

PEACE AND SECURITY

SHAPING THE ZEITENWENDE

Towards a Shared Social Democratic
Approach to Eastern Europe

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This consensus paper presents the positions of a Social Democratic working group from the the Baltic States and Central Eastern Europe, Germany and the Nordics.



The launch of military aggression against Ukraine was the latest act in a long process of Russia's disengagement from the West.



There will be no peace in Europe with an international law-breaking, aggressive Russia. Ukraine first.



Ukraine should become a role model for a "Second Transition" concentrating also on education, public health and other social policy areas.

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Preface

A new Social Democratic Eastern Policy is necessary, and can only be initiated in close cooperation with partners from the Baltic States and Central Eastern Europe, Germany and the Nordic Countries because of their close proximity to the Eastern border of NATO and the EU. This goal from Social Democratic Party leaders at the Zeitenwende Conference in Warsaw in March 8, 2023 was the impulse for this paper. In order to outline such a shared Social Democratic Eastern Policy, a group of experts and politicians from eight countries met regularly in Warsaw, Riga and Vienna with the support of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung from March 2023 until May 2024. This consensus paper is the result of their insights and positions on a shared Social Democratic view. The paper has been edited by Ireneusz Bil (Amicus Europae Foundation, Poland), Max Brändle (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Poland), Reinhard Krumm (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Baltic States) and Iwona Reichardt (New Eastern Europe magazine, Poland) on the basis of the discussions and inputs of the working group. What is unique is that the consensus paper reflects a shared view, avoiding the pitfall of criticizing (or endorsing) particular national policies towards Russia, Ukraine or other states of the region. The following members of the "Shaping the Zeitenwende" working group subscribe to the text presented here:

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I. FROM SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC EASTERN POLICY SUCCESS TO RUSSIA'S DISENGAGEMENT FROM THE WEST

“Ostpolitik” and the Post-Cold War Era

Since Willy Brandt's “Ostpolitik,” a peaceful and dialogue-oriented foreign policy towards Central and Eastern Europe has taken paramount place in the foreign strategy of Western Social Democrats. Despite many setbacks and periods of contraction, this policy helped to bring freedom to the Eastern block and foster a democratic transition after 1989. In the period that followed, European Social Democrats built upon that heritage and became staunch supporters of enlarging the area of stability and economic prosperity of our continent further to the East. This was done by positively addressing the aspirations of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) states to become members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and of the European Union (EU). The role that Social Democratic parties played in that grand endeavor is undisputed, as is the role of the pivotal political figures from the progressive parties who facilitated the uniting of Europe. European Social Democracy, along with the other major European political families, proudly stood up to the challenge of the post-cold war, pro-European transformation in Central and Eastern Europe.

A similar approach was offered to the late-transforming states of the former Soviet Union, built upon the belief that all nations of Europe finally have an undisputed chance for peaceful and prosperous cooperation. With regard to Russia, not only the Social Democrats but all relevant political forces in Europe and the United States shared the conviction that a positive, pragmatic relationship needed to be worked out. There was a fairly broad understanding among Western decision makers that due to its complex history, vast geography and ethnic diversity, Russia required patience and a particular relationship, which would enable a gradual transformation of its politics, economy and society. That supportive pathway of transformation followed the principle best described by the German term “Wandel durch Annäherung” (change through rapprochement), which entailed practical cooperation and investments between the East and West in all mutually beneficial areas.

The aspirations of the other states bordering the European Union changed over time, fueled by political and social, but also security considerations. Enjoying the benefits of freshly restored independence, Kyiv, Tbilisi and Minsk initially saw themselves as bridges between the East and the West, cherishing the cultural and economic dimensions of their historical heritage, rather than as unquestioned part of the Western world and its institutions. Particularly active in fostering relations with these countries were the Social Democratic forces in Central Eastern Europe, under the guidance of such prominent political figures as Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Algirdas Brazauskas, Rudolf Schuster, Milan Kucan, Vaclav Havel and Vladimir Spidla.

Misinterpretations and Russia's Disengagement from the West

However, at least since 2004 and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, these policy approaches towards Russia and towards the non-EU neighbors have begun to show their limitations and weaknesses. The reason was that Russia gradually began insisting, with increasing aggression, on maintaining a privileged influence over its direct neighbors to the West and South. This stance gathered momentum from several factors. First, from Moscow's perspective, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was proof of Western hypocrisy and double standards. Second, the stabilization of the economy and soaring budget incomes from oil and gas transferred into more self-confidence and enabled increased militarization and securitization of the Russian political system, while also increased economic and energy vulnerability of Europe. Third, after several years in office, Vladimir Putin evolved a set of ideological beliefs about the position and role of Russia from a historical perspective. These and other factors emboldened him and the Russian political, security and military apparatus to adopt a strategy of countering Western influence, particularly in the close neighborhood of Russia. The Orange Revolution was perceived by the

Russian leadership as a humiliation for Putin, and a sign that Russia cannot compete with the West by soft power alone. Aiming to deter similar “color revolutions,” both home and abroad, Moscow put new contingency plans into place, established new capabilities and changed, or at least altered, the narratives. Soft power was replaced by sharp and hard power.

The military aggression against Ukraine was the latest act in a long process of Russia’s disengagement from the West. The country is closing its window to Europe, one that Czar Peter I had opened at the beginning of the 18th century. Although this window facilitated trade and exchange with the Western European powers, enabling Russia to escape its isolation and begin modernization, for the Central Eastern European states, their new neighbor was not at all a useful partner but rather a repressive invading power, one that occupied their territories for prolonged periods. Now, 300 years on, this open window is being shut. Russia has chosen to no longer be part of the European community of nations, and Europe – horrified by Russia’s aggressive actions – is shutting the door as well. The president demonizes the West; the Russian state and large parts of the population willingly support the war against Ukraine; the political elite ignored the death of leading opposition politician Alexey Navalny in a prison camp – these are clear signs that Moscow has given up on democracy, the rule of law and also international law. Whenever it can, Russia also attempts to stop sovereign choices of countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. In doing so, Russia acts either directly through its own instruments or indirectly by using national political forces (for example in Belarus or Georgia) to cement authoritarian solutions that serve the Kremlin’s interests.

This detachment from the West is Moscow’s decision, not the initiative of Brussels, Berlin, Warsaw or Kyiv. Most likely, the EU and NATO are facing a period of long, hostile confrontation with Russia, including the threat of conventional warfare and even the specter of nuclear weapons. The only deterrence that seems effective now is that of a country’s membership in NATO. So far, Russia has remained surprisingly resilient to any sanctions on the part of Western states to prevent or change its actions and behavior. This is because Moscow has alternatives to cooperation, mainly by turning towards China, but also other countries outside Europe. It remains to be seen how sustainable this “pivot” to the South and the East will be in the long run, how successful Russia will be

in projecting its soft power in this direction, having failed miserably towards its Western neighborhood.

The West misinterpreted the internal developments in Russia after the end of the Cold War. The former superpower could not simply accept its loss of power and status, nor was it content to be reduced to simply one among a number of former Soviet states. The memories of the Soviet victory in World War II, which came at such a high cost in human lives and material losses for all the nations of the former Soviet Union, have not constrained the largest of these nations, Russia, from unleashing the terrors of a war against what it sees as a “brotherly nation.” The 24th of February 2022 has been marked in European history as the end of the post-cold war era. Despite all the political and legal achievements in safeguarding peace, and efforts to bring Russia and its society closer to Europe, Russia has launched a large-scale war against its neighbor, Ukraine.

In the perception of much of the European general public, Germany – and particularly the Merkel governments, with the SPD as a coalition partner – bears a particular responsibility for having ignored the warning signs of a failing policy. But to be fair, no other country’s policy was successful either; none of these policies failed to prevent the war and were thus, by definition, failures. The identification of the policy failures of the democratic West towards Russia in the last 30 years – as publicly acknowledged by SPD Chairman Lars Klingbeil in 2022 – is undoubtedly a necessary endeavor today, also within the Social Democratic family: not to point the finger of blame, but rather to lower the risk of falling into the same policy traps in the future.

The analyses of Russian domestic and foreign policy over the last 10 years did not differ greatly among Western, Central or Central Eastern Europe observers. Russia was considered neither a strategic partner nor a friend, but rather a difficult neighbor that was becoming increasingly threatening. What was not the same were the various policies derived from this analysis. There was no unity among the member states of the EU and NATO. The most noticeable lack was of a Plan B for the worst-case scenario, one that would have involved a serious increase in European military capabilities.

The countries of Europe must not continue to let differences among us weaken our positions and options in the face of the challenges we now face. It is important

to mobilize our potential to assist Ukraine and to propose a Social Democratic concept for an Eastern European policy. We have to draw lessons from the recent past and at the same time preserve our Social Democratic belief that a better future based on dialogue and cooperation is possible; even though there are currently very few grounds for optimism.

The following reflections and recommendations, initiated by the FES and produced in cooperation with

representatives from social democratic parties from CEE and Scandinavia, are to be seen as a contribution to a shared progressive strategy towards the European East and to the debate on the Zeitenwende. This paper is unique in the respect that it reflects a shared view, avoiding the pitfall of criticizing (or endorsing) particular national policies towards Russia, Ukraine or other states in the region. All initiative-takers from different countries were guided by a sense of special, shared responsibility rather than attempting to push a particular agenda.

II. SHAPING THE ZEITENWENDE: THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC ROADMAP

Key Considerations for a Shared Eastern European Policy

With the ongoing aggression of Russia, and Ukraine fighting to survive as an independent and free state, the reflection on a shared Eastern European policy may be seen by some experts as premature. But the authors believe the opposite. The war is the result and manifestation of much deeper problems in the European neighborhood, which should be addressed in a comprehensive manner. These issues will most probably remain as a policy challenge in the years to come, amplified by the negative fallout from the war. Also, the lessons learned from our policy failures of the past decades signify the need for strategic forward thinking, scenario analysis of potential consequences and optimal policy recommendations.

A shared Eastern European Policy would reflect a strategy towards Eastern Europe in general and towards Russia in particular. We Social Democrats want to contribute to the crafting of such a policy and propose an approach that reflects both the short term-needs of supporting Ukraine and the long-term vision for relations with the EU neighborhood:

- **Achieve three goals.** A new Eastern policy would aim at achieving three goals: first, it should support and integrate into the EU its willing eastern neighbors and should have a plan for dealing with Russia. Second, it should take into account the broader global context of relations with China and the global South. Third, it should strengthen the EU as a whole and support its position as a more active participant in international and security affairs.
 - **Do not presume that peace in Europe is possible with an aggressive and law-breaking Russia.** There will be no peace in Europe with an international law-breaking, aggressive Russia. For a long time, foreign and security policy-making assumed that peace in Europe can only be achieved with Russia.
- Not anymore. There is, at the moment and for the foreseeable future, no peace in Europe with aggressive Russia. For the time being, we have to organize a security architecture in Europe that considers Russia as an aggressor. It might not be possible to create a lasting and sustainable peace in Europe without involving Russia, but this is the reality we are currently faced with.
- **Build a European Russia policy based on containment, constraints and deterrence.** A robust defense of NATO and EU on the eastern flank, together with serious security guarantees or NATO membership for Ukraine, must focus on containing Russia. The international sanctions regime against Russia will have to be prolonged and enforced in order to constrain Russia, Russia's economy and Russian elites. Deterring Russia is necessary to ensure security, prosperity and intermediate peace in Europe.
 - **Adapt European foreign and security policy to the changed reality.** The framework for our relations with Ukraine and its reconstruction is the EU accession process, which embraces the country's social, political and administrative reforms. Militarily, Ukraine has to be strongly and permanently supported to be able to defend itself, and Ukraine's possible NATO membership will be the framework for discussing security and defense, including a larger EU stake in this field in accordance with existing NATO structures. In the accession / enlargement processes, pragmatic, effective and realistic intermediate steps have to be developed in order to avoid prolonged and frustrating administrative procedures and political obstacles. The financial means that will be allocated within the EU Ukraine Facility are to assist Ukraine in this process.
 - **Base the policy on democratic principles.** The credibility of the Social Democratic approach to Eastern Europe needs to result from our values and principles, carefully weighing the political and economic interests of our Union in the short and long term. There

cannot be compromises in addressing the expectations of EU-aspiring nations – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – and there must not be any compromises on their independent status because of political or economic interests. Also the democratic aspirations of Belarusian society, oppressed by the Lukashenka regime for over three decades now, need proper recognition and support. The EU’s political message must be clear both to Russia and its neighbors – there is no return to a policy of privileged zones of influence. The sooner Moscow accepts its status of being legally equal to its smaller neighbors, the sooner a stable peace can return to Europe.

- **Reject the view of a geopolitical inevitability of systemic rivalry between states and nations.**

This is another feature that distinguishes the social democratic approach. Geopolitical competition for spheres of influence or natural resources tends to end in conflict and aggression, the latest example of which we are now witnessing in Eastern Europe. Even in these difficult times, European Social Democrats must not lose sight of the chance to rebuild sustainable peace and international cooperation. Especially in a new era of geopolitical competition, it is up to Social Democrats to support arms control and peaceful conflict resolution wherever possible. Recognizing threats and preventing dangers should not make us overlook the emerging opportunities for gradual and positive change.

- **Support the strengthening of collective defense capabilities.**

No single country in Europe can face the Russian threat to peace and security in Europe alone. Credible political and military alliances – NATO and the EU – are the key to maintaining security, limiting the arms race and preventing national military expenditures from spiraling out of control. The membership of Finland and Sweden in NATO is a manifestation of this philosophy. Both countries are also good examples of how to combine an increase in military spending without at the same time adopting an austerity policy that might undermine the social fabric of society. The aim should be guns and butter, not guns or butter.

- **Prevent the militarization and fragmentation of foreign policy.**

As the need for improving the military capabilities of NATO and EU is beyond doubt, more efforts should be invested into strengthening the relative and absolute perception of solidarity among the

East European states. We share the conviction that including Ukraine and Georgia into both organizations will increase security in Europe, while limiting the financial burden of these new member states, as well as that of current members. Moldova is on track to join the EU and, as a self-declared neutral state, has declared its desire for an intensified, accelerated cooperation with NATO.

- **Act against a spillover of authoritarianism to EU member states.**

The war has had a detrimental effect on the state of democracy in Central Eastern Europe. With a prolonged conflict, it may similarly influence other EU countries. Already existing problems with the quality of democracies in the EU are aggravated by the practice of numerous political forces seeking to exploit the conflict for their own political purposes, or justifying the weakening of the rule of law, freedom of speech or civil rights. In this respect, the observation and intervention role of the European Commission must be maintained and strengthened by implementing the procedures enshrined in the Treaty on the European Union.

- **Address the problem of the future of relations between democracies and autocracies.**

The practice of international political and business relations between democracies and autocracies maintains that pragmatic cooperation between them is possible and even advisable, as such cooperation may facilitate democratic transition in autocratic countries. Such cooperation makes sense as long as these autocracies do not become oppressive dictatorships and/or engage in military aggression. With Russia being the biggest of these autocracies, the future of the Ukraine conflict will also influence the EU’s approach towards others, most notably China. With regard to Europe, a new Social Democratic Eastern policy needs to analyze the latest authoritarianism tendencies in the EU neighborhood and contain a set of guidelines, risk assessments and early warning mechanism for dealing with them.

Priorities of for the Short, Medium and Long Term

A shared social democratic Eastern European policy should be divided into short-, medium- and long-term goals, as follows:

1. Short Term: Support Ukraine and Stop Russian Aggression

1.1 Ukraine first

- The commitment to Ukraine should be immediate, strong and long-lasting.
- The EU should be prepared for substantive financing of Ukraine's military operations during the war – in addition to, or substituting US contributions.
- With clear criteria for Ukraine's accession (no short-cuts), the process should progress with benevolent intentions and mutual determination.
- Concentrate on fair and just reforms in Ukraine.
- Manage expectations to avoid frustration regarding the future of Ukraine.

1.2 End the armed hostilities, manage European security and avoid further escalation

- Commit to deterrence and defense expenditures.
- Build a credible European military deterrence within NATO.
- Improve the EU's capabilities in the defense industry and its technological base.
- Increase dialogue among EU member states concerning a secure, stable and prosperous Eastern Europe (coordination through a Polish-Ukrainian-German-French "Square" political initiative).
- Keep communication channels open with Russia and Belarus, strengthening the latter country's sovereignty and independence from Moscow as well as recognizing and supporting the democratic aspirations of its society.

2. Medium Term: Manage Security Risks and Stabilize the EU Neighborhood

2.1 Provide security, stability and prosperity to Ukraine and other countries and their populations in the EU neighborhood

- Use the influence of Social Democrats in Brussels to ensure a social and just recovery and reconstruction. This includes the equal participation of women and marginalized groups in decision-making processes.
- Ensure that Ukraine follows a model of socially just transition according to EU standards.
- Be present and engaged with Social Democrats in all Central Eastern European and Eastern European countries.
- Speak to Social Democratic partners in the region to support and unite them.

2.2 Look for possibilities to communicate with Russian society

- Engage with the Russian diaspora.
- Do not forget Russian society in Russia.
- Identify, if possible, future decision-makers in Russia.
- Continue, to the degree possible, researching Russia and its society. Seek signs of change.

2.3 Create credible EU foreign and security policies and improve shortcomings

- Also commit to conflict prevention policies.
- Support qualified majority voting to enable the EU to become a serious actor in foreign and security policy. A new approach to enlargement might even be needed.
- Be resilient against undemocratic tendencies within the EU.
- Ensure that the EU promotes the participation of important countries from the Global South in talks about a sustainable global security order.

3. Long Term: Achieve a Sustainable Peace in Europe

3.1 Take a leading role in European Security based on the principles of the Paris Charter as well as the realities of the new status quo

- Use a process comparable to that of the Conference on Security and Cooperation (CSCE) in Europe.
- Use the OSCE and its experience, such as confidence-building measures (CBMs).
- Hold Russia responsible for war crimes, avoiding revenge and supporting reconciliation processes.
- Engage the public in European Security policies.
- Involve the Global South.

3.2 Commit to international law and take responsibility for military aggression

- Attempt to regain credibility for international law institutions by making sure that they must act against all violations with the same force, no matter who is at fault. In this matter, international law has to concentrate foremost on territorial integrity. The fact that Russia has broken the rule of law does not invalidate the fact that international norms and principles have also been broken by the West.
- Continue supporting processes of nuclear and conventional disarmament.

- Maintain a strict sanctions regime against Russia, in particular by restricting the access of Russian companies to Western technologies and capital, so long as Russia refuses to reconcile with the letter and spirit of international law.

III. CONCLUSION: THE DESIRED FUTURE

It is in the spirit of Social Democracy, when focused on the European neighborhood in the East, to promote stability, security and prosperity based on a social-oriented reform program. A clear and realistic plan should provide a roadmap for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to proceed with EU accession at their own speed and according to their own wishes. It should also recognize the democratic aspirations of Belarusian society, which may one day see implementation in the form of free and democratic Belarus.

A Social Democratic Eastern Policy must have as its first goal to support Ukraine militarily, politically and financially. Thus, for the time of war and reconstruction the motto should be: Ukraine first. It also has to ensure that Ukraine remains independent and retains its territorial integrity. It cannot allow Russia to be victorious in challenging the sovereignty and territorial integrity of an independent state. It might take a long time to achieve these aims. Achieving a just peace is the ultimate goal.

The main emphasis in foreign policy should be on Ukraine. Still, even if Russia has chosen to disengage from the West, diplomacy will still be required to avoid further escalation. Therefore, it would be wise to keep some channels open on both official and unofficial levels. There should also be a permanent conversation with the Russian diaspora and with the engaged Russian citizens who remain in the country.

Signs of change on all levels have to be monitored very closely. Our policy towards Russia will have to live up to this new reality and will be focused on the medium and long term. It will not exclude possibilities for a lasting peace in Europe with a Russian Federation that would have to be considerably different from the present authoritarian and aggressively imperialistic regime.

The security environment world-wide has changed dramatically. European security no longer depends only on Europe. Russia has powerful partners around the world, which partly support the Russian war against Ukraine. In their tradition as internationalists, Social Democrats have to be more engaged with the so-called Global South to improve relationships and be more convincing about the advantages of international law, rule of law, human rights and democracy.

History and its perceptions continue to play an important role in Eastern Europe. Coming to terms with the past is often an act of courage, especially when it does not concern victims from one's own nation. Social Democratic Eastern policy must be sensitive to the historical experiences of the countries and nations of the region and pay attention to processes of tolerance and reconciliation.

To be effective, the EU has to reform itself. Decisions must be made more rapidly and should not be blocked by a minority that is more concerned with domestic challenges than cognizant of the importance of European security. Europe needs to have a say in formulating international norms and principles.

Lessons from previous rounds of EU enlargement will have to be learned and implemented in Ukraine's accession process. The EU will be a key player in the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine. While Social Democratic actors in the Ukraine still do not have a strong presence or representation, Social Democrats in Europe should use their influence in Brussels to ensure a social and just recovery.

The EU accession process for Ukraine has to be built on a foundation of solidarity with Ukraine. Ukraine should become a role model for a "second transition," which might also be the framework for re-designing the accession process for the Western Balkans as well as for Moldova and the future candidate Georgia. International financial institutions might be a key instrument of an inclusive reform process. The second transition has to be fair, concentrating also on education, public health and other social policy areas.

A key element for intermediate peace and security in Europe will be the re-instatement of the rule of law. This pertains not only to the fight against corruption and the foundations of a democratic state; this also refers to the re-instatement of a security order based on international law. Bringing justice to the victims of Russian aggression should also involve the enlargement of the scope of the International Court of Justice, including all Western partners.

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IMPRESSUM

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SHAPING THE ZEITENWENDE

Towards a Shared Social Democratic Approach to Eastern Europe



A new Social Democratic Eastern policy is both necessary and can only be initiated in close cooperation with partners from the Nordics, the Baltic States and Central Eastern Europe. This consensus paper presents the positions of a Social Democratic working group from these regions.



The launch of military aggression against Ukraine was the final act in a long process of Russia's disengagement from the West. Social Democrats propose an approach that reflects both the short term-needs of supporting Ukraine and the long-term vision for the relations with the EU neighborhood.



There will be no peace in Europe with an international law-breaking, aggressive Russia. We will have to build the European Russia Policy on Containment, Constraints and Deterrence. The main emphasis will be: Ukraine first.



The future of Ukraine will be discussed in the format of NATO and EU accession. Ukraine should become a role model for a "Second Transition" concentrating also on education, public health and other social policy areas.

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