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**Article in the journal «Analytical papers of the Institute of Europe RAS»  
(Volume IV) № 41, 2025 (№ 409)**

**German–Russian Relations:  
Current State of Affairs and Strategic Outlook**

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**Abstract.** *The paper examines current state and evolution of German–Russian relations under the coalition government of Friedrich Merz. The author argues that in 2025 the relations have entered a phase of structural confrontation shaped by deliberate political re-definition of Russia’s place in German foreign and security policy. Anchored in the post-Zeitenwende logic, Germany increasingly promotes military deterrence, expansion of military-industrial capacities, support for Kyiv regime and militarisation of the Baltic–Scandinavian macroregion. The author concludes that Germany’s present course deepens long-term strategic risks for the European interests, weakens prospects for a renewed regional security architecture, and limits scenarios for diplomatic de-escalation between Berlin and Moscow.*

**Keywords.** *Germany, Russia, NATO, Ukraine conflict, German–Russian relations, Merz, Zeitenwende, Baltic–Scandinavian macro-region, security policy, sanctions, confrontation, European security.*

In late 2025 German–Russian relations entered a phase of structural confrontation shaped by a deliberate political reframing carried out by the new coalition under Chancellor Merz. From the outset, the coalition agreement positions Russia not simply as a challenge or competitor, but de facto as an adversarial strategic actor. This shift marks a decisive break with the previous German approach, which, despite tensions, retained the space for selective cooperation<sup>1</sup>. Under Merz, this space has been effectively closed. Instead, Berlin’s foreign and security policy has been anchored

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.15211/analytics44120258894> EDN: <https://www.elibrary.ru/STALVU>

<sup>1</sup> Stewart S. Consolidating Germany’s Russia Policy. SWP Comment 2023/C 30, 06.06.2023, 8 Seiten. DOI: 10.18449/2023C30. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C30/>; Meister Stefan. No More Illusions? The Turning Point in Germany’s Russia Policy. DGAP. 01.11.2024. <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/no-more-illusions-turning-point-germanys-russia-policy>

in an expanded understanding of *Zeitenwende*, now filled with concrete military, institutional and industrial content.

The current trajectory shapes events and is not reactive. Key figures in promoting the new approach are Chancellor Merz; Lars Klingbeil, who has positioned the SPD as a fully Atlanticist force; minister of defence Boris Pistorius, the principal architect of Germany's fast militarisation; and foreign minister Johann Wadeful, whose rhetoric helped consolidate the coalition's hawkish consensus. Together they have re-oriented German policy towards long-term strategic competition with Russia, with the Baltic–Scandinavian macroregion (BSM)<sup>2</sup> emerging as a principal geographic focus of German military planning. Within the coalition's analysis, this macroregion is increasingly viewed as the most likely theatre of a possible clash with Russia.

### **Political relations: restructuring and heightened confrontation**

Against this backdrop, political relations between Berlin and Moscow have lost all elements of pragmatic engagement and have acquired a structurally adversarial framework. Merz government's key documents, including the coalition agreement<sup>3</sup>, security guidelines and public statements<sup>4</sup> consistently frame Russia as a strategic antagonist whose actions allegedly undermine the "European order" and Germany's core interests<sup>5</sup>. Unlike the oscillating and contradictory approach of previous governments, current line is explicit and deterministic: Russia is looked upon as a country with which a selective cooperation is not possible any more.

German political instruments have been adapted accordingly. Diplomatic engagement has been reduced to basic communication – consular issues, technical coordination within multilateral structures, crisis-avoidance mechanisms. High-level dialogue is frozen; the German Chancellery and foreign ministry act on the assumption that political dialogue is neither feasible nor desirable in the medium term. The objective is not to manage problems but to institutionalise distance. This approach mirrors the logic of early 1980s deterrence paradigm, but without parallel channels of political communication that existed during the Cold War – an important distinction often highlighted in Russian analyses of the new German line.

Domestic political dynamics largely reinforce the new course. However, resistance to the dominant anti-Russian sentiments exists. *AfD* remains the only significant parliamentary force consistently opposing the coalition's confrontational line toward Moscow. It is widely criticised, labelled as

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<sup>2</sup> Gromyko A.I.A. The Baltic-Scandinavian Macroregion: Regionalism of a New Type [In Russian: Baltijsko-Skandinavskij makroregion: regionalizm novogo tipa. *Sovremennaja Evropa*, 2025, № 6, s. 5-24.] DOI: 10.31857/S0201708325060014

<sup>3</sup> Belov V.B. The Russian Vector of the Foreign Policy of Friedrich Merz's Government. Article in «Analytical papers of the Institute of Europe RAS» journal № 15, 2025 (№ 383) – pp. 37-44 [in Russian] DOI: 10.15211/analytics21520253744. <http://www.zapiski-ieran.ru/images/analitika/2025/an383.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> First government statement. "Responsibility for Germany". The Federal Government. 14.05.2025. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/first-government-statement-chancellor-merz-2347710>

<sup>5</sup> Belov V.B. The First Government Statement of Friedrich Merz: Self-Legitimation and Mobilization. Article in «Analytical papers of the Institute of Europe RAS» journal № 17, 2025 (№ 385) – pp. 53-60 [in English] DOI: 10.15211/analytics21720255360. <https://www.instituteofeurope.ru/images/news/052025/an385en.pdf>

“pro-Moscow” or even the “agent of Kremlin influence”<sup>6</sup>. Beyond parliament, extra-institutional actors such as *BSW* (*Sara Wagenknecht Union*) also voice sharp criticism of mainstream anti-Russia policies. While the Bundestag lacks significant institutional support for Russia-pragmatic platforms, the existence of *AfD* and outside-parliament groups like *BSW* serves as a limited counterpoint to the dominant confrontational mood.

The defining component of the new German posture is an accelerated integration of Russia-related decision-making into broader transatlantic framework. Under Merz, Germany has effectively abandoned the notion of *Sonderverantwortung* (special responsibility) – the concept that Berlin bears a unique burden of maintaining dialogue with Moscow given historical, geographical and economic factors. Instead, Germany’s policy is being renormalised within NATO structures and EU coordination, with Berlin aligning with Washington, London and Nordic states. In effect, Berlin now views Russia through a predominantly military lens, assigning priority to deterrence, defence industry expansion and forward deployment across BSM.

### **Northern orientation: Baltic–Scandinavian macroregion as strategic focal zone**

BSM has become one of priority theatres in German strategic planning. Internal documents of the coalition, reflected in parliamentary debates and ministerial statements, identify the northern flank of NATO as the most probable theatre of future crisis involving Russia. The ingredients of confrontation are: the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO; increased density of allied military infrastructure along the Baltic Rim; dominance in sea and energy supply corridors; growing importance of Arctic delivery routes and High-North connectivity. Germany increasingly treats developments in the Baltic Sea<sup>7</sup>, High North and the Arctic<sup>8</sup> as part of a security continuum<sup>9</sup>. This is also reflected in political rhetoric. Key coalition figures in Berlin frame Russia not merely as a revisionist power, but as a systemic actor incompatible with “European security” unless contained and weakened.

### **Sanctions and Germany’s Role as the EU’s Centre of Anti-Russia Policy**

The central pillar of the new German posture is a consolidation of comprehensive sanctions-based framework aimed at constraining Russia’s strategic capabilities over the long term. Under Merz, sanctions are no longer reactive crisis tools, but a part of structural containment architecture designed to reduce Russia’s economic resilience, weaken its technological base, and reshape

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<sup>6</sup> Cracks in the Pro-Russia Front: Why the AfD’s Internal Conflict Alarms the Kremlin. Robert Lansing Institute. 13.11.2025. <https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/11/13/cracks-in-the-pro-russia-front-why-the-afds-internal-conflict-alarms-the-kremlin/>; Pauline von Pezold, Gordon Repinski. Germany’s far-right AfD attempts to rebrand as real power comes within reach. Politico. 01.12.2025. <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-far-right-afd-attempts-rebranding-as-real-power-comes-within-reach-siegmund-weidel/>

<sup>7</sup> Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. Federal Foreign office. 2025. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/europe/cooperation-in-europe/ostseekooperation>

<sup>8</sup> Arctic Security: Germany’s Bold New High-North Strategy. Grosswald. 13.05.2025. <https://www.grosswald.org/germanys-new-arctic-strategy-highlights-the-growing-importance-of-the-high-north-in-global-security/>

<sup>9</sup> Matlé A., Rácz A. How to Deter Russia from Attacking the Baltics. Germany’s To-Do-List for the North-Eastern Flank. DGAP. 16.06.2025. <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/how-deter-russia-attacking-baltics>

connectivity patterns between Russia and Europe. Bundestag debates and ministerial briefings increasingly treat sanctions not as just punitive measures, but as instruments of long-term “strategic degradation” of Russian capacity to project influence.

Within the EU, Germany assumed a leading role in shaping more and more rounds of restrictive measures.<sup>10</sup> Rather than acting as a relevantly moderating voice (as in 2022–2023), Berlin now behaves as a principal architect of sectoral, financial and technology-transfer restrictions. German diplomacy played a decisive role in advancing multilateral sanctions packages, expanding them into new domains. The Chancellery and foreign ministry frame these instruments as part of a “long-run pressure ecosystem” – sanctions are now embedded into a broader Western strategy of containment<sup>11</sup>.

This sanction-centric policy is tightly connected to Germany’s broader diplomatic strategy of “institutionalised distance”. Political dialogue with Russia is deliberately minimised and reconfigured as a function of sanctions enforcement and coordination with allies. The logic is the following: every channel of engagement is assessed through the lens of compliance, risk mitigation and intelligence-sharing, rather than through the traditional goals of diplomacy such as conflict management or confidence-building measures. In this regard, Berlin has moved further than most EU partners, anchoring its diplomacy in the premise that restoration of meaningful political dialogue with Russia is neither desirable nor necessary in the foreseeable future.

Germany’s leadership in the EU’s sanctions regime is closely tied to the institutional architecture of Brussels. Berlin has become the gravitational centre around which consensus is formed and not only because of the scale of its economy. Merz government articulated a clear, proactive line: sanctions should be expanded, legally codified, technologically enforced and synchronised with the defence-industrial policies of NATO allies. This position differs markedly from France or Italy, where domestic debates and political culture create more ambivalence. Germany now coordinates closely with Poland, Nordic and Baltic countries, forming a coalition that shapes the direction of EU policy toward Moscow.

The notable feature of German approach is its increasing reliance on legal-institutional innovation. Berlin supports strengthening of the EU’s Anti-Circumvention Office, harmonisation of criminal penalties for sanctions violations, tighter export-control regimes, and enhanced scrutiny of third-country trade flows. The government endorses expansion of secondary sanctions within the EU framework – a previously controversial idea – arguing that without such measures the integrity of sanctions regime cannot be sustained. These steps reflect a deeper transformation of Germany’s policy: from resisting maximalist proposals to pushing them forward.

In autumn 2025, Chancellor Merz adopted a resolutely hard-line stance toward Moscow, publicly advocating de facto confiscation of the frozen Russian sovereign assets to underpin what he identified as a 140 bln euro interest-free “reparations loan” for Ukraine – designated exclusively for Kyiv’s military procurement and industrial reconstruction. According to Merz, the measure

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<sup>10</sup> Germany’s leadership in the EU’s sanctions. Iclg. 02.10.2025. <https://iclg.com/practice-areas/sanctions/germany>

<sup>11</sup> Belov V.B. The Role and Place of Germany in the EU’s Anti-Russian Sanctions Policy: Evolution, Consequences and Scenarios [in Russian: Belov V.B. Rol’ i mesto Germanii v antirossijskoj sankcionnoj politike ES: jevoljucija, posledstvija i scenarij. Sovremennaja Evropa, 2025, № 6, s. 112-127] DOI: 10.31857/S0201708325060099. <http://www.sov-europe.ru/en/2025-6.html>

should not be treated as a temporary humanitarian gesture, but as a structural instrument of economic warfare and strategic deterrence. This initiative reflected a broader re-definition of Berlin's role: now Germany appears ready to institutionalise economic coercion not as an exceptional measure, but as a permanent tool in its long-term anti-Russia policy<sup>12</sup>.

As a result, Germany's leadership in shaping the EU-Russia policy and its central position in the sanctions architecture consolidates its role of a strategic anchor of Western containment efforts.

### **Integration into NATO/EU Strategic Architecture and German Defence Planning**

Consolidation of Germany's adversarial posture toward Russia is inseparable from the parallel transformation of NATO and the EU strategic planning, in which Berlin has assumed one of central roles<sup>13</sup>. In 2025 the new German government systematically embedded Russia-related threat assessments into core documents of both organisations, helping them shift from reactive language to a sustained framework of long-term strategic competition. While in the past German diplomacy used to balance deterrence with dialogue, now Merz government promotes a doctrinal architecture in which Russia is a persistent generator of instability.

This shift is visible across multiple levels. Within NATO, Germany aligns itself with the Northern Europe and Atlantists wings, advocating further strengthening of deterrence posture in the Baltic and Nordic subregions. Berlin supports full operationalisation of NATO's regional defence plans, expansion of forward deployment, and development of integrated early-warning and command-and-control systems. The Bundeswehr's capability planning, especially in the land and air domains, is increasingly tied to scenarios of crisis escalation in BSM, described now in German strategic documents as the most likely theatre of a high-intensity confrontation. This reflects reorientation of military-industrial and procurement agenda under Merz's leadership, underpinned by the "Russian factor"<sup>14</sup>.

The membership of Finland and Sweden in NATO reinforced the logic of German policy. The alliance's northern flank, stretching from Schleswig-Holstein to Finnish Arctic frontier, is now conceptualised as a single defence space, and Berlin views its own role as pivotal for sustaining the military, industrial and logistical backbone of this approach. Russia is not seen merely as a challenge to Eastern or Central Europe, but as a systemic actor whose military behaviour in the High North, Baltic Sea and wider Arctic–North Atlantic continuum must be countered through coordinated allied planning and arrangements.

Germany has become the principal architect of EU's Russia-related strategic guidelines. Evolving security documents, including those governing defence industrial coordination, technology

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<sup>12</sup> Belov V.B. Russian Assets in the EU Sanctions Architecture: the Transformation of Germany's Position. Article in «Analytical papers of the Institute of Europe RAS» journal № 36, 2025 (№ 404) – pp. 48-57 [in Russian] DOI: <http://10.15211/analytics43620254857>. <http://www.zapiski-ieran.ru/images/analitika/2025/an404.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Laird R. Re-Imaging German Defence: A Strategic Opportunity for the West. DEFENCE. info. 07.10.2025. <https://defense.info/re-shaping-defense-security/2025/07/re-imaging-german-defence-a-strategic-opportunity-for-the-west/>

<sup>14</sup> Kamp K.-H., Raik K., Pallin C.V. Deterring Russia from Military Aggression Against Europe's NATO Allies. DGAP. November 2025. [https://dgap.org/system/files/article\\_pdfs/DGAP%20Policy%20Brief\\_No-22\\_November-18\\_2025\\_8pp.pdf](https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/DGAP%20Policy%20Brief_No-22_November-18_2025_8pp.pdf)

controls and resilience of critical infrastructure, are increasingly shaped by German interpretation of Russia as a strategic antagonist. Berlin worked to align EU defence initiatives – from Defence Industrial Reinforcement Instrument to joint procurement frameworks – with NATO’s operational requirements, creating an interlocking institutional environment where Russia is the main organising threat. This institutional synchronisation departs from earlier German policy and underscores the extent to which Berlin has embraced the logic of sustained confrontation<sup>15</sup>.

Bundeswehr’s planning cycle reflects the same trajectory. The minister of defence Boris Pistorius has accelerated the shift of German military force structure toward territorial defence, rapid-response capabilities, air and missile defence, and northern-flank reinforcement. *Zeitenwende*, initially criticised for lack of substance, has been filled with concrete procurement priorities, infrastructure upgrades, military-industrial expansion – all justified by the “factor of Russia”. Even political communication surrounding these initiatives identifies Russia not as a temporary challenge but as a strategic rival whose military posture requires permanent German response.

In June 2025 a group of left-wing members of the Social Democratic Party of Germany attempted to challenge the prevailing pro-NATO, deterrence-oriented trend by publishing a “Peace Manifesto”, in which they call for dialogue with Russia, return to détente, and rejection of the new arms race in Europe. The Manifesto was met with harsh criticism from the leadership and coalition partners<sup>16</sup>. As a result, despite its symbolism, the Manifesto failed to steer any significant reversal of the new government’s policy, thereby underscoring the consolidation of anti-Russian course<sup>17</sup>.

These developments illustrate that Germany’s anti-Russia policy is no longer an ad-hoc reaction to current crisis – it has become structurally embedded in a multilayer institutional ecosystem spanning NATO, the EU and national defence planning. The result is a long-term strategic alignment designed to persist beyond electoral cycles and coalition changes, establishing Germany as a central pillar of the Western deterrence architecture vis-à-vis Russia.

## **Conclusions: Structural Confrontation and Strategic Reorientation of Germany**

German–Russian relations in late 2025 are at their lowest since early 1980s with one decisive difference: unlike the Cold War, present confrontation unfolds without stabilising mechanisms, political dialogue and crisis-management mechanisms. Merz government has fundamentally reconfigured Germany’s Russia policy, replacing the model that once allowed selective cooperation with a doctrine where Russia is a structural adversary. This transformation rests on several core parameters: deliberate political reframing of Russia as a systemic opponent; the policy

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<sup>15</sup> Marangé C., Stewart S. (Hg.) The Tipping Point: An Emerging Model of European Security with Ukraine and without Russia. SWP Research Paper 2025/RP 05, 06.11.2025, 96 S. DOI:10.18449/2025RP05. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/the-tipping-point-an-emerging-model-of-european-security-with-ukraine-and-without-russia#hd-d63210e2191>

<sup>16</sup> Schwarz P. Germany: SPD “Peace” Manifesto—an attempt to cover their tracks. World Socialist Web Site 13.06.2025. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2025/06/14/dduc-j14.html>; Hebel S. Das SPD-Manifest: Eine konstruktive Annäherung. Frankfurter Rundschau. 26.06.2025. <https://www.fr.de/meinung/das-spd-manifest-eine-konstruktive-annaeherung-frieden-verteidigung-93800029.html>

<sup>17</sup> Belov V.B. The SPD Peace Manifesto: A New Ostpolitik or an Intra-Party Debate within Germany’s Social Democrats? Article in «Analytical papers of the Institute of Europe RAS» journal (Issue II) № 19, 2025 (№ 387) – pp. 69-77. [in English] DOI: 10.15211/analytics21920256977. <https://www.instituteofeurope.ru/images/news/062025/an387en.pdf>

of sanctions functioning as structural containment; diplomatic distance as policy objective; strategic shift toward the Baltic–Scandinavian macroregion; and institutional consolidation across NATO, the EU and German national defence planning. Together they show that Germany’s strategy is now embedded and designed to endure across electoral cycles.

However, it reveals critical structural weaknesses: overstretch of ambitions relative to defence-industrial capacity; excessive reliance on transatlantic anchor; erosion of crisis-management mechanisms due to absence of political dialogue; high escalation risk in the Baltic–Scandinavian theatre due to dual-use infrastructure and concentration of allied deployments; potential long-term instability stemming from embedding confrontation in German political culture.

For Russia, the German trajectory creates a multidimensional set of strategic challenges: consolidation of pressure at the EU level; systematic narrowing of its strategic manoeuvrability, particularly in the North European security complex; long-term disruption of political and diplomatic channels; growing vulnerabilities around critical maritime, cyber and space infrastructure; potential shaping of adversarial Berlin’s stance for years to come.

In these circumstances the goals may be to preserve technical and multilateral communication channels (consular, maritime/air de-confliction, UN-based mechanisms), to monitor German military, infrastructural and foreign-policy shifts in the northern theatre, to strengthen Russian economic resilience, and maintain humanitarian, scientific and educational contacts that can support eventual post-crisis deconfliction<sup>18</sup>.

The overall conclusion is that German–Russian political relations went through profound and durable transformation – they are no longer cyclical or reactive, but structurally adversarial. Germany’s internal political consensus, its strengthened leadership within NATO and the EU, and its pronounced northern orientation together create a durable configuration that will shape European security for decades. For Russia, the strategic task is to tackle confrontation with resilience, selective engagement and targeted risk mitigation, ensuring that it does not escalate out of control.

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Release date: December 9, 2025.

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<sup>18</sup> While the focus of this paper is on political-security dynamics, it is worth acknowledging that residual economic and cultural-humanitarian links between Germany and Russia still exist, albeit in sharply attenuated form. These ties may become the latent basis for future stabilisation, once the broader geopolitical crisis subsides.