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## **THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN–UKRAINIAN WAR ON EUROPE AND THE GERMAN LEADERSHIP**

### **A b s t r a c t**

The research methods used in this article are systems analysis supported by text analysis. The aim is to look at Germany as part of a larger Euro-Atlantic system (including the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), in which leadership is one of the resources. The article draws attention to the process that affects the ‘flows/processes’ within this resource, i.e. the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. The research hypothesis is the statement about the impact of the conflict in Ukraine as a ‘flow’ on the coherence of the closed Euro-Atlantic system and its leadership ‘resource’, the effect of which is a ‘feedback’ affecting the size and nature of the resource (change in the nature of German leadership in Europe, e.g. the transition from political-economic leadership to political-economic-military leadership). When using these methods, I will refer to available data, analyses, and forecasts, including: NATO Review, the Department of Defense of the United States, the European Commission, Auswärtiges Amt, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Carnegie Europe, Stratfor, the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity. The analysis of the mentioned data will be supported by the analysis of scientific and media discourse in Germany, Europe, and the USA. The Russia–Ukraine war is seen as the end of the old international order and the beginning of a new Cold War 2.0. From Berlin’s perspective, this is another ‘crisis’ that may become a catalyst for a deeper redefinition of German leadership in Europe. The emerging ‘flows’ in the form of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict and the related threat to which the border states of the Euro-Atlantic system are particularly exposed do not affect its use as an impulse to change the leading role of Germany (feedback). The

leadership discourse in Germany and the taken steps clearly indicate that the current German government is in an intermediate phase and it tries to fill the gap between the German leading role ('leadership aspiration') and the actual performance of Germany ('leadership reality'). For now, German leadership will have the character of leadership *a la primus inter pares*. The German security strategy opts for integrated security, in which Germany will play the role of an honest broker or a reluctant leader. The planned German leadership system in the EU is to be compatible with the military power of NATO and the USA.

**K e y w o r d s:** Russian–Ukrainian war, Germany, leadership, Europe.

## RESEARCH METHOD AND STRUCTURE OF THE ARTICLE

The aim of this article is to analyze the impact of the Russian–Ukrainian war on the nature of German leadership in Europe (Deutsche Führungsrolle in Europa) through the application of systems analysis as the primary research method. The author conceptualizes the conflict as a flow—a disruptive process affecting the coherence of the Euro-Atlantic political and security system—leading to the necessity of redefining Germany's role as a leader. This method enables the identification of dynamic feedback mechanisms between external systemic pressure and the adaptive behavior of the state. The article also draws on constructivist theories of international relations, which posit that changes in political identity and threat perception in Germany constitute key conditions for foreign policy transformation. On this basis, it is argued that the war in Ukraine has acted as a catalyst for transforming German leadership—from a normative-economic model to one that increasingly includes a political-military component.

The article integrates three analytical approaches:

- Systems analysis, which treats the Euro-Atlantic system as an interconnected structure whose coherence depends on the efficiency of flows and the balance of resources.<sup>1</sup>

- Constructivism, which assumes that a state's foreign policy is shaped by dominant identities and societal beliefs.<sup>2</sup> In this view, the

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<sup>1</sup> Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (Chelsea: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008); Virginia Anderson and Lauren Johnson, *Systems Thinking Basics: From Concepts to Causal Loops* (Westford, MA: Pegasus Communications, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey W. Legro, 'The Transformation of Policy Ideas', *American Journal of Political Science* 44: 3, 2000, pp. 419–32; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

conflict functions as a trigger for redefining Germany's role within the collective narrative.

– Adaptive leadership theory, which draws on research into institutional change and leadership within the EU.<sup>3</sup> It assumes that Germany functions as a 'control subsystem' that stabilizes its environment.

The main research hypothesis asserts that the Russian–Ukrainian war has triggered a redistribution of leadership resources in Europe, leading to a transformation of Germany's role—from that of a normative and economic actor to a state partially responsible for the continent's military security.

The independent variable in this hypothesis is the external systemic shock caused by the Russian–Ukrainian war (which began in 2022), serving as a catalyst for political, security, and energy-related processes in the EU. The dependent variables include the nature of Germany's leadership in the EU (Führungsrolle), operationalized through: changes in its stance on military engagement, decisions concerning deterrence policy and support for Ukraine, the transformation of its national security strategy (e.g., the *Zeitenwende*), and Germany's evolving role in shaping the EU's common foreign policy.

The structure of the article consists of three main parts. The first part focuses on the impact of the Russian–Ukrainian war on Europe's security architecture and attempts to conceptualize shifts in the international order by referring to selected theories of international relations. The second part examines Germany's response to the conflict, with particular emphasis on the redefinition of its foreign, security, and energy policy. The third part analyzes the phenomenon of so-called feedbacks—the feedback mechanisms that influence the transformation of Germany's leadership role (*Deutsche Führungsrolle in Europa*) under the new geopolitical conditions. The purpose of this structure is to enable a systemic account of the relationship between external pressure and internal adaptive processes in German foreign policy.

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<sup>3</sup> Sylwia Zawadzka, 'European Policy as Adaptive Behavior of Germany and the Leadership Role in EU as a Result of Political Adaptation', *Online Journal Modelling the New Europe* 36, 2021, pp. 106–30, <https://doi.org/10.24193/OJMNE.2021.36.06>; Magnus Schoeller, 'Leadership Aspirations versus Reality: Germany's Self-Concept in Europe', *International Affairs* 99: 4, 2023, pp. 1615–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad121>.

## THE IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON EUROPE

Keeping a relatively quiet peace will cost us a lot  
of strength and imagination, and above all money.  
Herfried Münkler<sup>4</sup>

The first important step from the perspective of systems analysis is the characterisation of the Russian–Ukrainian war as a flow/process that affects the coherence of the Euro-Atlantic system. This characterisation includes a description of the impact of this phenomenon, its diversity, and its impact on the political and scientific discourse in this area.

Robert Kagan, a leading American political analyst, in his book titled *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World*, warned that the international liberal world order symbolised by the ‘garden’ (where cooperation instead of competition is achieved, geopolitics has been replaced by geo-economics, and cosmopolitanism prevails over tribalism) is threatened by the constantly growing jungle, i.e. authoritarianism, geopolitical ambitions, aggressive attitudes, and the spheres of interests of superpower. The weakening of the US power or its withdrawal from its role as a guarantor of liberal order could plunge the world into instability and chaos, as Kagan<sup>5</sup> predicted.

The war in Ukraine is treated by international relations theorists, especially realists, as another proof of the end of the idea of the ‘end of history,’ a beautiful illusion in which the war was permanently removed from Europe. From the perspective of geopoliticians, this is a turning point that marks the end of the so-called strategic pause. The Russian–Ukrainian war marks the end of the old international order and the beginning of the Cold War 2.0. This reality is to be characterised by constant competition for spheres of influence, and this competition can lead to a world war. There are many hotspots and unstable spots on the map of Europe and beyond, and according to German political scientist professor Herfried Münkler, Ukraine is just one of many such areas. ‘Keeping a relatively quiet peace will cost us a lot of strength and imagination, and above all money,’ as the author emphasizes.<sup>6</sup> Conflicts can spread geographically, and Europe’s main

<sup>4</sup> Herfried Münkler, ‘Putins Krieg zerstört die Hoffnung auf ein gemeinsames “Wir”’, *Der Spiegel*, 25 February 2022, no. 9, p. 23, <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/wladimir-putins-angriff-auf-die-ukraine-das-ende-der-alten-weltordnung-a-fa31d97d-8208-408c-8106-21e9e776ac64> (access: 19 August 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Münkler, ‘Putins Krieg zerstört’.

task is to block this process. The war in Ukraine exposed Europe's military weakness and underlined the American security leadership. Stanley R. Sloan, in his book titled *Defense of the West: NATO, the European Union and the Transatlantic Bargain*, recalled that the founders of the Alliance assumed a kind of transatlantic agreement: the possibility of joint action of post-war Europe, and the USA helping to protect the continent.<sup>7</sup> Even a small alliance of European countries providing tank supplies to fighting Ukraine required participation of the USA.<sup>8</sup>

The one can safely call the history of the transatlantic alliance a kind of love-and-hate story. After a period of tension during Donald Trump's presidency, when the idea of the US leaving NATO was being considered, Russian aggression against Ukraine made Europe aware of the role of the Atlantic security community. NATO is still the basis and legitimacy of American supremacy in the world. It is a multiplier of the US strength, and the military bases in Europe are logistical hubs that allow the US forces to be redeployed to the Middle East or other regions of the world. Additionally, the US nuclear supremacy is a key feature of NATO.<sup>9</sup> As former US Secretary of Defense James Mattis said a few years ago, 'Our greatest strength in the world is our network of alliances.'<sup>10</sup> This is even more important in the face of ongoing changes. For some time now, Americans have been interpreting global changes as a return to great power competition.<sup>11</sup> The US security strategy of 2018 linked the slow weakening of the international order to the activity of China and Russia. The strategy considers both countries as a 'revisionist powers' that 'want to shape the world according to their authoritarian model.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Stanley R. Sloan, *Defense of the West: NATO, the European Union and the Transatlantic Bargain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Christian von Marschall, 'Regierungserklärung zur Zeitenwende: Olaf Scholz kann Europa nicht führen – und will es auch nicht', *Tagesspiegel*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/internationales/olaf-scholz-bei-joe-biden-deutschland-kann-europa-nicht-fuehren--und-will-es-auch-nicht-9434114.html> (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>9</sup> Johannes Thimm, 'NATO: US Strategic Dominance and Unequal Burden-Sharing Are Two Sides of the Same Coin', *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, 2018, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/point-of-view/2018/nato-us-strategic-dominance-and-unequal-burden-sharing-aretwo-sides-of-the-same-coin/> (access: 17 September 2024).

<sup>10</sup> 'James Mattis' Resignation Letter', *CNN*, 21 December 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/20/politics/james-mattis-resignation-letter-doc/index.html.index.html> (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Mahneken, 'Forging the Tools of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Great Power Competition', *The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2020, [https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/GPC\\_Final\\_Report\\_Web.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/GPC_Final_Report_Web.pdf) (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>12</sup> 'Summary of the National Defense Strategy of The United States of America, Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge', 2018, *Department of Defense of*

The Russian–Ukrainian war also forces the diversification of raw material sources, the promotion of renewable energy sources, and the reduction of dependence on countries such as China or Russia. The Ukraine–Russian war also increased the importance of both military spending and military alliances. European NATO members commit to providing 50 percent of the resources needed for collective defence by the end of this decade.<sup>13</sup> Being aware, the Alliance must develop a network of connections with other organisations, such as the EU or the OECD, in order to have the resources necessary to build up human capital, which is so needed in countries consumed by civil wars and the weakness of state institutions.

The Ukrainian crisis has also become another strong argument for a more integrated Europe, primarily in the energy, cyber, and defence dimensions.<sup>14</sup> Ursula von der Leyen, in her speech before the European Parliament, declared that the European Union would support Ukraine attacked by Russia, and described the conflict itself as a clash of freedom and autocracy.<sup>15</sup> EU countries, as assured by the President of the European Commission, are not only to provide hospitality and protection to war refugees, but also to provide military and medical support to fighting Ukraine and help in the reconstruction of the country. However, these plans may be thwarted by problems facing the EU and NATO countries, including, above all, demographic challenges (scientific research urges caution when drawing conclusions about the long-term impact of crises such as COVID-19 or the war in Ukraine on citizens' attitudes toward the EU).<sup>16</sup> Expenditures related to the effects of global warming and the rising costs of social policy may significantly hamper the implementation of ambitious plans to increase spending on security or the reconstruction of Ukraine.<sup>17</sup>

*the United States*, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (access: 10 September 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Vershbow, 'Russia Policy after the War: A New Strategy of Containment', *Atlantic Council*, 22 February 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-policy-after-the-war-a-new-strategy-of-containment/> (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Judy Dempsey, 'Russia's War on Ukraine Is Changing Germany', *Carnegie Europe*, 7 March 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2023/03/russias-war-on-ukraine-is-changing-germany?lang=en> (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>15</sup> 'State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen', *European Commission*, 14 September 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech\\_22\\_5493](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech_22_5493) (access: 16 September 2024).

<sup>16</sup> Christian Rauh and Michal Parizek, 'Converging on Europe? The European Union in Mediatized Debates during the COVID-19 and Ukraine Shocks', *Journal of European Public Policy* 31:10, 2024, pp. 3036–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2344849>.

<sup>17</sup> Przemysław Łukasik, 'Zmiany ludnościowe jako determinanta w polityce przyszłości na przykładzie UE i NATO', *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne XXXI*: 1, 2022, pp. 173–74, <https://doi.org/10.4467/2543733XSSB.22.008.16710>.

Germany allocates approximately 53 billion EUR to defence.<sup>18</sup> Each year, to achieve two percent of defence spending, funds in the amount of approximately 30 billion EUR are allocated from a special fund for the Bundeswehr and funds allocated for this purpose by other ministries. However, once the funds from this fund are exhausted after 2026, the question will arise about the ability to pay for further arms contracts. A huge challenge to the implementation of defence obligations is the so-called ‘debt brake.’<sup>19</sup> Increasing defence spending without increasing taxes will violate constitutional regulations regarding the admissibility of debt. At the same time, increasing taxes or making cuts in other areas may cause tensions within the ruling German coalition.

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More often crises occur in Europe and the longer they last,  
the more clearly Germany’s new role will manifest itself.  
*Herfried Münkler*<sup>20</sup>

I will now analyse the impact of the conflict in Ukraine on Germany. In this new reality, Russia and Putin play the role of a destroyer, not a defender, of the international order. In this way, the incorrect assumptions of German foreign policy towards Moscow from the last three decades—as it turned out—have been undermined. The belief that Russia can be modernised, among other means through trade (*Wandel durch Handel*), turned out to be a pipe dream, while the Nord Stream project, supported by politicians and German business, has become a moral and political failure.<sup>21</sup> The Putin regime has not yet reached the status of a full dictatorship as seen in the cases of Hitler and Stalin, as

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<sup>18</sup> Kamil Frymark and Lidia Gibadło, ‘Niemcy: Kompromis budżetowy na przetrwanie’, *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich*, 9 July 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2024-07-09/niemcy-kompromis-budzetowy-na-przetrwanie> (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>19</sup> Sebastian Pióciennik, ‘Wzrost wydatków obronnych w RFN – kwestia reguły wydatkowej’, *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich*, 15 March 2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-03-15/wzrost-wydatkow-obronnych-w-rfn-kwestia-reguly-wydatkowej> (access: 19 September 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Herfried Münkler, ‘Germany’s New Role in Europe’, *Deutschland.de*, 18 June 18 2015, <https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/politics/germany-europe/germanys-new-role-in-europe> (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Burkhard Olschowsky, ‘German Ostpolitik—Traditional Patterns and New Approaches’, *International Conference titled “The Politics of Memory as a Weapon: Perspectives on Russia’s War against Ukraine”* (8–10 February 2023, Berlin), You Tube video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z\\_Tj7ZVujY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_Tj7ZVujY) (access: 19 August 2024).

German political scientist Claus Leggewie put it, but its fascist features are as recognisable as are its links to the Soviet heritage.<sup>22</sup>

In the new reality, Germany must find a balance between helping Ukraine while preventing NATO countries from being drawn into the ongoing conflict. A significant re-evaluation is taking place in the internal debate in Germany (from a constructivist view, Germany's foreign policy depends on how it defines the meaning of *Zeitenwende* and its own identity).<sup>23</sup> The marginalization of the use of the so-called *Putinverstehers* (Putin sympathizers) group, and the more exposed group of supporters of *Unterwerfungspazifismus* (submissive pacifism), the genesis of which comes from the *Ostermärsche* (Easter Peace March) of the Cold War era.<sup>24</sup> German passivity motivated by pacifism is explained as a kind of defensive reaction to excessive activity in the past. The behavior can be interpreted as one's own leniency towards the victims (German crimes against the USSR citizens during World War II), an expression of gratitude for the peaceful end of the Cold War.<sup>25</sup> The very slow turn (*Zeitenwende*) in German policy towards Russia that we are witnessing can also be seen as the result of the continuous influence of the culture of memory.<sup>26</sup> Philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas encouraged Western European politicians to start negotiations and find a compromise solution.<sup>27</sup> According to the philosopher, Russia should not gain any territorial benefits, but the terms of the ceasefire should take into account the interests of the Kremlin.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Claus Leggewie, '“Wladolf Putler”? Was Putins Regime mit Faschismus und Stalinismusgemein Hat', *Deutschlandfunk*, 19 February 2023, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/was-putins-regime-mit-faschismus-und-stalinismus-gemeinh-100.html> (access: 10 September 2024).

<sup>23</sup> Tobias Bunde, 'Zeitenwende as a Foreign Policy Identity Crisis: Germany and the Travails of Adaptation after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 27: 4, 2025, pp. 1223–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241311568>.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Chappedelaine, 'Germany and the Zeitenwende', *Institut Montaigne*, 2 June 2022, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/germany-and-zeitenwende> (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>25</sup> Marci Shore, 'Germany Has Confronted Its Past. Now It Must Confront the Present', *The Foreign Policy*, 8 August 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/08/germany-russia-ukraine-nazi-stalin-crt-slavery-confront-present/> (access: 18 September 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Przemysław Łukasik, 'Impact of the War on Ukraine on German Culture of Memory', in Hanna Bazhenova, ed., *Russia's War in Ukraine: Implications for the Politics of History in Central and Eastern Europe* (Lublin: Institute of Central Europe, 2023).

<sup>27</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Krieg und Empörung', *Süddeutschen Zeitung*, 28 April 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/kultur/das-dilemma-des-westens-juergen-habermas-zum-krieg-in-der-ukraine-e068321/?reduced=true> (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Julia Haungs, 'Habermas über die Ukraine und mehr Sichtbarkeit von Frauen ab 47 in Film und TV', *Südwestrundfunk*, 15 February 2023, <https://www.swr.de/swr2/leben->



The majority of German society shares the opinion of intellectuals. According to a May 2022 survey, 63 percent of Germans fear that their country will become a party to the conflict, 38 percent oppose supplies to Ukraine, and 55 percent support supplies to a fighting country.<sup>29</sup> Research by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace confirms that 52 percent of Germans expected a wait-and-see attitude, while only 41 percent expected decisive action from politicians in Berlin. Respondents believe that diplomatic action should be the priority.<sup>30</sup>

In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, the perception of Eastern Europe in Germany changed noticeably. In light of research conducted after the Russian aggression in Crimea, it can be said that: '[i]t takes quite some time for Germans to realise that Ukraine is not Russia.'<sup>31</sup> For an average German, Ukrainians are perceived through the prism of Russia, and the language and culture are treated as local varieties of the Russian culture. 'If Ukraine was as transparent as Estonia, it would be much easier to argue in Germany in favor of supporting Ukraine with defensive weapons'<sup>32</sup>—this is one of the conclusions of such analyses. The problem, however, is not the lack of knowledge itself, but, above all, the asymmetric perception of Russian–Ukrainian relations by Berlin's political elites. Germans prefer to talk about the Russians in Crimea rather than about the Crimean Tatars or the Ukrainian history of Crimea, as Ukrainian historian Andrii Portnov, who works as an academic teacher in Germany, argues.<sup>33</sup>

Over the last two years, changes have been visible in the mutual perception of Kiev and Berlin. Chancellor Scholz appears as the guarantor of the post-war reconstruction of the war-ravaged country. In turn, the President of Ukraine expresses his full support for Berlin's

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und-gesellschaft/habermas-ueber-die-ukraine-und-mehr-sichtbarkeit-von-frauen-ab-47-in-film-und-tv-1522023-100.html (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>29</sup> 'Viele Deutsche haben Kriegsangst', *ARD-Deutschland Trend*, 13 May 2022, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-3019.html> (access: 15 September 2023).

<sup>30</sup> 'One Year On: Germany's Foreign Policy Shift and the War in Ukraine', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2 February 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/02/02/one-year-on-germany-s-foreign-policy-shift-and-war-in-ukraineevent-8008> (access: 19 September 2023).

<sup>31</sup> 'Pictures of the Ukraine: The Crimea, War, Crisis, Corruption', in Oliver Gnad, ed., *Ukraine Through German Eyes. Images and Perceptions of a Country in Transition* (Berlin: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2018), p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Andrii Portnov, 'Rethinking Memory Studies in the Time of War', *Opening Lecture during International Conference Titled "The Politics of Memory as a Weapon: Perspectives on Russia's War against Ukraine"*, 8 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUY2TpWCrm0> (access: 18 September 2023).

leadership role, declaring support for Germany's membership in the UN Security Council.

One of the consequences of the war in Ukraine is a return to super-positive relations between Berlin and Washington, which are reflected in public opinion polls. In the last two decades, German criticism of the USA has often taken on the features of anti-Americanism. It could also be perceived as an attempt to legalise the process of transforming the international political system from unipolar to multipolar, in which Germany is to play the role of one of these poles.<sup>34</sup>

From the perspective of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the old continent should transform into the so-called 'Geopolitical Europe' in order to face the challenges. Scholz announces the creation of the Council of Defence Ministers in the headquarters of the EU. The Chancellor also announced EU enlargement and reform. The EU is to expand to include the Western Balkan countries as well as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, the decision-making system is to be improved by introducing majority voting instead of unanimity in the EU Council.

The elements of the *Zeitenwende* that entered into force include: a change in the approach to arms supplies to Ukraine, strengthening NATO's eastern flank, creating a special fund for the modernisation of the Bundeswehr, and allocating two percent of GDP to defence and to the reduction of dependence on imports of Russian energy resources.<sup>36</sup> The German Air Force has strengthened the patrolling of the airspace of Poland and Romania; the navy became more involved in patrol activities in the Baltic and North Seas; ground forces periodically increased their presence to 900 soldiers in the NATO battle group in Lithuania and also sent a company of tanks to the newly established battle group in Slovakia. The Bundeswehr also became involved in strengthening the air defence of Slovakia and Poland with Patriot systems. Germany also wants to strengthen its air defence system (Arrow-3 systems). However, the permanent budget of the Ministry of National Defence will remain constant at 51.8 billion EUR per year in the coming years.

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<sup>34</sup> Przemysław Łukasik, *Antyamerykanizm w Niemczech* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, 2018), p.130.

<sup>35</sup> George Friedman, 'Borderlands: First Moves in Romania', *Stratfor*, 27 May 2014, <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/borderlands-first-moves-romania> (access: 8 July 2024).

<sup>36</sup> Anna Kwiatkowska, Kamil Frymark, Michał Kędzierski, Lidia Gibadło, Sebastian Płóciennik, and Justyna Gotkowska, 'W poszukiwaniu straconego czasu. Niemcy w erze *Zeitenwende*', *Raporty OSW*, 12 September 2023, pp. 19–68, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/raport-osw/2023-09-12/w-poszukiwaniu-straconego-czasu> (access: 10 September 2024).

The problem of the economic crisis, inflation, and the influx of refugees increased scepticism among Germans regarding military support for Ukraine during the two years of the conflict.<sup>37</sup> In the long term, Germany hopes to return to normal relations with Russia after the end of the war in Ukraine. The logic of systemic confrontation with Russia seems to be too costly and is far from the way of thinking about security in Europe among German decision-makers. As analysts emphasise, the official denunciation of the NATO–Russia Founding Act and the granting of American security guarantees to Ukraine may be factors in changing this perspective.

## GERMANY AND LEADERSHIP

With the policy of integrated security, we want to contribute to security in Europe and the world together with our allies, neighbors and partners. We want to shape our future together—aware of the risks, but with confidence and full trust in our strengths.<sup>38</sup>

I will now turn to the analysis of the German leadership ‘resources’ and their character. There are many definitions of leadership. One can define leadership as the use of power resources as a necessary condition for the provision of leadership, as a policy, or as institutional change to improve collective action as a stated goal of political leadership. Some indicators of leadership include the following:<sup>39</sup>

- 1) developing initiatives or programmes to solve common problems;
- 2) assuming responsibility for the implementation of common initiatives or programmes;
- 3) acting as a broker or mediator among the members of a community;
- 4) exerting decisive influence on the evolution of a community or a common endeavour;
- 5) investing more than other members of the community in the success of a common endeavour;
- 6) striving for positions of responsibility (e.g. influential posts or offices);
- 7) representing common interests to third parties;

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>38</sup> *Wehrhaft. Resilient. Nachhaltig. Integrierte Sicherheit für Deutschland. Nationale Sicherheitsstrategie*, (Berlin: Auswärtiges Amt, 2023).

<sup>39</sup> Magnus Schoeller, *Leadership in the Eurozone: The Role of Germany and EU Institutions* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

8) contributing more than other members of the community to improving common decision-making processes and/or policies;

9) providing a vision for the future development of a community or a common endeavour.

German leadership in Europe (*Deutsche Führungsrolle in Europa*) as the most economically powerful state of the world and the leader of the European Union has been manifested in the last three decades, especially in crisis situations: the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, the Ukrainian crisis, and the negotiations in the Normandy format (2014–2021). In Berlin's current politics, most of the leadership indicators are recognisable. However, this was not always the case. Just after German reunification in 1990, Berlin's policy was to avoid the burden of responsibility as a leader. Political scientist William Paterson described this phenomenon as 'leadership avoidance reflex'.<sup>40</sup> A decade later, another American political scientist Peter Katzenstein argued that Germany was a 'tamed power' characterised by a Europeanised identity and the use of soft power restrained by multilateral institutions.<sup>41</sup>

In 2010, professors of politics Simon Bulmer and William Paterson suggested that Germany had in the meantime become a 'normalised power,' prepared to defend its interests through a more assertive diplomacy, including, if necessary, unilateral action and the full use of its economic and institutional power resources.<sup>42</sup>

As noted by Polish political scientist and historian Bogdan Koszel, Germany's current leading position in the European Union is not only due to the number of its population, the strength of its economy, and the area of the country. It is also the result of successive German governments building the capital of trust among the European Union's member states, which resulted in the thinking in the capitals of the old continent that 'what is good for Europe is good for Germany'.<sup>43</sup> This is the result of improving the models for submitting various ideas to the EU forum, which had previously been consulted

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<sup>40</sup> William Paterson, 'Muss Europa Angst vor Deutschland haben?', in Rudolf Hrbek, ed., *Der Vertrag von Maastricht in der wissenschaftlichen Kontroverse* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1993), pp. 9–18.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Katzenstein, *Tamed Power: Germany in Europe* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>42</sup> Simon Bulmer and William Paterson, *Germany and the European Union: Europe's Reluctant Hegemon?* (London: Macmillan Education, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Bogdan Koszel, 'Rola Niemiec w procesach decyzyjnych Unii Europejskiej w XXI wieku' (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wydziału Nauk Politycznych i Dziennikarstwa, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza, 2019), p. 5.

with the most important ministries, committees of the Bundestag and Bundesrat, as well as other state, social, and local government institutions, and with scientific research and expert institutes. German lobbying in the European Union also plays an important role in this process ('all the most important concerns, banks, and financial institutions have their representative offices in the capital of Belgium'.<sup>44</sup> Despite the possibility of exerting pressure on the decision-making processes in the EU, as Koszel notes, Germans do not always manage to successfully push through their ideas (the Constitution for Europe or the federal system for the EU did not come into force). At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Germany was not able to impose any European order on anyone, but also without their participation and approval of any attempt to organise Europe in some way, new rules were doomed to failure, as Koszel<sup>45</sup> noted. At the same time, Germany's attempts to strengthen its international position in both transatlantic and European Union relations were noticeable. However, it was defined as competition in the globalisation process, not striving for hegemony. The words of Berlin historian and publicist Peter Bender from 1969 were still relevant, namely that 'Germany is too small to rule the continent and at the same time too large to be treated on an equal footing with others'.<sup>46</sup> The growth factors certainly included, among others, economic growth and growing international involvement.<sup>47</sup> Germany's pro-export economy triumphed already in 2005, when the country took first place in the world in exports with a 9.6 percent share, ahead of the United States (8.9 percent) and the People's Republic of China (7.5 percent). The following year, the German foreign trade surplus reached a record high of 164.569 billion EUR. As part of Germany's international involvement, it continued humanitarian and food aid projects (*Welthungerhilfe*), and joined international expeditions of the armed forces to establish and maintain peace (Afghanistan, the Middle East, the Balkans, Somalia, Congo). Of course, this sacrifice and activity serves a specific strategic goal of German foreign policy, i.e. obtaining the status of a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Bender, *Deutsche Parallelen. Anmerkungen zu einer gemeinsamen Geschichte zweier getrennten Staaten* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1989), p. 217.

<sup>47</sup> Bogdan Koszel, 'Aspiracje mocarstwowe Zjednoczonych Niemiec w XXI wieku', *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe* 4, 2008, pp. 143–57.

As a result of the war in Ukraine, Berlin faced another chance to rebuild German leadership in Europe. Earlier, German influence had been limited to its economic influence and the promotion of norms. Now, there is a window of opportunity to include the geopolitical dimension and the security dimension.

Already in 2015–18, Germany and France submitted a number of projects in the field of security and defence within the EU. The aim of these projects was to break the image of the EU as a soft power actor through the gradual communitarisation of defence policy and the creation of the European Defence Union (smart power).<sup>48</sup>

The emerging crises force a change in German leadership in Europe as a result of political adaptation.<sup>49</sup> The political adaptation of states in the regional or international dimension depends on the state's priorities and capabilities as well as the conditions and absorption capacity of the external environment. This process manifests itself by adopting a different strategy for conducting foreign policy or making *ad hoc* decisions as adequate responses to changes. As Polish political scientist Sylwia Zawadzka<sup>50</sup> suggests, Germany's approach can be defined as relatively habitual or deliberative. During the economic crisis and the migrant crisis, German decision-makers had to abandon European policy solutions (the so-called habitual model) and adopt a deliberative approach by developing new change management tools. Changes in this environment force an alteration in adaptive behavior and Germany played the role of political homeostasis. There is growing expectation of long-term, coordinated actions that will allow us to adapt to the new situation and regain control over the system—restore its balance. This expectation is most often directed to the entity with financial resources as well as political and military potential. Therefore, Germany can act as a controlling subsystem (homeostasis). Trying to meet the environment's expectations, it assumes greater responsibility for solving problems important for the whole environment.

The Ukraine crisis (2014–22) has accelerated Germany's process of 'learning to lead,' engaging various government ministries in diplomatic, military, and economic efforts. Germany has developed its leadership in three key areas: diplomatic negotiations, politico-

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<sup>48</sup> Sylwia Zawadzka, 'Od *soft power* do *smart power*. Francusko-niemieckie wizje unijnej integracji militarnej i ich krytyka', *Przegląd Zachodni* 370: 1, 2019, pp. 7–25.

<sup>49</sup> Eadem, 'European Policy as Adaptive Behavior'.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

-military crisis management, and shaping the EU's sanctions policy. Rather than relying on formal EU structures, Germany has preferred flexible and informal leadership practices, utilizing mini-lateral forums and coordination mechanisms among member states. As a result, German leadership should be understood as a dynamic and interactive process.<sup>51</sup>

However, American economic historian Charles Kindleberger clearly stated that willingness is a necessary condition for leadership.<sup>52</sup> Public opinion polls conducted in 2022–23 clearly indicate that the German society perceives Russia as a military threat (72 percent) and expresses a fear of the possibility of the conflict shifting to the territory of NATO countries (80 percent).<sup>53</sup> At the same time, the German society expects the authorities to pursue conservative policies (52 percent). Those who support greater involvement in the Russian–Ukrainian conflict (42 percent) expects diplomatic action (65 percent), not military (14 percent) or financial (13 percent) actions. The vast majority of the society (68 percent) reject the idea of German military leadership in Europe (68 percent). Noticeable in the respondents' answers is the difference between the German leading role ('leadership aspiration') and the actual performance of Germany ('leadership reality').<sup>54</sup> The survey reveals a high level of agreement that Germany should take the leading role (approve: 63 percent; fully approve: 91 percent). At the same time, members of the society doubt that the German government actually fulfils leadership roles (approve: 19 percent; fully approve: zero percent). Germans express the opinion that Berlin should provide a vision for the future of the EU (91 percent), but only 22 percent believe that Germany actually does provide a vision.

<sup>51</sup> Lisbeth Aggestam and Adrian Hyde-Price, 'Learning to Lead? Germany and the Leadership Paradox in EU Foreign Policy', *German Politics* 29:1, 2020, pp. 8–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1601177>.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Kindleberger, 'Dominance and Leadership in the International Economy: Exploitation, Public Goods, and Free Rides', *International Studies Quarterly* 25: 2, 1981, pp. 242–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600355>.

<sup>53</sup> 'Deutsche lehnen militärische Führungsrolle in Europa ab', *Körber-Stiftung*, 17 October 2022, <https://koerber-stiftung.de/presse/mitteilungen/deutsche-lehnen-militaerische-fuehrungsrolle-in-europa-ab> (access: 19 September 2023); Kai Küstner, 'Militärische Führungsrolle unerwünscht', *Tagesschau*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/deutschland-aussenpolitik-103.html> (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>54</sup> Magnus Schoeller, 'Leadership Aspirations versus Reality'.

The idea of German leadership during the crisis of the Ukrainian–Russian war is ‘acting in community.’<sup>55</sup> The war made Germany aware of the role of the USA in this structure, which resulted in a number of actions and political decisions in Berlin. The German government assured long-term support for Ukraine (armed and non-military, including reconstruction), strengthening its presence on the eastern flank (by 2025, 35,000 German soldiers are to be stationed in these countries, and German troops are to be permanently present in Lithuania) and transferring a minimum of two percent of GDP to defence. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock clearly declared that Europe without the USA is defenceless. During the NATO summit in Vilnius in 2023, the United States and Germany agreed that Ukraine was not ready for membership in the Alliance. The current German authorities are also preparing for possible cooperation with the Trump administration by entering into negotiations with representatives of the Republican Party. According to Kiwerska,<sup>56</sup> an expert in American–German relations, leadership *a la* ‘acting in the community’ is a kind of ‘alibi’ for German restraint and the confirmation of fears of the need to take responsibility for the durability of the security architecture in Europe.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article set out to investigate how the Russian–Ukrainian war has acted as a catalyst for reshaping the nature of German leadership in Europe (*Deutsche Führungsrolle in Europa*). Using systems analysis as the primary methodological approach, the study conceptualized the conflict as a systemic shock—a *flow* that disrupts the coherence of the closed Euro-Atlantic political-security system and generates *feedbacks* influencing the scale and nature of leadership resources. These feedbacks help explain Germany’s evolving transition from a primarily economic-normative actor toward a more comprehensive leadership model that includes geopolitical and military dimensions.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine opened a window of opportunity for Germany to overcome its traditional ‘leadership avoidance reflex’

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<sup>55</sup> Jadwiga Kiwerska, ‘Stosunki amerykańsko-niemieckie w 2023 roku’, *Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego* 534, 27 December 2023, [https://www.iz.poznan.pl/plik,pobierz,6365,9fa872422070875dd4e8a7708a53d8b1/Biuletyn%20Instytutu%20Zachodniegonr%20534%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.iz.poznan.pl/plik,pobierz,6365,9fa872422070875dd4e8a7708a53d8b1/Biuletyn%20Instytutu%20Zachodniegonr%20534%20(1).pdf) (access: 19 September 2024).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



and move into a role of *reluctant leader* or *honest broker*, increasingly perceived as a stabilizing ‘homeostatic’ subsystem within the Euro-Atlantic community. In the last three decades, this evolution has been gradual, but the current context has produced growing external expectations—driven by Germany’s financial, political, and military potential—for sustained, coordinated leadership to rebalance the system. This leadership, however, remains shaped by Germany’s identity as a consensus-oriented, multilateral actor, preferring integration over unilateralism and continuity over rupture.

The *Zeitenwende* initiative, both discursive and operational, reflects this adaptive moment—manifested in higher defence spending, support for NATO’s eastern flank, and a push for EU reform toward a more geopolitical Europe. Planned changes include a larger, more agile European Union with streamlined decision-making (e.g., majority voting), strengthened military capabilities, and closer institutional ties among member states. Yet, the German vision remains one of leadership *a la primus inter pares*—a model that emphasizes collective action, compatibility with NATO and U.S. strategic frameworks, and avoidance of overt hegemony.

At the same time, the scope of transformation remains partial and contested. Public opinion and segments of the political elite remain skeptical of assuming a full-fledged military leadership role, citing high financial burdens and political-cultural reservations rooted in Germany’s postwar identity. There is also a persistent hope among decision-makers that, in the long term, relations with Russia can return to normal, reflecting a deep-seated reluctance to fully embrace a confrontational posture. As a result, the strategic gap between Germany’s leadership aspirations and its actual performance endures.

The article concludes that Germany’s leadership trajectory is best understood as a hybrid formation—neither a return to classical *Realpolitik*, nor a full rejection of multilateral pacifism. It is a form of adaptive leadership, balancing normative commitments with emerging geopolitical necessities, shaped by systemic pressures and internal constraints. Whether this transformation will prove sustainable and effective depends on Germany’s ability to reconcile its identity with its growing structural responsibilities in a volatile European security environment.

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