



More responsibility or lack of interest? German Perspective on the South Caucasus after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

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Germany's new federal government will not only decide the direction of German foreign policy but will also influence EU foreign policy. Alongside the transatlantic partnership, European integration and the European Union form the framework and direction of German foreign policy. Accordingly, the war over Nagorno-Karabakh in the autumn of 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the resulting geopolitical shifts in the EU's direct neighbourhood presented Germany, as a European power, with foreign policy challenges. The EU could draw three main conclusions from the war over Nagorno-Karabakh in the autumn of 2020: 1) International conflict mediation failed; 2) Systemic rival Russia expanded its influence in the South Caucasus, although its dominance is challenged by Turkey; and 3) The EU's room for manoeuvre in the region was restricted, while authoritarian actors gained influence. Although these developments were foreseeable, neither Berlin nor Brussels were able to prevent them. Germany's ambivalent foreign policy towards its eastern EU neighbours, which questions Germany's leading role within the EU in shaping its Ostpolitik, needs a reorientation, not through continuity, but through renewal. Berlin, as a key player in the EU will be able to act as a driving force in the context of EU foreign policy towards the South Caucasus as well as the EU's eastern neighbours in general, and to take on more international responsibility.

Key words: Germany, European Union, South Caucasus, Russia, Foreign Policy, Eastern Partnership (EaP), Nagorno-Karabakh war, Unresolved Conflicts, Geopolitics

The 44-day Karabakh war, from which Azerbaijan emerged victorious with Turkish support, and which only ended via Russian intervention, led to foreign policy discussions on the role of the EU in the South Caucasus due to its passive stance. Discussions within political and academic circles present different explanations for the EU's passivity. Two major lines of argumentation can be identified: First, the EU is not a geopolitical actor, and second, the EU avoided taking responsibility. Caucasus expert Stefan Meister explains the EU's passive role as a lack of geopolitical profile, which ultimately led to Brussels handing over the responsibility of stability and development in its neighbourhood to other actors (Meister 2021). On the other hand, the avoidance of responsibility is assessed by individual politicians as a mistake (Interview with von Cramon 2021), which is possibly related to the military nature of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Interview with Nils Schmid 2021). The hard-power nature of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict left no obvious role for the EU as a soft-power actor (Broers 2021). The process of shaping EU foreign policy with 27 states is complex, but with regard to EU passivity to the geopolitical changes in the South Caucasus, the main question is: Could the EU's passivity be explained by the fact that powerful EU states like Germany are not willing to act as a driving force within the EU during a crisis situation in the immediate EU neighbourhood?

The question about Germany's position is relevant because Germany's safety depends on the European security order and the wars in the EU's immediate neighbourhood threaten this order. Nevertheless, Berlin has not been interested in active EU engagement in the South Caucasus, even though there was a permanent danger of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict escalating. As this analysis will demonstrate, Germany showed lack of initiative in general towards the EU's eastern neighbours (Ukraine excluded), especially in the last legislative period (2017-2021). This development was reflected in Germany's EU Presidency in 2020, but also in the election programmes of parties in the run-up to the 2021 federal elections. Despite the new coalition in the federal government following the federal elections, the question of continuity or re-orientation of German foreign policy towards the South Caucasus remains open.

[1] This contribution reflects the personal opinion of the author.

Germany is one of the driving forces of European integration, decisively shaping the EU's foreign policy due to its political and economic weight. Moreover, Germany is the largest net contributor to the EU, contributing around 25% of the EU budget (European Union 2021). Germany is politically and economically linked to the South Caucasian states like no other EU member. As early as 2001, Germany was the only EU state to initiate a Caucasus Initiative tailored to the South Caucasus designed to support interregional integration and stability, as well as the transformation process in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in a regional context (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development 2014). Since the inclusion of South Caucasian states in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Berlin has acted as an active co-shaper of EU foreign policy towards the South Caucasian neighbourhood. Germany tried to work towards the resolution of regional conflicts through the peace plans both before the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 (Eckert 2008) and in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, in 2016 (Bundestag 2016). Since the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, Germany has made a considerable contribution within the framework of the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM) and, with 20 experts, provides about 1/10 of the EU personnel (German Foreign Ministry 2021). These reasons, among others, is why this policy paper focuses on Germany.

Due to the relatively active German role in the region, expectations of Berlin by south Caucasian countries are often high. From the Georgian perspective, this applies primarily to Georgia's EU and NATO integration, and from the Armenian and Azerbaijani perspective for greater partisanship over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (German Bundestag 2021). Germany, on the other hand, is primarily interested in regional stability and shows little enthusiasm for either Georgia's EU/NATO membership or for active participation in the Karabakh conflict. Different expectations often lead to misconceptions about Germany's role and foreign policy goals of the South Caucasus countries (Kakachia/Böttger/Lebanidze/Palm/Sarjveladze 2019). To best categorize German foreign policy towards the South Caucasian states, and in shaping EU foreign policy, it is necessary to take a look at German interests in the region and German foreign policy in general.

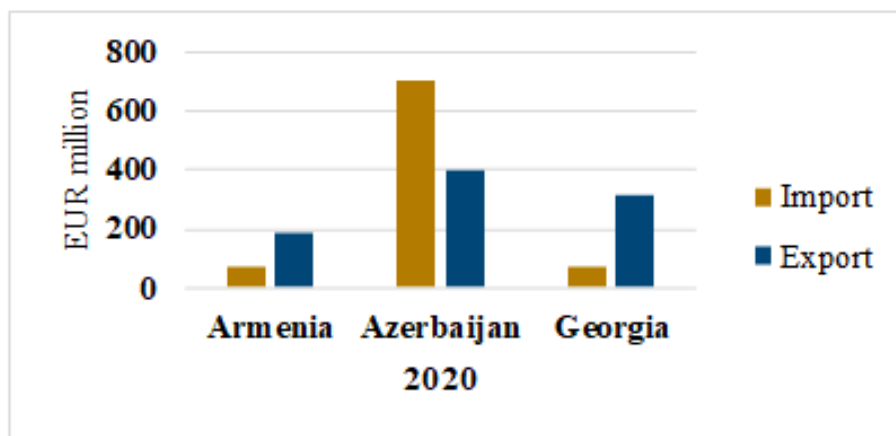
GERMAN INTERESTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Germany's ties with the South Caucasus are rooted in history and date back to the settlement of Germans in the South Caucasus at the beginning of the 19th century. In the 20th century, German-South Caucasian relations went through various phases. After the end of the East-West conflict, Berlin focused on supporting the South Caucasian states during their transformation process through active development cooperation. After the integration of the South Caucasian countries into the European Neighbourhood Policy, the focus shifted beyond development cooperation to the expansion of political and economic relations (Sarjveladze 2019). Germany's relations with the South Caucasian states remain largely aligned with the EU's foreign policy approaches. The EU currently focuses on three aspects: 1) recovery (overcoming the crises caused by the pandemic and economic renewal); 2) resilience (energy security and environmental protection, fostering societal and economic resilience, and long-term solutions to the unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus; and 3) reforms (rule of law and justice reforms as key platforms) (EU Commission 2021). It can be stated that Germany's interests vis-à-vis the South Caucasus derive primarily from the region's corridor function, from its interest in regional stability and from the promotion of the liberal model of democracy.

07 From Germany's point of view, regional stability is a high priority because destabilising the South Caucasian states could have long-term consequences for EU states in terms of international crime, drug trafficking, illegal migration, and terrorism. In the context of development cooperation, Germany is the second largest bilateral donor to the South Caucasian states after the USA (Sarjveladze 2019). In 2021, Georgia, together with Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkan countries, were promoted as a transformation partner in the Reform Strategy 2030 of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) (BMZ 2021a). German development cooperation in the South Caucasus focuses on democracy, civil society, and public administration, as well as sustainable economic development, environmental policy, and the protection and sustainable use of natural resources (BMZ 2021b).

Due to their size, South Caucasian states are not decisively important export markets from the German point of view, but as a link between Europe, Central Asia and China, the region is important in terms of economic policy.

Figure 1: Germany's trade with the South Caucasian states



Source: Germany Trade & Invest. 2021. Wirtschaftsdaten kompakt. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Available at <https://www.gtai.de/gtai-de/trade/ausgewaehlte-publikationen/wirtschaftsdaten-kompakt>

As a leading trade power with a view to the EU's connectivity strategy, (European Union External Action Service 2021) Germany is not interested in the region being affected by instability. The analysis shows that German foreign policy towards the South Caucasian states is adapted to the local political environment. The security policy aspects, in contrast to democracy promotion, shapes the German view of the South Caucasus in a relatively similar way. Nevertheless Georgia, as a NATO aspirant country, is more closely linked to Germany in terms of defence policy than its neighbours. When it comes to democracy promotion, the German government also focuses primarily on Georgia, which can be explained by Georgia's close ties to the EU. In contrast, the focus on Azerbaijan is on economic relations.

As the EU's immediate neighbour, the South Caucasus is also located at the crossroads of geopolitical competition between regional and supraregional actors such as Russia, the USA, China, Iran and Turkey. Since the initiation of the EaP, the EU and thus also Germany have been an unwilling, but nevertheless active part of this geopolitical competition. Through the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of the US from the South Caucasus, the EU has gradually become a more important actor (Cornell 2018). However, the past decade, and the Second Karabakh War have shown that the vacuum is not primarily filled by the EU, but by other actors

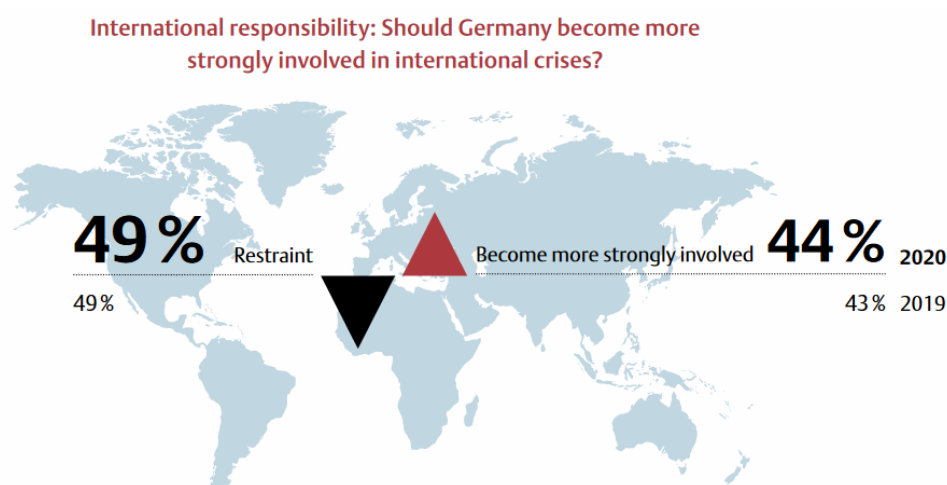
such as Russia, China, Turkey and Iran. The idea of a new regional format, "3+3", is a cooperation-oriented initiative (Samkharadze 2021), and is set to include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Iran and Russia. The initiative, which is promoted above all by Russia and Turkey, ultimately aims to weaken the West's positions in the region and promote illiberalism as an outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Germany, as the leading EU state, cannot be interested in such an outcome given its interests outlined above.

In the regional geopolitical competition, further fields are emerging that are of strategic interest from a German and European perspective. In this context, Russia's antagonism towards NATO and the EU should be mentioned first and foremost, which the German government is also experiencing in the form of disinformation and support for anti-European forces. The Kremlin's open antagonism in the common neighbourhood with the EU is aimed, among other things, at weakening Germany's region shaping potential (as a leading EU and NATO state) (Mair 2021). Accordingly, Germany, which relies on the European and transatlantic pillars in terms of foreign and security policy, should be interested in ensuring that the processes in the South Caucasus are not determined by actors aiming at weakening the EU and NATO. After the Merkel era, German foreign policy is faced with the challenge and the, "necessity of redefining the scope of German responsibility in world politics" (Maihold/Mair/Müller/Vorrath/Wagner 2021). The trends currently shaping the international order, such as growing authoritarianism, the weakening of the West's position, the intensification of competition for international influence, and the weakening of multilateralism, are also openly visible in the South Caucasus. If Germany, as one of the key actors in the EU, does not react to these changes in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, which other EU member state could effectively take over the function of a driving force?

The Need for a Realignment of German Foreign Policy?

Although the EU's eastern neighbours, including the South Caucasian states, would welcome a more active German foreign policy, the German government has avoided taking more responsibility at the EU level in shaping EU foreign policy towards the South Caucasian and eastern neighbours in general. In this context, German foreign policy can be understood as an extension of domestic policy.

Figure 2: Germany's international responsibility



Source: Körber-Stiftung. 2020. Involvement or Restraint? https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/koerber-stiftung/redaktion/the-berlin-pulse/pdf/2020/The-Berlin-Pulse_2020-21_Charts.pdf

09 According to a survey by the Körber Foundation (Figure 2), a slight majority of Germans are against Germany's active involvement in an international crises. Germany's historically fraught relationship with power contributed to German foreign policy being shaped by a fear of conflict and isolation (Speck 2012). This fear is also accompanied by an unwillingness to lead. Nevertheless, 44% of Germans support an active role for Germany, which in turn should go hand in hand with the strengthening of the EU from the German perspective. Angela Merkel's statement after the G7 summit in 2017 - "We Europeans must take our fate into our own hands" (Handelsblatt 2017) primarily revealed two developments: First, to what degree transatlantic relations were strained by the change in the global political role of the USA. And secondly, the recognition that the EU must reposition itself in a world of dynamic international politics. For the South Caucasian countries, more German responsibility at the international level would mean a more active role for the EU and NATO in the South Caucasus.

Whether Germany will push for a more active EU foreign policy towards the South Caucasus will depend on whether the new German government will redefine Germany's role within the EU as a driving force. With the increase of Germany's political and economic importance, it raises the questions like: Who sets the agenda in the EU? Are the key players in the EU, including Germany, prepared to make the EU a capable actor in the global context? Due to limited resources and a lack of will Germany is not hegemonic within the EU (Böttger/Jopp 2021). Instead, Germany is a heavyweight within the EU while at the same time dependent on a consensus within the union (Lübke-meier 2021). For an international order marked by increasing systemic competition, the "Merkel doctrine" of treating the United States, France, Russia and China largely as partners and making concessions to them in one area while frustrating them another no longer seems to work (Speck 2021a). Several arguments indicate that a realignment of Germany's foreign policy is needed. The lack of clarity about how Germany regards itself leads to uncertainty among partners, lowering Berlin's credibility. As already stated, German foreign policy needs updating related to a changing world order. This creates the need for a clear foreign policy line vis-à-vis challengers to liberal democracy and multilateralism. As the South Caucasus is geographically located at the point where the tectonic lines of geopolitical competition collide, Germany's positioning will be relevant from the perspective of South Caucasian states.

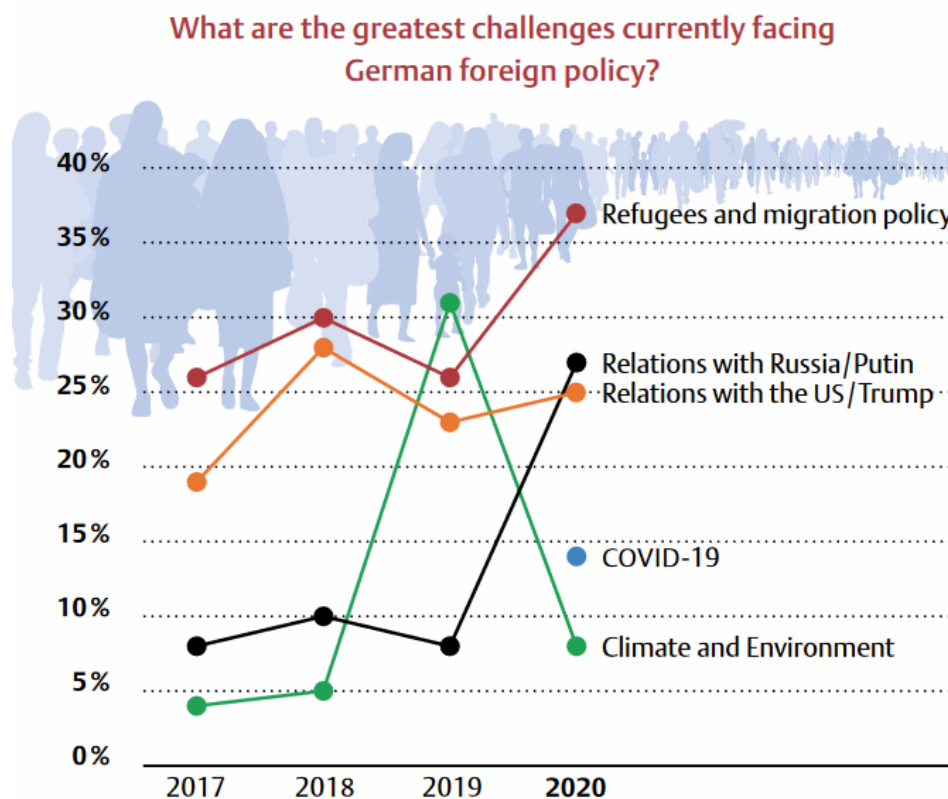
Changes and Contradictions

The fact that Russia is the most powerful actor in the South Caucasus in terms of security policy due to its influence on the regional conflicts impacts the German view of the South Caucasus. The existing conflict potential and Russia's willingness to interfere in the internal affairs of neighbouring states by hybrid means ultimately leads to Russian interests being considered when making foreign policy.

German foreign policy towards Russia and its eastern EU neighbours is marked by both changes and contradictions. *The changes* include the downgrade in German-Russian relations from 2014 onwards as a result of the Ukraine war. In the German government's most important security policy document - the 2016 White Paper - it clearly stated that Russia was openly questioning the European peace order (Weißbuch 2016). The caesura also includes the fact that the EU sanctions against Russia have received significant support from Berlin since 2014. In this respect, Germany has adapted its foreign policy to the changed conditions in the EU's eastern neighbourhood and embedded it in a European context (Fischer 2021). Additionally, more importance is now attached to the states of the eastern neighbourhood than in the 2000s (ibid.). Parallel to the strengthening of the Russian position after the second Karabakh war, it can be assumed that Russia will continue act as a brake on German foreign policy towards the South Caucasus (e.g. Georgia's EU and NATO membership, or Armenia's closer ties to the EU).

10 *The contradictions* include, above all, the ambivalent policy of the previous German government regarding Nord Stream II, which led Germany to question its own leadership role within the EU regarding Russia and Eastern Europe policy, as Berlin vehemently insists on implementing Nord Stream II on its own (Meister 2019). This approach by the German government could be based on the persistent misconception that Russia's attitude towards the EU can be positively changed through economic ties and that the Kremlin can be persuaded to make concessions (Fischer 2021). Although Russia is now perceived more as a threat than a strategic partner in the German political establishment (Weißbuch 2016), it is offered opportunities for influence and division in the EU through projects such as Nord Stream II (Meister 2019). In 2020, Russia's market share of EU gas imports was around 37% (Germany Trade and Invest 2021b). In terms of total German-Russian trade, the share of gas imports from Russia in 2020 was around 29.5% and for oil 32% (Germany Trade & Invest 2021c). Without Nord Stream II, Germany is already the largest European consumer of Russian gas. In 2020, Germany covered around 55.2% of its gas demand with Russian gas (statista 2020). At the same time, Berlin re-exported 76.2 bcm of predominantly Russian natural gas within the EU (Energie Informationsdienst 2021). Beyond the Ukraine war, the ambivalent Russia policy of the previous federal government, countering Russia with sanctions on one hand, while holding on to Nordstream II with the other, is apparently reflected as an influencing factor on the reality of Russlandpolitik for the population. From the perspective of Germans, Russia remains one of the most important challenges for German foreign policy, as the Körber Foundation survey shows:

Figure 3: Challenges of German foreign policy



Source: Körber-Stiftung. 2020. Involvement or Restraint? https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/koerber-stiftung/redaktion/the-berlin-pulse/pdf/2020/The-Berlin-Pulse_2020-21_Charts.pdf

- 11 Beyond Russian influence in the South Caucasus, the dependencies created by projects such as Nord Stream II are another factor that Germany must continue to consider regarding Russian interests in regions with conflict potential in order to not put its own national interests at risk. As the reactions from Berlin to the second Karabakh war illustrated, Germany was already not particularly interested in active participation in conflict management, nor in providing impetus for it at the EU level.

REACTIONS FROM BERLIN TO THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR

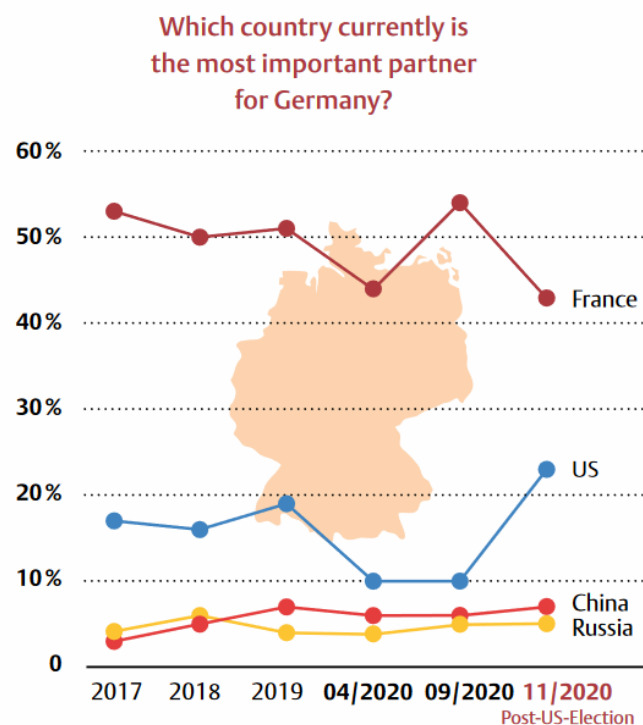
Immediately after the Nagorno-Karabakh war broke out on 27 September, Germany called on the parties to the conflict to agree to a ceasefire and pointed to negotiations within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group as the only way out (German Foreign Ministry 2020a). Chancellor Merkel already spoke on the phone with the heads of state of Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on 29 September (Federal Government 2020). In the German Bundestag, the war was the subject of several motions by the ruling CDU-CSU faction, among others, and of questions to the government by opposition factions. At the end of October 2020, the German Foreign Minister spoke in the Bundestag and repeatedly called on the parties to the conflict to conclude an immediate humanitarian ceasefire (Bundestag 2020). The positions of the individual opposition parties in Germany and the general European response to the war has been critical. While the Free Democrats (FDP) appealed for the EU to take more responsibility, the Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) blamed Berlin and Brussels for the escalation through inaction (ibid.). According to Nils Schmid, the German government could not have done much more, but the EU should have put more pressure on Russia, Turkey, and the parties to the conflict, in order to bring about a quick end to hostilities (Interview with Schmid 2021). However, in this context, two questions arise above all: Why did the German government avoid the responsibility to act as a driving force within the EU?; and what leverage could the EU have used to put pressure on Russia to end the war quickly (as a mediator) if Brussels itself had no influence on conflict management and was completely dependent on Russia in this context?

During the war, the German government constantly pointed out the importance of the Minsk Group. Unlike France, Germany is not one of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group, although, for example, the costs of the OSCE Chair's personal representative for the Minsk process, as well as for the High-Level Planning Group, are covered by the OSCE budget, in which Germany contributed 9.35% in 2019/2020 (Bundestag 2019). The Chair of the South Caucasus Group in the Bundestag explicitly pointed out that Germany should not seek a position as Co-Chair in the Minsk Group, and should instead consistently position itself towards the parties to the conflict and their allies (Hendricks 2021). This approach is probably motivated by the consideration of avoiding direct involvement in conflict management and not challenging relations with France. Disparity between resources invested and actual influence wielded is typical of Germany's often unambitious foreign policy. Germany holds back from active participation, but is willing to pay.

It is also symbolic that German Foreign Minister Haiko Maas, unlike most of his political predecessors, did not tour the South Caucasus. As the following sections will show, the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union (partly during the Karabakh war) was without a real focus on the EaP, and the election programmes 2021 clearly indicate that there is a lack of interest and strategies in German foreign policy towards the South Caucasus.

The German Presidency of the Council of the European Union (July-December 2020) illustrated Germany's lack of will to shape EU foreign policy towards the Eastern Neighbourhood. The EaP was not among the main topics of the German Presidency and was only mentioned in the margins of the presidency programme together with the Central Asia Strategy (German Foreign Ministry 2020b). It is also symbolic that conflicts in the South Caucasus, unlike the Ukraine conflict, were not even mentioned in the programme (ibid.). Germany was criticised by individual political representatives that Berlin did not use its Council Presidency to address either the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict at EU level or to call for a realignment of the Minsk Group (e.g. replacement of France by the EU) in response to France's party-political positioning (Von Cramon 2021). Moreover, the German government missed the opportunity to use the Presidency to reshape the EaP (Gregorová 2021). It can also be assumed that among other factors, the de facto failure of a "new partnership" between France and Germany (Kempin 2021) in recent years negatively influenced Germany's foreign policy engagement at the EU level in the case of the EaP and the Karabakh war. At the same time, France is perceived by far as the most relevant partner in Germany:

Figure 4: Germany's most important partners



Source: Körber-Stiftung. 2020. Involvement or Restraint? https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/koerber-stiftung/redaktion/the-berlin-pulse/pdf/2020/The-Berlin-Pulse_2020-21_Charts.pdf

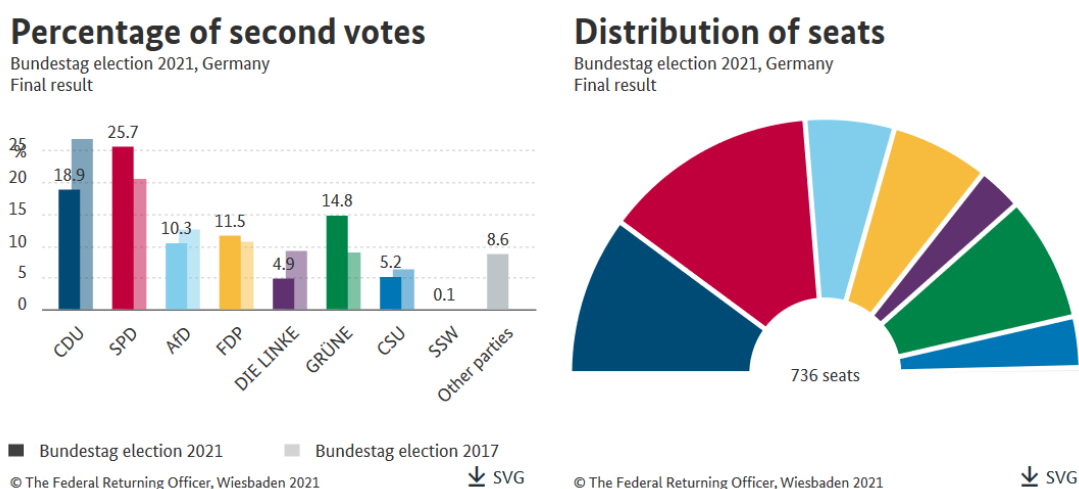
The fact that Germany's restraint has left a vacuum in the context of EU foreign policy towards the South Caucasus can be seen in Romania's initiative on the ongoing conflicts in the EaP and the wider Black Sea region. With the initiative, which is supported by another 10 EU members, Bucharest addressed the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania 2021) as late as November 2020.

- 13 The initiative envisages the establishment of a security dimension to the unresolved conflicts because, "the conflicts pose a major threat to the stability and security of the entire region and to Euro-Atlantic security" (ibid.). The initiative was predominantly supported by eastern EU states and is noteworthy because neither France nor Germany were among the original supporters. At the same time the Chair of the South Caucasus-German Parliamentary Group in the Bundestag assumes that the EaP will be an important impetus for German foreign policy in the period after the Bundestag elections (Hendricks 2021). This is questionable however because beyond the EU Council Presidency, the election campaigns and party programmes in the run-up to the 2021 Bundestag elections clearly showed that the South Caucasus plays a rather marginal role in the foreign policy plans of the political groups.

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN GERMAN INTERNAL PARTY DISCOURSE

Two months after the federal elections in September 2021, a "traffic light coalition" emerged in Berlin, consisting of Social Democrats (SPD), Alliance 90/Greens and Free Democrats (FDP), which will form the new federal government. Germany is now officially entering the post-Merkel era after 16 years of Angela Merkel's chancellorship.

Figure 5: Bundestag election 2021



Source: The Federal Returning Officer. 2021. Election results.
<https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse.html>

From the current perspective, it is relevant to look back at the election campaigns for the Bundestag elections in autumn 2021 to see what role the South Caucasus, and the EU's eastern neighbours in general, played in the election programmes. The analysis of the election programmes and especially the election campaign illustrates that in general the share of foreign policy has been rather minimal. Not only the South Caucasus, but also the EaP in general received low attention in the party programmes. Regarding the EU's eastern neighbourhood, the political parties focused predominantly on relations with Russia and Ukraine.

14 The election programme of the Union (CDU/CSU), which has provided the chancellor since 2005, announced that, "the independence of the EU's eastern partners [...] as well as their political and economic modernisation into European constitutional states will be actively promoted" (CDU/CSU 2021). However, it remains unclear how the Union intended to advance independence and modernisation in the case of the South Caucasus as the influence of authoritarian powers on the region has grown considerably since the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Moreover, the Union's former candidate for chancellor, Armin Laschet, has been known for his lenient position towards Russia. Even though the party programme emphasises the need for a firm stance towards Russia, and the party overwhelmingly supported the Russia sanctions, the fact remains that the Union has resolutely pushed for Nord Stream II, presenting it as an economic project for years.

Another party from the former government coalition - the SPD, which provides the new Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz, refers in its election programme to the need of Germany to meet the challenges (including the growing influence of other states) in Europe's eastern neighbourhood, "through a conceptually reoriented European neighbourhood policy". According to the election manifesto, the party strives for a new European Eastern policy, "geared towards a common and coherent EU policy towards Russia" (SPD 2021a). A coherent policy towards Russia however can hardly be expected from the SPD, considering its support for Nord Stream II. Olaf Scholz can largely be expected to maintain continuity with the current foreign policy as foreign policy has not been a focus of the new chancellor so far. He stands for the defence of the multilateral order against authoritarian tendencies and great power thinking, but at the same time warns against dividing the world into blocs (Speck 2021b). In dealing with Russia, he pleads for a willingness to engage in dialogue and for the Russian side to accept the principles of international law to best guarantee common security (Kinkartz 2021). The SPD seems to ignore that this approach has so far been interpreted by Russia as weakness on the part of the West. Scholz has not yet commented on the accession ambitions of associated EaP states, but based on his interviews, the following principle should apply to him: European integration first and then the rest, as long as integration is not endangered.

The only party that directly addresses the Eastern Partnership (and thus the South Caucasian states) or the future prospects of the Eastern Partnership with regard to EU membership in its election programme is the Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen). The election manifesto contains the statement: "We want to keep the path to the EU open for the EU-associated countries of the Eastern Partnership" (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2021). In contrast to Olaf Scholz and Armin Laschet, the former candidate for chancellor of the Greens and the incoming foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, supports a more robust foreign policy towards Russia. In view of Russia's instrumentalization of gas supplies, she advocated not granting Nord Stream II an operating licence for the time being (Küstner 2021). Considering the fact that the Greens are more open to rethinking and reorienting German foreign policy than the other political parties, this could have a positive impact on the dynamics of German foreign policy towards the South Caucasus in terms of rapprochement with the EU and NATO, efforts towards conflict resolution, or strengthening civil society. Another party in the new federal government is the FDP, which mentions the Eastern Neighbourhood in its election programme only in connection with the EU education programme "Erasmus+" (FDP 2021). The election programmes of two other parties represented in the Bundestag - the Left Party and the far-right, populist, Alternative for Germany (AfD) - do not mention the South Caucasus or the EaP, but actively address Russia.

Among other measures, they advocate a policy of détente towards Russia, the dissolution of NATO and its replacement by a collective security system with Russian participation, an end to the supremacy against Russia on the part of the EU and the USA (Die LINKE), the lifting of EU sanctions, the resumption of the NATO-Russia Council and the expansion of economic relations (AfD) (Die LINKE 2021 / AfD 2021).

- 15 The coalition agreement 2021-2025 between the SPD, the Greens and the FDP includes the statement: "We are working together with the EU and its member states on the further development of the Eastern Partnership. States such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, which aspire to EU accession, should be able to move closer through consistent rule-of-law and market-economy reforms" (SPD 2021b). It remains to be observed whether Georgia, which has been suffering from a domestic political crisis for a year, and whose government prefers the consolidation of its own power to the reforms that are indispensable for EU integration, will remain a trustworthy partner. It was apparent from the election programmes that the Ukraine conflict, in contrast to the conflicts in the South Caucasus, is the clear priority. At the same time, Russia, together with China, is perceived as an actor which increasingly challenges Germany and the EU. Even though the foreign ministry is led by the Greens, it can be assumed that the SPD will try to balance the robust attitude of the Greens towards Russia (from which the South Caucasian states could benefit, e.g. in terms of increasing support for political and economic resilience). Moreover, the Greens are divided when it comes to hard security and deterrence, as the internal party discourse on the possible delivery of defence weapons to Ukraine has shown.

CONCLUSION

Based on this analysis of the German perspective of geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus, it can be concluded that the South Caucasus is rather low on the priority list of German foreign policy. This also applies to the framework of the Eastern Partnership. Of the EaP countries, relations with Ukraine and the Ukraine conflict, in contrast to the conflicts in the South Caucasus, is the priority. This also appears to be confirmed by the new coalition agreement, which, in contrast to Georgia or other South Caucasian states, only mentions support for the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Germany's willingness to advocate for a focus on the South Caucasus at the multilateral level remained low in the final phase of the Merkel era. Berlin's concentration on the Ukraine conflict (Normandy format) clearly shows that concerns about immediate destabilisation of the European security order are greater in the case of Ukraine than in the case of the conflicts in the South Caucasus. Accordingly, Berlin has tried to avoid irritating Russia at other touch points beyond Ukraine. In this context, the question arises whether the Nagorno-Karabakh war has led to a rethinking in German foreign policy about whether Germany should intensify its engagement with the region in a bilateral or multilateral format? At this stage, this does not seem to be the case and the reasons why are complex. It would be beyond the scope of this paper, but three aspects in particular can be highlighted: 1) the dominance of other issues (transatlantic relations, Brexit, domestic political turmoil, the Ukraine conflict, relations with China, etc.) and the generally low level of interest towards the South Caucasus; 2) Restraint from areas with conflict potential (especially with Russia); and 3) Germany's lack of willingness to play a greater role in shaping the EU's foreign policy towards the South Caucasus.

For German foreign policy, categories such as power and leadership remain problematic and this weakens the EU. Without impulses from key actors within the EU such as Germany, the EU cannot pursue and implement a long-term and effective foreign policy towards its eastern neighbours. This applies first and foremost to active EU engagement in the unresolved conflicts which constitute the main security challenges of the South Caucasian states.

16 Without a security profile, the EU is perceived by challengers such as Russia as an actor who cannot compete in an environment shaped by hard power. The EU's unity depends on an internal European consensus, and at this point Germany, as a key actor, has the unifying or leading function. The new German government should ask itself whether it is in Germany's and Europe's interest for the EU's immediate neighbouring region between the Black and Caspian Seas to be dominated by the EU's systemic rivals. It remains an open question what consequences this development could have for the peace and security order in Europe as a protective order against wars, for the EU's energy interests, and against the potential strengthening of authoritarian tendencies.

Germany's reaction to the war over Nagorno-Karabakh and Berlin's role in the EU and OSCE context clearly show that Germany's foreign policy lacks a clear definition of what kind of responsibility Germany and the EU should assume in the EU's eastern neighbourhood and more generally in the world. This contributed to the reluctance of the EU to act during the Nagorno-Karabakh war. If key players such as Germany do not take more responsibility within the EU to guarantee the EU's cohesive action, the EU will continue to be subject to other actors in global competition, as it has been in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Based on the analysis of the German perspective on the Nagorno-Karabakh war, it can be concluded that if the key actors in the EU such as Germany are not willing to take more responsibility, the EU cannot be expected to act as a geopolitical player.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For European Union:

- Organize a South Caucasus conference with the participation of public and civil society actors under the auspices of the EU to discuss regional cooperation issues in the framework of relations with the EU. The conference could serve as a platform to prepare the EU as an active conflict manager (Tbilisi could serve as a neutral venue).
- Extend the mandate of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus to allow for its inclusion either as Co-Chair or as an observer in the Minsk Group.
- Strengthen co-operation with the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman (based in Tbilisi) and initiate an informal forum (with decision-makers and experts) on peaceful solutions to the current challenges surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Georgia would be a suitable location for such a forum.
- Review the possibility of active participation (e.g. with an observer mission) for peace monitoring from 2025. In November 2025, one of the parties to the conflict will (theoretically) be able to terminate the continuation of the mandate of the Russian peacekeeping forces.
- Consistent use of conditionality vis-à-vis the Georgian government beyond financial means to force the implementation of reforms, especially in the justice sector. Clarifying the prospects for candidate status (Georgia seeks to obtain it by 2030) could be helpful.
- Strengthening the focus on re-identifying common interests vis-à-vis the South Caucasus within the framework of transatlantic relations.

- Recognition that the South Caucasian states have different foreign policy orientations. Based on this assumption, acknowledgement of the split that has occurred in the Eastern Partnership and reconsideration of negative attitudes towards EU membership of associated Eastern Partnership states, such as Georgia.
- Assuming a proactive role in establishing the security policy dimension of the EaP with regarding to the conflicts in the Black Sea region.
- Together with France, which will take over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2022, take the initiative to organise the South Caucasus Conference under the auspices of the EU.
- Revitalization of the idea to establish an EU South Caucasus Strategy, already proposed by the EU Parliament in 2010. The strategy should consider the changing interregional differences regarding EU integration and clearly define the interests and role of the EU in the region.
- In the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Germany could use its close relations with the involved parties to jointly advocate in a trilateral and multilateral format for the release of prisoners of war and for the provision of mine maps/information on the laying of mines. Germany could get involved in clearing mines in the conflict zone, as in the case of Ukraine, and make efforts at the diplomatic level to persuade Azerbaijan and Armenia to accede to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (Ottawa Convention).
- Due to its existing international experience and traditionally good relations with the conflict parties, Germany could, together with the Minsk Group, actively participate in and secure coordination in the border definition and demarcation process.
- To enhance its role and strengthen the EU's voice within the Minsk Group, Germany should promote the EU to the role of co-chair. Since the war the Minsk Group has lost credibility. A neutrality-oriented and geopolitically rebalanced composition of the chairmanship could revitalise the Minsk Group functionality.

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