

After the Invasion: Germany Re-enters History

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The war in Ukraine has put an end to any illusion that war in Europe was a thing of the past. For decades, German foreign and security policy was happy to entertain this idea and allow business interests to trump geopolitical concerns. Reinhard Olschanski argues for a new basis for German security policy based on close ties in eastern Europe, EU integration, and the green transition.

The war in Ukraine is a leap of scale in politics and history. The largest country in Europe is at war with the second largest. Russia has launched the first major land war in Europe since 1945. If the aggressor does not manage to quickly bring this war down to what could be described in historical terms as an “episodic” scale – but I am very sceptical that this can be achieved – then 2022 will mark a change of era far more significant and profound than 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis, or the pandemic. A more comparable order of magnitude would be the years 1989 to 91 or 1945.

The memory of this scale should also make those who act and analyse politically think. In Germany, for example, the Social Democrats long harboured relations with Russia. The former chancellor Gerhard Schröder allowed himself to be bought into the Putin system. The scale of “Gerd’s” misjudgement is hard to overstate. Conflicts continue to rage around the world and the actions of many states should be criticised, but a war like the war in Ukraine, on such a scale on both an EU and a NATO border is new and unprecedented. The relativisation of Russian aggression is completely misplaced. The familiar “meso” categories of our analytical language no longer fit. The war is a macro-level event, a historical break.

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A Fascist construct to wage a war of aggression

What was to come was clearly indicated by Vladimir Putin’s incendiary speech a few days before the invasion of Ukraine. Putin presented Ukrainian statehood and nationality historically as an invention of Lenin, used as concessions to Ukrainian nationalists in the civil war in the years after 1917. According to this logic, there were at least a few people who wanted Ukrainian statehood and they were powerful enough to force a compromise. Putin even claimed that Stalin and Khrushchev – both of whom were involved in the Holodomor, the deliberate starvation of millions of Ukrainians – continued down Lenin’s wrong pro-Ukrainian path by keeping the independent Ukrainian nation alive.

According to Putin, there is no Ukrainian independence at all. Rather, together they are one Russian blood and one community of orthodox believers. In his view, the Ukrainians who clung to Ukrainian independence were either driven by oligarchic-clan interests, or agents in the pay of foreign powers, or both. His single objective is seemingly to abolish Ukrainian statehood in order to bring the people there home to the Putin empire as Russians by blood and culture. The speech was nothing more than a fascist construct in preparation for a war of aggression.

Donald Trump praised Putin as a genius shortly before the invasion. Such praise should have warned Putin of the error of his ways. So far, the war has been a twofold miscalculation. The first miscalculation concerned the unity of the West, which Putin underestimated. He thought that, with Schröder and the inner leadership circle of the Social Democrats, he could neutralise the strongest country in Europe; and with a neutral Germany, nullify the whole of the West.

The second, even greater miscalculation concerned Ukraine's readiness to fight. Putin did not expect much resistance. The first part of the campaign in the Kyiv region was an embarrassment. Putin has united the Ukrainians with his attack and made a historic contribution to the nation-building of the country. The results of the second phase of the war in the south and east of Ukraine are yet to be seen. It could well turn out to be a long war with heavy losses on both sides. With a GDP somewhere between that of Spain and Italy, Russia is no economic superpower. Whether it can sustain a long and expensive war is questionable.

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Germany's re-orientation

Russia's aggression in Ukraine marks a significant turning point that has triggered a completely new way of thinking about NATO and Europe. This rethink is most significant in Germany, which had long encouraged Putin with its ambiguous policies.

For the political forces on the far right and left, the war has been a major embarrassment. The pro-Russian trolls from the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany, (AfD) who formerly turned to Putin for both money and ideas, have been shown up by these connections. The same applies to the Wagenknecht faction in the Left Party, which operates with a right-left cross-over rhetoric. Current events could threaten the survival of these political forces.

The Social Democrats have also been under severe pressure. The legacy of Willy Brandt's outstanding *Ostpolitik* in the Cold War morphed into Schröder's chumminess with Putin. A simple volte-face by Chancellor Scholz has not proven sufficient and doubts still linger. After 16 years in government, the Conservatives bear the responsibility for the Federal Republic's unpreparedness.

German Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck called for arming Ukraine with defensive weapons as early as summer 2021. Subsequent developments proved him right. The German Greens have deep roots in the peace movement, but the principles of autonomy and self-determination are also central to their politics and to international law. While the centre-right would like to rehash the Cold War framework and mock the naïve tradition of the peace movement, the German centre-left does not need to go on the political defensive. A security policy that is not only about weapons and that seeks to eliminate the causes of conflict is as relevant as ever, even if alone it is insufficient in the current context.

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Listening to the East

The centre-left and centre-right should both take a step back in their thinking to fundamentally take in the new situation. The starting point for the reflection on security policy in Germany and Europe is taking the concerns of eastern and central European neighbours more seriously. It is the crucial point for the medium and long term.

The lack of emphasis on its eastern neighbours relative to Russia was the real scandal in Germany. The populations of Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia amount to 130 million people. Yet Germany's attitude was lukewarm, along the lines of, "We might defend you if you're part of NATO, but then again we might not." Above all, Germany did not want to get its fingers burnt. Russia, on the other hand, was courted and served for all it was worth. Nord Stream 2, now abandoned, was pushed through despite Germany's total isolation in the West and its earlier condemnations of Russia's annexation of Crimea.

The German government's policy over the last few years left no trace of doubt that our closest neighbours are worth less to us than Russia, despite it being further away. That was the big mistake in German security policy in recent years. And it must now be corrected urgently. The priority for German foreign policy today must be to stop talking over the heads of our closest partners. What would that mean in practice?

First, NATO must establish a strong and deterrent presence on its eastern external borders. It would protect our central and eastern European friends, as well as Germany itself. It must respond sympathetically and quickly to the requests of other countries in the region to join NATO, as well as the EU. In the coming years, it is a matter of deepening and widening European integration and credibly securing NATO's eastern flank so that our closest neighbours no longer have to live in fear and insecurity.

Second, Germany and Europe must also mentally say goodbye to their 70-year-long non-existent security policy which has been possible thanks to the US's security guarantee. From now on, the normal scenario of a security policy applies again, in which the countries

of Europe must guarantee their own security and independence. This is increasingly evident as American security policy focuses on China and the Pacific region. Such a common European security policy requires significantly deeper military and military-technical cooperation in Europe. Europe must be brought up to the necessary military standard – including, of course, the German Bundeswehr [armed forces], which also needs deeper structural reform.

Third, the need for a European security policy and the awareness that we are part of a European “community of fate” can also give renewed and strong impetus to European integration. The awareness of being truly “existentially” dependent on each other in questions of security can be another strong foundation for Europe, though the context of a new European security policy remains the transatlantic partnership and NATO.

Fourth, the values of liberal democracy, which are often called into question in a world of populism and authoritarianism and sometimes even forgotten by western governments, must be given renewed importance and protection. The Ukraine war shows drastically and on our own doorstep that Putinian despotism and the Chinese one-party dictatorship are an extremely bleak alternative to liberal democracy.

Finally, Putin’s war was mainly financed by fossil fuels exports. This reality, and Germany’s heavy reliance on Russian energy imports in particular, is compelling reason for a green energy transition. In his role as minister for the economy and climate protection, Robert Habeck is currently pursuing a double strategy in this area. He wants to make Germany independent of Russian energy in the short term by replacing it with imports from other countries as soon as possible. At the same time, he wants to accelerate the transition to renewable energies, and quickly lay the necessary political and legal foundations for this. Although traditionally the strongest advocates for the freedom of German car drivers from speed limits on motorways, the liberals have thrown their support behind Habeck’s vision, calling renewable energies “freedom energies”. The Ukraine war thus shows very clearly that the energy transition is not only a question of climate policy, but also of security policy.

In these times of war, green ideas are providing answers not only to fundamental questions about our economic future but to even deeper security problems too.



Dr Reinhard Olschanski studied philosophy, music, politics, and German language and literature in Berlin, Frankfurt, and Urbino (Italy). His doctoral thesis was written under the supervision of Axel Honneth. In addition to having held a range of teaching posts, Dr Olschanski has many years’ experience as a political advisor in the German Bundestag, the State Parliament of North Rhine-Westphalia, and the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg. Dr Olschanski has published widely on a variety of topics including politics, philosophy, music, and culture.

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