

“Zeitenwende”: Policy Statement by Chancellor Olaf Scholz (February 27, 2022)

Abstract

After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD), whose new coalition government had only been in office for three months at that point, gave this speech to the German parliament in which he declared a “*Zeitenwende*” – a turning point in history. Germany’s foreign and security policy would have to change course from a pro-Russian *Ostpolitik* in order to address new threats to peace and security in Europe and beyond. This specifically entailed an increase in military spending to the NATO target of 2% of the GDP.

Source

Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin

Madam President,

Distinguished colleagues,

Fellow citizens,

The twenty-fourth of February 2022 marks a watershed in the history of our continent.

With the attack on Ukraine, the Russian President Putin has started a war of aggression in cold blood.

For one reason alone: the freedom of the Ukrainian people calls his own oppressive regime into question.

That is inhumane.

It is a violation of international law.

There is nothing and nobody that can justify it.

The terrible images from Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa and Mariupol show Putin’s utter lack of scruples.

The appalling injustice, the pain of the Ukrainian people – they affect us all very deeply.

I know exactly what issues many people across the country have been discussing at their dinner tables in recent days.

What concerns are weighing on them – in light of the terrible news from the war zones.

Many of us still remember our parents’ or grandparents’ tales of war. And for younger people it is almost inconceivable – war in Europe.

Many of them are giving voice to their horror – across the country, including just outside in front of the Reichstag.

We are living through a watershed era.

And that means that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before.

The issue at the heart of this is whether power is allowed to prevail over the law. Whether we permit Putin to turn back the clock to the nineteenth century and the age of the great powers.

Or whether we have it in us to keep warmongers like Putin in check.

That requires strength of our own.

Yes, we fully intend to secure our freedom, our democracy and our prosperity.

And I am very grateful to you, Madam President, for allowing me to use today's special session to share with you what the Federal Government has in mind.

I also thank the heads of all democratic parliamentary groups in this House for supporting this session.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With the attack on Ukraine, Putin is not just seeking to wipe an independent country off the map.

He is demolishing the European security order that had prevailed for almost half a century since the Helsinki Final Act.

He is also isolating himself from the entire international community.

Our embassies around the world have worked with France in recent days to advocate for the United Nations Security Council to call this Russian aggression what it is: a flagrant breach of international law.

And they have done so quite successfully, considering the result of the Security Council session in New York.

The consultations showed that we are by no means alone in our commitment to peace.

We will continue to uphold it, with all of our might.

I am very grateful to Foreign Minister Baerbock for what she has achieved in this regard.

It was only by resorting to the use of its veto that Moscow – which is, after all, a permanent member of the Security Council – was able to prevent itself from being censured.

What a disgrace!

President Putin always talks about indivisible security. But what he really seeks now is to divide the continent into the familiar old spheres of influence through armed force.

This has consequences for security in Europe.

Yes, in the long term security in Europe cannot be achieved in opposition to Russia.

But for the foreseeable future, Putin is jeopardising this security.

That is why I say very clearly that we accept the challenge that now faces us – with clear-headed resolve.

There are five courses of action that we must take:

Firstly, we must support Ukraine in this desperate situation.

We have already provided significant support in recent weeks, months and years.

But with the attack on Ukraine, we have entered a new era.

In Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa and Mariupol, people are not just defending their homeland.

They are fighting for freedom and their democracy.

For values that we share with them.

As democrats, as Europeans, we stand by their side – on the right side of history!

With his attack on Ukraine on Thursday, President Putin has created a new reality. This new reality requires an unequivocal response.

We have given one.

As you know, we decided yesterday that Germany will supply Ukraine with weapons for the country's defence.

No other response to Putin's aggression was possible.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The second course of action that we must take is to divert Putin from the path of war.

This war is a catastrophe for Ukraine. However, it will prove to be a catastrophe for Russia, too.

Together with the Heads of State and Government of the EU, we have passed a package of sanctions on an unprecedented scale.

We are cutting Russian banks and state businesses off from financing.

We are preventing the export of cutting-edge technology to Russia.

And we are targeting the oligarchs and their investments in the EU.

In addition to this, there are the punitive measures against Putin and individuals close to him as well as restrictions on the granting of visas to Russian officials.

And we are excluding major Russian banks from the banking communication network Swift. We reached an agreement on this yesterday with the Heads of State and Government of the democracies with the strongest economies and of the EU.

We must not be under any illusions – Putin will not change course overnight.

But the Russian leadership will very soon see what a high price it will pay.

In the last week alone, Russian stocks lost over thirty percent of their value.

This shows that our sanctions are working.

And we have not ruled out further sanctions – nothing is off the table.

Our guiding principle remains the question of what will have the greatest impact on those responsible.

The individuals this is about.

And not the Russian people.

Because Putin, not the Russian people, has decided to start this war.

And so it must be clearly stated that this war is Putin's war!

It is important to me to specify this. Because reconciliation between Germans and Russians after the Second World War is – and remains – an important chapter of our shared history.

And I know how difficult it is for the many people in our country who were born in Ukraine or Russia to bear the current situation.

We will not, therefore, allow this conflict between Putin and the free world to lead to the reopening of old wounds and to new outbreaks of hostility.

And there is something else that we should not forget – in many Russian cities in recent days, ordinary people have protested against Putin's war, have run the risk of being arrested and punished.

That requires great courage and true bravery!

Today, Germany stands with the Ukrainian people. Our thoughts and our sympathy go out today to the victims of the Russian war of aggression.

And, equally, we stand with all those in Russia who are boldly defying Putin's regime and opposing his war against Ukraine. We know that there are many of them.

My message to them all is: Don't give up! I am quite sure that freedom, tolerance and human rights will prevail in Russia, too.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The third major challenge lies in preventing Putin's war from spilling over into other countries in Europe.

That means that we will stand unconditionally by our collective defence obligation within NATO.

I have said the same to our allies in Central and Eastern Europe who are worried about their security.

President Putin should not underestimate our resolve to defend every square metre of NATO territory together with our allies!

We are absolutely serious about this. When we welcome a country into NATO, we commit to defending that country as a partner and ally. Just as we would defend ourselves!

The Bundeswehr has already bolstered its support for our eastern allies – and will continue to do so.

I thank the Federal Defence Minister for this important gesture!

We have deployed additional troops in Lithuania, where we lead the NATO battlegroup.

We have extended and enhanced our participation in air policing in Romania.

We want to contribute to the establishment of a new NATO unit in Slovakia.

Our navy is helping to secure the North Sea and the Baltic as well as the Mediterranean with additional vessels.

And we are also prepared to contribute to the defence of our allies' air space in Eastern Europe using anti-aircraft missiles.

Our soldiers have often had only a brief time to prepare for these deployments in recent days.

My message to them, and I am sure you agree, is: Thank you!

Thank you for your valuable service – in particular at this time!

Ladies and gentlemen,

In view of the watershed that Putin's aggression entails, our standard is this: what is needed to secure peace in Europe will be done.

Germany will contribute its share to these efforts in a spirit of solidarity.

But stating that loud and clear today is not enough. To make it possible, the Bundeswehr needs new, strong capabilities.

And that is the fourth point that I want to address, ladies and gentlemen.

Anyone who reads Putin's historicising essays, who has watched his televised declaration of war on Ukraine, or who has recently – as I have done – held hours of direct talks with him, can no longer have any doubt that Putin wants to build a Russian empire.

He wants to fundamentally redefine the status quo within Europe in line with his own vision. And he has no qualms about using military force to do so.

We can see that today in Ukraine.

We must therefore ask ourselves: What capabilities does Putin's Russia possess?

And what capabilities do we need in order to counter this threat – today and in the future?

It is clear that we must invest much more in the security of our country. In order to protect our freedom and our democracy.

This is a major national undertaking.

The goal is a powerful, cutting-edge, progressive Bundeswehr that can be relied upon to protect us.

At the Munich Security Conference a week ago I said that we need aeroplanes that fly, ships that can set out to sea and soldiers who are optimally equipped for their missions.

That is what is important.

And it is quite certainly something that a country of our size and our significance within Europe should be able to achieve.

But we should be under no illusions. Better equipment, modern technology, more personnel – all of this costs a lot of money.

We will therefore set up a special fund for the Bundeswehr. And I am deeply grateful to Federal Finance Minister Lindner for his support on this!

The 2022 federal budget will provide a one-off sum of 100 billion euro for the fund. We will use this money for necessary investments and armament projects.

We will now – year after year – invest more than two percent of our gross domestic product in our defence.

And I now appeal to all parliamentary groups within the German Bundestag: We must secure this special fund in our Basic Law!

There is one thing that I would like to add. We have set this goal not only because we have made a promise to our friends and allies to increase our defence expenditure to two percent of our economic output by 2024.

We are also doing this for us, for our own security.

In the awareness that the Bundeswehr alone does not have the means to contain all future threats.

We therefore need strong development cooperation.

We will therefore strengthen our resilience – in terms of technology and as a society – for example against cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, against attacks on our critical infrastructure and channels of communication.

And we will keep pace with new technology.

This is why it is so important to me, for example, that we build the next generation of combat aircraft and tanks here in Europe together with European partners, and particularly France. These projects are our utmost priority.

Until the aircraft are operational, we will continue to develop the Eurofighter together.

Another encouraging development is that the contracts for the Eurodrone were finally signed this week.

We are also pushing ahead on the purchase of the armed Heron drone from Israel.

And with regard to nuclear sharing, we will procure a modern replacement for the outdated Tornado jets in good time.

The Eurofighter is set to be equipped with electronic warfare capabilities.

The F-35 fighter jet has the potential to be used as a carrier aircraft.

And finally, ladies and gentlemen, we will do more to guarantee a secure energy supply for our country.

The Federal Government has already initiated one important measure to address this.

And we will change course in order to eliminate our dependence on imports from individual energy suppliers.

After all, the events of recent days and weeks have shown us that responsible, forward-looking energy policy is not just crucial for our economy and our climate.

It is also crucial for our security.

This means that the faster we make progress with the development of renewable energies, the better.

And we are on the right track. We are an industrialised country aiming to become carbon-neutral by 2045!

With this goal on the horizon, we will have to take major decisions.

For example, on building up a reserve of coal and gas.

We have decided to increase the amount of natural gas in storage via long-term options to two billion cubic metres. Furthermore, we will acquire additional natural gas on the world markets – in consultation with the EU.

And finally, we have made the decision to rapidly build two LNG terminals in Brunsbüttel and Wilhelmshaven.

I would like to expressly thank Federal Economics Minister Habeck for his efforts to facilitate this!

Our current short-term needs can dovetail with what is already needed long-term for the transformation to succeed.

An LNG terminal that today receives gas can tomorrow be used to import green hydrogen.

And amidst all this, we will of course not lose sight of the high energy prices.

They have now been driven up yet further by Putin's war.

This week we have therefore agreed on a relief package, which includes lifting the surcharge under the Renewable Energy Sources Act by the end of this year, as well as an increase in the commuter tax allowance, a heating subsidy for low earners, subsidies for families and tax relief measures.

The Federal Government will act swiftly to set these in motion.

Our message is clear. We will not leave individuals and businesses to face this situation alone.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This watershed does not just affect our country. It affects all of Europe.

And this, too, is both a challenge and an opportunity.

The challenge consists in strengthening the sovereignty of the European Union sustainably and permanently.

The opportunity lies in preserving the united front that we have demonstrated in recent days in agreeing the sanctions package.

For Germany and for all of the EU's other member states, that means not simply asking what they can extract in Brussels for their own country.

But asking: What is the best decision for our Union?

Europe is our framework for action.

Only when we understand that will we prevail over the challenges of our time.

And that brings me to my fifth and final point. Putin's war marks a turning point – and that goes for our foreign policy, too.

As much diplomacy as possible, without being naive – that is what we will continue to strive for.

But not being naive also means not talking simply for the sake of talking.

True dialogue requires a willingness to engage – on both sides.

That is lacking on Putin's side, quite clearly – and not just in recent days and weeks.

What does this mean for the future?

We will not refuse talks with Russia.

Even in this extreme situation, it is the job of diplomacy to keep channels of communication open.

Anything else, I believe, would be irresponsible.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We know what we stand for – not least given our own history.

We stand for peace in Europe.

We will never accept the use of force as a political instrument.

We will always advocate the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

And we will not rest until peace in Europe is secured.

And we are not alone in this – we are joined by our friends and partners in Europe and worldwide.

Our greatest strength is our alliances!

It is to them that we owe the great fortune our country has enjoyed for over thirty years:

Living in a unified country, in prosperity and at peace with our neighbours.

If we want the last thirty years to be more than a historical exception, then we must do everything we can to maintain the cohesion of the European Union, the strength of NATO, to forge even closer relations with our friends, our partners and all those who share our convictions worldwide.

I am utterly confident that we can succeed in this. Because rarely have we and our partners been so resolved and so united.

What unites us at this time is that we know the strength of free democracies.

We know that when something finds a broad consensus among politicians and the public, it will endure – even in this watershed moment and beyond.

And so I thank you and all parliamentary groups in this House who have unequivocally condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine for what it is: an absolutely unjustifiable attack on an independent country, on the peaceful order in Europe and the world.

Today's motion for a resolution expresses that very clearly.

I thank everyone who has taken a stance against Putin's war – and who has gathered here in Berlin and elsewhere for peaceful demonstrations.

And I thank everyone who stands with us at this time for a free and open, fair and peaceful Europe.

We will defend it.

Thank you very much!

Source: Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin

<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>

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