

## V. FEAR OF CHANGE. THE SOCIAL COSTS OF THE ZEITENWENDE

When Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered his speech in the Bundestag on 27 February 2022, he convinced the majority of the German people that their country was at a ‘turning point’ (*Zeitenwende*). However, from the very start public belief in the politicians’ ability to cope with the anticipated challenges was limited. Only one in ten people declared that they had a high degree of confidence in the government’s ability to deliver results, while one in three had no such confidence at all.<sup>1</sup> As the implementation of the reforms proceeded over the next few months, the public became increasingly concerned about their impact. This trend has continued, especially with regard to the implementation of the key project: the transformation of the country’s energy and climate policy. These growing concerns have been compounded by the fear of impoverishment, which is much stronger in the east of the country, where worries about the consequences of the changes associated with the ‘new era’ and the fear of another transformational shock (after the one in 1989) are all too palpable.

The Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) has capitalised on the mood of anxiety and dissatisfaction with the ruling coalition’s performance to gain increasing support and become the second most popular party in Germany. Maintaining the unity of society, bridging the differences between the people of eastern and western Germany in their attitudes to the consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war, and the issue of further assistance to Ukraine will become major campaign themes in the run-up to the 2025 Bundestag elections.

The arrival of refugees from Ukraine became a test of the public’s reaction to the *Zeitenwende*. In the early stages of the war, Germany was the second most popular country of choice for fleeing Ukrainians after Poland. This was determined both by geographical proximity and the presence of an already existing Ukrainian diaspora. Other important factors included the reputation of Germany as a refugee-friendly country, its extensive welfare system and ample job opportunities on the labour-starved German market (see Appendix). At the time of the invasion of Ukraine, the vast majority of German people (91%) felt that accepting war refugees from that country was the right decision.

<sup>1</sup> T. Petersen, *Ein Funken Hoffnung*, Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 21 December 2022, ifd-allensbach.de.

Only a part of the AfD electorate had a different opinion, with 19% of those questioned saying that it was the wrong decision.<sup>2</sup> The negative attitude of both the AfD and its supporters on this issue continued thereafter. In fact, it also extended to other war-related measures: in July 2022, 80% of AfD supporters opposed the imposition of sanctions on Russia that could have negative consequences for Germany.<sup>3</sup>

In a survey published in mid-January 2023, the German people did not stand out from those in other European countries in terms of their attitudes towards the war or their willingness to help Ukraine; they did not deviate significantly from the average in most categories.<sup>4</sup> However, one notable exception came in the response to the statement “Ukraine’s problems are not our business and we should not interfere in them”. 43% of German respondents agreed with this, the highest percentage among respondents from the EU countries and also the highest increase since the previous survey (+11 p.p.). Two overlapping factors were responsible for this. The first of these was the economic crisis and high inflation in the country before the Scholz government had fully implemented its relief measures.<sup>5</sup> The other was the influx of refugees not only from Ukraine, but also from other places (the number of asylum applications surged by around 50% compared to 2021), together with the fact that some federal states no longer had the space to accommodate them. The survey also confirmed German scepticism towards providing military support to both its NATO partners and to Ukraine, as well as the nation’s traditionally strong commitment to diplomatic action.

From the start of the war, eastern and western Germany differed significantly on the issue of assisting Ukraine, especially with military aid. The transfer of Leopard 2 tanks was supported by 59% of respondents in the western *Länder* (while 33% were against) compared to just 35% in the eastern *Länder* (where the vast majority, 57%, did not support this step).<sup>6</sup> There were also fundamental differences on the plans to impose further sanctions on Russia. In western Germany, 63% of respondents supported this step despite possible negative consequences for Germany (29% were against). In the east, the opinions were almost exactly reversed: 51% opposed such restrictions while 39% approved

<sup>2</sup> ‘ARD-DeutschlandTREND März 2022’, Infratest dimap, March 2022, infratest-dimap.de.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Weiterhin Unterstützung für Sanktionen gegen Russland – trotz möglicher Nachteile für Deutschland’, Infratest dimap, July 2022, infratest-dimap.de.

<sup>4</sup> *The World’s Response to the War in Ukraine*, Ipsos, January 2023, ipsos.com.

<sup>5</sup> M. Kędzierski, S. Płóciennik, K. Frymark, ‘Germany: third relief package for the energy crisis’, OSW, 19 September 2022, osw.waw.pl.

<sup>6</sup> ‘ZDF-Politbarometer. Mehrheit für Lieferung von Leopard-2-Panzern’, ZDF, 27 January 2023, zdf.de.

of them.<sup>7</sup> There are also differences over the perception of Russia. Almost nine out of ten Germans in the western *Länder* (88%) and three quarters in the eastern *Länder* (77%) perceive Russia as a threat to global security; however, this leads to different responses to questions on some issues, including the future of US nuclear weapons on German territory. 43% of residents in the west and 29% of those in the east favour retaining the deployment of those weapons. Conversely, the percentages of those who demand their withdrawal are 35% and 54% respectively.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Frieden schaffen ohne Waffen***<sup>9</sup>

The wide range of German reactions to the outbreak of war, besides solidarity with the fleeing Ukrainians, has also encompassed pro-Russian demonstrations, including extensive processions of vehicles (*Autokorso*) through major cities.<sup>10</sup> The biggest of these have been held in Berlin, Frankfurt am Main and Hanover, cities inhabited by large and well-organised Russian diasporas. In the following months, most *Länder* banned the ‘Z’ signs that were displayed at these rallies in a clear expression of support for Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. These events also sparked counter-demonstrations.

The celebrations to mark the end of World War II have also provided opportunities for such protests, especially in 2023. In 2022 and 2023, the Berlin government banned the use of Russian and Ukrainian flags out of fear of violent disturbances. Following an appeal against this decision, the initial ruling was partially reversed in 2023, thus allowing the Ukrainians to demonstrate with their national flags. Many cities, such as Frankfurt am Main, witnessed pro-Russian demonstrations where participants voiced their opposition to German arms deliveries to Ukraine and demanded the lifting of sanctions and the launch of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. The speakers justified the war by arguing that Russia had to act in self-defence. These protests were frequently met by counter-demonstrations.

The escalating social tensions, the declining willingness to aid Ukraine, the two overlapping migration crises and the rise in prices all made it easier for AfD-affiliated groups to organise regular protests in the eastern *Länder* in

<sup>7</sup> ‘Weiterhin Unterstützung für Sanktionen gegen Russland...’, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> ‘US-Atombomben in Deutschland: 52 Prozent für Verbleib, 39 Prozent für Abzug’, Infratest dimap, June 2022, [infratest-dimap.de](https://www.infratest-dimap.de).

<sup>9</sup> “Peace-building without weapons” – the slogan of the German pacifist movement.

<sup>10</sup> *Prorosyjskie demonstracje w Niemczech*, OSW, 21 April 2022, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...).

late 2022 and early 2023. Some of them took place every week, on Mondays, in a reference to the 1989 demonstrations in Leipzig in opposition to the then East German Communist government, which initiated the process that culminated in the reunification of Germany. These recent ones were not only about Ukrainian and Russian issues: the banners also included anti-US ('US – occupier') and anti-government slogans.<sup>11</sup> The participants often carried Russian flags as a symbol of support for the invaders' actions. The protests continued to intensify until the spring of 2023. After the energy crisis abated, relief packages were implemented and the public became increasingly concerned about the influx of asylum seekers from areas other than Ukraine, the AfD refocused its message at the rallies on anti-immigration demands.

Such demonstrations are not a phenomenon exclusive to eastern Germany. In the west, the tradition of pacifist protests dates back to the 1950s, in resistance to nuclear weapons.<sup>12</sup> Both in 2022 (though to a lesser extent, as pandemic-related restrictions were still in force) and a year later, Easter marches calling for the preservation of peace swept through Germany.<sup>13</sup> A total of around 120 such gatherings were registered in 2023, some of which attracted several thousand people: most in Berlin (up to 2000), Frankfurt am Main (up to 2000) and Hanover (around 1200). Their main demands included an end to arms supplies for Ukraine and an immediate start to Ukrainian-Russian peace talks. The participants sometimes carried Russian flags. The banners featured slogans such as 'Peace, heating, bread instead of weapons, war and death' (*Frieden, Heizung, Brot statt Waffen, Krieg und Tod*) and 'NATO is the aggressor – peace with Russia'.

### **Eastern-western Germany: (near) alien societies**

The war in Ukraine has failed to consolidate the German people in the face of danger or to narrow the differences between the country's east and west. Quite the contrary: it has accentuated the existing disparities in a number of areas. Even though 34 years have passed since the Berlin Wall came down, the people are still fundamentally divided; in many areas we can even speak of two different societies in one country. This is largely due to the different experiences

<sup>11</sup> M. Bartsch, 'Sicherheit geht vor Freiheit', Taz, 14 December 2022, taz.de.

<sup>12</sup> Ł. Zieliński, T. Leś, *Pacyfizm czy strach? Niemcy wobec wojny na Ukrainie*, OSW, 19 November 2022, youtube.com.

<sup>13</sup> Easter marches have a long tradition in Germany, dating back to the 1960s, a decade marked by protests against the stationing of nuclear weapons on German territory. Since then, demonstrations against nuclear weapons and in favour of peace have been held during Holy Week and at Easter. Trade unions and churches also regularly attend these protests.

of the residents of the eastern and western federal states, the different lessons they drew from the post-1989 transformation, and the inequalities in their material status, which has also translated into their willingness to aid Ukraine. The majority of respondents from the eastern *Länder* (53%, in a survey by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen for ZDF television from September 2022) still feel that they are second-class citizens. People from these regions are also more likely to recognise differences between the east and the west (57%), while those from the western *Länder* emphasise the prevalence of common features.<sup>14</sup> Eastern Germans give much lower marks to their health care, incomes and access to culture and entertainment than western Germans. On top of this, people who live in the eastern and western *Länder* have completely different views of the German political system and institutions. Only 40% in the former group are satisfied with them, compared to 59% in the latter group.

The fundamental differences in the perception of the *Zeitenwende* in the two parts of Germany stem from the different experiences of ‘transformation/change’ (*Wende* is a word that has so far been used mainly to describe the events at the turn of 1989 and 1990). The residents of the western *Länder* tend not to see change as a threat (unlike those in the east), but rather as an evolutionary adaptation to the transforming social and economic environment. In the post-1945 history of West Germany, the processes that took place in politics, society and the economy (such as the terror of the Red Army Faction [RAF], the energy crisis of the 1970s and finally the reunification of the country) have often put the people’s unity to the test, but this never caused the existing structures to collapse. After the last of these major transformations in particular, everything stayed the same for most western Germans. The dominant thinking was that the west could remain the west (implicitly ‘normal’), while the east was supposed to adapt to this ‘normality’ and become part of it.

For the residents in the east, however, the reunification brought a fundamental change that was incomparable to anything most of them had previously experienced. The rapid incorporation into West Germany, and above all the enormity of the post-transformation challenges had a profound impact on them. In addition, they felt that the ‘alien’ Germans from the West had hijacked the reunification process. This confluence of factors created a sense of disempowerment among the citizens of the former GDR, which was later further reinforced by global crises (the economic crisis of 2008 and the migration crisis of 2015) that heightened their security concerns and created the impression

<sup>14</sup> ‘ZDF-Politbarometer. Hohe Preise: Für die Mehrheit großes Problem’, ZDF, 30 September 2022, zdf.de.

that the state was no longer in control. According to some sociologists, this led to the so-called double shock of transformation, which gave rise to a protest movement (including demonstrations by the anti-Islamic Pegida in the eastern *Länder*) and boosted support for the AfD.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the negative experiences of these events, the smaller resources of the population in the eastern *Länder* are another reason behind the fears over the consequences of the *Zeitenwende*. This primarily refers to a lack of savings, lower pensions, difficulties in finding a new job in the less urbanised regions (which predominate in these areas) and reduced mobility for senior citizens. It is estimated that some 3.7 million residents from the east, mostly the younger and better-educated, have moved to the western federal states since 1989. Furthermore, inadequate representation in decision-making bodies leads to a deepening sense of disempowerment. According to figures from the University of Leipzig, only 3.5% of leadership positions in Germany are held by eastern Germans, even though their share of the population is 17%. In the ruling SPD-Greens-FDP coalition, only two out of 17 ministers come from the eastern *Länder*. Among the 100 largest East German companies, only 27% are headed by eastern Germans. As regards the eastern universities, only 17% of their chancellors are eastern Germans. This kind of disparity is even more pronounced in the media.<sup>16</sup>

## The myth of a friendly Russia

The reason for German society's different views on the war and its consequences lies in its attitudes towards Russia. During the Cold War, West Germany saw the Soviet Union as one of the superpowers, a state with significant destructive potential, but which was also an important partner in the trade of raw materials.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, for East Germany it was an internal actor, a point of reference in all manifestations of political activity in that state. Despite the decades-long presence of Russian troops in the GDR, the eastern *Länder* harbour little resentment towards Moscow; therefore, the differences between the east and the west in how they view Russia remain significant. This has affected the attitudes towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the willingness to assist the latter. Indeed, in the eastern federal states, Russia is not seen as

<sup>15</sup> K. Frymark, 'Alternatywa dla wschodnich Niemiec. Saksonia i Brandenburgia przed wyborami landowymi', *Komentarze OSW*, no. 307, 28 August 2019, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>16</sup> W. Hollersen, 'Medienwissenschaftler: „Ostdeutsche müssen ihre Interessen viel klarer vertreten”', *Berliner Zeitung*, 3 June 2023, [berliner-zeitung.de](http://berliner-zeitung.de).

<sup>17</sup> A. Kwiatkowska, *Germany on Russia. Yes to links, no to rapprochement*, OSW, Warsaw 2014, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

an enemy and occupier, but rather as a liberator from the Nazi regime. In this narrative, Russia acts as a counterbalance to the West, which many people see in a negative light after the shock of the 1989 transformation – as a ‘coloniser’ that imposes its will. Then there is the ever-present, intergenerational myth of strong bonds between the Germans in the east and the Russians, which has been underpinned by factors such as numerous youth exchanges, study trips and competitions. Such events have fostered the positive image of the Russians in the eastern *Länder*; the former Chancellor Angela Merkel herself, born and raised in the East, made no secret of this fact.

The presence of a relatively large Russian diaspora (which has participated in demonstrations against supporting Ukraine) has also boosted sympathy for Russia in the eastern federal states. Paradoxically, the stationing of Soviet military units in East Germany also had a positive impact on the perception of Russia (in 1991, around 544,000 Soviet soldiers as well as auxiliary staff and families were still stationed on East German territory; by comparison, in Poland in late 1990, there were around 48,000 Soviet servicemen and a total of around 90,000 Soviet citizens including auxiliary staff and families). Some Germans viewed the Soviet army positively, for example as an employer, or through the prism of occasional contacts with soldiers. One effect of these experiences is the aforementioned belief in Germany’s cultural proximity to Russia, which is still reflected in opinion polls: 25% of the population in the east of Germany share this belief, compared to just 7% of those who live in the west. At the same time, almost twice as many people in the so-called old *Länder* (i.e. the former West Germany) feel a cultural connection to the US as do those in the east (42% and 23% respectively). The German people are also divided in their assessments of the tone of the media coverage: in the east, 33% of respondents believe that the portrayal of Russia in the media is too negative, while 37% believe that it is balanced. Among those in the west, the dominant opinion (45%) is that the coverage of Russia is objective, while 23% consider it too negative.<sup>18</sup>

Another way to interpret the residents of the eastern *Länder*’s vocal expressions of support for Russia is in terms of ‘Stockholm syndrome’, a psychological state of feeling sympathy for and solidarity with the oppressor.<sup>19</sup> Eastern Germans also fear the reactions (including a possible nuclear attack) of the

<sup>18</sup> ‘Russland-Bild der Deutschen’, Infratest dimap, October 2022, infratest-dimap.de.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Gauck sieht „Stockholm-Syndrom“ bei manchen Ostdeutschen’, ntv, 10 May 2023, n-tv.de; A. Heinemann-Grüder, ‘Lehren aus dem Ukraine Konflikt. Das Stockholm-Syndrom der Putin-Versteher’, *Osteuropa* 4/2015, pp. 3–23.

Kremlin to any threat or escalation of the conflict. This is most often expressed in the conviction that resistance to such a mighty, nuclear-armed power as Russia is pointless ('you can't win against them'). Moreover, a large part of society feels gratitude towards Russia for the 'favour' of reunification, which is compounded by the persistent sense of guilt among the older generation for the crimes committed against the Soviet Union during World War II.

Another factor that generates differences in the perception of the *Zeitenwende* between the eastern and western *Länder* is anti-Americanism, which can be seen in the opposition to certain features of the Western political and economic system.<sup>20</sup> The socialisation of parts of the older generation of Germans in two opposing military alliances also plays a significant role. The citizens of the GDR belonged to the Warsaw Pact, and the Socialist Unity Party of Germany considered the US as its main enemy. Meanwhile, in 1955 the people of West Germany became members of NATO, whose capabilities were geared towards responding to possible Soviet aggression. The differing assessments of Germany's current security policy are the aftermath of these fundamentally different Cold War experiences. Eastern Germans are more sceptical of the federal government's active stance in this area and less likely to support the Bundeswehr's participation in missions abroad, insisting that its primary role is to respond to natural disasters on German territory. They also have less confidence in the US and NATO.<sup>21</sup>

## **Exploiting the divisions: the surge in support for the AfD**

The AfD is the main political force that seeks to exploit the divisions among the public over the war and assistance to Ukraine. This stems from its pro-Russianism, extreme anti-Americanism and anti-immigration stance. Two-thirds of its supporters also see it as a party of protest that best expresses opposition to government policies. The party's growing popularity confirms the effectiveness of its tactics: in mid-2023 it came second in the polls, with support of around 20%, and for the first time ever it placed ahead of the incumbent Chancellor's party. The success of the AfD, which has been represented in the Bundestag since 2017, can be partly attributed to its opposition to the initiatives that the Scholz government has announced as part of the *Zeitenwende*

<sup>20</sup> 'Historiker: Im Osten lebt der Antiamerikanismus der SED weiter', Berliner Zeitung, 6 May 2023, berliner-zeitung.de.

<sup>21</sup> See M. Steinbrecher, 'Lebt der Kalte Krieg weiter?' [in:] M. Elff, K. Ackermann, H. Giebler, *Wahlen und politische Einstellungen in Ost- und Westdeutschland. Persistenz, Konvergenz oder Divergenz?*, Wiesbaden 2022, pp. 214-240.



(especially in the field of energy) and its disapproval of the German government's continued support for Ukraine. The party's members have also tapped into the German people's growing scepticism about the manner and pace of the implementation of environmental reforms. This is particularly true of some of the current government's key projects, such as the ban on the registration of cars with combustion engines in the EU and on the installation of gas and oil boilers in new buildings. A large part of the population sees this as direct, palpable interference by the state in two 'pillars' that German society considers extremely important: the car and the home.<sup>22</sup>

Of all the parties in the Bundestag, the AfD has been the most outspoken in advocating an alliance with Russia, and to this end often evokes the two nations' historical connotations ("German-Russian cooperation was beneficial for Europe in the past"<sup>23</sup>). Its members claim that the responsibility for the war in Ukraine lies with NATO (at least as much as with Russia), and especially with the US, because it infringed upon Russia's legitimate security interests. This bolsters the long-standing anti-American mood in German society. The party has been pushing a narrative of two equal sides in the conflict, thus blurring the line between aggressor and victim.<sup>24</sup> The AfD also opposes sanctions on Russia, and has called for maintaining economic cooperation with it (including in the field of energy) and for the launch of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which was designed to import gas from Russia to Germany.

What appeals to AfD voters in the eastern *Länder* is that the party rejects any military support for Ukraine, and keeps coming up with peace initiatives<sup>25</sup> that would *de facto* mean forcing it to surrender. The actions of the far right have been particularly well received in the Russian-speaking German community, which often votes for the AfD.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the party's politicians have repeatedly portrayed themselves as defenders of Moscow's actions after 24 February 2022: they have appeared on Russian propaganda programmes to

<sup>22</sup> K. Frymark, 'Too green, too fast, too dear. The AfD is gaining popularity in Germany', *OSW Commentary*, no. 518, 20 June 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>23</sup> P. Carstens, 'AfD nimmt sich Bismarck zum Vorbild', *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 12 September 2013, [faz.net](https://www.faz.net).

<sup>24</sup> 'Positionspapier der AfD-Bundestagsfraktion zum Russland-Ukraine-Krieg', AfD, 26 July 2022, [afd-bundestag.de](https://afd-bundestag.de).

<sup>25</sup> 'Deutschlands Verantwortung für Frieden in Europa gerecht werden - Eine Friedensinitiative mit Sicherheitsgarantien für die Ukraine und Russland', AfD, Drucksache 20/5551, 7 February 2023, [dserver.bundestag.de](https://dserver.bundestag.de).

<sup>26</sup> N. Friedrichs, J. Graf, *Integration gelungen? Lebenswelten und gesellschaftliche Teilhabe von (Spät-)Aussiedlerinnen und (Spät-)Aussiedlern*, Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, SVR-Studie 2022-1, [bamf.de](https://bamf.de).

criticise the German government, organised tours of the occupied territories and attended receptions at the embassy of the Russian Federation. In addition, they have fuelled anti-Ukrainian (as well as anti-American and anti-Polish) sentiments on social media, and attempted to influence audiences through the AfD-linked magazine *Compact*, which is under surveillance by counterintelligence.<sup>27</sup>

Another very important reason for the AfD's rising support is the public's growing opposition to helping refugees. The proposal to reduce support for asylum seekers and migrants is the party's most important political project, which has already boosted its ratings on several occasions. Moreover, voters believe that the AfD is most competent on this issue.<sup>28</sup> In the early days of the war the AfD, facing divisions within its electorate, expressed its willingness to support refugees from Ukraine. However, it insisted that assistance could only be provided to Ukrainian nationals, and that this would require a more effective programme to deport migrants who had no right to stay in Germany. There are ever-louder voices within the AfD that refugees (including Ukrainians) are generating too much social spending in the budget, thus leaving it short of funds for Germans in need. This opinion has found more and more supporters, especially as Germany now faces a new round of the migration crisis.<sup>29</sup>

### **Summary: how to maintain unity?**

The outbreak of the first full-scale armed conflict so close to Germany's borders since 1945 has failed to consolidate German society. There are significant differences of opinion within Germany about the causes and consequences of the Russian invasion. Social friction has also increased. Several relief packages that were adopted during the most severe phase of the energy and inflation crisis; these have reduced the frustration felt by the German people and made them less averse to the transformation process. However, any future reduction of tensions, especially between the residents of the western and eastern *Länder*, will depend on what the social costs of the *Zeitenwende* prove to be,

<sup>27</sup> The magazine's issues discussing the war in Ukraine echo Russian propaganda, fuel anti-Americanism and relativise history. See for example the following covers: *COMPACT-Spezial 33: Feindbild Russland. Die NATO marschert*, *COMPACT-Spezial 36: USA gegen Deutschland. Der hundertjährige Krieg*, *COMPACT-Geschichte 17: Polens verschwiegene Schuld*.

<sup>28</sup> 'Bundestagswahl 2021: Wer wählte die AfD - und warum?', ARD, 26 September 2021, tagesschau.de.

<sup>29</sup> 'René Springer: Mehr als eine halbe Million Ukraine-Flüchtlinge in Hartz IV - Verteilungskonflikte sind vorprogrammiert', AfD, 1 September 2022, afdbundestag.de. 244,000 asylum applications were filed in Germany in 2022, 47% more than the previous year. The situation worsened even further in the following months: 80,978 applications were registered between January and April 2023, an increase of 80% compared to the same period of the previous year.

especially in the field of energy. The clear split in the approach to the reform process has triggered a discussion about what role the eastern federal states can play in it. One of the most important threads of this debate concerns the question of what western Germany can learn from the east. This primarily involves the issues of responding to ‘change’ and implementing often profound and socially difficult transformation processes; the people who used to live in the former GDR have had extensive experience in these areas.

All these fears and divisions will mainly benefit the AfD, which is capable of exploiting the lack of unity within Germany and the fear of the new like no other party. It has been particularly effective in the eastern federal states, where it is seen as a mass-scale party that represents voters of all social groups and ages. In all the eastern *Länder* it either leads the polls or forms the largest opposition force. Its likely success in the 2024 elections to the parliaments of Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia will give it a boost ahead of the elections to the Bundestag in 2025.

Dealing with the implications of the war and fleshing out the transition process will be the focus of the upcoming campaign for the Bundestag elections. Germany is also involved in a growing debate about the redistribution of wealth, a discussion which will further intensify if the economic downturn continues. The calls for increased defence spending, the increasingly costly support for Ukraine and the funding for the new energy policy will amplify fringe voices in the debate. However, the central themes of the 2025 election campaign will be the direction and pace of changes in environmental policy and the vision of Germany as an immigrant state. Indeed, the shortage of workers poses one of the greatest threats to the implementation of the *Zeitenwende*. If it does not attract additional labour, Germany will be unable to carry out its energy transition or transform its economic model at the pace envisaged. The other major problem is the shaky public support for the transformation process that was initiated in February 2022. Convincing the majority of the public that the implementation of these ‘epochal changes’ is necessary while avoiding a deepening of divisions will be the most important task for future German governments.

## APPENDIX

### The *Zeitenwende* in practice. Refugees from Ukraine in Germany

1,060,000 arrivals from Ukraine had been registered in Germany by mid-2023. More than 200,000 Ukrainian children are studying in German schools. In reality, there are probably fewer than one million Ukrainians in Germany at present, but the failure to register those leaving Germany (passing through to other countries or returning home) makes it difficult to precisely estimate the number of refugees and draw concrete conclusions. According to the Central Register of Foreigners (AZR), about 349,000 Ukrainian children and young people under the age of 18 are currently living in Germany, including about 133,000 aged between 6 and 11 and about 127,000 aged between 12 and 17.

The biggest challenge related to hosting the refugees concerns their accommodation. Many remain in asylum seeker centres for extended periods of time, due to the insufficient number of properties allocated exclusively to refugees, as well as the difficult general situation on the housing market in major cities. The education system is another problem.<sup>30</sup> German schools constantly have to deal with very large numbers of pupils and have long faced shortages of teachers; the quality of education also suffers from insufficient investment. The welcoming (integration) classes, which roughly a third of Ukrainian students have attended, have also come under increasing criticism. They are often not integrated into the curriculum, which leads to the stigmatisation of the refugee children and the underperformance of pupils with migrant backgrounds.

The German experiences and the lessons learned from the migration crisis of 2015–16 have translated into the actions taken by the government with regard to the refugees from Ukraine. In addition to spontaneous social solidarity, cooperation between local governments and the *Länder* was also instrumental in dealing with the problems that arose eight years ago. After 2016, a great deal of effort has been put into changing procedures and improving communication at the level of the local governments, which are responsible for a large part of the refugee policy. Most notably, the Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) has been strengthened, receiving a threefold increase in its staff (to around 8100) and budget (from €250 million in 2015 to around €760 million in 2022). In addition, federal funds are used to partly finance social assistance

<sup>30</sup> See K. Frymark, 'Obowiązek szkolny ukraińskich dzieci w Niemczech', OSW, 8 September 2022, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

and integration courses for asylum seekers. The *Länder* also receive a targeted subsidy for accommodating refugees. In 2021, a total of around €12 billion was spent from the federal budget for these purposes.

As a consequence of the two overlapping crises (the refugees from Ukraine and the asylum seekers from other areas) the burden on local governments has been growing, resulting in social tensions. The challenges include ensuring places for arrivals (mainly those from the Middle East and Africa, as most of the Ukrainians live in private lodgings: according to a survey published in December 2022, 74% of them lived in rented flats and houses, 17% in hotels and guesthouses, and only 9% in refugee centres), devising methods of financing their stay, and facilitating their future integration and helping them enter the labour market. An appeal by local government officials from the Green Party, who called for curbs on illegal migration, demonstrates the scale of the problem. Once again, as in 2015, market halls have been rented (for example in Hanover) and local government buildings have been renovated to house new arrivals. It is noteworthy that tensions have grown particularly in those municipalities that have held debates on hosting the refugees. The differing procedures for Ukrainians and other asylum seekers have led to discussions about the informal existence of two classes of refugees. Some Left and Green politicians have sought to put the two groups on an equal footing by increasing social benefits and boosting their job opportunities.

The German government assumes that refugees from Ukraine will stay in the country for a longer period of time, or even permanently in the best-case scenario. For this reason, it has placed great emphasis on getting each refugee to participate in language and integration courses. The high qualifications of the Ukrainians (also when compared to the German population) are very well suited to the needs of the receptive German market. According to estimates by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), the country will be short of 7 million workers by 2035, and the new arrivals could partly fill this gap. Whether this scenario becomes reality will primarily depend on their progress in learning the language, the reduction of bureaucratic obstacles to the recognition of their professional qualifications, and the provision of school education for their children. In Ukraine, relatively large numbers of women have worked in academic, technical and medical professions in fields where Germany faces significant staff shortages.

## The phases of the refugee crisis

1. *The preparatory phase.* Germany expected an increased influx of Ukrainians due to the possible outbreak of war. Its interior ministry initially stated that Germany was focusing on offering possible assistance to the neighbouring countries, which would be the first in line to receive refugees. At the same time, as more asylum seekers were registered in 2021 (around 150,000) than in the previous year (around 100,000), some *Länder* reopened previously closed shelters for asylum seekers and opened new ones.
2. *The humanitarian phase.* The spontaneous coordination between officials at various levels and, above all, the immense amount of public support made it possible to take care of people who were crossing into Germany. This required the preparation of additional places, especially at transfer points such as those in Berlin (for example, refugee tents were set up once more at the former Tegel airport) and Hanover; the latter became a hub for aid to Ukrainian refugees in the north-west of Germany.
3. *The transitional phase* saw the beginning of efforts to integrate the new arrivals and make their livelihoods more sustainable. In a crucial step, in early March 2022 the EU introduced an executive decision which *de facto* equalised the rights of Ukrainians and Germans in terms of access to social services and employment as well as education.
4. *The consolidation phase.* This was the moment when the number of arrivals stabilised, and Germany was now better prepared to host them in terms of both organisation and finances, as appropriate subsidies from the federal budget had now been earmarked for this purpose.<sup>31</sup> In early 2023, covering the costs of hosting refugees from Ukraine accounted for more than half of Germany's assistance to that country.<sup>32</sup>
5. The 2015–16 migration crisis also went through a *relaxation phase*, when the number of asylum seekers dropped rapidly while social tensions

<sup>31</sup> *Idem*, 'Dispute over funding refugees' residence in Germany', OSW, 11 May 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>32</sup> *Idem*, 'German support for Ukraine: taking the communications initiative', OSW, 18 January 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

over migration policy escalated.<sup>33</sup> This time, the relaxation phase has not followed, mainly due to the onset of another round of the migration crisis from areas other than Ukraine.

**KAMIL FRYMARK**

<sup>33</sup> A. Kwiatkowska, *Strangers like us. Germans in the search for a new identity*, OSW, Warsaw 2019, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).