
NEW GENERATION LEADERSHIP IN SHAPING EU FOREIGN POLICY IN
THE FACE OF THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE AND THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

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Received 15 May 2023; accepted 30 June 2023; published 30 July 2023

Abstract. The article analyzes how Germany, particularly through the Ukrainian crisis that began in 2014, has been placed at the decision-making center of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), thus becoming the de facto chief architect after Poland of the EU's response to Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine. The article highlights the internal and external implications of this role, including in other policy areas in particular with regard to the Baltic States. To do so, we must first take a closer look at the principles of German foreign policy and the specific nature of German-Russian relations.

Keywords: conflict management; leadership; foreign policy; Ukrainian crisis; perception management; leadership vacuum; informal governance.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Kuryłowicz, M., Rogozińska-Mitrut, J. 2023. New generation leadership in shaping EU foreign policy in the face of the crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. *Journal of Security and Sustainability Issues*, 13, 219-229. <https://doi.org/10.47459/jssi.2023.13.24>

JEL Classifications: I2

1. Introduction

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the Russian-induced upheaval in eastern Ukraine ended Europe's illusions, Europe's illusion that it had definitively entered a postmodern world in which territorial conquests would belong only in the history books. Over the past decade, the EU has built its foreign policy on the assumption that in the absence of traditional military threats, security challenges will come from non-state actors: terrorism, failed states, organized crime and Balkan-type regional conflicts (Koeth, 2016).

Brussels began with the general approach that foreign policy in the 21st century was based on the projection of norms and values abroad, rather than military power (Krawcewicz, 2019).

The belief that this post-modern political approach would also be able to transform the former Soviet republics into modern European states was the main driving force behind the association agreements signed between the EU and the former Soviet republics. The association agreements were signed between the EU and Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in 2014.

In line with its post-war pacifist traditions, Germany has been a staunch promoter of a rules-based multilateral foreign policy. Their own foreign policy is characterized by the role of a civilian power and Ostpolitik, i.e., privileged ties with former Soviet bloc countries. In addition, German-Russian relations were important to Germany not only economically, but also politically.

Moreover, German-Russian relations were important not only economically, but also politically, as they increased Berlin's importance in the EU and NATO. As a result, the annexation of Crimea and Moscow's thinly disguised military aggression in eastern Ukraine had a clear impact on German foreign policy.

Not only has Germany's foreign policy prompted Berlin to reconsider the nature of its relationship with Moscow, but it has also changed the dynamics in the European Union, where Germany has changed its relationship with Moscow. A European Union in which Germany's leadership role has been strengthened, albeit more accidentally than intentionally.

This emancipation of Germany as a player in EU foreign policy had already manifested itself in concrete ways in Kosovo and Afghanistan, after Kohl's government was replaced by a coalition bringing together the Left and the Green Party in 1998. Although Germany did not seek this voluntarily, the leadership role that was destined for it, finding itself in a situation of accidental leadership¹.

2. German foreign policy: inspired by the cold war

It can be difficult for the casual observer to understand the motives behind German foreign policy, while most countries view foreign policy as an instrument to defend their political and economic interests abroad, reflecting a desire to get other countries to behave in a certain way.

Attempts to use foreign policy as a means of gaining influence were a taboo subject in post-war Germany for many decades.

Although revisionist tendencies were still present in Germany for the first two decades of its existence, the complete rejection of nationalist ideology was one of the pillars of West Germany's postwar identity (Steinmeier, 2023).

This new approach to foreign policy, motivated by guilt and shame over Nazism, was one of the pillars of West Germany's postwar identity (Steinmeier, 2023), and partly out of fear of the spread of communism, removed the concepts of "national interest" and "identity" from the political vocabulary.

Germany's difficult relationship with its past, its dependence on its Western allies, and its need to redefine its place in Europe and the world have led Germany to champion "national interest" and "identity."

3. Germany's position in European integration

The process of European integration enabled the Federal Republic to assume a new role among civilized nations consistent with its economic interests (access to a common market for its industrial products). This was in line with the expectation of Germany's neighbors to restrain the country with supranational cooperation mechanisms that would prevent it from following its own *Sonderweg* (special path), while allowing them to benefit from the dynamism of German industry. In this way, Germany became the representative of European integration: Germany could only play a positive and productive role in international politics in Europe and beyond.

While Germany's Euro-Atlantic integration proved to be a win-win situation, relations with the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries became the litmus test of Germany's European identity in the 1960s and 1970s.

Germany's geopolitical situation demanded a certain pragmatism: the division of Germany, the family ties of many Germans behind the Iron Curtain and the question of West Berlin (the western enclave within the Eastern Bloc), meant that good relations had to be maintained. Chancellor Brandt's *Ostpolitik* in the early 1970s (symbolized by the famous *Kniefall* in front of the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943) had the triple advantage of facilitating people-to-people exchanges, opening markets for (West German) industry, and

¹ Russia is Germany's 11th largest trading partner. In 2013, Germany exported 23 billion euros worth of goods and services to Russia.

allowing Germany to strengthen its moral position vis-à-vis East Germany by taking responsibility for its past.

The ability to promote freedom and democracy not only on its own behalf, but also on behalf of the entire Western world, helped Germany strengthen its new postmodern identity based on multilateralism and the principle of “quiet power.”

When the GDR collapsed in 1990, the magnetism of the West German model - combining economic wealth, democracy, rule of law, moral superiority and a good international reputation - became irresistible to East Germans.

4. Germany and the CFSP. the slow emancipation of German foreign policy in the European context

The “2+4” agreement of 1990 finally put an end to the Cold War order and restored German sovereignty. Initial concerns among Western partners about the hegemony of a unified Germany in Europe, particularly after Germany’s uncoordinated recognition of Croatia and Slovenia in Slovenia in 1991, led to the establishment of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in the 1993 Maastricht Treaty. The CFSP was defined as a broader diplomatic operation and balance-of-power exercise in which member states sought to embed the enlarged German state within a stronger European entity (Banasik, 2022).

Moreover, at a time of great geopolitical change, during which Europe lost face as a result of the Gulf and Yugoslavia crises, the CFSP was seen as a tool for strengthening European identity (Jeffery et al., 2019).

Significantly, when the Maastricht Treaty was being drafted, Germany was one of the countries that advocated a more supranational CFSP, which meant in particular qualified majority decision-making (giving up national veto rights) and greater autonomy for the European Union.

These proposals were strongly rejected by the two other major foreign policy players, Britain and France. From an outsider’s point of view, it may seem that Germany has deliberately limited its room for maneuver in foreign policy matters through integration with the CFSP. But in reality, it is the integration of foreign policy into the CFSP that has enabled Germany to emancipate itself as a foreign policy actor in the EU.

But this integration into the European policy framework has also complicated the German task. Germany’s desire to continue its old policy of avoiding political responsibility through *Scheckbuchdiplomatie* (check diplomacy), which relied on financial contributions to policies implemented by its partners, remained in the shadow of attention. Accepting political responsibility required Germany to overcome patterns of avoidance and military non-involvement (as in the 1991 Gulf War and the first two Balkan wars).

The move was not without controversy: when German troops began taking part in international peacekeeping missions in the 1990s, parts of the German political spectrum warned against a return to militarism, which would have fueled fears of a return to German hegemony and imperialism: fears that were generally expressed more in Germany than abroad. It was in Kosovo in 1999 that Germany finally managed to overcome its history and accept the need for its own military intervention, as part of a US-led coalition, to honor its post-war commitment to the slogan “never again,” in reference to the genocides and concentration camps of World War II. In retrospect, fears that Germany would abandon the European project in favor of the *Sonderweg* proved unfounded: the Kohl government, dominated by a select generation still traumatized by the experience of fascism and World War II, was still fully committed to the European project and had a natural aversion to any attempt at German domination. Instead, their economic power demographics and geographic location meant that Germany moved closer to the center of power in Europe. This role, which really made itself known during the financial crisis since 2008, was not only accepted but actively supported by many Central and Eastern European countries.

Within the EU, the close partnership between Germany and France has allowed the country to remain in the shadow of the rest of the world, and EU policy to serve its own interests. Major initiatives, such as the Eco-

conomic and Monetary Union, were prepared in close cooperation and then proposed as a joint venture: a strategy that suited France and Germany's desire to reduce their involvement in the public eye as the driving force behind the European political agenda. However, the interests of Berlin and Paris were not always aligned: the enlargement process that began in the second half of the 1990s.

The enlargement process, which began in the second half of the 1990s and culminated in the accession of ten Central and Eastern European countries in 2004, was primarily driven by Germany, which sought to export its European identity to the rest of the world.

Germany sought to export stability to its eastern neighbors while extending the EU single market to the rest of Europe. Paris saw enlargement more as a threat to closer political union and a weakening of France.

In the context of the CFSP, the special relationship with Russia proved important to Germany, not only economically, not only economically, but also politically. First, the relationship was highly symbolic, as Russia was the country that suffered most from the Soviet Union.

Russia suffered the most from German atrocities during World War II. Good relations with Russia served as a way for Germany to admonish its militaristic past. Moreover, the privileged relationship gave Germany an extra dimension in the EU and NATO, compensating, compensating for its lack of military power. It was natural, therefore, that Europe should turn to Germany, which played one of the leading roles in the post-2008 euro crisis, following Russia's annexation of Crimea. Once again, in order to properly assess Berlin's attitude toward the Ukrainian crisis, we need to look at the history of German-Russian relations.

5. The peculiarities of German-Russian relations

Over the centuries, Germany and Russia have always played a key role for each other in their foreign policy. The two countries share many similarities: neither has natural borders; both have historically expanded at the expense of the freedom and sovereignty of their neighbors in an attempt to increase their influence and power (Keukeleire et al., 2014), and in the past Germany and Russia have been unable to maintain their influence and power.

Rapallo and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in the 20th century justified imperialist tendencies by ideology, and both considered their imperialist ambitions defeated. For both countries, the redefinition of national identity can be explained by their past. While Germany has succeeded in achieving a new, postmodern identity through a complete break with its past, Russia has taken the opposite path: attempting to reconnect with its past by rediscovering its former glory.

A combination of historical guilt, gratitude to Russia for German reunification and the abandonment of Germany by Soviet troops, combined with economic interests, may explain why Germany was one of Russia's staunchest supporters in the early 1990s. At the time, Russia, like the Soviet Union's successor, was facing a deep economic and social crisis. For Germany, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emancipation of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe were seen as confirmation of Francis Fukuyama's "end of history," in which European values such as democracy and human rights were shared from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

However, Germany underestimated the sense of humiliation felt by many Russians, who were more willing to suffer a dramatic decline in their standard of living than to enjoy the geopolitical benefits brought by the end of the Cold War. The perception mismatch was symbolized by the figure of Mikhail Gorbachev, who enjoyed pop star status in Germany, but was despised in Russia for lowering living standards and humiliating a nation that in less than a decade had gone from a superpower to be feared to a superpower to be pitied and a recipient of humanitarian aid (Schmidt, 2023).

In 2000, Vladimir Putin took over the Russian presidency, coinciding with a period of rising commodity prices, particularly for exported gas and oil, leading to an unprecedented explosion in inflation levels.

The expansion of NATO and the EU in 2004 was reluctantly accepted by Russia, which did not have the resources to prevent it, as it was still embroiled in the war in Chechnya and grappling with many other internal challenges. Russia also failed to respond to the EU's initiative to establish a "European Neighborhood Policy" bringing together all the neighbors of the enlarged EU.

Russia also failed to respond to the EU's initiative to establish a "European Neighborhood Policy" bringing together all the neighbors of the enlarged EU in 2004, refusing to be reduced to a mere object of EU foreign policy.

Putin has never hidden his disdain for the EU and has favored a "divide and rule" approach of exploiting potential divisions between member states. In particular, Putin reminded Germany that Russia supported and enabled the process of German reunification against the resistance of France and the UK. In this context, the construction of the Nord Stream pipeline, which transports Russian gas directly to Germany, bypassing the Baltic States and Poland, was one of Russia's major strategic achievements.

When Angela Merkel succeeded Gerhard Schroeder as chancellor in 2005, relations between the two leaders changed radically. Schroeder, who described Putin as a "pure democrat," developed very strong ties with Putin (known in German as *Männerfreundschaft* - male affinity). Merkel, a veteran of socialism in the former East Germany and familiar with the mechanisms of authoritarian power, was far less sensitive than Schroeder to Putin's courtesy. As one of Germany's major trading partners and in keeping with Germany's traditions of economic diplomacy, Russia nevertheless remained an important element of German foreign policy. This reflects the continuity of German policy based on the principle of *Wandel durch Annäherung*, i.e., change through rapprochement with the Eastern Bloc by means of small-scale, bottom-up cooperation that would ease tensions, introduced by former Chancellor Willy Brandt in the late 1960s.

During the escalation of the Ukraine crisis, Merkel sought to work with her European partners, at the time firmly rejecting any calls for Ukraine's membership prospects (highly unpopular politically).

Germany strongly supported the EU's Association Agreement with Ukraine as a basis for closer integration. For both the EU and Germany, the association agreements were conceived as an instrument for exporting European standards and values, such as democracy, the rule of law and a market economy, to partner countries. This approach was not controversial because it assumed the willingness and ability of each partner state to participate in the association process.

However, this approach, developed at a time when the EU was the only model of integration on the European continent, clashed with Russia's plan to create a Eurasian Customs Union. As a result, the very fact that another country could not only oppose the plans, but also openly try to challenge them, without fear of armed conflict, was unimaginable before March 2014. But unlike the EU, Russia has not yet arrived at a postmodern world: instead, it views its interests through the zero-sum *Realpolitik* prism of the first half of the 20th century, where geopolitical influence is based primarily on military and economic power. This was already clear after Russia's incursion into Georgia in 2008, although it was not widely recognized.

Russia interpreted the signing of the Association Agreement as a direct threat to its geopolitical aspirations and therefore demanded a strong response. While until 2008 Russia presented itself as a model of inviolable borders and national sovereignty (Schmidt, 2023), by 2008 it had already begun to disregard these principles in Ossetia.

North Ossetia and Abkhazia took a major rhetorical turn in 2008. Abandoning all references to territorial integrity and inviolability of borders, Russia invoked the unilateral declaration of Kosovo, recognized by Germany and 23 other EU member states, as a precedent and gave military support to the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, referring to the right of citizens to self-determination and alleged human rights violations suffered by Russian-speaking citizens.

The EU's lack of reaction to the de facto annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, aside from a few diplomatic notes of protest from the EU and member states, and the rapid return to normalcy in Berlin and Brussels, gave Putin the impression that the West would not dare confront Russia by intervening in what it still considers its "near abroad."

6. German management of the conflict in terms of "Euromaidan" and the annexation of Crimea

Former German Chancellor Merkel has never been known for her political boldness. Her deep risk aversion and willingness to avoid any decisive action became something of a trademark at the head of the German government, which lasted for more than a decade. Politically, her wait-and-see attitude paid off, as she achieved record election results and was re-elected twice. Staying in the shadow of the spotlight and avoiding political controversy allowed the chancellor to maintain her image as the "mother of the nation."

Nevertheless, during the Euromaidan, which began in late 2013 and culminated in the flight of President Yanukovich and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014. Merkel issued a series of strong statements that, in other European capitals, were seen at the time as a reaffirmation of Germany's resolve and leadership.

Russian state media were quick to exploit German support for Russia for their own ends, portraying its leaders as fascists and drawing parallels between the fate of Russians in Ukraine and that of Jews in Germany.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 sent a particularly strong shockwave through Berlin: Russia's annexation of Crimea marked a rupture of the post-Cold War consensus based on respect for national sovereignty and the democratic process, thus returning to the democratic process, thus returning to the 19th century and the principle of territorial sovereignty through power. Merkel reacted immediately, denouncing the annexation as illegal, later even describing it as "criminal" (Tomaszewski, 2001). While calling for a strategic rethink of Germany's and the EU's energy dependence on sanctions (thus risking alienating her support base in German industry), she also insisted on dialogue and cooperation (Steinmeier, 2023). The German government spoke with Putin almost daily during the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis, and even after the Russian leader sent troops into Crimea.

It was only after the in-flight destruction of civilian airliner MH-17 in July 2014 that Germany, increasingly frustrated, went beyond rhetorical condemnation of Russia. Although not itself a staunch supporter of tough sanctions, Germany clearly took the lead in consolidating a policy of joint sanctions (Steinmeier, 2023). However, Berlin has constantly reminded its partners that the door to a peaceful solution must remain open, and that emotions must not be a political driving force (Steinmeier, 2023).

Germany took its role as negotiator, along with France, of the Minsk II ceasefire agreement very seriously at a time when other countries were beginning to lose confidence in the process. Germany was so keen to avoid rhetorical escalation that it explicitly rejected any historical parallels, despite the high level of outrage. Many observers pointed out, however, that the annexation of Crimea was along the lines of the annexation by Nazi Germany of the Sudetenland in 1938 (Steinmeier, 2023). But when then-German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (due to his age and reputation as an outspoken person), the reactions to his comeback were merciless: even indirectly comparing the European leader to Adolf Hitler was considered exaggerated, in the sense that it could contribute to the trivialization of the Nazi regime through historical comparisons. Merkel, instead of admonishing her minister, immediately distanced herself, declaring that the annexation of Crimea was a sui generis case. This comparison with the Sudetenland region highlighted the sensitivity of German-Russian relations in the European Union.

Although the annexation of Crimea was condemned by almost the entire political class, there is still strong opposition to the confrontation between Germany and Russia. The opposition does not come from the far-left of the political spectrum, but also from the Die Linke party, which derives from former East German communists. Die Linke comes from former East German communists with strong anti-American and anti-NATO attitudes.

In addition, some factions of the Social Democrats, such as former Chancellors Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Schmidt, have issued statements condemning the tough approach taken toward Russia (Keukeleire et al., 2014). Those members of the intelligentsia who express empathy for Russia and Putin are often referred to by the rather sarcastic term *Russland*, meaning those who understand Russia or apologists for Russia. But these *Russlandversteher* are by no means limited to the political left.

On the far right, Putin also enjoys a certain amount of sympathy among populists from the Alternative for Russia, and board members of some large German companies have lobbied to avoid or reduce sanctions. Despite its pacifist roots, the Green Party, for its part, has advocated a tougher line toward Moscow.

Social Democrat and former protégé of then-Chancellor Schröder, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was also politically closer to *Russlandversteher*. However, Putin's sudden and anti-diplomatic behavior made things easier for Steinmeier.

The crisis made things easier for Steinmeier, and later for Merkel: any attempt to resume the more cooperative *Ostpolitik* of the 1970s in the current context would look naive and risk undermining Germany's position among its transatlantic and European partners.

Assuming that most countries view relations with Russia in terms of their history, experience and individual interests, Germany is no different from other EU member states. The particular sensitivity of German-Russian relations may explain why Germany has taken a cautious and even ambiguous stance from the outset. While Britain, Poland and the Scandinavian Baltic states adopted a confrontational approach quite similar to that of the United States, most southern and southern European EU members adopted a more cautious stance.

Most southern and southeastern European members, for economic reasons or fear of damaging energy supplies, do not look favorably on any deterioration of relations with Russia over Ukraine. This raises the question of how a common EU position can go beyond the lowest common denominator of 28 member states as individual national positions. This is where the question of leadership comes into play.

7. The impact of the Ukraine crisis on Germany's leadership role in the EU

In January 2014, in the wake of Euromaidan, German President Joachim Gauck, at a conference in Munich, called for a new German foreign policy strategy based on more active engagement on the international stage and better integration into the European agenda. Although Gauck's role as president was purely ceremonial, his speech struck a chord with German politicians born after the war. Many ministers, including Foreign Minister Steinmeier, openly welcomed Gauck; in fact, the statement was not only a signal to Germany's European partners, but also a wake-up call for Berlin.

An alarm bell at the time for Merkel, who was criticized for her lack of courage and initiative, especially in foreign policy. According to Gauck (who defended Germany's culture of military restraint in his inaugural speech), the country should get rid of the bad habit of "looking the other way" during international crises (Banasik, 2022).

Germany's desire to play a more active role on the international stage coincided with a distinct lack of political leadership not only in the CFSP, but also globally: embroiled in its own domestic problems, the United States was not ready to take on this role; unlike the Bush administration, the Barack Obama administration was not ready to take on this role.

Unlike the Bush administration, Barack Obama was not motivated by a specific desire to invest in Europe. Europeans were expected to take the initiative themselves when crises arose on their continent.

Given the EU's inability to speak with one voice, the European institutions were also unable to play a leading

role. The other potential leaders at the European level, Britain and France, were too busy with their own issues.

France was too busy with its own domestic problems. While Britain, grappling with a dual identity crisis related to the Scottish referendum and uncertainty about its European future, French and British leaders were too preoccupied with their own domestic problems.

Uncertainty about its European future has caused France to turn against itself (Jeffery et al., 2019), almost permanently consumed by its own economic and political problems.

The annexation of Crimea has undermined German foreign policy in several ways. Germany is very much in favor of a common EU foreign policy, because the EU, like Germany, has always preferred norms and rules to power in international relations. Moreover, German-Russian relations have been important to Germany not only economically, but also politically, strengthening Berlin's position in the EU and NATO.

With these elements of foreign policy in question and the United States refusing to take the lead, all eyes turned to Berlin, so that Berlin would have to coordinate the EU response.

However, it was only after the destruction of Flight MH-17 in July 2014, allegedly by Russian-backed separatists, that Merkel fully assumed the role expected of the rest of Europe. Although not a staunch advocate of tough sanctions herself, Germany took the lead in consolidating a common sanctions policy in the second half of 2014 (Koeth, 2016).

This is not the first time Berlin has found itself, without France as co-pilot, in the driver's seat of the EU. With the economic and financial crisis that began in late 2007 and early 2008, the political center of gravity in the EU shifted from Brussels to the capitals of the other EU member states. In particular, the key role played by Berlin in the eurozone debt crisis (and Germany's economic strength in general) put Germany at the center of EU decision-making. As with the euro crisis, Germany has been at the top of EU foreign policy.

The Ukraine crisis was not intentional, but rather a consequence of the leadership vacuum inside and outside the EU.

Germany's restraint in foreign policy has always been greater than in other policy areas. It was only gradually, at the turn of the century, that the country began to behave like a "normal" foreign policy player and gradually abandoned its "normal" foreign policy role.

The country began to behave like a "normal" player in foreign policy and gradually abandoned its "leadership avoidance reflex" (Schmidt, 2023), taking responsibility in Kosovo and Afghanistan. But assuming a leadership role also meant taking risks, as the fear of being accused of hegemony was always present in Berlin. And rightly so, since any unilateral move toward Moscow was viewed with suspicion in the "new" EU member states.

Comparing the Nord Stream gas pipeline between Russia and Germany, which would bypass the Baltics and Poland, to the infamous 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the USSR and Nazi Germany.

Although most member states view the Ukrainian conflict in terms of their own experiences and interests, in practice most EU members generally align themselves with German security policy.

German leadership stems in part from Berlin's combined advantage of sufficient diplomatic capacity and privileged access to information, which greatly strengthens its authority among its partners.

Berlin is able to bolster its authority among its peers. But this situation lends credibility to Germany's credibility in Europe, as it is generally perceived as less interested and more sensitive to the positions of smaller countries than other member states.

In addition, the practice of “informal governance,” where key decisions are made at informal meetings of EU leaders before they are formalized, as well as the strong ties between Berlin and Warsaw, have helped reassure Germany’s partners that they will accept German leadership and thus make the EU’s shared ambitions possible.

8. EU’S common foreign policy ambitions: preventing Moscow from pushing back the EU and Warsaw

Moscow before pushing back the EU and NATO and regaining control of what Putin still considers its “near abroad.” On the Russian side, given Putin’s obsession with status and prestige, it is also unlikely that Moscow would agree to a substantive deal with an interlocutor that carried less weight than Germany, since France and the UK have been unable or unwilling to comply. The choice of a key interlocutor is supported by the personal relationship between Merkel and Putin, who speak each other’s language.

In addition, Moscow realizes that Germany, due to its economic interests in Russia, is less inclined to damage bilateral relations and therefore a more moderate approach. We can therefore conclude that Russia, through its annexation of Crimea, military intervention in Ukraine and clear preference for dialogue with Berlin rather than Brussels, has indirectly promoted Germany as a key player in EU foreign relations.

What does this mean from the perspective of the Baltic countries? For Russia, with its deteriorating economic situation, defending its citizens against perceived enemies (including the Baltics) has replaced economic prosperity as a source of legitimacy. By exacerbating tensions, Putin is able to redirect public anger at declining living standards and direct it against the West. Although they are protected from direct military aggression by Russia through NATO membership, as immediate neighbors Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are among the first to suffer political and economic consequences.

Viewed from Vilnius, Riga or Tallinn, Germany’s moderating influence on Russia may seem like a lack of firmness. However, further escalation of rhetoric would only strengthen Putin’s system, as it would allow the Kremlin to take the initiative. This would enable the Kremlin to continue to justify the growing difficulties of ordinary Russians while fighting internal opposition.

9. Summary and conclusions

The three successive crises - the euro, Ukraine and refugees - that have rocked the EU in just a few years have highlighted a number of challenges. The years have highlighted major divergences between member states and challenged some basic assumptions about European cohesion. In all three crises, Germany found itself in the leadership seat, reluctantly at first, but then gradually accepting the role.

The euro crisis highlighted the objective need for strong leadership. This leadership in the initial phase fell to Berlin, and rather as a default solution. Encouraged by the generally positive reception of its new role by most of its partners, Berlin decided to take the lead and, given its lack of leadership during the Ukraine crisis, Germany strengthened its foreign policy position.

This development has been greatly facilitated by Russia’s growing arrogance and blatant violation of basic European values and international law.

Viewed from Vilnius, Riga or Tallinn, the specter of possible German hegemony in Europe now looks like the “least evil.” While EU resistance to Germany’s leadership role has faded, Berlin has been able to gain legitimacy by reconciling the defense of its own interests with strengthening its image as a society based on EU norms and standards.

Outside this context, Berlin’s role in Europe’s third crisis, the 2022 refugee crisis, may seem irrelevant, given that Germany, in opening its borders to Muslim refugees from Syria and other war-torn regions, has taken the risk of alienating its European partners and undermining the legitimacy gained in previous crises. Nevertheless,

a second analysis reveals the logic behind Berlin's stance. Germany's political room for maneuver in the region is now greater than ever: for one thing, its leadership role is now widely accepted outside its borders, and the lack of a populist opposition strong enough to undermine the government means that Germany has less and less room for maneuver than ever before.

Berlin hopes that the short-term negative effects and unpopularity of the measure at home and abroad will be offset by long-term benefits in terms of perception management and economic growth.

At a time when nationalism, populism and religious intolerance are making a comeback around the world, Germany's reputation as an open, tolerant and values-based country is unlikely to stand out as before.

For Berlin, the preferred option would certainly be to enshrine its refugee policy in the EU, thus sharing both the risks and opportunities of this approach. However, the current political climate in the EU is not conducive to such hopes.

As a result, there has been a risk of weakening German leadership. Centrifugal forces in the EU have, as a result, strengthened Poland's power to become attractive to Berlin, Brussels, Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn.

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