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# Unwanted partner? Germany and Ukraine (1991–2022)<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The authors' analysis focuses on Germany's engagement in the processes of democratic transformations, the establishment of a free-market economy, bringing Ukraine closer to the European Union, and efforts to achieve peace in the Russia-Ukraine War. Despite Ukrainian government declarations of bilateral cooperation willingness with Germany, chancellors prioritized cooperation with Russia, unquestioningly acknowledging Ukraine's affiliation with the Russian Federation's sphere of influence. The temporary occupation of Crimea by Russia and the war in Donbas compelled Germany to participate in EU sanctions and seek compromise solutions in the Russian-Ukrainian War. However, this had no significance in maintaining correct relations with Moscow in any dimension.

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## АНОТАЦІЯ

Аналіз у цій статті зосереджений на участі Німеччини в процесах демократичних перетворень, становленні вільної ринкової економіки, наближенні України до Європейського Союзу та зусиллях щодо досягнення миру в російсько-українській війні. Попри декларації українського уряду про готовність двосторонньої співпраці з Німеччиною, канцлери віддали пріоритет співпраці з Росією, беззаперечно визнаючи приналежність України до сфери впливу Російської Федерації. Тимчасова окупація Криму Росією та війна на Донбасі змусили Німеччину брати участь у санкціях ЄС та шукати компромісних рішень у російсько-українській війні. Однак це не мало значення для підтримки коректних стосунків з Москвою в будь-якому вимірі.

**КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА:** Німеччина, Україна, Росія, Європейський Союз, 21 століття.

## Introduction

In the late 19th century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Wilhelmine Germany supported the Ukrainian national liberation movement, viewing it as a means to weaken the power of the Romanovs, especially in the face of the impending great war. During the Second World War, individual Ukrainian politicians aspiring for their own statehood, unwarrantedly tied their future to the Nazi Reich. Contrary to their dreams of independence, Ukrainians faced severe Stalinist reprisals as Hitler's plans did not include an independent Ukraine (Torke & Himka, 1994).

Ukraine re-entered the European and global stage only in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The aspirations for the reconstruction and transformation of the country were traditionally linked with a united Germany. Germany was one of the first countries (after Poland, Canada, and the USA) to recognize Ukraine's independence on December 26, 1991.

Diplomatic relations were established on January 17, 1992. The authors' analysis presumed that Germany, citing Russia's paramount role in its Eastern policy, endeavored in subsequent years not to undertake actions towards Ukraine that could negatively impact the well-developing economic relations with the Russian Federation. In their view, condemning Russia's foreign policy could have far-reaching negative consequences for building European security structures with the crucial involvement of the Russian Federation.

There is a question whether West Germany believed in the deep-seated orientation of Ukrainian society towards close cooperation with Moscow, conveniently limiting German activity along the Dnipro. The analysis assumes the hypothesis of Germany utilizing instruments of the European Union (PCA agreement, Eastern Partnership, association agreement) to stabilize Ukraine politically, economically, and socially. The authors' assessments require scrutiny of German activity (Minsk agreements, Normandy Format, Steinmeier formula) from 2014 to 2022, aimed at restoring peace in the Russian-Ukrainian War. Linked to this is the subsequent research question of whether Russia's departure from promises of political liberalization and democratization after the 2012 presidential elections, coupled with the temporary occupation of Crimea by Russia and the war in Donbas, initiated a significant erosion of trust and an increase in German disillusionment with Russia. This became evident with the concept of *Zeitenwende* ("turning point") after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022.

## Method

In their research on the article, the authors applied research methods commonly used in political science: institutional-legal, comparative, source analysis, historical, statistical, and decision-making methods. Source materials from the German government and the foreign affairs office, as well as materials and expertise from German research institutions and foundations, were utilized. Articles and monographs were consulted, and available Ukrainian and Russian literature was reviewed.

## Results

### Germany and Ukraine after 1991

After 1991, to the disappointment of Ukrainian politicians, there was no interest from the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the struggling republic, dealing with numerous issues. There was no new Marshall Plan and no anticipated extensive assistance for democratic reforms. Germany, focused on completing the reunification process and the evacuation of Russian troops from the territory of the former GDR, nurtured primarily its relations with Moscow. Ukraine was absent in German media, political statements, and economic circles. The visit of Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk to Bonn in February 1992, and expectations for greater assistance from Germany, turned out to be exaggerated. Only the German-Ukrainian cultural agreement (15.02.1992) was signed, resulting in the opening of the Goethe Institute and regional centers for the study of the German language, as well as representations of major German foundations. In the subsequent years, the Federal Republic entered into a total of 15 various detailed agreements with Ukraine, covering areas such as environmental protection, advisory and technical assistance, cooperation in nuclear disarmament, and youth exchange. However, this did not translate into broader cooperation (Vertragsrechtliche Grundlage, 2022).

Greater hopes rested on Chancellor Helmut Kohl's visit to Kyiv in 1993. During his stay in the Ukrainian capital on June 9–10, a declaration on the foundations of mutual relations and an agreement on the development of cooperation in the fields of economy, industry, science, and technology were signed. Subsequent years saw mutual visits and the expansion of various cooperation dimensions. From 1998 onwards, regular annual high-level consultations were conducted. Ukraine, still facing significant challenges in implementing democratic state rules and striving to be free from oligarchic ties, sought the approval of Western countries for NATO expansion to the east and close collaboration in shaping European security. Ukraine was the first Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) country with which the European Union signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) on June 14, 1994 (Die deutsch-ukrainischen Beziehungen, 2010).

During the presidencies of Leonid Kravchuk (1991–1994) and Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005), Ukraine was interested in strengthening cooperation with both Russia and Germany. At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, modest progress was observed in Ukrainian-German economic cooperation. Since 1996, Germany, following Russia, ranked second in Ukraine's foreign trade, but the bilateral turnover was not impressive, amounting to 6.25 billion euros in 2006.

Upon taking power in 1998, the SPD-Greens coalition further diminished Ukraine's importance as a crucial partner and desired ally. For many years, the guiding principle was "Russia first," outlining Germany's ambitious plan for the modernization of Russia – constructing a democratic and liberal order through an extensive economic cooperation program (resource purchases, industrial product exports). The aim was to persuade the EU to finance a concocted program for Modernization in Russia, initially functioning in Berlin. In 2009, this program was successfully expanded to encompass the entire European Union, thereby incorporating its resources into projects primarily favoring the Federal Republic (Rahr, 2008, pp. 46–56).

The German slogan boiled down to emphasizing the immense role of the Federal Republic in maintaining European security. The newly enthralled Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, impressed by President Vladimir Putin, cautioned against any independent steps that could strengthen the Ukrainian state and bring it closer to European structures and standards. He unreservedly accepted the notion that Ukraine was within the Russian sphere of influence, particularly since, in his opinion, Ukrainian society highly valued its friendship with Moscow. Despite Germany's eager support for the aspirations of young democracies to join the European Union and NATO, it adopted an extremely reserved stance towards Ukraine.

In the fall of 2004, public opinion in Germany was enthralled by the "Orange" revolution and the festival of freedom on the Maidan in Kyiv. Though reluctantly, Germany, inspired by the Polish side, played a certain role in resolving the conflict and organizing a repeat of the presidential

elections. This was mainly due to pressure from the German public and media. On October 21, the parliamentary factions of the SPD and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen appealed to the German government for an active policy and increased pressure on the authorities in Kyiv to ensure that the elections proceeded “properly and democratically” with the participation of international observers. It was recognized that these elections would have a significant impact not only on the situation in Ukraine but also in the entire region, affecting the development of relations between Kyiv and Berlin (Deutscher Bundestag, 2004).

After winning the repeated elections, President Viktor Yushchenko called for a more concrete vision for Ukraine’s accession to the EU during visits to Brussels, Strasbourg, and Germany. On March 8, 2005, he addressed the Bundestag, emphasizing that Ukraine is an integral part of the European family of nations. However, the response to his appeal in government circles was weak. The Christian Democrat opposition demanded that Ukraine receive the status of a market economy and be admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO). (Deutsche Christdemokraten fordern, 2005).

“The Orange Revolution” in Ukraine in 2005, under the leadership of Viktor Yushchenko, did not implement the necessary economic and social reforms. Disputes and conflicts quickly arose within the ruling elite, leading to the disintegration of the “orange camp.” Benefiting from this situation was the leader of the pro-Russian Party of Regions, former Prime Minister and presidential candidate in 2004, Viktor Yanukovych. He returned to the position of prime minister in 2006 after winning parliamentary elections.

From the fall of 2005, under the coalition government led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, consisting of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, Germany continued its previous eastern policy. In line with Moscow’s wishes, Germany did not endorse Ukraine’s membership in the European Union. Instead, it offered only the possibility of signing an association agreement and EU assistance within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, promoted by Poland and Sweden. At the NATO summit in April 2008 in Bucharest, Germany opposed Ukraine’s accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Jureńczyk, 2019).

The electoral campaign in Ukraine in 2009, as well as the competition among presidential contenders – Yulia Tymoshenko, Viktor Yanukovych, and Viktor Yushchenko, was characterized by a persistent state of tension and an uncompromising campaign involving accusations and mutual denunciations. The weaknesses in the rule of law and state administration, coupled with the extensive influence of oligarchs and pervasive corruption, served as convenient arguments for the German government to abstain from involvement in Ukraine’s internal processes.

After the election of Viktor Yanukovych as the President of Ukraine in January 2010, the situation in Ukraine became more complex. Shortly after taking office, the president attempted to play a balancing act between the European Union and Russia. Deliberately choosing Brussels over Moscow, he embarked on his first foreign trip to the European capital. Yanukovych aimed to establish a free trade zone with the EU and swiftly implement a visa-free system for Ukrainian citizens. He assured that Ukraine, as a transit country, was prepared to fulfill its commitments regarding the regular supply of gas to European consumers. However, he openly stated that to achieve this goal, Kyiv would need to significantly improve its level of partnership with Russia (New Ukrainian President, 2010).

After Vladimir Putin’s return to the presidency of the Russian Federation following the presidential elections in March 2012, Yanukovych swiftly declared his intention to deepen cooperation with Russia on various fronts. As early as April 2010, he signed an agreement to extend the deployment of the Russian Black Sea Fleet until 2042, and in August 2012, he officially expanded the use of minority languages, particularly the Russian language. This raised questions in Brussels and Berlin about the continued rationale for attracting Ukraine to the European Union, especially when dealing with a country seemingly reconciled with existence within the Russian sphere of influence. This became evident at the fourteenth Ukraine-EU summit in November 2010, where the European Commission did not conceal its dissatisfaction with the shift in Ukrainian

foreign policy orientation. Although negotiations on the association agreement were concluded at the next EU-Ukraine summit in Kyiv on December 19, 2011, doubts lingered about Ukraine's readiness for closer ties with the EU (Dokumentation: 15., 2011; Ukraine-EU Gipfeltreffen, 2011).

It was only on March 30, 2012, that negotiators from the European Union and Ukraine initiated an association agreement comprising over a thousand pages. However, the actual signing and ratification date of the document remained unknown. The European Union delayed these steps due to the deterioration of the situation regarding the rule of law in Ukraine and the necessity of releasing the detained Yulia Tymoshenko (Koszel, 2016, p. 93).

Faced with such a situation, Ukrainian elites, led by President Viktor Yanukovych, were aware that Ukraine had to choose a strategic partner: either consistently pursue integration with the EU or join the customs union offered by Moscow, consisting of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. Opting for the first choice provided no guarantees of immediate membership and entailed a lengthy and troublesome process of talks, negotiations, and, above all, the gradual implementation of high-ranking EU standards. The second option condemned Ukraine to remain in the sphere of Russian influence, burying the pro-European aspirations of its citizens.

In February 2013, the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the association agreement would most likely be signed during the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in November 2013. On May 15, the European Commission confirmed this and, at the same time, acknowledged the conclusion of negotiations on this matter that had been ongoing since March 2007 (Europäische Kommission, 2013).

The prospect of Ukraine officially entering the sphere of influence of the European Union and the broader West triggered a swift diplomatic offensive by Russia, aiming to sabotage the rapprochement between Ukraine and the EU. Moscow enticed Ukraine with the prospect of membership in the then-promised Eurasian Union. After the meeting between Putin and Yanukovych in Kyiv in July 2013, Russian propaganda and economic pressures intensified, attempting to dissuade Kyiv from signing the association agreement with the EU. Faced with proverbial walls, Yanukovych had limited maneuverability. With the upcoming Eastern Partnership Summit planned for November 2013, he was under time pressure and the necessity to make a decision. He made a choice, and as a result of intense consultations with President Putin in Sochi (October 27) and Novo-Ogaryovo near Moscow (November 9), the fate of the association agreement was thereby sealed. It seems that Kyiv had no alternative, and the relevant agreements were signed on December 17 during President Yanukovych's visit to Moscow (Putin verspricht, 2013; Putin gewährt, 2013). Earlier, on November 21, 2013, the Ukrainian government announced the suspension of the preparations for signing the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the European Union.

There is no doubt that President V. Putin outbid the European Union in promises, as it proposed aid – financial support program worth \$15 billion. The European Union has declared amounting to only 610 million to 1 billion euros, which was insignificant for a country in an extremely difficult economic situation and possessing merely 20 billion dollars in reserves. At the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius on November 29, Yanukovych tried to play the EU against Russia and counted on multibillion-dollar aid, with which he intended to save his reelection in 2015.

The thorough change in Ukraine's foreign policy was closely linked to Berlin's hopes for improving German-Russian relations after a brief downturn in 2012 following Putin's return to the presidency. It was known that, once again avoiding antagonizing Moscow, Germany would not encourage the EU to take actions perceived by the Kremlin as unfriendly. However, with the introduction of new anti-democratic reforms in Russia in the fall of 2012, a certain disorientation emerged among the political elites in the FRG. The existing consensus, assuming that Russia's integration with Europe and its democratization are key to the security of the old continent, was shaken. Until then, all parties represented in the Bundestag, based on an unwritten political agreement, believed that relations with Russia played a unique role in German as well as EU Eastern policy (Franzke, 2013, p. 40).

Engaged in the election campaign, Chancellor Merkel showed little interest in the transformations in Ukraine. Following the Bundestag elections on September 22, 2013, due to the weak performance of the liberals, who did not secure seats in the Bundestag, the Christian Democrats were compelled to renew the old coalition with the Social Democrats, which predetermined certain concessions to Russia and restrained support for Ukraine. The coalition agreement from November 27 featured an exceptionally elaborate offering to Russia, while Ukraine was not mentioned. In a brief paragraph, the idea of the Eastern Partnership was vaguely acknowledged, stating that association and free trade agreements, along with visa facilitation, were the most effective instruments for supporting Eastern partner countries (Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten, 2013, p. 116).

In Germany, Ukraine's refusal was met with disbelief, as the association agreement was considered well-prepared. However, Chancellor A. Merkel officially assured that both Germany and the European Union were ready for negotiations, and the doors to Europe remained open for Ukraine. The Chancellor negatively commented on the strategy of bidding in relations with Ukraine. She pointed to Moscow's uncompromising pressure as the main reason for the failure of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in November, indicating that Moscow could not reconcile itself to the loss of its area of influence. (Bollmann, 2021, p. 462–463).

After Yanukovych's announcement of suspending talks on the association agreement, demonstrations began on the streets of Kyiv, demanding the president's resignation. Following the outbreak of bloody riots on the streets of Kyiv (February 18–20, 2013), most German media outlets from the very beginning placed their sympathies on the side of the demonstrators, but politicians called for reason and agreement. It was widely believed that the current situation could not be ignored, and efforts should be made to prevent further bloodshed on the streets of Kyiv. Referring to their example of toppling the Berlin Wall and the pursuit of unity, journalists, and often ordinary citizens of Germany, viewed the "Revolution of Dignity" demonstrated on the barricades of Maidan with goodwill (Berwanger & Karsten, 2014, p. 41–43). Chancellor Merkel's favorite was Vitali Klitschko and his party, UDAR, which advocated deep democratic changes. While the Christian Democratic parties and the Green Party sided with the demonstrators, Die Linke openly supported Yanukovych, and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) maintained an ambiguous stance. On February 18, Foreign Minister F.-W. Steinmeier, in a television interview, attributed responsibility to both sides for the acts of violence on the streets of Kyiv. In the parliamentary debate the next day, left-wing MPs openly spoke about Ukrainian fascists and anti-Semites who had seized power (Linke sieht Faschisten, 2014). The spokesperson for Die Linke, Ulla Jelpke, and the rising star of the media on Ukrainian issues, Sahra Wagenknecht's deputy, suggested Western inspiration for the "coup" on Maidan, with some finding inspiration in the actions of the USA and native Ukrainian fascists under the banner of Stepan Bandera. They defended Russia, unjustly accused by Western countries, and demanded a ban on any aid action for Kyiv from the EU and IMF (Linkspartei, 2014).

The German government outlined its position on January 29, 2014, in a declaration by Chancellor Merkel, announcing a joint, patient pursuit of a peaceful resolution to the conflict with the European Union. It was assured that the doors to the association agreement were still open, and all misunderstandings between the Eastern Partnership countries, Russia, and the EU should be clarified. Earlier, on December 17, in a speech inaugurating his renewed term at the Auswärtiges Amt, Minister Steinmeier did not hide his outrage (*empörend*) over Russia's exploitation of Ukraine's difficult situation (Rede von Außenminister, 2013).

Preventing the escalation of the bloody confrontation and reaching an agreement between the government and the opposition was the achievement of the Weimar Triangle mission (F.-W. Steinmeier, R. Sikorski, L. Fabius). On February 21, the president left Ukraine and was removed from office by parliament. Such a course of action was not provided for by the Ukrainian Constitution, and one could speak of a violation of its basic norms and principles (Stelmach, 2015, p. 21).

## Two vectors of German policy in the Russia-Ukraine War

In response to Ukraine's attempts to gain independence from Moscow after the "Euromaidan" revolution in Kyiv, Russia reacted with the temporary occupation of Crimea on March 18, 2014, based on a hastily conducted illegal referendum on March 16. The next step in Russia's war against Ukraine was the outbreak of conflict in the eastern part of the country, particularly in the Donetsk Basin, which is predominantly inhabited by Russian-speaking people. Separatists, supported militarily and financially by Moscow, declared the establishment of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic. After capturing key cities in the Donbas region, in May 2014, they announced the confederation of both republics. In response, the Ukrainian armed forces initiated the so-called "anti-terrorist operation," aimed at recapturing major cities and eliminating armed separatist groups.

Temporary occupation of Crimea by Russia and the outbreak of war in the Donbas were serious violations of international law, and Merkel could not overlook this. On March 13, she warned the Bundestag about the escalation of the armed conflict and declared readiness to "seek a political-diplomatic way out of the crisis" (Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzlerin, 2014). In response to Putin's speech on March 18 regarding temporary occupation of Crimea by Russia Merkel reacted with restraint, calling on EU member states to stand united. She limited her response to stating that it was a violation of international law but concurrently emphasized that dialogue with Moscow would continue despite the sanctions imposed by the EU (Merkel: entschlossene Antwort, 2014).

In response to the temporary occupation of Crimea, one day after the referendum, the EU and the USA imposed economic sanctions on the Russian Federation. They suspended its participation in the G-8 and imposed entry bans on their territory for 21 prominent Kremlin officials (31 in the case of the USA). On March 25, a boycott of the G-8 summit in Sochi was announced (Rinke, 2014).

Following the parliamentary discussion in the Bundestag on March 19, 2014, a certain helplessness among the deputies was evident. There was uncertainty regarding the extent of Putin's ambitions and the appropriate boundaries for EU concessions. Concerns were raised that his objective might include the annexation of another part of Ukraine's territory, leading to its political and economic destabilization, and ultimately, the disintegration of the state. Other scenarios considered included strengthening NATO's presence in Eastern Europe and the tangible prospect of Ukraine's EU membership. Simultaneously, there were apprehensions about whether this would result in enduring divisions in Europe and whether the loss of Crimea by Ukraine should be accepted in exchange for Moscow's inclusion in discussions about the future of the state. A decisive majority of deputies from the Union, SPD, and Greens condemned Russia's aggression towards Crimea but also called for a peaceful de-escalation of the conflict (Bannas, 2014).

Ultimately, it was decided to employ all available instruments, i.e., to engage in dialogue with Moscow through various methods, expand sanctions against Russia if necessary, and continue financial aid for Ukraine. The main goal was to prevent the crisis from spreading to eastern Ukraine, leading to the official German proposal to send OSCE observers to the country. Minister Steinmeier felt a sense of defeat, having had ambitious plans to give new impulses for cooperation with Russia. He made considerable efforts to calm the situation, traveling to the Baltic states and Budapest, meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and thereby positioning Germany at the forefront of nations involved in resolving the conflict in Ukraine. He firmly believed, as noted in his diplomatic memos, that when "conversations cease, only the roar of cannons will remain" (Steinmeier, 2016, p. 47).

While criticizing Moscow, within the framework of the Normandy Format established in June 2014 (Germany, France, Russia, Ukraine), Germany, in solidarity with France, sought to achieve a ceasefire. Following the meeting of the G-20 in Brisbane (Australia) on November 15–16, 2014, and a fruitless conversation between Merkel and Putin, the Chancellor ultimately discarded any illusions regarding the intentions of the Russian counterpart. European Union countries agreed to entrust Germany with the task of seeking a diplomatic solution, as apart from France, no one was

eager to undertake the difficult and seemingly hopeless mission. Germany reluctantly assumed the role of the main arbitrator in the Russian-Ukrainian war and found it challenging to endorse the policy of sanctions against Russia. The new task that fell upon Angela Merkel became more of a burden than a cause for pride. However, thanks to the persistent and conciliatory stance of the German leader, in cooperation with French President François Hollande, it was possible to reach the so-called second Minsk agreement on February 12, 2015. The main point of this agreement was a ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy equipment from the front lines. The negotiations required significant effort from Merkel. They did not address the temporary occupation of Crimea by Russia, but the Chancellor maintained the view that it was necessary to engage in dialogue with Russia because the war in Donbas was of paramount importance for Ukraine and unwinnable. She managed to maintain the shaky unity of EU countries on the issue of maintaining sanctions against Russia and domestically quelled the noisy propaganda and offensive by those “understanding Russia” (Russlandversteher) (Koszel, 2019, p. 30).

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the repression against the anti-Kremlin opposition, symbolized by the murder of one of the opposition leaders, Boris Nemtsov, in February 2015, began to shape the Eastern policy of the Federal Republic. The exclusive policy of Germany towards Russia was no longer discussed but rather maintained within the framework of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The German dilemma regarding military engagement abroad was also evident during the NATO summit in Warsaw on July 8–9, 2016. On one hand, they declared loyalty to alliance commitments and strengthening the southern and southeastern flank of NATO due to threats from Russia, but on the other hand, they strongly emphasized the need for dialogue with Moscow and maintaining communication channels with it due to its growing role in the Syrian conflict. (Nato-Gipfel in Warschau, 2016; Szubart, 2016).

After two unsuccessful trips by Merkel to Russia in May 2015 in Moscow and May 2017 in Sochi, Germany realized that the Russians did not take their efforts to restore peace in eastern Ukraine seriously and even made them feel that if it were not for Germany’s categorical reaction to Crimea and Donbas, EU sanctions would never have been implemented (Aleksander, 2017). At the same time, in the first half of 2017, Chancellor Merkel met with President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko on four different occasions, but no new proposals were developed regarding the conflict with Russia. A compensation for Ukraine was the abolition of the visa requirement for Ukrainian citizens traveling to the European Union on June 11, 2017, and in July, the completion of the ratification process of the association agreement with Ukraine in the member states, which enabled its full implementation on September 1, 2017 (Układ o stowarzyszeniu, 2017).

Absorbed by the election campaign for the Bundestag in the fall of 2017, Chancellor Merkel lost interest in further attempts to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine. She paid more attention to problems associated with Brexit, the migration crisis, the civil war in Syria, and the troubling friendliness of the administration of US President Donald Trump towards Putin. The difficult parliamentary elections dragged on until March 2018, when it was possible to establish a long-term coalition government of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. Due to the lack of prospects for resolving the conflict in Donbas, issues related to Russia and Ukraine were not priorities for Chancellor Merkel. She focused on mitigating internal conflicts in Germany and rebuilding her own image after the refugee crisis.

Germany and the European Union only returned to the conflict in eastern Ukraine in mid-2018. The main burden of negotiations within the Normandy Format was taken on by the new Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas (SPD). Upon taking office, he accused Russia of aggression against Ukraine, but his first visit was not to Kyiv but to Moscow. In the capital of Ukraine, he assured the hosts that Germany would not leave them alone and would defend their interests. The basis for his action was the so-called Steinmeier formula, proposed back in 2016. It aimed to regulate the principles of introducing a special status for parts of the Donbas not controlled by Kyiv. It was anticipated to grant a special autonomous status to the occupied territories of the Donbas while simultaneously ensuring the conduct of local elections there (Salzen von, 2019).

However, despite his ambition to give a new impulse to the talks on the conflict in Donbas, the negotiations were thwarted by Russian stubbornness and Ukrainian reluctance. The Russians continued to demand the inclusion of a provision on the special autonomous status of Donbas in the Ukrainian constitution. This would have allowed for the start of preparations for local elections in those areas of eastern Ukraine not under the control of the authorities in Kyiv. The special status of Donbas was to apply temporarily during the election campaign, and if the elections were recognized by international institutions, it would be introduced permanently. Subsequently, Russian citizens fighting on the side of the separatists would leave Donbas, taking weapons and equipment with them. This scenario, previously pushed by Steinmeier, raised concerns among Ukrainians, as it would effectively lead to the recognition of the self-proclaimed “people’s republics” and legalize the Russian protectorate in Donbas. The Ukrainians were not convinced that there was no other, better solution for the decentralization of the state. In their opinion, while regions like Galicia, Volhynia, or Donbas have different traditions, histories, and experiences in self-organization, which should be respected, it should not come at the expense of the state’s cohesion (Iwański, Nieczypor, 2019).

In the difficult situation in eastern Ukraine, the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline began. From the perspective of Germany, this investment was necessary and beneficial. After moving away from nuclear energy in 2011, Germany became dependent on imports of natural gas and crude oil from Russia. It was argued that cheaper raw materials would lead to the development of the German industry and the export of their competitive export goods, which in turn would drive the growth of the entire economy. The fact that this investment could completely bypass and replace the transit of Russian gas to Western Europe through Ukraine, the Baltic states, and Poland was not considered. For a long time, the German government maintained that this was a “purely commercial” venture and had no connection with the foreign policy objectives of the Russian Federation. It was only during President Poroshenko’s visit to Berlin in April 2018 that Chancellor Merkel admitted that the “political aspects” of the project should be considered (Kinkartz, 2018).

On November 1, Chancellor Merkel was in Kyiv, where she advocated for the continuation of EU sanctions against Russia due to its non-compliance with the Minsk agreements. She critically addressed the municipal elections planned for November 11 in the two separatist republics. She did not mention that, during the same days, a delegation of the German economy was in Moscow discussing the development of mutual cooperation with the government of D. Medvedev. She promised German assistance amounting to 85 million euros for vocational training and support for Ukrainian scientists.

Russia’s temporary occupation of Ukrainian territories the Federal Foreign Office published a document on November 30, 2018, providing an interpretation of Russia’s temporary occupation of Ukrainian territories.

It was mentioned that the temporary occupation of Crimea by Russia and the outbreak of conflict in the East of Ukraine had cost the lives of 10,000 people. The German government, “advocating for peace and stability,” took the position: 1.Implementation of the Minsk agreements (continuation of negotiations on this matter jointly with France); 2.Non-tolerance of violations of international law (the territorial integrity of Ukraine must be respected); 3.Strengthening and protection of the OSCE missions (essential in maintaining the peace process); 4.Consideration of sending a UN peacekeeping mission to Donbas (support for a UN mission with the caveat that it should not result in the consolidation of the existing status quo); 5.Support from Germany for economic reforms in Ukraine, aimed at restructuring the state and organizing civil society, as well as, among other things, modernization of the administration and greater decentralization (Auf welche Strategie, 2018).

### **Overview: Towards a Breakthrough**

The new President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, who began his term in May 2019, hoped for Germany’s increased activity in the Normandy Format, the specification of the “Steinmeier formula,” and announced determination in resolving ongoing Russian aggression in the eastern

part of the country. On December 9, 2019, in Paris, at the summit of the N4 leaders, a document was adopted that approved a new phase in the implementation of the Minsk agreements and the specification of the “Steinmeier formula” – the holding of elections in the territories occupied by pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions even before Kyiv regains control over these areas. These provisions anticipated the implementation of this “formula” into Ukrainian legislation. The sequence of conditions necessary to hold local elections there, in accordance with Ukrainian law and under OSCE supervision, was defined. The release of prisoners was promised. The “formula” did not address whether Russian troops should withdraw from Donbas and Ukraine should regain control over the state border before the elections. It was only agreed that within four months, the details of the political and military implementation of the Minsk agreements would be agreed upon (Gemeinsam..., 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic paralyzed progress in diplomatic talks on Ukraine, and Germany only announced further N4 summits in Berlin with President Zelensky’s participation in April 2021 due to the resistant implementation of the Paris summit’s agreements. On September 26, 2021, the Bundestag elections took place, leading to the formation of a unique governing coalition composed of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals. In the coalition agreement signed two months later, most words were devoted to Russia, described as an “important, international actor” (wichtiger internationaler Akteur), and it was assured that efforts would be made “towards substantial and stable relations” with Moscow. Ukraine was promised efforts to prevent actions destabilizing Ukraine and its eastern territories, respect for the Minsk agreements, and the resolution of frozen conflicts (Mehr Fortschritt, 2021, p. 154).

The new Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD) maintained Germany’s traditional policy towards Russia. The purchases for the Ukrainian army conducted within NATO were blocked – these included sales of rifles designed to combat drones and equipment for fighting snipers. Lacking experience in foreign policy, he preferred the broad, active endeavors of France’s ambitious President E. Macron and signs of the American administration’s engagement in the conflict in Ukraine. The German side was still ready for dialogue with Russia and, should there be readiness on their part, for negotiations concerning security in Europe. The visit of the new Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock to Moscow (January 16, 2022) and Kyiv (January 17, 2022) did not yield any progress. Russia was not interested in the N4 meetings and argued that it was not formally a party to the conflict, and the problems concerned only the separatists from both “people’s republics.” (Baerbocks Botschaft, 2022; Jede erneute Aggression, 2022).

Judging by the statement of the Normandy Four adopted after the summit in Paris, President V. Zelensky agreed to extend the special status of Donbas for another year. The law on special status was to be agreed upon within the Trilateral Contact Group and the Normandy format. In turn, Russian President Vladimir Putin clearly stated that Ukraine would have to incorporate the “special status” of both republics into its constitution.

Due to internal criticism in Germany for conducting unsuccessful diplomacy within the N4 and accusations from partners of weak engagement on the side of Ukraine, Chancellor Scholz visited Kyiv and Moscow (February 14–15, 2022) amidst intensifying Russian-Belarussian maneuvers. Although he mentioned that Germany stands with Ukraine, his primary goal was to continue the policy of dialogue and diplomacy towards Moscow (Pressekonferenz, 2022).

Three days after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, on February 27, 2022, Chancellor Scholz promised a “turning point” (*Zeitenwende*) in Germany’s foreign and security policy. There were announcements of renewing the sanctions policy against Russia and halting the Nord Stream 2 operations, extensive multifaceted support and increased arms supplies to Ukraine, strengthening and modernizing the Bundeswehr with a 100-billion-euro funding and rigorously applying 2% of GDP for the development of the armed forces (Regierungserklärung, 2022). This marked a boundary line ending the growing process of disillusionment of the German society with the Eastern policy of the chancellors and the associated years-long illusion of having influence over Putin’s administration actions towards Ukraine and European security policy. There was consistent

understanding for Moscow's interests in Ukraine, even though after 2012 Russia quickly abandoned the modernization of the state in the Western model and adopted a sharp neo-imperial course in its foreign policy, with the main goal being the vassalization of Ukraine. In Berlin, it was not recognized that barriers were being erected before Ukraine's integration with European structures. There was no conviction about supporting a state riddled with corruption at every level, the omnipotence of oligarchs, the inefficiency of administration, and the popularity of radical nationalist political groups. Given Germany's European capabilities, leaving Ukraine to fend for itself or abandoning the pro-European orientation of its citizens would have been an irreplaceable loss for the process of building European unity. Guided by these considerations, Germany decided to lead Ukraine onto European tracks through financial and advisory support. Shortly before the Russian invasion, it was announced that over 1 billion euros had been allocated for the reconstruction and modernization of Eastern Ukraine. In 2022, the budget of the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development guaranteed 600 million euros and an additional 400 million euros for the Ukraine reconstruction program (Savinok & Tepper, 2022, p. 2). Despite a strong pro-Russian lobby in Germany, society is forming a clear and coherent perception of the necessary support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia. In Europe, this is seen as a test of Germany's credibility but also as a perspective for increasing its international position.

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