

# The Legacy of Willy Brandt: 'Ostpolitik' in Germany's Russia Policy - Arne Kristian Mark



On June 24, 2024, the European Union (EU), adopted the 14th Sanctions Package against Russia. Despite the Council's emphasis on unity, the decision to implement a new round of sanctions faced opposition, particularly from Germany's Social Democrats, thus it's important to understand the history behind their intransigence to reinforce existing sanctions. What is their reasoning and how has that attitude contribute to the exacerbation of the ongoing war in Ukraine?

To understand German foreign policy towards Russia, we need to go back to Chancellor Willy Brandt (Social Democrat) and his 'Ostpolitik,' which was introduced in the late 1960s. Ostpolitik emphasized economic engagement and diplomatic dialogue, laying the groundwork that eventually led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Ostpolitik reinforced the German perception of the necessity for a

special role towards Russia within the Western community. The success of Brandt's plan set the groundwork for Germany's 21<sup>st</sup> Century policy towards Russia, which included prioritizing trade and utilization of soft power towards Moscow. The idea was that [Russia should not be completely isolated](#).

Germany's limited military support for Ukraine and overall ineffective sanctions before the outbreak of the war in 2022 can be explained through this conciliatory attitude. Equally important is to pay attention to the disbelief among social democratic circles towards Putin's interventionism in the [German government decision making system](#). This weakened Ukraine's position and encouraged Kremlin's aggression.

Germany under Social Democrat Chancellor Gerhard Schröder intensified the ties with Russia in the early 2000's and in turn, [became acknowledged as Russia's representative in Europe](#). The most notable example of this form of political cooperation was [the joint action taken by Germany, Russia and France against the US war in Iraq in 2003](#). In an economic sense, it was the launch of the Nord Stream 1 natural gas pipeline project in the Baltic Sea. From a security policy perspective, Nord Stream 1 was extremely sensitive, as eastern European countries, such as Ukraine and Poland, would have lost their influence over the transport of Russian gas to Europe because the new pipeline would bypass the existing transit countries. Schröder himself expressed understanding for Russia's security concerns in connection to NATO's eastward expansion. [Schröder became increasingly friendly with Vladimir Putin personally](#) , once calling him a "[flawless democrat](#)".

When Christian Democrat Angela Merkel came to power in 2005, Germany's policy towards Russia hardly changed. This is because key positions in the foreign ministry were held by Social Democrats, coupled with Merkel's tendency to sit on the fence and maintain the status quo. [Merkel was more critical](#) of Russia than Schröder had been for sure, but the general approach of viewing Russia as a potential partner persisted. "[For Russia, I use the term strategic cooperation](#)," declared Angela Merkel, which explains why she vetoed Ukraine's and Georgia's

possible admission to NATO in 2008, and [pursued a reconciliatory approach towards Russia](#) following the conclusion of the 2008 war in Georgia and the resolution of the Transnistria conflict in 2010. Putin`s repeated criticism of NATO`s eastward expansion and rejection of the European “open door” policy for Ukraine and Georgia met with a certain degree of comprehension in German discourse. By that time, [German exports to Russia had grown threefold since 2002](#). German industry, represented by the lobby firm *Ostausschuss*, had heavy investments in Russia. Berlin strove not to provoke any political or diplomatic tensions with Russia that could potentially jeopardize existing relations or interests. This was precisely how [Berlin indirectly supported Moscow financially and politically](#).

The escalation of the Ukrainian Crisis in February/March 2014 was a touchstone for the German stance; in hindsight, we now know that Berlin completely botched. The crisis in Ukraine as a whole led to a turning point with an abrupt realization that Russia has long ceased to be a partner and now an open adversary of the West. This could have been an opportunity for Berlin to accept and face Russia`s expansionist ambitions and change its course. But Germany`s Russia policy was self-deceiving in a way that it was unable to adjust its position accordingly - despite the numerous warnings raised in Germany as well as the Transatlantic alliance. A crucial observation one might have hoped for is that conciliatory gestures did not prevent the annexation of Crimea and military aggression in the Donbass region. This, of course, did not happen.

Economic sanctions against Russia were implemented, but in truth, they were utterly ineffective. This was mainly because the most important sector, natural gas, was excluded from sanctions. Secondly, when put into practice, the scale of actually implemented sanctions were limited. These small-scale sanctions were criticised by businesses as “counterproductive”, as well as by social democrats, who feared an isolation of Russia. Angela Merkel stated that there had been no change in the fundamentals of Ostpolitik: she insisted that a partnership with Russia would persist - both in the middle and long term.

The absence of German military exports to Ukraine after 2014 was characteristic

of the lingering influence of Ostpolitik. Declared goals of the German foreign policy agenda precluded provoking Putin, as [no effective deterrent against Putin could have been achieved through Ukraine](#). Despite ongoing sanctions, cooperation in the natural gas sector, Russia's most important export market, was further intensified with the Nord Stream 2 project, which led to [payments of around 200 million Euros daily to Russia just before the outbreak of the war in 2022](#). From 2011 onwards, interdependence between Russia and Ukraine in the natural gas sector diminished when Germany and Russia formally inaugurated the new Nord Stream 1 pipeline. Nord Stream 2 would have made the Ukrainian transit system completely obsolete. The complex interdependence between Russia and Ukraine in [the energy sector has never been fully grasped by German politicians](#). On several occasions, latest in December 2021 by Social Democrat Chancellor Scholz, Nord Stream pipelines were described as exclusively "private-sector projects".

The decision not to support Ukraine militarily, a sanctions policy with very limited effect and the decision to build the Nord Stream pipelines contributed to the weakening of Ukraine's geopolitical situation. The attack on Ukraine was a decisive moment in German foreign policy, which revealed the grave mistakes that had been made. When Olaf Scholz, Federal Chancellor since 2021, spoke of *Zeitenwende* (turning point), he called fundamental cornerstones of German foreign policy into question. He advocated an active defence policy for Germany, but the idea of Ostpolitik within German society and politics did not diminish, as well as stakeholders of the German economy still have a huge impact today.

The presence of Brandt's legacy and Ostpolitik in contemporary German politics becomes crystal clear in the recent German veto of a proposed tightening of EU sanctions against Russia. Russia continues to access Western military equipment through third countries. The 14th EU sanctions package aimed to include a "No Russia" clause in export contracts, even for subsidiary companies. The German refusal to support this new law is due to concerns over increased bureaucracy and potential decreases in sales. This law sparked intense debates within German politics. Foreign Affairs Minister Annalena Baerbock of the Green Party, known for her strong anti-Russia stance, expressed concerns that the veto from the Social Democratic-led chancellery could undermine the trust built over the past

two years since Olaf Scholz spoke about *Zeitenwende*. Berlin plays the role of Hamlet and remains hesitant when it comes to support Ukraine. Therefore, I suggest three key political recommendations:

- Berlin needs to understand that the only language Vladimir Putin understands is the one of power. Appeasement has only led to a strengthening of Putin's position in the past and encouraged him. Consequently, Berlin needs to take its *Zeitenwende* serious.
- This implies full military support for Ukraine. There can only be a solution on the battle ground, and the West has to accept that there is no other way than unifying behind this goal. Germany should stop to refuse advanced measurements, like Macron's plan to send ground troops for help into Ukraine.
- The symbolic sanctions policy should be abandoned immediately. The European Union still imports Russian Liquified Natural Gas, and plans to stop this only by the year 2027. This date must be brought forward. Furthermore, there are still parts of western military equipment found in Russian weapons regularly on the battle ground. The German government has to give up its obstructive attitude and align with its European partners.



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