Poland, Germany and Ukraine at a Turning Point: Making or Breaking the Western Alliance

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Introduction

At the beginning of 2025, the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine that is now in its third year still constitutes the most fundamental challenge to the security of the European Union and NATO. The transatlantic community continues to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine through various cooperative efforts. Poland and Germany are particularly significant providers of security to Central and Eastern Europe. However, the rising influence of far-right and nationalistic left parties in Europe, as well as Donald Trump's victory in the US elections, introduce uncertainties about future support for Ukraine. This raises the urgent question of whether new alliances and mechanisms are necessary to contain Russia´s confrontative geopolitics and uphold security in Europe.

Various political and social forces in Germany, Poland and the EU, particularly from the radical right, and to a lesser extent the far left and left-wing nationalist groups, are undermining Western support for Ukraine's war effort by promoting "pacifist" messages and spreading disinformation. Additionally, anti-Ukrainian and/or pro-Russian actors often operate with direct or indirect support from the Kremlin. Their narratives, whether intentionally or unintentionally, subsequently reinforce Russian propaganda. Some even openly express sympathy for Putin's totalitarian Russia. Anti-Ukrainian sentiment is on the rise due to war fatigue, economic hardships and resentment directed towards Ukrainian refugees. Populism concerning Ukraine is gradually gaining ground even in the mainstream. The intensification of these negative trends may severely hamper the EU's support for Ukraine.

Finally, as hybrid warfare evolves, EU and NATO member states, including Germany and Poland, need innovative strategies for enhancing the integration of their military, governmental and civilian sectors to build resilient societies. Having been exposed for many years not only to traditional forms of military aggression but also to hybrid warfare, Ukraine has gained an invaluable insight into the methods and instruments employed by the Russian aggressors. Indeed, more exchanges of know-how and best practice between Berlin, Kyiv and Warsaw are needed more than ever.

Taking into consideration all these fundamental challenges currently facing Poland and Germany, the **College of Eastern Europe (KEW)** is publishing the report "**Poland, Germany and Ukraine at a Turning Point: Making or Breaking the Western Alliance**". This collection of essays from prominent German and Polish experts aims to provide responses to the urgent questions mentioned above.

The report starts with the article "**Western cognitive bias vis-à-vis Russia: how to fix it?**", which is written by **Maria Domańska**, a Senior Fellow at the Warsaw-based Center for Eastern Studies. According to her, in order to address the security threats coming from Moscow, the transatlantic community's approach to Russia requires urgent and significant changes. Without this, calls for negotiations with the Kremlin to stop or freeze the military conflict with Ukraine will only encourage further escalation and prevent a sustainable peace in Europe. On the other hand, **Julia Friedrich**, a Research Fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI), shows in her article "**Partners from the «Global South»: a way towards new alliances for Ukraine?**" that the engagement of key non-Western powers against Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine has been partially successful at best. While some key

non-Western powers might be willing to engage with select issues, none of them are likely to become additional allies to Ukraine. In the next essay, "**The same but different? Poland and Germany's perspectives on EU-NATO cooperation in light of the Russian war in Ukraine**", **Monika Sus**, Professor at the Institute of Political Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences, points out that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has highlighted both convergence and divergence in Poland and Germany's perspectives regarding priorities and preferred frameworks when it comes to security cooperation in Europe. This is particularly true concerning NATO and the European Union. While both countries share foundational commitments to European security, they differ quite considerably in their perspectives on how to best enhance it. **Cornelia Juliane Grosse**, a researcher at the Centre for Military History and Social Sciences of the Bundeswehr, notes in her essay "**No strength attached? Civil defense as a (trans-)national challenge**" that new efforts have been made to strengthen Germany's comprehensive defense system since Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Nevertheless, the road ahead is still long and many obstacles that could slow down this process have historical roots that are deeply ingrained in the German mindset.

Piotr Kocyba from the Else Frenkel-Brunswik Institute for Democracy Research in Saxony (EFBI) at the University of Leipzig has written the article "**A poster boy of support for Ukraine. Struggling with the normalization of war and raising enemies within in Poland**". This piece pays attention to a decrease in Poland's solidarity with Ukraine, especially as historical and economic tensions are instrumentalized by the far right. In his opinion, such a development endangers not only relations with Ukraine and European unity in dealing with Russia, but also Poland's own security.

Finally, **Rebecca Pates**, Professor in the Department of Political Science of the University of Leipzig, analyzes in her article "**German anti-establishmentarianism and the Russian war in Ukraine**" how support for Ukraine in the Russian war has been weakening among German voters. She also looks at why anti-establishment parties have been successfully gaining representation at the national level. However, she stresses that these political forces are mainly successful in the Eastern provinces of the country, which make up only 20% of the total vote.

The report is published within the framework of the project "**Poland and Germany in Eastern Europe**", which was launched by the College of Eastern Europe in 2019. It has been implemented in cooperation with **Austausch**, a German NGO, and has received financial support from the **Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation (FWPN)** and the **Heinrich Boll Stiftung (HBS)**. The main general goal of the project is to develop a platform for Polish-German dialogue on Eastern Europe. The key priorities of such dialogue are to bring closer the positions of Germany and Poland; reduce the differences between the two countries; make them aware of common interests; overcome mutual stereotypes; encourage German and Polish participants to think in unconventional and innovative ways; and provide recommendations to decision makers of both countries. The German-Polish Roundtable on Eastern Europe organized at the Castle on Water in Wojnowice (Poland) every year since 2019, which gathers experts, scholars, journalists, politicians, diplomats, NGO activists and local government officials from Poland, Germany, Ukraine and other countries, constitutes the key driver of this project. The essays brought together in this report were presented and discussed during the last Roundtable, which took place in October 2024.

Adam Balcer is Program Director at the College of Eastern Europe (KEW).

Western cognitive bias vis-à-vis Russia: how to fix it?

Maria Domańska is Senior Fellow at the Warsaw-based Center for Eastern Studies. She specializes in Russian domestic politics

To address the security threats coming from Moscow, the Transatlantic community's approach to Russia requires urgent and significant changes. Without them, calls for negotiations with the Kremlin to stop or freeze the military conflict with Ukraine will only encourage further escalation and prevent sustainable peace in Europe.

Despite considerable positive changes in the West concerning policies towards Russia that have taken place since 24th February 2022, certain fallacies are deeply inserted in many Western countries and societies. Three main fallacies still present in the political mindset of Western politicians include: the misunderstanding of the Russian strategic culture; underestimating the connection between the nature of Russia's political regime and its revanchist foreign policy; and fetishizing Russia's domestic stability.

In consequence, the West's policy toward Russia is still insufficient to defend Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, effectively deter Russia from aggression against NATO, or create lasting peace in Europe. Moreover, the Ukrainian war's outcome will directly impact global stability and the future of the international legal order. If Moscow emerges from this war of aggression with territorial or political gains (like blocking Ukraine's NATO membership), the risk of global proliferation of nuclear weapons — increasingly perceived as the only reliable means of deterrence against the powerful — goes up exponentially.

While individual states (among them Poland) are adjusting their policies to the fact that Moscow is at war with the West, others (among them Germany) have embraced mostly the policy of half-measures and self-restraint, thus hampering necessary shifts in the EU and NATO collective policies. Many Western politicians remain reluctant not only towards the long-term and full-fledged military and economic support for Ukraine, but even towards a significant increase in the European security investments. It has facilitated Russia's mobilization of domestic resources for a protracted war, in spite of economic sanctions which were introduced too slowly and too modestly. Restrictions on Ukraine's self-defense has deteriorated Ukraine's military position vis-à-vis Moscow and wasted opportunities to regain a large part of the occupied territories.

In the late 2024, the advocates of a more assertive approach vis-à-vis Russia (including the members of the new European Commission and top-level NATO officials) became more vocal and more listened to. However, the scope and timing of the implementation of their ideas remains an open question. The scale of threats requires not only far-reaching changes in NATO's military stance, including its defense and deterrence policy, or in the Western sanctions regime. A revision of the West's cognitive patterns, mental maps, and strategic communication is also badly needed.

Three cognitive fallacies of the West

First, the West often misunderstands or underestimates the logic and practical consequences of Russian strategic culture, leading to flawed strategic communication with Moscow. Experts and policymakers tend to project Western political and strategic culture onto Russia, ignoring the systemic difference of Putin's personalist dictatorship and the criminal mindset of the Kremlin's rulers, which is counterproductive and dangerous.

Indeed, Russia's strategic culture is based on values, ideas, and rules that are fundamentally different from those of the democratic West. The *modus operandi* of Russia's ruling elite is informed by a way of thinking with roots in the secret services and the criminal world. They employ the logic of a zero-sum game in the international relations, value the arbitrary will of the authoritarian and totalitarian rulers and crude force much more than legal norms, and sideline the question of human rights in international conflicts. The logic of a zero-sum game excludes negotiations understood as a path to compromise, while violence is seen as a natural part of diplomacy. Under Putin's rule, there is no control mechanisms against the leader's whims: no institution would prevent the autocratic leader from violating future international commitments. Moreover, Moscow regards Western readiness for dialogue and attempts at de-escalation (see: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's telephone diplomacy) as weakness and a green light for further aggression.

Debates about the possible negotiations with Russia must take into account the fact that for the Kremlin, war is an all-encompassing endeavor with a strong cognitive component. It incorporates a variety of techniques designed to prepare for or replace a military attack. Primary among them is reflexive control, which aims to steer Western decisions to benefit Russia's strategic interests and undermine democratic institutions. Moscow's hybrid warfare against the West and threats of military escalation, including nuclear blackmail, are an inherent part of the psychological warfare that aims to force substantial political concessions at the lowest price possible.

Second, Western officials continue to underestimate the connection between the nature of Russia's political regime and its revanchist foreign policy. As long as Russia remains authoritarian, aggressive wars will remain the Kremlin's main source of legitimacy.

The Russian model of rule is inherently repressive, kleptocratic, and based on the patrimonial idea that the leader is the owner of the country. State governance is based on the primacy of control over development and on deep social inequalities. The regime's capacity for economic, social, and technological development and modernization is severely limited. Genuine economic reforms would require political liberalization that the Kremlin perceives as an existential threat. Retaining political power for life is the overarching goal of the Russian rulers, as power comes together with financial assets and physical safety.

The leadership realizes that Russia cannot compete with the innovative potential and the soft power of the West. Hence, sources of their legitimacy must be found not internally but externally. Instead of economic growth, high living standards, or efficient state institutions that inspire public trust, they offer citizens a "national pride" coming from the revival of the imperial past. Fight against alleged enemies and made-up existential threats has become under Putin an effective way to mobilize Russians' support for the repressive, corrupt government. To distract the population from domestic shortcomings the Kremlin has created a self-isolationist ideology of

the „besieged fortress". It widely resonates among the public: deprived of political agency, it seeks its *ersatz* in the imperial might of the state.

Systemic confrontation with the West is a central element of this approach. "Harmful" democratic ideas (presented, explicitly or implicitly, as "Nazism" or "Satanism") must be prevented from contaminating Russian society. The long and consistent suppression of human rights, civil society activism, freedom of expression, and democratic opposition in Russia was a prerequisite for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the rapid suppression of any significant domestic anti-war protests. Moscow also strives to fight the evil at its source: hence the attempts to influence the domestic political situation in Western democracies to polarize societies and undermine their confidence in their governments and democratic procedures.

Third, the West's fear of fallout from political turmoil in Russia leads it to value the system's stability over the prospect of significant political change, even though such change could render Moscow less belligerent toward its neighbors. Conversely, the damage to the global security order caused by the continuation of the current regime is greatly underestimated. This approach also overlooks the fact that structural grievances Putinism has created pose a significant risk of destabilizing Russia. The Russian model of rule is based on lawlessness, systemic violence exacerbated by war crimes, degradation of state institutions, and devaluation of human life. Criminal methods have become an inherent element of the state governance. The focus of law enforcement agencies on prosecuting political opponents appears to limit their ability to recognize and avert real threats to the security of the population, like terrorist attacks. Systemic suppression of ethnic and national minorities' cultures, languages and historical memories fuels the growing frustration of the regions coming from their economic exploitation by the federal center of power.

In addition, Putin is repeatedly portrayed as the last line of defense against radical nationalists, religious extremists or criminal groups that might take power on central or local level if he is overthrown. In reality, he is Russia's leading nationalist flavoring the Russian chauvinism with a religious fundamentalism and an internationally wanted war criminal. The Western policies that promote half-measures, self-restraint, and appeasement toward Moscow is unlikely to have a positive effect on the domestic political situation in Russia.

A view from Warsaw

In 2025, there are still significant differences between Poland and Germany on the desired outcome of the war. While Poland calls for decisive action by the West to defeat Russia (viewing it as the only path to bring sustainable peace to Europe), Berlin's approach remains ambiguous.

Owing to the memory of the Soviet occupation in the 20th century, including state terror and its atrocities, the political class and public in Poland have deep understanding of Moscow's political and strategic culture. They have also developed patterns of resilience vis-à-vis Russian propaganda, disinformation and subversive activities, even though certain sectors of the Polish society are vulnerable to anti-Ukrainian narratives. Bilateral tensions between Warsaw and Kyiv, stemming from divergent economic interests and historical disputes, do not lead to pro-Russian mood. This firm stance on Russia is shared by many other NATO eastern flank countries.

Similarly to other Moscow's direct neighbors, Poland is much less concerned about possible destabilization of Russia than about the continuation of the genocidal war in Ukraine and the *de facto* war against the West. As Poland's historical

experience showed, every time when Russia could not afford imperial expansion due to its domestic developments, the Eastern-flank nations would get a chance of genuine sovereignty. It makes Poland far less concerned than Germany about possible political turmoil in Russia, and supportive of an emergence of more pluralistic and competitive form of government there.

There has also been a community of fate between historical Poland and nations of the Russian Federation whose identities, languages and historical memories are currently suppressed by the Kremlin. This community has been reflected in the long tradition of Polish scientific research into the non-Russian ethnic and national groups. There is quite a broad understanding in Poland that the only path to eradicate Russia's imperial and colonial policies can be paved by genuine federalization of the state, the empowerment of non-Russians, and democratic reforms.

Recommendations for the Transatlantic community

1. Creative adaptation to Russia's strategic culture

Moving away from the passive and pigeon-hearted variant of Western strategic culture in relations with Moscow could raise the costs of Russia's aggressive foreign policy and give the West more influence over Moscow's calculations. The best way to avoid escalation is to demonstrate military, economic, and political preparedness for it. The EU and NATO must create strategic dilemmas and ambiguities for the adversary and present it with *faits accomplis* to narrow Russia's scope for anti-Western reflexive control. Strengthening Western societies' resilience by raising public awareness of the severity of security threats while preventing defeatism and panic, and pooling resources to counter Russian hostile actions, is also key.

So far, the West has more economic, political and demographic resources, but Russia has more resolve. Debates about possible negotiations with Russia while it still believes in its ultimate victory only bolster Moscow's ambition to tire out Ukraine and the West. If Russia sees itself forced into actual negotiations by developments on the battlefield, it will know how to make an acceptable offer to Kyiv.

2. Delegitimization of Putin's regime

For decades, the West has legitimized the increasingly repressive Putin regime in the eyes of Russian society, the ruling elite, and other state leaders. At the same time, the regime has paid little cost for its massive human rights violations. Thousands of individuals responsible for political assassinations, politically motivated trials, the brutal suppression of peaceful protests, and the shutdown of independent media have never made it onto the sanctions lists, perpetuating a sense of impunity for state criminals.

It is in the West's strategic interest to delegitimize Putin's regime and bring about his departure from power, which could open a window of opportunity for political change. Although the entire Russian state bears responsibility for the war of aggression against Ukraine, no one has made himself as much of a political hostage to the war as Putin. He will likely continue the invasion at all costs as long as he remains in power (even if its dynamics and means may change, including a temporary cease of its hot phase).

The West should not recognize Putin, who ran unconstitutionally for his fifth term in 2024, as the legitimate president of Russia and its representative on the

international stage. It should be regularly recalled that since the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for his arrest in 2023, Putin has been an internationally wanted criminal.

3. Revision of the West's cognitive patterns and mental maps

The West needs to continue the decolonization of its mental maps and perception of the Eastern Europe. The "Russia first" policy (concentration on Russia as the biggest country) has instilled a sense of impunity among the Russian ruling class and led to the biggest security threats in Europe since 1945. This fallacious policy should be replaced by prioritizing relations with other, smaller states (first of all, Ukraine) that can offer a peaceful, stable, win-win cooperation.

Sustainable peace in Europe will not come without a more pluralistic, competitive form of government in Russia. To avoid a Russian relapse into imperialism, future attempts to normalize relations with the Kremlin must be contingent on Moscow's renunciation of aggressive foreign policy and the liberalization of domestic politics.

While liberal democracy in Russia is not a realistic prospect in the coming decades, political liberalization and pluralism, even if defective, would be in line with the West's interest. The achievable minimum is to let institutional checks and balances, as imperfect as they can be, to prevent a narrow group of rulers from taking decisions crucial for the global security order, without any scrutiny from the broader elite and the public. These changes can only be achieved by Russian citizens themselves, but they will need the West's help against the defenders of the old regime.

Instead of falling into the trap of Moscow-stoked fears, the West needs a sober analysis of Russia's domestic weaknesses and stability factors, as well as the risks and opportunities of possible regime change. This would make it possible to prepare appropriate and coordinated responses to the challenges, as well as maximize the benefits of different change scenarios and contain turbulence.

Once the personalist dictatorship is gone, the system could indeed become unstable and chaotic. This prospect naturally raises the question about the safety of Russia's nuclear arsenal. However, there are good reasons to believe that the new rulers, seeking international legitimacy, will be no less interested in securing nuclear weapons than the post-Soviet *nomenklatura* was in the 1990s. Even if there is a violent power struggle, the actors will fight each other, not neighboring states.

The new approach vis-à-vis Russia also needs a long-term support for democratic groups within the country and in exile. Most activists are not likely to play decisive role in post-Putin state politics. Nonetheless, overcoming social atomisation and building trust in local communities is often a value in itself in an increasingly totalitarian state. Micro-steps, like formally apolitical initiatives launched by civic activists, can pay off in the future, when a space for political action opens up. The Western support needs to be based on clear political criteria: beneficiaries should act in line with anti-war, anti-authoritarian, and anti-imperial agenda, even if they are forced to self-censor their public performance. However, a space for political change will only emerge if the regime is significantly weakened by military defeat in Ukraine and adverse effects of economic sanctions.

Partners from the "Global South": a way towards new alliances for Ukraine?

Julia Friedrich is a Research Fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI) in Berlin where she works on German and European foreign policy, as well as security dynamics in Ukraine and Russia.

European engagement of key non-Western powers against Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine has been partially successful at best. Western attempts to sway others were footed on a variety of misconceptions, including how much of a priority the war in Ukraine would be for them among other strategic and economic interests, as well as the depth of their relations to Russia. While some key non-Western powers might be willing to engage on an interest base on select issues, none of them are likely to become additional allies to Ukraine.

The view of the war in Ukraine as a "watershed moment" which threatens the core of the rules-based international order, is mostly a European one. In other parts of the world, the economic consequences of the war, including secondary effects of sanctions, were much more discussed and in fact criticized. Drawing on its longstanding effort to position itself as a champion of the so-called Global South against the West, Russia seamlessly integrated narratives to counter the Western response to its aggression into its advocacy for a different, multi-polar world order, attempting to shift the blame for the war and its consequences to the West. While there are few illusions about the nature of Russian aggression against Ukraine in most "Global South" countries, it has had a very limited effect on their relationship to Moscow.

Western, including German and Polish, attempts to engage key non-Western actors such as Brazil, China, India, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa in support of Ukraine and against Russia have so far proven largely unsuccessful. This has had important consequences in preventing the international isolation of Russia while in particular the new depth of Chinese-Russian relations has become vital for the Russian economy.

At a time when support for Ukraine might be dwindling on both sides of the Atlantic, three crucial questions need to be addressed: Who else might step up for Ukraine? Is there a realistic possibility for an increased support by key non-Western actors? Why have efforts to mobilize support beyond the West proven largely unsuccessful, and what are the lessons to be learned?

Three Important European Misconceptions

First, there is no homogeneous view on the war against Ukraine among the five above-mentioned countries. Their voting patterns on resolutions regarding Ukraine in the context of the full-scale invasion in the UN General Assembly are a good example of this, as they do not neatly fall into patterns of democracy/autocracy, geography, BRICS(+) membership or on any scale of economic development. Rather, they reflect each of these countries' foreign policy priorities:

Saudi Arabia, a traditional US ally, voted in favor of the resolutions in the General Assembly. South Africa and India, two large democracies, prioritized sustaining their economic and historical relations to Russia over condemning the invasion and abstained. Brazil, another big democracy, though dependent on Russian export of fertilizers and diesel, voted in favor of the resolutions due to its traditional foreign policy commitment to international law and the peaceful settlement of disputes. China, Russia's most important ally in the war, abstained. A tendency among Western countries to generalize and view the "Global South" as one big entity that shares the same interests is detrimental to understanding these individual motivations and trade-offs.

German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock proclaimed during her speech at the UN General Assembly on 1 March 2022, upon voting the first of several resolutions condemning the Russian aggression: "Today, all of us have to decide. Between peace and aggression. Between justice and the will of the strongest." This European view misunderstands that key non-Western partners did not want to choose, nor feel the need to. Instead, one of the main motivations for the countries examined here to not sour their relations with Russia is their geopolitical positioning. The West and Europe are perceived as being in decline; the US "superpower" waning. Officially, Brazil, China, India, Saudi Arabia and South Africa are all advocating for a more multi-polar world, in which there is more than one or two centers, and with more just global institutions where power is distributed more equally. To achieve this goal, Russia is seen as an important partner, especially if leaders want there to be more "centers" than just the US and China. An important motivation for India, for instance, is to keep Russia from becoming fully dependent on China. In China itself, some experts arguing along party lines contend that the war is an expression of China-US rivalry. Independent analysts have stressed that Beijing, too, needs partners against the US and has found one in Moscow – and was never going to throw it under the bus.

This geopolitical context has little to do with Ukraine itself, but it is a highly important and often misunderstood context in which key non-Western players act. Re-shaping international institutions to a more equal distribution of power across the world is a more important goal to these countries than upholding the current order, which they see as flawed, arbitrary and not necessarily protective of all countries' sovereignty.

Second, European countries grossly underestimated the depth of key non-Western countries' relations with Russia, while Ukraine did not have very developed relations with them. For instance, Russia is a quite important economic partner for India and Brazil, who dependent on the imports of oil and military equipment, as well as fertilizer and diesel, respectively. The relationship to Russia is portrayed in both countries as pragmatic, though there are important ideational components: Indian officials frequently cite that the Soviet Union, which is equated to Russia, has stood by its side through turbulent periods; while in Brazil, personal ties of the leadership with Russian officials play a role, as do the ruling worker's party's historic ties to the Soviet Union and subsequently Russia. In South Africa, where trade with Russia is minimal, the memory of the support of the Soviet Union to the ruling African National Congress to end the apartheid regime is a strong reason why Pretoria has not wanted to endanger its ties to Moscow.

When it comes to China, the Western hope that Beijing would be the actor to convince Russia to end its war has proven delusional, latest with the increasing reports of China circumventing sanctions to supply Russia with dual-use goods. While the Chinese leadership was allegedly not happy about Russia's actions, Xi Jinping

would only consider attempting to increase pressure on Russia if offered something in return. Finally, Saudi Arabia is traditionally firmly suited in the Western camp. Due to increasing disappointments with the US, and a desire to diversify its foreign policy partners, it has taken an ambiguous stance. Perhaps for this reason, Saudi Arabia has successfully facilitated prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine.

Ukraine factors very little in these interests and motivations. With most of these countries, Ukraine did not have very developed relations before the full-scale invasion and Ukraine's diplomatic presence in these countries pales in comparison to the Russian one. While there are few illusions among key non-Western players, considering the war to be unnecessary and unjust to Ukrainians, there is a degree of susceptibility to narratives about NATO's eastward expansion going against Russia's security interests. Russia's extensive diplomatic leverage also includes the influence of outlets like Russia Today, for instance RT Arabic or Sputnik Arabic in the Middle East. Ukraine has little narrative power to compete and its attempts to frame the war as a postcolonial struggle against an imperial Russia have not gained traction.

Kyiv's European partners have tried to mitigate this imbalance. However, while these countries have a greater diplomatic presence, deeper relations and more clout in key non-Western states than Ukraine on its own, they also come with their own burdened histories of European colonization and US dominance. For these reasons, the framings for the war used by Europeans have only worked partially at best. While initial shock and moral arguments led to worldwide support to Ukraine during the vote on the first General Assembly resolution, these did not convince everyone. Framing the war as a systems competition between democracy and autocracy put traditional Western partners like Saudi Arabia in a tough spot; while democracies like India, South Africa or Brazil were not happy that their support for Ukraine was simply expected, without being granted any agency or individual interests in the matter. The Russian breach of international law and the rules-based order served as a more useful line of argument, though many reference the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, or support to the Israeli campaign against Gaza after the 7 October 2023 attacks by Hamas as a proof of Western hypocrisy in this regard.

Third, there is a mismatch in priorities and Western countries overestimated the role that key non-Western actors can and want to play in future negotiations. Although the diplomatic, economic and military relations of these key non-Western countries give them a varying degree of leverage over Moscow, none of countries has been willing to use it over an issue that is of secondary importance to them. Still, over the last almost three years, there have been several initiatives by key non-Western players. The latest was a Chinese-Brazilian "peace plan", published in the summer of 2024 not referring to principles of international law, such as territorial integrity, and referencing Russian narratives and claims towards Ukraine. A corresponding "Friends of Peace Group" assembled 17 countries at the 2024 UN General Assembly. There has also been an "African Peace Mission" to both Kyiv and Moscow, led by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, in summer 2023. The corresponding ten-point-plan was not well-received in either capital. India has engaged in what could be seen as the beginnings of shuttle diplomacy over the summer of 2024. Saudi Arabia has hosted the only Ukrainian "peace formula" meeting attended by the Chinese special envoy. It has also facilitated prisoner exchanges.

Ukraine has tried to engage key non-Western states in the frame of the Ukrainian ten-point peace formula and successive meetings. This engagement has had both positive and negative effects. Positive elements included that Kyiv was able to showcase that it was interested in diplomacy and forge stronger ties with some of

the key non-Western actors. Given that many non-Western stakeholders considered that Ukraine was the party that had to primarily be talked into negotiations, and worst case, into handing off some of its territory, this is no small thing. In terms of negative effects, a degree of frustration has become apparent with the peace formula meetings as being mostly a format of support to Ukraine, rather than an actual effort at peace-making, which, according to these countries, would require Russia to be present.

There is no one actor who will get parties to a table and produce solutions. Brazil, China, India, Saudi Arabia and South Africa, all for their individual reasons, are unwilling to use their leverage or risk their international reputation (in case negotiations fail) to force parties to the table, especially for a war that they might want to see ending, but that is not very high on their list of priorities. With the election of Donald Trump as US President, perspectives on potential negotiations are changing and it is questionable if anyone will be at the table while a "deal" is being brokered.

Recommendations for Germany and Poland

While the war against Ukraine is not a foreign policy priority for key non-Western countries, there is a recognition that it is a priority to Western countries, who are important trading and diplomatic partners. If only for status concerns, it is considered important to play a role in any potential resolution of the war. This **willingness to engage can potentially be leveraged by the Western countries, including Poland and Germany**.

There is also a **willingness among key non-Western countries to cooperate on select issues** if the offer is right. One example of this is increased Indian imports of military equipment from France to diversify away from Russian military supply. Other European countries can replicate this example. Such an engagement requires Germany, Poland and others to first recognize the economic and material interests driving the individual non-Western countries. Additionally, much of Ukraine's engagement of non-Western partners has aimed at public condemnations of Russia, which, for reasons outlined above, has not been effective. Proposals like the Czech initiative to buy ammunition for Ukraine anonymously from around the world can be easier for these countries to engage with.

Any present or future engagement of key non-Western countries also depends on their **perception of the war's trajectory**. Indeed, some of them only considered engaging with Ukraine because it did not lose in first three days; while for others, Ukraine is fighting a lost cause, making engagement with the issue increasingly unnecessary. Germany and Poland can therefore step up their military and other support to Ukraine to ensure that Russia is seen as failing in this war. Secondary sanctions on Chinese companies on the European level are another step in a good direction to show that military support to Russia will have negative consequences.

Finally, it's important to stress that these measures are damage control. None of the key non-Western powers will replace the US if it massively scales down support to Ukraine; and none of them will provide a long-term solution to the war. They expect European countries to find solutions for the war and the reestablishment of the European security architecture. Ukraine might gain and secure some more friendly partners among non-Western actors, but no additional allies.

The same but different? Poland and Germany's perspectives on EU-NATO cooperation in light of the Russian war in Ukraine

Monika Sus is Professor at the Institute of Political Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences and an adjunct and fellow at the Hertie School.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has highlighted both convergence and divergence in Poland and Germany's perspectives on the priorities and preferred frameworks for security cooperation in Europe, particularly within NATO and the European Union. While both countries share foundational commitments to European security, they differ quite considerably in their perspectives on how to best enhance it.

The strategic partnership between the European Union and NATO has become more critical in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Over the past decade, these two organizations have become central to broader European security governance. An implicit division of labor gradually emerged that mirrors their functional distinctions, with NATO handling defense and the EU focusing on the diplomatic and economic dimensions of security. However, the EU's growing involvement in defense and military operations, alongside NATO's expansion into civil security tasks, has led to both cooperation and tension, with fears of the duplication of efforts and competition for resources.

Assessing the EU-NATO Strategic Partnership

Despite the tangible progress achieved over the last decade, there still is a considerable gap between the political rhetoric (laid down in Joint Declarations on EU-NATO Cooperation in 2016, 2018 and 2023) and day-to-day practice. This is especially pressing in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, which has increased the need for a more coordinated EU-NATO partnership. Two aspects stand out in this regard.

Firstly, as NATO and the EU continue to expand their roles into each other's domains, addressing complementarity and interoperability between the two organizations remains essential. The war in Ukraine has revealed the inadequacies of European defense capabilities, including the fragmentation of the European defense industry and the EU's dependence on NATO, particularly the US, for strategic enablers. As European NATO allies ramp up defense spending, the partnership between NATO and the EU becomes essential with regard to the coordination of capabilities targets (NATO), as well as providing fiscal mechanisms to incentivize joint procurement (the EU).

Secondly, the unpredictability of US foreign policy under Donald Trump's second presidency constitutes a challenge to the European security architecture. Trump's rhetoric, including calls to reduce US involvement in Europe and NATO and even blackmail through discussions of a US exit from the Atlantic Pact, represents a significant challenge to transatlantic security cooperation. A potential withdrawal of US support for Ukraine and NATO exacerbates fears of European dependence on the

US. With Trump's previous criticism of NATO and the US commitment to European security, the EU may find itself needing to strengthen its own defense capabilities. This is particularly true in areas where NATO alone might not be sufficient, such as hybrid threats and cyber warfare.

Despite Poland and Germany's recognition of NATO's fundamental importance to European security; joint support for increased defense spending; and the advancement of a European defense industrial base; the nuances of the national approaches – such as their views on the US commitment to Europe's security – reflect distinct historical, geographical and strategic imperatives and perceptions. At the same time, in light of the persistent Russian threat, the mutual understanding and close cooperation between these two nations form the backbone of European security architecture.

Poland's perspective on EU-NATO cooperation

Poland's strategic approach to EU-NATO cooperation is profoundly rooted in its geopolitical vulnerability and traumatic historical experiences with Russian aggression and dominance. The country's national security framework is fundamentally anchored in a robust transatlantic alliance, with NATO – and particularly the United States – serving as its primary security guarantor

In recent years, responding to the increasingly imperialistic Russian policy, Poland has dramatically increased its defense spending to bolster its security posture and to contribute to the overall security of NATO's Eastern Flank. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Poland's military expenditure has risen substantially, reaching approximately 4.2% of its GDP in 2024, well above the NATO-recommended 2% threshold. The Polish government has already announced that in 2025 the defense budget will reach 4.7%, showing a significant increase compared to before Russia's invasion. In other words, with the defense spending planned for 2025 (43.6 billion euros), Poland is moving closer to the spending of countries with significantly higher GDPs per capita, such as Germany. Poland's financial commitment represents one of Europe's highest defense spending levels, and also reflects the country's serious approach to national security and the security of the NATO Eastern Flank.

The Polish strategic doctrine also prioritizes hard security measures, with a particular focus on deterrence and territorial defense. The geopolitical tensions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have only reinforced Poland's security strategy. The country has become a critical front line state, hosting NATO troops and providing substantial military support to Ukraine. At the same time, the Polish policymakers decided to put forward significant military investments, including the acquisition of advanced South Korean and US military equipment. Poland has purchased among other things Abrams tanks; FA-50 light combat aircraft; Black Panther tanks; Thunder self-propelled howitzers; Apache attack helicopters; the Integrated Battle Command System to support Patriots; and multiple rocket launcher systems like HIMARS, which significantly enhance its defensive capabilities along the Eastern Flank. These acquisitions are strategically positioned to create a robust defensive line against potential Russian aggression.

At the same time, the EU has increasingly become an important security framework as well for Poland. While the previous Polish government led by Mateusz Morawiecki maintained a skeptical stance toward EU defense mechanisms, the current government under Donald Tusk has shifted Poland's approach, offering more

support for the EU's growing role in security and defense matters. A manifestation of this strategy is a joint geopolitical agenda for the EU put forward by the Weimar Triangle in May 2024, and Poland's vocal interest in defense-oriented initiatives of the new EU administration, such as the White Paper for Defense expected to be published in March 2025. Still, Warsaw carefully evaluates EU security initiatives through the lens of complementarity with NATO, ensuring that any collaborative efforts do not compromise the Alliance's strategic effectiveness. This approach demonstrates Poland's pragmatic diplomatic strategy, balancing its strong priority for NATO alignment with constructive EU engagement, which is seen as complementary.

Germany's perspective on EU-NATO cooperation

In turn, Berlin's strategic approach to EU-NATO cooperation represents a nuanced balancing act, reflecting its central role in European geopolitics and commitment to multilateral security frameworks. As a key European power, Berlin advocates for a sophisticated integration of EU and NATO capabilities, seeking to enhance European strategic autonomy while maintaining a strong transatlantic alliance. Germany's commitment to multilateralism is evident in its approach to security policy. The country consistently advocates for collaborative solutions that involve diplomatic dialogue, technological innovation, and strategic cooperation. This commitment is deeply rooted in Germany's post-war political philosophy, which prioritizes peaceful conflict resolution and collective security mechanisms. Thus, one can argue that the nation's strategic outlook represents a forward-looking model of international cooperation, seeking to create a more integrated and resilient European security architecture. By promoting complementary roles for the NATO and EU defense initiatives, Germany positions itself as a key architect of a resilient European security framework. Due to its significant size, Germany's defense industry plays a crucial role in its strategic vision. The country's domestic defense sector, which generates around 42 billion euros annually, benefits from increased European defense integration. By promoting European strategic autonomy, Berlin aims to develop indigenous defense technologies and capabilities that could compete on the global market while reducing dependency on external suppliers.

Admittedly and in opposition to the Polish approach, Germany's defense strategy has traditionally emphasized a comprehensive approach to security that extends beyond traditional military considerations. Germany has significantly invested in addressing hybrid warfare challenges, allocating approximately 800 million euros to cybersecurity initiatives between 2021 and 2023. This investment underscores the country's focus on emerging security threats that transcend conventional military paradigms.

However, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has triggered a fundamental shift in Germany's approach to security, marking a departure from its traditionally restrained defense posture. This shift, often referred to as the *Zeitenwende* (turning point), has underscored the importance of hard security capabilities and led to unprecedented investments in modernizing the Bundeswehr, addressing decades of underfunding and structural inefficiencies. According to SIPRI, Germany's military expenditure has risen in recent years. In 2023, Germany's defense spending increased by 9.0% to reach $66.8 billion, accounting for 1.5% of its GDP. In response to evolving security challenges, the German government has committed to meeting NATO's military spending target of 2% of GDP. To facilitate this, a special €100 billion fund was established in 2022 to bolster the Bundeswehr's capabilities. Projections

indicate that Germany's defense budget will continue to rise. The country plans to allocate €60 billion in 2024. This sustained increase underscores Germany's dedication to enhancing its military capabilities and contributing more robustly to collective defense within the NATO alliance. Despite these planned increases, Germany's defense spending as a percentage of GDP remains below that of countries like Poland or the Baltic states. Nonetheless, Germany's absolute defense expenditure remains among the highest in Europe, reflecting its significant economic capacity and strategic commitments.

Recommendations for Germany and Poland

The dynamics between Poland and Germany in EU-NATO cooperation reveal a complex interplay of similar and different strategic priorities, historical experiences, and shared security challenges. Despite their divergent approaches and persisting tensions, both nations have found common ground in responding to the evolving geopolitical landscape, particularly in the context of Russian aggression in Ukraine.

The ongoing war in Ukraine and the growing recognition of the Russian threat as a critical challenge to the overall European security architecture have acted as powerful catalysts for convergence between Germany and Poland. Both countries have substantially increased their defense spending, aligning with NATO's collective defense goals, and have continuously emphasized enhancing their military readiness. Their shared commitment to strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank has become more pronounced and this is reflected in joint efforts to bolster deterrence and ensure a robust forward presence in the region. Their collaborative potential is evident in their complementary capabilities. Poland's strong emphasis on territorial defense and military hardware acquisition pairs with Germany's technological innovation and diplomatic expertise. This combination creates a more robust European security framework that will hopefully enable the EU and NATO to address both conventional and hybrid threats.

The evolving relationship between Poland and Germany reflects a broader transformation in European security dynamics. Their ability to navigate considerable differences while maintaining a united front against common challenges demonstrates the potential for flexible and adaptive international cooperation.

In light of the above, we conclude with five policy recommendations aimed at both Polish and German policymakers to facilitate and leverage the EU-NATO strategic partnership.

1. Joint mechanism to counter hybrid threats – Establish a bilateral Polish-German center for comprehensive threat assessment and a coordinated response to hybrid warfare, cybersecurity challenges, and disinformation campaigns. This will help create a robust early warning and mitigation system.

2. Integrated defense technology development – Create a joint defense research and development framework that combines Poland's focus on territorial defense equipment with Germany's advanced technological capabilities. Focus on developing interoperable military technologies that strengthen NATO capabilities and European strategic autonomy.

3. Synchronized defense strategy for the Eastern Flank – Develop a coordinated military positioning strategy for NATO's eastern regions, integrating Poland's

front line defense infrastructure with Germany's diplomatic, logistical and operational support. One concrete and crucial step could involve advancing NATO's Central Europe Pipeline System (CEPS) to enhance energy security and operational readiness.

4. Cooperation platform for economic security – Establish a bilateral mechanism that links defense investments with economic policies, enabling more efficient resource allocation and creating synergies between military preparedness and industrial capabilities. This approach would maximize defense spending effectiveness and support technology development.

5. Diplomatic coordination – Create a permanent strategic dialogue framework between the Polish and German leadership to continuously align NATO and EU security perspectives. This will ensure consistent messaging and coordinated approaches to emerging geopolitical challenges, particularly concerning Russia and transatlantic relations.

No Strength Attached? Civil Defense as a (Trans-) National Challenge

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Since the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, new efforts have been made to strengthen the comprehensive defense system in Germany. Nevertheless, the road ahead is still long and many obstacles which slow down this process have historical roots that are deeply ingrained in the German mindset.

Despite the German *Zeitenwende* in 2022 few changes have been implemented in Germany's civil defense system. Indeed, since the time of the Cold War, the civil half of the German defense system has mostly been sidelined. After the alleged end of the Cold War, or 'the end of history' as Francis Fukuyama put it, preparing for emergencies, let alone a wartime scenario, seems to have become (even more) superfluous. This stance has not really changed despite drastic transformations in the international security environment.

The lack of a functioning comprehensive defense system has become a critical issue since existing problems have only multiplied and diversified in recent years mostly due to the war in Ukraine resulting in new challenges. Germany has become a main target of Russian hybrid warfare, especially disinformation campaigns. If the civilian side of the German defense system isn't bolstered and given stronger (financial) support and more attention by authorities, the whole defense system will fail in an emergency, or worse yet in a wartime scenario, since both sides of the system have to function properly to ensure not only deterring but also defense capabilities.

Civil defense: not only a German problem

The German Guidelines for Total Defense, published in 2024, define that every NATO member state is responsible for their own individual civil defense measures. However, 'civil defense' or 'civil preparedness', which is the official NATO terminology, is not and cannot solely be a national task as too many aspects of civil defense require multi- or transnational approaches and coordination. This was already acknowledged in 1949 when the NATO was established. Article 3 of NATO's founding treaty provides the basis for joint measures in the sector of civil preparedness: "In order to more effectively achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack." In the 1950s NATO established a Civil Emergency Planning Committee which acted as an advisory board for NATO member states in the area of civil defense. It supported the planning and coordination of many civil defense measures of its member states. Although this shows an awareness of joint measures, it must be acknowledged that

already during the Cold War the "nationalization" of the majority of civil defense measures led to diverging results and stark contrasts when it comes to the implementation of civil defense programs in NATO member states.

After the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, it became increasingly clear that NATO needed to boost its civil preparedness and resilience. Thus, at the Warsaw summit of 2016 NATO member states agreed on seven Baseline Requirements to enhance NATO`s resilience capacity. These encompass: assured continuity of government and critical government services; resilient energy supplies; the ability to deal effectively with uncontrolled movements of people; resilient food and water resources; the ability to deal with mass casualties; resilient civil communications systems; and resilient civil transportation systems. It is important to note that these measures do not only concern the civil side but they also add to NATO's military defense capabilities. This becomes fairly obvious when you consider the effect uncontrolled movements of civilians would have on military deployment moves or the need to ensure energy supplies for the civilian population as well as the military in case of an attack on critical energy infrastructure. To showcase this interconnectedness in a nutshell: 90% of military transport is accomplished using civilian assets, over 50% of satellite communications used for defense purposes are provided by the commercial sector, and 75% of host nation support to NATO operations is provided by local commercial sources. Civil defense measures and well thought-through civil-military cooperation are thus an important aspect of deterrence by denial, which aims at persuading an adversary not to attack because an attack would not achieve its intended objectives.

Especially when it comes to hybrid threats, the importance of a transnational approach towards civil defense becomes all the more obvious. An attack more often than not concerns multiple parties, as in the case of the supposed attack on a submarine data cable between Finland and Germany in November 2024 that disrupted communication channels. Moreover, disinformation campaigns sometimes use similar or even the same narratives to destabilize several societies. The common denominator of most recurring narratives is the fear that life as one knows it will take a turn for the worse. A narrative that appears across several (European) states, among them Germany and Poland, is that of anti-immigration and xenophobia. Stories transporting this narrative often foster the idea that refugees are criminals and are treated better than nationals. In Poland, for example, a false story spread that Polish citizens were being discharged from hospitals to treat Ukrainian refugees. In the German case, these rumors claim a rise in crime rates, especially violent assaults, committed by refugees.

NATO and the EU have institutionalized mechanisms to counteract these hybrid attacks and enhance resilience and civil preparedness in general. Research institutions, such as the Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid threats or the EU DisinfoLab strive to enhance knowledge about connected risks. NATO also undertakes regular assessments of the civil preparedness state of the alliance and the efforts of its individual member states. The difficulty of implementing laws and/or programs on a multi-national level however, point to the limitations and challenges of these measures. Ironically, it is often the democratic framework, and thus the exact system of values that the Western alliance tries to protect, which hinders that process by allowing discussions, disagreements and diverging approaches. These difficult negotiating processes may be used nefariously by adversaries who seek an advantage.

German (lack of) experience with civil defense

Taking a closer look at the German approach towards civil defense, it is evident that it stands in stark contrast to that of some of its neighboring countries, especially those to the East and to the North. Whereas those countries, like Finland, Sweden and the Baltic States have extensive programs for civil defense and a strong governmental incentive, until just recently, Germany's civil defense program was almost non-existent. A telling example are the above-mentioned Guidelines for Total Defense which were published only in June 2024. The previous version of these Guidelines dated back to 1989, a time when the Cold War still provided the framework for civil defense planning assumptions. At first glance this negligence might seem all the more astonishing, considering the role Germany plays in European defense and security structure and its being one of the main targets of Russian hybrid attacks. However, upon close examination, the root causes for this unwillingness, or at least hesitancy, to take action are revealed.

As with many things in Germany, one has to start with the end of the Second World War. After Germany's complete defeat in 1945, demilitarization was one of the main goals of the Allies to ensure that Germany would never again pose a threat to other nations. Simultaneously the international security environment changed which led to a new conflict, soon to be known as the Cold War. The Soviet bloc and the Transatlantic community delved into a confrontation that was accompanied by the formation of two military alliances: NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, the two German states that resulted out of these developments, respectively joined the two alliances. At that time, the confrontational line traversed the middle of Germany, making new defense measures all the more necessary.

Following the Federal Republic of Germany's accession to NATO in 1955, it started to build new military capacities and new civil defense programs. Crucially, it remained important to avoid the appearance of Germany as a military threat again. For this reason, and unlike in other countries, German civil defense remained under civilian control and under the purview of the Federal Ministry of the Interior. Since the 1950s, comprehensive approaches existed in Germany which aimed at protecting the civilian population and at strengthening its resilience. Measures also included actions against hybrid threats; although most were only designated to be put into effect during or shortly before an actual act of aggression or an interstate war. Under these circumstances, a source from the 1980s stressed, that "The Warsaw Pact has means at its disposal to weaken our psychological and physical resistance, especially since it will coordinate these means with measures of a political, military and subversive nature." The report thus stressed the importance of information policy as part of NATO's deterrence strategy and the necessity of its coordination ("to speak with one voice").

During much of the Cold War, Germany still continued to struggle with its Second World War legacy, limiting its government incentive, especially in activating the civilian population to take part in its defense efforts. Thus, despite several civil defense concepts being developed by the West German government during the Cold War, the majority resulted in poor realization. For example, the shelter capacity for the German population never exceeded the benchmark of 4 %; in other words, none at all. The situation deteriorated even further after the so-called end of the Cold War. While the 1990s brought about German reunification, they also witnessed the breakdown of the Soviet Union. As a result, the security environment seemed to have

fundamentally changed. As the former German Minister for Defense, Volker Rühe, famously stated, "We are now surrounded by friends." This resulted in Germany drastically reducing its defense spending and also cutting most programs and provisions connected to civil defense. Additionally, this involved the closing down and selling of (the few) public shelters or deinstallation of sirens which were part of the public warning system – the only portion of the German civil defense system that had really been established during the Cold War. Quantitatively during this period, the spending for civil defense was cut from 500 million Euro in 1992, to 200 million Euro in 2006. This reveals that not even events like 9/11 or the major flooding hazards in Germany (2002) substantially changed the course of action.

A shift to strengthen civil defense started to slowly take hold following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and on a larger scale after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In the civilian sector, it brought about the development of a new concept for civil defense, which was issued in 2016. An emphasis on the risk posed by hybrid threats was recognized and a related strategy offered for the first time. However, the focus remained on peaceful disaster or crisis management. Since 2016, further concepts have been developed that, considering the expanding scope especially of Russian threats and aggression, try to further reinforce German military and civil defense in all parts of society in a comprehensive approach. This is all the more important, since Germany has become one, if not the central, target for Russian hybrid threats, especially in disinformation campaigns. Again, this should not come as a surprise, since Germany as an economically strong nation in the heart of Europe and an essential supporter of Ukraine, is a strategic and highly relevant target for Russia.

Germany fulfills a leading role in NATO's engagement in Eastern Europe, deploying a brigade to Lithuania starting in 2025 and serves as NATO's logistical hub in Europe. Moreover, Russia targets Germany to such a high degree because there exists a strong German-Russian minority, that encompasses about 3 million people (ethnic Russians immigrants, *Russlanddeutsche* (Germans of Russia), Russian Jews) who comprise a considerable voter base. Without a doubt, if Russian disinformation campaigns manage to reach this audience it might have a palpable effect on the German political landscape and potentially destabilize society in certain federal states.

Another explanation for the Russian focus on Germany points to Germany's supposed "special relationship" with Moscow. This accounts for the Eastern and Western part of this country. In the East, many Germans tend to have close cultural and political ties with Russia, since the former German Democratic Republic used to be part of the Soviet bloc. In West Germany on the other hand, a considerable portion of Germans feel they have taken on a 'mediator' role, maintaining good relations with especially since the beginnings of the so-called *Ostpolitik* (Eastern policy) in the 1970s. Until 2022, economic ties and a strong dependency on Russian energy resources, especially oil and gas, played a part in this stance.

A comprehensive *Zeitenwende*

Because, to a large extent, hybrid attacks and disinformation campaigns target civilian populations, one of the first goals should be to gain the support of one's own population for civil defense measures and, in a best-case scenario, active participation of the majority. This is an especially big challenge for Germany because since the Second World War German society has been infused with the idea of seeking peace and an equilibrium in international relations. This is also why there has always

existed a strong peace movement in Germany. As has become clear since the enhanced Russian aggression and the proclamation of the *Zeitenwende,* it is very difficult to shift the balance of this firm belief. Many Germans do think that making provisions of any kind that are connected to the military or a wartime scenario, which includes the area of civil defense, account as warmongering. Hence, all measures must start by developing a communication strategy that is able to reach the public. One very important aspect is to not only convey important information, but also to communicate honestly; to give a realistic assessment about what is or is not possible and to clearly state that this is a marathon and not a sprint, if not a permanent task. One of the major goals should also be to let people know they have agency in this scenario. What keeps people from taking action and sliding into a psychologically-informed frozen state is the feeling of helplessness and the rise of fear. One way to combat this can be to show people how they can take steps to actively enhance their own security which would have the side effect of reinforcing the comprehensive defense system of the whole nation. Acquiring media literacy, possibly already in school, would be an important facet in this scenario, to help people to be able to discern Russian disinformation campaigns early on.

While these recommendations are actionable at the grassroots level, it is important for people to see that the government is also taking action and not only leaving it to the individuals to support and protect themselves. This can be one of the lessons learned from Cold War times. From this perspective, *kriegstüchtig* (wartime readiness) must also be understood as *zivilverteidigungstüchtig* (civil defense readiness). Thus, a key and basic recommendation should be to substantially spending for civil defense to complement the increased spending on the military sector. There are many ways, such as strengthening resilient (critical) infrastructure, in which these expenses help to also enhance the credibility of deterrence which has been partly eroded by hesitant behavior from the West in the Ukraine conflict. It is important to reverse this trend. We, the Western alliance, also have to define our own red lines versus Russia and stick to them.

This finally points to one of the most important aspects of a functioning (transnational) comprehensive defense system. Since the Second World War the front lines between homeland and combat zone have become increasingly blurred. Nowadays, more and more dimensions enter the arena and in hybrid warfare scenarios there is no such thing as a safe haven behind the front lines. At the same time the boundaries between peace and war have often become indistinct – since 2022 we find ourselves in an ambiguous state of not peace anymore, but not war yet. Given these realities, it is all the more important to strengthen resilience and comprehensive defense structures not only within our societies, but also within our alliances. This idea should be implemented by working together, sharing resources and insights and developing coordinated approaches towards common threats. Germany could also look to other countries, like Finland or the Baltic states, to learn from their best practices when it comes to developing a good strategy for civil defense. Learning from the experiences of Ukraine, and thus including this nation in a strategic (civil defense) alliance, should be part of a strong incentive to create a resilient civil defense structure in Germany, EU and NATO. Germany and Poland have already adopted a number of measures to cooperate in times of crisis. These include an agreement on mutual assistance in the event of disasters or major accidents and the establishment of a center for cross-border police cooperation.

There exists a great range of further possibilities to cooperatively enhance each country's civil defense capabilities. One opportunity could be to develop a

joint information campaign that highlights how we have become targets of similar disinformation narratives, e. g. that Ukrainian refugees are being prioritized over one's own nationals when it comes to health or social care. Further options arise when one looks at the hard facts of civil defense like protecting critical infrastructure or securing supplies for the general public. In November 2024, the Polish Prime Minster, Donald Tusk, suggested a multinational initiative to protect the Baltic Sea from Russian threats, reacting to the data cable incident already mentioned. Germany should respond to this proposal and closely cooperate with Poland to ensure the realization of this project.

A poster boy of support for Ukraine. Struggling with the normalization of war and raising enemies within in Poland

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Poland's solidarity with Ukraine is increasingly showing signs of fatigue, especially as historical and economic tensions are instrumentalized by the far right. Such a development endangers not only relations with Ukraine and European unity in dealing with Russia, but also Poland's own security.

The case of Poland shows that even NATO frontline states, whose stance on the war in Ukraine could hardly have been clearer at the beginning of the conflict, are suffering from political and social fatigue from the war. Even if in the medium term political forces won't come into decision-making positions that would herald a complete turnaround in Ukraine policy or even call NATO membership into question, we can't speak of unconditional support anymore. This shows that in the face of similar or even worse developments in other EU and NATO countries (see the most recent presidential elections in Romania, for example, which were accompanied by the surge of radical right promoting pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western ideas, unprecedented Russia's interference in the campaign and the annulment of the first round), it will become increasingly difficult to take a united stand against Russian aggression. Moreover, the case of Romania shows, that the security situation in Europe, here especially in frontline states, could deteriorate rapidly. This challenge is particularly relevant in Poland because of the presidential elections of key importance for its future will be held in late Spring this year.

The socio-political and historical background of Polish-Ukrainian relations

Poland shares with Ukraine not only a long history of coexistence and cooperation, but also a history of conflict that, during the German occupation in World War II, led to the massacre of (mostly Polish) civilians (the Volhynian massacre). As a result of the ethnic tensions and the war, Poland lost its former eastern territories, including an almost complete exchange of populations on both sides of the new border. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it proved difficult to come to terms with these events. The dominant perspective in Poland was not only that the now independent Ukraine had not done enough for reconciliation, but also that the Ukrainian nationalists responsible for the massacres of Polish civilians are publicly remembered and positively referred to. According to a general population survey in Poland, 60% of respondents considered in 2018 the shared history to be rather and clearly divisive for relations, while no one assumed that it was clearly unifying, and only 23% assumed that it was rather unifying. Although there are traditional voices of reconciliation and warnings to come to terms with the Polish crimes against the Ukrainians, such

unresolved historical baggage is a fertile breeding ground for fomenting discord, as the two terms of Law and Justice (PiS) in power (2015-2023) have demonstrated. Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the party, was the first heavy-wight Polish politician who openly stated that Poland will precondition Ukraine's accession to the EU on changes of its politics of memory concerning the Ukrainian nationalist guerrilla in line with the Polish position.

Despite this historical background, Polish society and politics responded to the full-scale invasion of Russia against Ukraine with immense mobilization and support. Not only did countless people help with the initial care of the large number of refugees from the war (63% stated in April 2022 that they or someone in their household had volunteered to help refugees from Ukraine), but the PiS government was also one of the first to supply large amounts of heavy equipment (supported by 68% of the population, who were in favor of NATO supplying heavy offensive weapons) and called on NATO partners, especially Germany, to act more decisively and provide extensive military support to Ukraine.

Almost three years after the outbreak of the war, this picture has changed. Although there has been no collapse in support, there has been a gradual decline, for example in the willingness to accept refugees, from 94% in March 2022 to 53% in September 2024. During this period, there were also open political conflicts with Ukraine, especially during the PiS government. One example is the statement by then-Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki in September 2023 that Poland would no longer provide military support due to grain imports. Also motivated by grain imports, border crossings were blocked during the so-called Farmer's Protests in February 2024, resulting in an import ban on certain agricultural products, which was challenged by Ukraine at the WTO and is still in place under the Tusk government that took power in December 2023. Moreover, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, deputy prime minister from the peasant party, several times have stated that Ukraine will not join the EU without apologizing for the crimes and *de facto* accepting the Polish interpretation of the past. His position was endorsed, though in a milder way, by prime minister Donald Tusk, the leader of the center-right Civic Coalition. Although such political threats and conflicts can be explained by domestic political developments or economic interests, they nevertheless put a strain on Polish-Ukrainian relations and, above all, on public opinion. This is one of the reasons for the worsening attitude of Poles towards war-torn Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. Moreover, such public conflicts and accusations open windows of opportunity for anti-Ukrainian actors and narratives.

Protagonists of anti-Ukrainian narratives

The protagonists of the dissemination of content critical or even hostile to Ukraine are mainly found on the far right in Poland and are therefore much more marginalized than in Germany, for example, where the far-right Alternative for Germany and the left-wing nationalist Alliance of Sahra Wagenknecht have adopted a hostile stance towards support for Ukraine as one of their main political messages (and where there are at least skeptical voices about arms supplies within the Social Democrats, who hold the office of chancellor). Nevertheless, they exist in Poland and have a considerable echo, especially online.

First of all, we should mention the politicians of the Confederation Party which at the beginning of 2025 enjoys support of up to 15% of decided voters. Most active in spreading anti-Ukraine content is the controversial and provocative Grzegorz

Braun, who participates in "peace" protests, which are much smaller in Poland than in Germany, or on X, where he has over 200,000 followers and actively tweets under hashtags such as #StopUkrainizacjiPolski (Stop the Ukrainization of Poland). A July 2022 document from his party, Konfederacja Korony Polskiej, which is part of the Confederation Party, bears the same name. It warns of mass immigration from Ukraine, which would change the ethnic composition of Poland, stirs up debates of envy against Ukrainians allegedly favored by the social welfare system, warns of imported violent crime, and instrumentalizes historical tensions (especially the Volhynia massacre).

However, so-called independent journalists, who usually publish as freelancers on their own online channels and/or have links to far-right Internet media, also play a central role as mouthpieces. In this context, the former priest and far-right extremist Jacek Międlar, who intensified his historically based anti-Ukrainian statements after February 2022 on far-right platforms such as wPrawo.pl, where he published the documentary "Neighbors. The last witnesses of the Ukrainian genocide against the Poles". Another particularly vivid example is wRealu24.tv, an Internet TV channel, which has been accused by the Polish secret service of spreading Russian propaganda and is full of anti-Ukrainian content. Typical titles of such broadcasts include "URGENT NEWS! We expose how Ukrainian 'refugees' are ripping off the Polish welfare system". Less inflammatory but more wide-ranging (especially historically motivated) content critical of Ukraine is also published in established right-wing media such as Do Rzeczy or wPolityce. Influencers and publicists such as Wojciech Cejrowski, Rafał Ziemkiewicz, and Stanisław Michalkiewicz, who were already spreading their Ukraine-critical narratives before the war broke out, play a central role in this.

In addition to politically identifiable politicians and publicists, there is also the phenomenon of influencers who make derogatory remarks about Ukrainian refugees. The most prominent example is Jakub Czarodziej (actually Jakub Łotecki), who specializes in topics such as personal development and motivation and is known for his direct and controversial style. He has an impressive reach of well over half a million followers each on Facebook and TikTok. In September 2022, he published a video that was widely criticized in the media discourse, in which he listed a whole series of alleged misdeeds of Ukrainian refugees and described them as dogs that bite the hand that feeds them and should therefore be shot.

Channels of anti-Ukrainian propaganda

Anti-Ukrainian narratives are spread particularly actively on the Internet. For example, before February 2022, there were information portals in Poland openly supported by foreign actors (probably coordinated by the Kremlin) that translated Russian content into Polish (this also happens with other target languages). The most popular were https://pl.mriya.news/, https://pravda-pl.com/ or Rubaltic.ru. However, there are also websites with pro-Russian content that are more tailored to the Polish audience. These include Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny (Independent Political Newspaper) or myslpolska.info. Many of the large and small platforms that spread Russian propaganda were blocked in Poland in April 2022 by the Polish domestic intelligence service. Some have successfully appealed, while others have been active on messaging apps since the block, most notably Telegram. However, the reach of Telegram groups and channels is much smaller than in Germany, and only in exceptional cases do they have more than 15,000 followers. By comparison, one of the largest in Germany, News from Russia by Alina Lipp, has nearly 190,000 followers.

Nevertheless, the Polish public sphere is flooded with Russian disinformation. Analyses by the Instytut Monitorowania Mediów (IMM) and Stowarzyszenie Demagog showed that about 90% of anti-Ukrainian content in Poland appears on the X portal. Between 5,000 and 15,000 thousand posts with anti-Ukrainian content were counted every month in 2023. Among the top ten accounts on X, the aforementioned Grzegorz Braun was in second place (the potential reach of his anti-Ukrainian posts is 642,000). The other nine accounts with the highest reach (1,000,000 to 265,000 interactions) are run under pseudonyms and cannot be attributed to a specific person or organization.

Measures and Aims of the Anti-Ukrainian Actors

Anti-Ukrainian actors in Poland apply the same strategies as in other countries, with the basic rule being the flooding of public space with disinformation. This is done through a mixture of propaganda created in Russia and disseminated from abroad through dubious Internet portals and social media channels (also using bots). The relevant narratives are then picked up and shared by actors and influencers from the far-right or conspiratorial scene, who often do not work directly for the Russian side.

At the latest in this second step, the propaganda is adapted to the local context. In Poland, this is usually a reference to historical issues, such as the Volhynia massacre in particular, or the Ukrainian nationalists active at the time in general (with the symbolic figure of their leader, Stepan Bandera). These historical animosities have traditionally been one of the most important vehicles for evoking hostility toward Ukraine and Ukrainians in Poland. However, anti-immigrant sentiments, which are also virulent in Poland, are also often used. Envy debates are evoked, according to which Ukrainian refugees are either favored or unnecessarily take up scarce resources in Poland. The image of alleged ingratitude or unjustified expectations of the refugees also plays a central role (cf. the story of a Ukrainian woman who was said to have expected a free haircut – a Polish version of the story about dentists by Freidrich Merz, chairman of the Christian Democrats in Germany). The assumed threat to public order posed by criminal migrants and refugees also plays a role.

Furthermore, anti-Ukrainian narratives are scandalized in the case of suitable breaking news. This often happens when there are media reports about crimes committed by Ukrainians who have fled the country, with fake news also playing an important role. An example of this is a deadly attack in the center of Warsaw on May 8, 2022, which was attributed to a Ukrainian man on social media by a pro-Russian Telegram channel, contrary to the facts and denials of the security authorities. However, anti-Ukrainian messages are also increasingly spread whenever the Polish government openly engages in conflicts with Ukraine, which are then used as an opportunity to create negative sentiment against Ukraine and the Ukrainian refugees – for example, during the farmers' protests, when the cost of supporting Ukraine was scandalized as being too burdensome for Poland.

Recommendations for Poland

The Polish government needs to do much more to counter disinformation campaigns and anti-Ukrainian narratives. It would be advisable to work more closely with civil society actors working against disinformation, to support them better, but also to launch public campaigns emphasizing the importance of standing together with Ukraine. In doing so, one can certainly point out that military and financial

support for Ukraine is not only a moral imperative, but also in Poland's security interests.

Similarly, the importance of supporting Ukrainian refugees should be communicated more publicly, not only to support those affected who are increasingly exposed to hostile discourse, but also to encourage Polish volunteers to continue their work and assist Ukrainians that found shelter in Poland. After all, they are the ones who act as multipliers of a positive attitude towards refugees and witnesses of the horrible consequences of war.

Finally, a broad political consensus must be reached to ensure that Ukraine policy is not instrumentalized in Poland's highly polarized and populist political climate. The anti-Ukrainian narratives of the Confederation or similar public voices should therefore be ignored by the other parties in order to prevent its messages from gaining further public resonance. Nevertheless, the further radicalization of the PiS' position on the Ukrainian issue might make this *cordon sanitaire* unsustainable.

German anti-establishmentarianism and the Russian war in Ukraine

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Support for Ukraine in the Russian war has been weakening among German voters throughout 2024, and anti-establishment parties have been successfully taking on representation at the national level. These groups are mainly successful in the Eastern provinces of the country, which make up only 20% of the total vote. Such parties tend to gain voter support with the weakening of the economy.

Unlike the dominant parties in the German Bundestag who support weapons deliveries to Ukraine, the majority of Germans oppose them. However, this will – mostly – not influence their voting decisions in the next federal election in February 2025 — except for those also distrustful of democracy. But the growing anti-establishment feeling and increasing voter volatility make it difficult to predict the next election results. The consequences of this for support for Ukraine might be hard to plan for as a result. Over the course of 2024, Germans have increasingly objected to weapons deliveries to Ukraine. Those who object now make up more than 50% of the population. In contrast, the majority of the members of parliament of the mainstream political parties (Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberals and Greens) approve of supplying weapons to Ukraine, levying sanctions against Russia, and taking in Ukrainian refugees.

There thus seems to be a representation gap that two political parties are trying to use to gain votes from at least a considerable minority contesting Germany's support for Ukraine: the conservative left Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht (*Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht - BSW*) and the far-right Alternative for Germany *(Alternative für Deutschland - AfD*). The far-left Die Linke (the Left) also engages in such rhetoric at times. The results of federal elections, which will be held in February 2025, will depend on the outcome of these attempts at representation and the electoral performance of these parties, especially the AfD. The more successful the AfD and BSW are in the upcoming election, the worse for Ukraine's cause in Germany.

The German political scene and the war in Ukraine

Whilst representatives of almost all German parties initially condemned the Russian invasion in Ukraine on February 24th 2022, they took a few days to agree on the delivery of weapons to Ukraine and comprehensive sanctions against Russia. Exceptions to this unanimity could be found in Die Linke and the AfD, but also in significant segments of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* - SPD). This was even true to a certain extent regarding the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Die Linke justified their stance with a general and principled commitment to disarmament and opposition to weapons shipments.

They consider themselves mainly to be representatives of Eastern German culture and a voice for peace. They have even taken positions sceptical of NATO for years, calling for its abolition. The AfD point to Western culpability for the escalations, even accusing Chancellor Scholz of restarting the Cold War. A significant number of Social Democrats fear igniting a Third World War, though others align more closely with the conservative Christian Democratic Union (*Christlich Demokratische Union* - CDU), the liberal Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei* - FDP) or Alliance 90/ The Greens (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen)*, all of whom support supplying Ukraine with weapons, albeit for different reasons. Thus, the mainstream parties have been clear on their support for Ukraine, whilst anti-establishment parties on the far left and far right have been clear in opposing support for Ukraine.

In early 2024, a splinter group within Die Linke formed a new party named after its founder, one of Germany's most popular and well-known politicians, Sahra Wagenknecht. BSW runs on a platform they call "left-conservative": their voters are close to the Social Democrats with regards to "left" social and economic policies, and close to the Christian Democrats in their opposition to gendered language, migration, multiculturalism and green taxes. That is why Sahra Wagenknecht calls BSW a left -wing conservative party.

Although only just founded a year ago, as of January 2025 BSW is expected to gather around 6% of the votes in the upcoming federal elections, enjoying its largest support in the Eastern provinces (where polls show they might gain up to 20% of the vote). The success of BSW means that their parent party, Die Linke, will probably be relegated from parliament as a result of not reaching the election threshold of 5%. The four most important political issues named by BSW's potential voters are dissatisfaction with current policies; personal confidence in Sahra Wagenknecht; fear of the country's decline; and dissatisfaction over the government's support of Ukraine. Amongst these issues, studies have shown that the Russian aggression against Ukraine is the most salient issue for BSW supporters. Indeed, the stance of a voter on the Russian war is the clearest predictor of their support for BSW.

Alternative, BSW and the East

There is another party representing voters who would prefer to cease all support of Ukraine: the AfD. Like BSW, the AfD has considerable voter support in the Eastern provinces (approximately 30%). Overall, they are expected to win roughly 18% of the vote in the entire country, which means that they might nearly double their share of the vote compared to the 2021 election (where they achieved 10%). But whilst they are overall the second most successful party after the Christian Democrats, they are the most successful party in the Eastern provinces (followed by the Christian Democrats and BSW). Eastern voters thus seem considerably more willing to vote conservative (left or right), but also significantly more nationalistic and anti-establishment than Western voters. Both BSW and the AfD run anti-establishment campaigns with a populist veneer. They distinguish those who they call the "real people", the "honest hard working decent" man, the "little" ordinary man, or the "normal German" from those they call the elite, who they regard as corrupt, self-regarding, self-righteous, toxic to the general good, and detrimental to the German economy. These anti-establishment perspectives are, needless to say, also to some degree anti-democratic. That may be because, as the contemporary historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk has argued, democracy is detrimental to "peace and quiet", to orderliness

and homogeneity. For many Eastern Germans, the post-communist unification did not bring the wealth and national brotherhood they had imagined. Instead, it brought unemployment and a unification with West Germany that had seen considerable levels of migration of visible minorities unexpected by the East. Unification thus came with a sense of unease, and the economic and personal shocks of unification caused little identification with the new democracy.

Thus, the hardships of unification came with a re-appraisement of the communist dictatorship and economy. The German Democratic Republic (DDR) now, to some, seemed to offer safer, better, more equal times, in which key decisions were taken for the population without any consultations. Government control of the media also meant that crises and conflicts stayed unknown. Suddenly, after the reunification, conflicts were discussed openly, and the individual was expected to develop an opinion on them. This was deemed egregious.

For Eastern Germany after reunification, there was no economic miracle to sweeten the transition to democracy the way the Western Germans experienced after 1949. On the contrary, they saw their economy having to cope with serious problems that saw the lives of many people upended. Still, 35 years after reunification, mistrust of government is more widespread in the Eastern provinces, and the current "poly-crises" stoke ever more displeasure with democracy. Additionally, an admiration for Putin has been publicly voiced ever since the anti-Muslim Pegida's demonstrations (2015) and especially during the pandemic lockdown (2020). Demonstrators against COVID-19 policies held placards asking Putin for help against what was seen as a vaccination dictatorship (*"Putin hilf!"*). This dissatisfaction with democracy continues to be more characteristic of Eastern German than Western voters. These two groups of voters continue to show noticeable differences in voting behaviour, political culture and attitudes, and generally divergent interests. Both BSW and the AfD are playing to these differences with considerable success.

The AfD and BSW are not the only parties that explicitly support the Russian perspective on the war, or argue against supplying weapons to Ukraine. A handful of other more local parties, such as the Free Saxons (*Freie Sachsen*, a local secessionist and monarchist party), Homeland (*Heimat*, the former far-right extremist National Democratic Party), and the Third Way (*der Dritte Weg*, another neo-Nazi party) tend to favour "peace", by which they often mean that Ukraine should surrender. However, it should be remembered that sometimes their members also volunteer for nationalist Ukrainian battalions in a show of comradeship, so there is no united right-wing and anti-democratic front supporting Putin's war. Most of these parties are relevant mainly at a very local or regional level. In contrast to these, the two federal parties BSW and AfD have reason to be optimistic that they will be reasonably successful in the upcoming federal elections in February 2025, though with significant regional disparities.

No to weapons deliveries!

There are, of course, serious differences in the aims of the AfD and BSW, but both support the end to German military support for Ukraine. If we look at the reasons that are brought up against weapons deliveries to Ukrainians, BSW and the AfD agree on four issues. My analysis of 19 recent Bundestag debates on military support for Kyiv shows that these include:

1. *Particularist principles of solidarity* – German taxpayer money should not be spent on foreigners (including refugees and immigrants) or their wars. Instead, German money should go to German pensioners, infrastructure and military buildup.

2. *Profiteering* – Those who profit from the war are (mainly US) arms manufacturers and shareholders of military companies that are seen to lobby and unduly influence democratic governments, rendering their decisions undemocratic. Supporting Ukraine is for Sahra Wagenknecht and the AfD proof of the country's status as a transatlantic vassal.

3. *Social Justice* – Germans are affected by the war in their everyday lives via price increases; refugee movements; the consequences of sanctions; and shortages of goods.

4. *Apocalyptic consequences* – The government's decision to support Ukraine affects the quality of democracy in Germany; is ruinous of the German economy; causes widespread poverty for Germans; and results in crumbling infrastructure.

The AfD and BSW disagree on much at the same time. For instance, they diverge on the *cause* of the war. BSW's perspective is that the US provoked the Russians by stationing NATO troops in Ukraine. Once the Russians responded as expected, the US now wants to profit from a boost to their military industrial complex on the one hand while trying to achieve or maintain their hegemony on the other. BSW sees an international conspiracy at work with the German government as dupes. Meanwhile, the AfD is more likely to see the cause of war in a fraternal conflict between Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking Ukrainians, and thus a local matter and a civil war. In either case, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is viewed as a matter that Germans should not need to get involved in. One MP of the AfD has even described the Russian invasion as a "proxy war" between the US and China for hegemony.

What to expect after the elections

Neither the AfD nor BSW will likely be able to form a government in the next election cycle at the federal level. Thus, future governments are likely to continue to support Ukraine through weapons supplies. However, there are a couple of ways in which these parties can affect federal decision-making. This is namely in terms of coalition governments at the *Länder* level, by changing public attitudes to the war in Ukraine influencing positions of these MPs from SPD whose support for Ukraine is lukewarm and achieving blocking minority status in the Bundestag in the future.

At the Länder level, BSW is making good progress. Whilst the AfD is not a member of a coalition government in any of the *Länder*, the BSW has just formed coalition governments in Thuringia (with the CDU and the SPD) and in Brandenburg (with the SPD) in the final months of 2024. In both Thuringia and Brandenburg, BSW's central condition for the coalition agreements was a peace clause. These coalition governments must promote diplomatic solutions to the war and push for two issues at the federal level. First, they must oppose the stationing of US long-range missiles on German soil, and second, they must stop German weapons supplies to Ukraine. Also, a diplomatic solution to the "Ukraine conflict" must be sought by both governments.

Of course, none of these decisions are actually taken at the level of the *Länder,* nor are these governments responsible for German foreign policy.

However, the Federal Council (Bundesrat), which consists of representatives of the state governments, can pass resolutions on foreign and security policy issues. On the second anniversary of the Russian attack on Ukraine, the Federal Council passed a resolution stating that military support for Ukraine was still necessary. Individual federal states can also take the initiative. In March 2022, Bavaria submitted a motion for a resolution regarding an "immediate program" to equip the Bundeswehr. There was no majority in the Federal Council in favor of it and the public response was zero. A motion for a resolution by Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg against the stationing of American medium-range missiles would probably be just as inconsequential. Nevertheless, it could be a chance for "pacifists" to rally under one flag.

Matters are a little different in the Bundestag. If we imagine a scenario in which the AfD and BSW become so strong after the upcoming elections that these two parties have a blocking minority, consisting of a third of the members of parliament, they could block important decisions. Currently, as of January 2025, that seems highly unlikely, as both parties combined stand at a maximum of 27% and on average poll below 25%. However, should they achieve the status of a blocking minority with some MPs from other parties (Die Linke if it gets into the parliament, the SPD and others), they could prevent decisions in the Bundestag that require a two-thirds majority, including military support for Ukraine. Moreover, their good results in the upcoming elections might translate into a further increase in the opinion polls and strengthen their influence in public debate.

Although BSW knows that the *Länder* cannot actually make decisions nor influence the international relations of Germany, they celebrate peace clauses as a symbolic victory. And given that a considerable number of Germans, in particular in the East, are against supplying weapons to Kyiv, they are hoping this will draw in more voters. Indeed, voters who oppose supporting Ukraine do favor BSW. This potential to attract voters might very well continue to rise as Germany's economy continues to flatline, infrastructure crumbles, public services are cut, and the inflation rate continues to rise. The current troubles of the automobile industry could also mean more plant closures and rising unemployment mainly in the Eastern provinces.

Indeed, as this dissatisfaction with various social-economic problems rises, so do voters' likelihood of voting for the left and right populists. If the AfD and BSW are gaining influence largely due to various social and economic reasons that are not related to the war in Ukraine, their rise will still undermine the legitimacy of Germany's support for arms supplies to Kyiv. This might eventually impact even the position taken by the mainstream parties.