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MARIAM MACHARASHVILI

203

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Introduction

This paper aims to analyze Germany's approach to the Eastern Partnership against the backdrop of the "turning point" (Zeitwende) in German foreign policy announced by Olaf Scholz in February 2022. The deviation from the previous policy came as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine, which disrupted the European collective security system and called into question the main characteristics of German foreign policy. The outbreak of the war on the territory of Europe showed the German leadership that the use of non-military means in the foreign policy, as well as their policy of openness and normalization towards the East (Ostpolitik), which largely implies Russia, turned out to be wrong. Russia's war in Ukraine also became the basis for the rethinking of yet another political concept - change through trade (Wandel durch Handel), according to which trade and economic interdependence with Russia will facilitate its integration into Europe and push it towards peaceful mutual cooperation. Germany's dependence on Russian natural resources on the one hand gave Russia a lever of political influence, and on the other made the German economy vulnerable.

Russian aggression in Ukraine also renewed the EU enlargement process, which presented an opportunity for the Eastern Partnership states and the Balkan region to acquire candidate status and accelerate their accession to the European Union. The German authorities also responded positively to the aforementioned developments, while before the war in Ukraine, they were skeptical about the EU's eastward expansion for geopolitical and energy reasons. Germany considered the European Union's neighborhood policy, and in particular the Eastern Partnership, as a tool to bring its member states closer to the European Union economically, without political integration and promises of accession. After the "turning point" announced by the German Chancellor, which largely accounts for the reassessment of relations with Russia, the question on how the Zeitwende has changed Germany's attitude towards the Eastern Partnership becomes pertinent. To answer this question, we, first and foremost, discuss the meaning of Zeitwende, and then the German policy approaches before and after the war in Ukraine.

The *Zeitwende* and German Foreign Policy

For decades, the German foreign policy has been based on such principles as multilateralism, European integration, rejection of the use of military tools in foreign policy, maintaining a low military budget, and close cooperation with Russia. The so-called “traffic light” coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens, and the Free Democrats (FDP), formed after Angela Merkel, did not plan for any alterations in the foreign arena (Marschall 2021). Moreover, they supported the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, despite international sanctions (Blumenau 2022, 1897). Germany’s main argument was that the construction of the pipeline served only economic and not geopolitical goals (Westphal 2021, 2). The mobilization of Russia’s military assets near the Ukrainian border in late 2021, and its subsequent recognition of the occupied regions of Lugansk and Donetsk, made it clear to Germany that Russia’s goals went beyond economic and energy interests. This is precisely what triggered the change in Germany’s foreign policy, which was first expressed by the termination of the pipeline certification process. Chancellor Scholz considered Russia’s actions a “serious violation of international law” and agreed with the US to act against Nord Stream 2 if Russia were to use natural gas as a weapon or attack Ukraine (McHugh 2022).

The war against Ukraine revealed the urgent need to adapt the foreign and security policy to the new geopolitical reality. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, in a famous address to parliament on February 27, 2022, which became known as the *Zeitwende*, announced the beginning of a new era in the country’s foreign and security policy:

We live in a transformational age, and that means that the world after will not be the same as before... The main question is whether we will allow force to prevail over law. Shall we allow Putin to turn the clock back to the nineteenth century in the age of great powers? Or are we able to control warmongers like Putin? (Scholz 2022)

The *Zeitwende* came about as a result of a number of factors. For Germany, a war in Ukraine means not only the violation of the European peace architecture, but also the return of Russian imperialism to the borders of NATO and the EU. Russia’s military aggression is an attempt to use force to change borders and divide the world once again into blocs and spheres of influence, which is a well-known historical experience for Germany

(Scholz 2022). The increase in the prices of energy resources played an equally important role in the change to the foreign policy (Dienes and Katsioulis 2022, 3). In addition, with this move, Germany is responding to growing international pressure from its partners to play a leading role in safeguarding peace in Europe (Mehrer 2022). It should also be noted that Germany receives the largest number of refugees in the EU, a number which increased by 28% in 2022 compared to the previous years (Sanderson 2023). Accordingly, the conflict zone means a new flow of refugees at the country's border, and therefore providing assistance to a country at war will help reduce the wave of migrants.

The Chancellor's speech outlined five key ways Germany plans to change its foreign policy:

- Financial and technical support for Ukraine;
- Imposing sanctions on Russian companies and Russian oligarchs;
- Germany's strong support for NATO's collective security;
- 100 million euros for a special fund that will be used to increase military capabilities and fulfill the NATO commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defense;
- Rapid investment in the field of renewable energy.

The short-term goal of these steps is to reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels and prevent Putin from financing the war (Mehrer 2022). In the long term, Germany's goal is to strengthen the defense capability and integration of the European Union as a unified actor, in which it will assume a leading role.

In the country's foreign and security policy, the *Zeitwende* had the greatest impact on two German policy concepts - relations with Russia, and change through trade. The German leadership believed that Russia's imperialist ambitions was possible to restrain through diplomacy, trade ties, and Russia's integration into European institutions (eventually contributing to its modernization) (Szabo 2017, 44). However, trade for Russia was only a tool to fulfill more ambitious geopolitical goals, and despite the German beliefs, Russia gradually became increasingly autocratic. For Russia, world politics is a zero-sum game and not a mutually beneficial one (Blumenau 2022, 1907). The war in Ukraine vividly demonstrated the failure of the German approaches, a fact acknowledged by President Steinmeier: "It

is very sad, but we failed in many ways... We failed to build a common European home... We continued to believe in the bridges that Russia no longer had any faith in" (Corblin 2022). Germany's future policy towards Russia is still difficult to pinpoint; however, as the Minister of Foreign Affairs Annalena Baerbock pointed out, the continuation of pre-war relations with Russia is already unthinkable (Corblin 2022).

Germany's Approach to the Eastern Partnership: Before and After the Ukraine War

Germany's policy in Eastern Europe has always been determined on the one hand by its geographical location, historical heritage and economic relations, and on the other by the Russian factor. Germany traditionally maintained close ties with Russia, and was actively involved in improving EU-Russia relations (Fix and Kirch 2016, 5). Given that Russia was an important energy partner, Germany continuously sought not to irritate it, which led to its skeptical attitude towards the accession of the Eastern Partnership countries to the European Union. According to 2014 data, even energy-rich Azerbaijan ranked 45th in terms of the volume of imports to Germany (Russia 10th, Georgia - 105th), which actually determined the country's "Russia first" policy (Fix and Kirch 2016, 8). That is why, for Germany, the European Union's neighborhood policy and the Eastern Partnership served to create a stable and secure space that could be achieved with Russia, not without it. In addition, the phenomenon of "enlargement fatigue" emerged in German society, which further strengthened Germany's passivity (Gotkowska 2010, 2). Such geopolitical caution was the reason Poland and Sweden assumed a leading role in the formation of the Eastern Partnership. Germany offered the Eastern Partnership countries economic and trade cooperation with bilateral relations, not the political integration or membership guarantees of the European Union.

Russia's annexation of Crimea, which became a challenge for German foreign policy, changed that policy to some extent. First of all, the gross violation of peace in Europe contradicted the German vision that the world order should be based on rules and norms, and not on force. At the same time, the "vacuum" during this period, with the US refraining from active involvement in Europe and France, and with Great Britain focused on solving domestic problems, pushed Germany to play the role of a leading power in shaping the EU's response policy (Koeth 2016, 111). There was

also a demand for a policy change from within the country: a large part of the population already considered Russia a threat and put peace above economic interests (Siddi 2016, 669). Accordingly, Germany replaced “constructive relations” with Russia with “situational cooperation:” joining the Minsk 2 negotiation process and the sanctions against Russia (Kusa 2023). Nevertheless, the annexation of Crimea was not enough to encourage them to give consent on the process of political integration of the Eastern Partnership countries with the EU: Germany still believed that Russia could be contained through dialogue and negotiations.

Russia starting its war in Ukraine was the final proof for Germany that Russia is a significant threat to the security of Europe, and, together with Ukraine, it revealed the challenges faced by Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova, where Russia’s interference in domestic politics is the main threat to their independence and sovereignty. Such interference puts the security and stability of the region at risk, and its consequences affect the EU. Although the German authorities feared extreme tensions in NATO-Russia relations, and nuclear escalation, there was a desire in political circles and society for a more “responsible Germany” (Cuperus and Molthof 2022, 3). As a result, Scholz noted:

If we don’t confront Putin’s aggression now, he could go even further. We’ve seen it before: he invaded Georgia in 2008, annexed Crimea in 2014, then attacked eastern Ukraine, and finally...expanded the war against the entire country. (Scholz, 2022)

Destabilization at the borders of the European Union threatens political and economic stability. To avoid further aggression and the division of Europe into spheres of influence, Germany has stopped viewing the Eastern Partnership from the Russian perspective. Moreover, according to public opinion polls in Germany, for the first time, the number of supporters of EU enlargement (52%, an increase of 20% compared to the previous year) exceeded the number of opponents, which is an important factor (Statista 2023). This was first of all reflected in Germany’s position to grant EU candidate status (Ukraine and Moldova) and European perspective (Georgia) to Eastern Partnership countries, while offering more pragmatic relations to Armenia and Azerbaijan. In March 2023, Chancellor Scholz, during an official visit to Armenia, revealed an initiative to start more ambitious relations with Armenia, along with a future plan to open local offices of German development agencies (Armenpress 2023). The role of

Azerbaijan for the European Union has increased significantly due to the potential natural gas supply. Azerbaijan is among the ten most important suppliers of crude oil to Germany (Azernews 2022). This means that the real foreign threat mustered the political will to deepen relations with the Eastern Partnership countries and bring them closer to the European Union.

Chancellor Scholz's statements highlighted Germany's need to establish the European Union as a single geopolitical actor, and its desire to initiate internal reforms, of which it considers itself to be the leader. With such a move, the German government believes that "realpolitik should mean involving friends and partners, while supporting them to become stronger in global competition through cooperation" (Scholz 2022). That is why Germany supported the French initiative to establish a European political community, where, several times a year, EU countries and their partners discuss key security issues at the political level. This means that Germany attaches not only an economic but also a political dimension to the Eastern Partnership and considers it a part of the "broader European concept".

It is noteworthy that Germany's desire to present itself as a reliable partner in the Eastern neighborhood was highlighted not only by its granting of EU candidate status, but also by additional factors: 1) Germany has broken the decades-long practice of positioning itself as a country with a "civilian power" and, along with it, an approach that meant refusing to send German-made weaponry to crisis regions. The developments of February 2022 made this clear, and, according to official data, the total amount of military equipment supplied by Germany to Ukraine is worth more than 2 billion euros (The Federal Government n.d.); 2) Germany decided to increase the number of soldiers on NATO's eastern flank and strengthen its defense capabilities; 3) Germany has diversified natural gas supply and had reduced Russian natural gas imports from 52% to 22% by the end of 2022 (Giegerich and Schreer 2023); 4) Annalena Baerbock's visits to Georgia and Moldova underlined Germany's special interest towards the region. The main message of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in both countries was Germany's strong support for their development and integration into the European Union. She directly pointed out that these countries belong in Europe. In Moldova, Baerbock emphasized Germany's political and financial support, which was reflected in the allocation of a special grant for development, and assistance in managing the energy sector and the flow of Ukrainian refugees (Corblin 2022). The minister's visit to Georgia

was unexpected, which reaffirms Germany's interest in the country's current developments. Baerbock particularly underlined the significance of implementing the EU's 12 recommendations, and the need for joint and timely work in this direction.

More than a year has passed since the announcement of the Zeitwende in German foreign policy. Despite the steps taken, challenges have also revealed themselves, which can be formulated as follows: 1) **Strategic communication** - there are three parties in the German coalition government, whose visions differ. While the Social Democrats are the least enthusiastic about providing arms to Ukraine, the Greens and Free Democrats are demanding more action from Germany (Corblin 2022). This often complicates the decision-making process; 2) **Implementation** - it still remains to be seen in Germany how the government will be able to mobilize resources for the special defense fund and spend them in a targeted way, and whether the new defense minister, Boris Pistorius, will be able to reform the armed forces (Giegerich and Schreer 2023); 3) **"Reluctant" leadership** - Berlin only started supplying weapons in the face of numerous international appeals and only after other Allies took the first step. It took Germany some time to agree with NATO members on the issue of sending German-made Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine; 4) **Long-term strategy** - Germany does not yet have a strategy for the kind of relationship it will have with Russia and the countries of the Eastern Partnership after the end of the war.

Conclusion

For Germany, Russia's war in Ukraine became an important factor in announcing a turning point in its foreign policy and reassessing its decades-long relationship with Russia, which led to a change in the EU's approach to the Eastern Partnership. Where, before the war, Germany believed that Russia could be restrained by trade and integration into European institutions, the war demonstrated vividly Putin's geopolitical ambitions, which not only threaten Ukraine, but also other countries of the Eastern Partnership, and which put the security of the European Union at risk.

In order to prevent the division of Europe into spheres of influence, and in the face of international pressure, Germany, as one of the leading states of the European Union, has seen the need to adjust its foreign policy to geopolitical requirements, and to become more active in terms of the

European Union's neighborhood policy. In particular, the Zeitwende towards the Eastern Partnership involves presenting Germany as a reliable partner and giving it a political dimension, along with an economic one, a fact validated by Germany's consent to grant candidate status to countries, offer pragmatic relations, engage in political community dialogue, and offer military and financial support to Ukraine.

Nevertheless, the Zeitwende faces some challenges, manifesting in the lack of strategic communication and delays in implementation. In addition, Germany takes significant steps to supply weapons only after consulting with other countries, which often calls into question the genuine realization of the "turning point" in its foreign policy. Furthermore, Germany still does not have a long-term strategy for the period after the end of the war in Ukraine, as to what kind of relations it will have with Russia and, accordingly, with the Eastern Partnership countries. It is likely that in the near future, the German authorities will try their best to reduce energy dependence on Russia, and will determine the country's own role in the Eastern Partnership based on the gains of the warring parties.

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