

# Geoeconomic Statecraft and Normative Power: Germany, the Eurozone, and Strategic Interdependence with Russia

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## Abstract

The author studies Berlin's role in shaping European economic governance and external interdependence through the lens of geoeconomics and normative power. It argues that Germany's leadership during the Eurozone crisis consolidated a form of asymmetric economic governance that prioritized stability, fiscal discipline, and export competitiveness, while simultaneously deepening structural dependencies in Europe's external relations—most notably with Russia. Rather than treating these trajectories as separate policy domains, the article demonstrates how internal crisis management and external economic strategy became mutually reinforcing. Germany's selective deployment of norms within the Eurozone, combined with its preference for depoliticized market-based interdependence in energy relations, contributed to a European order characterized by economic resilience and strategic vulnerability. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of policy discourse, institutional practices, and geopolitical reasoning, the article situates German policy within broader debates on Normative Power Europe and geoeconomic statecraft. It concludes that the limitations of the European response to Russia's aggression cannot be understood solely as failures of foresight or unity, but as the outcome of a political-economic configuration in which normative governance and strategic risk management were unevenly aligned.

## Keywords

Normative Power Europe, Russia, Germany, Geoeconomics, Geopolitics

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## 1. Introduction: EU Norms and Foreign Policy Objectives

The European Union (EU) is often referred to as a “project of peace” because it emerged from the ruins of World War II to establish enduring peace, foster coop-

eration among European nations, and facilitate the reconstruction of a devastated continent. The foundation of European integration is an institutional framework designed to generate norms that protect human and civil rights while promoting multilateralism and adherence to international law. During the Cold War, Europe was still in the process of formation, and thus its global influence was somewhat limited; however, it successfully developed an internal governance system based on values that positioned it as a civilian rather than a military power. Following the Maastricht Treaty, the EU created a unique form of international influence characterised by the export of its legal and regulatory frameworks (Cohen-Tanugi, 2021). This normative influence extends EU rules beyond its borders through economic and political leverage, actively engaging in global initiatives to establish international standards, and serving as a regulatory model that other countries voluntarily adopt, often referred to as the “Brussels Effect” (Bradford, 2020).

However, the European Union lacks a true federal core in key areas. It does not possess a unified fiscal authority (no equivalent of a Ministry of Economy), speak with a single foreign policy voice, or maintain a common military force. This incomplete integration has significant consequences. First, decision-making remains primarily in the hands of the European Council, where national governments hold the majority. Although unanimity is formally required for major foreign policy decisions, the strongest member states effectively set the agenda in practice. Second, beneath the EU’s normative façade lies a system driven by power politics, especially evident during crises. The Franco-German axis leads, while smaller states have little room to influence outcomes. Major EU initiatives—whether in fiscal policy, defence, or enlargement—are typically shaped and constrained by Paris and Berlin. Third, with power concentrated in the Council, other EU institutions lack the authority to provide cohesive leadership. The President of the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) remain vastly bureaucratic figures, perpetuating the question famously attributed to Henry Kissinger: “Who do I call if I want to call Europe?”

Berlin’s role in European political architecture has been pivotal in this context. With the EU lacking a federal framework, Germany emerged as the natural, albeit reluctant (Bulmer & Paterson, 2013), leader during the Eurozone crisis, dictating policies and priorities in normative terms. In parallel, it attempted to revive its Eastern foreign policy (Ostpolitik) in a quasi-European context, promoting energy partnerships with Russia despite the security concerns of some member states. The main argument is that Berlin’s post-Cold War approach to Moscow cannot be understood only as a simple policy option or a miscalculation. It was the re-emergence of a structural temptation long embedded in Germany’s geopolitical position: the pursuit of continental stability and growth through accommodation with Russia. While the forms change (pipelines replace military coalitions), the underlying logic endures.

In short, consecutive German governments capitalised on the EU’s normative

power to satisfy the dual ambitions of dominating Europe economically while seeking to expand its access to Russian essential energy resources via the Nord Stream pipelines. This is what the present paper attempts to conceptualise: German geopolitical identity, as expressed through Ostpolitik and within European norms, to achieve geoeconomic gains as a “civilian power” (Tewes, 2002).

The study is structured into five sections. The first assesses the concept of Normative Power Europe, developed by Ian Manners, to explain how Germany, under Angela Merkel, benefited from the EU’s moral authority and institutional weight to legitimise its policies and actions. The second examines Germany’s geopolitical orientation in retrospect, which defined its uninterrupted strategic placement. Following Harold Mackinder’s Heartland thesis, a land power has a natural geopolitical orientation towards the Pivotal area or Eurasia. This is evident in Germany’s historical tradition of Ostpolitik and its continuous interest in controlling and benefiting from land-based trade routes. The third section analyses the different phases of Germany’s geoeconomic behaviour, following the development of European institutions. Drawing on the Stability Pact and the Eurozone crisis, it is observed that Germany undergoes a crucial transition from norm enforcer to norm creator. This case conforms to the established pattern of hegemonic powers within international systems—the fourth delves into normative geoeconomics and the implications of Ostpolitik for transatlantic relations. The last section discusses Germany’s vulnerability to overextending its hegemonic role, failing to prevent or handle the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

This article deliberately focuses on Ostpolitik as practiced in the post-Cold War era, culminating in the Schröder and Merkel years. While the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered the declaration of a *Zeitenwende* by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, that moment represented a rupture and therefore belongs to a separate line of inquiry. The author is concerned with the geopolitical logics and legacies that defined Germany’s Russia policy up to the eve of the war, enabling an interpretive reading of Germany’s policy priorities and strategic decisions—an approach consistent with existing scholarship on foreign policy analysis of major powers (Rosato & Schuessler, 2011). Due to the ongoing crisis in Eastern Europe, the paper does not claim exhaustive empirical coverage; however, the selected cases are deliberately illustrative, chosen to contrast Germany’s norm-based discourse and its interest-driven practices across different policy areas.

Last, the paper does not assume that Berlin’s policy was fully calculated. German leaders often found themselves confined by domestic political pressures and electoral competition. For example, Angela Merkel defended her Administration for failing to do enough for Ukraine in 2014, and she said, “We had elections [in Germany], there was always something going on with Greece at the time, and I broke my pelvic bone” (Connolly, 2022). The crucial distinction is the image of Germany’s geopolitical orientation as a strategic culture, not as a deterministic law.

One can only speculate whether Berlin could have predicted the strategic back-

lash, especially after Washington, DC, explicitly raised concerns about the construction of Nord Stream 2. The following pages display that reliance on economic dominance and energy partnerships ultimately undermined Germany's broader geopolitical aspirations, compelling a strategic pivot toward collective European security. This shift underscored the reemergence of the American factor in European security, while Donald Trump's return to power in 2025 eliminated any potential conduit for Moscow's penetration into the West.

## 2. From Normative Power Europe to Political Realism

The concept of Normative Power Europe (NPE), developed by [Ian Manners \(2002\)](#), presents the European Union as a political entity that exerts influence through ideational and ethical means, rather than military or coercive instruments. Manners explicitly responded to Hedley Bull, a leading figure of the English School, who once urged Europe to become a military power to play a decisive role in global politics ([Bull, 1982](#)). Manners' framework positions the EU as a moral actor in international politics, relying on its civilian character ([Kirste & Maull, 1996](#)) and normative credibility to shape world affairs ([Erickson, 2011](#); [Diez, 2005](#)).

The idea of Europe as a normative power is attractive, but requires reevaluation due to the Union's internal differences and geopolitical challenges. The normative identity that characterises the EU presupposes a collective understanding; however, Europe has not yet achieved the status of a federal state; instead, it remains a composite of sovereign member states with varying interests, capacities, and strategic perspectives. Under such structural conditions, stronger states are better positioned to shape the production and enforcement of norms, especially when weaker states face crises and have little incentive or capacity to challenge dominant actors.

Some scholars have already noted how EU norms are often instrumentalised in practice, applied with inconsistencies or double standards ([Youngs, 2004](#); [Balducci, 2010](#)). We build on this critique by arguing that power within the EU, particularly within the Eurozone, has been exercised not primarily through consensual norm-sharing, but through bargaining dominated by its strongest member states—chiefly Germany. This dynamic exposes a core contradiction in the NPE thesis. While the EU projects itself externally as a normative actor, its internal structure enables dominant states to instrumentalise those very norms for strategic ends ([Rosenthal, 2012](#)).

As a peace project emerging from the wreckage of war, the EU has historically promoted democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and market liberalism as foundational principles—universal norms that it seeks to diffuse globally. Germany, in the same period, has sought to advance its industrial and export leverage, forming a distinct geoeconomic statecraft. This paradigm has established institutional leadership within the EU, setting policy priorities favourable to its long-term strategic interests. As it became apparent, particularly during the Eurozone

crisis, Germany consolidated sufficient material and institutional power to act as if its preferences and fiscal philosophy were synonymous with European norms (Matthijs, 2016). While rules were indeed invoked to justify austerity measures, it is critical to acknowledge that the Eurozone lacked pre-existing tools for handling state insolvency. Establishing emergency mechanisms such as the EFSF, later institutionalised as the ESM, was not a predetermined pathway but an ad hoc response shaped by political negotiations. As path dependence theory suggests (Holzinger & Knill, 2002), these improvised solutions hardened into institutional arrangements that entrenched creditor-driven fiscal orthodoxy.

Germany was not alone in imposing its preferences; it successfully forged a “creditor coalition” that collectively ratified and enforced these norms across EU institutions. This coalition-building became the indispensable pillar to support German preferences with the appearance of a pan-European consensus, further embedding them into the normative fabric of EU governance (Stelzenmüller, 2015). A crucial aspect of this normative consolidation was the moral framing of the crisis. German leaders, most prominently Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, and their allies in the Eurogroup articulated a discourse of responsibility, discipline, and moral hazard, recasting the structural imbalances of the Eurozone as ethical failings of debtor states. This discourse was exceptional because it introduced a moral dimension to EU politics (Schelkle, 2023). Austerity was justified not merely as an economic necessity but as a moral correction (De Grauwe, 2011), obscuring the creditor-debtor relationality in which the surpluses of the North were structurally linked to the deficits of the South.

In this light, it is contended that the EU’s normative identity can serve not merely as a vehicle for values-based diplomacy but also functions as a legitimising framework for geo-economic dominance. Under conditions of asymmetrical sovereignty and institutional incompleteness, EU norms are not produced and applied neutrally; they are shaped, enforced, and instrumentalised by dominant states through coalition legitimation and moral discourse (Beetz, 2017; Haine, 2012). Germany’s conduct during the Eurozone crisis—mobilising institutional leadership, creditor coalitions, and moralising narratives—illustrates how normative power can become an instrument to secure material and geopolitical advantages, within the Union.

Therefore, the EU’s normative power is not exercised abstractly or uniformly, but is operationalised through specific institutional channels, many of which are disproportionately shaped or controlled by its most powerful member states (Lever, 2017: p. 21). The agencies and mechanisms that enforce EU norms, extending from economic governance and competition regulations to external action, are based on an institutional balance of power reflecting national preferences, most frequently of the strongest members. Germany, by virtue of its economic pre-eminence and institutional embeddedness, has been uniquely positioned to shape, interpret, and enforce norms inside the Union while retaining notable flexibility outside it. While Berlin insisted on strict adherence to fiscal and

economic norms within the Eurozone, it often adopted a more pragmatic, or even permissive, approach toward normative commitments in its external relations, such as overlooking human rights violations in key partner states.

Framing Nord Stream 2 as a “commercial project”, sidelining EU energy solidarity and Eastern European security concerns, reflects Germany’s use of norms based on selective geo-economic interests (Godehardt, 2024). Rather than rejecting them outright, Germany prioritized market rationality and bilateral economic interests over collective risk assessments, thereby demonstrating how normative commitments could be hierarchically reordered to accommodate strategic and geo-economic objectives. This pattern underscores that instrumentalization did not involve the abandonment of norms, but their selective activation and contextual reinterpretation.

### 3. Continental Strategy and Geo-Economic Power

While NPE claims that the EU has the capacity to shape the world by exporting its values, political realism holds that it is hard power that shapes international relations (Platias, 2010; Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979), and even soft instruments (law, regulation, trade) become tools of power competition (Toft, 2005; Shore, 2005). Geography has long been a defining factor in world politics, setting the stage on which global dominance unfolds. British geographer Halford Mackinder was the first to conceive of Europe and Asia as a single strategic domain, arguing that the central area of Eurasia—what he called the *Heartland*—could leverage its position to dominate Europe, Asia, Africa, and, by extension, the world (Mackinder, 1904; Kearns, 2010). The Heartland’s significance was no coincidence: it combined size and value, today accounting for more than a third of global territory, hosting 70 per cent of the world’s population, and containing much of its industrial production.

Geography placed Germany at the intersection of continental and maritime imperatives, influencing—but not fully determining—its foreign policy choices (Scalea, 2013). Mackinder famously warned that a German-Russian alliance could create a powerful centre capable of dominating Eurasia, posing a threat to the maritime powers (Mackinder, 1904: p. 436; Lowe, 1981). He was indeed concerned about a potential alliance between the *Saxon* and the *Slavic* world, because, in such a case, if Germany allied with Russia, the empire of the world would be in sight and the maritime powers would be at a strategic disadvantage (Blouet, 2005: p. 8).

Decades later, Nicholas Spykman, a leading American strategist, expanded Mackinder’s thought, adding that the coastal fringes of Eurasia—the *Rimland*—were even more critical. These areas, including Western Europe, the Middle East, and Asia’s coasts, were key to global power due to their strategic location, access to the sea, and economic strength. For Spykman, “who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world” (Spykman, 1943: p. 43).

Essentially, Mackinder diagnosed that this spatial logic transcended German strategic thinking (Kearns, 2009), with a consistent focus on securing strategic depth through Eastern Europe and Russia. From Bismarck to the Third Reich, Germany's economic and military security was often envisioned through land corridors to the East. Notably, General Karl Haushofer, a student of Mackinder and the thinker of *Lebensraum*, conceptualised the unity of all German-speaking peoples into a strong, central European power (Herwig, 2016) and a concord with Russia to allow a campaign for the conquest of the Rimland from the maritime powers (Blouet, 2005: p. 3).

After World War II, Europe's division into rival camps effectively split the *Heartland*. NATO's informal doctrine (to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down) significantly limited Bonn's geopolitical room for manoeuvre, embedding it within an Atlanticist security framework. However, by the late 1960s, as West Germany regained industrial confidence, a new desire emerged: to reclaim strategic autonomy within the rigid order of the Cold War (Alonso-Trabanco & Miguel, 2022).

It was precisely within this context that Chancellor Willy Brandt advocated for a *Neue Ostpolitik* and argued for a fresh start in his country's relationship with the Soviet Union. His innovative foreign policy is often seen as a break from the past and a pragmatic effort to normalise relations with the Eastern Bloc. Nevertheless, *Ostpolitik* also carried a deeper strategic aim: to loosen Germany's geopolitical constraints and, over time, pave the way for reunification. Despite US doubts, Brandt managed to engage in *détente* through a series of accords with its neighbours in the USSR, Poland, and, of course, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), signing terms for economic cooperation, political reassurances, and expanded trade with Moscow.

When Chancellor Brandt laid the foundations of the *Neue Ostpolitik*, influenced by Egon Bahr's "Bismarckian tradition" (Klinke, 2025), he advocated for "change through rapprochement" (Niedhart, 2016). Although Germany had adapted to the general context of *détente* (Perchoc, 2018), Brandt and Bahr formulated their desire to detach West Germany's foreign policy from the doctrine of containment, as imposed by American Cold War strategy, supporting that West Germany should not underestimate its role as a partner of the USSR. Bonn sought to exert greater influence on the Western Allies, thus gaining room for manoeuvre towards the Eastern Bloc and Third World countries. Essentially, the *Neue Ostpolitik* envisioned a new European security framework and a new ideological orientation towards the Eastern Bloc to achieve German reunification (*Wiedervereinigung*). By restoring relations with the East, he sought to pursue "legitimate national interests" (Bange & Niedhart, 2004) and establish the conditions for a permanent solution to the so-called German question. The subsequent initiatives of the Federal Republic, which put Brandt's *Ostpolitik* at the forefront of the de-escalation process in the early 1970s, were clear evidence of his impulse to autonomous action. Put differently, *Ostpolitik* was not just a Cold War policy but a

lasting identity framework shaping Germany's approach to Russia (Siddi, 2019).

Germany's foreign policy under Brandt's successors, including Helmut Schmidt, aimed to leverage growing contacts with the communist bloc through political, business, and cultural channels to bring about peaceful change for the long-term benefit of the West. American reservations toward Ostpolitik were not merely bureaucratic; they reflected deeper strategic concerns. Henry Kissinger, then National Security Advisor to President Nixon, viewed Brandt's policy with suspicion, fearing it might fuel German nationalism, embolden Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, and complicate the fragile balance within the NATO alliance (Kieninger, 2019). Despite his scepticism, Brandt convinced him and his colleagues that a change in policy towards Eastern Europe (by softening its stance) would have positive consequences for the de-escalation of tensions. While the US ultimately tolerated Ostpolitik under the broader détente framework, its embrace was conditional and cautious. The German experiment would be dominated by the US, which shadowed Europe militarily and had regular talks with German politicians (Juneau, 2011). A defining moment for the establishment of a multilateral, institutional framework to host dialogue and collaboration between Europe's capitalist West and socialist East was the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (1973-1975), which supported Brandt's vision of rapprochement.

At the same time, the Soviet Union, then the world's largest oil and gas producer, needed capital and advanced technology to develop and transport its resources. West Germany, driven by economic and geopolitical motives, offered a large, modernising energy market and saw rapprochement as a pathway toward its long-term strategic goals. This approach resonated with a longstanding intellectual current in German foreign policy: the *Russlandversteher* ("Russia-understanders"), a network of political, business, and academic elites who were sympathetic to engaging with Russia (Siddi, 2018; Von Steinsdorff, 2015). These Russia sympathisers (or empathisers) shared a perspective that blended cultural affinity, economic pragmatism, and security concerns, reinforcing that partnership with Moscow was desirable and necessary.

With reunification in 1990, Germany regained its historical geography: once again bordering Eastern Europe and standing as a bridge between Western Europe and Eurasia. After decades, Germany no longer shared a direct border with Russia: it was buffered instead by newly independent states like Poland and, farther east, Ukraine. This geographic shift altered Berlin's sense of proximity and exposure to Russian power, even as it deepened economic interdependence with Moscow. The new conditions opened the door to new strategic prospects that would advance Germany's geoeconomic potential. The EU–Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement of 1996, advocated by Berlin, transformed Ostpolitik from a bilateral engagement into a Europeanized project, securing access to Russian markets and energy, promising long-term stabilization of Germany's eastern neighborhood (Timmermann, 1996).

Putin's rise to power in the Kremlin and the maturing of a strategic Russo-Ger-

man energy partnership (a pact between two traditional land powers) enabled Moscow to link the Pivotal area by land, from Beijing to western Europe, gradually challenging the maritime dominance of the maritime powers, such as the US. This continental orientation occasionally conflicted with the priorities of Germany's NATO allies. For example, Berlin believed in conditions for NATO's expansion eastward in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Spohr, 2012; Zaborowski, 2002); although it did not always oppose it outright, it was not a champion of it either. These hesitations and doubts reflected the tension between its Eurasian geopolitical logic (in Mackinder's typology) and the strategic agenda led by the United States (Overhaus, 2004). This divergence surfaced most clearly at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, where Germany (together with France) blocked the extension of Membership Action Plans to Ukraine and Georgia (Erlanger & Myers, 2008) to the frustration of President George W. Bush Jr. and the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (Wiegrefe, 2023), fearing it would provoke Russia and destabilise Europe's eastern periphery.

The American intervention reflected how spatial dynamics intersect with broader strategic concerns: maritime routes, economic corridors, trade flows, and regional stability. Drawing from Mackinder's logic, Edward Luttwak introduced the concept of geoeconomics, showing how these principles have evolved in a globalised economy. He argues that economic tools—trade, investment, sanctions, and financial regulation—can be utilised as instruments of statecraft to achieve geopolitical objectives: the logic of conflict remains zero-sum, but it now operates “with the grammar of commerce” (Luttwak, 1990: p. 18). This shift from military to economic means marks a defining feature of modern international relations (Baru, 2012; Blackwill & Harris, 2016).

Germany's energy partnership with Russia exemplifies this geo-economic approach: using economic interdependence to secure industrial strength, political stability, and strategic depth, even when it conflicted with EU commitments to democracy and human rights. However, as Szabo (2014: p. 118) illuminated, Germany's geo-economic rise also included its weaknesses. While it emerged as a leading global exporter, it ultimately remained dependent on Russia's natural resources, entailing a greater risk to Europe's security system: European integration of Eurasia would ultimately benefit China more than anyone else (Mikelsaar, 2022). Confident in its economic performance, and influenced by the strong industrial lobby (Janson, 2021), Germany had overlooked that in a long-term framework, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was the ultimate geopolitical winner as China could dominate these networks by increasing its economic and infrastructure investments, and eventually by absorbing much of the financial benefits that Germany had hoped to achieve. The growing partnership with Russia trapped Germany in a Eurasian logic, accelerating China's hegemonic rise in the region by bolstering Russia's economic position and indirectly providing access through the development of energy and trade corridors. The assistance Beijing provided to Russia for the war in Ukraine is a strong indicator of its geo-strategic calculations

(Bogusz & Rodkiewicz, 2025). The US recognised this long-term shift as a threat to the existing international order early on, particularly given its competition with China in global markets and the strategic implications of such a move (Biba, 2023; Ewers-Peters, 2024).

Germany's approach to China further illustrates the broader logic of strategic prioritization that characterized its geoeconomic orientation before the Ukraine war. Until the mid-2010s, expanding commercial relations with China were largely evaluated in positive terms, framed as an extension of export-led growth and market integration rather than as a strategic challenge. Within this context, economic engagement tended to take precedence over political and normative concerns, contributing to a persistent underestimation of the strategic implications of China's rise (Fan & Jach, 2025). This stance was not simply the result of commercial opportunism, but reflected a spatial imagination in which Germany's geoeconomic influence was anchored in a Eurasian continuum extending through the *Heartland*, where stable energy supplies and transport corridors were assumed to underpin European economic centrality (Brands, 2025). As long as this configuration appeared viable, China's geoeconomic expansion could be accommodated as a partner within an interdependent global order rather than confronted as a systemic rival.

This interpretive framework began to erode as geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe intensified and China's Belt and Road Initiative increasingly signaled ambitions that extended beyond trade facilitation to strategic positioning. The reassessment culminated in the German government's 2023 China Strategy (Bundesregierung, 2023), which simultaneously defined China as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival. Significantly, this shift did not represent a sudden discovery of risk, but rather a delayed strategic recalibration shaped by earlier commitments to asymmetric interdependence. In this sense, Germany's prolonged focus on stabilizing its eastern economic environment through Russia contributed to a form of geoeconomic path dependency that constrained its ability to anticipate and respond coherently to China's transformation from commercial opportunity to strategic challenge (Hildebrandt & Klose, 2024).

Germany's policy reflected a cynical alignment of EU norms at home and a pragmatic approach to Moscow abroad. Resembling a neorealist perspective, this delicate interplay of spatial strategy prioritised energy supply, industrial supremacy, and critical market access. This type of "normative geoeconomics" champions the strategic use of moral rhetoric and normative institutions to achieve material and geopolitical advantages. Yet, the ambivalence signals the deeper continental orientation within Germany's geopolitical tradition.

#### **4. Geoeconomic Priorities: EU Leadership, the Eurozone Crisis and Financial Stability**

Having established the theoretical limitations of NPE under conditions of intra-European power asymmetry (Manners, 2002; Hyde-Price, 2006) and the geopolit-

ical nexus in Eastern Europe, we now turn to examine Germany's foreign policy conduct during the critical period spanning the Eurozone crisis to Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022. The analysis understands that Berlin faced two interconnected challenges: one fiscal, inside the EU, particularly during the economic problems of the European South, and one in the periphery, regarding its relations with Russia. By tracing policy choices across these areas, the study aims to illustrate how Germany, while verbally committed to EU norms, effectively utilised its structural advantages to promote national interests in both fronts (Newmann, 2015; Youngs, 2017). This dynamic, the author argues, demonstrates the practical limits of NPE when a dominant state exercises disproportionate influence over the normative and institutional agenda (Sjursen, 2006; Hyde-Price, 2006). In other words, this section understands Germany as an actor embedded within, but not reducible to, the EU institutional framework (Bulmer & Paterson, 2013).

The empirical focus centres on two intertwined dimensions: firstly, Germany's role in shaping EU responses to the Eurozone crisis, with particular attention to its enforcement of fiscal discipline and austerity, and secondly, Germany's pursuit of energy and economic partnerships with Russia, including its restrained response to the annexation of Crimea and deepening engagement through Nord Stream 2.

The relationship between these dimensions should be understood not merely as a temporal coincidence or as a case of strategic distraction. While the crisis undeniably absorbed political attention and institutional capacity at the European level, it also reinforced a German preference for external economic stability and export-oriented recovery. In this context, access to comparatively cheap and reliable Russian energy functioned as a stabilizing factor within a broader recovery strategy, supporting industrial competitiveness and domestic economic consolidation. The intensification of economic interdependence with Russia was thus not simply the result of inattention to security concerns, but a calculated prioritization of medium-term economic resilience over longer-term geopolitical risk management.

A comparative approach to these cases helps illustrate a dual process: firstly, Germany's advocacy for EU institutional rigour and the invocation of norms, and secondly, interest-driven external relations. This dynamic not only strengthens Germany's dominant role but also exposes the underlying structural imbalance within the EU's normative framework. This approach demonstrates how, under specific historical and structural conditions, NPE can be subordinated or instrumentalised by a hegemonic actor pursuing realist objectives. The policy outcomes, culminating in the *Zeitenwende* as an implicit recognition of strategic miscalculation (Bartenstein & Wessels, 2024), invite a re-evaluation of the balance between normative commitments and power politics within EU foreign policy.

The progress in European integration, as outlined in the Maastricht Treaty and the complementary Stability Pact, laid the foundations for the Monetary Union (EMU), aiming to provide a framework for economic development across the EU.

The negotiations for the rules of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) brought two conflicting economic standpoints to the fore. On one hand, the French sought to accelerate Europe's adaptation to the new global circumstances, while on the other, the Germans, having just unified their eastern and western states, aimed to slow down the growth of their European competitors while reconstructing East Germany's economy (Hoekstra et al., 2007). In the end, Berlin managed to base the Eurozone's structure on the Deutsche Mark and even persuaded the European Central Bank to prioritise anti-inflation goals rather than economic growth (Mody, 2018: pp. 112-116). Concurrently, commercial banks were left unregulated, benefiting those in Germany and France, who could take financial risks to serve national economic policies. Germany also made the most of the interest rate differentials resulting from the Maastricht Treaty, as a common currency was established. Still, the terms of monetary policy varied from country to country, favouring stronger economies over weaker ones in the long run.

The Community budget ceiling remained low vis-à-vis the European GDP. Yet, a significant portion of it went to East Germany, which was treated as a "separate" member state in terms of funding (Boss, 1998). The catalyst for developments was the Stability Pact of 1996, which complemented the EMU by imposing strict budgetary conditions. It was a set of rules designed to guarantee sound public finances for the EU member-states, coordinating their fiscal policies. Panayiótis Yennimatás, Honorary Vice-President of the European Investment Bank (1994-2000), described the Stability Pact as a "refinancing program for German reunification" (Yennimatás, 2023: p. 45) since it fitted perfectly the political objectives of Berlin. With this act, the initial vision of a European Germany transformed into a "German Europe", Yennimatás concluded.

During Gerhard Schröder's chancellorship (1998-2005), Germany was among the states that deliberately evaded the provisions of the Stability Pact's excessive deficit rules (Baerg & Hallerberg, 2016) to control high unemployment and assist growth (Afflatet, 2016). Simultaneously, Germany pursued the enlargement to Eastern Europe, transferring industrial plants to countries with competitive production costs, such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. The reduction of interest rates in the Eurozone and the consequent reduction in borrowing costs boosted German exports to its partners, resulting in large trade surpluses, which reached EUR 109 billion in 2007. Jamet (2010) notes that "most of Germany's trade surplus is made within the euro area". By 2010, German exports accounted for 48% of GDP, emphatically underscoring Germany's intra-European trade dominance, even amid the global financial crisis of 2008 (Kundnani, 2015: p. 76).

The country's rapid economic growth filled the political system with optimism. The German trade miracle relied on perpetual deficits for the less industrially developed countries, while it called for a new external policy to open the way to Asian markets, or in geopolitical terms, the eastern Rimland. Simultaneously, Germany turned to Russia as an energy supplier and to China as a new, large trad-

ing partner. The pragmatic, albeit unconditional, opening of Berlin to non-democratic countries outside Europe required toning down its criticism of the state of the Rule of Law. Enthusiasm for the growing Russo-German relationship was so strong that Chancellor Schröder declared Russian President Vladimir Putin a “flawless democrat” (Pieper, 2022), marking the beginning of a stable partnership with the Kremlin. In the aftermath of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Bingener and Wehner characterised this relationship as “the biggest mistake of German foreign policy since the foundation of the Federal Republic” (Bingener & Wehner, 2023), putting an overwhelming blame on Schröder, as if Ostpolitik started and ended with him.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Schröder’s trusted man from the Social Democratic Party, who served as Merkel’s Foreign Minister and later Federal President, was a staunch supporter of a cooperative Ostpolitik, and his successor in the Ministry, Guido Westerwelle, a liberal democrat, promoted the “change through trade” doctrine with Russia (Westerwelle, 2013; Szabo, 2014: p. 122), advocating for a special bilateral relationship, despite his party’s concerns for the violations of human rights in other parts of the world.

As Szabo (2014: p. 119) argues, commercial relations and the logic of the market shaped Germany’s approach toward Russia, softening its stance toward Putin’s authoritarianism in the interior and revisionism in Eastern Europe. During the same period, a financial crisis opened an intra-European front for Berlin. The Eurozone sovereign debt crisis became a decisive episode in Germany’s consolidation of structural power within the European Union, presenting a complex cluster of EU norms, fiscal rules, and geopolitical realities. The crisis offers an exemplary case study to assess Germany’s hegemonic positioning and management, calling upon it to make decisions that, in the medium term, would shape both the economic governance of the Union and its own political authority (Romanova, 2009: p. 63).

While the sovereign debt crisis originated from fiscal mismanagement in debtor states, Germany’s leadership played a hegemonic role in formulating the EU’s response (Mody, 2018). Technical decision-making was delegated to the so-called *Troika* (an ad hoc tripartite authority consisting of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund), but it was German preferences that significantly shaped the terms of the bailout programs (Hertner & Miskimmon, 2015). In his book entitled *German Europe*, Ulrich Beck argued that the Eurozone crisis made Germany’s normative and economic power converge into unintended hegemony, redefining European norms as German interests (Beck, 2012).

Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble’s insistence on strict conditionality unveiled his normative understanding of the crisis as a failure of fiscal sanity, resonating with German public opinion and political discourse in his homeland (Nones, 2024). In the case of Greece, austerity was promoted not only as an economic correction but as a moral imperative on a profligate people, aligning fiscal

consolidation with perceived European values (Jamet, 2010; De Grawe, 2011).

The German media and many representatives of the political class reinforced this narrative (Rathbun, Powers, & Anders, 2019), casting Greece along with other Southern European states as irresponsible actors requiring moral discipline (Khan & McClean, 2017). For a long time, it was commonly believed that the Greeks were systematically lying about their budget deficits, their living standards were higher than what they could afford (including the alleged height of salaries and pensions), and that overall they had built a credit bubble at the expense of the sacrifices made by the Germans (Jamet, 2010). Such moralising frames obscured Germany's own breaches of the Stability and Growth Pact in earlier years (Yennimatás, 2023). They downplayed the role of German banks in financing risky deficits across the periphery. Indeed, by 2009, German financial exposure to Greek debt exceeded €38 billion—a factor underpinning Berlin's reluctance to contemplate debt restructuring (Matthijs, 2016).

Berlin's narrative was that Merkel's intervention aimed to keep the EU together, prevent a Grexit, and assure economic and fiscal recovery. However, scholars have argued that the design of the initial adjustment programs prioritised financial protection over economic recovery, focusing on containing contagion risks and safeguarding creditor interests (Berghahn & Young, 2012)—particularly German and French banks (International Monetary Fund, 2013; Lenoël, Macchiarelli, & Young, 2023; Robbins, 2015; Krugman, 2012). As Axel Weber, then President of the Bundesbank, acknowledged, the programs aimed less at resolving Greece's fiscal imbalance than protecting the Eurozone's financial system (Matthijs, 2016). The result was a decade-long contraction that shrank Greece's GDP by over 30%, destabilised its political system, and left lasting scars on its social fabric.

Germany was victorious in rescuing its own banks and eliminating the risks they had taken. That was the first and most important priority of Berlin's crisis strategy. Moreover, it shaped the institutional and normative trajectory of the Union, embedding a disciplinary approach to fiscal policy that reflected its own policy objectives (Marsh, 2011: p. 253). From a structural perspective, the Eurozone crisis reinforced Germany's position as indispensable to EU economic governance. At the same time, it consumed precious political capital and diverted collective attention inward, focusing the EU on fiscal orthodoxy and institutional governance. This turn left a vacuum in EU foreign policy leadership (or at least reduced scrutiny), allowing Germany to pursue more autonomous bilateral dealings with Russia without significant contestation from its peers. Put differently, it served as a distraction for EU institutions and member states questioning the dependency on illiberal partners. One such incident was Russia's annexation of Crimea, when Germany shaped the EU foreign policy by applying "different shades of power" without, however, disrupting the strategic ties with Moscow (Fix, 2018).

From a political standpoint, in the name of technocratic enforcement of EU rules, Berlin used its structural power to cloak self-interest under broader European values (Bulmer, 2014; Szabo, 2017) without genuine deliberation or consensus-building among member states (Münchau, 2024). If normative power de-

pends on legitimacy from consent and shared norms, Germany's crisis response—though legal—used asymmetric power (Bickerton, 2011), introducing a model of “authoritarian liberalism” (Wilkinson, 2021). As a result, trust in Germany's leadership started to erode, limiting its capacity to ignite a unified EU foreign policy in subsequent crises.

Berlin's recognition that its legitimacy was in question and growing Eastern European concerns over Ostpolitik prompted Merkel to recalibrate her leadership style by moving Schäuble to the Bundestag presidency in 2017. Beneath that, Germany followed a structural geopolitical instinct persisting in austerity, securing its industrial base, and relying on interdependence with Russia (Mauil, 2025). Cabinet changes were not followed by policy diversification and, as a result, Berlin's intra-EU hegemony kept shaping broader geopolitical conditions, potentially reinforcing Russia's perception that European borders were open to revision. Therefore, NPE and geopolitics are not opposites: they intersect when norms are instrumentalized to advance strategic interests.

### **5. From Ostpolitik to *Zeitenwende*: The Breakdown of Normative Power Europe**

The final section assesses Germany's insistence on a policy trajectory that enabled Russia's geopolitical assertiveness and left Europe unprepared for the consequences. To begin with, any substantial discussion on geopolitics in Germany today remains extremely limited (Fard, 2021; Scalea, 2013) because the field has become synonymous with the ideology of German expansionism under the Third Reich (Murphy & Johnson, 2004). However, references to continuity in German strategic thinking concern shared modes of spatial reasoning, economic prioritization, and security conceptualization rather than ideological content or expansionist intent. The geopolitical practices of past regimes remain historically singular and cannot be meaningfully equated with post-war German policy orientations. The analytical point here is limited to the persistence of certain structural assumptions regarding geography, interdependence, and influence, not to any continuity of political ideology or normative ambition. Even the brief respite of the Hallstein doctrine obeyed the geopolitical logic because it aimed to restore German unity and preserve Bonn's claim to speak for the entire German people (Klinke, 2025).

Grounded in Ostpolitik's logic, Germany endorsed a strategy of engagement with Russia, rooted in energy interdependence, as early as the 1970s (Gustafson, 2020; Szabo, 2015), which took off in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Perović, 2022). Auer criticizes Berlin's self-deception about the effects of economic interdependence with Russia as “apolitical” and, using a Schmittian framing, he argues that Europe's denial of geopolitics enabled Russia's aggression (Auer, 2022) even when the latter's authoritarian aggression and a classic Realpolitik logic became blatant.

Neither politicians nor economic leaders were eager to give up the privileges of

the Russo-German axis (Heinemann-Grüder, 2022). Timmins observes that Angela Merkel's foreign policy favoured a "constructive engagement" with Russia, driven by economic interests, energy dependence, and a strategic ambition to strengthen its leadership role in Europe (Timmins, 2011: p. 191). Looking for the thin balance between German national priorities and EU normative objectives was a precarious task that characterised Berlin's approach as it navigated through intra-European crises and Eastern partnerships.

On the other hand, Russia's understanding of international relations was not a secret. President Vladimir Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference clearly articulated his objection to NATO expansion to the East and Western advance beyond previously agreed limits, implying Moscow's readiness to safeguard its alleged sphere of influence. Denouncing NATO's expansion further East, he wondered:

against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to our Western partners' assurances after the Warsaw Pact's dissolution? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them (President of Russia, 2007).

Russia's subsequent moves, galvanising its opposition to Ukraine and Georgia's NATO aspirations, reflected a realist pursuit of security interests (NATO, 2008). However, Germany responded by doubling engagement: Foreign Minister Steinmeier's call for a "new European Ostpolitik" envisioned Russia as an indispensable partner, underscoring Berlin's belief in economic interdependence as a pathway to stability (Federal Foreign Office, 2008).

This policy was institutionalised through initiatives like the 2008 Partnership for Modernisation (PfM), which nominally aimed to draw Russia closer to European norms but ensured continuous economic and energy ties in practice. Even after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the eruption of conflict in Donbas, Germany sought to preserve dialogue, despite a change in rhetoric after the pressure of the domestic opposition (Trenin, 2021; Fix, 2018). Although a change in rhetoric against revisionism was noted, substantive German-Russian cooperation remained intact (Forsberg, 2016: pp. 28-29). Key figures, such as Sigmar Gabriel (Meister, 2019), consistently defended the partnership, whose Social Democratic Party had historical ties to Russia and the concept of Ostpolitik. Merkel was also very active in balancing the situation. Hoping to break the stalemate, she instituted the Normandy Format (with French President François Hollande) in June 2014. She even travelled to Minsk and got involved in the diplomatic process, upholding Ukraine's territorial integrity while keeping diplomatic channels with Moscow open (Siddi, 2016: p. 668; Auswärtiges Amt, 2019).

During the Eurozone crisis, as Greece and other nations faced major financial risks, Germany maintained caution in its relations with Russia. By choosing to enforce austerity in the name of fiscal orthodoxy, Angela Merkel demonstrated a strategic confidence that Germany was consolidating its hegemonic position at

the EU's core (Siddi, 2018: p. 2). Importantly, this was not mere economic pragmatism or naive idealism. Instead, it reflected a deliberate prioritisation of economic statecraft and strategic autonomy under the rubric of a normative power. While Germany underrated the geopolitical dimension of its Russian policy by framing energy cooperation purely economically (Meister & Jilge, 2023), the EU proved poorly equipped to enhance its energy security (Balmaceda, 2021). However, this assessment was itself a strategic calculation: Berlin willingly accepted certain geopolitical risks to preserve its industrial base and economic model.

The greatest energy project, though, was Nord Stream 2, which aimed to bypass Ukraine for gas transit to Germany, and from there to the EU market. It was advanced to the construction phase after the 2014 events, when the Minsk Agreements had passed into oblivion (Wittke, 2019). The EU lacked unity towards Gazprom (Lang & Westphal, 2017), but German leadership believed in the project as a pragmatic step toward stability and cooperation (Siddi, 2019). Merkel presented the new pipeline as an exclusively economic project of private investors, independent of geopolitical threats (Gustafson, 2020). She even used her institutional power on the EU partners to protect the energy sector from the Commission's sanctions (Youngs, 2017: p. 70).

Construction began in 2018, was completed in late 2021, and was planned to operate in February 2022. While critics (Fischer, 2016; Loskot-Strachota, 2016) warned of the pipeline's geopolitical risks (including Ukraine's vulnerability now that it was bypassed), and proposed taking a wide scale of precautions, from an emergency brake mechanism (Ishinger, 2021) to postponing the operation (Hoell, 2021), Berlin treated energy as separate from security, reflecting continuity with Ostpolitik rather than adaptation to a changing security environment (Kemfert, 2023). As a result, the United States reacted at the top level, revealing the serious strategic rift with Germany. The first Trump administration announced that:

Nord Stream 2 would help maintain Europe's significant reliance on imports of Russian natural gas, which creates economic and political vulnerabilities for our European partners and allies [...].

The United States' intention is to stop the construction of Nord Stream 2. Congress acted, and the President signed the bill. The US position opposing Nord Stream 2 has been consistent across multiple administrations, as part of a longstanding practice to promote energy security through diversification of energy supplies by country of origin, path of delivery, and fuel types, including renewables (Department of State, 2019).

President Donald Trump condemned German policy on several occasions, arguing that Europe was becoming a captive to the Kremlin (Mason, 2018). He also transferred weapons to Ukraine, strengthening Kiev's defence capabilities but increasing Moscow's security risk (Rogin, 2017). Joe Biden, Trump's successor, was sceptical about Russia's intentions. Nevertheless, he was reluctantly persuaded by Merkel to abandon the bipartisan consensus on sanctions against the companies

constructing Nord Stream 2 (Skinner & Berman, 2021).

In November 2020, the German Bundestag devoted a plenary debate to the question of Nord Stream 2, following an AfD motion to secure parliamentary backing for the project. The discussion took place amid heightened geopolitical tensions, including the aforementioned sanctions threats from Washington. Yet, the parliamentary majority reaffirmed its support for completing the pipeline. Across the party spectrum, CDU/CSU and SPD, as the ruling coalition, defended the pipeline as vital for energy security and as a legally authorized infrastructure project. The AfD and Die Linke endorsed it with more overtly anti-American tones. The FDP adopted a conditional stance, based on Russia's human rights record, rather than security issues. Only the Greens rejected the project outright, citing climate goals and the risks of deepening dependency on Russia (Deutscher Bundestag, 2020). The overall tenor of the debate underscored that, despite growing awareness of geopolitical vulnerabilities, the Bundestag at that juncture maintained broad cross-party support for Nord Stream 2 as consistent with Germany's long-standing Ostpolitik of economic interconnection with Russia.

Despite the United States' apparent opposition to the project and while political debates in Germany displayed diverse attitudes toward Russia after 2010, a broad consensus sustained the principles of Ostpolitik until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Merkel mentioned no regrets or self-criticism in her memoirs (Merkel, 2024). On the contrary, she conveyed a sense of fulfilment that arguably reveals a consciousness about the depth of Germany's strategic culture in privileging economic integration as a means of managing geopolitics (Stelzenmüller, 2015).

The rupture marked by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked a rupture, unveiled the limits of Germany's engagement strategy. Although Berlin retained its normative fashion, condemning Putin and imposing sanctions (Scholz, 2022), this change weighed more rhetorically than factually. The internal antinomy was revealed by Ukrainian Ambassador Melnyk, who said that Christian Lindner, the Finance Minister and Chairman of the (liberal) FDP, was against sending help to Kiev or sanctioning Russia, when the war broke out, because "Ukraine would collapse within several hours and [he] was ready to talk to a puppet regime that would be installed by Russia" (Kyiv Independent, 2022). The initial reluctance of German leaders to impose harsh sanctions or supply weapons (Wurthmann & Wagner, 2024: pp. 4-5), and the delayed pivot to military investment (Gehrke & Burchard, 2022) reflected a profound strategic unpreparedness—if not a cynical compromise (Gustafson et al., 2024). Thus, arguing that the EU was "in denial about the geopolitical competition" (Raik et al., 2024) until the war broke out is ill-informed. The one in denial was Germany.

The European Union's sanctions on Russia were weak and came in successive waves (Selga, 2024). This reaction indicated both Europe's geopolitical lightness and Germany's reluctance to sever ties with Russia. The primary energy security issue that had arisen threatened German industry and, by extension, the German

economy. During winter, most Germans expressed concerns about the shortage of oil and natural gas supplies, and Berlin proposed a Europe-wide cap on gas use to save resources to support its exports. In late September 2022, following the German government's dismissive attitude and sparing military support for Ukraine, a sabotage against the NS2 took it out of service (Koponen, 2024). Although there is no definitive response as to who blew up the pipeline, it has been argued that only the United States would benefit from such an act (State Department, 2022; Orozco, 2023). All in all, Ostpolitik had taken a painful blow, Germany was entering a crisis that threatened the structure of its economic supremacy, and Europe was again turning to America for help.

Germany's Ostpolitik thus collapsed not simply because Russia acted aggressively, but because Berlin's normative posture failed to anticipate or mitigate realist dynamics. The sabotage of NS2 sealed the end of an era. It was a strategic and psychological blow, turning the page to German calculations of external dependencies and economic exceptionalism. It closed the door to the Pivotal Area.

As Chancellor Scholz framed it, Germany faced a *Zeitenwende* (turning point) requiring a reassessment of its strategic identity (Mahli, 2024; Téterchen & Ricken, 2025). This dramatic turn invites reassessments of the foreign policy threats faced by other EU frontline states, like Greece, whose longstanding security concerns over a revisionist neighbour were occasionally dismissed by Berlin as exaggerated. In hindsight, such challenges appear prescient within an evolving European security order increasingly shaped by power politics.

In sum, Germany's post-Cold War Ostpolitik culminated in a crisis that revealed the tensions between its normative aspirations and the structural realities of international politics. While Russia pursued its national interest with strategic sincerity, let alone cynicism, Germany's approach blended economic incentives, normative rhetoric, and geopolitical risk in ways that undermined both European security and, ultimately, its own leadership credibility. Failure to reconcile the normative ambitions of Normative Power Europe with the complex realities of power politics, lacking both military means and strategic conditionality, left Berlin unable to balance or deter a revisionist Russia. By overestimating the moderating effect of economic interdependence and underutilising even its normative leverage in exchange for critical assets like NS2, Germany not only enabled deeper vulnerabilities but must also reckon with its share of responsibility for the geopolitical fallout of the war in Ukraine and its consequences for the entire European Union.

## 6. Conclusions: Europe after Ostpolitik

This study has sought to analyse Germany's geopolitical identity, its structural incentives within the EU, and how they shaped the strategic partnership with Russia. The analysis proposed a nuanced critique of Normative Power Europe, as exemplified by Manners. The author agrees that the EU possesses normative capital, but he argues that it can be co-opted for (national) economic gains. The research

hypothesis suggested that Germany's continental orientation was materially grounded in a longstanding tradition that prioritized energy imports from Russia over security concerns, discursively blended in a normative rhetoric about European peace, interdependence, and modernization.

German leaders consistently underestimated the risks of reliance on Moscow, interpreting this continental orientation as both natural and legitimate, in line with the European Union's self-image as a peace project. What is often described as "Normative Power Europe" thus intersected with Germany's own strategic preferences, providing the language through which a geopolitically risky policy could be presented as an extension of Europe's normative vocation.

Critical geopolitics adds an explanation to this intersection. As Fard (2021) has argued, geopolitics is not only about territory, resources, or military capabilities, but also about the discourses and narratives that render particular spatial choices acceptable. Space can be socially constructed through representation, and even classical ideas such as the *Heartland* are framed to justify political orientations. The author of this paper holds that geopolitics derives from a collective strategic mindset that is embedded in a people's character. Critical geopolitics presents a compelling argument considering reality a subjective viewpoint, yet this "construction" is not independent from the historical process and its spatial and power characteristics.

In practice, Ostpolitik combined both dimensions: material dependence on Soviet and later Russian energy, and rhetorical packaging as a peace and modernization project consistent with Europe's normative identity. This duality explains why Germany's continental strategy persisted despite mounting warnings. By presenting dependency as virtue, Ostpolitik blurred the boundary between geopolitics and normative justification—until the war in Ukraine revealed that what had been a source of legitimacy had become a profound source of vulnerability.

This paper has further shown that Germany transformed its economic weight into normative dominance while managing the Eurozone crisis. Berlin framed its preferred policies of fiscal discipline and austerity as moral imperatives for European stability, thereby turning national preferences into European rules. As Bulmer (2014) explained, the Eurozone crisis was a struggle between *ordo-liberal* economics and pro-European integration, with the former prevailing. In this way, Germany redefined the Union's political economy on its own terms. As a result, for almost a decade, Angela Merkel could design intra-European economic governance and, by extension, pursue its external policy priorities with limited contestation. The Euro crisis, therefore, was not an isolated episode of technocratic management but a critical juncture in which normative power became the vehicle of geopolitical expansion. Essentially, Germany contributed to the reproduction of instability through geo-economic prioritisation. This led to a state of strategic unpreparedness when war erupted. All the above considered, the collapse of Ostpolitik cannot be attributed solely to Russian aggression; it was also a result of Germany's failure to adapt its strategy to evolving geopolitical realities.

A possible objection is that the declaration of a *Zeitenwende* in 2022 demon-

strates Germany's capacity for strategic adaptation. Yet the very need for such a rupture confirms the central argument of this paper: Ostpolitik, extended into the post-Cold War era, had become unsustainable. It was less a proactive recalibration than an admission of failure: the recognition that a policy of deliberate dependence on Russia had collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions.

In the EU context, although the author accepts that it can exert normative power, this can be undermined by policies of member states that can afford to prioritise national interest over collective norms. In addition, in the absence of military capability or credible deterrence, normative power becomes wishful thinking, especially when engaging revisionist or illiberal states. In an era in which the EU aspires (and needs) to deepen its ties with third countries, the shortcomings of normative engagement become increasingly apparent, particularly in the absence of credible hard power. The sudden deterioration in EU-Russia relations, following the invasion of Ukraine, underscores the need for necessary reforms that are still pending: the integration of strategic deterrence, the cultivation of resilience, and the incorporation of geopolitical foresight into the EU's foreign policy framework. The Europeans need to respond to the complexities of contemporary international relations, giving a robust response to emerging challenges. Similarly, the growing strategic dependence on the United States for European defence points to an unfinished quest for EU strategic autonomy, with implications for military readiness and diplomatic agency in a multipolar order.

Lastly, the challenges posed by Ukraine and the rising threats to regional stability call on the EU to agree on a common defence and security policy. The discussion that started after the 2024 European elections in the European Commission and the European Parliament has focused primarily on budgetary aspects of the defence industry, instead of a thorough security architecture that can increase deterrence against any possible enemy. To address these challenges, EU foreign policy should remain committed to its normative aspirations, as NPE argues, correlating them with the realities of systemic power and acknowledging its role in the world as strategically autonomous. Germany's experience serves as a cautionary tale for policymakers and scholars regarding the EU's reliance on economic leverage without a corresponding foundation of political or military power.

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