



# Germany's Russia Policy in Light of the Ukraine Conflict: Interdependence Theory and *Ostpolitik*

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*Abstract: Germany's recent Ostpolitik (Eastern Policy) has become a major topic in Western discussions about how to deal best with Vladimir Putin's Russia. This essay proceeds from Interdependence Theory to argue that the Berlin-promoted Nord Stream gas pipeline projects are loosening Russian-Ukrainian economic ties, and thereby easing conflict between the two post-Soviet states. Ukraine's surprisingly peaceful development during its first 20 years as an independent state is contrasted with the escalation of tensions between Moscow and Kyiv in 2013-2014. The completion of the first Nord Stream pipe in October 2012 is seen as a crucial development that untied the Kremlin's hand vis-à-vis Ukraine. The lowering of Moscow's dependence on the Ukrainian gas transportation system, due to the new Baltic Sea pipeline, eventually led to a territorial conflict between Ukraine and Russia.*

The genesis and course of the Ukraine conflict during the last years contain a bitter irony for German foreign policy thinking and conduct. Moscow's escalating aggressiveness toward Kyiv—beginning with Russia's rising economic and political pressure on Ukraine throughout 2013—can be seen as a confirmation of a central axiom of German *Ostpolitik* over the past 50 years.<sup>1</sup> The emergence of the Ukraine conflict demonstrates the

1 On *Ostpolitik* until 2014: Angela E. Stent, *Russia and Germany Reborn: Unification, the Soviet Collapse, and the New Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Christopher Chivvis and Thomas Rid, "The Roots of Germany's Russia Policy," *Survival*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2009), pp. 105-122; Stephen Szabo, "Can Berlin and Washington Agree on Russia?" *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2009), pp. 23-41; Constanze Stelzenmuller, "Germany's Russia Question," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 1 (2009), pp. 89-100; Graham Timmins, "German-Russian Bilateral Relations and EU Policy on Russia: Between Normalization and the 'Multilateral Reflex,'" *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2011), pp. 189-199; Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, "Wandel statt Anbiederung: Deutsche Russlandpolitik auf dem Prüfstand [Change through Ingratiation: German Policy towards Russia on Trial]," *Osteuropa*, vol. 63, no. 7 (2013), pp. 179-223.

relevance of the interdependence-theoretical philosophy with the help of which German efforts to deepen economic collaboration with Russia and other non-Western countries is often rationalized.<sup>2</sup>

Interdependence theory can be applied to both, the cooperation and the confrontation between the Russian Federation and Ukraine since 1991. This theoretical framework is well-suited to explain the long-standing absence of war between the two countries, as well as the escalating tensions and eventually armed conflict between Moscow and Kyiv in 2013-2014. An intensification of Russian economic and political warfare against Ukraine immediately followed the first Nord Stream pipeline's completion at the end of 2012. The Ukrainian case is, thus, a textbook example of the serious consequences of underestimating the role that economic—especially energy—interdependence between states can play in securing peace.<sup>3</sup>

2 On German *Ostpolitik* after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014: Tuomas Frosberg, “From Ostpolitik to ‘Frostpolitik’? Merkel, Putin and German Foreign Policy toward Russia,” *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 1 (2016), pp. 21-42; Hannes Adomeit, “Müssen wir Russland besser verstehen lernen? Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit den Argumenten für eine neue Russlandpolitik [Should We Learn to Better Understand Russia? A Critical Assessment of Arguments for a New Russia Policy],” *Sirius: Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2019), pp. 224-241; *idem*, “Bilanz der deutschen Russlandpolitik seit 1990 [The Record of German Policy Towards Russia since 1990],” *Sirius: Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2020), pp. 276-292; Maryna Rabinovych, “How the Federal Republic Reacted to Russia’s Annexation of Crimea: Berlin’s Diplomatic Response and German Media Representations in 2014–2020,” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2020), pp. 213-243; John Lough, *Germany’s Russia Problem: The Struggle for Balance in Europe* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2021); Liana Fix, *Germany’s Role in European Russia Policy: A New German Power?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Stefan Meister, “A Pragmatic Policy towards Russia: Germany Should Strengthen Its Negotiating Position,” *DGAP Memo*, Sept. 8, 2021, [dgap.org/en/research/publications/pragmatic-policy-toward-russia](https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/pragmatic-policy-toward-russia); Andreas Umland, “Merkel’s Ambivalent Legacy in Post-Soviet Eastern Europe: German *Ostpolitik* in the Shadow of Russia’s Imperial Revenge,” *Foreign Policy Association*, Oct. 8, 2021, [foreignpolicyblogs.com/2021/10/08/merkels-ambivalent-legacy-in-post-soviet-eastern-europe-german-ostpolitik-in-the-shadow-of-russias-imperial-revenge/](https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2021/10/08/merkels-ambivalent-legacy-in-post-soviet-eastern-europe-german-ostpolitik-in-the-shadow-of-russias-imperial-revenge/).

3 Nataliya Esakova, *European Energy Security: Analyzing the EU-Russia Energy Security Regime in Terms of Interdependence Theory* (Berlin: Springer, 2013); Alexander Libman, Susan Stewart, and Kirsten Westphal, “Dealing with Differences: The Role of Interdependence in the Relationship with Russia,” in: Volker Perthes, ed., *Outlook 2016: Concepts and Realities of International Politics* (Berlin: SWP, 2016), pp. 18-22; and Kristi Raik and András Rácz, eds., *Post-Crimea Shift in EU-Russia Relations: From Fostering Interdependence to Managing Vulnerabilities* (Tallinn: ICDS, 2019).

## The Ukrainian Peace Miracle until 2014

How did the Russian-Ukrainian war become possible? In the early and mid-1990s, Ukraine fully surrendered its thousands of nuclear warheads inherited from the Soviet Union to Russia in connection with the Ukrainian accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In the famous 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the three depositary states of the NPT—the United States, Great Britain, and Russia—promised Ukraine the security of its borders, and non-application of political, economic, and military pressure on the country.<sup>4</sup> And indeed, in the nearly 20 years that followed the December 1994 deal, the post-Soviet non-nuclear-weapons country was able to achieve an astonishing *Frieden ohne Waffen* (peace without arms), as a popular phrase of the German pacifist movement goes.

That happened although neither Washington nor Brussels helped Kyiv secure this quiet phase which was unusually long in the post-Soviet regional-historical context marred by wars in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia since 1991. Neither the U.S. nuclear umbrella nor the economic power of the European Union (EU) protected the young East European republic on its risky post-colonial path. Although the country was largely left to its own devices, Ukraine, unlike other non-integrated states emerging from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and USSR, preserved its stability, sovereignty, and integrity until 2014.

Moreover, post-Soviet Ukraine achieved its surprising peace feat despite its location on a risky geopolitical fault line. The very name of the state “Ukraine,” which can be translated as “borderland,” expresses the precarious security situation of its territory on the edge of former European empires.<sup>5</sup> Already in the early 1990s, the young Ukrainian state was surrounded by war zones in Transnistria, Chechnya, and Abkhazia to its west and east. In the mid-

4 Mariana Budjeryn, “The Breach: Ukraine’s Territorial Integrity and the Budapest Memorandum,” *NPIHP Issues Brief*, no. 3, 2014; *idem*, “The Power of the NPT: International Norms and Ukraine’s Nuclear Disarmament,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2015), pp. 203-237; Andreas Umland, “The Ukraine Example: Nuclear Disarmament Doesn’t Pay,” *World Affairs*, vol. 178, no. 4 (2016), pp. 45-49; Mariana Budjeryn and Andreas Umland, “Damage Control: The Breach of the Budapest Memorandum and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime,” in: Oxana Schmies, ed., *NATO’s Enlargement and Russia: A Strategic Challenge in the Past and Future* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2021), pp. 177-190.

5 Margarita M. Balmaceda, ed., *On the Edge: Ukrainian-Central European-Russian Security Triangle* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001); and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, *Borderlands into Bordered Lands: Geopolitics of Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2010).

1990s, Kyiv had to contend briefly with a pro-Russian separatist movement on Crimea which, however, proceeded peacefully and soon subsided.<sup>6</sup>

### Early Orientation to the West

Moreover, Ukraine had managed, for more than twenty years after gaining independence in 1991, to preserve peaceful relations with Russia. Kyiv achieved this result in spite of the fact that, unlike Minsk or Yerevan, it decided early on against re-entering Moscow's sphere of influence. Contrary to some popular narratives about an alleged ambivalence of the Ukrainian state's international orientation, the country's political class made pro-Western geopolitical commitments already during the first decade and a half after independence.

In 1998, Ukraine officially declared full EU membership to be its state goal in the presidential decree "On Reaffirming the Strategy of Ukraine's Integration into the European Union."<sup>7</sup> In 2003, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted the law "On the Fundamentals of Ukraine's National Security." Article 6 of this law states that Ukraine "strives for integration into the European political, economic and legal space with the goal of membership in the European Union, as well as into the Euro-Atlantic security space with the goal of membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" (NATO).<sup>9</sup>

Kyiv made these two fateful decisions under President Leonid Kuchma who was, at the time of the acts' adoption, considered to be a pro-Russian politician. He served in office from mid-1994 to early 2005 and came from the northeastern Ukrainian region of Chernihiv. The Ukrainian government leaders during the adoption of the above pro-Western decree and law were also eastern Ukrainians. Valery Pustovoytenko was prime minister from 1997 to 1999, when Ukraine first officially declared full EU membership as its state goal; he is from the southeastern Ukrainian region of Mykolayiv. Viktor Yanukovych

6 Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine - Crimea – Russia: Triangle of Conflict* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2007); and Gwendolyn Sasse, *The Crimea Question: Identity, Transition, and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

7 André Härtel, *Westintegration oder Grauzonen-Szenario? Die EU- und WTO-Politik der Ukraine vor dem Hintergrund der inneren Transformation (1998-2009)* [Western Integration or Gray Zone Scenario? Ukraine's EU and WTO Policies against the Background of the Internal Transformation (1998-2009)] (Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2012).

8 "Pro zatverdzhennia Stratehii integratsii Ukrainy do Evropeis'skoho Soiuzu [On Reaffirming the Strategy of Ukraine's Integration into the European Union]," *Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy*, zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/615/98.

9 "Pro osnovy natsional'noi bezpeky Ukrainy [On the Fundamentals of Ukraine's National Security]," *Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy*, zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/964-15.

served his first term as prime minister from 2002 to 2005, when Ukraine legislated the goal of full EU and NATO membership; he is from the Donetsk region in the east. Other politicians who later played key roles in Ukraine's nascent integration with the West, such as Presidents Viktor Yushchenko (2005-2010), Petro Poroshenko (2014-2019), and Volodymyr Zelensky (since 2019), as well as two-time Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko (2005, 2007-2010), hail from eastern or southern and thus largely Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine too.

With the two acts of 1998 and 2003, Kyiv had fixed its orientation to the West already before the pro-Western Orange Revolution of 2004.<sup>10</sup> With this and many other signals, Ukraine demonstrated early on its disinterest in Moscow's various integration models and security alliances. Moreover, virtually all of Ukraine's decisive foreign policy and legislative steps toward the West were co-initiated and implemented by officials who were not from traditionally pro-EU and pro-NATO western Ukraine. In fact, they often were not even from central Ukraine, but from regions of the country that are largely Russophone.

Despite Ukraine's early disengagement from Russian neo-imperial integration schemes and advances towards the EU and NATO, it had managed to avoid, until 2014, the fate of the likewise Western-oriented republics of Moldova and Georgia. This temporary success had been, among others, due to Ukraine's close economic ties with Russia. While Moldova and Georgia, among other post-Soviet states, experienced war and fragmentation as early as the 1990s, Ukraine developed peacefully until early 2014—despite high domestic political and social tensions as well as numerous Russian statements expressing appetite for Ukrainian territories and displeasure with Ukrainian independence. Ukraine's successful security record over two decades can be explained, in part, through the Interdependence Theory of international relations, which is popular not least in Germany.<sup>11</sup>

## Peace through Trade

A major determinant of Ukraine's geopolitical position until about a year before the Euromaidan Revolution was its mutually dependent relationship with Russia, a petrostate and world-wide exporter of energy, due to the large

10 Andreas Umland, "The Six Futures of Ukraine: Competing Scenarios for a European Pivot State," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2017), pp. 261-278.

11 Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *International Relations Theory: Power and Interdependence* (New York, NY: Longmans, 1977).

Ukrainian gas transportation system (GTS).<sup>12</sup> Until 2011-2012, more than half of the West Siberian and Central Asian natural gas coming from Russia for the EU flowed through Ukraine. The annual revenues of the state-owned conglomerate Gazprom from its gas exports to Europe were then and remain today critical for the functioning of the entire Russian socio-economic system as well as certain foreign political operations.

With special price policies, Gazprom is subsidizing businesses, agencies, and households throughout Russia and some allied entities, such as Belarus or Transnistria. Moreover, Gazprom also supports a myriad of not-for-profit projects in and outside Russia. In doing all of this, the monopoly draws largely on the high income from its lucrative international trade outside the post-Soviet space.

To be sure, it was not only the case that Russia was and partly is tied to Ukraine via its once huge and today still considerable gas exports via the Ukrainian GTS. Ukraine too heavily benefited in the past, and still benefits today, albeit to a lesser extent, from the annual transit fees for the transmission of West Siberian and Central Asian gas through its territory to the EU.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Ukraine's high geo-economic leverage vis-à-vis Moscow through its control of a large share of Russian gas exports until 2011-2012 was and, to a lesser degree today, is more important than the financial aspect of this interdependence.<sup>14</sup> For the first twenty years after the break-up of the USSR, Kyiv could have cut off more than half of Russia's natural gas exports to the EU at any moment. Russia had only limited alternative gas transport options until about a year before the Euromaidan Revolution began.<sup>15</sup>

12 Margarita M. Balmaceda, *Politics of Energy Dependency: Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania between Domestic Oligarchs and Russian Pressure* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

13 Margarita M. Balmaceda, *Energy Dependency, Politics and Corruption in the Former Soviet Union: Russia's Power, Oligarchs' Profits and Ukraine's Missing Energy Policy, 1995-2006* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); *idem*, *Russian Energy Chains: The Remaking of Technopolitics from Siberia to Ukraine to the European Union* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2021); Thane Gustafson, *The Bridge: Natural Gas in a Redivided Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

14 Andreas Umland, "Berlin, Kiew, Moskau und die Röhre: Die deutsche Ostpolitik im Spannungsfeld der Russisch-ukrainischen Beziehungen [Berlin, Kyiv, Moscow and the Pipe: German Eastern Policy in the Tension Field of Russian-Ukrainian Relations]," *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2013), pp. 413-428.

15 Andreas Stein, "Zu den ökonomischen Auswirkungen der Ostseepipeline auf die Ukraine [On the Economic Impact of the Baltic Sea Pipeline on Ukraine]," *Ukraine-Nachrichten*, May 13, 2010, [ukraine-nachrichten.de/ökonomischen-auswirkungen-ostseepipeline-ukraine\\_2449](http://ukraine-nachrichten.de/ökonomischen-auswirkungen-ostseepipeline-ukraine_2449).

In September 2011, the interdependence of Kyiv and Moscow was already reduced by the commissioning of the first leg of the Nord Stream pipeline through the Baltic Sea. It decreased again after the ceremonial opening of the second leg of the first Nord Stream pipeline, by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in October 2012. A third reduction of Russian-Ukrainian interdependence occurred with the start of gas flow through the Turkstream pipeline via the Black Sea in January 2020. The start of operation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline would make the Ukrainian GTS redundant for the EU-Russia gas trade.<sup>16</sup> This change is feared not only in Ukraine but also in such EU countries as Slovakia, Poland, and the three Baltic countries. The project would have more serious geopolitical consequence than the often-cited loss of revenue that Ukraine would suffer from further detour of Russian natural gas to a new Baltic pipeline.<sup>17</sup>

### Gaps in the Western Nord Stream 2 Discussion

The serious geopolitical implications of Gazprom's massive new infrastructure projects are obscured deliberately by Russian businessmen, politicians, diplomats, and state propaganda tools, such as *Russia Today* or *Sputnik*. The complicated geo-economy of Eastern Europe is also often presented incompletely or distorted in Western mass media, and even in some relevant expert debates. For example, many publications are misleading on the past and future usage as well as significance of Russian payments for gas transport through Ukraine, and on Kyiv's expected financial net losses resulting from a reduction in gas transit through Nord Stream 2. The Ukrainian revenues from the transportation of Russian natural gas are often not set against Kyiv's

16 Severin Fischer, "Nord Stream 2: Trust in Europe," *CSS Policy Perspectives*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2016); Andreas Goldthau, "Assessing Nord Stream 2. Regulation, Geopolitics & Energy Security in the EU, Central Eastern Europe & the UK," *European Center for Energy and Resource Security Strategy Papers*, no. 10 (2016); Kai-Olaf Lang and Kirsten Westphal, "Nord Stream 2: A Political and Economic Contextualisation," *SWP Research Papers*, no. 3 (2017); and Margarita Assenova, *Europe and Nord Stream 2: Myths, Reality, and the Way Forward* (Washington, D.C: The Center for European Policy Analysis, 2018).

17 Andreas Heinrich and Heiko Pleines, "Towards a Common European Energy Policy? Energy Security Debates in Poland and Germany: The Case of the Nord Stream Pipeline," in: Anne Jenichen and Ulrike Liebert, eds., *Europeanisation vs. Renationalisation: Learning from Crisis for European Political Development* (Leverkusen: Barbara Budrich, 2019), pp. 169-182.

significant costs for maintaining and modernizing the existing transmission service.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, Ukrainian expenditures for ensuring the effective operation of its onshore pipeline system are often compared incompletely with the total costs of the construction and maintenance of the underwater Nord and Turk Stream pipes and their domestic supply infrastructure. The environmental costs of Gazprom's projects are partly illuminated in relevant press and expert reports, yet have been assessed only insufficiently in governmental, industrial and public deliberations so far. These omissions have led to skewed picture of the winners and losers of the three costly Baltic and Black Sea pipelines. Either deliberately or unintentionally sketchy cost-benefit calculations for the construction and operation of the technologically challenging underwater pipes and their onshore infrastructure have created a misleading impression in parts of the European public. Both Russia and its Western gas consumers appear as hostages to an alleged Kyiv rip-off for Ukrainian pumping services that, purportedly, are available elsewhere at a far lower price.

For more than a decade, certain West European supporters of the two Nord Stream projects have been circulating supposedly reliable insider information that the Ukrainian pipeline network inherited from the Soviet Union is on the verge of physical collapse. This seemingly plausible assessment of post-Soviet industrial capacity becomes, however, more questionable with every year of mostly reliable gas transit through Ukraine. If one believed rumors that have been spread in Brussels, Berlin, Vienna, and other Western European capitals for many years, Ukraine's capacity to transport Russian natural gas should have significantly declined or disappeared during the last years—due to the allegedly decrepit condition of the Ukrainian pipeline system.

Western media and expert debates have largely ignored the question of what social consequences a possible cessation of all Russian natural gas transit through Ukraine to the EU would cause. Despite an intense discussion of the Baltic Sea pipelines in hundreds of texts and meetings over the last years, this potentially grave problem for Ukraine is almost entirely absent in West European debates of Gazprom's underwater projects. In contrast, among East European and some North American energy specialists, there is high concern about how gas supplies to the Ukrainian population and industry can be secured after Nord Stream 2 starts operation. Should Moscow decide to cease all Russian gas transit through Ukraine in the future, the operation of Ukraine's

18 Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk, Marcin Terlikowski, Zareba Wiśniewski, and Szymon Bartosz, "Nord Stream 2. Inconvenient Questions," *PISM Policy Papers*, no. 5(165) (2018); and Piotr Przybyło, *The Real Financial Costs of Nord Stream 2: Economic Sensitivity Analysis of the Alternatives to the Offshore Pipeline* (Warsaw: Casimir Pulaski Foundation, 2019).



internal gas transportation may become financially unviable. The pressure previously generated by Russian gas injection in the overall Ukrainian pipeline system would be missing. How these financial and technical issues will affect Ukraine and might be resolved is, despite its larger political implications, a non-issue in West European debates.

It is an open question how energy transport within Ukraine can continue should the pipeline network not any longer fulfill its cross-border transit function. The pipeline system, built in the 1970s for simultaneous external and internal use, might not be fully operational and not any longer economical, once it is only necessary for its secondary task of supplying gas to Ukrainian customers. Parts of the population as well as of Ukraine's chemical and heavy industry could be cut off from vital natural gas supplies. Such a potential crisis could be due to a lack of funding for continued operation of the GTS, or/and a drop in pressure in the internal Ukrainian pipeline system. Certain parts of the Russian elite, it should be remembered, do not hide their intense hatred towards the post-Soviet Ukrainian state. A subversion of the economic and social life of the "brother nation" may, in fact, be a main function of the entire – logistically and economically, in fact, unnecessary – Nord Stream 2 project.

### **Alienation Through Disentanglement**

Some already obvious lessons from the first Nord Stream project are instructive, in this regard. Russia's political and economic pressure on Ukraine increased quickly after completion of construction of the first new subsea pipeline from Vyborg to Lubmin in late 2012. In August 2013, for example, Moscow blocked all trade between Russia and Ukraine for about a week. This blockage was a warning against Kyiv's planned signing of an association agreement with the EU. Russia's political rhetoric, public diplomacy, and propaganda machinery ran hot against Ukraine's drift toward the European Union, when pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich was still in power, and when his soon demise was not yet foreseeable.<sup>19</sup>

On February 20, 2014, two days before Yanukovich was thrown out of office by Ukraine's parliament, a large-scale Russian military intervention began in the southern Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea. Shortly thereafter, Yanukovich fled to Russia. Moscow actively incited pro-Russian activists to revolt against

19 Andreas Umland, "Tor zum Osten oder Krisenherd? Wie das EU-Ukraine-Abkommen den postsowjetischen Raum verändern würde [Gateway to the East or Trouble Spot? How the EU-Ukraine Agreement Would Change the Post-Soviet Space]," *Internationale Politik*, vol. 68, no. 6 (2013), pp. 108-112.

Kyiv in several cities in eastern and southern Ukraine in March 2014. In April 2014, a paramilitary group led by notorious Federal Security Service (FSB) veteran Igor Girkin sparked a pseudo-civil war in the Donets Basin. In fact, his irregular armed unit started a delegated Russian war against Ukraine which soon also involved regular Russian troops such as the infamous BUK anti-aircraft unit that accidentally shot down Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 on July 17, 2014.<sup>20</sup>

Since then, Ukraine has been marked by foreign occupation, a simmering conflict, sometimes high- and sometimes low-intensity warfare, as well as a partially failed state. With this fatal development, the Ukrainians, in many respects, merely followed the earlier fates of the Moldovans and Georgians.<sup>21</sup> The 2014 Russian-Ukrainian escalation in Crimea and the Donets Basin confirmed the validity of the interdependence theory and relevance of this aspect of German *Ostpolitik* over the past 50 years. Similar to the way modern states often experience political – as the Germans say—*Annäherung durch Verflechtung* (approximation through entanglement) of their economies, the economic disentanglement of nations can lead to their rapid alienation. This, at least, is suggested by the soon escalation of Russian-Ukrainian tensions after the first Nord Stream pipeline went into full operation in late 2012.

The post-Soviet republics of Moldova and Georgia, which are also Western-oriented but have always been far less economically intertwined with Russia since the Soviet Union's collapse, were in a geo-economically different position from Ukraine from the beginning. Chişinău and Tbilisi, unlike Kyiv, never possessed significant economic leverage over the former imperial center.

20 David R. Marples and Frederick V. Mills, eds., *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Analyses of a Civil Revolution* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2015); Victor Stepanenko and Yaroslav Pylynskyi, eds., *Ukraine after the Euromaidan: Challenges and Hopes* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015); Olga Bertelsen, ed., *Revolution and War in Contemporary Ukraine: The Challenge of Change* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2016); Elizabeth A. Wood, William E. Pomeranz, E. Wayne Merry, and Maxim Trudolyubov, *Roots of Russia's War in Ukraine* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016); Derek Averre and Kataryna Wolczuk, eds., *The Ukraine Conflict: Security, Identity and Politics in the Wider Europe* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019); Mychailo Wynnyckij, *Ukraine's Maidan, Russia's War: A Chronicle and Analysis of the Revolution of Dignity* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2019); Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jakob Hauter, ed., *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014–2020* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2021); *idem*, "Forensic Conflict Studies: Making Sense of War in the Social Media Age," *Media, War & Conflict*, Aug. 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352211037325>.

21 Vasile Rotaru, *Russia, the EU, and the Eastern Partnership: Building Bridges or Digging Trenches?* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2018).

Therefore, unlike Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia never enjoyed the luxury of territorial integrity and political sovereignty. Chişinău and Tbilisi can now look back on almost 30 years of Moscow interference in their internal affairs. The by now largely similar fates of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine illustrate a broader trend in the post-communist space after the Cold War's end.

### **The East European Regional and Historical Context**

Most European post-communist states joined the West relatively quickly, after the Eastern bloc's collapse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Soon thereafter they began accession procedures with the EU and/or NATO. In contrast, Belarus and Armenia – while also being European – went back under the Kremlin's wing after the Soviet Union's disappearance in 1991. Yerevan and Minsk joined the Moscow-dominated "Tashkent Pact" in 1992 and 1993, respectively, and the resulting Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002. In 2010 and 2015, these two countries also became members of the Eurasian Customs Union and later the Eurasian Economic Union, both conceived by Putin.

Most East European and South Caucasian countries that either did not want or were not able to join either bloc have been plagued by armed conflicts and political separatism. From Azerbaijan to Bosnia-Herzegovina, many post-communist countries that had broken away from their old hegemony, but had not found a new international embedment became, at some point, failed states. They could not or partly today cannot ensure an entirely peaceful development or/and full territorial control for their nations. Armenia and Belarus merely escaped this bitter fate by ceding a part of the independence they had gained from Moscow in 1991 back to post-Soviet Russia. (Central Asia is a more complicated case because of the diversity of foreign actors in that region.)

For historians of imperialism, the sad fates of the young, unincorporated republics of post-communist Southeast Europe and South Caucasus are hardly surprising. They represent historical regularities rather than exceptions. The political detachment of former colonies from onetime empires often proceeds in a bloody and/or initially incomplete manner. After gaining formal independence, the achievement of actual sovereignty and territorial integrity often must be fought for at significant expense by new post-colonial nations that cannot count on the benevolent support of powerful third parties.<sup>22</sup>

Such historical insights were among the reasons for a remarkable discussion among leading Western security experts about Ukraine shortly after

22 Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

the Soviet Union's collapse. In the early-mid 1990s, *Foreign Affairs* magazine, among other forums, featured a heated controversy over the question of war and peace in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. The debate included John J. Mearsheimer, professor of international relations at the University of Chicago;<sup>23</sup> Steven E. Miller, editor of the U.S. journal *International Security*;<sup>24</sup> and the late Samuel P. Huntington, professor of government at Harvard University, among others.<sup>25</sup> These scholars, as well as further political scientists, discussed what Kyiv's best foreign policy strategy might be in light of growing tensions within Ukraine, as well as Moscow's appetites regarding both eastern and southern Ukrainian territories. While the scholars offered rather diverse policy advice to Kyiv and the West, all discussants agreed that achieving full independence from Russia was likely to be a high-risk road for those new post-Soviet states who could not count on outside support.

Against this background, many political scientists and historians may have wondered before 2014 how Ukraine had remained resilient so long. Shouldn't this country have disintegrated, at the latest, after the pro-Western Orange Revolution of 2004?<sup>26</sup> Until October 2012, interdependence theorists could have answered to this question by pointing to Moscow's and Kyiv's high mutual dependence and these interconnections' peacekeeping effects: "Energy cooperation hinders military conflicts!" Oddly, it was Germany, which considers itself as an interdependence-promoting peace power, that played, with its first Nord Stream project, a central role in loosening Russia's reliance on Ukraine. After the start of operation of Turk Stream in 2020, Berlin is now preparing to fully abolish, with Nord Stream 2, any remaining Russian dependence on the Ukrainian pipeline system for its gas exports to the EU.

23 John J. Mearsheimer, "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3 (1993), pp. 50-66. See also: Peter Toft, "John J. Mearsheimer: An Offensive Realist between Geopolitics and Power," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2015), pp. 381-408.

24 Steven E. Miller, "The Case Against a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, (1993), pp. 67-80.

25 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

26 Igor Torbakov, *After Empire: Nationalist Imagination and Symbolic Politics in Russia and Eurasia in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2018); Ostep Kushnir, *Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism: The Divergent Break* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018); and Serhii Plokhyy, *Lost Kingdom: A History of Russian Nationalism from Ivan the Great to Vladimir Putin* (London: Penguin, 2018).

## German Geopolitical Daydreaming

The German political class's cognitive dissonance regarding even the basics of the tense Russian-Ukrainian relationship was a result of, among others, widespread lack of Ukraine expertise in Berlin's federal ministries, editorial offices, political parties, think-tanks and educational institutions, before 2014.<sup>27</sup> The popular German approach of *Russland verstehen* (understanding Russia) proved to be unsuitable regarding the Ukraine crisis.<sup>28</sup> After the annexation of Crimea and the start of the Donbas war, many Germans and Russians realized they had apparently misunderstood each other. In 2014, many experts, diplomats and politicians across Germany could not any longer comprehend Moscow's behavior, and were taken aback by the degree of the Kremlin's aggressiveness vis-à-vis the Ukrainian state.<sup>29</sup>

In its turn, some in Moscow may have been perplexed about why suddenly many Germans did not any longer want to "understand Russia." Why couldn't the same approaches that had been earlier employed in assessing Russia's behavior in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia for more than 20 years also apply to Crimea and the Donbas in 2014? At a time when Russian troops were on Moldovan territory against Chișinău's expressed will as well as in manifest contradiction to bi- and multilateral agreements, Putin was invited to the German parliament in September 2001. The new Russian President received a standing ovation from most federal deputies after his German-language speech in the Bundestag.<sup>30</sup> Now, however, Putin has, for some reason,

27 Andreas Umland, "Weißer Fleck: Die Ukraine in der deutschen Öffentlichkeit [White Spot: Ukraine in the German Public]," *Osteuropa*, vol. 62, no. 9 (2012), pp. 127-133.

28 Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, "Lehren aus dem Ukraine Konflikt: Das Stockholm-Syndrom der Putin-Versteher [Lessons from the Ukraine Conflict: The Stockholm Syndrome of the Putin Understanders]," *Osteuropa*, vol. 65, no. 4 (2015), pp. 3-24; *idem*, Claudia Crawford, and Tim Peters, eds., *Lehren aus dem Ukraine Konflikt: Krisen vorbeugen, Gewalt verhindern* [Lessons from the Ukraine Conflict: Obviating Crises, Preventing Violence] (Leverkusen: Barbara Budrich, 2021).

29 Wolfgang Seibel, "Arduous Learning or New Uncertainties? German Diplomacy and the Ukrainian Crisis," *Global Policy*, vol. 6, issue supplement S1, 2015, pp. 56-72; Stefan Meister, "From *Ostpolitik* to EU-Russia Interdependence: Germany's Perspective," in: Raik & Rácz, *Post-Crimea Shift in EU-Russia Relations*, pp. 25-44; and André Härtel, "The EU Member States and the Crisis in Ukraine: Towards an Eclectic Explanation," *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2019), pp. 87-106.

30 Oleksandr Suschko and Andreas Umland, "Unrealistisches Szenario: Anmerkungen zum 'Pluralen Frieden' [Unrealistic Scenario: Notes on 'Plural Peace']," *Osteuropa*, vol. 67, nos. 3-4 (2017), pp. 109-120.

been castigated by Berlin. But didn't Moscow merely do to the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 what Bonn had done to the German Democratic Republic in 1990?

Misunderstandings such as these in Russian-German relations are based on, among other factors, a continuing German romanticization of Bonn's so-called New *Ostpolitik*'s achievements in the 1970s for Western-Soviet relations.<sup>31</sup> West Germany's conciliatory turn towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War produced some positive effects in the humanitarian sphere. It contributed to a lasting improvement in Germany's relations with Russians and Poles, as well as in intra-German East-West relations.<sup>32</sup>

However, the apparent détente of the mid-1970s, as it turned out, also functioned for Moscow as a smokescreen for a new Soviet rearmament program and deployment of medium-range nuclear missiles to Europe. Already before the conservative changes of power and corresponding foreign policy reversals in Washington (1981) and Bonn (1982), Soviet troops had marched into Afghanistan in December 1979. This fateful move started a rapid escalation of Cold War tensions that brought the world to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe in the period of 1980 to 1985. In German-Soviet relations, New *Ostpolitik* and the associated closer economic cooperation between the Federal Republic and the Soviet Union may have achieved some positive results. However, the New *Ostpolitik* could neither prevent Soviet military activities in other regions of the world nor avert the enormous increase in tensions between the West and Soviet Union in the early 1980s.

Bonn's twelve-year *Röhrenkredit I* (Pipeline Credit I) loan to Moscow in 1970 represented the largest West German-Soviet financial transaction up until that date (and curiously led to, among others, the initial construction of Ukraine's today renovated gas transportation system).<sup>33</sup> The first Nord Stream project initiated in 2005 was the largest infrastructure project in Europe until that time. Both agreements may have partly contributed to rapprochement of Germans and Russians as well as to a general improvement in Moscow's relations with the West. They may have also improved, in certain regards, the economic situation of the entire European Community (EC) and the European

31 Wolfgang Schmidt, "Die Wurzeln der Entspannung: Der konzeptionelle Ursprung der Ost- und Deutschlandpolitik Willy Brandts in den fünfziger Jahren [The Roots of Détente: The Conceptual Origins of the Eastern and German Policies of Willi Brandt in the 1950s]," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2003), pp. 521-563.

32 Tatiana Timofeeva, "Russische Reaktionen auf den deutschen Einigungsprozess im Spiegel damaliger und heutiger Umfragen [Russian Reactions to the German Unification Process in the Mirror of Past and Current Surveys]," *Forum für osteuropäische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2010), pp. 85-98.

33 Frank Bösch, "Energy Diplomacy: West Germany, the Soviet Union and the Oil Crises of the 1970s," *Historical Social Research*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2014), pp. 165-185.

Union, respectively. Neither of the two pipeline deals of 1970 and 2005, however, could prevent Moscow from invading a neighboring country nine years later in 1979 and 2014, as well as the Kremlin's subsequent deep rifts with the West.

The Federal Republic may have achieved greater narrowly German security and some special goodwill in the Kremlin with these two deals and a resulting increase of economic interdependence. However, Moscow's high revenues from the huge Siberian energy supplies to the EC/EU, brokered by Bonn and Berlin, respectively, have not contributed to world peace, as many Germans anticipated and some still wrongly claim. On the contrary, in two recent empirical studies, Russian political economist Maria Snegovaya has demonstrated a correlation of Russian expansionist sentiments with the amount of income from energy exports, as well as the country's related general socio-economic situation. The aggressiveness of Russian presidents' foreign policy rhetoric is related to the level of oil prices and export revenues (and thus indirectly also gas prices and gas export revenues).<sup>34</sup> In addition, Russia's population's mood is more enterprising in foreign affairs in times of good socioeconomic development, i.e., when world market prices for energy and Russia's resulting export income as well as economic growth are relatively high.<sup>35</sup>

## Trade Through Change

The obvious lesson from these circumstances and some similar tales of the last 30 years is that Germany and the EU must make it clear to Moscow that Kyiv, Chişinău, and Tbilisi are full participants of the European security conversation. Economic interdependence between Western Europe and Russia is possible only if there is peace in Eastern Europe, conflicts subside, and international law is respected. Brussels and Berlin have a core interest in the integrity, sovereignty, and stability of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.<sup>36</sup>

The Kremlin should be better made to understand that more trade and investment are only possible after a fundamental change in the geopolitics of

34 Maria Snegovaya, "What Factors Contribute to the Aggressive Foreign Policy of Russian Leaders?" *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 67, no. 1 (2020), pp. 93-110.

35 Maria Snegovaya, "Guns to Butter: Sociotropic Concerns and Foreign Policy Preferences in Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2020), pp. 268-279.

36 Thomas D. Grant, *Aggression against Ukraine: Territory, Responsibility, and International Law* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and *idem*, *International Law and the Post-Soviet Space II: Essays on Ukraine, Intervention, and Non-Proliferation* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2019).

Eastern Europe. Berlin should better communicate to the Kremlin the metaphorical and not direct meaning of the popular German slogan *Annäherung durch Verflechtung* (approximation through entanglement). In reaction to numerous ambivalent German signals over the last 30 years, some in Moscow may have come to believe that Berlin's approximation formula implies a geographical rapprochement of Moscow's sphere of influence to Germany's eastern border, as a result of a territorial expansion indirectly co-financed by Russian revenues from exports of Siberian energy to the EU.

This fateful misunderstanding must end. If Russia insists on unilateral intervention rights in the post-Soviet space, the current sanctions, it should be made clearer, shall remain in place. The unambiguous message should be that the longer the Russian violations of international law last, the more punitive Western actions there will be. As these measures are responses to Russian military incursions and hybrid threats, such a containment policy—this should become clearer to pacifist Germans—is a way of protecting peace.

At its time, former Chancellor Willi Brandt's New *Ostpolitik* meant a certain turn towards Moscow. However, part and parcel of the social-liberal coalition's new start in its policy towards the East was also Brandt's genuflection in Warsaw and the German recognition of the Oder-Neisse border with Poland.<sup>37</sup> Since 2014, much of the German discussion of whether the two Nord Stream pipelines are good *Ostpolitik* and economically sensible has been one-sided or even off the point.<sup>38</sup> The primary significance of the two projects is not commercial and not even geoeconomic, but geopolitical in that they lead to a dangerous reduction of Russian-Ukrainian economic interdependence. Above all, they mean an abolition of Kyiv's economic leverage vis-à-vis Moscow. Presenting such projects as a continuation of classic social-democratic peace policies and *Ostpolitik* is misleading. The Nord Stream pipelines have already led and may lead even further to destabilization of Eastern Europe—a result of which the staunchly pro-Western Brandt, one may speculate, would have hardly approved.

So far, Russia is wedded to neo-imperial thinking and unwilling to respect the borders and independence of various neighbors, as well as the rule of international law in the post-Soviet space. Any possible conflict-reducing

37 Leonid Luks, "Das Dilemma der Ostpolitik [The Dilemma of Eastern Policy]," *The European*, Jan. 21, 2015, [www.theeuropean.de/leonid-luks/9501-willy-brandts-ostpolitik-aus-heutiger-perspektive](http://www.theeuropean.de/leonid-luks/9501-willy-brandts-ostpolitik-aus-heutiger-perspektive).

38 Antto Vihma and Mikael Wigell, "Unclear and Present Danger: Russia's Geoeconomics and the Nord Stream II Pipeline," *Global Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2016), pp. 377-388; Roland Götz, "Die Kontroverse um Nord Stream 2 [The Controversy around Nord Stream 2]," *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik*, Nov. 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12399-021-00875-4>.



aspects of Western-Russian energy cooperation are, against this background, dwarfed by the high collateral damage of projects such as Nord Stream in Eastern Europe. Under these conditions, the geostrategic significance of Moscow's partial reliance on Western markets lies in the fact that the European Union and the United States can use this Russian need for cooperation to exert more pressure on the Kremlin, inhibit post-Soviet hybrid conflicts, and protect international law. Though being relatively minor so far and while merely affecting select political actors as well as economic sectors, the Western sanctions imposed on Russia since 2014 have already had notable effects on Russian economic growth.<sup>39</sup> Such achievements indicate that economic interdependence creates political leverage which is waiting to be more effectively used for the benefit of the post-Cold War European security order.



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<sup>39</sup> Erik Andermo and Martin Kragh, "Sanctions and Dollar Dependency in Russia: Resilience, Vulnerability, and Financial Integration," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2021), pp. 276-301; Anders Åslund and Maria Snegovaya, "The Impact of Western Sanctions on Russia and How They Can Be Made Even More Effective: Report," *Atlantic Council*, May 3, 2021, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-impact-of-western-sanctions-on-russia/](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-impact-of-western-sanctions-on-russia/).