

EU Today Podcast 14 Transcript

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[Intro music in theme of piano playing Ode to Joy]

Katie Lindner: Hello, and welcome to EU Today, a podcast from the Center for European studies, a Jean Monnet Center of Excellence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Thank you to the Erasmus+ program of the European Commission, the EU Delegation to the U.S., and the U.S. Department of Education for supporting our center and its programs. On this podcast, we sit down with scholars and policy leaders to discuss pressing issues facing the EU. We hope you enjoy it.

Mackenzie Hansen: *Christiane Lemke is emeritus professor of political science and international relations and former director of the Jean Monnet a European Center of Excellence at Leibniz University, Hannover. She received her Ph.D. and her second Ph.D. at the Free University Berlin, one of several visiting professor positions at universities in the U.S., including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Harvard University and NYU, where she was the Max Faber chair in European and German politics. She was the first woman to be director of State Parliament in Lower Saxony. Her research focuses on German politics, European affairs and transatlantic relations. I sat down with Dr. LAMB after Europe Week 2023 to discuss the Zeitenwende policy change in European security.*

Christiane Lemke: *Well, I think that the war Russia started in Ukraine really is a turning point for Europe and also for security policy in Europe. When the war started last year in February, many people were surprised, including the German government. Everybody thought, we are trading with Russia. Russia will not dare to violate rules of international law and just invade another country.*

But I guess Putin felt pretty safe doing it because he thought the West was anyhow divided and preoccupied with COVID and all kinds of economic problems. So he could actually capture or land that from his perspective as part of Russia, which is actually not as Ukraine, is a sovereign

state. So when Orlov shows the German chancellor gave his speech to the Federal Parliament in February of 2022 talking about a Titan vendetta, I think he captured this moment really well.

I mean, Zeitenwende is not only a change, it's a sea change. And he meant it as a complete turnaround of German foreign policy. That was his first and foremost meaning. But it had, of course, implications for all of Europe. So what does site and vendor mean? Actually? Last year we thought it was powerful rhetoric. So this announced €100 billion in funds he would give to the military, to the Bundeswehr funds that were directed towards supporting Ukraine in their attempt to fight off the Russian aggression.

And he also emphasized that Germany would fulfill the required means need or had actually agreed upon many years ago. Actually, that was way back during the George W Bush presidency, namely dedicating 2% of the GDP, the gross domestic product, to spending on defense. And previously, Germany had always argued, well, yes, we are moving towards spending that much, but we also spend money on development aid, on diplomatic initiatives, on peacebuilding.

All of this has to go into the expenses that we count as part of defending our values and providing security. So what shows actually set in motion was a complete paradigmatic shift for Germany to no longer insist on its role as a civilian power in Europe, but to take the military side more seriously, to move it up actually above being a civilian power or acting as a civilian power in international politics to developing a very robust security policy.

However, the problem was that the German army was not in good shape, has not been in good shape for quite some time, and nobody really cared about it too much because we were we are a member of NATO. We have our forces to fulfill NATO's requirements, participate in exercises. But to look at defense in earnest and to move to a war.

This was not really part of the scenario that German, the German army was geared towards. So one of the major challenges for Schulz and for his government was to get the German army ready and to provide better equipment, better modernized communication systems, more ammunition and a whole range of things, new fighter planes and so on. The other major challenge occurred because Ukraine was really lobbying hard, especially in Germany, to be supported by weapons deliveries.

And the Ukrainian ambassador to Germany was really one of the most outspoken members of his government, of the Ukrainian government. He was all over and talk shows in the media. He



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would constantly stress that Germany should send modern weaponry to Ukraine to put it in a position to defend itself. However, there was a great reluctance in Germany. Just think about this image in the historical perspective.

German tanks in Ukraine. I mean, we've seen that during the Second World War and Germany was an aggressive country under Nazi rule. Most of the battles were actually fought of the Second World War, were actually fought on Soviet soil, mainly on the area which is today, Ukraine, the Baltic states, Belarus, Belarus and Russia. So because Germany always argued and still are still argues we have a historic obligations to avoid being perceived as aggressors.

Again, just like in the Second World War. The German government did not want to send tanks. They were willing to send all kinds of equipment. But the issue of tanks was a hot button issue, and it was not until early this year, 2023, that the government finally agreed to send the very modern little part to tanks from German production.

And there was an interesting deal made. The German government insisted on not going alone, and they wanted the American ones, the US forces, to bring in battle tanks as well, the Abraham tanks and the US. Finally agreed. However, it will take a couple of months, I guess, till these tanks will ever arrive in Europe. But the German government moved on sending little part tanks, and I think there are some 18 very modern tanks now operating in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian army is actually now well-trained in Western technology and communications. In fact, we know that Ukrainian officers and soldiers were trained after Crimea was annexed in 2014 and they were trained in different European countries, including the UK. But also the United States and in Germany. So they can operate these weapons. That was always one of the concerns.

If we send modern weapons, will they be able to handle them? But that is not the issue really. I mean, they know how to how to drive and operate the fighter tanks. So Germany has really come forward. This is a paradigmatic shift because one of the foreign policy guidelines of Germany is and has always been after German unification in 1990, no weapons to countries where there's fighting going on.

If they are not NATO countries, Germany does not want to send weapons. Well, I mean, this has not always been true. There were previous cases where Germany did export weapons to countries where there is fighting. Very controversial. For example, Turkey. Turkey's a NATO

member, but they are fighting the Kurdish uprising in their own country, but also in northern Syria, northern Iraq.

And so Germany was very reluctant to send weapons and other equipment to Turkey, but it did do so. Same to Saudi Arabia, which is involved in the Yemen war. So there have been other kind of cases. Ukraine is not the first case. However, this is a war fought on Europe soil. Ukraine is part of Europe. And so Germany felt an immediate need to support the country, defend its territorial sovereignty, because that's what it's all about.

One year after the start of the war, I would say that the German public is still supportive. Germany was very supportive last year to take in Ukrainian refugees. About 1 million Ukrainian refugees are now living in Germany, mostly women and children. And I think the country that took in most refugees is Poland, an immediate, you know, neighbor of Ukraine with 2 million refugees.

That was never controversial to, you know, take in refugees. Military support we find in surveys. Most Germans support sending tanks supporting Ukraine militarily. However, most Germans also support diplomatic action. And they would like to see the German government engage more in diplomatic initiatives, trying to settle the conflict in some way. However, the German government feels it is not yet the time to do so because there is a, you know, a widespread feeling in the population.

Let's push for peace talks. The domestic reactions in Germany are kind of mixed. You have a very broad support for the government policy, which is actually a social democratic, green free democratic government. And it's interesting because the Social Democrats, which is the major party in the coalition, the chancellor is a social Democrat. They were more friendly towards Russia than other parties until the war started.

And still they realized that Russia is not the same Russia that we used to deal with in the 1990s after the wall came down and after Germany was unified, the Russians under Boris Yeltsin actually tried to become a member of the European community and Russia was closely aligned. The NATO Partnership for Peace and other programs. And there was even talk about should Russia be a member of the European Union or not.

But all of this has changed under Putin. When he came to power. He clearly was not so much looking towards Europe as a partner, but more as a trading partner for sending their energy, gas and oil and for imports going to Russia. And Putin is also looking to Asia. So the Social

Democrats had to make a swift turn, really 180 degrees from being more open and supportive towards Russia to really saying no, this is it.

There is a red line. So when we talk about a paradigmatic shift, this is clearly the case for the social Democratic Party. The Greens are also very supportive of sending military aid to Ukraine, which is interesting because the Green Party has its roots in the German peace movement. And I was just reading a piece by a prominent green supporter and Green member who said the new peace movement is supporting Ukraine militarily.

So you see here, again, a paradigmatic shift. Actually, our foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, and also the economics minister for the topic, support Olaf Scholz in his approach. They also support the 2% spending on military, which is quite amazing. And the Free Democrats, I think they have always been this the smallest coalition partner. I think they have always been in favor of modernizing the German army so they have less of an issue.

However, in the German population, you find two parties on the left and on the right that are opposed to the military support for Ukraine, and that's the far left party called the left. It's a bit confusing because they are only part of what we consider the left intellectually. It's a political party that came out of the East German post-communist party and they came forward arguing that in federal parliament that the government should do more to support diplomatic initiatives and should not what they call wage war.

Even though it's Russia waging war and Ukraine defending itself, but they have it somehow twisted. But one of the very prominent speakers of the left parties have organized, together with a very well-known feminist, Alisa Schweitzer. They came out just a couple of weeks ago with a manifesto with a declaration for Peace, which was signed by 600,000 German citizens.

Now, when you look at this, you really kind of wonder what these two prominent figures think about Ukraine. They are more concerned about kind of a general appeasement of Putin, not to anger Putin even further than they are concerned about the Ukrainian right of defending their country. And, you know, the 600,000 signatures, I would say they're easy to get because it's a no brainer.

You know, if you want peace, everybody wants peace. But the difficult question is how to get there. And still I mean, this was a widely discussed paper. And in the paper, in the newspapers, in the public, in talk shows and so on. But I don't think it will have a major impact on the government and on the far right.

You have the Alliance for Germany, far right party, and they have always been pro-Russian. They like dictators, they like people like Putin and they think, you know, the Germans should not be involved in the conflict and they should not support Ukraine. They should just somehow do nothing because they feel like, you know, the national interest is just with our own country, with Germany and not with, you know, more broader goals of peace or security or order for Europe.

So they have spoken out against the budget of 100 billion support for the Bundeswehr. They spoke out against sending tanks to Ukraine. But one has to see the honesty is not a very influential party on the national level. They had about 10% voter support in the federal elections 2021. But in some states in East Germany, Thuringia and Saxony, they are the strongest party in terms of their electoral support.

So they do have an audience in these states. However, the parties on the national level, on the state level as well, have pledged not to form a coalition with the AfD, with the far right. So they don't really have a direct influence on government policy. Yeah. How do neighbors see the German site in Vienna? That's a very interesting question because Germany is the most important, most populous, economically important country in the European Union.

And it was very interesting that when Olaf Scholz declared, you know, that site and vendor to be the new shifted paradigm for Germany, most European countries, I would say all European countries welcomed this shift and in particularly Central European countries said finally, Germany is waking up to the threat Russia is posing. I think we have to remember that the Baltic states were part of the Soviet Union and they became independent only in 1990 after the Soviet Union dissolved and they are afraid that Putin might actually annex, you know, the small states Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the next.

And they actually saw the Soviet Union and later on Russia as a major threat to their identity, to their statehood. And after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, time and again, lobby. They are NATO members. So they tried to lobby with NATO to have more military presence in that region of Europe. And very slowly they realized, yeah, they have a real problem if Russia tries to annex these states.

So, in fact, just recently, Germany sent a German soldiers from the German army to Latvia, and they also are present in form of NATO units in Estonia and Latvia, so that, you know, these countries should feel safe. And the same is true with Poland. Poland really is the strongest

supporter for Ukraine and for Ukraine's goal to become a member of the European Union and eventually also of NATO, which is somehow, you know, far off, I would say, time wise.

But Poland would like to see Ukraine in NATO because for them it would be another security assurance to the east of their border that, you know, they don't bought a border, a country that is either in stable or, God forbid, you know, dominated or ruled even by Russia. So Poland really welcome the German term, but turn but they felt that the site then was too slow and they would like to see more of German investment in military of German presence in the region.

And I think the same is true for for, you know, the Baltics, but also the Czech Republic, that whole area. And so East of Germany, these countries welcome that site and vendor, which is very, very significant and interesting looking again, looking at history. After all, under Nazi Germany, these countries feared German military power tremendously. And the just think about this, the capital of Poland, Warsaw, was completely destroyed by Nazi Germans.

And now you see this site invented on a mental level that Poland is the country saying you need more military might, you need more weapons. Germans should really kind of be more powerful militarily with NATO. And that is always the the assurance to these countries. Germany is not going alone, but it feels like it will always be a member of the NATO alliance.

So there is this multilateral kind of broad consensus in German foreign policy. The Americans also welcomed the German site and vendor. I mean, the US has long pressured Germany to increase its military spending. This was President Bush. It was President Obama. It was the former President Donald Trump. It is strong. It is Joe Biden now always calling on Germany to increase its military spending.

So meet the benchmark of 2%. And so it was really welcomed in Germany and beyond Germany, in the United States, that the Germans are finally increasing their budget, which they actually are, and investing more in military. The Americans feel Germany should probably play a more active role in European defense. And I think that's an interesting question for transatlantic relations, more broadly speaking, because in the U.S. we see that the willingness to defend other countries and regions away from the American continent in Europe, there is a, how shall I put it, the support is kind of not as strong as it used to be during the Cold War because the US government feels Europeans should defend

themselves and should do more in terms of security. So the interesting question for the side event in the future is who will who will take on this leading role in Europe? Because it's quite

clear sight. And when there is a beginning of a longer process, and I don't think we can say now a year after this famous speech and here after all the parties have changed their foreign policy in Europe, that it's it's completed.

I think it's an ongoing process. Who is willing and capable to take on a leading role for European security. And here it's quite striking. If you go through all the European countries, I don't think that Germany really wants to play a leading role. The Germans, like American leadership. They are very closely aligned with the U.S. and willing to cooperate closely with the US, but taking a leadership role on their own, that's not a German thing.

France right now is tied up in domestic issues. It's very difficult for the French president to play this leading role effectively. The UK is not a member of the European Union anymore, even though the UK supports Ukraine very actively on many different levels. For Europe, the UK does not play such a great role anymore since they are no longer a member of the EU.

They don't have these kind of close ties. Other countries. Poland has a problem because the European Union filed a suit on Poland's violation of the rule of law. So there is this political and judicial tension here. Poland cannot play the leading role, and neither does Spain or Italy or Sweden or any other country. You have the capacities to do so.

So my kind of perception is and prediction the US will have to continue to play a leading role militarily. There's no question the US has the capabilities, including a nuclear deterrence, but also other capabilities in terms of air defense and all the other, you know, important battlefield technologies. The interesting question will be how do we get to a settlement between Ukraine and and Russia?

Because we're hoping that the war will not go on endlessly. The war of attrition is really very costly for Ukraine, but also for all the other parties involved, also for Russia. So what we are hoping is that at some point the fighting parties may feel it is too costly and will move to negotiate over a potential settlement. And I do think that this settlement will not come easy because the expectations are so controversial and so far apart at this point.

But from what we know from peace and conflict research is that fighting parties will at a certain point reach a point where they are exhausted, where they feel it might be more beneficial to go for a settlement, whatever that will be in the end. And I do think that this settlement, whatever it will look like, is only possible if there is a strong military backing.

If we are willing we Europeans are willing to commit to military presence to support this peace settlement if needless willing to support this peace settlement. And this will necessarily mean the US will have to play a leading role in this settlement for peace. For a while I was thinking there has to be a third party coming in and people had all kinds of wild ideas that maybe Turkey could step in, which has good relations to Russia, but also as a NATO member, Israel could step in because it has good relations to both and it might, you know, have the power in as far away from the conflict removed geographically.

But I right now, I don't think that is going to be an option. And so we will have to rely on the political forces that are right there in Europe. We need skilled diplomats. We might need an international crisis group to come together. And I would hope that several countries will sign up, including countries like the UK, Sweden, Germany, France, which do have experience in diplomatic conflict resolution, have very strong interest to see this conflict end.

And I do hope that there will be an international tribunal to investigate the war with war crimes are already being investigated. The Ukrainians do a great job in collecting data about violations of human rights, war crimes such as rape, the kidnaping of children and so on right there in Ukraine. So we will have a lot of material to look at.

So that will be part of an international settlement. So let's hope this is not too far away. But I do think to sum up that the paradigmatic shift that was started in 2022 will continue and will have a far reaching impact on the security structure of Europe. Very different from what we saw in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War and the unification of Germany.

This is a new time, a new epoch, one could almost say. So let's hope that we will have a peaceful settlement in the end, that we can all rearrange and go back to, you know what? Go back to peaceful and civil relations between countries and peoples in Europe.

Mackenzie Hansen: *Certainly as a forward looking place to end. Thank you so much, Dr. Christiane.*

Kathleen Shanahan Lindner: *Please note that any opinions expressed the EU Today podcast are solely those of our guests and our hosts and not of the USC Center for European Studies, which takes no institutional positions. Be sure to tune in for more episodes and subscribe to EU today wherever you listen to podcasts.*

[Ode to Joy fades out]

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