

Ukraine as a Litmus Test: Germany Must Redefine Its Role in Europe and the World

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US President Donald Trump's policy of undermining multilateralism, redefining relations with Europe, and normalizing relations with Russia is an expression of a changing world order. It also exposes the limits of European actorness. Germany must redefine its role in Europe and its policies toward Russia and Eastern Europe. Ukraine is the test case for whether Moscow and Washington will recognize Germany and Europe as relevant actors. If Ukraine fails, Europe will fail. At the same time, Ukraine is crucial for influencing change within Russia.

THE SHIFT GLOBAL AUTHORITARIAN RISE

One year into Donald Trump's second term as US president, we are witnessing the next step in an ongoing, fundamental shift in the global order. The resurgence of great-power politics, the demand for and recognition of spheres of influence, and the declining relevance of state sovereignty and borders are precisely the policies pursued by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Trump's seizure of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his claims on South America and Greenland as part of the US sphere of influence, is something that Putin's regime will, to some extent, accept – if the United States accepts Russia's domination of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea.

Beyond the rise of authoritarianism and transactional, national-interest-driven policies, there is growing pressure on civil society and shrinking spaces

for independent media and democratic opposition worldwide. The closure of USAID as the main funder of organized civil society and independent media globally – but especially in post-Soviet countries that have long been a US priority – represents a major blow to these actors. In regions such as Central Asia, almost no funding for civil society and independent media remains. In Russia, Eastern Europe, and the South Caucasus, many organizations have been forced to close due to a lack of funding.

For the Kremlin and other authoritarian leaders in the region, these actors represented the main domestic threat to their power. In countries such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, systematic crackdowns on civil society and political opposition are accelerating, as the United States no longer criticizes or responds to these policies. For Russia, a declining power waging the largest war in Europe since World War II, these developments are good news. Not only

has its worldview of a multipolar order been seemingly confirmed – based on the decline of US unilateralism and soft power – but Moscow is also facing less pressure from Washington to end the war in Ukraine and is once again being recognized by Donald Trump as a great power that must be engaged.

While the war in Ukraine is accelerating Russia's decline as a regional and international power, Donald Trump's policy of normalizing relations with Russia is likely to slow this process.

THE IMPLICATION FOREIGN POLICY IDENTITY CRISIS

Germany and Europe – including the post-World War II European Community/European Union – were products of US policy. West Germany's integration into NATO and the transatlantic partnership, as well as its role in European

integration, were major success stories in terms of democratization, economic development, and its rise as Europe's economic powerhouse and one of the world's largest economies. Multilateral regional and global institutions provided the framework for this success, alongside US security guarantees.

Today, the global and European multilateral order – including financial institutions, the United Nations, and the OSCE – is eroding. It remains an open question whether the EU, as a normative power, can survive without US security guarantees and the broader normative framework Washington has provided until recently. The shift in US policy highlights the foreign and security policy weaknesses of Europe and Germany, which are neither institutionally nor psychologically prepared for this new world order. Russia, by contrast, is prepared. In cooperation with countries such as China and Iran, the Russian leadership is seeking to build an alternative form of authoritarian multilateralism through platforms such as BRICS+ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These platforms serve the interests of authoritarian regimes to stay in power, the creation of alternative financial systems, and the development of authoritarian norms in areas such as security, conflict resolution, and governance.

At the same time, Donald Trump is transforming the transatlantic partnership from a values-based, win-win relationship into a purely interest-driven, transactional business interaction. His administration increasingly views Europe as a competitor, a threat, or even an adversary, while Trump appears to share more common ground with Putin in his understanding of power and interests.

As a result, Europe lacks actorness, and Germany must redefine its role in Europe and the world, as well as its relationship with both the United States and Russia. Germany is experiencing a profound foreign policy identity crisis and must reinvent itself while its political elites

simultaneously manage multiple crises. Germany's post-Cold War socialization emphasized not leading, but "leading from the side." German society remains broadly skeptical of strong international engagement and crisis management. The idea of change through trade or conflict prevention through economic cooperation has failed. Germany's rhetoric and instruments of multilateralism, its development agencies, and its cultural diplomacy are all undergoing a severe stress test.

While the United States is cutting funding in these areas, Germany is following suit, reallocating resources toward defense. As Europe's former key actor in shaping relations with Russia, Germany has lost contact with the Russian leadership, has little influence on Russian domestic developments, and remains unwilling to fundamentally rethink its Russia and Eastern Europe policies. This has left Europe without leadership in shaping a coherent approach toward Russia and the region.

THE RESPONSE

UKRAINE AS THE TEST CASE

For German decision-makers, these shifts coincide with an erosion of domestic political stability and societal cohesion. Germany is not only facing a deep economic crisis, but trust in institutions, politicians, political parties, and the media has been declining for years. A fundamental shift in German foreign and security policy – responding both to Russian aggression and to Donald Trump's America First policy, while assuming a leadership role in Europe – requires political elites who are willing and able to act, and who are prepared to take risks by changing the domestic discourse on key strategic issues.

German society and political elites remain divided over Russia, which hampers strategic rethinking. Although Germany is the largest supporter of Ukraine in

Europe and its political leadership identifies Russia as the main security threat, significant parts of the population and the political opposition continue to question this policy. Germany needs to play a far stronger role in elevating support for Ukraine and integrating the country into the EU and the European security architecture. It must also raise its profile in reforming the EU and advancing the EU's development as a capable political actor. If necessary, this can be pursued through a core group of willing states.

Germany must invest more in its diplomatic capacities, strengthen its soft-power institutions, and simultaneously expand its defense capabilities. Russia is – and will remain – the main security threat to Germany and Europe. Germany therefore needs a medium- and long-term strategy toward Russia that goes beyond deterrence and actively supports change within the country. Together with its partners, Germany must define where and how Russia can be weakened in the shared neighborhood and globally – through deeper engagement with other countries and by raising the costs for Russia in multiple regions.

Ukraine is the key to European actorness and credibility vis-à-vis Moscow and Washington. If Ukraine fails, Europe will fail. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made this clear in his speech in Davos, arguing that Europe is not acting as if it fully understands what is at stake. Germany has a central role to play in changing this. The outcome will shape not only Europe's future, but also that of Russia and the Putin regime.

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