

Turning point. From old thinking to new politics

Markus Meckel

The challenges facing us, not only in Germany and Europe, are immense. And we all know that we cannot master them alone, but only as the EU and NATO, that is the West in its entirety.

February 24th 2022 will remain unforgettable for all of us. “We woke up in a different world”, is how Germany’s foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, put it. Indeed, who could have imagined that we would have to experience this? A war of aggression, conquest and annihilation in the 21st century against a peaceful neighbour in the middle of Europe, against a country that I have visited many times. Despite all my reservations about Vladimir Putin, I would not have thought it possible.

Bombs, rockets, death, destruction, murder and multiple crimes against the civilian population – images that we know from wars in the distant past, or from complex conflicts in faraway places. This situation, however, is simple to analyse and evaluate: an autocratic president in Russia who is afraid of democracy and freedom in his own country, because that would sweep him away, and anywhere in his vicinity, because that could also set a precedent in Russia. A president with a vision of rebuilding the former Russian empire, which had lived on in the Soviet Union and disintegrated together with it. To this end Putin has torn up everything that he himself had signed up to, everything that evolved in the wake of the horrors of the world wars in the 20th century as the basis of international coexistence. By invading his neighbour, Putin is destroying these foundations and attacking not only Ukraine, but international law, which will be difficult to re-establish but is of fundamental importance for our future.

Unlearnt lessons

I grew up in a dictatorship where law was regarded “as an instrument of the ruling class”. Law was subordinate to power, and thus at the mercy of arbitrary rulers. The fact that together with democracy and freedom the rule of law was once again established, to which power is also subordinate, was the main achievement of the revolutions and upheavals of 1989.

This was precisely the aim of the “return to Europe” proclaimed in the countries of Central Europe. Gorbachev committed to international law and human rights in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly on December 7th 1988, and in the 1990 negotiations, when his counterpart spoke of western values, he objected that they were universal values that are not inherently western. It was already clear at that time that it would be a difficult process to articulate and implement a culture of the rule of law at all levels. It quickly became apparent that many did not fully understand the concept, and had to learn it painstakingly. This is still the case in many countries, not least in Hungary and Poland.

Yet for many years the biggest challenge in this regard has been Russia, which annexed Crimea in 2014 and has since been waging a covert war in eastern Ukraine, claiming tens of thousands of lives. And since February 24th 2022 we see Russia’s war to destroy Ukraine as a nation with its tanks, missiles and bombers, as well as horrific crimes against the civilian population. Even the most pessimistic among us could not have imagined such a brutal war of conquest, or indeed of annihilation, in the immediate vicinity of the European Union.

Shortly after the invasion, the German Chancellor spoke in the Bundestag of a “turning point” (*Zeitenwende* in German) in a special parliamentary session. Within an incredibly short space of time, the government announced the outline of a new policy in response that doubtlessly startled the majority of listeners (even those in the coalition itself). The government broke with various longstanding tenets of Germany's foreign and security policy. Russia was clearly named and shamed as the aggressor, and Germany took the side of Ukraine without reservation. 100 billion euros was announced for the chronically underfunded Bundeswehr, as well as a future increase in the defence budget to at least two per cent of GDP, a decision that previously seemed unthinkable. Germany was now prepared to supply Ukraine with weapons in order to defend itself, breaking with the post-war consensus that it would not supply weapons to war zones.

Of course, new hurdles have repeatedly appeared, together with the inexplicable discussion about the supply of heavy weapons, but it should be agreed that as much as possible should be provided as quickly as possible so that the Ukrainians can defend themselves. At least that

is my position. Indeed, if Russia were not a nuclear power, we would have to assist Ukraine – as in the Balkans with Slobodan Milošević – to help protect it from worse. Following the outbreak of war, the new Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which had been so hard fought for a short time before, finally became passé. Germany committed itself to harsh sanctions, which were then agreed by the EU with astonishing unity. Since then they have been tightened several times.

Hundreds of thousands and then millions of Ukrainians fled the war, death and destruction, and were willingly taken in by their western and southern neighbours – especially in Poland, but in Germany too. A wave of solidarity swept across Europe, one that continues to this day. Again, we seem to be living in a new era. There has been no dispute in Germany about this welcome, but rather an attempt to share the burden and show solidarity with open arms. Outside Germany, especially in the south, people could not believe what they were seeing, remembering Horst Seehofer's dispute with the former Chancellor about restricting the flow of refugees in 2015.

Epochal break

Meanwhile, the war has been going on for almost one year. Contrary to what many had feared, Ukraine has managed with the help of weapons from the West to stop the conquest and the advance of the Russian army, and some territory has even been regained. Monstrous atrocities and war crimes against the Ukrainian civilian population have come to light. The destruction is immense, with infrastructure deliberately destroyed by Russia in order to impede or even to prevent supplies from reaching the population.

No one knows how long this terrible war will last, in which not only the Ukrainian army, but the entire population is resisting conquest and annihilation. At the same time, the consequences of the war are evident not only in Europe, but throughout the world. The missing wheat supplies from Ukraine and Russia have exacerbated famine globally. Over the last 20 years, we Germans – but also other countries – have made ourselves increasingly dependent on Russian energy supplies, which today means we are in a real predicament and great uncertainty. We ask ourselves anxiously how we will get through the winter, and at the same time how long we can convince our own people that solidarity with Ukraine is necessary,

even if it demands sacrifices from us. I do not think we should be under any illusions: Putin is also destroying the infrastructure in Ukraine in order to make living conditions for the population so difficult that they will flee the country. He wants to precipitate a new refugee crisis, using them as a weapon to bring us in the EU to our very limits and to try and undermine the acceptance of aid to Ukraine among our own population.

In his speech to the nation on October 28th 2022 the German president spoke of an “epochal break” that the Russian war against Ukraine signifies, not only for that country itself, but for us all. However, such an epochal break not only calls for a change of course in a new situation, but also requires an analysis of its prehistory in order to draw appropriate conclusions for future policy. Sometimes it takes time to understand the significance of new developments. Sometimes it takes courage and determination to face facts and not close our eyes. Critical self-questioning is called for – but it must not become mere navel-gazing at a time when decisive action is necessary.

The title for these remarks refers to old thinking and new politics. Yet, this in itself also requires “new thinking”. This formulation reminds me of Gorbachev, who also spoke about a new way of thinking. In recent lectures and discussions on the topic, there has already been a necessary discussion of the mistakes of the past with regard to Russia policy. I would therefore like to turn more towards questions of the future.

This is our war

It is often said that this war is an attack on the international order based on values and recognised law, whose emergence was necessitated by the horrors of two world wars. Even during the Cold War, it was a difficult challenge to preserve the UN Charter and the principles on which it is based. The dilemma is obvious: we must try to preserve this international legal order as the basis of global coexistence, despite the attacks coming from so many sides – for it is not only Russia! China and Turkey also have completely different interests from ours and are trying to enforce the law of the strongest in their own regions. In this respect, solidarity with Ukraine is key, and at the same time we are talking about the defence of this legal order. It is therefore also our war!

However, Russia is a nuclear power, and we cannot simply enter this war directly on the side of Ukraine, as we did in 1999, when Milošević expelled the Kosovars and genocide was imminent.

But how to protect oneself from ultimately becoming susceptible to blackmail? Much will depend on whether the democratic states of the UN are united in their action. The German government is rightly trying to use the chairmanship of the G7 for this purpose and to seek dialogue with the democracies of other continents within the framework of the G20 in order to achieve the greatest possible global unity. However, this must not be a flash in the pan, but have a plan behind it, as well as credibility and staying power. Unfortunately, both our credibility and staying power often leave much to be desired. We need concrete plans to be developed and coordinated beforehand within the framework of the EU, more than has been the case so far. The German-French relationship continues to play a central role here, although it is unfortunately not sufficiently in focus at present.

It is to be assumed that following Russia's war against Ukraine, thought will have to be given to a reform of the UN, a product of the Second World War, given the new global realities. The composition of the permanent members of the Security Council and their veto rights is no longer appropriate in today's world. But I realise that this will be hard to change. Despite the organisation's many shortcomings, the United States always stood by the United Nations and its rulebook throughout the second half of the 20th century. But given the domestic political situation there, the conditions for establishing and maintaining an international order based on law and common rules are becoming increasingly difficult.

Developing globalisation in a spirit of shared responsibility

Whether it's vaccines against the pandemic, rare raw materials or energy, we all live in this world and are far more interdependent than we often realise. Given Russia's war against Ukraine and its deliberate use of dependencies as a weapon, it is becoming increasingly clear that care must be taken to avoid unilateral dependence in the future, especially where we are talking about states that do not share our values – those that are authoritarian or dictatorial. In the past, it has all too often been the case that in the area of economic and trade relations, the criterion of human rights has been viewed as morally honourable but naïve in terms of

realpolitik. So I can only welcome the fact that the German foreign minister is saying we must develop a new concept for its relations with China, in which the various aspects of our interests and values are balanced out. In recent weeks, it has also become part of the public debate: diversification is the order of the day, and this will be a long and complicated restructuring process. Supply chains must be re-examined and specific criteria put in place. Going ahead at national level makes sense in some areas, but ultimately we will have to try to reach an agreement on a common plan (not only with regard to China policy) within the EU. For in the end, coping with the consequences of this war and the challenges posed by climate and energy are directly linked.

A stress test for peace ethics

The European churches, which still fully supported the respective national policies of their governments during the First World War and blessed weapons, became a force for peace in the second half of the 20th century. At the founding of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948, they stated: "War is contrary to the will of God!" Peace ethics therefore played a central role in the German churches, in both East and West.

As a 17-year-old in East Germany I completely refused military service, even in the army construction unit. This was an affront to the state. The question of peace has accompanied me all my life. In the discussion about rearmament at the beginning of the 1980s, the opposition strengthened in the GDR. During the Cold War, with the nuclear powers in hostile confrontation, I was a pacifist, or at least a "nuclear pacifist". Later, in the 1990s, I supported the Bundeswehr deployments because I was convinced they were necessary to maintain a law-based international order, and that we as Germans must not leave the burden of military operations to others alone. This was a much-disputed issue in the churches. The peace memorandum of 2007 then created a consensus that was in my opinion acceptable, but in the end was not really sustainable. The use of military force was consented to as a last possible resort. The statements of the Synod of the German Protestant Church in 2019 then moved back towards a more absolute pacifism.

Against the background of Russia's war of aggression, the debate has flared up again, with German arms deliveries to Ukraine being questioned and a negotiated solution called for. This

was a central topic at the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany, and the inner turmoil that is somehow present in each of us became clear. Who doesn't want peace as soon as possible? It's surely first and foremost the invaded Ukrainians themselves who do, experiencing as they are death and destruction on a daily basis. But what kind of peace? After the discovery of the terrible crimes against Ukrainian civilians in Bucha – and since then in many other places – the surrender of Ukrainian territories with their population to those occupying troops cannot be the peace we recommend.

And what about negotiations: these presuppose trust that the other party will adhere to the negotiated result. Should we persuade Ukraine that they can still trust Putin, who has so far broken all treaties? Or, when it comes to third-party guarantees for the outcome of negotiations, are we prepared to give such guarantees? But that would mean we are prepared to enter the conflict ourselves if such agreements are broken – indeed, to become a party to the war for what has been agreed. Who should be giving such guarantees? Who, if not us, the West? And in the West – do we want the Americans to shoulder this responsibility alone, yet again?

And then, of course, the following must apply: negotiations must not be conducted over the heads of those affected – “Nothing about us without us!” We realise how complex this is – and that the call for peace and negotiations in itself has very concrete consequences.

The importance of history for the conflicts in Eastern Europe

For both Germany and Russia, history plays a central role in foreign policy. For Germany, this applies not only to Israel, but also to its eastern neighbours and to the whole of Eastern Europe. In the past, however, the responsibility that lies with us as Germans because of the crimes committed during the Nazi era was usually focused on Russia in the East. This went so far that it served as an argument for Nord Stream 2. The fact that this responsibility affects all our eastern neighbours – Poland, the Czech Republic, the Baltic states, and together with them all the countries of the former Soviet Union, with Ukraine and Belarus the largest among them – largely fell by the wayside. So far, this has only been recognised in the case of Poland.

Thus the existence of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact is completely blocked out by Russia, as it was previously by the Soviet Union – but also here in Germany. This alliance between the two great dictators of the 20th century – Hitler and Stalin - is basically absent from our public consciousness, our memory and remembrance. I would say this is because in Germany we want to clearly distinguish between the various chapters of our difficult 20th-century history. On the one hand there are the incomparable German Nazi crimes, and on the other the communist crimes – and one should not compare them, let alone consider them together, to preclude the danger of relativising their uniqueness.

But in the period from 1939 to 1941 they did belong together, and even took place in accord with each other. Even the Soviet murder of the more than 20,000 Polish officers in Katyń and elsewhere would not have taken place without this pact – and Germany also therefore bears joint responsibility for it. Not everything that took place in this period can be neatly separated, but on the contrary is part of a deep-seated interrelation that we largely ignore to this day. This has been and will be experienced by the affected peoples themselves, not least by our Polish neighbours. The German remembrance culture, however, insists on difference – and only addresses German crimes in isolation. In the past, this has led to a de facto cooperation with Russia, which wants to consign the Stalinist and other communist crimes to oblivion and makes the victory against Hitler's Germany the unifying seal of the people.

Almost every family was affected by German crimes (in Belarus, for example, more than a quarter of the population died). Unfortunately, the Soviet population was similarly affected by the Stalinist crimes, both before and after the Second World War. These cannot be played off against one other. Forgetting or at least neglecting these connections, Germany regarded Putin's history politics with a certain understanding for a long time. It was quite shocking to me that the great man of the SPD and former chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who with age had become something of an icon of German foreign and European policy across party lines, denied Ukraine independence as a nation shortly before his death. Here we are witness to a profound ignorance of the history of Eastern Europe and its problems, not only in Germany but also, I believe, throughout Western Europe. Even after 1990, for a long time they were not considered important – the dismantling of scientific research on Eastern Europe in recent decades is frightening proof of this!

I myself was saved from such misperceptions through my close contact with Poland (not because of my background as a GDR citizen). I still well remember a conversation with Bronisław Geremek in 1992, when he explained to me why the recognition of Ukraine's independence was so important for Poland and the whole of Europe. In my opinion, an important step would be for Germany to take the initiative for a large-scale “European Historical Institute for the Study of 20th Century History” with a focus on Eastern Europe. It should be financed to a great extent at the European level and, together with a network of national partners, research and present the connections and interdependencies and in this way help to overcome the frequently all too national narratives and perspectives.

Now to Russia itself. In a speech shortly before the war began, Putin was explicit in his historical justification of the war against Ukraine. Following an old Russian nationalist narrative, he denied the existence of the Ukrainian nation and Ukraine's right to exist as a sovereign state. He transferred the image of the “fascist” enemy, which originated in the struggle against Nazi Germany and is so deeply rooted in Russia, to Ukraine, as well as that of “America and NATO” from the Cold War. He is only capable of imagining that the people of Ukraine would turn to the West when spurred on and seduced by America and the West – but in fact they simply want to live self-determined, free lives in a democratic community, and for this they see greater opportunities if they move towards the EU.

For Putin, however, an aim like this in his neighbourhood means a threat to his power – because this desire for freedom could also spread to Russian society. Putin, who spent five years in Dresden as a KGB officer, witnessed the Peaceful Revolution there in 1989. In January 1990, he and the entire office fled the city in its wake, having first destroyed all secret documents. I am convinced that for Putin, this revolution and the subsequent flight were traumatising events that still affect him today. And here the circle closes as far as understanding his politics is concerned – domestically the construction of authoritarian and ultimately dictatorial structures, and externally the hope of rekindling old imperial dreams of power. Unfortunately, for too long German politicians could not or did not want to join the dots.

More influence for foreign and security policy

In 1990, Hans-Dietrich Genscher told me that during the negotiations on German unification a united Germany would not require additional staff in the foreign ministry, as everything needed to represent Germany on the world stage was already in place. This turned out to be a major error. The needs grew, not only because of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, but also as a result of the growing importance of Germany within Europe. Nevertheless, in the following years, not only the Bundeswehr, but also the foreign ministry was hit with increasing financial cuts. Although I have not checked the current figures, I am sure I can safely assume that even today the German foreign ministry can only dream of the human resources with which those in France or the United Kingdom are equipped.

I believe that it is of major importance to bring about a shift not only in terms of the defence budget, but also of the foreign ministry's toolset. After all, foreign and security policy is not just military hardware. It is not enough if we were to meet NATO's two per cent target. We also have much to do in these fields conceptually and administratively. It was in 1990 that Horst Ehmke told me about the most recent reform of the foreign service with shining eyes.

The current "traffic light" coalition is now working on a national security strategy, under the lead of the foreign ministry. This was already planned before the war, but it has since become even more urgent. I understand that the aim here is to develop a policy of "integrated security", which therefore does not only focus on the military dimension, and which is not just a theoretical plan, but includes the structures necessary for it to take shape. For too many years, we have been talking about a comprehensive approach to security in which the civilian and military dimensions of security are brought together, with the further addition of cybersecurity. However, we are still a long way from a set-up that gives this approach coherence and ensures that it works, if only for our own decision-making and the groundwork that precedes it. In addition, there is the need for coherent communication with the EU and NATO.

I was very glad when Lars Klingbeil recently said that Germany must be willing to assume a leading role in foreign policy, which by the way the former Polish foreign minister, Radosław Sikorski, demanded of us 15 years ago. I do not see the ability to do that yet. But it is good that there is now a willingness to rise to the challenge. Leadership, though, must go beyond

declarations and have life breathed into it – through intelligent and inclusive moderation, with original ideas and adequate resources.

In recent decades, the German political class has led the population to believe that security issues would no longer be of great importance to them; or, no better, that others would take them on. A number of wake-up calls, such as that at the 2017 Security Conference, ultimately went unheeded. However, a government that wants to and has to address these issues – as the current one does after the shocking experience of this war – needs popular support. Here we are all challenged, not least the churches and their academies. For to this day, the wind blows violently against anyone in Germany who is facing up to the challenges of our security. On this point we are still at the very beginning.

Western unity – and reconstitution

Following February 24th 2022, not only Putin but probably also many of us were surprised at how quickly and clearly the West reacted to the attack on Ukraine. The EU, which had previously been so divided, proved itself capable of joint action at unusual speed – and also of good coordination with the United States, Canada and Britain. That was a hopeful sign, even if cracks are now reappearing, and that's only thinking of Hungary's special role. Another cause for concern is the apparent lack of coordination between Germany and France, but that seems to me to have been recognised.

The challenges facing us, not only in Germany and Europe, are immense. And we all know that we cannot master them alone, but only as the EU and NATO, that is the West in its entirety. Much will depend on the intensity of communication between the various parties involved – not just the big states. Indeed, the small ones must also be taken seriously, a case in point being that we should now be learning from the strength of judgement of the Baltic States. The debate must be transparent and include a clear explanation of policies to the public, including difficult questions and dilemmas. In recent months, I have often had particular admiration for Robert Habeck – not because he did everything right, but because he shares his thinking and the considerations that have led to difficult decisions. Such openness engages people and helps them to understand and to show solidarity and loyalty, even if they don't think every decision is right – but at least it becomes clear that “up there”,

as people say, it is not just machines that make politics, or hired villains as the conspiracy theorists believe, but that these are usually people who mean it seriously and do their best. This is of immense importance for democracy.

For the unity of the West or indeed an integrated security policy in NATO, it is important that we know and can trust each other. Neither happens automatically, and remains a task for everyone involved. This has a simple human dimension – but also an institutional one. People look each other in the eye, interact – and see that they can or cannot work together. Especially in the latter case, institutional cooperation plays a central role. And this is a delicate balancing act. It must be clear beforehand where there are well-rehearsed mechanisms that can be relied upon in an acute situation, or whether there are open questions that need to be decided politically.

NATO repositions itself

When Putin gave his famous speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, in which he accused the West of having broken all its promises, I was the first German politician to have the chance to react briefly to him. I countered that NATO's eastward enlargement was not an aggressive project of the Americans or the West (this wasn't the aim at all), but the wish of the new democracies like Poland and the Czech Republic, of Presidents Havel and Wałęsa, who felt abandoned by the West. I countered that Russia could feel absolutely safe if all its western neighbours belonged to NATO. His problem lay elsewhere, I said.

It was not until 1993, after Madeleine Albright had travelled through the countries of Central Europe and was convinced particularly by these two presidents, that NATO began to adjust to enlargement. As late as 1997, with the creation of the NATO-Russia Council, Russia accepted the expansion of NATO to include these new democracies and sought new structures for security cooperation. That ended with Putin. At any rate, under Putin's rule Russia did not seek its security in cooperation and reliable common structures, but, as in the 19th century, in buffer zones, in spheres of influence of the "near abroad", as they have long been called in Russian security strategy, thereby denying neighbouring countries the sovereignty to which they are entitled under international law (and indeed in line with the

OSCE principles). But this meant and still means that Putin measures security according to imperial standards, the principle that might is right.

Over the last two decades, this was ultimately conceded to him by those in power in Germany – and that is the problem. By Gerhard Schröder in any case, but also by subsequent governments. When, after the annexation of Crimea and during Russia's covert war in Eastern Ukraine, the concern of the eastern NATO members grew and NATO at least began to station a symbolic number of troops in the east, this was still called “sabre-rattling” in Germany. Although German policy is different today, this has not been forgotten by our eastern neighbours.

Most importantly, with this war, Putin has had to realise that he has miscalculated. All attempts to divide and weaken the West have ultimately failed to bear fruit. NATO is repositioning itself as the security anchor of the West. Even countries that previously defined themselves as neutral are now seeking their common security within the Alliance. Finland and Sweden will become part of NATO. This is an important signal. Both countries will also be important when it comes to ensuring that European countries have a greater weight within NATO in the future – and will also have to provide more resources. Whether this is possible with two per cent of GDP remains to be seen.

Europe will have to take much greater responsibility for its own security. The United States will shift its focus more to Asia, but if it follows a rational policy, it will remain the central security partner within NATO. But who knows what will happen after the next elections in the US. The very thought of this must make us grateful that Joe Biden, an experienced foreign policy expert and a reliable and strong partner, is in the White House now in this time of crisis, during this war. At the same time, it must make us apprehensive that our security depends to such a large extent on uncertain election results in the United States.

Ukraine recently applied for NATO membership. Here I share the position of most NATO countries that the most important thing at present is that we provide Ukraine with all possible help and military support to defend itself, but do not become a party to the war ourselves.

At the same time, however, it is important to make clear to Russia that there is a clear red line with regard to other countries in the region. I am thinking in particular of Moldova. In my opinion, we should not only support Moldova for its help to the many Ukrainian refugees, which is fortunately already happening, but also be prepared to provide security guarantees for the country. How this should be structured in concrete terms would have to be clarified with Moldova itself, which is constitutionally neutral.

After this war, further NATO memberships will have to be considered as part of a new security strategy. The structural relationship between the EU and NATO must also be deepened. Turkey has blocked that from happening for a long time, but this must be overcome. For the foreseeable future, security in Europe will have to be conceived as security from Russia. Which Russia we will have to deal with in the future remains open today. It is to be hoped that it will one day become a state that is a reliable member of the international community – and can thus once again become a partner on security issues.

The EU finally takes up the challenge

In my opinion, the German public has not sufficiently perceived the fundamental change in policy that the EU has made after the launch of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. The willingness to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova (and Georgia, as soon as it is ready) is truly a long-awaited breakthrough and policy change that previously seemed almost unthinkable. The German government deserves high praise for helping to achieve this, and for the fact that it is now also strongly committed to the integration of the Western Balkan countries. Hopefully, this policy will finally gain momentum! Of course, there can be no quick accession to the EU, because it is a community based on law – and this law and its institutions must first be set in motion. This also means an end to oligarchic rule – and that is a great challenge, not least for Ukraine.

However, I would like to make a structural proposal on the way to membership. I already did it in the 90s, when it had no chance – but I still think it is useful and helpful. By this I'm talking of observer status in the European Parliament for the countries in the process of joining the EU. Such observers – who would belong both to the parties making up the government and the opposition – would get to know the political culture in the EP and take this discourse back

to their own countries. I am convinced that this would have a profound effect, and would contribute to greater realism and a more nuanced understanding. A transfer of knowledge in both directions. We need this increase in knowledge that began during these months of war, and we must give it institutional permanence. These observers should also be elected in their own countries – thus resulting in a European election campaign in these states. Imagine the political signal: a European election campaign in Ukraine.

Perhaps we have learnt in recent months that the European East is of existential importance for us. We must get to know it better – far better than before – in all its complex history, and to take it seriously. This will require a great deal of effort.

The huge challenge of reconstruction aid for Ukraine is very acute. A major joint effort is needed here, but it cannot mean returning to the status quo ante. Reconstruction will have to be combined with modernisation, taking into account for example the climate issue, renewable energy supply, modern transport infrastructure, but also the administration. This is a field in which Germans and Poles could cooperate excellently.

Foreign policy and civil society

I am one of those who considered the Ostpolitik and détente policies of Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr to be beneficial for us in East Germany. I am convinced that it made a significant contribution to finally ending the Cold War. One error of judgement by the protagonists of this policy, however, must be remarked on: they did not expect that in the Eastern Bloc, in these dictatorships, a political entity would emerge from within society that would gain such potency. When Polish Solidarity came into being in 1980 (and later also the opposition groups in other countries), its importance was completely misjudged and it was regarded rather as a problematic development that endangered Ostpolitik. The establishment of the Social Democratic Party in East Germany was thus regarded by Egon Bahr as a threat to his policy. As Gert Weisskirchen told me, Willy Brandt once commented on Bahr's prioritisation of stability with the remark "my little Metternich," and thus hit the nail on the head. Willy Brandt himself admitted to Bronisław Geremek at a conference in Paris shortly before his death that this emphasis on stability and the miscalculation of the importance of society's demands for human rights was an error of judgement.

This error of judgement remained a part of the SPD foreign policy for a long time. Egon Bahr in particular stuck to this line throughout his life – and his influence on SPD foreign policy was enormous. In 2013, he said at a school in Heidelberg: “International politics is never about democracy and human rights. It is about interests and states. Keep that in mind, no matter what you are told in history class.”

On the other hand, one of the lessons of 1989 in my view is that democracy cannot be exported (this was another misjudgement that had been made previously), but that it is a key challenge to show solidarity with and support the tender plants of democratic civil society in authoritarian and dictatorial countries. The democrats in these places need international solidarity and support to facilitate their practical activities, while at the same time international public opinion contributes at least a little to their protection.

It is striking that countries with a communist past have learnt this lesson and are advocating it in the EU. But Germany and the EU as a whole are still quite weak and underdeveloped in this field. Here we can truly learn from the US.

Ten years ago, the “European Endowment for Democracy” was created as a means of reaching this goal during the Polish EU Presidency, in order to provide civil society with flexible and rapid support in the form of small amounts of funding. This European foundation is doing remarkable work. Unfortunately, neither the EU itself nor the member states are providing enough recognition or funding in order to do justice to this enormous task, which is staring us in the face in many countries. More should be done in this area as a matter of urgency – we need to use all the means at our disposal.

This is particularly true of civil society in Russia and Belarus. At the moment, little is possible in either country. But we can support the democratic exile. It would be a great accomplishment if Germany were to become a country of democratic exile. For Belarus, this is happening now in Poland and Lithuania. Germany could do the same for Russian exiles. This would include fast and flexible visas, institutional and financial support through an

infrastructure that allows these people to be active on the international arena from Germany, on behalf of the cause for which they had already campaigned at home – a democratic Russia.

Translated by Adam Carr

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