Germany, Russia and the "In Between"

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A new national security strategy, as proposed by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and as is the focus of this symposium, must also upend the basic features of Germany's Ostpolitik. A Bucha Genuflection is not enough to achieve this – but it could be a good place to start.

Following the battle of Kyiv and the massacres in Bucha, Irpin, and Hostomel, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has entered a new phase. At the same time, the discourse in Germany has also shifted considerably in the last 50 days. Whereas the first month of the war was characterized by passionate words of solidarity and sympathy with the Ukrainian plight, translating words into action seems to be significantly more challenging for Germany. This is not only due to strategic-political considerations, namely what type of support Germany wants to provide to Ukraine, but also because the fundamental cracks in Germany's foreign policy have become apparent. For too long Germany's Ostpolitik has seen Russia as its primary point of reference. The heated debates in the media about the role of German President Steinmeier and the behavior of Ukrainian Ambassador Melnyk expose a discourse that has so far neglected the political positions, historical experiences, and future perspectives of the countries and societies "in-between".

This blog post outlines the possible benchmarks, challenges, and potentials of a regional perspective in the context of the Ukraine crisis. For German foreign policy, this specifically means a change of perspective: Ostpolitik has to be more than just a policy concerning Russia. A new German Ostpolitik 2.0 is an opportunity for the Federal Republic to no longer position itself only defensively vis-à-vis acute problems on arms supplies or Russian energy imports, to avoid imperial East-West "Großraum" logics, and to develop a sustainable European security architecture. It can be seen as the first stress test of the structural changes required in German foreign policy that Stefan Mair has called for in this symposium.

Eastern Europe: the blind spot?

"We are living through a *Zeitenwende*. And that means that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before." This statement by Chancellor Scholz is important, but quite irritating to most people from an Eastern European background. In reality, whose worldview has fundamentally changed in recent days? The point of reference can only be the German one. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is destroying the peaceful lives of millions of people in Ukraine, but Ukraine has been warning of such a crime since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The 2008 war in Georgia also seems to have received little attention in the German consciousness. The interests, historical experiences, and fears of Eastern European states have usually been ignored (for historical examples, see also the viral Twitter thread on #RussianColonialism by Maksym Eristavi). The continued commitment to Nord Stream 2, despite strong criticism from Eastern European states, is a sad culmination of such geopolitical short-sightedness.

In today's foreign policy debate, I identify three types of discourse that are particularly problematic with regard to the Eastern European states and their societies. On the one hand, there are the apologetic "Russlandversteher*inner" of all political backgrounds who deny Ukraine's right to self-determination. They often emphasize the historical guilt of Germany towards Russia on account of the massive crimes committed by the National Socialists in the territory of the former Soviet Union. For them, modern Russia is equivalent to the Soviet Union. On the other hand, there is a new wave of experts who practice "Westsplaining". This term refers to the behavior of Western

experts when they project their analytical schemes and political predictions onto the war in Ukraine, thereby disregarding the interests and expertise of Ukrainians, (other) Eastern Europeans, and affected people (see also the contribution by Cindy Wittke). The third type of discourse is characterized by anti-Slavic racism, which in Germany not only manifests itself in jokes about Polish people or hostility towards Russian speakers, but also in the current political debate, for example when experts in talk shows casually mention that "even if Russians look European, [they] are not Europeans – in the cultural sense" and therefore allegedly have a different understanding of violence and death.

These three discourses significantly shape the conception of Eastern Europe in the debate. Eastern Europe is understood primarily in contrast to Western, enlightened Europe, a process of so-called "othering." The region is conceived as a unitary, homogeneous entity characterized by the clear dominance of Russia or, more importantly, as being primarily "post-Soviet." This negates the linguistic and cultural diversity of Eastern European populations. The fact that Kyiv is geographically closer to Berlin than Rome and only imperceptibly further away than Paris is something most people in Germany have only become aware of since the arrival of thousands and thousands of refugees in recent weeks.

A new German Ostpolitik should resolutely counter all three types of discourse. The conception of Russia as the regional hegemon of a post-Soviet zone of influence can no longer be the exclusive point of reference for Germany's future foreign policy course. Instead, I argue that German security should be understood regionally – in and with Eastern Europe.

Regional Security in and with Eastern Europe

"Russian security interests" have been repeatedly debated in recent weeks, for example in Ulrich K. Preuß' contribution to this symposium. But what are actually the German security interests? The politicking following the foreign and security momentum of February 27, which was initially understood primarily in military terms, reveals its limits when it comes to Germany's dependence on Russian energy imports. The security-oriented turn also requires an energy-oriented turn, as Sebastian Lutz-Bachmann explains. Nicole Deitelhoff argues that a sustainable peaceful order must combine military deterrence, economic interdependence, and political cooperation.

Of course, implementing such a new peaceful order is a mammoth task. It will certainly not be a German solo effort, however, the traditional partners of German foreign and security policy are not very promising so far. Both the U.S. and France are only a few percentage points away from a Trump II or Le Pen presidency; NATO's role in Northern and Eastern Europe is extremely complex (see also Reut Yael Paz's contribution on Finland) and, in any case, purely defense-oriented. Needless to say, it is also hard to imagine how Russia can continue to be included in a European security structure if it is not held accountable for the war crimes in Ukraine in the first place.

The current geopolitical situation therefore underscores the importance of regional security complexes for peace and security in Europe. The theory of regional security complexes was developed within the framework of the so-called Copenhagen School by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. This IR-tradition became known to a wider audience primarily through the concept of securitization. The term describes how certain issues are turned into security problems in political debates, so that, for example, refugees are primarily perceived as a potential security threat. Regional security complexes can respond to these very different threats because they are closely linked geographically and their security needs are structurally interconnected.

Security, in their perspective, is deliberately understood in the broadest terms and includes political, military, economic, social, and ecological needs. This became particularly evident in the German debate. Changes in Russian energy imports to Germany are discussed under very different aspects: as financing for Russian aggression, as a stumbling block for economic dependence, as a potential threat for societal distribution conflicts, and as a potential accelerator of the transition to sustainable energy. Regional

security complexes show that these needs are interrelated: within nation states, but especially within a region. In the age of multipolarity, international security must therefore be constituted primarily at the regional level.

Strengthening regional security complexes in and with neighboring Eastern European states is thus a possible vision for a German Ostpolitik that integrates defense policy as well as economic and ecological perspectives. Certainly, this does not make solutions simpler, but overly simple solutions are seldom sustainable for complex problems.

Lessons for value-based multilateralism

What are the lessons for German policy, especially in multilateral institutions outside of traditional defense policy? The German government's 2021 White Paper on Multilateralism sees the protection of the normative order of international law within the framework of a value-based multilateralism as an elementary task (see also Malcolm Jorgensen). However, the contours of this value-based multilateralism remain vague. The White Paper emphasizes the desire to expand human rights standards and to prevent armed conflicts by strengthening multilateral institutions. Ukraine is also mentioned to a significant extent:

> *Germany resolutely opposes any attempts to weaken international law and international jurisdiction. The open violation of international legal principles such as the general prohibition of the use of force by states and the prohibition of annexation is a particular cause for concern. Germany has therefore repeatedly and firmly condemned Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. The annexation of Crimea by Russia is a contravention of international law that cannot be rectified by staging referenda, nor by maintaining this state of affairs, which was brought about by the use of force. (page 36)*

In practice, however, Germany's value-based cooperation in international institutions often revealed its own limitations, for example in human rights policy. For instance, Germany was the most significant opponent of continued sanctioning or suspension of Russia in the Council of Europe, which had been called for by Ukraine and other Eastern European states. Moreover, in the multilateral institutions which the German government wants to support most intensively – the UN Security Council, NATO, and the G7 – Eastern European states are at most only partially represented.

A new German Ostpolitik which seeks to transfer value-based multilateralism into regional structures should therefore focus on three institutions in particular: the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the EU. These three organizations are not only characterized by the fact that they consider security needs in an integrated way (see also Anna von Gall), they are also inclusive and representative in their composition with regard to Eastern European states.

The OSCE has come to the public's attention as an important forum for conflict management, especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, the high hopes placed in the OSCE have not been translated into the necessary institutional reforms (see also Steinbrück Platise/Moser/Peters 2019). In a cruel twist of fate, the OSCE's hard consensus provisions have thus made it possible for the Russian Federation to refuse to extend the mandate of the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine on March 31, 2022.

The Council of Europe, which expelled Russia in March 2022, faces an acute financial crisis as Russia had been one of the five major donors, thus leaving a large financial gap of 33 million euros. In order to effectively process the flood of cases against Russia in the coming years, including inter-state cases brought by Ukraine and potentially thousands of individual claims on behalf of Ukrainian victims in territories occupied by Russia, the European Court of Human Rights has to rely on additional funding. Experts further argue that the Council of Europe could also install a possible tribunal for the Russian crime of aggression committed against Ukraine. However, all of this requires money. Minister Baerbock has promised the International Criminal Court an additional financial contribution of one million euros; however, it is still unclear whether and to what extent Germany will

provide similar additional support to the Council of Europe.

The EU, with its assistance clause in Article 42 (7) TEU, is at the center of the Ukrainian demands. As investigated by Jelena von Achenbach, the EU has rapidly integrated itself in terms of military policy under the radar of the public. However, those Eastern European states that are particularly threatened by Russian aggression (such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia) are not included because they are not (yet) EU member states. The extraordinary "fast-track membership" process, which the President of the European Commission von der Leyen promised to President Selenskyi, is therefore being watched with great anticipation not only in Ukraine. However, a new German Ostpolitik in the EU must also go beyond the possible accession of Ukraine.

Value-based cooperation reveals itself in two open questions: First, there is the question of how to deal with other Eastern European candidates for accession, for example, with the states of the Western Balkans. This includes Serbia, which has an ambivalent relationship with Russia and does not participate in the EU sanctions. Second, value-based cooperation must also be reflected after accession and in cooperation with Eastern European EU member states. For example, the EU continues to engage the annual Cooperation and Verification Mechanism against Romania and Bulgaria 15 years after their 2007 EU accession. Originally planned as a transitional measure prior to accession, it is now being used by the EU as part of a "carrot and stick" model for Romania and Bulgaria's eventual Schengen accession. Although the apparent problems regarding the rule of law and corruption in both states are well-known, it is nevertheless questionable to what extent the measures of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism are of any use for anymore and whether they may cement a two-class Europe. The European rule of law crisis vis-à-vis Hungary and Poland cannot remain unmentioned either. Unexpectedly, however, the Ukraine crisis reveals a potential opportunity for Germany and other EU member states to split up the authoritarian alliance between Poland and Hungary, as Jakub Jaraczewski and Tom Theuns argue.

Ukraine and Beyond

Two observations can be made at the end of this regionally focused reflection: First, conflict prevention is the best conflict management. Besides the war in Ukraine, simmering centers of conflict exist elsewhere in Eastern Europe, including most notably in Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh, which are directly threatened by the Ukrainian-Russian conflict dynamic. The most critical situation at present, however, exists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the pro-Russian, nationalist politician of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has repeatedly threatened secession as well as a potential recognition of the Serb entity's independence by Russia (similar to the self-proclaimed People's Republics in Donetsk and Lugansk) in recent months. Germany has a special responsibility in this regard, as CSU politician Christian Schmidt is the acting High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. This highly controversial position was introduced by the UN in the wake of the Dayton Agreement and has extremely broad powers. For example, the High Representative can remove democratically elected politicians and officials, pass laws, and create new authorities (the so-called "Bonn powers").

This also includes my second closing point: This appeal for a new German Ostpolitik is not a party-political pillory for statements by party leaders from the SPD and the Left that are extremely worthy of criticism. After all, one should not forget the Azerbaijan affair of politicians from the CDU/CSU, as well as Christian Lindner's close connection to the Belarusian honorary consul Steffen Göpel. Instead, I would just like to end with an excerpt from Willy Brandt's government declaration of October 28, 1969, with the hope that this might inspire some:

> *Our national interest does not allow us to stand between the West and the East. Our country needs cooperation and coordination with the West and understanding with the East.But on this background I say with strong emphasis that the German people need peace – peace in the full sense*

of this word – also with the peoples of the Soviet Union and all the peoples of the European East.We are ready for an honest attempt at understanding, so that the consequences of the disaster brought upon Europe by a criminal clique can be overcome.In doing so, we do not indulge in deceptive hopes: Interests, power relations and social differences cannot be resolved dialectically, nor must they be obfuscated. But our interlocutors must also know this: The right to self-determination, as laid down in the Charter of the United Nations, also applies to the German people.This right and the will to assert it cannot be a subject of negotiation. (translation by the author)

A German version of this article has been published here.

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