

Ukraine Expert Talks

“The sticking point is going to be Crimea.”

Interview with **Susan Stewart**
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In your opinion, what is the level of knowledge about Ukraine in Germany, both among policymakers and in society in general?

I think we do need to make a distinction between policymakers and society overall. I would start with the political elites. Those who have been dealing with Ukraine consistently over recent years naturally gained a high level of knowledge, at least in the sector they were involved with. I'd say since the war started, there has been much more intensive interaction with Ukraine, so those people who were used to working with or on the country may have deepened their knowledge.

The level of knowledge could also depend on the sector – full-fledged war means that cooperation in certain sectors has been difficult to pursue. However, in military- and security-related sectors, a lot more people are involved now. Overall, the level of knowledge has increased, particularly in specialized areas, and knowledge about Ukraine now plays a much greater role than it might have done before. Secondly, it has broadened in scope, in the sense that more and more people are affected by the situation and as such are connected to the country.

With regard to German society, I think in general knowledge about Ukraine is fairly limited. But because of certain significant, recurring events like the Orange Revolution, the Maidan uprising, and now full-fledged war, reporting about Ukraine has come in waves, and interest has then built among people. Unfortunately, what usually happens in those phases is that initial interest in Ukraine gives way to interest in Russia's involvement.

After the Maidan uprising came the annexation of Crimea, then the de facto occupation of parts of

Donbas, and now clearly with the present war, the conversation often revolves around Russia. Although I'd say that is only partially the case with regard to the current war because *there's widespread sympathy for Ukraine, as well as a lot of focus on the performance of the Ukrainian armed forces, on the achievements of Ukrainian society and what people are going through, and on the question of reconstruction.* There are also many questions being asked as to why Russia is doing this, and why its army is performing badly. Nevertheless, the emphasis on Ukraine's position is extremely strong, which amounts to a very powerful wave whereby those in Germany have learned much more about the country.

What also contributes to that is the high number of refugees – about a million Ukrainians have come to Germany. And most of the people who have taken them in would not have had much to do with Ukraine before. This is an informal type of interaction, but one that is increasingly sensitizing people to the fact that Ukraine exists, and to the Ukrainian people and the events that led them to flee their country. They talk about their lives, about their struggles in this time of war. And then, of course, there are so many children coming, who are integrating into the schools, so that German children get to learn something about their situation and culture.

So I hope that even though it's a terrible situation, whereby so many people have had to flee, there might be a positive side effect – that knowledge about Ukraine will permeate German society to a much greater extent than was the case before.

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What about the potentially destructive impact of Russia? There are political movements and parts of society that are more vulnerable and receptive to Russian narratives, albeit these are definitely less influential than before the war. Nevertheless, who do you think make up these spheres and political classes that are the most vulnerable to Russian provocation and manipulation? Or can we finally say that Germany has developed some kind of immunity to Russian hybrid interventions?

I do not think Germany has immunity to Russian hybrid interventions.

No, I do not think it has immunity. This is a very complicated question. I think those groups that used to be most involved with Russia or inclined to support Russian narratives have the least immunity today. Because it is psychologically extremely difficult to go through a 180-degree mental shift. This could be seen even after the annexation of Crimea, where people were really struggling with the idea that Russia had done this; it went against their previous view of Russia and its leadership. So I think the groups that are still vulnerable are more or less the same ones.

In the political sphere, both the Alternative for Germany and also Die Linke have had very pro-Russian narratives in the past. And we have seen them move away from those narratives somewhat, but not as completely as one might have expected. We also hear arguments such as: "Yes, what Russia is doing is wrong, but the West needs to ask itself whether it is, at least partially, at fault." And then, of course, we have the Social Democrats, who for a long time have been the most Russia-friendly party in the government, especially under Gerhard Schröder. Certainly the war has been a wake-up call for some in the political arena. However, there is still a struggle going on. It's also a generational issue – there are still people who are attached to the Ostpolitik of Willy Brandt, etc.

I think that's why it's so important for Germany to come up with a new policy on Russia. Because the absence of such a new policy means that these people can look back at the former policy and say things like: "Okay, at present we are in crisis mode, but we are going to move beyond that at some point, and then we can revert back and incorporate some of the elements of the previous policy." That is the political side of things; in society, there are different issues.

One issue is the fact that attitudes toward Russia in eastern Germany have been consistently more positive than in western Germany, and that continues to be the case. For example, fewer people support the imposition of sanctions, or even the approach to Russia generally, in the east than in the west. Connected with this is also a certain anti-American sentiment, which has arisen in part from the way people were socialized in the German Democratic Republic. This is why it is largely a generational question – though not exclusively. I think it also ties in with certain perceptions about being second-class citizens, even now, within the wider German context, and an appreciation for authoritarian styles of governance.

So you have those people who are predisposed to these attitudes, who have been, and continue to be, more vulnerable to Russian narratives. Then you have a general question about the need for more emphasis on critical thinking – this is essentially the root of it. People who might not have experienced as much emphasis on critical thinking in the German education system might demonstrate more sympathy toward Russia. And I think that is an area where work needs to be done.

In addition, we have the question of so-called “Russia Germans,” the people who came from the former Soviet Union and emigrated to Germany in various waves. They are a very heterogeneous group, so it’s not possible to lump them all together. Yet, among them, there are people who might have been older when they moved, who have not learned German that well, who continue to rely on Russian media, etc. That is also a group which is potentially prone to lean toward Russian narratives.

Given that there are still these sentiments in German society toward Russia in some groups, can we say that there is still no specific vision of what the German policy toward Russia in the near future might look like? Could you also comment on how the idea of potential peaceful negotiations with Russia is perceived in Germany? How common is it, and what are the arguments of those who are pushing for it?

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I would not say that the notion of peace negotiations is particularly dominant right now within the debate, but it certainly exists. If you look at the wider society, there are some who are in favor of peace, which sounds like a good idea, but requires both sides to sit down at the table as soon as possible and negotiate. For such people, peace is the overarching, most dominant value. Therefore, one argument is that if peace is the main goal, then any kind of negotiations that work toward peace would be valuable. This is the thinking in certain groups within German society, and maybe also to some extent in church circles. However, the idea does not necessarily involve fleshed-out arguments.

In the political sphere, there’s an idea – not only in Germany – that the war has to end at some point through negotiations, and if that’s the case, we should already be thinking about how this could happen. There is

always a tendency to orient along the lines of previous models, which is where the concept of “Minsk 3” comes from. *Germany has experience with “Minsk 1” and “Minsk 2,” and some of the elites who were involved in those agreements remain attached to the idea of such a model.*

If you bring together both ideas – that at some point there need to be negotiations on peace and that in the past such negotiations took place – then you can see how this, as a solution, might occupy some people’s thinking. Especially if a perceived benefit of this route is to gain some breathing space or a short- or medium-term solution. But *people often disregard the implications of such a choice in terms of Russian behavior going forward.*

Some are of the opinion that German officials might well be skeptical about any “Minsk 3” negotiations, because they have already experienced “Minsk 1” and “Minsk 2.” Germany pushed hard for these agreements, but in the end they were ineffective. Does this skepticism really exist?

Certainly, there is a lot of skepticism about whether “Minsk 3” negotiations could get underway and if so, in what way. And of course this can’t be done without involving Ukraine, without its approval as to the right time to do this. Reverting to previous models is one option, but as you said, if people have seen such methods fail, they may be against trying them again. It depends on their previous experience with this or other similar processes and how they feel about that experience.

On the other hand, there may be other people coming through who have not yet had sufficient experience to assess the situation. I see this as a fundamental problem in Germany, including in terms of advising on Russia, because it takes quite a while to really become accustomed to how the current Russian leadership

operates. As a country, it is so far from German thinking, in terms of how things work, as well as how its people and leadership function. It is quite a serious learning process.

So, on the one hand there are people who understand the history and as a result are rejecting certain options, or are skeptical about them, and on the other hand there are those who have not yet engaged with Russia to the extent needed to deal with the current circumstances. Given the present war, the latter may start to gain a better understanding, because they can see for themselves Russia’s extremely barbaric behavior. Nonetheless, it seems to need repeating, again and again, that this is exactly the type of behavior we unfortunately have to expect from Russia as it is today. It is a very complicated picture.

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Could you please let us have your thoughts on the kind of debates going on among German policymakers about how to define a “Ukrainian victory” in terms of this war? In spring, the New Europe Center launched an expert survey asking a similar question. Several Western researchers refused to answer our questionnaire, finding it without basis or premature, but the majority of experts were very positive, and the most frequent answer was that Ukrainians have to define for themselves how victory should be shaped and the West simply has to accept this definition. How has this discussion evolved in German policymaking discourse over the 10 months of war? Could we say that German policymakers, or at least Chancellor Scholz, has a clear vision of how Ukrainian victory should take shape?

The idea that Ukraine needs to decide what victory should look like, and the West should follow along with that, has featured in German discourse for quite a while. However, this has receded a little bit and there is also

the counter-argument that the West is still involved, it is providing so much support that it should also have a say in how this continues. De facto the West has a say, because if a decision was taken to stop arms

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deliveries or to reduce them, the impact on the war would be huge. So this voice of the West has so far been substantially in favor of support for Ukraine, even if arguments can be made as to whether that support is sufficient, or fast enough, or should have come before the war, etc.

In my opinion, the sticking point is going to be Crimea. Virtually no one in the West is saying that Ukraine should not attempt to take back the territories that Russia has occupied since February 24. Then we get to the question of a kind of “Minsk 3” agreement – whether there should be a return to the situation before February 24. I am sure there are plenty of Western actors who would be fine if Ukraine said: “Yes, we are okay with that, let’s go for that.” But that does not seem a likely scenario, so then the question arises: how much of this territory should Ukraine get back and should it be only the part of the Donbas that was under Russia’s control before February 24, or should it also include Crimea?

There are also other positions, that one should not talk only about territories, but more about the kind of sovereignty Ukraine might have in a postwar situation and how that sovereignty would manifest itself. But if we talk about territory, *it seems to me there is much more concern about Ukraine trying to retake Crimea than about the Donbas.* So, you still have these claims that were there

when Crimea was annexed – such as that historically speaking Crimea is in a sense more Russian than Ukrainian, or it has been Russian longer – or people call into question the decision by Chruschtschow in 1954 to transfer the peninsula to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. In addition, the argument that most people in Crimea speak Russian or are ethnic Russians. I do not agree with these claims, but they are certainly present in the discussion in Germany.

These arguments are combined with a fear that Crimea will be the ultimate red line for Putin. And if that red line is crossed, he might resort to the use of nuclear weapons, which is very frightening to some in the West. Those affected by such fear also believe it would be worth Ukraine giving up Crimea in order to avoid such an outcome. I don’t know if this is being explicitly discussed – perhaps in some back rooms, but less so in public debates.

My feeling is that people are not thinking about this too much yet, because none of us know how the war will develop; there may ultimately be no need to have those discussions. Nor is it a subject people are particularly eager to talk about at the moment.

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Let's return to the present day. You mentioned that some Western countries believe they can have a say in determining what Ukrainian victory might look like, because they continue to offer their support to Ukraine. Therefore, our next question deals with the support Germany has provided to Ukraine. How ambitious could such support become in the future and does it face a challenge now due to winter? What will Berlin's support for Ukraine look like in the near future?

One of the reasons for the gap between German rhetoric about helping Ukraine and its actions is a difficult mental shift (from seeing Russia as a partner to adversary).

Germany as a political actor has not been so accustomed to strategic thinking with regard to security and defense.

Actually, I am fairly optimistic. I just completed a short piece that will be published early in 2023, which looks at the *reasons for the gap between German rhetoric about helping Ukraine and its actions. There are three factors. One of them is a difficult mental shift, especially shifting the perspective on Russia, which for so many years was seen as a difficult or problematic partner, but nonetheless a partner. And now, it is clear that Russia is an adversary, but for many people, that shift needs time. For them, even the fact that Russia invaded Ukraine in an unprovoked and unjustified manner on February 24 does not mean that they have accepted the need to see Russia as an adversary. But nevertheless, the process of changing the approach to Russia is ongoing on the levels of both politics and society.*

Another factor causing a gap between rhetoric and action is that Germany as a political actor has not been so accustomed to strategic thinking with regard to security and defense. Only now is Germany formulating a National Security Strategy, which is supposed to be launched at the

beginning of 2023. The full-fledged war and the current situation were not originally the reason for the Strategy, but they are forcing Germany to embark upon a higher level of strategic thinking.

The third element comprises bureaucratic hurdles that we have seen many times previously in the German context. These bureaucratic issues have interfered with the sending of arms, the speed of delivery, the kind of arms sent, and the ability to follow through on certain types of expenditures.

I am cautiously optimistic that these three factors are beginning to be addressed. But it won't necessarily be a quick process – at least not in all areas. But it is underway. If you look at the speeches by Scholz, one on February 27 in the Bundestag, one in Prague in August, his speech at the UN in September, and his recent article in the journal Foreign Affairs, I think his rhetoric is actually very good. It's what we need to see; now it's a question of living up to that rhetoric.

How seriously do you think Germany could accept Ukraine as a European nation? For all of us, it was a pleasant surprise that Ukraine was granted EU candidate status. Now it is doing its best to start accession negotiations and become an EU member as quickly as possible. How ambitious is the German vision in that regard? May we count on German support in this process?

There is much less agreement in Germany on Ukraine's NATO membership or Ukraine being part of a new security architecture than on the question of EU accession.

The good thing about the process is that now Ukraine as a candidate country can put pressure on the EU.

I was surprised that Germany decided to support Ukraine's candidacy, and apparently it happened only at the last minute. So, there is good reason to ask how serious the intention is. I personally was very impressed by the comments made on reconstruction by Chancellor Scholz at the conference in Berlin on October 25. Those comments indicated that he had internalized the idea that Ukraine will become an EU member and that the reconstruction process needs to be linked to accession to some extent.

There is a fear, in particular because of that speech in Prague, where Chancellor Scholz focused very intently on the question of EU reform, that this could be used as an excuse – that until the EU reforms substantially, it can't admit new members. And it could take a long time for such reform to take place. I don't know if that will become an issue.

I do think there will be difficulties in any process of EU reform, but I also think that the depth of cooperation with Ukraine prior to February 2022 means there is a very good basis for cooperation on the accession process. There were many sectors in which cooperation was going on, sectors in which people know each other, know what has been achieved and what the next steps are going to be. A lot of that could well carry over

into the accession process, meaning that at the technical level, a lot is already in place.

It seems to me that it's very likely that Ukraine will become a member of the European Union. I'm optimistic about it, more than about Ukraine's NATO membership or Ukraine being part of a new security architecture. That is also not ruled out, but *I think there is much less agreement on those issues than on the question of EU accession*, where the path is laid out, and it's simply a question of following that path. But even independent of the EU reform process, it's likely to take quite a while to get through all of the chapters and have Ukraine adopt all of the acquis.

But the good thing about the process is that now Ukraine as a candidate country can put pressure on the EU. This is something that the war has also demonstrated: when push comes to shove, the EU can respond relatively quickly, more quickly than we have seen in other instances in the past. There is also an opportunity for the EU to put pressure on Ukraine, to take certain steps through conditionality, and in turn, Ukraine can exert its own pressure on the EU by fulfilling those conditions.

The arguments for Ukraine joining NATO involve it winning the war.

For a long time, Ukraine's NATO membership has been something of a taboo topic in Germany. In 2008, Germany and France vetoed granting MAP to Ukraine. What is the attitude in Germany now? What arguments can Ukraine provide so that Germany can say "yes" to NATO membership when the war is over?

The current attitude in Germany is that Ukraine cannot possibly join NATO while the war is ongoing. Otherwise, that would mean NATO becoming involved in the war, which is something Germany refuses to countenance – and I'm sure it's not alone in that. *The arguments for Ukraine joining NATO involve it winning the war.* This is why the focus is on EU accession, because that process can at least move forward. Whereas a potential NATO membership is seen as something much further down the line.

It is true that France and Germany vetoed the MAP back then, and it's true that France and Germany and the US are key NATO players. But it's also true that all NATO member states would have to accept this. If we look at how EU decision-making works, and the unanimity principle, problems arise, for example with

states like Hungary often imposing their veto. We have also seen what has happened with Sweden and Finland, who are willing to join NATO but are being held up by Turkey. So, it's important to have France, Germany and certainly the US on board, but that is not the only potential hurdle.

I do not really think it was a taboo subject before. It was just very clear from the German perspective that they did not support MAP at that point. I'd agree it was problematic that a decision was taken in Bucharest in 2008 to say: "Yes, Ukraine and Georgia will join NATO at some point," and then never return to that. But for Germany, it was clear the time had not yet come to admit Ukraine to NATO, not just in 2008, but in the years following as well.

Do you see any shift in the discourse with regards to NATO? Some prominent German policymakers have acknowledged lots of initiatives taken against Russia (for example, Nord Stream) as mistakes. We would also add to that the mistake made in the form of the Bucharest NATO Summit decision. Maybe it is time to listen to Kyiv? Because Ukraine as a part of NATO is the only feasible scenario for stability in this part of the world. Russia would not have even considered interfering in Ukraine had it been a part of the Alliance.

At the moment, there is more discussion about so-called security guarantees than about NATO. So maybe that has, for the time being, replaced the NATO debate. Chancellor Scholz has also said Germany would be willing to be one of the countries involved in providing these security guarantees. But there

has not been much precision in terms of what they would actually involve. However, the conversation is ongoing and much more intense than the one about NATO.

Former Chancellor Merkel has justified making that decision regarding the MAP in 2008. But it

I don't see many people acknowledging that it was a mistake back in 2008 not to give the MAP to Ukraine.

is inevitable that some people will want to return to the question of mistakes made in the past, especially as Germany's future policy on Russia has not yet been elaborated. There are individual politicians who have said, "Yes, I made this mistake" or "That was wrong of us." But there does not seem to be a real desire on the political level to systematically examine errors that were made or to be overly self-critical.

For example, a recent article stated that a journalist had asked all of the factions in the Bundestag whether they would initiate or support a parliamentary investigative commission on Germany's previous policy on Russia. And no one wanted that, not even the opposition. The CDU probably did not want it because they were in power at the time the decisions now being

criticized were taken. Die Linke and Alternative for Germany perhaps did not want such a commission because they supported those Russia-friendly policies. Essentially, hardly anyone is interested in this approach, in creating an opportunity to examine earlier mistakes, except for certain experts. And while experts are indeed looking into these errors, I *don't see many people acknowledging that it was a mistake back then not to give the MAP to Ukraine.*

An important question is how other EU member states (i.e. Poland and the Baltic states) viewed not only the NATO question, but also Russia, – its regime, intentions, goals, etc. They proved to be right in their analysis. My hope is that Germany will turn more to those member states when formulating its upcoming policy on Russia.

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