DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 19.03.2026 | Dmitri Stratievski

Germany in the new ‘world without rules’

A reluctant power steps into the spotlight. Can Berlin lead amid crises at home and abroad?

For decades, Germany operated within clear and well-defined societal parameters. Extremist ideology was branded as marginal and, until 2017, had no representation in the Bundestag. In conservative circles, criticism of Washington was perceived as anti-Americanism, whilst warnings about Russia’s aggressive intentions led the left to associate them with attempts to revise the outcome of the Second World War. On the international stage, Germany remained in the geopolitical ‘shadow’ of the US. The world’s third-largest economy by nominal GDP, for a number of historical and social reasons, was unwilling to translate its economic clout into political influence. The entire foreign policy concept of the modern German state was based on European solidarity, Euro-Atlanticism, and the primacy of diplomacy and peacekeeping. But following two momentous events – the start of Russia’s large-scale aggression against Ukraine and Trump’s return to the presidency – Germany’s political class was forced to urgently reassess its priorities.

The current government, comprising the conservatives (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democrats (SPD), has repeatedly made strong foreign policy statements on the need to strengthen the European Union, oppose ‘Trumpism’ and contain Russia in the long term. It appears that Germany intends to play a key role in this process, and these statements are backed up by concrete actions. However, three challenges currently facing Berlin could hinder these ambitious plans.

Pressure at home

In Germany, parliamentarism and federalism are the main factors ‘cementing’ the entire system of government. The key to the success of the ‘German machine’ is the synchronised work of all levels and branches of government. But now, the ideal model of German statehood has developed a noticeable crack.

The far-right party 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD) does not merely criticise all other political forces in the country, but in fact proposes a development concept steeped in anti-migrant sentiment, ethno-nationalism and exaggerated Euroscepticism. It opposes the foundations of the social contract that has been in force in Germany since the country's reunification, yet consistently tops the polls, holds the second-largest parliamentary group in the Bundestag and has a significant presence in all state parliaments. The party has ceased to be an 'East German phenomenon' and has doubled its popularity in western Germany over the past five years, as demonstrated by the recent elections in the state of Baden-Württemberg.

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The AfD is constantly dogged by scandals, and its prominent politicians are accused of collaborating with foreign intelligence services and nepotism. Yet this has not led to a significant drop in the party's ratings. Under these circumstances, democratic forces employ a 'firewall' strategy, refusing any form of cooperation with the AfD, let alone a coalition. So far, these commitments are being upheld, yet this strategy has a downside. Four out of the six governments over the past 20 years have consisted of the CDU/CSU and the SPD, whereas in the preceding half-century this format was used only once. The absence of a traditional opposition party – be it the Conservatives or the centre-left – has a negative impact on the balance of power in the country.

At the state level, minority governments are formed relying on the support of the Left Party, and even the radical leftists from 'Sahra Wagenknecht's Alliance' are forced to become coalition partners of the Democrats. Following the results of a series of elections in 2026, the number of such coalitions based on the principle of 'against the far right' is likely to increase. Against this backdrop, there is a decline in public trust in state institutions and the media. This is most evident among young people. The personal approval ratings of key politicians, starting with Chancellor Friedrich Merz, have also fallen significantly, with the possible exception of Defence Minister Boris Pistorius. A phenomenon of nostalgia has emerged in society for the era of Angela Merkel's rule, which is associated with stability and predictability.

A team player

Germany requires enormous financial resources to implement its leadership project. The reform of the Bundeswehr and the implementation of a package of measures to enhance the security of critical infrastructure alone will cost the state budget hundreds of billions of euros. This funding must be generated by economic growth and stable external markets.

Germany ranks among the world's top three exporters in a number of indicators. An export-oriented economy is both a strength and a weakness. The advantages lie in significant budget revenues, global recognition of 'Made in Germany' products, technological development and job creation. The disadvantage lies in the economy's vulnerability and its dependence on conditions in foreign markets and global politics as a whole. Moreover, crises deal a double blow: disruptions to supply chains and rising energy prices, which are felt particularly acutely by the energy-intensive flagship sectors of German industry, such as the chemical industry, car manufacturing and mechanical engineering.

The total damage suffered by Germany from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2022, Russia's war against Ukraine and the US trade tariffs already introduced by Donald Trump from the start of 2025 amounted to up to €1 trillion. A new war against Iran could increase the losses by €40–80 billion.

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In foreign policy, Germany is a team player. For Berlin, it is both important and customary to act not in isolation, but in close cooperation with partners within the European Union, NATO and the wider Western community. Yet every new crisis reveals yet another crack in the 'edifice' of the Western world. The reliance on 'Merz's magic' in dealings with Trump, and the hope that two 'businessmen' would be able to establish a mutually acceptable framework for US-German relations, has not paid off. And opponents of European unity, both within Europe and beyond, are exploiting this.

The federal government has already had to make a difficult choice three times in less than three months of this year: to oppose Washington or to seek compromises. This was the case in January, at the height of the threats against Greenland and following the attack on Caracas and the subsequent abduction of the then Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro,

and again in March, after the start of the US-Israeli operation against Iran. Caught between opposing positions (between Euro-Atlanticists, advocates of strict adherence to international law, pacifists and human rights activists), the ruling coalition had to make decisions that inevitably caused discontent amongst sections of society.

The Bundestag has taken an unprecedented decision, exempting budgetary expenditure on security and aid to Kyiv from the 'debt brake'. Domestically, it is necessary to continue explaining to the population that Ukraine cannot be left in the lurch, even in the face of national economic problems.

The Russian-Ukrainian war continues, the bloodiest and largest armed conflict in Europe since the end of the Second World War. Berlin, having unequivocally condemned Moscow's aggression and become Kyiv's main ally, has taken on a whole range of financial and diplomatic commitments amidst the unpredictability of the US administration. These processes entail significant costs, and by no means only financial ones. Germany has to convince its European allies of the need to continue and even step up support for Ukraine, and of the reality of Russian threats to Europe, regardless of how far countries lie from the bloc's eastern border. The Bundestag has taken an unprecedented decision, exempting budgetary expenditure on security and aid to Kyiv from the 'debt brake'. Domestically, it is necessary to continue explaining to the population that Ukraine cannot be left in the lurch, even in the face of national economic problems.

In essence, Germany has no other historical choice but to make a serious bid for leadership and, in this new 'world without rules', to become – in cooperation with its allies – that pole of power which is prepared to abide by the rules. Berlin has already taken a number of steps in this direction, initiating a new national and pan-European course. The Federal Republic has succeeded in creating a largely unique model of checks and balances, with functioning state institutions that ensure political competition, freedoms and the rule of law. A developed economy and a high standard of manufacturing provide a reliable financial foundation for politics. Civil society in a country where one in three adults volunteers makes this model sustainable. The main problem is whether German politicians will have the consistency and courage not to stray from the chosen path.



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