Expert Comment

The end of the post-modern dream: Europe and Germany’s return to Realpolitik?

Peter W. Schulze (2019)
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The unravelling of post-modern illusions

Germany still enjoys a relatively secure place amidst an apparently chaotic environment. This is in spite of the turmoil of shifting constellations of international systemic power and despite being confronted with intra-EU troubles like the lingering financial crisis of some Mediterranean countries, the unresolved refugee and migration crisis of 2015, terrorism, the seemingly never-ending story of Brexit, and uncertainties over security guarantees for Europe by the former hegemonic power, the US.

Economic growth rates have been rock solid. Despite confusion about looming trade wars between the US, China, and the EU, Germany’s export-driven economy has been booming. Unemployment figures have been down to pre-unification levels, and recent populist election gains have been met by a grand coalition of established democratic parties. Surrounded by friendly EU member states, any threat of aggression or military intervention from the outside seems absurd.

In other words, both German society and its political spectrum have seemed soundly consolidated.

This encouraging environment makes Germany one of Europe’s last bastions of a highly cherished post-modern dream. The dream was that democracy could be successfully projected east and south to transform formerly authoritarian ruled countries; furthermore, the nation-state as the foundation of civil societies was seen to be either gradually withering
away or at least submitting its functions to supranational institutions created in the wake of European integration.

As predicted in the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties, integration was to finally move towards political and social dimensions. The new Europe, based on normative consensus, would act as an internationally respected civil power, eliminating the risk of war in Europe, while arbitrating military conflicts further afield through dialogue and political negotiations.

This post-modern dream is deeply embedded in contemporary German political culture. Historically, it is anchored in the anti-militarist and pacifist beliefs that war should never again originate from German soil.

However, Germany’s gruesome fascist past has blocked the conversion of the country’s anti-war policies into a realist political stance and has obstructed the pursuit of sovereign national interests.

Berlin’s post-modern policies, supported by a broad coalition of left-liberal and green parties, NGOs, social movements, media, and churches, have been unable to counter external challenges. Immobilised by internal power struggles and suffering a loss of authority, Berlin has lost credibility as an anchor of European stability and as an engine of further integration. Given Berlin’s dominant economic and political position within the EU, this immobilisation has of course had an impact on the rest of the union.

As a consequence, the EU’s position as a mediator of conflict resolution in and beyond Europe has become seriously troubled.

Since 2015, exposed to a conflux of internal and external factors, a slow but essential shift of paradigm has occurred in German politics. As I wrote earlier this year,

“...in contrast to the standstill in German politics, an open … debate has suddenly materialized in Germany’s political community to define the position of not only Germany itself, but also Europe, amid the accumulating challenges of the
international arena. ... In retrospect, 2018 may come to be seen by future historians as the watershed year in which the political and expert community of Germany realised that the free ride in security guaranteed by the United States during the bipolar era is over” (Schulze, 2019, p. 27).

Across the political spectrum, from the left to the conservative parties, a chorus of elder statesmen have raised their voices to criticise the degree of immobilisation and the lack of political will, both in governments of leading EU member states and in Brussels.

The collective verdict seems to be that Europe and Germany have arrived at a ‘crossroads’ where a balance between moral politics and Realpolitik must be established. They charge that the post-modern design and pursuit of objectives in German foreign and security policies amounts to a variant of political escapism.

Initiatives to deal with unresolved crises in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, or elsewhere are missing. In apparent contrast to the prevalence of stability and security, the re-emergence of national interests deriving from the transient and volatile state of the present international system has rendered basic tenets of the post-modern apparatus incapable of dealing with today’s reality.

Numerous demands have been formulated and constitute a broad consensus in the expert community and among the aforementioned group of elder statesmen.

- The European Union should enact substantial structural and institutional reforms;
- France and Germany should exercise common leadership for enhanced and deeper integration, eventually transforming the EU into a Core Europe with multiple integration speeds;
- The EU and its dominant member states, particularly Germany, must shoulder more responsibility and be ready to participate in international missions to prevent or terminate conflicts and war-like situations;
- European self-assertiveness should work towards a role as a respected and important geopolitical actor among the dominant forces of the emerging new world order: China, the US, and Russia;
Europe’s relationship to the main actors in the new world order should be balanced and realistically interest-driven. On one hand, the balance must underline Europe’s commitment within the transatlantic community without jeopardising its sovereignty or blocking its pursuit of objectives. On the other hand, steps to normalise the EU’s relationship with Russia are a precondition for stability, security, and welfare throughout Europe.

Constructive relations with Moscow should be pursued as essential to Europe’s role as a sovereign power in the emerging new global order. Europe cannot achieve its goal of self-assertiveness or a status as a reputable international actor without peaceful coexistence with, or even better, partnership, with Russia. This objective would foster a political and security-orientated dialogue between the EU and Russia. Practical steps are necessary to build trust, including an easing of the visa regime and an enhancement of cultural and academic exchange programmes.

The creation of a European Security Council, including Russia, would be an indispensable element in the restoration of cooperative relations between the EU and Russia. This could function as a clearing medium to resolve the frozen conflicts in the Caucasus and particularly to offer a basis for the end of the Ukraine conflict.

The EU will only be able to fulfil these objectives if it is committed to building trust and countering antagonistic narratives and violations of international law. Above all, Europe must be recognised as a geopolitical actor and civil power sui generis. However, given the political reality in its leading member states, this is far from being achieved.

There is a significant gap between the aforementioned demands of Germany’s various elder statesmen, the political performance of the EU itself, and that of its national governments. The rise of protest movements throughout Europe indicates a general public distrust of political establishments. Significant portions of the protest movements are shifting towards extremely nationalist and anti-European attitudes, opposed to greater integration.
Neither Paris nor Berlin seems to be capable of responding accordingly. Although proposals for EU structural reform are put forward and debated, the essential issue of a comprehensive security and peace concept for Europe, including Moscow, is not in sight. Antagonistic narratives and the lack of an open discourse have destroyed the once intensive and cooperative dialogue between Brussels and Moscow, which lasted for nearly two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a consequence, both sides are deeply entrenched in some variety of bloc mentality that obstructs the search for agreeable solutions, particularly an end to the Ukraine war and any resolute involvement in peaceful settlements to the frozen Caucasus conflicts.

Feelings of insecurity and concerns over possible conflicts are spreading among European citizens. The threat of war is haunting Europe again. Internationally, and even within Europe, regional, interstate, or civil wars are now seen as increasingly possible. There is widespread fear that EU member states could be drawn into such conflicts.

**A wake-up call for Europe?**

In the context of remarkable challenges to European security from the south and the east, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) presented an opinion poll of seven European states in early 2019. It examines both the public assessment of Europe’s present security situation as well as the views of a focus group of consulting experts in each country.

The study, *Security Radar 2019: Wake-up call for Europe*, was presented at the Munich Security Conference in February 2019. It argues that the “selection of the seven countries for participation in the poll was based on their value for European security”. Some

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1 See the sharp critiques by Horst Teltschik, the influential former adviser to Chancellor Helmut Kohl and one of the architects of German unification, of the lack of leadership and passivity of the Merkel government. Teltschik accuses Merkel of being responsible for the strained relations between Moscow and Berlin. In Der Spiegel (2019a) and Contra Magazine (2019b).
2 The surveyed countries are Germany/DE, France/FR, Latvia/LV, Poland/PO, Serbia/RS, Ukraine/UA and Russia/RU.
findings may have differed if a neutral country like Finland or one of the Mediterranean countries had been involved in the study. Nevertheless, the study offers a comprehensive view of public anxieties, hopes, and opinions regarding the respective countries, often in contrast to official state and media narratives.

The study connects the unpredictability of international developments and the transient state of the emerging multipolar global order with the prevailing conditions in the surveyed European populations. Evidently, the volatile relationships between the major actors in the international system – the US, China, Russia, and the EU – are seen as influencing regional and even domestic perceptions of the respective countries’ political and security futures. In summary, “the security situation is seen as fragile in both West and East” (FES, 2019, p. 6). What seems to be even more disturbing is that although we know who the currently dominant global actors are, there is a high degree of uncertainty as to what constellation of power will finally emerge as the new order. Furthermore, who is going to pick up the pieces of the old order and assemble them into a multipolar form?

The rivalry between the powers and the incompatibility of their geopolitical concepts could create a power vacuum and prolong the “anarchy” (Waltz, 1979) of the international system. Neither Beijing nor Washington has the capability or the preparedness to dominate the international order, either alone or in alliances.

However, there has been a noticeably fundamental change in US policies. The objective of achieving ‘regimes changes’ remains but today’s instruments are different. The present Trump administration focuses on economic and financial weaponry, using the overriding international position of the US Dollar. The use of hard power or military interventions plays more a secondary, supportive role. Fiscal, economic, and technological sanctions, tax regimes, trade restrictions, and threats of economic warfare are the new instruments to exert pressure and project power.
Beijing and Moscow lack the capacity to create a solid alliance system. Both are rather isolated and follow different means of spreading their influence. So far, all three foreign policy concepts of Moscow have failed. The first one, to integrate into the Western sphere of institutions and alliances, was rejected by the West. The second one, the attempt to build a ring of friendly and cooperative CIS states in the post-Soviet space has not been completely successful either. And the third one, to eventually transform the relationship with Beijing into a more solid and integrated alliance, is far from becoming a reality. The relationship is more in favour of China than Russia.

Brussels lacks the capability to significantly shape the emerging new global order in accordance with its own set of interests. As a civil power, it may act as a conflict mediator in a limited capacity. For the foreseeable future, it will remain within the transatlantic community and operate as a junior and dependent partner of Washington. However, both the EU and Moscow will be more objects than subjects in the evolving power struggle between Beijing and the US.

Some voices even argue that Europe is in a worse situation today than during the Cold War, because the bipolar consensus on avoiding nuclear war at any cost seems to have vanished. This fear is due to the weakening of security guarantees and international arms reduction treaties, and confusion over the value of certain alliances. Initiatives for the projection of democratic projects have been weakened. The search for stability and security dominates the political agenda in most European states, resulting in significant divisions in public opinion across the continent.

Countries which border Russia or have traumatic historical memories of Soviet occupation are more inclined towards war-mongering policies, seeing hard-power options as solutions to the security dilemma of potential invasion or war. Within NATO and the EU, these countries form a strong transatlantic and nationalist bloc, supported by the UK, Scandinavian countries, and the US in opposing policies of rapprochement with Moscow.
Shifting threats: Sanctions and the Russian factor

Some of the FES report’s findings should be highlighted because they are crucial to an understanding of the present mood of European citizens within and beyond the surveyed countries.

Beginning with an affirming, positive point, 87% of all surveyed citizens agree that their country is part of the European cultural sphere. Even in Russia, despite its supposed pivot to the East and towards Eurasia, 74% share the same opinion. Furthermore, 79% of those interviewed support the idea that Europe has its own unique culture and that it should grow together as a community. This view is shared in Russia (78%), being even more popularly held than in Ukraine (76%). Astoundingly, only 66% of French respondents support this idea, and the figure is even lower in Germany (59%). About 80% of respondents demanded more protection for European culture.

Perceptions of physical threats like conflicts, war, military interventions, or the use of hybrid instruments and terrorism are astoundingly similar across all the surveyed countries. An average of 78% of participants is either ‘somewhat worried’ or ‘very worried’ about present and future challenges, especially wars and conflicts. International terrorism ranks highly on the list of threats (75% average).

On the question of whether war and conflicts will affect one’s own country, the data point to the old dividing line between East and West. While public opinion in Germany seems to be almost evenly split – 51% fear such threats while 48% disagree – in France, the

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3 Dmitri Trenin makes some interesting points in ‘It’s Time to Rethink Russia’s Foreign Policy Strategy’. Contrary to a generally held view in Russian expert circles, Trenin doubts that Russia has undertaken a real pivot towards the East, i.e., towards Eurasia. He argues that the changed international constellation of forces did not force upon Russia such a turn. The pivot was “not to the East, but to itself … Such a step is entirely logical. Post-Soviet developments have made clear that Russia will not accept US global leadership, a stance that necessarily closes the door to its integration into Western-led structures. It has also become clear that the United States does not intend to tolerate an independent Russian foreign policy, while the EU does not intend to tolerate Russia’s domestic political order. This has not only put the issue of Russia’s integration into the expanded West to rest, but also created the conditions for the return of great-power rivalry and a clash of values”.

difference is even more telling in that only 37% see the country affected by military actions and 59% of the interviewed do not share such a fear. Not surprisingly, perceptions are entirely different in Poland, where 79% are worried, and in Ukraine the figure amounts quite understandably to 87%.

The pattern of responses is repeated when asked about a likelihood of war between Russia and the West. For Germans such risk borders on the absurd. Only 24% are fearful of such an eventuality and this outlook is shared in France (34%).

Climate change is rated as a severe threat by an average of 70% of respondents. The highest figures of 83%, 80% and 72% were found respectively in France, Germany, and surprisingly in Ukraine.

In regard to uncontrolled immigration, the figures are also telling. Although Latvia (70% worried), Poland (66%), and Russia (70%) are less affected by immigration, popular concerns about immigration are greater than in both Germany (51%) and France (58%). In Serbia, the level of concern is as high as in Latvia, probably due to the country’s location along the former ‘Balkan route’.

An average of 68% of participants is concerned about economic crises, while disagreement and conflicts within the EU are perceived as less threatening (54%).

On the influences on European-Russian relations, an overwhelming majority of respondents point to the Ukraine conflict and to the resulting sanctions against Russia. The eastward expansion of NATO and the EU is also seen by a majority of participants as a factor contributing to the European-Russian relations.

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4 It is rather surprising that nearly the same quota of responses point to the fact that Russia’s interference in Western states and the EU’s interference in Russia are also causes for the strained relationship. Of course, if we take a look at the various countries, the picture is more differentiated. Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine lead in negative attitudes towards Russia. The ratio of responses which point to the fact that the US is profoundly influencing the relationship of the West with Russia is shared in all countries by an average of 68% (FES, 2019, p. 14-15).
The question of whether the eastward expansion of NATO poses a threat to European security shows remarkable differences. Opinions are split within both Germany and France: 50% of Germans see NATO’s expansion as a threat to European security while 42% disagree; similarly, in France, 35% see NATO’s move towards Russia as a threat and 38% disagree. Here we can see a gap between official government statements and public opinion. This is even more remarkable because of the enduring negative image of Russia presented in Western media (FES, 2019, p. 23). Disagreement with this idea that NATO movement towards Russia threatens European security is higher in Poland (51%) and Latvia (42%).

Views of solutions to the Ukraine crisis differ widely among participating populations. Amazingly even a majority in Poland (54%) agrees with expected prevailing views in Russia (64%) and Serbia (74%) that the Ukraine conflict results from domestic matters and should be solved by Ukrainians themselves. A majority of respondents across all countries besides Serbia (where 62% think otherwise) believe Russia cannot resolve the conflict.

A 90% majority across all countries agree that a diplomatic solution should be found to resolve the Ukraine crisis, but a ‘blue helmet’ UN mission is less desirable. The overwhelming majority of all respondents agree that their countries should not intervene militarily in the conflict (80%).

A majority of 60% holds Russia responsible for the escalation of the Ukraine conflict, with 57% of respondents also seeing separatists as responsible. Ukraine is held responsible too (50%) and the US seems to be seen as a hidden influence on the conflict (44%). The idea that the EU bears responsibility has contrasting responses: while Western partners regard the EU as less responsible for the conflict, Russia (57%) and Serbia (57%) differ.

Opinions on the Western sanctions regime are divided in ways one might expect but there are also splits in the Atlanticist camp: 59% of Latvian respondents object to the widening of sanctions, whereas stronger sanctions are agreeable to 62% of surveyed Poles.
Surprisingly, in midst of media and political campaigns against Russia, Germans object to the widening of sanctions with a 75% majority and only 33% of French participants are in favour of expanded sanctions (FES, 2019, p 29).

Unexpectedly, the findings reveal a noteworthy divergence between official government statements and public opinion on concrete security threats to Europe. In Germany and France, 50% and 44% respectively see the US as a threat to Europe while majorities in Poland (62%) and Ukraine (59%) disagree. In Latvia, opinion is balanced (49% disagree and 47% agree).

When Russia is considered as a potential threat to European security, the data are more perplexing: 33% of Germans agree that Russia might be a threat but 65% disagree; in France, the situation differs slightly as 50% disagree that Moscow is a threat while 40% agree. In Poland, 77% of respondents see Russia as a threat, followed by 67% of Ukrainians and 50% of Latvians (FES, 2019, p. 24).

Participants were asked about the international influence and status of Western and Eastern institutions and the data show that the EU and NATO are rated as those with the highest impact on international developments. The UN is seen as less important but still more influential than the OSCE. Eastern organisations like the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are not yet seen as playing a decisive role internationally.

Survey respondents view the power, influence, and status of their own countries very differently. These disparities in perception, wrongly or rightly, do influence the respective countries positions in international affairs by impacting the design and objectives of foreign and security policy. With this in mind, it is interesting that 56% of Russian respondents believe that their country does not have the international status it deserves. This figure is even higher in Serbia (85%) while 71% of Germans and 59% of France respondents state that their countries do have the status they deserve. Furthermore, 69% of Russian and 75%
of Serbian respondents believe that other countries are actively preventing their countries from achieving the global status they ought to have (FES, 2019, p. 21).

**Loss of trust in governance and political elites**

The relationship of the surveyed states to Russia is pivotal for security, cooperation, and stability in Europe. This view is shared by 56% of all respondents. As expected, the data differ from country to country, but even in Poland 52% argue for improvement of relations. An unexpected 27% of Ukrainian respondents also support this view. In Germany and France, more than 50% of respondents advocate better collaboration with Moscow.

Connecting the survey’s findings with the aforementioned demands of elder German statesmen, we can conclude that there is a gap between official statements and political attitudes of governments and the expectations of the public.

Agreement on the value of pursuing the national interest is shared by 77% of all respondents. Furthermore, in Germany (68%) and France (63%), as well in Poland (62%), majorities believe their country should take more international responsibility and assist other countries, albeit not militarily. Russia represents a sharp deviation from this trend. Only 39% of Russians argue for more international responsibility, the lowest figure in the sample.

However, the demand to shoulder more international responsibility runs counter to the public’s trust in social and political institutions. In total, 63% of respondents do not trust the media – the largest majority with this view is in Russia with 70%. Political parties, essential intermediaries between civil society and government, rank lowest in terms of public trust in each country. Only an average of 18% finds political parties trustworthy. Contrary to such negative attitudes, the military enjoys a high and solid positive ranking, even in Germany (58%). The average is 72%.
Longing for stability and assurances: The search for pragmatic relations with Russia

Political leadership and readiness to shoulder international responsibilities in relevant EU member states is needed in order to achieve structural reforms. Furthermore, the EU must reconstruct a moderate, pragmatic, and goal-driven relationship with Russia. In this respect, the old social democratic proverb of German Ostpolitik is as up to date as ever: peace and security in Europe cannot be achieved without or in opposition to Russia.

However, it seems that restoring a constructive relationship with Russia is only a priority for a few countries in the EU. Improving the state of affairs with Russia is a thorny and divisive issue within the EU. To achieve a goal like this, the comfortable motto of present German foreign policy, to operate ‘inclusively within a European context’ will be questioned.

Even a convoy needs direction, guidance, and leadership. Given the lack of consensus and deep divisions in the EU about the design and goals of its Ostpolitik, Germany, together with like-minded partners, must take the lead. When Germany steps up, all efforts will be needed to convince other member states – which will be an uphill battle – that Berlin is not seeking a ‘special relationship’ with Moscow.

European self-assertiveness towards attaining a status as a recognised geopolitical actor among the dominant powers of the emerging new world order, i.e., China, the US, and Russia, depends on its state of affairs with Russia. In this regard, the encouragement of a dialogue driven by political and security objectives could be supported by practical steps to build trust from below: an easing of the visa regime and enhanced cultural and academic exchange programmes. Last but not least, it could be worth retrieving elements of the reflections held in Meseberg in June 2010 between the then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Chancellor Angela Merkel. The Meseberg memorandum is still a valid option and could stimulate a dialogue on a comprehensive European security treaty. Furthermore, Berlin should seize the initiative and set in motion a process to mend the defunct Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between Moscow and Brussels. In St. Petersburg in
2003, elements of a follow up to the PCA were agreed. A consensus was reached on the three dimensions of cooperation. To amend, renew, and/or activate them under present conditions would definitely improve the relationship between the EU and Russia.

Eventually a dialogue between a self-assertive EU and Russia could end up creating a European Security Council. Including Russia, a body like this could function as a clearing medium to resolve the frozen conflicts in the Caucasus and particularly to offer a basis for an end to the Ukraine conflict.

All these findings reveal that the shift towards a more interest-based foreign and security policy which focuses on the accomplishment of national objectives and which opposes external influences is gaining momentum among European societies. The shift towards Realpolitik is well underway, and hopefully the wake-up call for Europe will do the trick to awaken some governments from the post-modern dream-world that has insulated them against the reality of present and future challenges.

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References


