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Contradictions, Delays, Pushback: The Politicisation of the *Zeitenwende*

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ABSTRACT
The article focuses on the *Zeitenwende* in German foreign and security policy and examines its politicisation in German domestic politics. The *Zeitenwende* ranks as the most consequential foreign policy legacy of the Scholz government and represents a major watershed moment for Germany's post-Cold War foreign and security policy. Ever since Chancellor Olaf Scholz coined the term shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the foreign policy implications of the *Zeitenwende* have sparked intense domestic and international debate. The article explores how the *Zeitenwende* became strongly politicised, both from the 'inside-out' and the 'outside-in', arguing that these closely entwined politicisation dynamics contributed to the uneven foreign policy record of the Scholz government. The empirical analysis zooms in on the most significant foreign policy dimensions of the *Zeitenwende*, specifically Germany's relations with Russia, its support for Ukraine, the transatlantic relationship, and German defence spending.

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Introduction

Three days after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (2022a) argued that 'We are living through a watershed era. And that means that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as before'. This 'epochal tectonic shift' (Scholz 2022b), or *Zeitenwende*, marked a fundamental rupture for German foreign and security policy (Fröhlich 2023), requiring decision-makers to revisit central tenets of Germany's international orientation. This resulted in far-reaching departures from some key traditions in German foreign policy (Mello 2024), most notably *Ostpolitik*, but simultaneously further

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entrenched other traditions, such as Germany's *Westbindung* (Blumenau 2022). While the *Zeitenwende* speech was initially widely praised, both in the domestic arena and by Germany's international partners (Jarausch 2024), its implications for German foreign policy became the subject of sustained debate domestically and internationally.

On the domestic level, the foreign policy consequences of the *Zeitenwende* sparked controversy within and between the main political parties (Mello 2025). This could be seen inside the Traffic Light Coalition between SPD, Greens and FDP, where foreign policy often pitched (parts of) the SPD against the two smaller junior coalition partners, the Greens and the FDP. At the same time, the *Zeitenwende* became entangled in opposition politics, with the main opposition party, the CDU/CSU, capitalising on intra-coalition divides and widely criticised foreign policy delays and contractions. The *Zeitenwende* also fed into the growing polarisation between a broad foreign policy consensus at the political centre and the populist challengers of this consensus at the margins of the German party system (Oppermann 2022), where the far-right extremist AfD, the far-left Die Linke and the newly formed left-populist Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) all mobilised against central planks of the Scholz government's foreign policy. The German public, moreover, ranked the war in Ukraine at or near the top of its political concerns throughout the Scholz government's tenure (Infratest dimap 2022, 2023, 2024a), and foreign and security policy became a salient issue in the 2025 German general election (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2025). On the international level, Germany's EU and NATO allies, most notably in Central and Eastern Europe, widely criticised the Scholz government for its perceived hesitancy and lack of commitment in pulling through with the *Zeitenwende* (Bunde 2022), tarnishing Germany's reputation as a reliable international partner (The Economist 2022).

Against the backdrop of such contestations, this article examines how domestic and international politicisation dynamics have affected German foreign policy in the wake of the *Zeitenwende*. It focuses on what are arguably the *Zeitenwende's* most significant foreign policy dimensions, specifically Germany's relations with Russia, its support for Ukraine, the transatlantic relationship and German defence spending. For each of these issues, the analysis establishes the main domestic and international politicising agents, how and to what extent the issue became politicised in German domestic politics and how this politicisation influenced the foreign policy of the Scholz government. The article argues that politicisation dynamics across the different foreign policy fields varied, contributing to explanations of the Traffic Light Coalition's uneven foreign policy record during the *Zeitenwende*.

To develop this argument, the next section elaborates the concept of politicisation and suggests that foreign policy is politicised in two-level contexts.

The subsequent sections explore how politicisation dynamics have played out in the selected foreign policy issue areas. The article concludes with a summary assessment of how politicisation shaped the Scholz government's foreign policy.

Politicising the *Zeitenwende*: From the 'Inside-Out' and the 'Outside-In'

Politicisation can be understood as 'the promotion of a topic as a public issue where competing interpretations exist as choices' (Wood and Flinders 2014, 161). Which issues become politicised in domestic politics demarcates the scope of political conflict (Schattschneider 1957) and is a central parameter of the policy-making context. In empirical analysis, the degree of an issue's politicisation is typically evaluated using the three interrelated criteria of salience, contestation, and mobilisation (e.g. Zürn 2014). First, politicised issues tend to be highly salient within public debate (Grande and Hutter 2016a), a quality that can be assessed through opinion polls and media analyses. Second, politicisation involves public contestation, reflected in expressions of dissatisfaction with a particular issue or policy and the emergence of increasing polarisation between opposing viewpoints (De Wilde 2011). Third, politicised issues are characterised by the mobilisation of a growing and diverse range of actors who articulate competing claims (De Vries, Hobolt, and Walter 2021). Politicisation is thus a continuous concept, meaning that issues can be more or less politicised (Dür, Hamilton, and de Bièvre 2024, 4). How much an issue becomes politicised depends on the agency of strategic actors, exploiting political opportunity structures such as national elections, debates in parliament or international crises (e.g. Grande and Hutter 2016b).

In foreign policy, politicisation takes place in a two-level context (Putnam 1988). It comes from the interplay between domestic ('inside-out') and international ('outside-in') drivers, shaping how governments navigate the incentives and constraints on both levels (Oppermann 2026). At the same time, governments are not passive bystanders of politicisation, but resourceful actors at the interface between domestic and international politics that may pursue strategies of 'politicisation management' (Schimmelfennig 2020, 357). From the 'inside-out', foreign policy becomes politicised through the interests and priorities of domestic actors, playing out across different arenas ranging from mass and interest group politics to parliamentary, party, and coalition politics. Political parties, in particular, stand out as key politicising agents (e.g. De Vries, Hobolt, and Walter 2021, 315), who can politicise foreign policy both from within the government, most notably as coalition partners in multiparty coalitions (Kaarbo 2012), and from outside the government, in the shape of opposition politics. From the

'outside-in', foreign policy can be politicised through the 'reverberation' (Putnam 1988, 454) of international politics in domestic political debates, for example contentious policies of foreign governments or international institutions and global events with substantial domestic consequences, such as international conflicts.

Foreign policy making can thus occur in more or less politicised domestic environments, shaped by the interaction of domestic and international dynamics. Different levels of politicisation, in turn, impact the relationship between the domestic and international arenas: High politicisation tightens the coupling between the two (Hooghe and Marks 2009), increasing the likelihood that developments in one arena will have repercussions in the other. Conversely, under conditions of low politicisation, these linkages are weaker, and potential feedback effects remain limited. High politicisation thus constrains a government's domestic autonomy, because domestic actors monitor international activities more closely and a wider range of societal groups become mobilised to voice their diverse foreign policy preferences. It fosters more political modes of foreign policy making (e.g. De Wilde 2011), pushing governments towards domestically driven strategies, where domestic political risks and opportunities outweigh international considerations. Since highly politicised foreign policy issues can have a strong impact on a government's domestic standing, policymakers will seek to avoid policies that might damage—and ideally pursue those that enhance—their reputation at home (Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012). By contrast, low levels of politicisation afford governments greater domestic leeway, as foreign policy resonates only weakly within domestic politics and thus attracts limited engagement from domestic actors.

Along these lines, the following sections explore the politicisation dynamics across some of the most important foreign policy dimensions of the *Zeitenwende*. From the 'inside-out', the discussion identifies the main domestic politicising agents and how they politicised the respective issues in German party politics and in broader political discourse. From the 'outside in', the analysis considers how international demands, expectations and responses vis-à-vis the *Zeitenwende*, most notably from Germany's international partners in EU and NATO, intertwined with German domestic politics and contributed to the respective politicisation dynamics.

Relations with Russia

The *Zeitenwende* has led to a fundamental shift in Germany's foreign policy towards Russia. The first German National Security Strategy, published in 2023, singled out Russia as 'the most significant threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area' (Federal Government 2023, 11–12). This turned

on its head the long-standing premise of German foreign policy, still in place after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, that security in Europe, in the words of then-foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2016), cannot be achieved 'without and certainly not against' Russia. The Traffic Light Coalition thus ended the deeply anchored tradition in German foreign policy, tied to Willy Brandts *Ostpolitik*, of a cooperative and dialogue-oriented approach to Russia (Blumenau 2022).

This shift left its most immediate mark on Germany's energy foreign policy. This can be seen, above all, in the Scholz government's decision, two days before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, to halt certification of the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline, but also in other efforts at ending Germany's energy dependency on Russian natural gas (Umbach 2022), including the establishment of infrastructure for importing liquefied natural gas and the conclusion of new long-term energy contracts, for example with Norway and Qatar. As a result, Germany no longer imported any natural gas from Russia by the end of the Scholz government (Reuters 2025). Moreover, the Traffic Light Coalition put its weight behind the unprecedented EU sanctions regime against Russia, most notably far-reaching financial and economic sanctions and an EU oil embargo (European Commission 2025). Further, if mainly symbolic, expressions of the more confrontational German line on Russia include the Traffic Light Coalition's public endorsement of the International Criminal Courts arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin for alleged war crimes (Foreign Office 2023) as well as its demand for a special tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine (German Bundestag 2023).

The turn-around in Germany's foreign policy towards Russia was driven by the strong politicisation of the issue in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, making the established German approach untenable, domestically and internationally. Politicisation happened from both the 'outside-in' and the 'inside-out' and was able to tie in with previous, if less forceful, contestations of Germany's policy on Russia. On the international level, Germany's EU and NATO partners, above all in Central and Eastern Europe, increasingly contested Germany's *Ostpolitik*, especially after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Lemke 2024). In particular, Nord Stream 2 was as a long-standing focal point for international criticism, being widely opposed by Germany's international partners, including the U.S. (Wood 2024). This 'outside-in' politicisation resonated with Russia-critical voices in German party politics, where in particular the Greens and the FDP advocated for a more assertive line on Russia already before the war in Ukraine. In their 2021 election manifestos, for example, the Greens demanded to stop Nord Stream 2 and the FDP argued for a moratorium, while both parties spoke out in favour of stronger EU sanctions in case of continued Russian aggression against Ukraine (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2021; FDP 2021).

With the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these international and domestic contestations gained traction and moved into the centre of political debate. Germany's relations with Russia became highly salient in public opinion, with the German public regularly naming Russia's war against Ukraine among the 'most important problems' for Germany in 2022, 2023 and 2024 (Infratest dimap 2022, 2023, 2024a). The issue's high salience was also reflected in public threat perceptions, for example when 72 per cent of respondents to a July/August 2022 poll identified Russia as a military threat (Körber-Stiftung 2022). Against this backdrop, Russia's invasion of Ukraine led the German public to back a harder line towards Russia, while public support for seeking good relations with the Putin regime declined (Mader and Schoen 2023). This shift was paralleled in German party politics, where the main political parties at the political centre, including the largest opposition party, the CDU/CSU, coalesced around a more confrontational approach towards Russia (Mello 2025). At the same time, relations with Russia remained controversial in the arena of coalition politics, specifically between the two junior coalition partners, the Greens and the FDP, on one side and more 'Russia-friendly' voices within the SPD on the other side. The Greens, in particular, cultivated a public profile as a Russia 'hawk', criticising the SPD around Chancellor Scholz for what they saw as a lack of resolve, for example regarding EU sanctions against Russia (Jarausch 2024). However, the balance of opinion also began to shift within the SPD, with some prominent previous supporters of *Ostpolitik* distancing themselves from the policy (Lough 2024).

Overall, the strong politicisation of Germany's relations with Russia weakened domestic support for *Ostpolitik* and thus helped instigate a fundamental re-orientation of Germany's approach to Russia. Among the three partners to the Traffic Light Coalition, the high-politicisation environment was politically most fraught for the SPD (see Böller and Harnisch 2026), which had to contend with remaining intra-party attachment to the key principles of *Ostpolitik*. Moreover, the foreign policy shift sparked significant counter-politicisation from the far right and the far left. Here, the AfD, Die Linke and the BSW all came out strongly against the new government line on Russia, mobilising existing pro-Russia sentiment in parts of the German public, in particular in eastern Germany. Despite their different ideological starting points, the three parties opposed the EU sanctions regime and demanded a more cooperative, dialogue-oriented and accommodating approach towards Russia (Wurthmann and Wagner 2025). While this counter-politicisation did not (yet) have a discernible impact on German foreign policy towards Russia, it reinforced the polarisation in German foreign policy between the foreign policy mainstream and populist anti-mainstream mobilisation at the political extremes. It also suggests that the issue of Germany's relations with Russia will continue to be highly politicised in German political debate.

Support for Ukraine

Financial, diplomatic and military support for Ukraine has been a central plank of the *Zeitenwende*. In the words of Chancellor Scholz (2022a): '[W]e must support Ukraine in this desperate situation. […] As democrats, as Europeans, we stand by their side – on the right side of history!'. As of 30 September 2025, Germany had delivered or earmarked a total of 36 billion euro in non-military aid as well as around 40 billion euro in military assistance (Federal Foreign Office 2025), making it the second-largest bilateral supporter of Ukraine worldwide at the time, after the U.S. (Trebesch 2025). Diplomatically, the Traffic Light Coalition consistently signalled strong German support, including high-level symbolic visits of Chancellor Scholz, foreign minister Annalena Baerbock and defence minister Boris Pistorius to Kyiv, sustained public backing for Ukraine's EU membership perspective, advocated for a 'Marshall Plan' for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction (Scholz 2022c), and committed to a bilateral security agreement, promising German support for 'Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity' (Federal Government 2024).

The Scholz government's strategic decision to side with Ukraine built on a broad consensus among German foreign policy elites and the parties at the centre of the political spectrum, but was criticised from the right and left extremes (Fix 2024). The decision also initially tapped into widespread pro-Ukrainian sentiment, with strong majorities in favour of helping Ukraine (ZDF 2022), in particular by non-military means. This public support eroded over the course of the war, for example with the share of respondents who believed that German financial aid for Ukraine went 'too far' doubling between April 2022 (20 per cent) and January 2024 (41 per cent) (Infratest dimap 2024b). The by far most controversial aspect of German support for Ukraine, however, was the issue of military assistance. In his *Zeitenwende* speech (2022a), Chancellor Scholz confirmed that his government would supply Ukraine with arms, going against the longstanding – albeit occasionally violated – principle in German foreign policy not to deliver weapons into conflict zones. Although Germany was often criticised – not least by Ukraine – for acting too slowly and cautiously (Jarausch 2024), it has since emerged as the second-largest supplier of military aid to Ukraine in absolute terms and is providing an increasingly wide array of heavy weaponry (Trebesch 2025). It must be noted, however, that this is still modest relative to Germany's GDP (around 0.1 per cent) and remains well below the relative contributions of some smaller European states, especially Denmark and the Baltics, where military aid for Ukraine amounts to more than 0.4 per cent of GDP (Binder and Schularick 2024).

The policy of military support for Ukraine was strongly politicised in German domestic politics from the start (see Oppermann 2026). First, the

issue was highly salient in German political debate over the entire tenure of the Scholz government, which showed in its broad media coverage (Maurer, Haßler, and Jost 2023), influence on voting intentions (Wurthmann and Wagner 2025) and central role in the 2025 federal elections (Tagesschau 2025). Second, arms deliveries were strongly contested between political parties and in the general public. Germany's party system became highly polarised, with the CDU/CSU, along with the Greens and FDP within the governing coalition, pushing for more decisive military support for Ukraine, while Die Linke, AfD, and BSW argued for ending it (Heck 2024). The issue also split the governing SPD, pitting its left-wing sceptics against the foreign-policy pragmatists around Chancellor Scholz (Mello 2025). Moreover, public opinion was, at times, almost evenly divided. In a January 2023 poll, for example, 25 per cent felt Germany's military support 'did not go far enough', 26 per cent thought it 'went too far', and 41 per cent viewed the existing level as 'appropriate' (Infratest dimap 2023). Third, the issue mobilised widely, from public protests and a widely-signed petition against arms deliveries (Wüstner 2024) to open letters for and against military support in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, provoking 'heated debates in the media and public sphere' (Mello 2024, 10).

The strong politicisation of German military support for Ukraine was driven by two antagonistic politicising coalitions, intertwining 'outside-in' and 'inside-out' politicisation. This politicisation from two opposite sides reinforced each other in cycles of politicisation and counter-politicisation, especially at the occasion of recurring debates about the delivery of different 'heavy' weapons systems, such as Leopard 2 battle tanks and Taurus cruise missiles (Bunde 2025). The politicisation for more and faster German military support was led from the 'outside-in' by the Ukrainian government, which had called for such support already weeks before the Russian invasion (Deutsche Welle 2022). The Ukrainian appeals were backed up by growing pressure from Germany's EU and NATO partners to expand its military support, most notably the U.S. administration under Donald Trump and Germany's allies in Central and Eastern Europe (Politico 2022).

These international requests became entangled with similar demands from a broad range of domestic actors, politicising the issue from the 'inside-out'. Here, the CDU/CSU was a strong politicising force throughout, first criticising the Scholz government's initial opposition, before the *Zeitenwende* speech, to deliver lethal weapons at all and then urging the government to abandon its ongoing reluctance to supply heavy weapons (Mello 2025). The issue was also politicised from within the Traffic Light Coalition, where both junior partners, the Greens and the FDP, blamed the SPD for holding up stronger German support and frequently came out in favour of sending weapons despite the objections of their coalition partner. This can be seen, for example, in the debate about delivering Taurus missiles which

Chancellor Scholz continued to oppose, citing the risk of Germany becoming a direct war party (Tagesschau 2024), despite criticism from both coalition partners as well as the CDU/CSU (Oppermann 2026). The Greens, in particular, proved one of the staunchest advocates of military support for Ukraine (Mello 2025), having moved away from its pacifist roots ('never again war') already during earlier post-Cold War debates about deployments of the German Bundeswehr, especially during the Kosovo War, embracing the view that military force is sometimes necessary to counter aggression and crimes against humanity ('never again Auschwitz') (Longhurst 2004). Beyond party politics, Germany's mainstream media also largely argued for stronger military support and often framed government policy as insufficient (Maurer, Haßler, and Jost 2023). The same is true for most military experts, who regularly featured on major news programmes and talk shows, as well as leading think tanks such as the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (e.g. Minzarari and Stewart 2021) and the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP 2022).

The opposite politicising coalition against German military support was led by populist parties at the right and left extremes of German party politics (see Böller and Harnisch 2026). Specifically, the AfD, Die Linke and BSW all opposed sending German weapons to Ukraine, and used the issue in state-level and federal election campaigns, albeit with emphasis on different arguments. While AfD and BSW followed broadly similar lines, warning that military support for Ukraine would lead Germany into military conflict with Russia, prolong the war and violate Germany's economic and geopolitical interests, Die Linke drew more on pacifist arguments, invoking the lessons from Germany's past (Heck 2024; RND 2023). These parties politicised the issue against the foreign-policy establishment, linking it to their broader anti-mainstream politics. German military aid to Ukraine was also politicised by government critics within the SPD (Mello 2025), where prominent voices, including the parliamentary party leader in the Bundestag, Rolf Mützenich, spoke out against supplying heavy weapons and called for putting more emphasis on diplomatic efforts (Handelsblatt 2024). The issue deepened intra-party rifts, including among Bundestag members, and sparked public disputes between leading party figures (Tagesspiegel 2022).

Politicisation extended to the broader public sphere, moreover, fuelling civil-society mobilisation and mass protests. A key example was the 'manifesto for peace' by Alice Schwarzer, a prominent feminist and journalist, and Sahra Wagenknecht, a leading figure on the hard left who would later set up the BSW, published in response to the decision to deliver Leopard 2 tanks. Urging the Scholz government 'to stop the escalation of arms deliveries' (Schwarzer and Wagenknecht 2023), the manifesto drew more than 900,000 signatures (Change.org 2023). This 'inside-out' politicisation

tapped into existing pro-Russia sentiment, especially in Eastern Germany, as well as public fears of a wider European war (Richter et al. 2023), which were amplified by Russian propaganda and nuclear threats, contributing to the issues politicisation from the 'outside in'.

In this highly politicised context, decisions of the Traffic Light Coalition about the scope of German military assistance had strong domestic and international repercussions. In response, the Scholz government tried to steer a middle course that would honour its commitments towards Ukraine, while avoiding the risk of further escalating the war and becoming a direct war party (Bundesregierung 2023b). This attempt at 'politicisation management', however, repeatedly saw the government initially opposing the supply of specific weapons, for example Leopard 2 tanks, only to later change its position under domestic and international pressure. This 'salami slicing' approach (Fix 2024, 50) led to contradictions, inconsistencies and delays in German military support for Ukraine, drawing criticism from both sides of the debate.

Transatlantic Relations

The return of Donald Trump to the presidency added uncertainty to the transatlantic relationship, and with it an urgency to revisit Germany's security dependency on the U.S. Whereas the question of providing armament to Ukraine to enable it to hold off Russian aggression was obviously new on the transatlantic agenda, most other issues in transatlantic relations during the Scholz government's tenure were continuations of previous years, if not decades. Those included: U.S. concerns over Germany's energy dependency on Russia; German (under-)spending on defence; and the reliability of U.S. security guarantees for Europe. Since most issues are covered in other sections of this article, the following discussion focuses on U.S. security guarantees, which in turn were coupled with questions concerning European strategic autonomy and ultimately the future of NATO.

Politicisation of the issue occurred both 'outside-in' and 'inside-out'. Regarding the former, concerns across Europe over the reliability of the United States had already emerged during Trumps first presidency, when for instance French president Macron opined that 'our aim needs to be ensuring Europes autonomous operating capabilities, in complement to NATO' (Elysée 2017). While European fears of abandonment were somewhat placated by Biden's election, they returned with a vengeance following Trump's election victory in 2024. Indeed, on various occasions Trump cast doubt on America's continued willingness to act as security provider for Europe, which he considered to be free-riding at the expense of the U.S. Most notably, Trump repeatedly called into question NATO's Article V as well as U.S. membership in NATO in general (e.g. CBS News 2025), and

chastised Europeans for underspending on defence: 'They don't pay, I'm not going to defend them' (The Guardian 2025). Politicising the issue from the 'outside-in', Trumps obvious 'disregard for Europe … jolted the continent's leaders' (The Economist 2025) and put discussions on the future of NATO and European strategic autonomy squarely back on the agenda.

However, like the preceding Merkel government, the Scholz government did not warm to the idea of pursuing European strategic autonomy. In this sense, a major German broadsheet suggested that 'Macrons proposals to strengthen Europe's strategic autonomy have met with no response whatsoever in Berlin for six years' (Die Welt 2024), and the minority Scholz government that Scholz led since November 2024 did not turn the page on this, either. Notably, the National Security Strategy adopted in June 2023 does not feature the term 'strategic autonomy' at all. What is more, the section on European security only generically refers to a need for 'independence' without, however, embedding this discussion explicitly in the context of independence from the United States or NATO (Federal Government 2023, 37). To the contrary, in its much more extensive discussion on collective defence, which precedes the section on European security, the strategy emphasises that 'Credible deterrence and defence capability in the transatlantic alliance of NATO is the indispensable foundation of German, European and transatlantic security' (Bundesregierung 2023a: 31). This logic – and de facto rank order between NATO and the EU in the security realm – was mirrored in various statements of Chancellor Scholz (e.g. Scholz 2022b) and in the Defence Policy Guidelines (*Verteidigungspolitische Richtlinien*) (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung 2023).

Yet the Scholz government's position on European strategic autonomy and the role of NATO – and with it on the continued reliance on the United States – was by no means consensual in the domestic political arena. Indeed, fluctuations and countervailing trends were discernible in the German public's perception of the United States in general and on security-related issues in particular. This 'uneasy' stance was strongly, albeit not exclusively influenced by the respective holder of the U.S. presidency. For example, Germans' view of the United States exhibited significant changes during the Scholz government's tenure, mirroring the transition from Biden to Trump. While more than 70 per cent held favourable views of the country throughout the Biden years, this number plummeted to 27 per cent in 2025 (Pew Research Center 2025). A mixed picture also emerged specifically with respect to security-related issues. However, those were not entirely tied to the respective U.S. presidents. For instance, in June 2022, a few months after the Russian invasion in Ukraine, a majority of Germans (52 per cent) – and here especially the supporters of parties from the political centre – were in favour of the continued stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons in Germany, which was a notable change from previous years when less than

15 per cent had held such a view (NDR 2022). Supporters of the Traffic Light Coalition and the CDU/CSU also exhibited very positive views of NATO, with more than 90 per cent showing support for the organisation during a poll conducted in mid-2024 (FNS 2024). However, the same year 49 per cent of Germans were against the deployment of new U.S. middle-range missiles to the country, with supporters of the BSW and the AfD being particularly sceptical (NTV 2024). After Trump's return to office, negative evaluations of the United States also included supporters of centre-left and centre-right parties. For instance, in March 2025 66 per cent of Germans considered their country essentially at the mercy of both Trump and Putin (WDR 2025). A similar number (67 per cent) no longer placed trust in the United States to provide military support to Germany, with supporters of the AfD being by far the least sceptical in this regard (Infratest Dimap 2025).

Against this background, it is not surprising that the issue was also politicised on the party-political level. Generally speaking, the concept of strategic autonomy found little traction on that level. In turn, while calling for a stronger European role within the alliance, parties from the political centre emphasised the continued value of NATO, thus echoing the government's position. For their part, populists from the left were highly sceptical towards NATO and military spending in general. Conversely, at the far right the AfD was closer to centrist parties by praising NATO's role for European security.

Those patterns of contestation came to the fore for instance in the parliamentary debate on NATO's 75th anniversary in July 2024. Parliamentarians from the Traffic Light Coalition and the CDU/CSU emphasised the continued relevance of NATO for Germany's security. Several times, this was coupled with calls for a stronger European role within NATO (e.g. Bundestag 2024, 23420, 23421), but not with demands for decoupling that the (vaguely-defined) concept of strategic autonomy might ultimately suggest. Parties from the far left called out NATO for various shortcomings without, however, making calls for strengthening the EU as a security actor to replace NATO. For instance, Sören Pellmann from Die Linke chastised NATO for global interventionism and for urging countries to spend billions of euros on defence that could be better spent on other purposes (Bundestag 2024, 23430). In a similar vein, Sevim Dağdelen from the BSW denigrated NATO for engaging in 'wars of aggression' and sustained violations of human rights by some of its member states (Bundestag 2024, 23432).

Yet the opposition was by no means united. Indeed, the AfD voiced very different positions compared to Die Linke and the BSW. For instance, Alexander Gauland praised NATO as a 'success story' and 'insurance cover' for Germany whilst criticising its enlargement after the end of the Cold War, efforts to protect non-member states, and its outreach to the Indo-Pacific (Bundestag 2024, 23422–23423). In turn, Gerold Otten from the AfD was

the only speaker who actually used the term 'strategic autonomy' during this debate (Bundestag 2024, 23428). He suggested that the U.S. will only maintain its nuclear umbrella over Europe if European countries become independent from U.S. support regarding conventional weapons, which led him to conclude that 'European countries must … develop the will to be strategically autonomous together' (Bundestag 2024, 23428).

Overall, strong politicisation of the transatlantic relationship from both the 'outside-in' and the 'inside-out' did not constrain the Scholz government's stance on this issue in a meaningful way. Clearly, NATO remained the core security organisation. Following Blumenau, the *Zeitenwende* even 'actively *revived* Germany's commitment to and support for NATO' (Blumenau 2022, 1903; emphasis added). At the same time, the government showed little inclination to systematically engage with calls for European strategic autonomy. The Traffic Light Coalition parties did not exhibit major fault lines on this issue, and their position was supported by the main opposition party, the CDU/CSU, and to some degree also by the far-right AfD. Pushback from Die Linke and the BSW was insufficient to alter government policy. While Trump's return to office clearly raised concerns over the reliability of U.S. security guarantees, the by-then minority Scholz government was in no position to usher in meaningful adjustments in Germany's policy at that point. Indeed, the arguably most far-reaching change initiated over the final months concerned defence spending, to which the discussion now turns.

Defence Spending

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine ushered in a seismic shift in German defence spending under the Scholz government. While defence expenditures still amounted to a meagre 1.3 per cent of GDP in 2021, they steadily rose up to 1.89 per cent in 2024. In absolute numbers, the defence budget increased from 47.8 billion euros in 2021 to 81.8 billion euros in 2024 (all data from SIPRI 2025). Crucial for this increase was a special fund (*Sondervermögen*) that Chancellor Scholz announced on 27 February 2022 in his *Zeitenwende* speech. The purpose of the special fund, which allocated an additional 100 billion euros to the armed forces on top of the regular defence budget, was to enable the country to undertake 'necessary investments and armament projects' over the next five years (Bundesregierung 2022). The *Sondervermögen* together with the necessary constitutional change of Article 87a of the Basic Law that exempted the special fund from the Debt Brake (*Schuldenbremse*) were eventually adopted in June 2022. As Blumenau (2022:, 1903) put it, the '*Zeitenwende* thus marked the point when the German leadership acknowledged that it had underspent on its military and had a Bundeswehr that was largely unfit for purpose'.

However, since it was a one-off measure, it was obvious that the *Sondervermögen* would neither suffice to close all the gaps in the armed forces that years of underfunding had caused, nor to continuously enable Germany to fulfil its NATO commitment to spend two per cent of GDP on defence, as Scholz had pledged in his *Zeitenwende* speech (Bundesregierung 2022) – much to the chagrin of the more pacifist-oriented members of his own party including the chairman of the SPD's parliamentary group (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2022). Therefore, in March 2025 an even more far-reaching constitutional change was enacted which aimed at essentially enabling Germany to spend as much on defence on an annual basis as the government of the day perceives necessary without violating the Debt Brake. To that end, Article 109, Paragraph 3 of the Basic Law was changed to allow for loan-based expenditures on defence broadly understood (including, for instance, civil protection and intelligence services) that exceed one per cent of GDP without being constrained by the Debt Brake. In so doing, a current political challenge was translated into a long-term political rule. The resulting prioritisation of defence spending over other expenditures will be hard to reverse since this would require another constitutional change. In a sense, those reforms provided an answer to Bunde's (2025:, 1230) wondering 'whether German politicians and the public are prepared to confront the fiscal trade-offs and implement the long-term adjustments in public spending that the *Zeitenwende* demands'.

The reforms in defence spending were strongly politicised, from the 'outside-in' and, even more so, from the 'inside-out'. True, the country's European partners were somewhat hesitant in their critique of German underspending on defence, not least since most of them did not meet the NATO target either. When criticism was voiced, it was more about the tardiness and hesitancy with which the Scholz government contributed specific military gear to Ukraine, as outlined above. Having said that, German underspending had been met with sustained concern by its main security partner. Indeed, as alluded to in the previous section, the Scholz government was under constant prodding from the Biden and Trump administrations to increase defence spending. The 2022 invasion made underspending fully untenable.

As was to be expected, decisions to that effect became highly salient. For instance, in the run-up to the adoption of the *Sondervermögen*, polls showed that while a majority of Germans (55 per cent) thought that the country should not hold back in its support for Ukraine, an even larger number (63 per cent) harboured concerns that the country might eventually be dragged into the war (Tagesschau 2022). Still, another poll found that a similar number of Germans (65 per cent) was nonetheless in favour of establishing the *Sondervermögen* (Die Zeit 2022). Regarding the 2025 reforms, one poll found that 71 per cent of Germans favoured the relaxation of the Debt

Brake to enable higher defence spending. However, a clear party-political gap emerged in this regard between the supporters of the SPD, the Greens and the CDU who were highly supportive on the one hand and supporters of Die Linke and the AfD who were much more critical (Statista 2025). It was thus not by chance that the decisions were heavily contested. Yet the political battle lines did not neatly separate the governing parties from the opposition parties but rather split the opposition, and in 2025 it also did not leave the by then outgoing minority Scholz government unscathed.

In the case of the *Sondervermögen*, contestation was mainly limited to the populist opposition parties from the political extremes, with the AfD not being united in their rejection. Die Linke, who voted without exception against the *Sondervermögen*, argued that rather than using 100 billion euros for defence, the money should be spent in areas such as social policy and climate (Bundestag 2022a). In turn, while the AfD was generally sympathetic to the idea of spending more money for defence since it lamented the sustained underfunding of the *Bundeswehr*, it took issue with the formal construction of the *Sondervermögen* based on its envisaged exemption from the Debt Brake (Bundestag 2022b). This ambiguous stance was mirrored in the vote of the AfD's parliamentary group, which was almost split in half in terms of support (e.g. Beatrix von Storch) or rejection (e.g. Alexander Gauland); in turn, the co-leaders of the partys parliamentary group, Tino Chrupalla and Alice Weidel, abstained (Bundestag 2022c, 4264).

Conversely, the major opposition party, the CDU/CSU, sided with the government in an effort to cast itself as the 'better' governing party. Indeed, bar one parliamentarian the entire CDU/CSU parliamentary group voted in favour of the *Sondervermögen*. During the third reading of the draft law, Johann Wadephul (CDU) argued: 'Everything for the German Armed Forces: That is the right decision at this point' (Bundestag 2022c, 4237). Bar a few exceptions, the parliamentary groups of the by then still three governing parties (SPD, Greens, FDP) also supported the *Sondervermögen*. Ultimately, the latter received broad parliamentary support, with 593 parliamentarians voting in favour and 80 against (with seven abstentions) (Bundestag 2022c, 4261).

Whereas the adoption of the *Sondervermögen* in 2022 was politicised primarily from the political extremes, the politicisation of the 2025 reforms was brought about at least as much by the parties from the political centre based on how they handled and ultimately pushed through the reforms. Interestingly, those reforms were not initiated by the by then outgoing minority Scholz government but resulted from a joint proposal from the SPD and the CDU/CSU. This collaboration, in turn, was triggered by the results of the snap elections of late February 2025. The increases in the number of seats held respectively by the AfD and Die Linke all but foreclosed the

adoption of constitutional changes to augment defence spending in the incoming Bundestag.

Thus, reform-minded parties had to move quickly and push through constitutional changes still under the outgoing Bundestag where they held the required number of seats. This led to political manoeuvring that ultimately culminated in a draft law that was submitted jointly by the SPD and the CDU/CSU and that was eventually also supported by the Greens. The draft expressly highlighted the perceived need to back-up as well as to put on a more long-term basis the modernisation drive that had been initiated by the *Sondervermögen* (Bundestag 2025a).

The draft law was rushed through parliamentary procedures and adopted by the outgoing 20th Bundestag on 18 March 2025, thus only a few days before the newly elected 21st Bundestag held its first session. 513 parliamentarians voted in favour, 207 against, none abstained. Bar one exception from each parliamentary group, the SPD, the CDU/CSU, and the Greens voted in favour. The ranks of the political opponents were even more closed, with every single parliamentarian from the FDP, the AfD, Die Linke and the BSW voting against the proposal (Bundestag 2025b, 27795).

The latter voiced various points of critique. For example, Christian Dürr from the FDP called the reforms 'the starting signal for unrestrained debt accumulation' (Bundestag 2025b, 27750). Tino Chrupalla from the AfD similarly chastised the increase in government debt and opined that 'we don't need so-called military readiness' (Bundestag 2025b, 27753–27754). Lastly, Sahra Wagenknecht from the BSW characterised the proposed reforms as 'foreign policy megalomania and unprecedented rearmament' (Bundestag 2025b, 27778). Mind you, though, that also the Greens had to be won over by the other two parties, among other things by interpreting defence and ensuing defence spending broadly to include issues such as civil protection (Bundestag 2025b, 27748).

Overall, while Germany had been under pressure most notably from the U.S. for quite some time to augment defence spending, it took the war in Ukraine to get serious about it. The major changes that followed the *Zeitenwende* announcement mainly juxtaposed centrist political parties in and out of government (with the exception of the FDP) on the one hand and populist parties from either side of the political spectrum on the other hand. Indeed, the chasm hardened over time, with the opposition against increased defence spending not only closing their ranks still further but also growing larger in numbers from the 2022 to the 2025 vote.

Conclusion

The *Zeitenwende* in German foreign and security policy was strongly politicised in German politics, driven by deeply entwined processes of 'inside-out'

and 'outside-in' politicisation. At the same time, these politicisation dynamics played out differently across issue areas, affecting the main foreign policy dimensions of the *Zeitenwende* differently. While politicisation has largely worked in favour of some aspects, it has led to contradictions, delays and pushback on others. This contributed to the Scholz government's uneven foreign policy record during the *Zeitenwende*. Conversely, the coalition's other landmark foreign policy project, in the form of feminist foreign policy, has had next to no influence on the *Zeitenwende*, as had been the case on a range of other important foreign policy decisions (Färber 2025).

Broadly speaking, the different politicisation dynamics have followed one of two patterns. In the cases of Russia and the transatlantic relationship, politicisation has supported the *Zeitenwende*. As for Germany's foreign policy towards Russia, politicisation discredited *Ostpolitik* and facilitated a fundamental shift in its relations with Russia. Similarly, politicisation of the transatlantic relationship for the most part worked in the same direction, strengthening Germany's existing pro-NATO orientation. In this first pattern, politicisation thus pitched a largely united political centre against (parts of) the political extremes. While this reinforced the growing polarisation between the German foreign policy mainstream and its populist challengers, it did not impede the Scholz government's ability to pursue the *Zeitenwende*, but rather pushed in its favour. In the second pattern, by contrast, politicisation mobilised foreign policy divides within the political centre, constraining the *Zeitenwende*. This pattern was most pronounced on the issue of German military support for Ukraine, where politicisation extended to the arena of coalition politics. On the issue of German defence spending, finally, politicisation dynamics were mixed. While the politicisation of the *Sondervermögen* followed the first pattern, putting the political extremes against a united political centre, the 2025 reforms were also politicised from within the political centre, leading to rushed constitutional changes by the outgoing Bundestag to enable further increases in defence spending.

The article shows how politicisation dynamics matter for foreign policy. Future scholarship should thus pay more systematic attention to how and to what extent foreign policy issues become politicised. In German foreign policy, the fragmentation of the party system in conjunction with growing international demands suggest a trend towards increasing politicisation, including for example Germany's approach to China or Israel. This can also be seen in the German domestic debate about the Iran war, in which several key issues have become politicised between political parties and in broader public discourse, including possible German contributions to securing the Strait of Hormuz and arms exports to Israel. While the dividing line between the political centre and the political extremes will likely be a key

driver of this trend, it should be particularly consequential for German foreign policy to see how much politicisation will also spread to the foreign policy mainstream. In addition, future scholarship should focus on the interplay between 'inside-out' and 'outside-in' politicisation. For example, is the politicisation of foreign policy mainly an attribute of foreign policy crises or has it become part of the 'normal politics' of foreign policy? What is the relationship between politicisation and securitisation, and under what conditions should external demands be a source of politicisation or foster domestic consensus? A better understanding of how politicisation dynamics develop and how they affect foreign policy would advance both Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and knowledge about German foreign policy.

Disclosure Statement

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