

Ukraine in the German Foreign Policy: old problems and new challenges

The 24th February marks a turning point in many areas of German politics. Eastern policy is one of the key ones. Although in this area the most discussed aspect is the attitude towards Russia, it is vital to recognise the evolutionary approach towards Ukraine. Today Ukraine is perceived not only as a key element in concluding a peace agreement: its success

will be vital for stabilisation in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. In the post-war perspective, Ukraine may be a new investment destination for German business, especially in energy and infrastructure.

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Approach towards Ukraine before the 24 February

Before the war, Ukraine was perceived primarily as a member of a group of countries located between the Central European countries – supporting tightening Eastern Europe's EU and NATO accession ambition – and Russia, which perceived this region as its sphere of influence. Given this status, German government approached the issue of Ukraine's membership in both organisations with great restraint. Berlin treated this issue as a kind of red line, the crossing of which would dangerously antagonise relations with Russia and pose a threat to relations with a key state of German Ostpolitik.

As a result, Russia has been the point of reference in shaping German policy towards Ukraine. This was most evident in 2014, when the issue of Ukraine's future was added to the catalogue of dilemmas in German policy towards Russia. Having seized Crimea and got involved in the conflict in Donbass, Russia continued breaking international law – a cornerstone of German foreign policy after 1949. At the same time, Germany faced the risk a potential conflict escalation, which posed a threat to the security of the entire Europe. However, Berlin has perceived Moscow as a key partner due to its nuclear power status, trade interests and developing energy cooperation.

The heritage of historical relations also played a significant role in the German attitude towards Russia: from the Prussian-Russian alliance, through the second world war, to the gratitude for the Soviet leadership's consent to the unification of Germany in 1990. Additionally, after the financial crisis of 2008/2009 Germany was expected to take over the leadership in the next crisis in Europe in the 21st century. The position adopted by Chancellor Angela Merkel at that time was continued until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Firstly, all diplomatic instruments had to be used, excluding military means. EU sanctions were a means of pressure on Russia, and economic and expert support was to be provided to Ukraine in order to support its modernisation process and strengthen its prospects for EU accession. The starting point for stabilising the situation was to be the signing of a peace agreement in Minsk in September 2014, and then, after its breaking up by the Russian-backed separatists, a new one in February 2015. The years following the signing of the document, however, showed that the agreement was only a temporary solution: the Kremlin kept violating the provisions of the agreement and the built up its forces on the border with Ukraine. Additionally, the meetings under the Normandy format were suspended.

An important element constituting Russian-German relations was the growing dependence on imports of Russian energy resources. Gas, seen as a bridging material in the energy transition, played a special role. As the country with the largest demand for gas in the EU (vide Eurostat data for 2021), Germany depended on access to cheap raw material, access to which was to be improved by both lines of the Nord Stream pipeline. The consequence of this approach was the neglect of efforts to diversify the gas import. The scale of challenge of giving up Russian resources after the invasion in Ukraine is evidenced by data from 2021: at that time, according to estimates by the Federal Association of Energy and Water Industries (BDEW), about 55% of the gas imported to Germany came from Russia.

Another area worth mentioning as an element of German-Ukrainian cooperation is economy. Although Ukraine has not been among the most important trade partners of Germany (41st place in 2021), the value of trade between 2013 and 2021 increased by 1.5 billion euro (8.5 billion euro in 2021, + 23%). The level of German investments was much less satisfactory. In the years 2017-2019 the German foreign direct investments in Ukraine increased, which might have indicated that in the next few years it would be possible to reach the level of 4.2 billion euro from 2012. Nevertheless, the pandemic thwarted these plans: according to data from Bundesbank in 2020, the sum of German direct investments in Ukraine amounted to 2.4 billion euro, and in the coming years it may be further reduced due to Russian aggression. The ongoing conflict may prevent German entrepreneurs from returning to Ukraine: before February 24, around 2,000 companies operated in Ukraine, creating 50,000 jobs. The energy industry, including the production of low-emission hydrogen, was of particular interest to Berlin. This area was one of the key elements of the German-

Ukrainian energy partnership established in 2020. According to the predictions, the raw material produced in Ukraine was to be exported to Germany. In part, such a policy was intended to compensate for the construction of Nord Stream 2, against which Ukraine protested.

German-Ukrainian cooperation also covered the social area. Foundations associated with German political parties, commercial foundations, as well as Goethe institutes were active (about 10,000 people in Ukraine attended German language courses annually) were active. To this day an important platform for building contacts is cooperation between local governments: currently there are 107 German-Ukrainian municipal partnerships (70 before the war).

Ukraine in German Zeitenwende

When analysing Germany's policy towards Ukraine after February 24, several factors should be taken into account. Firstly, the Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine came more than two months after coalition negotiations had been finalised, while the SPD, Greens and FDP were adapting to their new roles as the members of the federal government. The era of the 16 years rule of the Christian Democrats led by Chancellor Angela Merkel came to an end, and this time the coalition was built by the parties representing a harsher attitude towards Russia than the SPD or CDU/CSU. Although the leading competences in shaping foreign policy belong to the chancellor, the fact that the ministries of foreign affairs (Annalena Baerbock) and for economic affairs and climate action (Robert Habeck) were taken over by the Greens, allowed them to influence government's actions. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine was a turning point in the post-war history of Europe, and for the new government it was a kind of baptism of fire, posing an external and internal challenge for Germany (for example, dependence on imports of energy resources from Russia and the weakening of the economy).

The government had to quickly adapt its foreign policy to the new realities. The first of them was the announcement of the current eastern policy reorientation which up to this point was vastly concentrated on Russia. By transferring the armament to the Ukrainian army, the Germans also reversed the long-standing policy of not exporting weapons to the conflict zones. However, Germany makes its military aid to Ukraine dependent on the coordination of the other NATO countries and does not make steps that would make the Alliance and thus Germany a party to the conflict.

Thus, German assistance to Ukraine went through a succession of stages: from the announcement to send Gepard anti-aircraft systems, to the decision to send self-propelled howitzers in May and IRIS-T systems in September, to the January 2023 decision to send Marder vehicles and eventually Leopard battle tanks. In the meantime a widely reported example of German reticence to send

heavy armaments to Ukraine was the Ringtausch procedure. According to it countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Greece Post-Soviet tanks transferred to Ukraine were to be replaced by German deliveries. The discussion around the weapons export also showed intra-coalition divisions: while the Greens and FDP have been for this kind of help, the idea of sending heavy weapons was torpedoed by the Chancellery supported by the SPD until January 2023.

An important factor in shaping the policy towards Ukraine is also the humanitarian aid addressed to refugees in Germany and countries neighbouring Ukraine, which also accept refugees, as well as help for people remaining in Ukraine. There is also a dimension regarding the reconstruction of the country. Germany offers assistance in rebuilding such facilities as electricity infrastructure and access to drinking water. It is also interested in the long-term development of the country, which was reflected during the Conference on the Recovery of Ukraine organised by the German G7 presidency and the European Commission in Berlin in October 2022. Another issue closely connected with the process of rebuilding Ukraine is Germany's stance towards Ukraine's EU accession. Germany – though reluctantly – accepts the prospect of Ukraine becoming an EU member. However, Berlin has put forward requirements that Ukraine has to meet to join the EU. At the same time Germany presents the process of reforms in the EU itself, as an essential element of the future enlargement.

An important factor shaping perception of Ukraine, especially in the German public opinion, is the scale of war crimes committed by Russian soldiers on the occupied territories. The view of Russia and Russian was largely influenced by the awareness of the Nazi crimes committed in the USSR during the Second World War. Today this perception is confronted with television footage and photos of crimes committed against civilians on Ukrainian territories occupied by Russian army. For Germany, Ukrainians are also a separate nation that actively resists the invader and, despite cultural and historical ties, does not identify itself as "Russians".

Conclusions

1. Russian aggression has changed the perception of Ukraine in Germany. Today, its future is one of the focal points of German foreign policy. It should be noted, however, that while Germany has been willing to provide humanitarian aid and support for the reconstruction of the country, so far it shown great restraint when it comes to donating war equipment. Past experience shows that crossing red lines in matters of armaments is primarily the result of pressure from the allies, and above all from the U.S.
2. Ukraine's position in Germany's foreign policy will largely depend on the future shape of Ostpolitik, which is now the subject of the discussions among the experts and within political parties. It should

also be noted that while Germany declares its willingness to accept Ukraine membership in the EU, Berlin has put forward a clear signal, that ending the conflict and fulfilling the necessary accession criteria is not enough to agree for further enlargement. For Germany an additional requirement is the EU's internal reform, which for years has given rise to a number of disputes among the member states. Therefore, Ukraine's EU accession might be further postponed. At the same time Germany puts itself in the position of a partner offering expertise and financial support to meet the necessary conditions for the EU, help the Ukrainian citizens and provide necessary means to rebuild the country. This way Germany tries to rebuild the positive image, heavily strained after the Russian aggression, as well as get the best possible position in the reconstruction process and shaping the policy toward the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

3. Due to the piling-up challenges for the EU (independence from critical raw material supplies, improving the competitiveness of the economy, green transformation) and the above-mentioned condition for EU reforms, there is a still risk that the issue of Ukraine's membership will fall to the background. In view of such a perspective, in the coming years the Central European countries should keep the topic of Ukraine's membership among EU priorities and promote initiatives to increase Ukraine's connectivity with the EU.

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