

Opinion **German politics**

Germany is in urgent need of a courageous new Ostpolitik

Russia and China today pose very different challenges from those faced by Willy Brandt in the 1970s

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Chancellor Willy Brandt kneels before a memorial to the Warsaw ghetto uprising © Bettmann Archive/Getty

Timothy Garton Ash 5 HOURS AGO

The writer is author of a history of Ostpolitik, ‘In Europe’s Name: Germany and the Divided Continent’

German chancellor Olaf Scholz often and rightly praises the Ostpolitik of his great Social Democratic predecessor, Willy Brandt, who was chancellor of the Federal Republic a half-century ago. Indeed, [Brandt turned Ostpolitik](#), which simply means “eastern policy”, into a globally recognised term. But 50 years on, the geopolitical context has changed completely and Scholz urgently needs a new Ostpolitik for today.

In 1969, when Brandt launched what was then called his “new” [Ostpolitik](#), West Germany was a revisionist power, ultimately seeking unification with East Germany, and the Soviet Union was a defensive status quo power. Today, united Germany is the defensive status quo power and [Vladimir Putin’s Russia](#) is the revisionist power, prepared to use all available means to restore its hegemony over Ukraine and other parts of eastern Europe.

Back then, West Germany’s economic relations with Russia were put at the service of the country’s innovative variant of the detente also being pursued by the US, France and the UK. Osthandel, or eastern trade, paved the way for Ostpolitik. Gas [first started](#) to flow down a pipeline from Russia to West Germany in 1973. The long-term results of that systematic promotion of economic ties include Germany’s current energy dependence on Russia. The boot is on the other foot. That may help to explain

The underlying Ostpolitik gambit of [Egon Bahr](#), Brandt's adviser, was a judo throw: entice your heavy, slow-moving opponent, the Soviet Union, to lean so far into your embrace that with a skilful twist you can throw him over your shoulder. Now it is Putin, a judo black belt, who is trying to throw heavy, slow-moving Germany over his shoulder.

In the 1970s, as US detente policies skilfully widened the Sino-Soviet split, West Germany could concentrate its efforts entirely on the Soviet Union. But in Beijing a few days ago, Putin and Chinese president Xi Jinping reaffirmed a [Russian-Chinese alignment](#) against the west. So a new Ostpolitik has also to be a far eastern policy. Unfortunately, Germany's export dependence on China is as acute as its energy dependence on Russia.

Let me add a last, painful difference. Brandt was one of the most inspiring figures in Europe's postwar history. In a deeply moving symbolic expression of a democratic Germany learning the lessons of its past, [Brandt fell to his knees](#) in 1970 before a monument to the heroes of the 1943 Warsaw ghetto rising. But Gerhard Schröder, the last Social Democratic chancellor before Scholz, is one of the most disgraceful figures in the recent history of German democracy. After his rather successful period as chancellor, Schröder's acceptance of highly paid senior positions at Nord Stream, Rosneft and a recent [nomination](#) for the board of Gazprom, while offering constant apologies for Putin's repression and aggression, has shamed the legacy of Ostpolitik.

Now for the good news. All these points are being made eloquently in German media, think tanks and political debate. Even the left-liberal weekly [Die Zeit](#), the parish magazine of the church of Ostpolitik, has aired sharp criticism of those German Social Democrats who continue to mouth old Ostpolitik platitudes unfitted to new circumstances. Shaped by the junior parties in Scholz's "traffic light" coalition, the Greens and the Free Democrats, his government's three-party coalition agreement actually prescribes [a significant reorientation of the country's eastern policy](#). It is to be more integrated into an overall EU strategy, more attentive to human rights and democracy, and more concerned to balance the interests of countries like Ukraine and Belarus against those of Germany's special relationship with Russia. Scholz himself says we need "a European Ostpolitik".

Had it not been for the [Ukraine crisis landing on Scholz's desk](#) within hours of his

world will be listening.

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