

ZEITENWENDE: PERSPECTIVES FROM GERMANY AND CENTRAL EUROPE

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The German Zeitenwende was supposed to be the pivotal moment for the defense and security reforms reflecting the new geopolitical realm in Europe. However, time gaps between the declared intentions and concrete actions raised doubts regarding Berlin's readiness to be the EU's driving force in the changing security landscape.



The Zeitenwende moment can boost the European security sector reform. However, the lack of attention towards Central and Eastern European security concerns, strategic hesitation and the lack of cohesion between the EU member states leaves the EU vulnerable towards the new emerging risks and challenges.



Sustainability and irreversibility of Zeitenwende process depends on Berlin's ability to match short-term societal expectations and long-term strategic goals both at domestic and international level.

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses Germany's *Zeitenwende* from the perspective of 2024, with a focus on its external dimensions: the general foreign policy approach, relations with authoritarian states, and the European and NATO frameworks. The sustainability of *Zeitenwende* as a foreign policy shift is under question, as austerity-driven politics and internal political discrepancies threaten domestic cohesion and risk eroding support for this transformative policy change. At the core of the analysis are perceptions of *Zeitenwende* in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which highlight ongoing misaligned expectations between Germany and its CEE partners. The underpinnings of the CEE states' positions on the transformation of German foreign policy are discussed. Overall, while Germany emphasises achievements, such as its energy transition and enhanced NATO contributions, CEE states stress what remains undone to make *Zeitenwende* a truly sustainable and transformative effort. Ukraine's role within *Zeitenwende* and the country's integration into European political and security frameworks is discussed in relation to how it influences the Ukraine-Germany and CEE-Germany relationships. Finally, the paper provides recommendations for stakeholders in Germany, CEE, and Ukraine to foster dialogue and build a common understanding, enabling *Zeitenwende* to serve as a foundation for regional stability and cooperation.

INTRODUCTION TO ZEITENWENDE

The concept of *Zeitenwende*, or "turning point," has become a central pillar of Germany's reorientation in foreign and security policy in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The invasion of Ukraine exposed significant gaps in Germany's security strategy, forcing the country to confront uncomfortable realities. Initially introduced by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, *Zeitenwende* was framed as a decisive break from Germany's post-Cold War strategic culture.

Yet, despite its clear origins in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, *Zeitenwende* quickly expanded in scope. It came to symbolise a broader rethinking of Germany's place in the world, touching on issues of military spending, energy policy, and relations with both European and global powers. As the interviews we conducted highlight¹, there is no single, unified definition of what *Zeitenwende* actually means. For some stakeholders, it includes a stronger integration of Eastern European states into the European Union; for others, it is primarily about military reforms; some include the green energy transition into the broader framework of *Zeitenwende*, while others treat it as a fully independent process. The common thread across all interpretations is that *Zeitenwende* is not (exclusively) about Ukraine or Russia. Instead, it reflects Germany's need to recalibrate its policies in response to a shifting global order.

The *Zeitenwende* has not been uniformly understood or implemented, both within Germany and in its broader European context. While some perceive it as a profound shift, others view it as a continuation of pre-existing policies, albeit under a different guise. This report will reflect on the influence of such duality on the region of Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) and investigate the conflicting views on *Zeitenwende* in Germany/CEE.

¹ We conducted 11 interviews with German politicians, diplomats and analysts working in the field of foreign policy between March and June 2024.

GERMANY'S FOREIGN POLICY REORIENTATION

The concept of *Zeitenwende* emerged as a reaction to the stark realities of Russian aggression, which challenged many of Germany's long-held assumptions about security, particularly in relation to Russia and the broader European security architecture. At its core, *Zeitenwende* was a response to a crisis rather than a product of long-term strategic planning, and signals the long-lasting reactivity of the country's strategic culture. Germany's first ever National Security Strategy (NSS)² announced on 14 June 2023 came to symbolise a break from such reactivity and a signal to the partners a more active German foreign security and defence policy. Yet, its execution so far suggests that Germany is still grappling with how to implement a coherent, forward-looking strategy.

Despite being treated as a core milestone of *Zeitenwende*, the NSS fails to meet the main expectation – to help the country navigate complex security challenges and coordinate better and faster responses. This ambitious project became a politicised 15-months long bargaining process exposing the disagreements between not only the political parties, but also the foreign minister and the Chancellor.³ Since its adoption, NSS has been criticised for lacking clear priorities and strategic direction. Instead of offering a coherent vision for Germany's role in European and global security, the strategy reads more like "a collection of unprioritised goals and aspirations".⁴ The ambiguous language used in the document raises questions about the seriousness of the perceived reorientation regarding Russia but also other authoritarian regimes like China. This lack of strategic clarity is compounded by the absence of a National Security Council, which could have provided

the necessary institutional framework to coordinate and implement the *Zeitenwende* effectively.

German foreign policy, some would say, often seems to take three steps forward and two steps back dance, hesitating between progress and regression. In the context of NSS of 2023, such a dynamic is particularly visible within the current government coalition. The Green Party and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) have taken a more assertive stance, advocating for tougher measures against both Russia and China. However, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Chancellor Olaf Scholz have been more reserved⁵, reflecting Germany's traditional emphasis on economic stability and dialogue. Chancellery is facing a lot of strong criticism and largely being blamed for what "the *Zeitenwende* is and isn't," with Olaf Scholz believed to be concentrating too much power regarding foreign and security policy in his own hands.⁶ This divide was highlighted in the protracted debates over the delivery of heavy weapons to Ukraine and the decision to allow Chinese investment in critical infrastructure, such as the controversial acquisition of a stake in the Port of Hamburg by a Chinese company.

China takes an interesting and important place in the new foreign policy. Many experts we interviewed expressed their concern about potentially repeating the same mistakes with China as the country made with Russia. The 2023 National Security Strategy recognised China as a "partner, competitor, and systemic rival." It also acknowledges China's increasingly assertive actions both regionally and globally, yet still holds on to the idea that "China remains a partner essential for addressing many global challenges and crises." The basis for this optimism is unclear, given that Beijing has leveraged climate-change issues as a tool and continues to maintain

2 <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf>

3 <https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/06/germanys-first-ever-national-security-strategy/>
<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-06-26/germanys-first-national-security-strategy-minimal-consensus>

4 A quote from one of the interviews.

5 <https://ecfr.eu/article/turning-point-or-turning-back-german-defence-policy-after-zeitenwende/>

6 <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/end-zeitenwende>

its strategic alliance with Russia.

Germany's ability to maintain its position as a global actor will depend on whether it can resolve these contradictions. Ultimately, the success of the *Zeitenwende* will depend on Germany's ability to align its economic policies with its security objectives. The country's future foreign policy must find a balance between protecting its economic interests and standing firm against authoritarianism. As the geopolitical landscape continues to shift, Germany will need to make difficult decisions that go beyond rhetoric, requiring not only a rethinking of its foreign policy priorities but also the political will to act on them.

ENERGY AND AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Energy policy offers a mixed picture of success and new dependencies within the framework of the *Zeitenwende*. One of the clearest victories has been Germany's swift diversification away from Russian gas. By late 2022, Moscow had stopped supplying gas to Germany entirely, marking the culmination of a surprisingly rapid withdrawal process that proceeded much faster than many in Berlin and other European capitals had expected. The successful completion of two large liquified natural gas (LNG) terminals on the Baltic Sea coast, which were constructed in record time, was hailed by Chancellor Scholz as evidence of a "*new German speed*".⁷ This achievement demonstrated Germany's ability to pivot swiftly in response to external threats, and it was widely seen as a highlight of the *Zeitenwende*.

However, this success came at a cost. The desire to reduce dependency on Russian gas, coupled with Germany's nuclear power phaseout, led Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck (from the Green Party) to make difficult compromises, including increasing the use of high-polluting coal as a stopgap measure⁸. Furthermore, to secure alternative energy sources, Germany struck LNG supply deals with Norway, Qatar, and Azerbaijan. While these deals diversified Germany's energy portfolio, they simultaneously created new dependencies on authoritarian regimes, replacing one problematic supplier (Russia) with a longer list of others. This raises serious questions about whether Germany has truly achieved energy security or simply exchanged one set of vulnerabilities for another.

7 <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/speech-by-olaf-scholz-member-of-the-german-bundestag-and-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-at-the-world-economic-forum-in-davos-on-january-18-2023-2158658>

8 <https://www.dw.com/en/why-germany-is-reviving-dirty-coal-to-counter-russian-gas-cut/a-62195008>

THE EUROATLANTIC DIMENSION OF ZEITENWENDE

The *Zeitenwende* has significant implications for Germany's role within Europe and the broader Euro-Atlantic community. As Chancellor Olaf Scholz described in his Prague speech, *Zeitenwende* is not just about increasing military spending or reducing dependence on Russian energy. It also signals the need to strengthen Europe's ability to defend itself and make the continent more resilient against external threats. Based on the expert feedback, this involves reforms at the EU level, enlargement, and building stronger defence mechanisms. However, Germany's role in these areas has sometimes been marked by hesitation, internal contradictions, and a tendency to react rather than lead. This section will examine how the *Zeitenwende* has impacted Germany's positioning within the Euro-Atlantic community, focusing on its approach to EU enlargement, defence cooperation, and balancing domestic politics with foreign policy obligations.

STRENGTHENING EURO-ATLANTIC DEFENCE

Zeitenwende carries significant implications for Germany's role within NATO and its position in the broader transatlantic defence community. One of the clearest aspects of Germany's National Security Strategy is its reaffirmation of NATO as the "primary guarantor of protection against military threats". The strategy outlines Germany's commitment to bridging capability gaps and expanding its military presence on NATO's eastern flank, acknowledging the importance of strengthening the European pillar of the alliance. This commitment has been broadly welcomed by Euro-Atlantic allies, who see Germany's enhanced role in NATO as vital for European security.

Germany has pledged to become a framework nation within NATO, with its military serving as a cornerstone of conventional defence in Europe.⁹ This includes promoting the development of advanced military

capabilities, such as precision deep-strike weapons, and expanding Germany's military footprint in allied territories, particularly along NATO's eastern border. In principle, this aligns well with Germany's promise under the *Zeitenwende* to take a more active role in European and transatlantic security. As one interviewee noted, "*the Zeitenwende acknowledges the necessity across the board,*" recognising that the changing global security landscape demands a more capable and responsive Europe, one that can act independently but within the NATO framework.

Germany's €100 billion fund to modernise the Bundeswehr, launched in 2022, was a major milestone in bolstering both national defence and NATO commitments. This special fund reflected what seemed like Germany's proactive response to the evolving security landscape, particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With significant allocations for advanced equipment, such as F-35 fighter jets and new tanks, Germany positioned itself to meet NATO's 2% defence spending target over the next five years.¹⁰ Key investments are already underway, with €30 billion earmarked for critical projects, including digitalisation efforts and new air, land, and sea assets.

THE EASTERN FLANK

One of the most visible commitments to NATO is the permanent deployment of a German combat brigade to Lithuania. This move is part of NATO's strategy to strengthen its eastern flank, a critical deterrent against potential threats from Russia. By 2027, this deployment is expected to be fully operational, with the brigade bolstered by Leopard 2 tanks and other key assets. As one German official put it, "*Zeitenwende means that we contribute fully to NATO security by increasing defence spending, also by permanently deploying troops on the eastern flank, which is a good example of Germany taking on more responsibility and showing the way to others.*"

⁹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/indispensable-natos-framework-nations-concept-beyond-madrid>

¹⁰ <https://www.dw.com/en/what-happened-to-the-german-militarys-100-billion-fund/a-64846571>

However, despite these positive steps, Germany's actual contributions have been uneven, and there remains a perception that Berlin is not moving fast enough to meet its own ambitions. Although widely praised as a positive move, the brigade lacks key assets – such as tanks – which won't arrive for some time. Such delays raise questions about Germany's readiness to support its allies in a timely manner, which is crucial for Europe's broader defence strategy. Other European countries have been quicker to act radically. Denmark, for instance, has not only joined the EU's common defence policy but has also reintroduced conscription, even extending it to women.¹¹ The Netherlands and Finland are also ramping up their defence budgets, with both nations heading toward NATO's target of spending 2% of GDP on defence. Scholz may have coined the term *Zeitenwende*, but as one expert remarked, "other countries have already operated their own *Zeitenwende* since then." Germany, on the other hand, has often appeared to be reacting to developments rather than driving them forward.

For Central and Eastern European countries, the military aspect of Germany's *Zeitenwende* is both the most tangible and crucial element of this policy shift. However, these efforts are not without limitations, both in terms of strategy and resources. Despite advancements in military commitments, a significant shortfall remains in Germany's strategic vision concerning Central and Eastern Europe. The recently published National Security Strategy notably lacks specific priorities for the region, with the term "NATO's eastern flank" conspicuously absent from the document.¹² Aside from the United States, the strategy fails to mention other allies with whom Berlin intends to enhance political-military cooperation, which suggests a limited recognition of the importance of CEE countries in Germany's security planning. The lack of a cohesive approach is further exacerbated by internal discord within Germany; there is no consensus on how to engage with the CEE, with criticisms ranging from the Chancellor's Office being perceived as arrogant to the Greens being considered overly ambitious. Germany also faces significant resource constraints that temper its ability to expand military commitments further east. Years of underinvestment have left the Bundeswehr grappling with modernisation and readiness challenges. As one of our experts said, it's hard enough for the Bundeswehr to sustain a brigade in Lithuania and the current challenge is not to keep adding more and more, but to make the existing commitments sustainable.

Importantly, much of the progress, even within NATO, depends on initiatives from CEE capitals themselves. The case of Lithuania illustrates this dynamic; the Lithuanian government actively sought a greater German military

presence, facilitating the deployment of the brigade. "A lot goes through NATO," noted an interviewee, "but we could say we need some progress to reach that objective." Political changes within the CEE region are also influencing Germany's security role. Poland's recent political shift has opened doors for renewed cooperation—a new government which promises a fresh start. This development was expected to ease previous tensions and pave the way for joint initiatives such as streamlined maintenance of military hardware, collaborative sanctions policies, and coordinated support for Ukraine. Germany appears ready to engage, but Berlin's approach here remains largely reactive.

COOPERATION WITH ALLIES

One of the more strategic and contentious debates within NATO and the EU is how Europe should manage its own defence capabilities. Many European allies, particularly France, have long pushed for a more autonomous European defence that is not solely dependent on U.S. support. The first chapter of the German strategy also emphasises the importance of the EU's mutual assistance clause (Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union)¹³, the Trinity House Agreement with the UK¹⁴ and the German-French mutual assistance commitment (Article 4 of the Treaty of Aachen)¹⁵. The Russian war in Ukraine has added urgency to these discussions, with the idea that Europe must be able to defend itself in the face of future threats, particularly if U.S. commitment to European security wanes. For countries like Poland and Lithuania, this means building a capabilities-based European pillar within NATO, one that can function independently if needed. However, Germany has been hesitant to fully embrace this vision, particularly when it comes to proposals for joint EU defence funding, with some experts saying that German strategy lacks a cohesive approach toward Europe. It largely views the EU as merely a platform for potentially expanding its national security initiatives.¹⁶ As one interviewee remarked, "the reluctance to consider joint debt to fund increased defence spending has been a point of frustration for European allies." Recently dismissed Finance Minister Christian Lindner, at the time supported by Chancellor Scholz, has prioritised maintaining Germany's debt brake over significantly increasing defence spending, which has drawn criticism from leaders like Donald Tusk, who see this as Germany not fully living up to its responsibilities within NATO.¹⁷

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13 <https://bit.ly/3CxDS5z>

14 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-uk-germany-defence-agreement-to-strengthen-our-security-and-prosperity>

15 <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2192638/ccd486958222bd5a490d42c57dd7ed03/treaty-of-aachen-data.pdf>

16 <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Germanys-national-security-strategy-What-does-it-mean-for-Europe~51f860>

17 <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-donald-tusk-germany-olaf-scholz-defense-spending-planning-cooperation/>

11 <https://www.politico.eu/article/denmark-extend-military-service-women-conscription/>

12 <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-06-26/germanys-first-national-security-strategy-minimal-consensus>

Still, Germany's *Zeitenwende* has breathed new life into multilateral defence cooperation. A revitalised Weimar Triangle – a forum for collaboration between Germany, France, and Poland – has emerged as a potential point for discussions on security. It has potential to bear strategic importance: *"We need a new Ostpolitik in the EU... that could be elaborated in the Weimar Triangle as a kind of laboratory where three big member states with completely different views on Russia come together and find an approach."* Instead of German-led diplomacy with Eastern Europe, a reimagined Ostpolitik would be an EU-centred initiative, where Germany, France, and Poland align their often divergent views on Russia and regional security to forge a coherent, collective response. If successful, this trilateral collaboration could set a powerful precedent for a unified EU approach to the east, one that integrates CEE concerns into the broader European security fabric.

So far, however, Germany-led joint security initiatives, as one aiming to enhance Europe's air defence, have also faced hurdles. The European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), led by Germany and backed by over 20 nations, aims to bolster Europe's defences against missile threats. However, key NATO members like France and Poland have refused to join. France, in particular, has voiced concerns over how ESSI favours German and non-EU interests at the expense of some allies.¹⁸ Paris also criticised the initiative from a strategic point of view calling it controversial and unrealistic, which reveals a misalignment of key European capitals. While ESSI is an important step toward improving European security, Germany's struggle to secure unanimous support within Europe underscores the challenges of building a truly unified defence strategy. It reflects Germany's ongoing balancing act between pushing for stronger European defence and managing the political realities of a diverse and occasionally divided EU.

Ultimately, *Zeitenwende's* success hinges on Germany's ability to align its ambitions with the diverse security needs of its neighbours. If *Zeitenwende* is to transcend German borders and truly bolster European security, it must evolve into a multilateral effort that responds not only to Germany's strategic goals but also to the urgent realities facing, first and foremost, CEE states. A genuine dialogue about shared security goals – and a willingness to adapt *Zeitenwende* to the region's expectations – could turn Berlin's pivot into a foundation for lasting regional stability.

ENLARGEMENT: GERMANY'S TAKE ON EU EXPANSION

Another significant dimension of the *Zeitenwende* is its impact on the EU's enlargement process. With Ukraine and Moldova now candidate countries and Georgia seeking accession, there is renewed momentum for expanding the EU to include Eastern European nations. These countries, especially Ukraine, see EU membership as not just a political goal, but a vital security measure – an anchor that could protect them from future Russian aggression. Scholz, in his Prague speech, linked the enlargement process to his vision for a stronger Europe, describing the need to *"consolidate the European house"* by bringing vulnerable states inside.

As one expert pointed out, *"Germany is not taking the lead in enlargement,"* despite the assertive rhetoric. This hesitancy is partly due to Germany's broader foreign policy approach, which tends to be cautious and consensus-driven. Historically, Germany has been more comfortable acting within multilateral frameworks than taking bold unilateral steps, and this is evident in its approach to EU enlargement as well. While supportive in principle, Berlin has not demonstrated the same urgency or commitment as some other EU members. Rather than pushing the issue forward proactively, Germany has often deferred to other member states, focusing more on domestic concerns and maintaining internal EU cohesion than on taking risks to speed up the enlargement process. What is perceived as Germany's reluctance to step up has led to frustrations among its Eastern European allies, who see Germany as a natural leader in this area but are disappointed by its lack of action. *"There is some work being done,"* one interviewee noted, *"but it's not moving fast enough and Germany is not taking the leadership role in this area."* As a result, there is growing concern that if Germany doesn't step up, the EU may once again falter in its enlargement efforts – just as it did with the Western Balkans.

This reluctance also raises questions about Germany's broader geopolitical strategy. If the EU fails to integrate countries like Ukraine and Moldova, it could undermine the bloc's credibility as a global actor and weaken its ability to project stability in its neighbourhood. As one interviewee pointed out, *"if we fail again with enlargement, it questions the capabilities of the EU to play a geopolitical role."* Germany's hesitation, therefore, has broader implications, not only for the future of the EU but also for Europe's standing in an increasingly competitive and unstable world.

18 <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-06-22/france-against-germanys-european-sky-shield-initiative>

DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS: BALANCING POLITICS AT HOME WITH FOREIGN POLICY

One of the most significant obstacles Germany faces in implementing the Zeitenwende is the need to balance domestic politics with foreign policy imperatives. While Scholz has publicly committed to strengthening Europe and taking on a larger role in global security, his government is frequently divided on key issues, particularly when it comes to dealing with authoritarian regimes, like Russia and China. Within the coalition government, the Greens and the FDP have pushed for a more confrontational stance towards Moscow, while Scholz and the SPD have taken a more cautious approach. This has been particularly evident in Germany's handling of military aid to Ukraine, where the Chancellor has faced criticism for being too slow to provide the necessary support. Far-right parties like the AfD have also added to the complexity of the situation by advocating for an end to weapons deliveries to Ukraine, tapping into a strain of pro-Russian sentiment, particularly in eastern Germany.

The internal struggles are particularly evident when it comes to developing Germany's relations with China. As the interviewees pointed out, Germany's economic ties with China have led to significant divisions within the government. The long-anticipated government strategy on China was developed in 2023 after months of internal negotiations,¹⁹ but despite the effort, it was widely seen as a missed opportunity. While acknowledging the growing dangers of economic dependence on Beijing, the strategy failed to deliver a decisive shift.²⁰ While it outlines a clear approach to "de-risking" – reducing dependency on Chinese trade and investment – there is no consensus within the government on what this actually means in practice.

Many seem to blame the Chancellery for a rather soft stance on China. Chancellor Scholz's approach has been described as "diversifying a little bit and hoping for the best," a strategy that prioritises economic interests over a more aggressive decoupling from China, even when

it comes to critical infrastructure.²¹ The controversy surrounding China's purchase of a stake in the Hamburg port is emblematic of this divide. Multiple governmental agencies opposed the decision to allow a Chinese company to buy a stake, warning about the potential security risks. However, Scholz, backed by the SPD mayor of Hamburg, ultimately allowed the Chinese company to buy a 25% stake, arguing that the economic benefits outweighed the potential risks. As one interviewee explained, "this decision reflects a critical dependency that Germany still has on China, despite recognising the dangers of such ties." The same dynamic is at play with Huawei's involvement in Germany's 5G network – while many European countries have moved to ban Huawei technology over security concerns, Germany has been slow to follow suit, once again prioritising economic considerations over national security. Similar situation can be observed when it comes to altering trade relations with Beijing. The German government left much of the responsibility in the hands of individual businesses, which ironically led to increased exposure to China, as many German companies seized this as an opportunity to expand their investments in China, despite the growing geopolitical risks.²²

This hesitancy of the government reflects a broader issue within German foreign policy: the reluctance to make difficult trade-offs. Germany's economic model is deeply intertwined with international trade, particularly with authoritarian powers like China. Cutting these ties would entail significant short-term costs, especially for German industries reliant on exports. However, maintaining this level of economic interdependence could limit Germany's strategic flexibility, particularly in an increasingly polarised global environment. Scholz's reluctance to support EU-wide tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, despite allegations of unfair competition, demonstrates how economic interests continue to shape Germany's foreign policy, even at the expense of broader strategic considerations.

19 <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2608580/49d50fecc479304c3da2e2079c55e106/china-strategie-en-data.pdf>

20 <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/end-zeitenwende>

21 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/germanys-zeitenwende-was-spinning-boris-pistorius-is-trying-to-set-it-straight/>

22 <https://www.ft.com/content/339ac2c7-f570-4ec0-8753-54f431c6aa10>

ECONOMIC SPILLOVERS: THE ZEITENWENDE AND ITS IMPACT ON EU NEIGHBOURS

Germany's economic choices, particularly in response to the war in Ukraine, have also had broader implications for its neighbours. The rapid shift away from Russian gas, while seen as a major success of the *Zeitenwende*, came with significant side effects for the rest of Europe. In 2022, Germany's sudden entry into the liquified natural gas (LNG) market drove up global gas prices, disproportionately impacting countries in the Global South and smaller European economies. As one expert noted, *"Germany hastily bought LNG at high global prices, raising costs for everyone else, especially neighbouring states."* This aggressive move helped Germany secure its energy supplies, but it left many of its partners struggling with the economic fallout.

Similarly, Germany's €200 billion energy relief package, announced in November 2022, raised concerns about competitive imbalances within the EU. This massive subsidy aimed to shield German consumers and businesses from the worst effects of the energy crisis, but it was introduced without consulting key partners in Brussels, Paris, or Warsaw. Critics argued that such unilateral actions could give German companies an unfair advantage over their European counterparts, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, where governments lacked the resources to match Berlin's spending power. This approach has drawn criticism for its lack of solidarity,

especially given that Germany's own reliance on Russian gas – exemplified by the controversial Nord Stream 2 project – was a major contributor to Europe's energy vulnerability in the first place.

The approach to dealing with China raised alarm bells in countries like Lithuania and the Czech Republic too. As one expert noted, *"if Germany has economic issues because of China, then Lithuania and the Czech Republic will face major problems too."* These countries, which are closely tied to Germany's economy, fear that Berlin's reluctance to fully address its dependencies on China could lead to broader instability within Europe.

These economic spillovers highlight a recurring theme within the *Zeitenwende*: Germany's tendency to prioritise national solutions over collaborative European approaches. While Berlin has made strides in addressing its energy dependence and contributing to European security, its actions are not always aligned with the broader interests of its EU partners. As one interviewee put it, *"Germany's first reflex is always, what can Germany do? It's never, what can we do in the European Union?"* This mentality, they noted, is a fundamental problem that limits Germany's ability to act as a true leader within the EU.

THE SUSTAINABILITY OF ZEITENWENDE

The sustainability of *Zeitenwende* is a major point of contention among the experts we interviewed. On one hand, the fact that the policy shift is irreversible deserves recognition. Russia's aggression has fundamentally altered Europe's security landscape, and Germany cannot simply return to its previous posture of engagement and dialogue, nor does it want to. There is a strong consensus across the core parties that the right path has been set and the country should continue following it. On the other hand, there are significant concerns about whether *Zeitenwende* can be maintained in the long term, particularly given the political and economic challenges that Germany faces. There are a few main factors causing concern about the future of *Zeitenwende*: whether the depth of the transformation matches the funds allocated for it, and societal reaction to change.

TRANSFORMATION SUSTAINABILITY

A central issue is the substantial financial commitment required to realise the *Zeitenwende's* ambitions. The German government's pledge to increase defence spending, including a €100 billion special fund for the Bundeswehr, represents a historic shift from its traditionally cautious fiscal stance on military expenditure. However, this surge in spending strains the national budget amid competing demands from other critical sectors. As one expert highlighted, *"the funding in general is a very big debate in Germany. It is one where there is no consensus, especially because the liberals and the conservatives are very much focused on the rules on not making any debts anymore."*

The federal government's commitment to balancing the budget – a priority for the Free Democratic Party (FDP) – has led to proposed budget cuts across all ministries over the next two years.²³ This fiscal austerity hampers investments in comprehensive security measures, extending beyond the military to include civil defence

and preparedness against hybrid threats such as cyber attacks on democratic institutions. An interviewee emphasised, *"it goes beyond the Bundeswehr. It's also civil defence, preparedness against hybrid attacks, and safeguarding our democratic institutions."*

The National Security Strategy adds to the ambiguity surrounding defence funding. Rather than a clear commitment to spending 2% of GDP annually on defence – as per NATO guidelines – the strategy states that Germany will allocate this amount over a multi-year period, initially drawing from the Bundeswehr's special fund. This approach lacks a firm guarantee of sustained funding, especially once the special fund is exhausted. *"Obviously, this €100 billion will not be enough," noted an expert. "And we have the across-the-board commitment of all parties in the coalition and also of the CDU... to live up to 2% as a minimum."* Despite this nominal commitment, the medium-term financial plan freezes the regular defence budget at approximately €50 billion until 2026.²⁴ This creates an annual shortfall of at least €25–30 billion needed to meet the 2% GDP target. The governing coalition is divided on solutions, debating options like cutting social welfare programmes, raising taxes, or easing the constitutionally mandated debt brake, or *Schuldenbremse*. *"I do not see how we can fund everything we need to fund under this regulation at the moment,"* an expert observed. *"We have the military side, we have the energy transformation. We need to support the economy in these times. We need social spending, we need humanitarian support for many countries."*

The challenges extend to the military transformation's implementation. The restructuring of the Bundeswehr has begun, but is progressing too slowly. Such pace is partly due to the defence industry's inability to rapidly scale up production, which *"is a problem in politics"*²⁵,

²³ <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-06-26/germanys-first-national-security-strategy-minimal-consensus>

²⁴ <https://www.bundesfinanzministerium.de>

²⁵ The German military still faces significant bureaucratic obstacles that hinder its ability to adapt to the new security environment. The reforms needed to make the Bundeswehr more agile and responsive are proving to be a day-to-day struggle, and there is scepticism about whether these efforts will be sustained over the long term.

but also a huge issue in the defence industry," remarked an expert. While adversaries operate with wartime economies, German industry remains in peacetime mode, hindering the timely enhancement of military capabilities. Furthermore, the *Zeitenwende* encompasses not only military modernisation but also the energy transition towards renewable resources – a cornerstone of Germany's climate commitments. Funding this shift requires significant investment, adding another layer to the financial burden. Balancing these demands necessitates difficult choices, potentially impeding progress in one area to advance another.

SOCIETAL COHESION

The influence of public opinion on *Zeitenwende* cannot be understated; society acts like a full-on stakeholder in *Zeitenwende*. German policymakers are acutely aware of the need to maintain public support for their actions, particularly in the context of rising energy prices and economic uncertainty. This dynamic further complicates the sustainability of *Zeitenwende*, as political leaders must balance long-term strategic goals with short-term domestic pressures.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Germans' views on security have shifted significantly. *The Berlin Pulse 2023/24* survey shows that 76% of Germans now see Russia as a military threat, and 86% express deep distrust in the Russian government under Vladimir Putin.²⁶ However, only 38% want Germany to become

more actively engaged in international crises, the lowest figure since 2016, showing that while Germans accept the need for increased defence, they prefer a restrained, diplomatic approach to involvement abroad.

This duality is also reflected in attitudes towards military spending. While 72% of Germans back the government's 2% GDP target for defence and a quarter believe this figure might still be too low, a strong majority prefer that defence investments stay focused on supporting roles rather than active military leadership. The Berlin Pulse data highlights that only 29% see Germany's role as one of military leadership, while 71% oppose it, favouring Germany's traditionally multilateral, cooperative stance in foreign policy. These attitudes demonstrate that, for the public, security enhancements should not come at the cost of Germany's reputation as a diplomatic and peaceful player in Europe.

Economic concerns are also interwoven with these opinions. Rising energy prices and inflation weigh heavily on Germans, making them wary of policies that might increase domestic costs. There's strong public support for a cautious approach that ensures resources for security do not overshadow other pressing issues. Public priorities are clear: while Germans still recognise the urgency of the war in Ukraine, the poll also shows high levels of concern for issues like migration, climate change, and economic stability. For German leaders, ensuring the *Zeitenwende's* sustainability means more than making policy shifts; it requires staying attuned to these complex public perspectives.

²⁶ <https://koerber-stiftung.de/en/projects/the-berlin-pulse/2023-24/>

PERCEPTIONS OF ZEITENWENDE IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE

WHAT IS BEHIND CEE PERSPECTIVE ON ZEITENWENDE

For many in the region Germany's initial response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine fell short of expectations. For instance, Germany's reluctance to fully sever economic ties with Russia, particularly in the energy sector, has been a major point of contention.²⁷ Despite the invasion of Ukraine, Germany initially hesitated to impose a complete embargo on Russian gas imports, a move that was seen by many in the CEE region as an indication that Berlin was still prioritising economic considerations over security concerns. While the gas cuts took place almost right after and Germany has increased its defence spending and taken on more responsibilities within NATO, the overall approach remained cautious. This has led to some frustration in CEE capitals, where there is a perception that Germany's commitment to *Zeitenwende* and the drastic changes needed to secure the region is not as robust as need be.

When assessing CEE states' standpoints regarding German *Zeitenwende*, multiple factors need to be considered, with historic memory being among the crucial ones. For many countries of the CEE region, the historic ties are not merely remnants of past conflicts but are active determinants of contemporary foreign policy dynamics. They feature prominently in the CEE's political and analytical assessments of *Zeitenwende*. The most obvious example in this regard is Poland, a country whose bilateral relations with Germany deteriorated significantly over the last 8 years, partially due to tensions regarding shared tragic past. The historical legacy of German engagement with Poland is marked by a duality – on the one hand, Germany is seen as a partner and economic powerhouse central to the country's European integration in the past, while on the other, memories of World War II continue to play a role in Polish-German dynamics.

The relationship between Germany and other CEE countries is also to an extent influenced by the events of the 20th century. These nations have a heightened

sensitivity to security threats from Russia, a legacy of their historical experiences under both Nazi and Soviet control. The memory of Western Europe's perceived appeasement of authoritarian regimes also looms large in the collective consciousness and language of CEE countries. It seems like for CEE states, the *Zeitenwende* was expected to acknowledge and respond to these deep-seated fears by recalibrating Germany's foreign policy towards a more assertive stance against Russian aggression. Geographical proximity plays a crucial role in shaping these perceptions. The Baltic states and Poland, in particular, are on the front lines of any potential conflict with Russia if the escalation was to take place. For them, Germany's *Zeitenwende* is not just about reorienting foreign policy but about ensuring their very survival in the face of Russian aggression. The expectation in these countries is that Germany, as Europe's largest economy and a central player in NATO, should take on a leadership role that reflects the gravity of the situation. Interestingly enough, the term 'Ostpolitik'²⁸ is still largely present in the CEE debates of German foreign policy, while being almost fully absent from the German discourse, as our interviewees confirmed.

On the German side, the role of historical tensions in shaping current relations with CEE countries is often viewed through a different lens. Berlin definitely recognises its natural proximity with Eastern Europe, both in terms of geography and history. As one of our experts mentioned, "*we [Germany] consider the northeast of NATO as our almost natural area of special responsibility*". Despite this, the historical dimensions do not always carry the same weight for Berlin in shaping current policies as they do for other CEE capitals. While CEE countries often see the memory of past conflicts as crucial to informing a vigilant and proactive stance against Russian aggression, German policymakers are sometimes hesitant to embrace these perspectives fully. As one interviewee pointed out,

28 The policy of Ostpolitik, initiated by Chancellor Willy Brandt in the 1970s, aimed at fostering closer ties with Eastern Europe through dialogue and economic cooperation. This approach was predicated on the belief that engagement with the Soviet Union and later Russia could lead to a gradual transformation of the relationship, reducing the likelihood of conflict. This policy framework, deeply embedded in Germany's strategic culture, influenced Berlin's response to Russian aggression even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

27 E.g., <https://www.politico.eu/article/polands-kaczynski-criticizes-germany-energy-russia/>

this reluctance stems from a feeling in Berlin that certain CEE positions verge on self-victimisation or a somewhat over-assertive claim to geopolitical centrality, which some German commentators feel is not yet matched by economic or political influence. The perception is that, although CEE countries are indeed at the “*centre of action*,” they are not necessarily the “*centre of gravity*” in European geopolitics. Consequently, Berlin may see itself as adopting a more balanced stance, avoiding what it perceives as an overly reactionary approach to historical issues.

MISALIGNED EXPECTATIONS AS A MULTILATERAL ISSUE

The *Zeitenwende* has come to symbolise not just a change in Berlin’s approach but also a series of clashing expectations across Europe. CEE states, which have long advocated for a hardline stance against Russia, hoped Germany would swiftly align with their calls for an assertive and proactive security policy. However, what Germany views as a substantial pivot remains, in the eyes of many in the CEE, too slow and tentative to meet the demands of the current security environment.

The story of the 5000 helmets – Germany’s initial, heavily criticised contribution to Ukraine – has become shorthand for this divergence. For Germany, the helmets represent the past, a story that they argue has been outpaced by their deeper commitments, such as becoming Ukraine’s second largest donor and hosting the reconstruction conference in June 2024. But CEE leaders and publics alike see the helmets as symbolic of a larger problem: Germany’s tendency to move incrementally when, from their perspective, the stakes call for rapid and decisive action—the assessment that by many in Berlin is considered unfair. *Zeitenwende* definitely is an unprecedented shift in policy. If someone had predicted in 2021 that Germany would commit to making its armed forces “*fit for war*,” it would have seemed outlandish.²⁹ And indeed, from Germany’s perspective, the steps taken – major increases in defence spending, shifts in NATO commitments, and leading support for Ukraine – mark a fundamental recalibration. Yet, it is not unfair to say that such moves still fall short, lacking the urgency that the ongoing threat from Russia demands. If you approach the assessment of *Zeitenwende* from the standpoint of how much has happened and how big the change is,

then the change truly seems significant. If you look at it from the perspective of the change in the international environment, the need to change to keep up the relative changes here towards the relative changes elsewhere, then the picture looks different. CEE states should stop reminding Germany of its 5000 helmets, that’s true. But if Germany wants to avoid the “*unfair criticism*”³⁰, it should leave the 5000 helmets story behind as well. It’s time to stop measuring *Zeitenwende* in terms of how much Germany has changed in the last three years. If *Zeitenwende* is to be sustainable, the focus has to shift from the past to the future: not only Germany’s but also European.

Adding to the friction is Germany’s continued prioritisation of its traditional partnerships, notably with France and the United States. Germany pursues strong alignment with the Franco-German axis, even as political uncertainties rise with France’s potential 2027 election outcomes, as well as the anti-German rhetoric of the major party National Rally or major strategic differences between Berlin and Paris in terms of European security environment. Same goes for the United States: Germany is still very much looking at the US as one of its key allies. As one interviewee highlighted, upcoming elections in the US and France add an element of unpredictability to Germany’s strategic orientation, potentially exposing Berlin to future diplomatic shifts that could again alter the balance of its foreign relations. Meanwhile, Germany’s engagement with its eastern neighbours often seems reactive, tied more to immediate threats than to a strategic, forward-looking policy.³¹ While Berlin may regard its steps as a significant shift, CEE experts see a persistent hesitation to embrace the region as a core pillar of Europe’s security architecture.

The result is a palpable sense of misalignment. Germany’s pace of change appears radical by its own standards, but to many in the CEE, it remains inadequate to meet the geopolitical reality. CEE leaders are looking not for incremental adjustments but for an irreversible commitment from Berlin to anchor itself firmly alongside its eastern neighbours. Only through a genuine, multilateral dialogue can Germany and its CEE allies bridge this gap, ensuring that *Zeitenwende* evolves from a German vision to a truly European one that addresses the diverse, and often urgent, security concerns across the continent.

29 <https://www.dw.com/en/bundeswehr-must-be-fit-for-war-says-german-defense-minister/a-67268608>

30 <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-germany-make-nice-support-ukraine-war/>

31 <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/zeitenwende-here-its-just-unevenly-distributed>

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN UKRAINE AND GERMANY: WHAT IS MISSING?

The strategic partnership between Ukraine and Germany is characterized by mutual goals and support, yet faces several challenges and lacks a unified vision in key areas. While Germany has provided considerable support to Ukraine, especially in areas like energy transition, decentralization, and rule of law, certain critical dimensions remain insufficiently addressed.

KEY AREAS OF SUPPORT AND COLLABORATION

Germany has long been a committed partner to Ukraine. Germany is providing substantial financial support – more than 33.9 billion euro as of June 2024. This aid includes “a substantial winter assistance program, helping those who have fled Ukraine, and assisting efforts to investigate war crimes as well as humanitarian assistance and mine clearance operations”. Germany is also the largest supporter of the refinancing fund for the European Peace Facility (EPF), which has so far allowed for the allocating of 7.1 billion euros from various European countries. These funds are intended for use between 2022 and 2026 to assist in supplying military equipment from EU member nations to the Ukrainian armed forces.

The German contribution is recognised not only by Ukraine but also by the Western allies: Germany is the second-largest provider of military aid to Ukraine after the United States, said the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, following his meeting with Germany's Defense Minister, Boris Pistorius.

The particular focus of German support is in the field of economic, environmental, and governance reforms. Germany is among the frontrunners in the field of green transition. It stands out within Europe as the largest single contributor for patents in the field of clean and sustainable innovation in the European Union, accounting for nearly 37% of Europe's international patent families (IPFs) in cleantech, followed by France and the UK with 14.5% and 8.5%. Ukraine requires at least 12 GW of additional installed capacity by 2034, with an estimated investment of \$17.2 billion to restore its power sector using green technologies whereas, Germany's initiatives

in renewable energy and decentralization even before the full-scale invasion demonstrated a willingness to invest in Ukraine's future: *“Germany has been one of those most engaged in Ukraine...energy transition to renewables... decentralization, conversion of mining industries”*.

These activities supported by Germany correspond with the National Energy and Climate Plan until 2030 which outlines all climate and energy policies and aims to transform the Ukrainian economy in line with the European integration process. They are being implemented in compliance with the requirements of the EU Regulation and taking into account the best practices of the EU member states. Germany's expertise and advancements in green technologies can aid sustainable reconstruction efforts in post-war Ukraine. Furthermore, Germany's dedication to decreasing reliance on fossil fuels is crucial amid geopolitical uncertainties, supporting energy security while tackling climate change challenges.

Additionally, the German government developed tools to stimulate such investments, including the Federal Investment Guarantee Scheme for German companies in Ukraine. German government covers the conversion and transfer risks of interest payments on investment loans. However, this critical step is underutilized. The low interest in the Mechanism may be caused by a few reasons. Either it is the outcome of alternative insurance mechanisms e.g. international agencies, such as the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA), have made significant strides. DFC, announced \$357 million in a new political risk insurance to protect critical investments necessary for our recovery. MIGA offers coverage for foreign investors starting at \$5 million, with terms lasting up to 20 years. Polish KUKE agency (Export Credit Insurance Corporation) provided guarantees to foreign and Ukrainian companies. or, arguably, due to the lack of vision of the future economic development of Ukraine which faces the war of attrition imposed by Russia.

In addition to financial support, there is significant potential for deepening industrial cooperation between Germany and Ukraine, particularly in the defence sector.

Ukraine's experience on the battlefield has led to significant innovations, particularly in areas such as drone technology and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). This expertise could be of great interest to German and other Western defence companies, offering opportunities for joint ventures, technology transfer, and industrial cooperation. Expanding this cooperation would not only strengthen Ukraine's military capabilities but also integrate Ukrainian defence industries more closely with those of NATO and the EU, enhancing collective security.

STRATEGIC GAPS AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Despite these efforts, there are growing voices within Germany calling for a "freeze" in the conflict. While these voices remain a minority, they represent a significant "danger" to Germany's unified support, creating tension between Germany's Social Democrats and Ukrainian representatives, especially given recent calls by SPD's Rolf Mützenich for a debate on freezing the conflict. Additionally, assumptions such as "Ukraine will win, the alliance will hold, money is there plentifully" are no longer unchallenged, influencing public opinion and potentially weakening the strategic partnership. There is no consensus for boosting German military aid to Ukraine or supplying Taurus missiles. Although the Russian regime is viewed as a risk to German interests, only 44% of Germans fully or somewhat agree that Germany should step up its military assistance to Ukraine, while 47% fully or somewhat disagree. German society is also divided on the issue of pressure on Ukraine. 41% of Germans believe that the West should pressure Ukraine to accept territorial losses if this could end the war, on the other hand, the same percentage (41%) are in favor of helping Ukraine recapture all Russian-held territories, including the Crimean Peninsula. The upcoming election may further polarize society and increase the political cost of the support to Ukraine for the leadership of the government and political parties whereas Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) parties insist on halting military support for Ukraine and seek to improve relations with Russia.

The Zeitenwende in Germany - its historic policy shift - is noted for being slow to deliver a proactive EU-oriented approach. There's criticism that Germany often thinks inwardly rather than seeking "a common solution... in the European Union," which reflects a "mentality problem"³². Although Germany has shown some openness to EU enlargement and reform, especially for Ukraine, "it's not moving fast enough" and lacks true leadership in shaping this vision³³.

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND BROADER GEOPOLITICAL VISION

Meanwhile, Germany's role in the EU accession process is crucial, yet some argue Germany could do more to champion Ukraine's position within the EU. This includes amplifying Ukraine's voice in shaping the EU they aspire to join, as well as fostering structural reforms that align with the EU's democratic standards and rule of law. Germany's ongoing contributions, especially in rebuilding Ukraine's institutions and infrastructure, are seen as foundational to Ukraine's EU candidacy: "*making Ukraine fit for EU membership is a huge task...*"³⁴. However, this approach is somewhat overshadowed by the vision of victory. While Kyiv's concept is a return to the borders of 1991 (although some shifts may become visible in 2025 given the change of the U.S. Administration and growing pro-Russian sentiments in some of the EU member states bordering Ukraine), Germany is hesitant to accept such an approach, focusing on reforms and integration that may arguably result in better negotiating positions for Ukraine vis-a-vis Russia. Ukrainian positions are supported by Poland, which causes fluctuation in relations between Germany and Poland. The German and Polish views, as rightly mentioned by Marta Prochwicz-Jazowska, encapsulate the two main camps well. Chancellor Scholz has said that "Russia must not win this war, Ukraine must prevail," Poland's prime minister responded, "Instead of saying that Russia cannot win or Ukraine cannot be defeated, we should change the paradigm and say: Ukraine must win. Russia must be defeated". The difference is subtle but important. For Poland and many others on the eastern flank, including Ukraine, using the term "prevail" instead of "win" highlights premature calls to bring Ukraine and Russia to the negotiating table. Germany's fear that the conflict would escalate beyond Ukraine and further into Europe was another point of difference between the East and the West of Europe. Moreover, messages emphasising that inviting Ukraine to join NATO would be a strong boost to Ukraine but carried little legal risk or political cost or could even be a catalyst towards ending the conflict, either had no effect or caused respondents to become more opposed to NATO inviting Ukraine to join the military alliance.

Besides, Germany's approach also falls short of addressing the broader geopolitical shifts in Eastern Europe. The call for a "new Ostpolitik" reflects a need for Germany to engage not only with Ukraine but also to adopt a forward-thinking stance on the entire Eastern European region, including the Caucasus and the Black Sea.

32 A quote from one of the interviews.

33 A quote from one of the interviews.

34 A quote from one of the interviews.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the partnership to be more strategic and less reactive, Germany should leverage Ukraine's integration potential as a cornerstone of a united Europe. This includes scaling up reconstruction efforts *"in a modern way, in a greener way,"* aligning with EU accession goals. Furthermore, establishing joint military-industrial initiatives would strengthen Ukraine's defense capabilities and create synergies that benefit both nations.

Boosting European integration of Ukraine and its path to peace can be possible if German bilateral initiatives are accompanied by the extension of the Zeitenwende approach to both the European and Central European level. The platforms for coordination and discussions are already in place. Extension of Zeitenwende can be a subject to the agenda of the Weimar Triangle which assembles France, Germany, and Poland. Apart from that coordination is possible within the format of Bucharest Nine which unites the countries of NATO Eastern Flank. The respective coordination can fill the existing gaps in Germany's NSS related to the region. As rightly mentioned by the respondents *"Ukraine has the potential to be the big difference maker for the Polish-German relationship because our future as Poland and as Germany is Ukraine. We need to support Ukraine because of Russia. It's a great opportunity for Poland and for Germany and for Ukraine. The way westward is through Poland and Germany. So what we need is economic and infrastructure cooperation between Germany and Poland in order to facilitate the westward integration of Ukraine. And we need military cooperation between Poland and Germany because of Ukraine and of NATO."*

Since Zeitenwende relates to security issues, it may also be extended to the region of Central Europe where the respective platforms are in place. For example, the format of the Three Seas Initiative. Against the backdrop of geopolitical upheaval caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Three Seas Initiative has reaffirmed the relevance of its concept and the urgent need to advance its goals. Given the recent global challenges and the resulting instability, the significance and underlying principles of the Three Seas Initiative have become even more important whereas Germany is already the Initiative's partner. The main goals of the Initiative are not only to promote economic development in the region by expanding connectivity but also to strengthen the cohesion of the EU and the transatlantic alliance. In this changing geopolitical landscape, the Initiative must also adapt its strategies and partnerships to the changing geopolitical framework of the European neighborhood and can be open to Zeitenwende approach extension and tailoring it to the Central European context.

Cooperation within the highlighted formats may be of immense importance for elaborating a common approach toward security in the region and a common understanding of Ukraine's victory. Germany's hesitance to take a firm stance on "victory" for Ukraine highlights a need for clearer goals and more explicit support for Ukraine's NATO and EU accession. By fostering a proactive, EU-centered partnership, and region-tailored approach Germany could strengthen Ukraine's position within Europe, thereby countering the influence of conflicting voices that suggest freezing or compromising the conflict.

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The German Zeitenwende was supposed to be the pivotal moment for the defense and security reforms reflecting the new geopolitical realm in Europe. However, time gaps between the declared intentions and concrete actions raised doubts regarding Berlin's readiness to be the EU's driving force in the changing security landscape.



The Zeitenwende moment can boost the European security sector reform. However, the lack of attention towards Central and Eastern European security concerns, strategic hesitation and the lack of cohesion between the EU member states leaves the EU vulnerable towards the new emerging risks and challenges.



Sustainability and irreversibility of Zeitenwende process depends on Berlin's ability to match short-term societal expectations and long-term strategic goals both at domestic and international level.