral über alles?*, p. 243.

'gift from God'.⁸⁶ Sahra Wagenknecht herself has praised Gerhard Schröder for understanding 'the importance of ensuring the flow of affordable pipeline gas'.⁸⁷ At the European parliamentary elections of 2024, BSW won 6.2 per cent of the vote. Key figures in Die Linke, out of which BSW emerged in early 2024, continue to view Bahr's realpolitik in a positive light,⁸⁸ although the party's internal divisions on the matter have made it difficult for a consistent policy to emerge.

The AfD, which won 15.9 per cent of Germany's vote at the June 2024 election, also holds Russophile positions. Although the German far right's leading intellectuals Karlheinz Weißmann and Götz Kubitschek have publicly disagreed on their response to Ukraine,⁸⁹ the party holds a consistent position on the war. When Zelenskyy spoke in the Bundestag, only 4 out of 76 AfD parliamentarians remained in the room.⁹⁰ The party wants Germany to balance between its commitments to Washington and Moscow. It sees itself as a 'party of peace' in a multipolar order. It pushes for a European security architecture defined by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), not by NATO. The party has since the annexation of Crimea been committed to ending the sanctions against Russia. It has also promised to end US military presence in Europe and nuclear sharing. Its party manifesto for the 2024 European parliamentary election sets out its Russia policy as follows:

Russia's geostrategic position, with its resulting historical and economic ties, especially with Germany, makes necessary the use of diplomatic means to work towards ending the war and thus ensure peaceful German–Russian relations. For decades, Russia has been a reliable supplier and guarantor of affordable energy supplies, which is the Achilles heel of the German economy due to our energy-intensive industry. To restore undisturbed trade with Russia, economic sanctions against Russia will need to be lifted and the Nord Stream pipelines repaired.⁹¹

For years, AfD parliamentarians appeared on Kremlin-funded TV station RT. Some have entertained links to Russian hawks like Sergey Karaganov; others are praised by neo-fascists like Alexander Dugin.⁹² More recently, their party co-leader Tino Chrupalla accepted an invitation to the Russian embassy in May 2023 to commemorate the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany.⁹³ Since February 2022, AfD has opposed military aid to Ukraine. In 2024, it was reported that two leading AfD politicians, including the party's lead candidates for the European parliamentary election Maximilian Krah and Petr Bystron, stand accused of having been on the Kremlin payroll.⁹⁴ The party's foreign policy lead has described the AfD's policy as 'almost identical' to Bahr's *Ostpolitik*, despite the different geopolitical context.⁹⁵

⁸⁶Lüders, *Moral über alles?*, p. 191.

⁸⁷Sahra Wagenknecht, 'Interview: Condition of Germany', *New Left Review*, 146 (Mar./Apr. 2024), available at: <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii146/articles/sahra-wagenknecht-condition-of-germany>.

⁸⁸Gregor Gysi, 'Peace is a human right', *CIRSD* (Spring 2023), available at: <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-spring-2023—issue-no23/peace-is-a-human-right>.

⁸⁹Karlheinz Weißmann, 'Die deutsche Position', *Junge Freiheit* (9 April 2022) available at: <https://jungefreiheit.de/debatte/forum/2022/deutschland-ukraine/>; Götz Kubitschek, 'Ersatznationalismus', *Sezession* (June 2022) available at: <https://sezession.de/65941/ersatznationalismus>.

⁹⁰'AfD und BSW boykottieren Selenskyj-Rede im Bundestag', *Die Welt* (11 June 2024), available at: <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article251968236/AfD-und-BSW-boykottieren-Selenskyj-Rede-im-Bundestag.html>.

⁹¹Alternative für Deutschland, *Europawahl Programm 2024*, available at https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023-11-16_-_AfD-Europawahlprogramm-2024_-_web.pdf, p. 29.

⁹²'Alternative für Russland? Die AfD und der Kreml', *Monitor* (25 April 2024), available at: <https://www1.wdr.de/daserste/monitor/sendungen/alternative-fuer-russland-die-afd-und-der-kreml-100.html>.

⁹³'Kritik nach Politikerbesuch in Moskau's Botschaft', *Tagesschau* (10 May 2024), available at: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/russland-botschaft-empfang-afd-100.html>.

⁹⁴'German far-right politician's office searched as part of bribery and money laundering probe', *Politico* (16 May 2024), available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-parliament-lifts-immunity-of-afds-mp-petr-bystron-office-searched-connection-bribery-money-laundering/>.

⁹⁵Interview with Matthias Moosdorf, July 2024.

'Russia first' is now attractive to German populists of different colours both because many older voters are still attached to it, and because it stands for a distinctly 20th-century way of doing things, much like supporting the internal combustion engine or nationalism. But in one mainstream party too there may be a temptation to revive it. For although the Scholz SPD has done much to confront the legacy of *Ostpolitik*, there are certainly individual politicians who remain attached to it. Not only does Gerhard Schröder attend functions in the Russian Embassy, he also continues to work for the Nord Stream consortium. Leading figures in Scholz's cabinet, such as SPD whip Rolf Mützenich and his fellow parliamentarian Ralf Stegner, expressed a preference for a negotiated peace at a time when few others did.⁹⁶ There was also concern that some of Scholz's closest advisors were half-hearted about *Zeitenwende*. In March 2024, it was reported that a group of leading social democrat historians surrounding Heinrich August Winkler had written an internal letter that criticised the leadership's hesitance to escalate further militarily.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, some in the party wanted Schröder to be rehabilitated.⁹⁸ This highlights a lack of unity within party ranks. And yet there was a consensus amongst key former SPD politicians that their party realised that security had to be sought against Russia and that *Zeitenwende* would thus not be undone in the foreseeable future.⁹⁹

A look ahead

Ostpolitik was long seen primarily as an act of de-securitisation. What often got lost, especially after 1990, was that it had never disposed of geopolitics. Immersed in a politics of pipelines, power, and narrowly defined national interests, *Ostpolitik* remained, to a significant degree at least, caught up in a spatial imaginary that valorised spheres of influence. As Henry Kissinger memorably put it, '*Ostpolitik* and great power politics grew organically.'¹⁰⁰

The prolonged crisis of Atlanticism after the US-led invasion of Iraq meant that *Ostpolitik*, now more Russophile than its Cold War iteration, was vindicated. Even after the annexation of Crimea, criticism of Bahr's policy was muted. It was only after February 2022 that Germany began to interrogate its own foreign policy tradition. What followed was a revival of Atlanticism which echoed in many ways the most hawkish discourses of the Adenauer era. This has meant that even *Ostpolitik*'s Cold War-era achievements have now been questioned.

How robust then is Germany's Atlanticist renaissance? There is no question that the German political landscape has experienced a delayed but profound shift in its view of European security. Given that it is unlikely that a coalition without the CDU will emerge from the Federal Election in 2025, a break with *Zeitenwende* seems unlikely. Instead, *Ostpolitik* will continue to operate mainly from the opposition benches. Even if Die Linke, BSW, or both fail to gain entry to the Bundestag, *Ostpolitik* will still be promoted by the AfD. Although Berlin is unlikely to outpace London or Warsaw in its efforts to support Ukraine, there are few incentives to reinstate Bahr's *Ostpolitik* in full for as long as Putin remains in power. Not only is there now a general recognition in government circles that Russia simply cannot be trusted to stick to the terms of treaties, but German companies too will be hesitant to re-invest in a country in which the interests of foreign capital count so little. The more Germany weans itself off fossil fuels, moreover, the less attractive Russia

⁹⁶'Mützenich kann es nicht lassen', *Tageszeitung* 19 March 2024, available at: {<https://taz.de/Debatte-ueber-Ende-des-Ukraine-Kriegs/!5999379/>}.

⁹⁷'Sozialdemokratische Historiker kritisieren Russland-Politik der SPD', *Die Zeit* (27 March 2024), available at: {<https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2024-03/spd-historiker-offener-brief-heinrich-august-winkler>}.

⁹⁸'Neuer SPD-General erklärt Gerhard Schröder wieder zum Teil der Partei', *Stern* (29 October 2024), available at: {<https://www.stern.de/politik/deutschland/spd-generalsekretar-miersch-scholz-verdient-eine-zweite-amtszeit-35168304.html>}.

⁹⁹Interviews with Thierse, Meckel, and Weisskirchen, July 2024.

¹⁰⁰Henry Kissinger, 'Ein langer Weg bis zur bleibenden Freundschaft', in Peter Brandt, Hans-Joachim Gießmann, and Götz Neuneck (eds), '*...aber eine Chance haben wir: Zum 100. Geburtstag von Egon Bahr* (Bonn: Dietz, 2022 [2015]), pp. 60–4 (p. 62).

becomes as a trading partner. The 200 billion euros spent on compensation to German companies and consumers will not be forgotten.

Germany's Atlanticist revival of 2022 might begin to show cracks if Ukraine loses decisively on the battlefield. For much of Germany's post-war history, Atlanticists did not need to distinguish between their allegiance to NATO and Washington. A Trump presidency will not only strengthen the remnants of Germany's *Ostpolitik* formation but also forces within Atlanticism that prioritise Berlin's ties with Washington over those with its European NATO allies. But even such events would need to gather significant momentum for German elites to abandon the new consensus that security must be ensured against rather than with Russia. It will be crucial to see whether Germany continues to champion the interest of NATO's former Soviet republics and satellites, especially those that have been hawkish on Ukraine. If Berlin shares Warsaw's threat perception, this will find expression in further initiatives to bolster NATO's conventional deterrence and continued high-level cooperation via the Weimar Triangle. A key indicator is whether Berlin decides to find ways to exempt the federal defence budget from the debt break (*Schuldenbremse*).

A final question concerns how the legacy of *Ostpolitik* will be narrated across and beyond the party spectrum. Social democrats and many Germans have long credited *Ostpolitik* as the harbinger of the end of the Cold War. If a Reaganite interpretation wins out in the newspapers and history books, then that enables a more hawkish Atlanticism to take root in the long term. And yet, even if *Ostpolitik* is not explicitly revived by future governments, its logic will live on, in a long-standing policy of balancing East against West and indeed in a more general way of doing great power politics in Europe. It has now become part of the populist repertoire, the policy of parties that look to the recent past to construct their political visions.

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