

Chapter 14: Europe's Response to the Russian War of Aggression in Ukraine and Germany's Place in the European Security Architecture

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Abstract

In response to the war in Ukraine, European member states have reacted in unison, sanctioning Russia as well as adopting comprehensive military, humanitarian, and financial aid packages for Ukraine. In the process, new power dynamics have emerged within the EU. An inclusive and cooperative security order together with Moscow is no longer conceivable in the foreseeable future. Instead, it is important to establish security in Europe in the face of Russia. In the future, Europeans will have to adjust to the fact that the U.S. will increasingly focus on the Indo-Pacific region and that Europeans will have to take more responsibility for their own security. The expectations placed on Berlin to play a much greater role in the military protection of Europe have increased significantly. Germany must take a leading role here and help ensure security and stability in close cooperation with its NATO allies.

Keywords

Ukraine, Russia, war of aggression, European security architecture, Germany, sanctions, assistance, security order

1 European Reactions to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Russia's war against Ukraine triggered unusual unity in the European Union (EU). While EU member states have often struggled to speak with one voice on foreign policy issues in recent years, this time they reacted resolutely, unitedly, and quickly. Just three days after the war began, the EU had already imposed two comprehensive sanctions packages, closed its

airspace to Russian aircraft and agreed to a 1.2 billion euros aid package. It had declared that citizens of Ukraine could live in the EU for up to three years without applying for asylum. By funding weapons and equipment for Ukraine under the European Peace Facility, the EU also broke a decades-old taboo against sending weapons to crisis areas. Finally, by granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova at record speed, Brussels “pushed open the door to the second great enlargement to the East”.¹ Many things that seemed unthinkable just a short time before suddenly became possible. Looking at all these developments, the Russian invasion represents nothing less than “a turning point for our Union”,² as Commission President Ursula von der Leyen already stated on February 27, 2022. Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, spoke of the “belated birth of a geopolitical Europe”.³

Previous disagreements among EU member states, based in particular on different threat perceptions, were eclipsed by the war, and united action became the focus. Nevertheless, tensions also emerged behind the scenes the longer the war lasted, and new dynamics developed among EU member states. Since then, criticism has been directed primarily against Germany.

While the Russian war of aggression confirmed the perception of Russia as an existential threat, especially in Poland and the Baltic states, the Germans were faced with the ruins of their previous *Russlandpolitik* on February 24, 2022. Together with Paris, Berlin had tried until the end to revive the Minsk II format, to dissuade the Kremlin from its aggressive approach, and to integrate Russia into the existing European security order through dialogue. Berlin believed that reconciling interests with the Kremlin was challenging but ultimately possible, and that Russia could be integrated into the existing architecture as a *stakeholder*. The German mantra was “security in Europe is only possible with Russia”.⁴ This, combined with Germany’s adherence to the *Nord Stream 2* pipeline until January 2022, as well as its initial blocking of a delivery of Estonian howitzers (originally from GDR

1 Lippert, Barbara: Die EU und die zweite große Osterweiterung – Déjà-vus und Neuerungen. In: Bossong, Rafael et al.: Der mögliche EU-Beitritt der Ukraine und seine Konsequenzen, SWP 360 Grad, 2022.

2 Von der Leyen, Ursula: Statement on Further Measures in Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, European Commission, Press release, 27 February 2022.

3 Borrell, Josep: Putin’s War Has Given Birth to Geopolitical Europe, Project Syndicate, 3 March 2022.

4 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: “Scholz. Sicherheit in Europa nur mit Russland möglich”, 15 February 2022.

stockpiles) to Ukraine, earned Germany a reputation of being an unreliable partner with regard to Russia before the war began. In Warsaw, Tallinn, and Riga, as well as in Stockholm and Helsinki, in January 2022 many wondered what to expect from Berlin. *The New York Times* summed up this impression with the headline, “Where Is Germany in the Ukraine Standoff? It’s Allies Wonder”.⁵

After the war began, the German government managed to dispel this mistrust, at least in part. Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s government statement on the *Zeitenwende*, delivered to the Bundestag on February 27, 2022, received a lot of positive reaction and support in Europe and the U.S. The world, Scholz said, had become a different place overnight as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The European security order had been shattered. He also said that Europe’s freedom, democracy, and prosperity are in existential danger.⁶ The resolutions that Scholz announced in his historic speech also met with broad approval in the Bundestag. They included arms deliveries to Ukraine, far-reaching sanctions against Russia, a strengthening of NATO’s eastern flank, a “special fund for the Bundeswehr” secured in the Basic Law, and an immediate reduction in energy dependence on Russia. In the months that followed, according to data from the *Ukraine Support Tracker* of the Institute for the World Economy (IfW), the Federal Republic became the fourth-largest donor of humanitarian, financial, and military aid to Ukraine, behind the U.S., EU institutions, and the United Kingdom.⁷

Nevertheless, distrust of Germany grew again in the months that followed, especially among EU partners in Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe. Many there had the impression that Germany had not sufficiently followed through on its grand announcement of breaking the taboo to adequately supply weapons to Ukraine. The widespread criticism was that Germany delivered too hesitantly, too little, too late. In addition, there was frustration that Berlin had put on the brakes during the debates on Russia’s exclusion from the international payment system SWIFT and on a possible import ban on Russian oil and gas. Minna Ålander of the *Finnish*

5 Bennhold, Katrin: “Where Is Germany in the Ukraine Standoff? It’s Allies Wonder”, *The New York Times*, 25 January 2022.

6 Bundesregierung: Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022. In: *Reden zur Zeitenwende*, 1st ed., September 2022.

7 See IfW Kiel: *Ukraine Support Tracker*, Commitments from January 24 to October 3, 2022.

Institute of International Affairs summed up in the German weekly *Die Zeit* on November 17, 2022: “The German response to Russia’s aggression was disappointing”.⁸

Because of this veritable loss of trust and miscalculation in Germany’s *Russlandpolitik* (despite years of warnings from home and abroad), Germany could not take the leading role this time in formulating the European response to the war in Ukraine that it had played, for example, in dealing with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic or the migration crisis in 2015. Unlike after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Angela Merkel had rallied the north, south, east, and west of the EU behind a united position, Berlin could not act as an “honest broker” this time. France also largely dropped out as a leading nation in Europe. The EU countries on the eastern flank had not forgotten Macron’s 2019 initiative to start negotiations with Russia on a new European security order,⁹ nor his statements on the “brain death” of NATO in the same year. In addition, the Franco-German tandem, which was actually very powerful, had fallen out of step after the German elections, and a multitude of disagreements strained cooperation between the two countries.¹⁰

Instead, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states in particular, together with Finland, took the helm and exerted a decisive influence on the EU’s crisis response. Precisely because they had been correct in their assessment of the Russian president’s motives, and also because of their geographical location as frontline states, these countries emerged as the EU’s new pacesetters in the crisis. Sylvie Kaufmann, a columnist for the French newspaper *Le Monde* and a researcher at the *Robert Bosch Academy* in Berlin, emphasized the novelty of this dynamic:

“This is not the old East-West divide, not the old Europe versus the new. The war in Ukraine has shaken existing coalitions. Viktor Orbán’s closeness to the Kremlin has paralyzed the Visegrád Group, consisting of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. Poland and the

8 Ålander, Minna: “Deutschland und Nordeuropa. Ihr enttäuscht uns!”, *Die Zeit*, 16 November 2022.

9 See Gressel, Gustav/Liik, Kadri/Shapiro, Jeremy/Varma, Tara: Emmanuel Macron’s very big idea on Russia, *ECFR Commentary*, 25 September 2019.

10 Ross, Jacob/Kremer, Kenny: *Stunde der Wahrheit*, *DGAP Kommentar*, 26 October 2022.

Baltic states can now count on the support of Nordic countries like Finland and Sweden, putting Paris and Berlin on the defensive.”¹¹

It remains to be seen whether this new dynamic will continue to solidify and also become apparent in other policy areas. In any case, despite all the tensions, it has so far been possible to avoid an open split in the EU – in the end, the insight that the unity of the EU is indispensable for the successful support of Ukraine prevailed. However, the ever-increasing number of Ukrainian refugees in the EU is increasingly calling this unity into question. There is a concern that the great willingness of Europeans to take in refugees could be overturned and that disputes – as in 2015 – could again arise over distribution within the EU.

2 EU Sanctions against Russia: Unity in Diversity in the Face of New Power Dynamics

Immediately after the Russian invasion, a comprehensive sanctions package was adopted,¹² which EU Commission President von der Leyen described as “the largest sanctions package in the history of our Union”.¹³ In the months that followed, the EU gradually expanded its sanctions regime. Below, the debate on travel bans and energy sanctions will be explored in greater depth to illustrate the different positions of the member states and the new power dynamics within the EU.

2.1 A “Visa Ban” for Russian Citizens

In addition to the targeted freezing of Russian assets in the West, after February 24, 2022, entry bans were imposed primarily on members of the Russian Duma and National Security Council, as well as military personnel, high-ranking officials, businessmen, and oligarchs. In August 2022, the governments of Estonia and Finland called for comprehensive Schengen visa restrictions on Russian tourists and were supported by Lithuania,

11 Kaufmann, Sylvie: “War in Ukraine has shaken the EU's power dynamics”, *Financial Times*, 30 August 2022.

12 European Council: EU sanctions against Russia: an overview, 2022.

13 European Commission: Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament plenary session on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, 2022.

Latvia, Poland, Denmark, and the Czech Republic. They argued that this was a moral duty in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it made it more difficult to circumvent EU trade restrictions, and it was also in the EU's security interests. This was met with stiff opposition, especially in Germany, France, and Greece, as well as by EU Foreign Affairs Representative Borrell, who argued that a "visa ban" would ultimately play into the Kremlin's hands, further isolate Russia from the EU, and make it harder for Russian dissidents to leave the country.¹⁴ For the first time since the Russian war of aggression began, the EU was threatened with open division.

After tough discussions, the EU states finally agreed on a compromise.¹⁵ The EU Commission provisionally lifted the visa facilitation for Russian nationals that had applied until then. In addition, the individual member states were given a great deal of freedom to take national measures within the framework of the Schengen Agreement. However, a general ban on entry was not decided. The compromise reached put an end to the disputes within the EU for the time being. However, the debate on the "visa ban" was an example of how the new force field from Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe was able to make its voice heard and, if necessary, set the European agenda even without the support of the established West-South flank.

2.2 A (Partial) Oil and Gas Embargo

An embargo on Russian oil and gas was particularly controversial in the EU from the beginning of the war. While Poland and the Baltic states, for example, immediately advocated a complete halt to Russian energy supplies, Germany, in particular, pointed to its enormous dependence in this area. Even though other countries shared Germany's concerns, the German government was for a long time particularly reluctant to act in Brussels.¹⁶ This became apparent for the first time when it came to the issue of Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT payment system. At the end

14 For a good overview of the arguments on both sides, see the *Constitution Blog Symposium*: constitutionblog.com/category/debates/european-visa-for-russian-tourists-debates/.

15 European Council: Council decides full suspension of visa facilitation for Russia, 2022.

16 Becker, Markus/Sauga, Michael: "Mögliches Ölembargo gegen Russland. Wie Deutschland Europa überrascht", Spiegel online, 3 May 2022.

of February, pressure from Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in particular succeeded in excluding seven Russian banks from SWIFT. However, Russia's largest bank *Sberbank* and *Gazprombank* were initially left out of the measures, as they played a central role in processing payments for Russian energy deliveries to Europe. The EU's sixth sanctions package of June 2022 succeeded in extending the existing ban to *Sberbank*, among others, but not to *Gazprombank*.

In addition to the SWIFT partial exclusion, a ban on imports of coal and oil from Russia to the EU was adopted. Furthermore, the export of goods and technologies for the extraction and processing of Russian oil as well as new investments in the Russian energy sector were banned. However, many EU member states still could not completely renounce Russian oil. As a result, only about two-thirds of Russian oil shipments to the EU were *de facto* embargoed in June 2022. By 2023, no more oil is to be sourced by sea. Excluded from this rule are Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, which are allowed to continue importing Russian oil. Due to a bridging period of six months for crude oil and eight months for oil products, the sanctions would only take full effect from December 2022 and February 2023, respectively. Despite these exceptions, imports of Russian oil are to be reduced by 90 percent by the end of 2022.¹⁷ However, the effectiveness of these sanctions has been called into question, as actors such as India and China have merely diverted the flow of oil, meaning Russia has suffered little from the partial embargo. As a solution to this problem and in response to Putin's sham referendums in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, EU states approved the eighth sanctions package in October 2022, providing the legal basis for a price cap on seaborne oil shipments to third countries agreed by the G7. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis continued to rate the new sanctions as too weak, but said they were "better than nothing, than no package at all".¹⁸

In the debate about an oil embargo, Berlin went from being an opponent to an inducer. Germany's reduction of its oil imports from Russia to 12 percent by May 2022 created the necessary political space for this shift.¹⁹ Achieving independence from Russian gas, however, is much more problematic for Germany. After all, Germany had deepened its dependence on

17 European Council: EU sanctions against Russia.

18 Tagesschau: "Nach russischen Eskalationen: EU einigt sich auf Russland-Sanktionen", 5 October 2022.

19 Becker/Sauga, Mögliches Ölembargo gegen Russland, 2022.

Russian gas with the *Nord Stream* pipelines. For years, the German government had been warned by its allies that its overdependence on Russia made Germany, and thus the entire EU, vulnerable to Russian blackmail attempts. In 2020, Germany imported 66.1 percent of its natural gas consumption from Russia²⁰ – with *Nord Stream 2* being launched, that figure would have risen even further. After the start of the Russian war of aggression, however, Germany was now doing everything it could to become independent of Russian energy sources as quickly as possible. In the first half of 2022, Germany was already producing 17.9 percent less electricity from natural gas than a year earlier, and the share of natural gas in electricity generation was even down to just 10 percent in the second quarter of 2022.²¹ Overall, however, it is proving more difficult to find alternative suppliers for gas than for oil. Lithuania and the Netherlands began looking for other sources years ago, which is why they are considered major proponents of a gas embargo, unlike Germany, Italy, Austria, and Hungary – which are particularly dependent on Russian gas. Poland and the Czech Republic, which would be hit hardest economically by an embargo, are making every effort to find solutions to end supplies from Russia.²² Until these are found, a joint EU gas embargo seems unlikely.

3 *The Future of Europe: A New Orientation of the European Security Order*

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has made it clear that an inclusive and cooperative security order together with Moscow cannot be realized in the foreseeable future. Instead, it is now a priority for Europeans to establish security from Russia.²³ The future security order will therefore again aim to contain and deter Russian aggression. Accordingly, NATO countries have already begun to substantially and sustainably increase their capabilities to deter and defend the Alliance area. They want to increase their defense budgets and strengthen the striking power of their armies. Sweden and Finland want to become members of NATO, and Denmark has opted to participate in the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy.

20 Eurostat: Einfuhren von Erdgas. Deutschland 2020.

21 Statistisches Bundesamt: Pressemitteilung Nr. 374 vom 7. September 2022.

22 Askew, Joshua/Sandford, Alasdair: "Vergleich: Welche EU-Länder wollen russisches Gas und Öl abdrehen?", Euronews, 18 April 2022.

23 Major, Claudia/Mölling, Christian: "Zusammen mit Russland, das geht nicht mehr", Zeit online, 24 April 2022.

Contrary to what many had hoped, the importance of the military for the future organization of security in Europe will not diminish but increase. Even if it is still open when and under what conditions the war in Ukraine will end, there will be no way back to the *status quo ante* with Russia. The far-reaching sanctions against Russia, the pursuit of extensive energy independence from Moscow, and the military, humanitarian, and financial support provided to Ukraine are largely aimed at isolating Russia and giving Ukraine a greater status as a partner.

At best, the outlines of a new order in Europe can be glimpsed. There are many indications that the future of Europe will be characterized by much greater uncertainty, new conflicts, and global upheavals.²⁴ The ever-worsening global systemic conflict between China and the U.S. will also have an impact on European security. President Joe Biden is already the third U.S. president after Donald Trump and Barack Obama to locate U.S. strategic interests primarily in the Indo-Pacific region, which is why Europe's security is slipping further down the U.S. list of priorities. In the future, the Europeans will therefore have to become much more involved in national and alliance defense, but also in crisis management in their own periphery, in order to guarantee their security.

So far, Russia's war of aggression has led NATO and EU member states to stand together in a united manner, perhaps more than they have in a long time, even though it required forging compromises. Nevertheless, the Kremlin leadership identifies the West's cohesion as the center of gravity of the transatlantic alliance and Western support for Ukraine's resistance – dividing it, torpedoing the European project, and driving a wedge between the allies is Putin's stated goal. For the Europeans, it is crucial not to allow themselves to be divided despite all internal disagreements.

Germany faces a particular challenge in this regard. It must regain lost trust – especially in Central and Eastern Europe – and show its partners that it has learned from past mistakes and will not fall back into old reflexes. It should no longer go it alone, as it did with the *Nord Stream 2* project. Instead, Germany must embed its Russia policy within a European framework. Due to its economic size, Berlin also has an outstanding role to play in the reconstruction of Ukraine.

24 Puglierin, Jana: Wohin führt der Epochenbruch? In: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte, Vol. 40–41, 2022, pp. 8–12.

Now, at the latest, the Federal Republic must also say goodbye to security policy principles to which it has oriented itself for years. These include, above all, the idea of a European “peace dividend”, on the basis of which Germany still saw itself primarily as a “civilian power” despite its increasing participation in foreign missions. Decades of deficiency management have hollowed out the Bundeswehr. On the day the war in Ukraine began, the Army’s inspector, Lieutenant General Alfons Mais, stated that the Bundeswehr was “more or less bare”.²⁵ Against the backdrop of Russian revisionism, the top priority must be to make the Bundeswehr ready to defend itself again and to enable it to make a leading contribution to NATO’s deterrence and defense posture. In her keynote speech on the emerging national security strategy, then Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht also spoke of a military leadership role for Germany. This, she said, consisted of giving the European peace order “the strength that guarantees freedom and democracy, prosperity and stability”. Without a functioning and operational Bundeswehr, however, Germany is not credible as a guarantor of security. No partner will follow Germany’s claim to leadership. If Germany wants to become an anchor of stability for Europe’s security on which its European partners can rely, the Bundeswehr must be given the structural and material capability to do so, and the German government must provide the necessary financial resources on a permanent and reliable basis.

4 Conclusion

In response to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the member states of the European Union managed to react in a predominantly united manner, imposing the largest sanctions package to date on Russia and adopting comprehensive military, humanitarian, and financial aid packages for Ukraine. In the process, a new power dynamic emerged within the EU: with the Baltic and northern states, Central and Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic and Poland found new partners who acted more decisively and appeared more reliable than Germany or France. Russia’s immediate neighbors in particular have recognized that an inclusive and cooperative European security order with Moscow will not be possible in the foreseeable future. Instead, security in Europe must be established before Russia.

25 Wüstner, André: “Mehr oder weniger blank”, Blogbeitrag auf der Internetseite des Deutschen Bundeswehrverbands, 25 February 2022.

Ultimately, Europeans will have to take more responsibility for their own security and adjust to the fact that the U.S. will no longer stretch its protective umbrella over Europe as a matter of course. There are signs that Washington is increasingly focusing on the Indo-Pacific region and that Europe is slipping down the list of priorities. European leadership must fill this gap. Expectations for Berlin to play a much more significant role in the military protection of Europe have increased significantly. In close cooperation with its NATO allies, Germany can assume these responsibilities and ensure security and stability on the European continent in the future. To do so, however, Berlin must first regain the trust it lost through a lack of will to make decisions.

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