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Why Ostpolitik is needed right now

Revisiting this policy of reconciliation could help to develop a realistic, step-by-step foreign policy towards the ultimate goal: peace with Russia

The conventional wisdom in Germany is that *Ostpolitik* – which is usually taken to mean a policy based on the idea of peaceful co-existence with Russia going back to the approach taken by Willy Brandt as chancellor – is now completely discredited. Even those who admit that it was successful in the 1970s seem to think that it is no longer relevant and should be completely abandoned. I have a different view: we need *Ostpolitik*, perhaps more than ever before, and Social Democrats should be going back to it rather than abandoning it.

The prevailing view, at least among German foreign-policy elites, is that until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, the Social Democrats remained in thrall to an outdated vision based on the approach that went back to Brandt. They say that although Chancellor Olaf Scholz promised a new approach after the invasion, he hasn't gone far enough in investing in military capabilities and has been too hesitant to supply Ukraine with the weapons it needs as well as too reluctant to say that Russia must be defeated. In other words, the Social Democrats can't quite let go of *Ostpolitik*.

A distortion of *Ostpolitik*

I look at this in a different way. For over a decade, I criticised the idea then prevalent in Germany, and elsewhere in the West, that economic interdependence with China and Russia would either democratise them or turn them into 'responsible stakeholders' in the international system. In other words, I was far from a defender of the soft approach to authoritarian states that Germany had taken from Gerhard Schröder to Angela Merkel. As I argued in 2013, the *Wandel durch Handel* ('change through trade') approach was not a continuation of *Ostpolitik* but rather a distortion of it.

Having distorted Egon Bahr, the architect of *Ostpolitik*, was a

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realist whose objective was not the transformation of the Soviet Union but German reunification. The approach he proposed in his famous speech at Tutzing in 1963 did not centre on economic interdependence at all — back then, the catchphrase was *Wandel durch Annäherung* ('change through rapprochement'), not *Wandel durch Handel*. It was about people-to-people links more than business — and to the extent that economic interdependence played a role at all, it was not an end in itself but a means to an end.

What happened from Schröder onwards, however, was that this rather clever and successful approach from the Cold War was instrumentalised, not only by Social Democrats but also by others, in order to justify a completely different approach to what was no longer the Soviet Union but a very different post-Cold War Russia. Doing business became the end in itself rather than a means — though in order to give it a moral or strategic spin, it was suggested that this would itself lead to 'change' in the authoritarian states that Germany was doing business with. In short, *Wandel durch Handel* was a liberal distortion of a realist idea.

Now, however, Germany seems to have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Having distorted *Ostpolitik* and in the process forgotten what it was really all about, it now seems at best irrelevant and at worst counter-productive in the context of the Russian onslaught against Ukraine. Instead, we are told that there can be no peace with Russia until it is completely defeated and we must therefore prepare ourselves for a long war — and there is no point even thinking about peace with Russia and even that doing so plays into Putin's hands.

Two important lessons

However, if we go back to what *Ostpolitik* really was – as opposed to the distorted *Wandel durch Handel* version of it that began with Schröder – it remains relevant. In fact, it seems to me that we actually need *Ostpolitik* now more than we did before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. After all, if despite all the differences between then and now, the situation in Europe resembles the Cold War more than it did in the two decades after the end of the Cold War, this clever Cold War strategy may be more relevant than it has been in a long time.

It seems to me there are two particularly innovative and interesting

elements of Bahr's approach that are relevant for thinking about German policy towards Russia today. The first is the paradoxical idea of accepting reality in order to transform it. In Bahr's case, that reality was the division of Germany. His insight was that the best way of overcoming that division was to recognise the German Democratic Republic (GDR) — what he called *judo innerdeutsch*, or intra-German judo.

The lesson from Ostpolitik is that, while we should accept the current reality, we should not forget about the goal altogether, but rather think about what small steps can be taken that might get us there eventually.

The second innovative and interesting – and potentially relevant – aspect of *Ostpolitik* is the idea of taking small steps towards a long-term goal that seems unattainable. In Bahr's case, this began with an agreement with the GDR that allowed West Berliners to apply for passes to visit relatives in East Berlin. At the time, it must have seemed at best irrelevant and at worst a concession — but it was the beginning of a process that would bring the two Germanies together.

Of course, despite the sense that there is a new Cold War, things are very different now than they were in the early 1960s when Bahr conceived of *Ostpolitik* and the 1970s when Brandt was able to implement it as chancellor. Above all, Germany is now reunified. But it seems to me that Social Democrats should think about how to apply these two innovative and interesting aspects of Bahr's approach to the current situation in Europe.

The goal now – that is, the equivalent of German reunification for Bahr – should be peace with Russia. At the moment, it seems as distant and unattainable as German reunification seemed in the early 1960s. But the lesson from *Ostpolitik* is that, while we should accept the current reality, we should not forget about the goal altogether, as German foreign policy elites seem to want to, but rather keep our eye on it and to think about what small steps can be taken that might get us there eventually.



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