



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

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### GERMANY AT 75: CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES

  
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pour l'histoire du temps présent

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This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Federal Republic of Germany. On 23 May 1949, the Basic Law (Grundgesetz), drafted by the Parliamentary Council, came into effect. It remains the cornerstone of Germany's legal and political system. Created in the aftermath of World War II, the Basic Law was intended as a provisional constitution for West Germany, with the hope of eventual reunification with East Germany. Designed to prevent the rise of totalitarianism and to protect fundamental rights and freedoms, it drew lessons from the dark period of the Nazi era. Seventy-five years later, we see a Germany that is remarkably different from the devastated, demoralised, and divided nation of 1949. Nevertheless, the anniversary provides a fitting occasion to assess the many changes—and the few continuities—over the past seven and a half decades. This article will focus on general German politics and security and foreign policies, especially given the recent attention due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of 2022 and the subsequent announcement of a *Zeitenwende*, or tidal shift, by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

### Germany - A Quick Assessment of a Nation

In 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany—or West Germany—was a pariah, grappling with the legacy of the Third Reich, which had unleashed a wave of destruction across Europe and the world a decade earlier. Nazi crimes and genocide accompanied the atrocities of war in all occupied territories. With the tides of war turning and Germany

accepting an unconditional surrender in May 1945, little was known about the fate that would befall the nation in the future. Plans were floated about reducing the country to a mere agricultural producer while it became increasingly clear that Germany would no longer be united but divided along the cracks that appeared among the former war allies. Germany in 1945 was occupied by the French, British, Americans, and Soviets, who reserved for themselves the full authority and power to do with the country as they saw fit. And thus, as the Cold War emerged, Germany was



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sucked into its maelstrom. The three Western allies formed the West German state from their zones, and it adopted its constitution—the Basic Law—on 23 May 1949. In response, the Soviets established the German Democratic Republic, East Germany, on 7 October 1949.

Both states were quickly integrated into their respective and antagonistic alliances—West Germany into NATO and Western European projects of integration—while East Germany joined the Warsaw Pact and Moscow-controlled institutions. Reunification, the goal prescribed for the West German state by its constitution, seemed far out of reach, a fact cemented when the East German regime erected a wall in Berlin on 13 August 1961. It would take 41 years from the creation of both German states for them to be reunited on 3 October 1990. In these four decades, both states took very different paths. West Germany became a stable and pluralistic democracy with a multitude of parties and is based on the principles of federalism, the rule of law, human dignity, and social welfare. The latter was present in East Germany as well, but the ruling regime took a path of authoritarianism and dictatorship, with farcical elections and a police and justice system geared towards securing the rule of the governing party, the SED, and punishing political opponents and delinquents. Economically, both states developed differently as well. Initially, it seemed that East Germany might fare well in terms of industrial output, but the Economic Miracle overseen by Ludwig Erhard soon catapulted West Germany into the position of a European and global economic powerhouse with a strong currency, while East Germany fell ever further behind. The growing political dissent and economic crises in East Germany contributed significantly to its eventual collapse. Additionally, West Germany's Ostpolitik, the increase in human contacts through *détente*, and reforms in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev facilitated the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989.

The subsequent negotiations involving both German states and the four Occupying Powers led to the 2+4 Treaty and Germany's reunification on 3 October 1990. This marked a major challenge for post-war Germany: integrating a part of the nation that had, for four decades, operated under a vastly different political, legal, and social system. Integrating East Germany came with a hefty price tag and took longer than anticipated, but it was, eventually, a success—though some differences remain. Those, however, are also a consequence of the strong regional characteristics that the country has always had and that are reflected in its federal character with strong federal states, or *Länder*. A different test for democracy and the rule of law had already presented itself in the 1960s and 1970s when the protests of 1968 led some radicalised people onto the path of terrorism, and initiated the decade of terror, from the early 1970s until the early 1980s. Sporadic episodes of terrorism continued into the 1990s—and revived under Islamist and far-right characteristics again in the 2000s. Though the Red Army Faction and other groups' violence was a serious and omnipresent problem in the 1970s, the rule of law and democracy prevailed. By the 1990s, Germany had become a stable and established democratic country.



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### Germany at 75 – State of a Nation

Seventy-five years after the foundation of both German states, the country looks very different. It is united—albeit not within the borders of the pre-war German Reich—a fact the country came to terms with slowly but surely since the 1970s and a status quo that is not challenged by any party represented in parliament. Moreover, Germany has evolved into a reliable democracy with a robust political and judicial framework. This is in stark contrast to the tumultuous episodes of the Weimar Republic seen in Germany between the First and Second World Wars. Human rights are guaranteed and protected, as is the plurality of political opinions. However, since the mid-2010s, Germany has experienced a resurgence of right-wing and far-right political movements, mirroring trends in neighbouring countries, and best demonstrated by the gains the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has made in recent elections, coming in second in the European elections of May 2024. This trend holds true across Western countries and is, in fact, more prominent in Italy, the Netherlands, where far-right positions determine government policies, or in France where they soon might. It is also a trend noticeable in [younger voters](#) and therefore [unlikely to disappear](#) soon. In Germany, the AfD is still far from leading a national government, at least for now. But it is a development that was particularly unexpected in this country, given its past and the long-held opinion that Germans would be immune to far-right parties.

At the same time, the two big popular parties—the Volksparteien of old—represent an increasingly smaller share of the national vote while other parties increase their votes. In this way, today's Germany is closer again to the early West German state, where a [number of parties](#) were represented in the Bundestag. In the 1960s and 1970s, the parties consolidated and only four would find their way into parliament—the CDU, CSU (which is normally in a union with the CDU), SPD, and the FDP. Since the 1980s, the trend reversed and more parties entered parliament again, a tendency that continues until today and might lead to the highest number of parties being represented in the next parliament—depending on how many manage to get beyond the 5% threshold needed to take seats in the Bundestag. However, the current rise of right-wing and far-right ideas is also in some ways resembling the early West German state when party positions—in general and certainly regarding social issues—were much more conservative than they had become over the past 30 years.

Compared with its beginnings, today's Germany is a significantly more liberal and diverse country with 10 million foreigners currently living on German territory and many more millions of Germans having foreign roots. This presents its own challenges as identity politics are—successfully—exploited by populists. But it might, hopefully, also constitute a safety check against a revival of mainstream völkisch politics.

At the same time, one of the proud achievements of post-war Germany—its extensive social welfare state—is in a protracted crisis as well, much like it is elsewhere in Europe. The ailing health system and the growing costs of providing social security risk further alienating voters from the established parties. When many of the social benefits were set up from the 1960s onwards, they were funded partly by a younger population but also by increasing debt.



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The shifts in demographics and the already high national debt now make reforms necessary, but these might further exacerbate issues around immigration which populist parties blame for the reduction in social benefits; and reforms might thus play into these parties' hands. This dilemma of reforming and sustaining the social welfare state while preserving social cohesion and unity will remain a central issue in German—and European—politics.

### Germany in a Changing World

Parallel to its domestic changes, Germany's foreign and security policies underwent significant transformations, adapting to a rapidly evolving global landscape. When Konrad Adenauer was elected first federal chancellor in 1949, his powers were limited, and his challenges astronomical: the Occupying Powers had maintained control over some key aspects of politics—especially regarding foreign policy, emergency powers, and the military—while the support of all four of them—the UK, US, France, and the Soviet Union—was needed to reunite the country. Berlin, Germany's former capital, was removed from the territory of West Germany and divided into four zones as well. Adenauer had thus to regain sovereignty and room for manoeuvre. He did so by making Germany a committed and faithful member of the Western alliance. His country joined the European integration process from the very beginning and reconciled with its western—and eventually eastern—neighbours. When escalating global tensions led to a re-establishment of German armies in the mid-1950s, the West German Bundeswehr became intrinsically integrated into NATO as the Federal Republic joined the alliance. Having caused two world wars, West Germany was also diligent in promoting a policy built upon the rules-based international order. Multilateralism – rather than going it alone along the German Sonderweg – became another pillar of foreign policy. These policies – Westbindung, respect for international law, and multilateralism—were the core strategies of Germany since its inception; and remain such today.

Other policies joined this triumvirate but never achieved their level of permanence across different governing coalitions. Chequebook diplomacy and pacifism (broadly speaking) became important policies throughout the post-Cold War era as the country wanted to cash in the 'peace dividend', focus on domestic unification, and shy away from joining military solutions to crises. The accompanying lack of leadership globally—and often on the European level as well—did not match the position that Germany had in terms of its economic prowess. A trade-focused foreign policy further complemented the foreign policy toolbox as did—from the 1970s onwards—Ostpolitik. This policy focused on rapprochement with the Soviet Union, the GDR, and Eastern European states in order to pave the way for reunification. Once this goal was achieved, however, Ostpolitik survived the Cold War and continued as a strategy to maintain close contact between Germany and Russia, with Germany acting as a bridge between Russia and the West, leading to lucrative deals on German exports and Russian oil and gas imports. The consequence of this policy that progressively became an instrument restraining Germany's room of manoeuvring vis-à-vis Russia was ultimately that Putin could threaten to cut off Germany's gas and oil supply in the vortex of the Ukraine war. This happened in 2022, and it took Germany considerable efforts—though surprisingly quick and successful ones—to wean itself off Russian hydrocarbons; at considerable costs, however.



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### Germany in a Changed World

Today, Germany continues to rely on its core triumvirate of policies. It is a committed member of European, Western, and international institutions, avoids acting unilaterally, and subscribes to the rules-based international order.

However, in light of the dramatic events of 2022, Germany had to undergo a [Zeitenwende](#) to adapt to the changed situation in Europe and the return of intra-state war to its neighbourhood. Chancellor Scholz, who instigated the policy shift, recognised that a competent and strong military was needed to counter any Russian challenges while he recommitted to the other core foreign policy strategies. Since then, a considerable budget has been set up for the Bundeswehr as the country had to abandon its pacifist convictions and had to become, in the words of Defence Minister Boris Pistorius, 'kriegstüchtig' (roughly translatable as capable of warfare) again. At the same time, political discourse has shifted to acknowledge the changed security situation and the need for a capable Bundeswehr, even—and in some ways particularly—amongst the Green party that derived from the pacifist movements in the 1980s. Within the German electorate, the reorientation of security policy broadly enjoys [support](#) as well, although pacifist tendencies and concerns [continue](#) to coexist. Consequently, Zeitenwende shifted the discourse and policies, albeit perhaps more slowly than initially anticipated.

At the same time, Zeitenwende and the changed security situation in Europe make German [leadership even more necessary](#), both in Europe and globally. However, [Berlin often shies away from it](#). This situation contrasts sharply with the immediate postwar era when neighbouring countries feared German ambitions. Today, however, the absence of German leadership has led one [Polish foreign minister](#) to declare, 'I fear Germany's power less than her inactivity.' With France possibly heading towards a stalemated executive and Eurosceptics on the rise there and in the Dutch and Italian governments, German leadership in Europe and a clear policy aimed at defending and advancing European integration are needed more than ever. This will remain a serious and important challenge for the German government.

A further consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that Ostpolitik is dead. Putin's aggression and disrespect for the sanctity of borders annihilated any remaining prospects for cooperation or business. Yet, some lessons are difficult to learn. Just as Germany relied heavily on Russian hydrocarbons in the past, it still depends greatly on the Chinese market for its export-led economy. Consequently, Germany is restrained in its capacity to criticise or disentangle itself from China. This might present further challenges if President Xi decides to conduct a more confrontational policy towards Taiwan or an antagonistic strategy against the West globally.



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Another consistent policy has been German support for Israel's existence, as Chancellor Scholz, reiterating Angela Merkel, called Israel's security Germany's [raison d'état](#). Israel's military action in Gaza in response to the heinous Hamas attacks of October 2023 now poses another foreign policy problem however. Germany has long been a champion of international law. But Israel's commission of [war crimes and crimes against humanity](#) (Palestinian groups were also accused of the same crimes) – bordering, according to some experts, on [genocide](#) – violates the principles of international humanitarian law (IHL) and other international norms.

These obligations for the protection of civilians and the proper conduct in armed conflicts are unconditional; they must be respected in all circumstances. Consequently, as justified as Israel's right to defend itself against the Hamas attacks certainly is, this response has to be in line with IHL; or, as one [expert put it](#), 'the rules of law are non-reciprocal, meaning that they apply irrespective of what the other side has done.

Violations – such as deliberately targeting civilians or imposing collective punishment – can never be justified by claiming that another party has committed violations, or that there are power imbalances or other injustices'. Israel's disrespect of these international norms presents a dilemma for German foreign policy as two of its strategies are now in conflict: support for Israel vs. promoting the respect for international law. And although Berlin has occasionally criticised Israel's conduct in Gaza, the German government's relative silence on these IHL violations – vis-à-vis the strong condemnations Russian atrocities in Ukraine provoked – leads to accusations of [German \(and Western\) hypocrisy](#), especially in the developing world.

Finally, climate change presents another challenge—and most likely the most consequential of them all—that the German government is struggling with. In light of the many other global crises, attention seems to have shifted away from this topic as has global decisiveness for action. The German government—being composed of a Green party and with a Green foreign minister—could have shown more leadership and initiative on this topic, but the number of simultaneous crises does not seem to allow much political bandwidth for this topic.

In summary, today, Germany is a respected and reliable Western partner, a proponent of the status quo, and a supporter of European integration and international law. However, similar to its early years, the Federal Republic still faces a multitude of serious challenges in its foreign and security policy. As we reflect on Germany's journey over the past 75 years, it is clear that while the nation has achieved remarkable progress, it must continue to adapt and address these ongoing issues to ensure a stable and prosperous future.



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### Conclusions

Today, 75 years after its post-World-War-II foundation, Germany stands as a stable, diverse, and liberal democracy. It lives in peace with its immediate neighbours, having long abandoned any ambitions of dominance or conquest. It has successfully passed several tests to its political system and rule of law as well as to the country's cohesion. It is a respected global partner that commits itself to maintaining the status quo, multilateralism, European integration, and the rules-based international order. As such, the country is light-years away from what it was in 1949. Germany has mastered many crises in the past. Yet, at present, it is facing new challenges with a significant number of simultaneous crises that affect one another. Germany will have to deal with threats to societal cohesion as the tone in political discourse is becoming rougher and [more violent](#), due to the rise of right-wing groups and populism—both at home and among its partners. It will also have to ensure that reforms to social welfare and benefits do not leave people behind—socially and politically. Climate change will have to be addressed both domestically—with a population reluctant to embrace radical changes—and globally.

War has returned, and the Bundeswehr needs to be equipped with both manpower and material to guarantee Germany's and Europe's security. At the same time, to protect the continent and the European integration project, Germany needs to exert more – and more decisive – leadership. Thus, political will and strategies have to be adapted to the new global environment, and efforts have to be made to ensure that the German population stays on board with these changes. Moreover, escalating regional tensions in the Middle East and Asia might further affect and endanger German trade and foreign policy strategies.

With Eurosceptic, anti-cooperation, and anti-integration parties on the rise in Europe—and the potential of a second Trump presidency looming large across the Atlantic—the problems are significant and, in their combination, unprecedented in recent decades. There are no easy answers and solutions to these challenges—a fact that populists all too willingly obscure. But, over the past seven-and-a-half decades, Germany has developed the mechanisms, the system, and the political culture that would allow the country to deal with them successfully. Since 1949, the Germans have faced seemingly insurmountable problems, yet they have managed to resolve them successfully. Hopefully, historians will be able to tell an equally successful story when the Federal Republic celebrates its 150th anniversary in another 75 years.

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