

DGAP REPORT

Saxony, a Seismograph

The (Anti-)Zeitenwende in
Transformation Regions



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Executive Summary

While debates in Berlin regarding the “Zeitenwende” (sea change or watershed moment) focus on budgets, alliances, and strategic priorities, the reality of life for many people – including in eastern Germany – remains disconnected from these discussions. This alienation jeopardizes public support for foreign policy actions. At the same time, the AfD and the BSW are mobilizing against this new foreign policy course, particularly in the East, by championing a kind of “anti-Zeitenwende.” This exploratory study examines how the Zeitenwende and the opposition to it are perceived on the ground and explores the scope for a foreign policy that can garner domestic support beyond populist and national-authoritarian polarization. The study is based on in-depth interviews as well as conversations in pubs and public spaces across Saxony.

The analysis identifies three underlying narratives: First, many interviewees view the Zeitenwende against the backdrop of 36 years of structural change since reunification. Consequently, it appears less as a historic rupture and more as one of several political turning points. With the end of the peace dividend, foreign policy has become a matter of distribution and identity. Acceptance of rearmament appears linked to whether its benefits are tangible, for example, in the form of job opportunities.

Secondly, alignment with the West is not a given. Experiences with the intra-German divide also shape perspectives on international politics. “Interests before values” is increasingly replacing “interests instead of values” as exemplified by the motto “rent before morality.” In other words: Before you intervene somewhere because of your values, the economic foundations must be secured.

Thirdly, the interviewees desire a more sovereign Europe that is open to Central Europe. They are pro-European but at the same time susceptible to a national-populist reinterpretation favoring a “Europe of Fatherlands.” This narrative is now being fueled not only by Moscow but also by Washington.

East German skepticism is thus less a rejection of rearmament than a sensitivity to how the burdens are distributed and who has a say in the decision-making process. In our study, Saxony serves as a seismograph rather than an outlier: The trends recorded there also affect other regions undergoing structural change far beyond Germany’s borders.

For policymakers, this means that trust cannot be built in a sprint but only in a marathon. It takes time, repeated dialogue, and staying power. Three guiding principles emerge from this:

First, participation must begin at the local level, with the European and federal levels providing targeted support to local and regional actors. In terms of procedure, the Federal Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defense, and the Bundeswehr should recognize East Germany’s experience with transformation as a source of expertise and close the representation gap within their own ranks. By working together with federal states, municipalities, and educational institutions, such as adult education centers and vocational schools, they can reach people in places where they already gather.

Secondly, local communities must benefit from the economic advantages of defense investments. The federal and state governments should promote regional value creation and research and take dual-use facilities into account when awarding contracts. Companies, chambers of commerce, and trade unions can help bring democracy and participation from the kitchen table to the factory floor. The guiding principle is: “Those who help pay should also benefit.”

Thirdly, a compelling and constructive European perspective is needed. The German federal government, the EU, and centrist parties should position Europe as a bulwark and problem-solver situated between Washington and Beijing. Cross-border infrastructure can anchor this narrative at the regional level. Furthermore, a “Görlitz Security Forum” could bring the eastern German states and Central Europe into the heart of Europe.

Introduction

Germany is in the midst of a “Zeitenwende” (sea change or watershed moment) in foreign and security policy. Since the Russian attack on Ukraine, German foreign policy has undergone a fundamental shift. While discussions in Berlin focus on budgets, alliances, and strategic priorities, these debates remain disconnected from the daily lives of many people, including those in eastern Germany. This disconnect jeopardizes public support for foreign policy actions. The foreign policy debate often lacks a connection between the political center and the perspectives of citizens in the periphery.

Alongside the paradigm shift in foreign policy, anti-establishment movements such as the AfD and the BSW have continued to gain support, particularly in eastern Germany. In the upcoming state elections in Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the AfD is leading the polls in many areas. Current surveys also show the party as the strongest force in Saxony, with around 42 percent of the vote. AfD and BSW capitalize on the feeling of alienation regarding foreign policy, mobilizing – in the spirit of an anti-Zeitenwende – against liberal democratic institutions as well as against a value-based and Western-oriented foreign policy.¹

At the same time, findings from across Germany show that a large majority of Germans increasingly perceive global political events as part of their daily lives and feel affected by the consequences of international politics. Yet they doubt Germany’s capacity to act on the global stage.² The question, then, is not whether foreign policy resonates with the public. What matters is how it resonates – and whether centrist parties can offer a compelling and competitive agenda.

Eastern Germany is particularly well suited for examining how foreign policy resonates at the local level. Here, foreign policy decisions directly intersect with experiences of social and economic transformation.

Structural change, deindustrialization, and gaps in representation intersect with foreign policy measures such as sanctions, conscription, and defense spending. At the same time, energy and living costs are rising, jobs are under pressure, and the economic future is becoming more uncertain. The consequences of the Zeitenwende are perceived – and often reinterpreted – differently on the ground; in our conversations, we encounter fatigue regarding change, narratives of social decline, and a sense of loss of control. This complex dynamic highlights where rifts and communication problems arise and why parts of the population are skeptical of German foreign policy.

This study explores two key questions:

- What is the societal resonance of the (anti-) Zeitenwende in eastern Germany? To this end, we first examine the background of the Zeitenwende and its interplay with domestic political developments in Saxony.
- What scope exists for a foreign policy that can garner the support of society even beyond populist and national-authoritarian anti-establishment mobilization? This question is the focus of the chapters on findings and discussion. We then describe concrete measures that would make it easier for the public to connect with foreign policy.

To answer these questions, we draw on in-depth interviews, pub discussions, and conversations with local stakeholders (see Methodology). The aim of the study is to examine the connection between federal politics and everyday life experiences in eastern Germany. The focus is on societal resonance: How do elements of the Zeitenwende – and the opposition to it – connect with daily experiences, frustrations, and visions of the future beyond party-political affiliations?

1 See Jacob Ross, *Anatomie der Anti-Zeitenwende: Konturen einer AfD-Außenpolitik*, DGAP Analyse Nr.4 (Berlin: German Council on Foreign Relations, 2025), 17, <https://doi.org/10.60823/DGAP-25-43014-de>.

2 See Lisa Höhn and David Melches, *Deutschlands Rolle in einer Welt im Wandel: Perspektiven und Bedarfe unserer Gesellschaft* (Berlin: More in Common, Oktober 2025), https://www.moreincommon.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/251027_MIC_DeutschlandsRolleinderWelt_RZ.pdf.

The Background

Chancellor Olaf Scholz coined the term *Zeitenwende* (sea change or watershed moment) in his speech to the Bundestag on February 27, 2022. He argued that Germany, in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, must assume responsibility for a rules-based international order – and be prepared to pay the price for doing so.³ This was followed by a historic reorientation: a special fund of 100 billion euros for the Bundeswehr, ongoing military and financial support for Ukraine, and a departure from principles that had been considered immutable for decades. Germany rapidly abandoned its self-image as a “civilian power.” Under “foreign policy Chancellor” Friedrich Merz, this process was further accelerated, driven by stronger European coordination of policy on Ukraine and massive investment in defense capabilities. With the enactment of the Military Service Modernization Act, this shift is now making itself felt in the daily lives of Germans.

FROM THE ZEITENWENDE TO AN EPOCHAL BREAK

With the start of US President Donald Trump's second term in January 2025, the *Zeitenwende* accelerated further. Trump's meeting with Putin in Alaska and his repeated claims to sovereignty over Greenland – which prompted Defense Minister Boris Pistorius to speak of an “epochal break” – illustrate the new global threat landscape. In this context, the goal is now to transform Germany into Europe's strongest conventional military power. The mandatory registration of all conscripts, introduced on January 1, 2026, and the controversial debate over the requirement for young men to obtain permission for stays abroad, demonstrate how this *Zeitenwende* is shifting from an abstract policy agenda to the lived reality of the German population.

The transition from a *Zeitenwende* to an epochal break unfolded at a rapid pace and without a broad societal debate about what the realignment of German foreign policy means for different regions, generations, and social groups. The Monday demonstrations in cities such as Chemnitz and Gera since 2022 show that foreign policy has become a mobilizing issue in East German communities.⁴ The simultaneous rise of the BSW and the continuing strength of the AfD show that this mobilization is also having an impact on the party system. Both developments are taking place against the backdrop of an anti-establishment political landscape that has evolved over more than three decades of structural change.⁵

Slogans at the Monday demonstrations included, among others: “Ami Go Home,” “Greens and war-mongers to the Eastern Front,” and “Why bike paths in Peru and no playgrounds here?”⁶ Does that signify “(East) Germany First?” In his “Anatomy of the Anti-Turning Point,” Jacob Ross shows how the AfD is constructing an increasingly coherent foreign policy platform: interests over values, a multipolar order rather than the collective West, and tactical Atlanticism alongside continued close ties to Russia. In doing so, the AfD is aligning itself with an international post-liberal trend. Jordan Bardella, the French presidential candidate for the Rassemblement National, also advocates for a Europe more shaped by nationalism, a Europe that promises greater sovereignty and aims to become more independent of a retreating United States.⁷

THE NEXUS BETWEEN DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICY

Foreign policy decisions cannot be viewed in isolation from domestic political dynamics. Robert Putnam's pioneering theoretical work on the “two-level

3 See Olaf Scholz, “The Global *Zeitenwende*: How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era,” *Foreign Affairs* 102, Nr. 1 (January/February 2023).

4 See Erik Vollmann, Paulina Fröhlich and Florian Ranft, “Mir reicht's” Bürger. Analyse der Montagsdemonstrationen in Chemnitz und Gera im Winter 2022/23 (Berlin: Das Progressive Zentrum, 2023) https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Studie_Mir_reicht's_Buerger_Montagsdemonstrationen_Progressives-Zentrum.pdf

5 See David F. Patton, “Monday, Monday: Eastern Protest Movements and German Party Politics since 1989,” *German Politics* 26, Nr. 4 (2017): 480–497, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2017.1365136>.

6 See Erik Vollmann und Friedrich W. Opitz, “Protest Movements Between Social Justice, Peace, and Anti-Establishment Politics? Evidence from Monday Demonstrations in Eastern Germany,” *German Politics* (2026), March, 1–22.

7 See Michaela Wiegel und Niklas Záboji, „Wir werden nationales Recht über Europarecht stellen“: Jordan Bardella von Rassemblement National“, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 12, 2026.

game” shows that international negotiations are always conducted at the domestic level as well: Only those who mobilize the broadest possible domestic support retain the capacity to act in the foreign policy arena.⁸ Without such support, gaps in legitimacy emerge that populist movements can exploit. This is also evident in the rise of populist parties since the 2016 Brexit referendum. Mader and Schoen have empirically demonstrated that this gap exists in Germany as well.⁹ In their analysis following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, they identify “no Zeitenwende in public opinion” – despite the epochal break repeatedly proclaimed in Berlin.

Recent findings from the Universities of Leipzig and Munich show that concerns about a military conflict with Russia are on the rise.¹⁰ Against this backdrop, support for higher defense spending is also increasing. However, the study focuses on military solutions and does not explore more fundamental questions regarding the causes, effects, and underlying rationales of threat perception. Given the growing success of the anti-Zeitenwende parties, it seems questionable to take these rising approval ratings as a basis for a fundamental realignment of foreign policy. Such support remains reactive and conditional.

For the nexus between domestic and foreign policy, this implies that empirical findings can, at best, provide indications as to whether a change of course will meet with approval. They do not, however, answer the question of how such a change should be shaped. Yet it is precisely the “how” that determines the viability of the new course within society.

With regard to other societies and other issues, too, the tension between domestic and foreign policy becomes evident in the question of “how.” When it comes to climate change, for example, the issue is often less about the findings themselves than about how they are addressed. The French “Yellow Vests” protests

illustrate this dynamic: Commuters and members of the rural population frequently perceive fuel taxes – motivated by climate policy and implemented as part of international commitments – as a redistribution of burdens imposed by the Parisian elite.¹¹ In the American Midwest, free trade agreements were perceived as a cause of deindustrialization and became politicized – due to a sense of alienation that transcended the boundaries of the US two-party system and mobilized both businesses and labor unions.¹² Trump strategically capitalized on this sense of alienation in 2016 and, during the 2024 election campaign, extended it to climate policy. With his slogan “Green New Scam” and the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, he framed international climate commitments as the embodiment of elitist politics implemented at the expense of steelworkers in Pittsburgh and employees of the fracking industry in neighboring West Virginia.

Ikenberry draws a far-reaching conclusion from these developments: The greatest challenge to liberal multilateralism today does not come from the outside – that is, from revisionist powers such as China or Russia – but from within: The societal coalitions that have sustained this order for decades are eroding.¹³ The liberal world order is losing its societal foundation because abstract alliance commitments and concrete realities of life are increasingly drifting apart. Even the Biden administration’s attempt to pursue a “Foreign Policy for the Middle Class” ultimately failed because in parts of US society, the gap between foreign policy aspirations and the lived experiences of everyday life had become too wide.¹⁴ For this study, this means that what we observe in Chemnitz, Görlitz, and in conversations around East German kitchen tables is not a regional anomaly. It is a local manifestation of the domestic political erosion that is systematically destabilizing liberal democracies across the world.

In the German context, the end of the peace dividend is having a particularly strong impact. For more

8 See Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization* 42, Nr. 3 (1988): 427–460.

9 See Matthias Mader und Harald Schoen, “No Zeitenwende (yet): Early Assessment of German Public Opinion Toward Foreign and Defense Policy After Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 64, Nr. 3 (2023): 525–547. Based on panel data, the authors find no evidence of a fundamental shift in attitudes, despite the Zeitenwende proclaimed by the elite.

10 The survey (July–September 2025) documents broad support for military preparedness: 77 percent favor higher defense spending, 70 percent support allocating at least 3 percent of GDP to defense, and 60 percent back an expansion of Bundeswehr personnel. At the same time, this support remains conditional: Funding via budget reallocation is preferred over tax increases, while aid to Ukraine is the only measure that fails to garner a majority. This is discussed in greater detail below. See also Sebastian Blesse, Philipp Lergetporer, Clara Pache, and Helen Zeidler, “Gefahr im Verzug?” *ifo Schnelldienst* 1/2026, 70–77.

11 See Mathilde Martin and Mine Islar, “The ‘End of the World’ vs. the ‘End of the Month’: Understanding Social Resistance to Sustainability Transition Agendas, a Lesson from the Yellow Vests in France,” *Sustainability Science* 16, Nr. 2 (2021): 601–614, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00877-9>.

12 See Lainey Newman and Theda Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues: Why Working-Class Voters Are Turning Away from the Democratic Party* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023). The authors examine how anti-establishment dynamics among union members develop in relation to union leadership and the leadership of the Democratic Party.

13 See G. John Ikenberry, “The End of Liberal International Order?” *International Affairs* 94, Nr.1, (2018): 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>.

14 For a discussion of the concept of US foreign policy tied to domestic politics, see Sullivan, Jake: “The Sources of American Power.” *Foreign Affairs* 102, No. 6 (2023); see also Jake Sullivan and Jennifer Harris on trade policy and the middle class in the run-up to the Biden administration.

than 30 years, foreign policy appeared to be a positive-sum game: Free trade generated prosperity, multilateralism was viewed as cost-effective, and disarmament made it possible to increase social spending. That logic has now broken down. The *Zeitenwende* therefore has far-reaching implications for distribution policy. In eastern Germany, it affects a region that has learned since 1989 that historic upheavals distribute their costs unevenly. Mauder and his colleagues demonstrate a pattern that is also reflected in the interviews conducted for this study: As soon as abstract security promises are linked to tangible burdens, public support for European security cooperation collapses – a “crumbling in the face of cost.”¹⁵

The German population does not simply appear to be divided between “pacifists” and “warmongers.” Contrary to the widespread polarization thesis, Mau, Lux, and Westheuser show that a broad social center shares certain fundamental convictions. Rather, the impression of a deeply divided society arises because the political fringes dominate public discourse, while a de-ideologized center often fails to clearly articulate its positions.¹⁶ This project therefore focuses on the shades of gray between the political camps: on attitudes that rarely appear in party platforms yet shape conversations. According to Mau and colleagues, political conflicts are sparked by “trigger points” – moments of perceived unequal treatment that stir up emotions and shape political disputes. Similarly, they can also trigger so-called “deep stories,” which we will explore below.

EASTERN GERMANY AS A PIONEER

Why is it worth taking a closer look at eastern Germany, even though its 16 million people account for only about one-fifth of Germany's population? Not because eastern Germany is a homogenous area with specific problems, but because certain political geographies can be understood as laboratories: Developments that first emerge there and in a concentrated form – such as a loss of trust in institutions, alienation from elite

foreign policy discourses, or the search for new forms of political belonging – appear elsewhere with a time lag.¹⁷ Weisskircher rightly warns against the “exoticization of eastern Germany.” The rise of the AfD is a transnational phenomenon, not a unique regional problem.¹⁸ Eastern Germany is therefore not an outlier but an early indicator.

Saxony stands out in this regard for a variety of reasons. The economic situation in East Germany is more complex than the image of a region in perpetual crisis suggests. After hitting rock bottom in the early 2000s – marked by mass unemployment, out-migration, and deindustrialization – the region had laboriously regained ground during the 2010s. Technology-intensive industries set up shop, unemployment fell, and cities like Leipzig and Dresden saw demographic growth again after decades of decline. However, this upswing rests on shaky foundations. It relied, among other things, on low energy prices, stable supply chains, and the favorable labor market conditions of the post-reunification decades.

Here, the *Zeitenwende* is compounded by ongoing structural vulnerabilities. According to the State Statistical Office, Saxony's economy lost 15,000 jobs in 2025, nearly 9,000 of them in manufacturing – more than any other federal state. Since 2019, the total job loss has reached 23,000.¹⁹ The automotive region of southwestern Saxony, home to the VW plant in Zwickau and the Chemnitz engine plant, is facing dual pressures: the transition to electric mobility and geopolitically driven supply chain disruptions. At the same time, new economic hubs are emerging, such as semiconductor investments around Dresden and defense production in Görlitz. This shows that Saxony is not a monolithic region in decline. Rather, economic development is diverging between growing high-tech clusters and shrinking industrial sites as well as between investment magnets and areas facing demographic challenges. Nineteen of the 22 oldest regions in Europe are located in eastern Germany, and quite a few of them are in Saxony.²⁰

15 Matthias Mader et al., “Crumbling in the Face of Cost? European Security Cooperation and the Limits of Public Support”, *European Union Politics* 25, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14651165241236772> See also Mader und Schoen, „No Zeitenwende (yet)“

16 Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux, und Linus Westheuser. *Triggerpunkte*. (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2023) <https://www.suhrkamp.de/epub/triggerpunkte-t-9783518776766>.

17 See Steffen Mau, *Ungleich vereint: Warum der Osten anders bleibt* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2024).

18 See Manes Weisskircher, “Internationaler Rechtsruck,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 19, 2024.

19 See Statistisches Landesamt des Freistaates Sachsen, „2025 stärkster absoluter Rückgang der Zahl der Erwerbstätigen in Sachsen im Deutschlandvergleich“, Medieninformation 4/2026, Kamenz, Januar 27, 2026, https://www.statistik.sachsen.de/download/presse-2026/mi_statistik-sachsen-004-2026_erwerbstaetigkeit-2025.pdf

20 See Philip Oltermann, Sam Jones, Jennifer Rankin und Pamela Duncan, „Germany and Spain Scramble to Reverse the Flight of Youth,” *The Guardian*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/02/germany-spain-scramble-reverse-the-flight-youth-eastern-europe>.

The political landscape reflects this fragmentation with the AfD, BSW, Freie Sachsen, independent candidates, and shrinking parliamentary groups from the Greens, FDP, and SPD. In this party landscape, the established blocs of the old Federal Republic are barely recognizable. Vorländer and Herold describe Saxony as a state with a “fragile democratic culture” – not pathological but susceptible to resentment and populism and marked by strong regional disparities.²¹ Early on, the so-called PEGIDA demonstrations revealed the growing support for extra-parliamentary groups that shaped public discourse for years to come. The Zeitenwende is now further exposing this economic and political fragility. The energy crisis, the decline of the German export model, and geopolitically driven supply chain disruptions affect the East not just as abstract geopolitical phenomena but as concrete threats to a hard-won economic and social stability. This makes the question of East Germany’s analytical significance for understanding the Zeitenwende all the more urgent.

Mau speaks of a “phantom border” in the current German discourse: If the West is taken as the norm, “the East is perceived primarily as a deviation rather than in terms of its own distinct characteristics.”²² This is a warning that should also guide this analysis. At the same time, a different perspective can be derived from this: Eastern Germany and Saxony are not just any region. They are a kind of pioneering territory. Developments that are only just beginning to emerge elsewhere – alienation from the foreign-policy discourses of elites, a loss of trust in institutions, and the search for new forms of political affiliation – occurred earlier here, are more pronounced, and are therefore particularly easy to observe. Anyone wishing to understand the tensions unleashed by the Zeitenwende in Western democracies can view East Germany as an early warning system – and learn from the experiences gained there.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, this study draws on the concept of “deep stories” developed by Arlie Russell Hochschild in her analysis of US regions undergoing transformation,

such as the Rust Belt. Beyond verifiable political facts, these narratives crystallize emotionally perceived truths about belonging, recognition, and experiences of injustice.²³ This study deliberately puts its analytical focus not on the programmatic offerings of the anti-Zeitenwende but rather on the demand side: Where do populist proposals connect with everyday experiences independently of party-political loyalties, and what societal conditions provide resonance for this?

The study follows a qualitative, triangulating design and is based on four formats involving more than 30 conversations held between November 2025 and May 2026. Key anchor points included three public “pub talk” evenings in Chemnitz, organized in collaboration with the Sächsische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung (Saxony’s State Agency for Political Education). This format was designed to provide a low-threshold, dialogue-oriented approach to the field: Experts took seats at individual tables and, after a brief introduction, engaged in conversation with participants on global political issues. Topics ranged from figures such as Trump and Putin to the impact of energy policy on everyday life in Saxony. However, the focus was on the themes that emerged from conversations among the pub patrons.

Secondly, we conducted qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews based on an interview guideline with predominantly young people aged 18 to 35. These participants were recruited and interviewed in collaboration with the “Junge DGAP” (Young DGAP) using methods such as snowball sampling.²⁴ The age focus was chosen deliberately: It allowed us to observe which “deep stories,” shared around the kitchen table, are transmitted to a generation that did not personally experience German reunification – and to see how stable such narratives remain when they are based on hearsay rather than personal experience. Almost all of the interviewees came from Saxony, with a few hailing from Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia.

Thirdly, in-depth discussions with local intermediaries – held as part of “Stadtgespräche” (city discussions) in Görlitz – complemented the data collection. These intermediaries included local politicians as well as representatives from sports clubs, the business

21 See Hans Vorländer und Maik Herold, “Ein unruhiges Land: Sachsen und seine labile demokratische Kultur,” *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 33, Nr. 4 (2023): 709–736.

22 See Mau, *Ungleich Vereint*, 10, 18.

23 See Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame, and the Rise of the Right* (New York: The New Press, 2024); also see Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

24 See Michael Meuser and Ulrike Nagel, “Das Experteninterview – konzeptionelle Grundlagen und methodische Anlage,” in *Methoden der vergleichenden Politik- und Sozialwissenschaft*, edited by Susanne Pickel et al. (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2009), 465–479.

community, and the church. As local intermediaries with privileged access to diverse local communities, they were able to provide insights into people's perceptions and experiences.

Fourthly, the findings were discussed in a workshop with representatives from politics, academia, and think tanks, and the resulting policy recommendations were reviewed.

The selection of conversation partners was aimed at capturing the broadest possible cross-section of society. Access to the field was gained through open pub events, via local intermediaries who opened doors to their respective networks, and – for the interviews – through a snowball sampling method. All conversations were analyzed anonymously; names and personal details were altered or omitted. The limitations of the study design are clear: While the group of participants was deliberately heterogeneous, it does not constitute a representative sample. Furthermore, the geographical focus on the anchor cities of Chemnitz and Görlitz limits how far our findings can be generalized for Saxony as a whole. Consequently, no claim is made to statistical representativeness; the findings are exploratory in nature and serve to generate hypotheses. Their strength lies in bringing to light nuances and emotionally charged perceptions that often get lost in polarized debates yet can be politically decisive.

Analysis and Discussion

ANALYSIS: 36 YEARS OF ZEITENWENDE

One of the questions explored in the following analysis is whether and to what extent “deep stories” reinforce skepticism towards the Zeitenwende and thereby create fertile ground for alternative visions of foreign policy. To understand the lack of resonance of German foreign policy in the East, this study identifies three collective narratives that lie beneath the surface and act as filters for the perception of current global political events.²⁵ These deep stories are not always explicitly articulated; rather, they emerge as recurring patterns in the respondents’ accounts. They shape the thinking, feelings, and political judgment of the interviewees and the people in their social circles. The interviewers asked about perceptions of the Zeitenwende, about influential global actors (“Do you trust Trump or Putin?”), and about ideas regarding foreign policy for the present and future (“Draw up the bridge or let it down?”). Similar guiding questions shaped the conversations in pubs and public spaces.

The responses paint a clear picture: There is a discrepancy between the federal government’s officially proclaimed policy of the Zeitenwende and the lived realities of the respondents. Perceptions of global crises and geopolitical have a direct impact on everyday life and reinforce a latent sense of exclusion and limited agency. In the conversations, these perceptions are shaped by experiences of systemic, economic, and personal transformation. The perspectives that emerge are ambivalent: They reflect a weariness with transformation after 36 years of an individually experienced Zeitenwende, a sense of distance from the “global West,” and a desire for a more sovereign Europe.

When it comes to Russia, many interviewees draw a distinction between the state leadership and Russian civil society. In contrast, sentiments towards the United States are dominated by irritation and skepticism – directed less at the principle of pursuing national interests than at the specific form this is taking under President Trump. “(East) Germany First” appears to be a slogan capable of winning majority support. What it actually means, however, remains one of those ambiguities open to varying interpretations. A multipolar world order is viewed not primarily as a threat but as an opportunity for realignment based on partnership. The following three narratives range from personal experiences with transformation and the resulting worldview – which does not necessarily entail an orientation towards the West – to a constructive political vision: a sovereign Europe that puts more of its focus on the East. Table 1 provides a brief comparative overview.

1. At the Kitchen Table: The Legacy of Transformation and Narratives of Relative Decline

The interviews show that it is not merely the imprint of the GDR but above all the experiences of four decades of structural change that have shaped the worldviews of the respondents and their families. Seated at the proverbial kitchen table, the interviewees express a latent skepticism towards “those at the top,” towards state institutions, established political parties, and “institutionalized” politics in general. The respondents describe a persistent feeling of a lack of self-efficacy that many in their social circles share and which they also attribute to the biographical ruptures following 1989/90. The foreign policy sentiments of many respondents also seem to tie into this: There is a prevailing feeling of being a “pawn of the great powers” and unable to exert any influence. Speaking to the interviewers, some respondents expressed surprise: “No one has ever asked me about foreign policy before,” or

²⁵ See Hochschild; also see Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, Chicago Studies in American Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

An Overview of Three Deep Stories

Deep Story	Meaning for Foreign Policy	Quotes
1. Transformation legacy and narrative of decline The 1989/90 system change and 36 years of structural change as a perpetual biographical experience; triple decline (demographic, economic, and political); loss of self-efficacy.	The Zeitenwende appears not as a clean break but as one of many experiences of profound change. With the end of the peace dividend, foreign policy is becoming a matter of resource allocation. There is a perception that rearmament means less money for social welfare and that resources are flowing „outward“ while domestic needs appear to be neglected.	“A turning point? Under Scholz, I found the term insulting. Where we are, everything has been changing constantly since 1989.” “But at least KNDS brings jobs.”
2. Orientation towards the West is not a given Persistent disparity between eastern and western Germany; lack of recognition of East German life achievements (economic loss is seen as proof that one is not part of “the West”); reactive East German identity; experiences passed down across generations.	The internal German divide is projected onto the geopolitical state: The United States is seen as the embodiment of “Western imperialism,” while Russia is viewed in a more nuanced – though not inherently positive – light. The war in Ukraine is being waged „at the expense of the East [Eastern Germany and Central Europe].“	“The West is saturated; people here don’t automatically feel connected to the West.” “In people’s perception, the burden of the war is being borne by East Germany.” “Some now feel like third-class citizens: first come the West Germans, then the Poles, then us.”
3. A sovereign Europe with a focus on the East Assertiveness vis-à-vis Beijing and Washington; experience of life in a border region; pragmatic prioritization of prosperity and jobs over abstract principles such as “rent before morals.”	A desire for a sovereign Europe with a stronger focus on Central and Eastern Europe. Yes to the EU, no to a “collective West.” Economic strength and diplomacy take precedence over military power. No fundamental opposition to rearmament – provided it also generates economic benefits.	„We need a 180-degree shift – we must look towards the East, not towards Brussels.” „Europe must be thought of as stretching from Lisbon to Kyiv.”

Source: : Author’s own

“Am I even allowed to say anything about that when I don’t have a clue?”

In these conversations, the Zeitenwende is perceived with ambivalence. One group finds little meaning in the term, associating it generally with the crises of recent years that are seen as defining, disruptive experiences, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Some link the Zeitenwende to fears of rearmament and the prospect of the return of the draft. Others, against the backdrop of 36 years of structural upheaval, view the term as downright insulting: “That certainly wasn’t meant to refer to us.” They consider former Chancellor Scholz’s choice of words simply “absurd.” Since the East German population has experienced continuous biographical, societal, and economic transformation

since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the idea of a sudden, unprecedented Zeitenwende seems out of touch with reality. From this perspective, what is taking place is not a historic rupture but the continuation of an on-going transformation – one whose current political interpretation fails to address people’s real concerns.

» **Zeitenwende? Under Scholz, I found the term offensive. Things here have been constantly changing since 1989.** «

This transformation fatigue is inextricably linked to a narrative of decline that unfolds on three levels: demographic decline (shrinking, aging population, missing generations), economic decline (loss of industry and economic identity) and political decline – the

impression that Germany is becoming increasingly insignificant on the world stage and is also failing to find strong leadership in domestic politics. This threefold downward trend reinforces skepticism towards a foreign policy that directs resources outward while the country itself is seen as being neglected.

» The time of Olaf Scholz – that wasn't a good era. He wasn't really present at all. And that was after Angela Merkel. Now Friedrich Merz - we haven't really moved up; things have tended to go downhill. «

The hopes for peace and fears of war associated with the Zeitenwende are also fueled by historical reminiscences of the GDR era: state surveillance, mandatory military service, and the experience of having security policy imposed on the individual without any say in shaping it. In part, these memories serve as a backdrop against which the current debate on remilitarization is interpreted. The concern that Germany could be drawn into conflicts “that are not ours” is widespread. At the kitchen table, this concern crystallizes into concrete worries about the next generation. In this context, the family does not appear as a safe haven, but rather as another arena of tension where politics is sometimes sidestepped. Yet family at the same time serves as a resource through which the respondents interpret the world. Consequently, differing perceptions of threat emerge between generations.

» The perception of the threat is different: Anyone who, during the GDR era, was told that the Soviet Union was the angel of peace while others waged wars of expansion is not going to believe it when Berlin tells them the exact opposite 35 years later. «

Economic concerns permeate conversations around the kitchen table. Rising living costs and the perceived or actual deterioration of the situation are directly linked to foreign policy decisions: the end of cheap energy supplies from Russia, the consequences of the sanctions policy, and the collapse of an economic model built on low-cost energy and labor. The breaking down of this model “hits the East first and hardest.” Here, a dimension of distributional policy becomes clear, one that runs through many conversations: With the end of the peace dividend and the creation of various special funds, foreign policy is becoming a matter of resource allocation. The resulting discontent is directed not abstractly at Russia or Ukraine but specifically at a federal policy that declares the additional

defense spending to be necessary without addressing the domestic political costs of this decision. In the perception of many, the war comes “at the expense of East Germany” and of economic cooperation with Eastern Europe.

» People are now afraid of falling behind the Poles and becoming “third-class” citizens. «

Intertwined with this is the demographic reality of eastern Germany. Some of Europe's oldest regions are located here. Outside of Leipzig or Dresden, an aging population is the norm. “We are missing at least one generation – especially the ones who have brains and drive,” respondents say. This gives rise to a distinct “economic need for security in the form of job stability” and considered objections to the rhetoric of rearmament, particularly among younger people: “With a society this old, what is there even left to defend militarily?” Priorities are shifting away from global perspectives and towards preserving one's own local environment. It is noteworthy that the same respondents make it clear that they fully intend to defend their friends and immediate surroundings. Their rejection is not directed against defense itself but against the abstract rationale, which they perceive as being dictated by outside forces. Where industry collapses – “Waggonbau Niesky, Bombardier Görlitz – all of that is gone now” – views on arms production become pragmatic: “At least KNDS brings jobs.” According to those interviewed, it is “the structural problems that drive people into the arms of the AfD” – not necessarily the ideology or the political platform.

A SNAPSHOT FROM THE FIELD:

"I don't see defense policy as warmongering but as an investment in security," says a soon-to-be master craftsman. His relatives, by contrast, regard it entirely "as warmongering." The craftsman describes his social circle as increasingly pessimistic and sees Germany as an actor that "stands on the sidelines and fails to make use of its strengths." When asked about global engagement, he says: "As a matter of principle, one should only get involved in problems one has caused oneself." In various instances, interviewees point out that it is primarily the people around them who hold divergent opinions and attitudes. In contrast, they see themselves as more moderate.

Worldviews and Actors: Not Necessarily Part of the "Global West"

The worldviews of the respondents and their families appear to be shaped by their critical stance towards the United States and "the West," whereas Russia is viewed with ambivalence. The United States is characterized as the embodiment of "Western imperialism," with the Iraq War serving as an example of the West's controversial actions. In contrast, Russia's behavior is often put into perspective. The impression remains that it is "the Ami" who pulls the important strings. This perspective has also developed historically: While Russia was viewed with ambivalence in the GDR, "the Americans" remain today as the global superpower whose actions are regarded critically. At the same time, President Trump's "America First" policy finds support.

» In general, the distinction between domestic and foreign policy no longer exists. Many people just want to be left alone. People don't want to think about Trump or Putin. They see Trump as difficult and out of touch – but the "our country first" message resonates. «

This attitude is less a matter of geopolitical analysis than a projection of intra-German experiences onto the global political stage. The lingering sense of an "East-West divide" – the perception that East Germans' life achievements are not taken seriously by West Germans and that East Germans have been shortchanged in favor of others – indirectly carries over to the international arena. "The West is saturated. People here don't automatically feel connected to the West simply

because of the fall of the Berlin Wall," they say. And: "The 'Wessis' have no understanding of what the 'Ossis' went through." Such statements also reveal a fundamental distance from "the West" and from the political self-image that became the benchmark after the end of the Cold War, including the "end of history" narrative. Many East Germans view their own history as a deviation from this West German standard. Those who did not experience the political and social upheaval following 1990 as self-evident do not seamlessly identify with "the West" in terms of foreign policy either.

This perception is reinforced by an economic interpretation: Respondents believe that the war is being waged "at the expense of the East," and this is seen as further evidence that Germany's foreign policy does not serve the country's own interests. That is a source of "fundamental alienation" which re-opens questions of identity. The search for credible representation also shapes which political actors are perceived as credible and as able to connect to people. When it comes to the question of political representation, Sahra Wagenknecht is mentioned as someone who is "truly symbolic of the East German kitchen table" – a reference to significant gaps in representation elsewhere that have effectively "pushed people into bubbles where they perhaps didn't even want to be in the first place." Tino Chrupalla and Defense Minister Boris Pistorius are mentioned at the national level. What is striking here is that these are generally figures who are still relatively new to the federal political landscape and who emphasize their closeness to ordinary citizens: "Here's someone who simply tells it like it really is." Meanwhile, attitudes towards Russia are more nuanced than the catchphrase of a "pro-Russian" sentiment – sometimes suggested by the BSW and the AfD – would imply. A distinction is made between the state leadership and civil society. The "sharp break" in German-Russian relations is viewed critically because it is seen as destroying influence and any possibility of international understanding. The narrative of alignment with the West finds little resonance – not because the alternative is "Russia" but because identifying with the "collective West" is not inherently perceived as an expression of one's own identity.

» There is a certain pro-Russian sentiment among the older generation because Russia is simply part of the picture. At the same time, we feel a bond with Ukrainians because they share our way of life. «

It is worth noting that many interlocutors do not view values such as peaceful coexistence and international

understanding as distinctly “Western” but rather articulate them as their own or as universal values. This suggests that the focus of criticism is not on the core values of foreign policy but on how they are framed. People speak of empathy for Ukrainian refugees and recall the immense willingness to help when the war broke out. At the same time, however, a particular attitude persists that can be summed up by the phrase “rent before morality.” While it does not imply indifference to global issues, it describes a different set of priorities: Only once Germany’s own economic stability – jobs, infrastructure, and social security – is secured, can the country act credibly on the international stage. This logic is contextualized pragmatically, not ideologically. It also forms the foundation upon which the constructive vision of a more sovereign Europe is built.

A More Sovereign Europe Between “East” and “West”

The fundamental skepticism regarding the *Zeitenwende* does not give rise to a general refusal to engage but rather to a desire to help shape policy. While the respondents view Germany as a “pawn” rather than an active shaper of world politics, the main criticism is that the country seeks to please everyone and holds back too much out of “fear of its own history.” At the same time, there is an expectation that Germany should assume a stronger and more independent role, with Europe serving as a central anchor. Support for Europe remains robust; criticism is directed not at European integration but at an orientation perceived as being exclusively Western and not allowing for any alternative. The desire is for a Europe “that, as a whole, has more political and economic say and does not make itself dependent on China and the United States.” The EU should remain, “but I would break away from the collective West and the United States because the East in particular seems to me to be a better trading and treaty partner.” This vision is made clear by specific demands:

» **We need a 180-degree shift in foreign policy. We must look eastwards and towards Eastern Europe, not towards Brussels.** «

The intention is not a retreat but rather a kind of remapping – a project in which the former border regions between the “old” East and the “West” shift from the periphery to the center. The fact that “Merz has not visited Warsaw six times since taking office” is cited as evidence of a “purely westward tilt” that has characterized relations since reunification. A “Görz Security Conference” modeled on the Munich

conference is being proposed – an event “where we can bring Central Europe together.” Underlying this is a deep cultural layer that remained unaddressed during the reunification process, which includes the “Silesian and Eastern European heritage” and historic ties with the Czech Republic and Poland. It is precisely here that the interviewees identify a risk to democracy: The fact that “too little has been done to come to terms with the past between East and West in Europe” leaves “so many voids for the AfD and PiS to fill.” Poland is not perceived as a threat in this context but rather as a benchmark: “We get along fine with Poles and Czechs – they aren’t the problem.” Where border security is called for, it is directed “not against Poland, but against what comes in via Poland.”

» **Europe must be envisioned from Lisbon to Kyiv, from Santiago de Compostela to Lviv.** «

Behind the call to look east lies a deeper question that keeps resurfacing: “Who are we?” In the past, people were citizens of the GDR; then they were nothing: “The citizens of the Federal Republic were the others.” Identification with Germany was limited to fleeting moments before people withdrew inward again. Today, the question of identity arises anew in the border region between Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic, not in the sense of a national narrative but as a search for a Europe that views its own history – for example, the Silesian heritage, the identity of the “Three-Country-Triangle,” and the long-standing neighborly relationships – not as a burden but as a European resource.

Underlying this vision is also a deep-rooted economic history that is politically underestimated. Lusatia has always been an energy region, according to some of the participants: from the Družba pipeline, which many “helped build in their youth,” to lignite. The phase-out of coal and the imposition of sanctions against Russia are perceived as “severed lifelines.” When Nord Stream 2 was blown up, “people here really wondered where things were heading.” The German economic model, built on cheap energy and a reasonably priced labor force, is crumbling. This is hitting the East first, especially due to structural conditions but also because it lacks many buffers and reserves. This fundamental economic calculation is not an expression of indifference but a prioritization shaped by experience. Anyone who lived through the post-reunification period and saw that major upheavals distribute their costs unevenly is quicker to focus on the price tag when faced with new projects.

This is the context that also shapes views on foreign policy. When weighing values against interests, respondents tend to prioritize safeguarding prosperity and jobs, since a “destroyed” or “economically ruined” Germany would benefit no one. This logic is not devoid of principle: There is a clear desire to distance oneself from states that violate human rights as long as this does not lead to economic hardship. Nor is the stance anti-military; rather, it establishes priorities: “Military strength goes hand in hand with economic strength – I would prefer to focus on the economic aspect,” and “delay military action through diplomacy for as long as possible.”

» The bike path in Peru – it’s a cool thing for that country, but it doesn’t really help us much in our day-to-day lives. Money is being poured into aid everywhere, yet our country isn’t economically up to par. «

Overall, a picture emerges of East Germany that is characterized by skepticism regarding current foreign policy, a stronger focus on domestic economic and social issues, and an open search for identity and a role within Europe. The “Zeitenwende” is not perceived as a new beginning, but rather as a continuation of a transformation process that has been ongoing since reunification, accompanied by uncertainties and a sense of being left behind. This perception does not automatically lead to a turning away from Europe; instead, it fosters a desire for a more independent Europe that charts its own course between China and the United States, prioritizes economic stability, and integrates Central Europe more closely.

DISCUSSION: GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DEBATE

In our conversations, the Zeitenwende encounters a segment of the population that has perceived change as a constant for the past 36 years. What is framed in Berlin’s foreign policy circles as an epochal break appears here as yet another turning point in a series of transformative processes – from the Treuhand Agency and the EU’s eastward expansion to the coal phase-out – which, in the eyes of many, were imposed from above rather than developed and embraced collectively. The rearmament accompanying the Zeitenwende seems to fit this same pattern, particularly

the circumvention of the debt brake and the financial mobilization for NATO’s five-percent target. This end of the peace dividend brings two sets of questions to the forefront: issues of distribution and participation as well as questions of identity and representation, namely, who do we want to be in Europe, and for whom is foreign policy made?

Against this backdrop, the deep stories presented in the findings section coalesce into three key findings, which are discussed in the following chapter. Each of them gives rise to a guiding principle for further political and societal debate. The experience of transformation serves as the canvas against which these shades of gray stand out. The fact that 55 percent of people across Germany perceive their country as a “pawn of the great powers” also shows that the findings regarding Saxony resonate well beyond eastern Germany.²⁶ The guiding questions developed here lead to the recommendations for action in Chapter 6, thereby offering concrete findings from our exploratory study. They identify the scope of action for a centrist (foreign) policy before the political fringes seize the initiative.

Leading Indicator, not Outlier: The Zeitenwende as a Distributional Issue

The crucial question of the Zeitenwende seems to be less about whether one supports defense in principle and more about who bears the costs. With the end of the “peace dividend,” foreign policy has become, for many, a matter of distribution. According to one interpretation, rearmament means less money for social programs. The war in Ukraine, in this view, is being fought “at the expense of the East” in economic terms. Compounding these structural conditions is the fact that both businesses and private households have fewer financial buffers. Theoretically, this complex constellation corresponds both to the conflicts identified by Mau, Lux, and Westheuser within the “top-versus-bottom” arena of socioeconomic distribution conflicts and to the finding that public support erodes as soon as abstract promises of security are linked to tangible burdens.²⁷

The debate over the distribution of resources has long since reached the level of state politics. When the Minister-Presidents met at Schloss Ettersburg in September 2025 – following consultations with Chancellor Merz and Defense Minister Pistorius – the heads of government from the eastern states insisted that

26 See Höhn and Melches, p. 21.

27 See Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser, *Triggerpunkte*; also see Matthias Mader et al., “Crumbling in the Face of Cost?”

the East must benefit more from the billions of euros spent on defense. They resolved to advocate for the increased establishment of production and maintenance facilities in eastern Germany. This same perspective is reflected in our conversations: KNDS's acquisition of the Görlitz railcar plant is welcomed as a source of jobs. Other conversations also reveal a concept of security that often begins with job security and regards defense spending as an opportunity for employment. Thus, the question of distribution is increasingly becoming a defining axis in East German state politics. Structurally, however, it must be noted that 90 percent of German defense companies are located in western federal states. Saxony-Anhalt's Minister-President Sven Schulze is not the only one who finds this troubling: "I will not accept a situation where East Germany – or Saxony-Anhalt – serves merely as a recruiting ground for soldiers."²⁸

Developments in the spring of 2026 illustrate just how difficult it is to address the issue of distribution. On the one hand, Rheinmetall announced in May that it would expand its operations in eastern Germany. While until now, 90 percent of the German defense industry is located in West Germany, the company stated that this would change "in the wake of the Zeitenwende." A study commissioned by the Thuringia's automotive association and presented in March 2026 identified opportunities in defense technology – such as optics, photonics, and specialized vehicle manufacturing – for struggling automotive suppliers in Saxony and Thuringia. On the other hand, experts are tempering expectations. The defense sector is "not a catch-all solution, but at best a bridge for employment," according to the IG Metall union.²⁹ Only a fraction of the workers made redundant in the struggling automotive industry could make a one-to-one transition. Furthermore, the IWH expects that the bulk of defense investments will continue to flow to western Germany, while the eastern German economy faces the additional burden of demographic decline.³⁰ Demands for participation thus clash with structural realities. It is the outcome of that clash that will decide whether concerns regarding distribution continue to intensify.

Skepticism in eastern Germany should therefore be interpreted less as a refusal to rearm and more as an expression of sensitivity regarding the distribution of associated burdens – a finding that ties in with research on the "geography of discontent" and "places that don't matter." It is in regions that feel left behind that discontent with transformation agendas first coalesces politically.³¹ Perceptions of threat also play a role here: Those who do not share the rationale behind these political agendas view the billions spent on them with greater skepticism. This is where the real tension of the key question lies. Eastern Germany is not an outlier but rather an early indicator. The end of the peace dividend confronts various societies with the question of how collective security and the welfare state can both be financed. In the East, the Zeitenwende can hardly be presented as a break with the past, yet it amplifies the uncertainties that many people experience daily. It can only be convincingly communicated if the associated burdens are linked to visible and tangible regional participation.

Participation and Representation – The Political Center Must Become Better at Connecting

The nuanced positions that emerge from our conversations – on Russia, the issue of wealth distribution, and Europe – indicate a selective receptiveness to the policy agenda of the (anti-) Zeitenwende. This receptiveness is selective because there are both points of convergence and points of divergence: Ross's outline of an AfD foreign policy partially aligns with skepticism towards the idea of a Western orientation and the perception that increasing multipolarity presents an opportunity. Points of convergence are evident across a spectrum ranging from the concept of multipolarity to tactical Atlanticism, provided that foreign policy serves the national interest. Conversely, other aspects of the agenda fail to resonate: The AfD's portrayal of Russia and the United States only partially reflects the attitudes of our interviewees. Russia is not viewed as a partner, while the United States is associated with negative connotations. The respondents do not share a post-liberal anti-universalism; instead, they tend to endorse fundamental democratic and human rights values. The notion of "interests over values" is replaced by "interests before

28 Marius Rudolph, "Was die neue Militärstrategie für Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt und Thüringen bedeutet," *MDR*, 23. April

29 See DPA, "Militär: Kann der Rüstungsboom den Strukturwandel im Land stützen?" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 12, 2026, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/militaer-kann-der-ruestungsboom-den-strukturwandel-im-land-stuetzen-dpa-urn-newsml-dpa-com-20090101-260512-930-6750>

30 Projektgruppe Gemeinschaftsdiagnose, Geopolitischer Umbruch verschärft Krise – Strukturreformen noch dringlicher: Gemeinschaftsdiagnose Frühjahr 2025, Dienstleistungsauftrag des Bundesministeriums für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, Nr. 1 (Essen: Projektgruppe Gemeinschaftsdiagnose, 2025), https://gemeinschaftsdiagnose.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/GD25F_final.pdf

31 See Lewis Dijkstra, Hugo Poelman, and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, "The Geography of EU Discontent," *Regional Studies* 54, Nr. 6 (2020): 737–753, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2019.1654603>; Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, "The Revenge of the Places That Don't Matter (and What to Do about It)," *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 11, no. 1 (2018): 189–209, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsx024>.

values” – a matter of sequencing, then, not an “either-or” choice.

The political center is credited with little credibility or ability to connect with the public. It struggles to articulate its views and cedes space for public resonance – a space that is by no means lost but is fiercely contested. It is telling to see who is most readily accorded credibility in this arena: figures perceived as “anti-establishment,” such as Wagenknecht (who symbolizes the “East German kitchen table”) and Chrupalla. The fact that a government minister like Pistorius is also cited reveals the limits of this logic: Credibility stems not merely from opposition rhetoric but from a perceived willingness to take East German concerns seriously. This is precisely where a countertrend is emerging: East German state premiers are taking an increasingly assertive stance on foreign and defense policy, attempting to occupy that space of public resonance from within. Whether the public perceives this as credible representation of their interests or merely as another maneuver by a distant political establishment remains to be seen.

The skepticism towards ties to the West described in the findings section stems less from a lack of information than from issues of belonging and representation. The lingering sense that East Germans’ life achievements have been devalued (“Federal citizens – that’s what the others were and are”) carries over to the geopolitical level. Those who never experienced themselves as an integral part of the West German project do not identify seamlessly with “the West” in foreign policy matters either. Hochschild’s concept of deep stories and Mitzen’s concept of ontological security explain³² why the mere communication of facts fails to address this attitude: Threats that destabilize a familiar narrative of the self are perceived to be just as dangerous as material risks. The Zeitenwende taps precisely into this dynamic. Material experience and questions of identity reinforce one another, generating a skepticism that cannot be dispelled by better communication or economic compensation alone. At stake here are emotional truths that cannot be addressed by facts alone.

This dynamic is also relevant to security policy. In early June, at an event in Dresden, the president of Saxony’s Office for the Protection of the Constitution described how hybrid influence operations specifically target gaps in trust and feelings of alienation: through the dissemination of narratives of social decline and scenarios of deindustrialization, driven by foreign actors ranging from Russia to J.D. Vance, as well as through disinformation campaigns on social media.³³ Domestic political alienation thus translates into foreign policy vulnerability. Representation and participation are not only essential for democracy but also serve as a safeguard against undue external influence. The question of belonging also has a structural dimension that can be quantified. The Elite Monitor, a joint project of the Universities of Leipzig and Jena and the Zittau/Görlitz University of Applied Sciences, shows that the proportion of East Germans in top positions rose by only one percentage point to twelve percent between 2018 and 2024. Meanwhile, in the business sector, that figure fell to four percent.³⁴ 85 percent of East Germans consider this level of representation to be unfair. The study’s authors state that this representation gap reinforces the feeling of being “second-class citizens” – a structural counterpart to the kitchen-table sentiment that, compared to Central European neighbors, East Germans are becoming “third-class citizens.”

“Participation and representation” must therefore mean two things: the descriptive representation of East Germans within the elites and the participatory involvement of citizens in foreign policy decisions. The expression coined by Elisabeth Kaiser, the Federal Government Commissioner for the New Federal States – “representation creates acceptance” – expresses the idea that both aspects could also strengthen resonance regarding foreign policy. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent institutional mistrust may already be too deep-seated to be overcome through improved representation alone.³⁵ This raises another key question: How can the democratic center reach these spaces of resonance? Support for foreign policy cannot simply be “better communicated” while the issue of participation and representation is left out of the equation. Several interviewees remarked that “no one has ever”

32 See Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, Nr. 3 (2006): 341–370.

33 For figures, Dirk-Martin Christian, President of Saxony’s State Office for the Protection of the Constitution, refers to both the 2025 Report on the Protection of the Constitution and the upcoming 2026 Saxony Monitor, www.verfassungsschutz.sachsen.de/download/Saechsischer_Verfassungsschutzbericht_2025.pdf

34 Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Ostdeutschland. “Elitenmonitor: ‘Packt man es an, bewegt sich auch was.’” September 19, 2025, <https://www.ostbeauftragte.de/ostb/Content/DE/Artikel/Aktuelles/News/2025/2025-09-19-ergebnisse-elitenmonitor.html>

35 Ibid.

approached them regarding foreign policy. Accordingly, participatory formats that provide space for such issues are not merely political folklore but rather a prerequisite for ensuring that foreign policy arguments are heard and, at the same time, can connect with people's personal stories. Here, it seems that international, national, and local actors alike are called upon to create spaces of resonance.

A More Sovereign Europe: Opportunity or Gateway?

In the conversations we held, the skepticism surrounding the *Zeitenwende* did not lead to an unconditional embrace of the nation-state but rather to a desire for a more sovereign Europe which would be economically robust and open to the East. This stance crystallizes into a call for a "180-degree shift." The focus, our interlocutors argued, must turn "to the East, not to Brussels," and Europe must be envisioned as extending "from Lisbon to Kyiv." Support for Europe remains strong. Skepticism is directed not against European integration itself but against an orientation that is perceived as exclusively Western, without giving room for any alternative. From this perspective, Saxony's location on the border to Poland and the Czech Republic represents a foreign-policy asset that has so far been underutilized: On the Polish side, trains run faster and the line is electrified, whereas the connecting train on the German side takes significantly longer and is still powered by diesel because for decades, the last 600 meters of electrification have remained incomplete. "These are not 'equivalent living conditions,'" one interlocutor laconically sums up, pointing to specific infrastructure deficits.

Underlying this perspective is a question of identity that goes beyond infrastructure. A recurring theme in these conversations is that the Federal Republic's Central European heritage receives too little recognition – as if the old Federal Republic's alignment with the West had, with reunification, buried this part of German history. For younger generations, who know the GDR only through kitchen-stable stories, this experience does not automatically translate into an intra-German East-West narrative. Instead, it evolves into a question of what place they occupy in the world today. Increasingly, they define themselves not in opposition to "Wessis" but as standing outside the "global West" as a whole, with the United States representing a counter-image. There are calls for a more sovereign Europe, not only to achieve greater political

and economic independence but also to foster a stronger sense of belonging: not just in the sense of a geopolitical agenda but also as a source of identity.

The tension lies in the ambiguity of this vision. The call for a sovereign Europe can be seen as a constructive, pro-European guiding principle. But it can also become a gateway to the "Europe of Fatherlands" that the European far right advocates. Following the 2024 European elections, the AfD, along with smaller parties, founded the "Europe of Sovereign Nations" group, while the broader right-wing camp has rallied under the banner of "Patriots for Europe." In political science, the "Europe of Fatherlands" is regarded as a battle cry that demands national autonomy while simultaneously invoking Europe in its rhetoric.³⁶ However, a Europe fragmenting along national interests weakens the very capacity for global action that the respondents desire.

This appropriation is facilitated by a void in the political center. The democratic center's debates on European policy are often overly simplistic and amount to little more than "Brussels-bashing" or criticism of bureaucracy. Thereby, however, the center cedes the space to the fringes to attribute, for example, a stronger protective role to Europe. The question of Europe is thus a contested one, seized upon by various sides as a central issue. The Trump administration has also been mobilizing against the current EU and its supranational orientation at least since the publication of the new US National Security Strategy, announcing its intention to encourage resistance within EU member states. At the same time, it openly favors "patriotic European parties." As a result, the narrative of a "Europe of Fatherlands" is being fueled not only by Moscow but also by Washington.

However, a sovereign Europe that "looks to the East" should not be misunderstood as endorsing a break away from the West. From a security policy perspective, it would be disastrous to play the EU and NATO off against each other. Their complementarity is crucial, with NATO serving as the framework for collective defense – at least until a viable alternative is found with the United Kingdom and the United States. Becoming "more sovereign" can also mean considering new alliances in the form of minilateral formats, such as Weimar Plus, E3, or E5, with which Saxony as a tri-border region can directly align. The same applies to foreign trade and economic policy.

³⁶ See Gudrun Hentges and Hans-Wolfgang Platzer (eds), *Europa – quo vadis? Ausgewählte Problemfelder der europäischen Integrationspolitik* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011).

Such policy must take the dimension of identity into account and engage regions that are experiencing structural change as a permanent condition. When European economic policy is perceived as a means of representing interests – whether to the outside through trade protection measures or to the inside through industrial policy measures – rather than as a regulatory project driven by Brussels, it lays the foundation for public support for foreign policy.

The crux of the matter, which will determine which interpretation of Europe prevails, is the phrase “(East) Germany first,” which has been voiced on multiple occasions. On the one hand, it can be understood as an assertive demand for a share in shaping the future, on the other hand it can be seen as a form of resigned, national-authoritarian isolationism. Which meaning it takes on depends not on East Germany alone, but on whether the democratic center proactively champions the image of a sovereign Europe open to the East before the fringes do so, for example, through formats that visibly place Central Europe at the center. This is not a matter of “interests over values”: Values certainly play a role, but only if they are appropriately framed and communicated in the right order. First, interests must be pursued successfully and credibly. Only that will create the foundation for values to be considered – and not to appear as a pretext for policies pursued at the expense of others.

Recommendations and Outlook

The starting point for this study was to ask what kind of societal resonances the (anti-)Zeitenwende encounters, and what scope exists for a foreign policy capable of garnering broader support, beyond the dynamics of anti-establishment mobilization. The issue seems to be less about the “whether” of transformation and more about the “how”: about the distribution of burdens and opportunities, about participation, and about the narrative framing of foreign policy. Saxony serves as a seismograph: The tremors recorded here – the intertwining of distributional and identity issues, the feeling of being a mere “pawn of the great powers,” and the stress of transformation – will sooner or later also play a role in other regions of Western democracies undergoing transformation, from the Saarland to the Rust Belt. The following recommendations are deliberately addressed not only to policy makers and government agencies – from the Federal Foreign Office to the European level and down to the states and municipalities – but also at businesses, chambers of commerce, labor unions, and civil society intermediaries. Political fringes capitalize on long-standing resentment and mistrust. Rebuilding trust and resonance therefore requires a shift in mindset: from a sprint to a marathon, from a one-time message to a sustained presence. Success requires not merely better communication but concrete changes in three areas: procedural, distributional, and programmatic.

PROCEDURAL: REACHING OUT TO PEOPLE

“Procedural” means reaching out to the people – because support for foreign policy cannot simply be “communicated better” as long as the issues of participation and representation are left out of the equation. Participatory formats – ranging from citizens’ assemblies on foreign and security policy issues to low-threshold regional dialogue forums – are not mere political folklore but a prerequisite for foreign policy arguments to be heard in the first place. The fact that, when it comes to foreign policy, “no one has ever” approached our respondents shows just how much room for improvement there is. A “bottom-up”

approach means two things in this context: starting where people already come together – at the pub, in clubs, at work, and in vocational schools – and reversing the direction in which knowledge flows. It is not just about explaining foreign policy in the region but also about feeding regional experiences back to the relevant government departments. This includes local facilitators, peer exchanges among people with similar experiences across regional and national borders, and continuity rather than one-off visits – all with the understanding that success depends on the support of regional stakeholders.

1. Recognizing Transformation Competence, Ensure Participation

The University of Leipzig’s Elite Monitor estimates that East Germans account for about 12 percent of top positions (compared to roughly 20 percent of the population). In military leadership roles, the figure is virtually zero. Anyone seeking to generate resonance for foreign policy matters should treat both qualitative and descriptive representation seriously and take concrete measures to underpin their commitment. These include targeted recruitment and career paths within the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defense, and the Bundeswehr; lateral entry and secondments from East German federal states; visible appointments to security policy committees and delegations; and selection processes that view biographies shaped by the post-1990 transformation not as a liability but as a qualification. Constructive application is key: Transformation competence is a resource a country needs in times of upheaval in security and economic policy. Berlin stands to benefit from such expertise. Practitioners from Lusatia, Zwickau, or central Germany can bring their experience to the places where transformation is currently being planned: government ministries, strategic planning staffs, and security policy academies. The formula coined by the Commissioner for Eastern Germany – “representation fosters acceptance” – remains a hypothesis for now. However, given the current findings, it is one that the state, the business sector, and society alike should put to the test

2. Broad-based Participation – Global-Local and Back Again

To firmly anchor debates on foreign and security policy in eastern Germany's semi-peripheral regions and to strengthen deliberative structures, the Federal Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry of Defense, state and local authorities, and think tanks should establish decentralized participatory formats on the ground. Instead of relying on centralized, large-scale events in major cities that yield few lasting results, efforts should systematically build upon existing, familiar, everyday structures. Adult education centers and vocational schools offer venues for developing practical formats in collaboration with instructors; the same applies to trade unions, skilled trades associations, and chambers of commerce and industry structures. A key to achieving scale and acceptance lies in engaging local "bridge-builders" – for instance, works council members, local officials, clergy, and business representatives – who, as credible multipliers, can carry the dialogue forward in their communities, associations, and workplaces. These formats can be complemented by informal pub gatherings where listening takes precedence over promoting or explaining. Moreover, communication should rely as little as possible on frontal presentations or panel discussions; instead, the approach tested in this study should be adopted: Experts are needed at the pub tables to act as points of contact and listeners. The discussion itself, meanwhile, should be led by the participants. Cross-border peer-to-peer formats offer a complementary approach, bringing together people facing similar challenges in regions undergoing structural change for a mutual exchange of ideas. Miners from West Virginia and Lusatia can discuss energy security; Ford works council members from Michigan can talk to Renault staff from Mulhouse and VW employees in Zwickau about the transformation of the automotive industry; and people from the Rhineland, Lusatia, Lower Silesia, and Ústí can discuss structural change.

DISTRIBUTIVE: CREATING ECONOMIC BENEFITS

In terms of distribution, it is essential to establish visible participation, as the *Zeitenwende* cannot be explained away in the East as a mere rupture. Treating it solely as a communication issue falls short. Politicians should strive to ensure that foreign policy is tangible and visible on the ground. Establishing production and maintenance capacities, making commitments regarding regional value creation and procurement,

and integrating defense policy with active structural and industrial policies can create bridges to employment. However, these are not a panacea. Issues of distribution and identity must be addressed together, because material concerns and questions of belonging reinforce one another. This also means openly addressing problems, solutions, and costs in equal measure. Foreign policy will only gain traction in the region when people do not only bear the burdens but also see potential benefits.

3. Anchoring Defense Investments in Regional Economic Growth

Defense spending in the coming years – already amounting to some 108 billion euros in 2026 – represents one of the largest industrial policy programs since reunification. A robust infrastructure is the foundation: Investments in rail, road, energy, and digitalization need to be expanded and rapidly implemented, as without them, neither business relocation nor regional value creation can be achieved. The "Ettersburg Principle" – that those who contribute should also benefit – needs to be translated into concrete procurement practices: through regional value-creation and business attraction targets in procurement and maintenance, supported by a social cohesion component within European defense and resilience programs. Particular attention should be paid to dual-use technologies, ranging from optics and photonics to sensor technology and microelectronics, whose benefits extend beyond the defense sector. It is crucial to attract not only production but also research and development to the region. Since the East German economic structure suffers from limited R&D capacity and the legacy of serving as "extended workbenches," the establishment of high-value-added development capacities will determine whether short-term contracts evolve into lasting regional economic strength. Long-term thinking is required here. The limits of industrial conversion must be communicated openly, and policymakers must not present defense spending as a substitute for structural policy.

4. Corporate Democratic Responsibility

The discussions that form the basis of this report can be extended to the workplace. Companies – acting as hosts rather than political advocates – should collaborate with vocational schools and think tanks to facilitate forums that link global affairs with the workplace. What do export markets, supply chains, sanctions, and the *Zeitenwende* mean for their own location and individual jobs? These formats can reach people during their working hours rather than requiring them to

attend additional evening events. They bring foreign policy to the very places where its consequences are felt firsthand. Companies that benefit from defense investments and relocation incentives, in particular, have a responsibility in this context. Such engagement is not an imposition from the outside; rather, in the spirit of “Corporate Democratic Responsibility,” serves the company’s own interest in resilience. Any business that depends on stable framework conditions, skilled labor, and open markets invests, by strengthening local democratic culture, in the very conditions that sustain its operations. A location with a stable democratic foundation thus becomes an asset in terms of both the economy and security policy.

POLICY AGENDA: EUROPE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

In terms of policy agenda, the desire for a more sovereign Europe positioned between East and West should be addressed politically. Contested narratives, such as the idea of a sovereign Europe, must not be left to the political fringes but should be proactively framed in positive terms and anchored at the regional level. Border regions such as Saxony can be viewed as core European regions and serve as hubs that foster connections across wider areas, for instance, through minilateral formats and high-profile Central European forums. In doing so, the EU can fulfill its role as a protective shield and problem-solver: acting as a framework that creates and secures jobs, consolidating negotiating power vis-à-vis Washington and Beijing, and building upon a shared history.

5. Protective Shield and Problem-Solver

Ever since the narrative of a “Europe of fatherlands” has been fueled not only by Moscow, Budapest, or Schnellroda³⁷ but also by Washington, the power to interpret the concept of sovereignty has become a matter of direct security relevance. The democratic center should proactively and positively frame this concept, presenting Europe not as an imposition or a regulatory project but as a protective shield and problem-solver for a society that must hold its own against authoritarian forces. Europe provides the framework within which Germany and its neighbors are large enough to avoid being mere “pawns of the great powers.” This narrative addresses a concern voiced by respondents

themselves: that Germany alone is too small to hold its own. It takes concrete form in minilateral formats, to which Saxony as a tri-border region can directly contribute. It is crucial that this narrative remains tangible at the regional level – and this is where it gains material significance: cross-border infrastructure for everyday life is European policy in action. Where the connection to a Polish partner city fails due to a 600-meter gap in electrification, the European comparison shifts from a promise to a source of resentment. The fear of becoming a “third-class citizen” has a concrete and measurable infrastructure dimension. A prioritized program of cross-border projects – covering rail, energy, emergency services, and workforce mobility – co-financed by the EU and featuring visible milestones could answer the “European question” right where it arises: in everyday life. For a border town, European sovereignty begins with an electrified rail link, not with a strategy paper.

6. A Görlitz Security Forum: Placing Central Europe at the Center

The vision of a Europe that is open to the East must not remain mere lip service; it must become tangible. Therefore, European, federal, and state authorities, in cooperation with local partners, foundations, and think tanks should establish a regular, high-level security forum in Görlitz modeled on the Munich Security Conference. Such a forum should place Central Europe at the center and involve Polish, Czech, Scandinavian, and Baltic partners. Alongside governments and experts, it should engage the region itself to turn foreign policy into something that can be experienced and discussed firsthand. This is not a grandiose concept dictated by politicians but an idea originating from our interlocutors – an initiative from the region, for the region. Such a forum would elevate the region’s border location from a rhetorical selling point to a genuine institutional function. In this context, eastern Germany and Central Europe would not be the periphery of the West, but the heart of a Europe growing closer together. A Görlitz Security Forum would thus represent the constructive translation of the “180-degree shift” called for in the discussion, translating it into a policy that is firmly committed to alliances, complementary to the EU, and deeply rooted in the local community.

37 For decades, Schnellroda in the Burgenlandkreis district of Saxony-Anhalt was the headquarters of the Institute for State Policy, a New Right think tank that set the agenda for an increasingly globally networked far-right movement; see Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung: <https://www.bpb.de/themen/rechtsextremismus/dossier-rechtsextremismus/500828/institut-fuer-staatspolitik-ifs/>

CONCLUSION: FROM SPRINT TO MARATHON

These recommendations offer a practical list of ways to address the disillusionment with foreign policy and the political center's lack of resonance in eastern Germany. They draw attention to a previously underestimated domestic dimension of the Zeitenwende. What is needed now is a shift from a sprint to a marathon. While the Zeitenwende was launched at breakneck speed, building societal trust operates on a different timescale, particularly in regions undergoing transformation. Future actions by local political and social actors will require time, iteration, and staying power – as well as formats that return regularly instead of making just a one-time stop in the region. Ideas such as a Görlitz Security Forum or exchange programs within companies that bridge the gap between global affairs and the shop floor offer concrete approaches that can achieve precisely that.

This is not just about occupying a space of resonance before the political fringes do. It is also about a resource that has barely been utilized so far: the experience of transformation shared by East German citizens, along with their competence in navigating upheaval, uncertainty, and new beginnings. If the democratic center embraces this experience not as a deficit but as a source of competence and identity, it does more than just occupy contested ground. It lays the foundation for shared experiences to give rise to a shared sense of belonging. This is precisely what will determine whether the Zeitenwende remains a Berlin-based project or becomes a society-wide endeavor built on participation and cohesion. The end of the peace dividend poses far more questions for German society than rearmament alone can answer. It is about the distribution of burdens and about hearing the voices of those who bear them. Rearmament may strengthen external security – but internal security can only be ensured when people see themselves as part of a greater whole.



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