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# The German attitude towards Russia in 2005-2021 as an example of political adaptation

## Introduction

Vladimir Putin's term in office has been a period of consolidation of Russia's international position. First, Chechnya was reintegrated into the Russian Federation. Then the Russian president thwarted the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine by initiating a conflict in the South Caucasus (2008), and in 2014 he began the process of subjugating Ukraine by occupying Crimea and supporting separatists in the Donbass. Lastly, since February 2022, a full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war has been underway. This chronology of the Russian Federation's expansion seems appropriate to describe the dynamics of change from 2005 to 2021.

Faced with a deteriorating international situation, European states have been forced to adjust their attitudes. In this context, Germany seems to be a particularly interesting case. Its relationship with Russia has fluctuated for three hundred years between rivalry and cooperation. Hence, it seems justified to take as a theoretical basis the theory of political adaptation (which is part of the systems approach, also known as the research approach<sup>1</sup>) and thus also its conceptual framework, which will be outlined in the next section, i.e. the theoretical subsection.

This article focuses on the attitude of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) towards the expansionist policies of the Russian Federation between 2005 and 2021, during Angela Merkel's chancellorship. The structure follows a chronological approach. After presenting the theoretical framework,

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of clarity of argumentation, the author sticks to the term: political adaptation theory, although he fully understands the doubts of researchers who define political adaptation as a research approach.

the paper discusses the position of the federal government before 2005. It then describes the next three sub-periods (2005-2008, 2008-2014, and 2014-2021), and concludes with a summary that also serves as a forecast for the coming years.

This article aims to test the hypothesis that Germany's attitude towards Russia during Angela Merkel's tenure as Chancellor is marked by a process of political adaptation. In these specific circumstances, this should be understood as Germany adapting to changes in the regional environment by influencing its form.

The wide range of topics makes it appropriate to approach the research problem by means of a case study. Its aim is to comprehensively describe a particular community, taking into account a broad set of variables, with the researcher's attention focused on both the values of the variables and the relationships between them (Nowak 1970). It should be clearly emphasised that such research does not deal with random or isolated events, but focuses on a single, specific subject (Sztumski 2005: 121).

This multifaceted nature of the relations described (primarily in the political domain, but also in the economic, social, and cultural spheres) calls for source and content analysis. They will be subjected to a broad source base in the form of official documents, speeches or newspaper articles and analyses (Bäcker, Czechowska, Gadomska et al. 2016: 66).

### **Theoretical issues**

The main premise of the theory of political adaptation is that each state (itself a system) functions in the international environment and forms a supersystem with it. This system evolves through constant interaction, in which relationships are always reciprocal (Pietraś 1989b: 3). The existence of an international system requires only two actors, with interdependencies between them, meaning that the decisions of one determine the behaviour of the other. These interdependencies are crucial when analysing their foreign policies. Interdependence is not limited to cooperation, but it also applies to enemy actors (Wendt 2008: 315-316).

Adaptation has a wide range of applications. It has been borrowed into political science from sociology and psychology and it should be understood as adjustment to new conditions (Dumała 2016a: 24). In political science, it is understood as adaptation to changes in the international environment and the state's independent shaping of this environment (Drygiel 2015: 178).

James N. Rosenau defines political adaptation as an action that helps to maintain basic social structures within acceptable limits (quoted in Rosenau 1980: 3-5, 38), a process guided by the concept of *raison d'état*, which encompasses ensuring both survival and the potential for development. This concept is intrinsically linked to key principles such as security, independence, and cooperation. However, it is important to recognize that the *raison d'état* is subjective, as its meaning varies for different social groups (Pietraś 1989b: 10-11).

Ziemowit Jacek Pietraś defined political adaptation as the state's pursuit of a state of equilibrium between the needs and interests of the state and the demands of the international and domestic political environment (Pietraś 1989b: 19). Adaptation theory distinguishes between two international and domestic environments and two types of adaptation (state and societal). Both environments are subject to constant transformation and interaction, resulting in a constant need to adapt (Dumała 2016a: 26). The following analysis will focus on adaptation as a category related to state foreign policy. The latter refers to any outward-looking stance (Rosenau 1980: 58).

It should be emphasised that the essence of adaptation processes is change in a temporal perspective. It is therefore perceived in a processual dimension. Its actors can be participants in international relations, and its subject scope is different contexts, such as political, economic or cultural (Drygiel 2015: 194-195). The question arises of what initiates the process of adaptation. It is triggered, for example, by a change in the international environment, which causes the state to adapt through changes in foreign policy, domestic policy, or both (Pietraś 1989b: 4). When discussing the process of adaptation, it is hard to overlook the geographical aspect. Tensions at the global level will affect every state in the world, but changes in a distant political region will have only an indirect effect (Pietraś 1989a: 2, 17).

Depending on the dynamics of change that trigger adaptation processes, four states of the international environment can be distinguished, namely

- stable – change is slow, political relations are not organised around values;
- quiet – the dynamics are described as medium-high, the actor's adaptation processes proceed faster as political relations are centred on values;
- oscillating – high dynamics, qualitative changes are taking place, actors are modifying foreign policy objectives and seeking to reorient the organisations to which they belong;
- agitated – very high dynamics, systems organised around core values, competition even in direct armed conflict (Pietraś 1989a: 15-17).

The configurations of the “internal and external state of the decision field” and the states of the environment form a classification of sixteen decision sit-

uations of the actor, six of which can be distinguished for the purpose of this article.

- unsettled – the international environment is calm, slow quantitative changes are taking place, structures are emerging that seek to create conflict;
- external threat – the internal environment is stable, the international environment is oscillating, qualitative changes are taking place;
- serious external threat – the internal environment is calm, the international environment is oscillating;
- very serious external threat – the international environment is agitated and the internal environment is stable, qualitative changes are taking place in the international environment;
- external crisis – the international environment is agitated and the internal environment is calm;
- severe external crisis – the internal environment is oscillating, the international environment is agitated (Pietraś 1989a: 18-20).

The above situations can be stimuli for adaptation processes (Pietraś 1989a: 6).<sup>2</sup> Their dynamics are proportional to the intensity of change (Gilpin 1984: 10).

Adaptation is not merely the result of reality affecting an actor but it also involves awareness — the reflection of this reality within the minds of decision-makers. The process of adaptation begins when actors recognise the phenomena to which they have been exposed (Dumała 2016a: 26). Perception plays a crucial role, first influencing the initiation of adaptation and subsequently guiding the selection of specific solutions (Drygiel 2015: 190). Awareness acts as a filter, shaping how information from the external world is processed. Decision-makers' political awareness comprises two primary images: international relations and their own social context. The goal of adaptation processes is to reconcile these images with reality and confront the challenges that arise.

When the decision maker's awareness is false, an imaginary reality is created. This triggers a process of adaptation to an imaginary reality that exists only in the falsified awareness (Pietraś 1989b: 6). The second threat to the process of adaptation is 'indecision'. By this we mean: the decision to be inactive, the inability to make a decision, as well as the exclusion of certain options from the decision field. All three meanings of 'indecision' come down to a single effect,

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<sup>2</sup> When actor A in a political relationship exerts influence on actor B, only when B fully comprehends the nature of this action is a political situation created for B. Then, when decision-makers for B begin adapting to this new situation, their response, in turn, generates a stimulus for actor A. Once A recognises this new stimulus, it becomes a new situation for them.

i.e. a mistake made by the state that affects the foreign policy pursued (Hill 2003: 107).

Changes in the “international social environment” may consist, for example, in the emergence of energy or political problems. They can permeate the state and trigger processes of adaptation in society, which are manifested as pressure on state institutions. In extreme cases, this can lead to a change of government (Pietraś 1989a: 3; Pietraś 1989b: 4-5). The processes of adaptation of states to the international environment are caused by three basic external factors: the actions of participants in international relations, transnational actions, and changes in the tensions in the international decision-making field (Pietraś 1989a: 52). In this context, Ziemowit Jacek Pietraś distinguishes three basic types of state adaptation: passive, creative and active. Passive adaptation is defined as adaptation of the state to stimuli and openness to environmental influences. It also involves the transformation of state structures in line with international stimuli. The conditions to be met are known, but the values behind them are rejected. In this type of adaptation, there is a distinction between intentional adaptation, when the state consciously agrees to accept pressure, and unintentional adaptation, i.e. inertial policy, when the decision-making centre does not agree to accept influence and refrains from acting. We will call the latter sclerotic adaptation. In a dynamically changing international environment, refraining from decisions leads to an increase in international contradictions (Pietraś 1989a: 31-32).

Creative adaptation involves overcoming environmental pressures (e.g. to protect identity) and actively seeking a constantly shifting balance between the dynamics of the international and domestic environment. In practice, this means shaping the environment in line with the state’s *raison d’être*, while making concessions on less important issues. The essence, then, is to harmoniously combine both above-mentioned strategies of adaptation to preserve identity and develop the state by ‘filtering’ environmental influences (Pietraś 1989a: 52). The implementation of such an adaptation process presupposes the tolerance of different value systems, recognising them as equivalent.

Active adaptation is the state’s refusal to adapt to the dynamics of environmental change. The aim is to shape relations with others independently. As a result, the state shapes the environment according to its own will, which in practice leads to isolationism (Pietraś 1989a: 33).

Finally, it is worth mentioning surrealist adaptation as a consequence of false consciousness. Its implementation means that the state makes efforts to adapt to a situation that exists only in the consciousness of decision-makers or social groups (Dumała 2016b: 29; Pietraś 1989a: 52-53).

In addition to the strategies described above, the position of the state is important. Let us restrict ourselves to two roles (i.e. medium-sized states and powers) because Germany should certainly not be defined as a small state. In a stable environment, medium-sized states and powers will seek active adaptation in order to achieve dominance. A quiet environment is conducive to a diversity of attitudes ranging from creative adaptation (medium-sized state) to active adaptation (superpower). Conversely, in an oscillating state, the superpowers will be inclined to compromise and use creative adaptation while the rest will use passive adaptation. An agitated international environment will favour compromise and the adoption of passive adaptation even by superpowers (Pietraś 1989a: 36-37).

### German-Russian relations before 2005

The rich history of German-Russian relations is marked by periods of cooperation and confrontation. It seems that it is mainly the latter that are part of the collective memory (Kosman 2022: 305). One could venture to say that the process of adaptation to the attitude of the partner has often taken place in the mutual relations of both actors. At the same time, Germany has often been accused of basing its *Russlandpolitik* on a historically shameful tradition, i.e. the partitions of Poland (1772-1795), the Rapallo Agreement (1922) or the German-Soviet Pact (1939). The historical relationship with Russia, on the other hand, is not so clear-cut as the Germans clashed militarily with the Russians on several occasions. The latter occupied Berlin in 1760 and 1945. The Second World War was deeply etched in the consciousness of the peoples who experienced its barbarity. The bloodiest battles were fought in lands inhabited by Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians (Žerko 2022: 13). “In history, certain arrangements and situational patterns are repeated. But for the most part, history is a catalogue of the first-time events themselves”, wrote Juliusz Mieroszewski in the Paris “Kultura” magazine in 1974 (Mieroszewski 1974: 3). As Stanisław Žerko comments, “the history of German policy towards Russia is a good example of how looking for analogies usually leads one astray and misleads, especially when comparing incomparable situations” (Žerko 2022: 57).

Adaptation to changes in the international system has been a frequent phenomenon in German-Russian relations. This was particularly intense during the interwar period. The prospect of German-Soviet cooperation outlined in Rapallo became a symbol of Berlin and Moscow working together at the expense of other states. However, by the late 1920s, conflicts were becoming more fre-

quent. One example was the Shakhty Trial (1928), in which a group of German engineers were accused of acting against the Soviet authorities. In the 1930s, the two countries were divided by rival ideologies: Nazism and Communism. The end of the decade, however, saw the conclusion of a German-Soviet non-aggression pact and a secret additional protocol on the division of 'spheres of influence' in Eastern Europe. The pact was finally broken in 1941, when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union (USSR) (Žerko 2022: 23-25, 30, 32).

Another change came in 1966, when the 'grand coalition' government of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) initiated a "new *Ostpolitik*" However, due to the USSR's pre-conditions (including acceptance of post-war borders), no breakthrough was made until 1969, under the cabinet of Willy Brandt. The changes in mutual relations were part of an atmosphere of relaxation (*détente*). The New *Ostpolitik*, according to the formula of Egon Bahr (its architect), envisaged "change through rapprochement" (*Wandel durch Annäherung*). The main objective, the reunification of a divided Germany, was also not forgotten (Žerko 2022: 36-37). From the 1970s onwards, all German political forces began to regard the USSR as a key economic and political partner. In this context, it should be recalled that the first gas supply agreement between the two countries was signed in February 1970 (Cziomer 1988: 138). In November 1981, Germany and the USSR concluded another agreement, which doubled supplies. It was also agreed that a gas pipeline would be built from the west of Siberia. Improved relations with the Soviet Union were soon met with accusations against the West German government of disloyalty to the Allies (Žerko 2022: 38-39).

A new phase in bilateral relations was brought about by Chancellor Helmut Kohl's visit to the USSR (October 1988). Soon the most serious problem was to obtain the USSR's approval for reunification. A reluctant Gorbachev agreed for the sum of DM 5 billion (Žerko 2022: 43-44). The Soviet leader's constructive attitude was firmly embedded in the German collective memory, generating a sense of gratitude towards Russia (Kosman 2022: 309). Reunification was even interpreted as the foundation of a 'strategic partnership' (Kwiatkowska-Drożdż 2014: 5).

The year 1998 saw a generational change at the top of the German government. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder became the first German leader to have no memory of the Second World War. A year later, Vladimir Putin became president of Russia. The new president distinguished himself from his predecessors by his knowledge of Germany and the German language. When he visited Berlin in June 2000, he and the Social Democratic Chancellor forged a bond of friendship. In the spring of 2001, at their initiative, the St Petersburg



Dialogue was established as a forum for discussion between representatives of the two societies. Cultural, scientific and educational exchanges were revived, as were twinning arrangements between cities in both countries (Žerko 2022: 45-46). The final chord of Schröder's tenure as Chancellor was the agreement in 2005 to build the Nord Stream gas pipeline from Russia along the bottom of the Baltic Sea to Germany (Kosman 2022: 313-314).

The rapprochement between Berlin and Moscow was supported by German business circles with the East German Economic Commission (*Ostauschuss*) playing an important role in this context. Economic cooperation is the most important element of the link between the two states. The German government supported the Commission politically and with loan guarantees. Economic contacts have been marked by a high asymmetry in favour of Germany and a focus on the energy sector (see *Russia-Germany Relations* 2006). This was fostered by a deep belief in mutual energy dependence as more than 40 per cent of gas and 30 per cent of oil were imported from Russia (Kwiatkowska-Drożdż 2014: 12).

The state of the international environment in the period 1989-2005 should be considered stable from a German perspective. The war in Chechnya continued, but the German elite treated it as an internal Russian affair. This was facilitated by the fact of geographical remoteness, which significantly undermined the process of change in the Federal Republic of Germany.

### **The Years 2005-2008**

The return to power in 2005 of the Christian Democrats, who were seen as potentially more assertive on Russia than the Social Democrats, raised the question about the shape of foreign policy. The Christian Democrats were only marginally ahead of the SPD in the 2005 election and both formations decided to form a 'grand coalition'. Angela Merkel focused on improving German-American relations. Relations with Russia at the leadership level proved less cordial than the eagerly demonstrated friendship between Schröder and Putin. At the same time, the SPD's participation in the governments led to speculation that the new Minister for Foreign Affairs, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (previously head of the Chancellor's office), would seek to maintain good relations with Russia. The presence of the Social Democrats in three of the four coalitions formed by Merkel as Chancellor softened Berlin's attitude towards Moscow. It also seems to have slowed down the process of adapting to the increasingly aggressive policies of the Russian Federation. Another is-



sue is that between 2000 and 2008, Russia's process of internal consolidation was underway, with limited impact on the international environment. It was only between 2009 and 2013 that a different party configuration, consisting of the CDU/CSU and the FDP (Free Democrats) was in power. Significantly, the coalition agreement between the Christian Democrats and the Free Democrats lacked the hitherto traditional provisions on a strategic partnership. In November 2005, for example, it was noted that:

“together with our European partners, we are committed to a strategic partnership with Russia, which we promote in all areas, both bilaterally and at EU level. (...) Russia remains an important partner in addressing regional and global challenges, in the fight against international terrorism and in relations with the countries of our immediate neighbourhood” (quoted in *Gemeinsam für Deutschland* 2005: 156).

It is also worth noting that in the German political system, the Chancellor is not only the foreign policy maker, but also the mediator and last resort in inter-ministerial disputes. The ministries involved in foreign policy-making are the Ministry of Finance, which decides on European policy, and the Ministry of Defence, which develops Germany's security policy. The other two ministries that influence foreign relations are the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (current name) and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, both of which implement economic policy strategies. In addition, the enormous influence of German exporters remains a constant factor in relations with Russia. By contrast, the role of the German Foreign Ministry is weak (Kwiatkowska-Drożdż 2014: 30).

However, in her role as Chancellor, Merkel heralded changes in bilateral relations. Above all, she was far more outspoken about the shortcomings of Russian democracy and human rights abuses. The fact that she spoke fluent Russian and had grown up in the former GDR made little difference. The change of form did not disrupt contacts and interests (Kosman 2022: 315-316). In early 2006, with Angela Merkel (CDU) already in office as Chancellor, a conflict emerged in Ukraine over the price of Russian gas. Given the country's transit position, the supply of this raw material to other European countries (e.g. Hungary, Slovenia or France) was periodically reduced. This led to a slow change in the perception of the relationship between the European Union (EU) and Russia, which was also influenced by Gazprom's monopoly on the gas trade, fears of over-dependence or, especially for transit countries, the fear of Russia exerting political pressure by withholding supplies (ibid: 330).

During its EU presidency (January-June 2007), the German government planned a new deal with Russia. Drawing on the *Ostpolitik* of the 1970s, the

idea was to strengthen ties with the Russian Federation in order to consolidate its pro-Western orientation. It was expected that this would automatically lead to a reinforcement of democratic tendencies in Russia. One obstacle was the Russian embargo on imports of certain food products from Poland, which led to Poland's veto in November 2006. Some new EU members felt that Moscow was reverting to imperialism and could threaten its neighbours. There were more and more reports of the Kremlin taking an undemocratic approach in its internal policy. In a survey commissioned by "Der Spiegel" in the spring of 2007, 29% of respondents said that Russia was moving towards Western-style democracy. The opposite view was held by 65% (Żerko 2022: 49). The Kosovo issue also gained ground (Kwiatkowska-Drożdż 2014: 13-14; Słowikowski 2007). This state of affairs can be described as unintentional passive adaptation, which could be labelled as a policy of inertia. A fitting description of Germany's attitude of abstention, in contrast to the observed resurgence of imperialist ideas in Russia observed in Central Europe, would therefore be sclerotic adaptation. This view was supported by Germany's lack of understanding of the sensitivities of the new EU members, who had had traumatic experiences with Moscow's centre of power not so long before.

The aforementioned reference to *Ostpolitik* was creatively developed by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who to this end, introduced the Partnership for Modernisation initiative in 2007. Initially conceived as a bilateral project, it was soon transformed into an EU project. The document outlining the new approach was framed under the slogan "rapprochement through interdependence" (*Annäherung durch Verflechtung*). It stressed the importance of Russia as a strategic partner, which is indispensable in solving international security problems, supporting the changes taking place there and building an axiological partnership while respecting cultural differences. From a mid-term perspective, it announced the creation of a common free trade zone, cooperation in education, culture and science and, above all, the establishment of an energy partnership (Koszel 2010: 99).

The Partnership for Modernisation initiative was officially announced at the EU-Russia summit in November 2009.<sup>3</sup> However, both parties differed on the priorities of this initiative. For Moscow, modernisation meant improving infrastructure and access to the latest technology. For the EU and Berlin, on the other hand, it was important to strengthen the standards of democracy and the protection of human rights. These divergences led to the failure of the initiative

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<sup>3</sup> Almost simultaneously, discussions continued on the Polish-Swedish Eastern Partnership project for the post-Soviet republics in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

(Kosman 2022: 322-323). The awareness of German decision-makers at this stage could therefore be regarded as false. They created an imaginary Russian reality consisting of a set of good wishes while the Russian elites rejected profound modernisation based on values and focused on the material aspect.

An attempt to enhance security cooperation also failed. The 2008 German Meseberg Initiative called for the establishment of an EU-Russia political and security committee at ministerial level. It was supposed to work out solutions in crisis situations. However, the first attempt to apply this approach (to the conflict in Transnistria) was met with misunderstanding by the EU partners, who were outraged by Germany's unilateral behaviour. Also significant was Russia's disinterest in Moldova's independence (Meister 2011: 8-9; Menkiszak 2014: 22).

The security sector was certainly of greater interest to the Russian Federation. However, Germany's willingness to cooperate in this area went beyond the limits of other European partners. Moscow also expected to be allowed a more paternalistic attitude towards weaker partners in the post-Soviet area.

The failure of the Partnership idea contributed to a growing perception within the Christian Democrat ranks that the Foreign Ministry's approach to Russia was a chimera and based on false premises. Some of the CDU-CSU politicians argued that Europe should refrain from 'lecturing' Russia. This view was voiced in May 2008 by Horst Teltschik, an adviser to former Chancellor Helmut Kohl in the "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung". Soon the ironic term *Russlandversteh'er* was coined in Germany to describe Russia sympathisers – people who embraced the claims of Russian propaganda (Žerko 2022: 47). Around 2008, the deterioration of the international situation as a result of Russia's aggressive policy encouraged a diversification of attitudes in Germany. The environment began to take on a quieter tone, with a moderately high level of dynamics and processes of adaptation. This was due to a shift in political relations towards values. There was a growing awareness of the changes within the German elite, which should be seen as the first step in the process of adaptation. This was because perception determines the initiation of the adaptation process and the subsequent choice of a specific solution. On the other hand, according to the actor's decision-making situation, which is a combination of internal and external states, one can speak of a turbulent decision-making situation that resulted from slow quantitative changes. At the same time, there were structures in Russia that tended towards conflict.

At the narrative level, the first controversy that raised alarm bells for the development of German-Russian relations was Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. In it, the Russian leader accused the

West that NATO enlargement had nothing to do with ensuring security in Europe, but was a provocation that was undermining mutual trust. He asked rhetorically: Why is it necessary to place military infrastructure on Russia's western border? In the ensuing discussion, he used veiled criticism of the West for playing God by imposing a solution to the Kosovo problem. At the same time, he made it clear that such an attitude could turn against its originators (*Speech* 2007). The quoted speech quickly acquired the status of a symbol of an aggressive Russian stance. Adaptively, it can be described as an impulse that, along with the events that followed, stimulated the efforts of NATO member states, including Germany.

### The Years 2008-2014

The future of Kosovo, which seceded from the former Yugoslavia in the late 1990s, divided the West and Russia. A seemingly minor issue became part of a larger problem and an argument for Russian claims. The question of the possible admission of Georgia and Ukraine into the Alliance divided the international community. The accession of several former Soviet republics was supported by the United States, the United Kingdom and Poland. This was unacceptable to Russia, which criticised NATO enlargement in diplomatic circles in 1999 and 2004. These reservations were particularly understood by the German Social Democrats. This point is aptly raised by Ronald Asmus who argues that after the Alliance's enlargements at the turn of the 21st century:

“Germany was surrounded by a wide circle of friendly countries, and politicians in Berlin concluded that the country's national interests had been served. While the rhetoric was still in favour of the ‘open door’ policy, in reality Germany was saturated. The priority now was good cooperation with Moscow” (quoted in Asmus 2010: 200).

The strength of the German voice was confirmed at the NATO summit in Bucharest (2-4 April 2008). Merkel and Steinmeier, like the French president, did not agree to include Georgia and Ukraine in the Membership Action Plan, fearing an escalation in relations with Russia that were already strained after Kosovo's proclamation of independence two months earlier (Kosman 2022: 326). The conclusions of the meeting included vague promises (point 23) about the chances of Georgia and Ukraine joining the Alliance. They stated that: “We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO. (...) Today we make clear that we support these countries' applications for MAP” (*Bucharest* 2008). The Bucharest Summit postponed the admission of Ukraine and

Georgia into the Alliance indefinitely. At the same time, it is highly likely that the ambiguous process motivated Russian elites to obstruct the two countries' accession to the Alliance (Kosman 2022: 326-327; Žerko 2022: 51).

The resistance of some members, particularly Germany, highlighted a second threat to the adaptation process, alongside false awareness: indecision, characterised by inactivity and a deadlock that hinders progress, both of which ultimately result in misguided policies. When the undeclared Russian-Georgian 'five-day war' broke out in the Caucasus in August 2008, a serious crisis ensued between Berlin and Moscow. The blatant violation of international law was met with a categorical response from Germany, which began to realise that the Kremlin's aggressive actions could realistically threaten the international order. The war in Georgia therefore marked a breakthrough for some members of the German elite, led by the Chancellor. This became clear at Merkel's meeting with President Dmitry Medvedev, which took place in a cool atmosphere in Sochi on 15 August. Two days later, in Tbilisi, the Chancellor called for international observers to be sent to the conflict zone and declared: "Georgia will be a member of NATO if it wants to be". This led to false speculation about Germany's agreement to such a possibility. Meanwhile, Minister Steinmeier initiated the suspension of the NATO-Russia Council.

Still there has been no fundamental shift in views. This would have been the case if Berlin had thought that isolating Russia was the right thing to do. In the meantime, it supported the French president's mediation by sending the experienced diplomat Hans-Dieter Lukas. The German foreign minister engaged in telephone diplomacy, putting pressure on both sides, soothing the mood and warning against isolating Moscow. The Chancellor seems to have adopted a more sceptical attitude towards Russia, stressing the need to respect Georgia's territorial integrity (Kosman 2022: 327-328; Žerko 2022: 511).

Despite the international crisis triggered by the conflict in the Caucasus, relations between the West and Russia improved relatively quickly, largely due to revelations that pointed to Georgia's complicity in the events. Initial speculation about a breakthrough in German *Russlandpolitik* in August 2008 did not materialise. It turned out that the good relations between Berlin and Moscow were based on firm foundations. Merkel's words on Tbilisi sounded tough, but did not represent a change of position (Žerko 2022: 51). At the same time, on 1 September 2008, Germany vetoed the EU-Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Chancellor Merkel also denounced the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, judging this step to be a violation of international law. Berlin refrained from calling for sanctions, not wanting

to antagonise Moscow too much (Kosman 2022: 328). In adaptive terms, such an action is referred to as the exclusion of a variant from the decision-making field and should be described as a third type of 'indecision' detrimental to foreign policy, in addition to those previously mentioned. Russia also benefited from the economic situation, i.e. the onset of the international economic crisis. The growing economic difficulties made the Russian market particularly necessary for the German economy. The German government was keen to have Russian capital involved in rescuing companies that were in trouble. A year after the Sochi meeting, there was no trace of the crisis in mutual relations (Žerko 2022: 52).

However, the war in the Caucasus in August marked the beginning of a change in Russia's image in Germany. Russia began to be seen as an actor that undermines international security. Merkel's assessment also changed; initially, she was critical of the Georgian president's decision to attack South Ossetia. Over time, she changed her position and became more critical of Russia's conduct (Kosman 2022: 328, 350). The earlier perception of Georgia's co-responsibility for the outbreak of the war can be seen as an element of false awareness on the part of German decision-makers, which was more widespread among European leaders. Since 2008, there has been a growing gap between the political and economic narratives in Germany. Although economic relations continued to develop well, the reassessment was significant and gradually began to encompass increasingly broader circles of public opinion and the political scene. Slowly, the view began to prevail that Russia's strength should be measured by its potential for destruction rather than its willingness to cooperate constructively (Kwiatkowska-Drożdż 2014: 19). Thus, the Russian threat was identified in Germany as an aggravating factor for the environment and its actions were perceived as a security threat.

As an indication of the slowness of the process of moving away from cooperation, the subsequent gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine (February 2009) was seen in Germany as a commercial dispute. It was considered whether work on the Northern Gas Pipeline should be accelerated. Russia's scepticism about the so-called missile defence shield project was also shared (Žerko 2022: 51). On a practical level, after 2008, efforts to diversify energy supplies were intensified. For example, at the end of 2008, Germany and Nigeria signed a letter of intent for an energy partnership. The then Minister of Economy presented a proposal for the creation of state-owned strategic natural gas reserves, and the government adopted a draft amendment to the law on the activities of foreign companies in strategic sectors. The amendment made it possible to cancel acquisitions of companies in the event of a security



threat (Kwiatkowska-Drożdż 2014: 32). Therefore, increasing emphasis was placed on the German state's adaptation to disturbances in the international environment, particularly the security challenges posed by Russia. With regard to the supply of energy resources, the exclusion of certain options from the decision-making field was abandoned. This strengthened the process of adaptation.

As a consequence of the reorientation of German policy following the events in the South Caucasus, Andreas Schockenhoff, a CDU MP and the German government's plenipotentiary for German-Russian public relations, authored the 2012 Bundestag resolution on cooperation with Russia. Reactions to it proved that attitudes towards Russia run within the parties, not between them. Schockenhoff gave a harsh assessment of the Kremlin's actions. He was criticised by some factions of the SPD and the Greens, as well as by coalition partners, who accused him of provoking unnecessary conflicts. Among others, his ideas were opposed by foreign policy spokesperson Philipp Missfelder, Karl-Georg Wellmann, and Peter Gauweiler, while they were supported by Ruprecht Polenz, chair of the *Bundestag's* Foreign Affairs Committee. Although the German Foreign Ministry made a mitigating change to the text, Chancellor Merkel supported Schockenhoff. She argued that constructive criticism was not slander (Bidder, Weiland 2012).

At the same time, a much more serious change took place, namely a re-orientation towards new regional powers (*neue Gestaltungsmächte*). As a result, new instruments of cooperation with Russia were increasingly avoided. This was because the existing instruments were not being fully utilised. Ideas for a long-term strategy were lacking, with fatigue and frustration being the predominating attitudes towards Russia. The 2013 coalition agreement lacked the previously constant phrasing of building an "energy partnership" with the Russian Federation (see *Deutschlands Zukunft* 2013). Emerging initiatives, such as the Königsberg Triangle, were at best tactical moves aimed at confidence-building. Berlin cabinets were increasingly adopting a wait-and-see attitude towards Putin's team.

The state of weariness described above can be seen as evidence of the use of passive adaptation by the German elite, which consists in adapting to stimuli and adjusting state structures accordingly. More precisely, it would be a kind of intentional passive adaptation, since, as the above description shows, the decision-makers acted in a conscious attempt to wait out the unfavourable policies developed by the Russian president's team. It seems no coincidence that this occurred during Angela Merkel's second government, in which the Free Democrats were the coalition partner of the Christian Democrats (2009-2013). It



should be noted, however, that business ties, including personal ties, remained strong and the potential of the Russian market was large enough for German business circles to deter confrontation between the two countries. However, there was no pressure on the German side to maintain the strategic and special relationship. This was influenced, among other things, by the rise of Germany's position in the EU after the economic crisis (Kwiatkowska-Drożdż 2014: 23, 39). The war in Georgia (2008), the failure of the Partnership for Modernisation project and Putin's return to the presidency (2012) reinforced the change in the perception of the Russian government in Germany, not only among the public, but also in expert and political circles. This change was facilitated, to put it mildly, by Chancellor Merkel's restrained approach. This led to more frequent and open reminders that there were still unresolved contentious issues (e.g. visas, returning cultural property, human rights violations). Frustration was growing with the Russian Federation's lack of willingness to cooperate, aggressive approach and unpredictability (ibid: 10-11).

### **The Years 2014-2021**

A further shock to German-Russian relations came with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Kremlin's fuelling of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, which resulted in a significant cooling of relations. The dynamics of change in the environment took on an oscillating form. Actors modified their objectives and tried to keep up with the ongoing reorientation. In terms of decision-making situations, there was a very serious external threat. In practice, this meant transferring the agitated situation in the international environment to the domestic arena.

However, the position of the German political elite towards Russia remained ambiguous. For Berlin, the occupation of the Crimea was a flagrant violation of the basic norms of international law. The German Chancellor did not mince her words, calling on EU members to adopt a "reasonable but firm course" towards Russia. She was echoed by Minister Steinmeier (Kosman 2022: 350; Žerko 2022: 7, 54). The shooting down of a Malaysian airliner over the Ukrainian Donbas region took on symbolic significance. The death of 283 passengers flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur on 17 July 2014 marked a turning point in Angela Merkel's relationship with Vladimir Putin. The German Chancellor was at the forefront of EU leaders calling for a broader package of sanctions, which until then had targeted a small number of Russian actors. A special EU summit sanctioned Russian banks and exports of military

technology and oil extraction (Stempin 2021: 405-407). Another move was to extend the list of oligarchs close to Putin who were banned from receiving funds within the EU.

The Chancellor's reaction to the shooting down of the plane shows that her political leadership was associated with a stronger emphasis on the axiological sphere (Kosman 2022: 351). In the following years, Germany lobbied for an extension of the sanctions. At the same time, efforts were made to maintain dialogue with Moscow. Together with France, Germany took on the burden of finding solutions. The mediation of the two countries (the Normandy format) resulted in the negotiation of the Minsk agreements. The role of Chancellor Merkel deserves special mention because, in the days before the second agreement (February 2015), she held a series of talks in Kyiv, Moscow, Munich, Washington and Ottawa (Koszel 2019: 341). They were not fully put into effect, but it should be acknowledged that the intensity of the conflict was reduced and not allowed to escalate. It should be emphasised that Chancellor Merkel proved to be one of the main advocates of a tough course towards Russia, thus assuming the role of a reliable ally of President Barack Obama. At the same time, she had to deal with pressure from pro-Russian business circles in Germany, as well as with pressure from some SPD politicians (e.g. Steinmeier and Sigmar Gabriel – Foreign Minister 2017-2018) (Kosman 2022: 340-341).

The appeals of the latter, a leading advocate of Nord Stream and closer economic cooperation with Russia, provoked critical media comments. He was accused of naivety and detachment from reality. Parallels were even drawn with the appeasement policy in the 1930s (Žerko 2022: 55). At the same time, the German government, led by a leading CDU politician, did not stand in the way of the Nord Stream construction agreement. However, in the “White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the *Bundeswehr*” (2016), published under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence, Russia was portrayed as a state “openly calling the existing peace order into question”, abandoning the policy of partnership with the West and blurring “the borders between war and peace” with hybrid actions, and constituting “a challenge to the security of our continent” (cited in *White Paper* 2016: 31-32).

To sum up the German government's attitude towards Russia in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, it is worth quoting Erhard Cziomer's opinion. He stated that that policy was based on a willingness: to maintain dialogue with Russia, to develop and implement sanctions as an instrument of pressure, and to provide economic and financial support to Ukraine (see Cziomer 2018: 196). In this way, Germany's efforts were part of a creative adaptation of over-coming environmental pressures and actively seeking a shifting balance point

between the dynamics of the international and domestic environment. At the same time, it left room for compromise. Thus, Germany's efforts were part of a creative adaptation, which consisted in overcoming environmental pressures, and actively seeking a shifting balance between the dynamics of the international and domestic spheres while still leaving room for compromise.

Among the major parties (CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP and the Greens) there was a basic consensus on Ukraine. Opposing views, however, were held by *Die Linke* and Alternative for Germany (AfD), as well as by the Eastern Commission of the German Economy (Kosman 2022: 351). Some experts also had no clear opinion. After the sanctions had been in place for a few years, their critics stressed the importance of geographical proximity. It was pointed out that isolation was not in the economic and geographical interests of Berlin and the EU. It was explained that it would be naive to expect a more democratic Russia. Rather, it would be business as usual, as it is in China's interest to keep Russia away from the West. It was also argued that sanctions were primarily affecting the population, not the Russian elite (Kosman 2022: 237). Such a narrative comes across as a departure from false awareness, i.e. wishful thinking. However, the sceptics still failed to see the Russian threat. The more radical Russian sympathisers became engaged, including two former chancellors, Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Schmidt. The latter defended Putin's neo-imperialist policies and questioned the existence of a separate Ukrainian nation (Žerko 2022: 54-55).

Given its steadily growing support on the German political scene, the Alternative for Germany appears to pose the greatest threat to Germany's adaptation process vis-à-vis Russia's expansive policy. The views of this formation, which take into account Russian interests in the post-Soviet region, were emphatically voiced in 2013 by deputy spokesperson Alexander Gauland. He went so far as to say that separating Ukraine or Belarus from Russia would be like separating Aachen and Cologne from Germany. Moscow, on the other hand, has played the role of "godfather in German history", repeatedly rescuing it from collapse and helping with reunification (*Die AfD* 2013). The rise of the AfD, which has been increasingly effective in challenging the mainstream parties since 2015 (the migration crisis), marks a significant translation of the agitated international situation into the domestic arena (see more: *Dlaczego* 2023).

One of Angela Merkel's most recent efforts regarding direct relations with Russia concerned the issue of the poisoning of Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny (August 2020). Faced with denials from the Russian side, the Chancellor became involved in the case and demanded that the activist be brought to Germany, but the Russian authorities initially refused. Tests carried out in a special *Bundeswehr* laboratory confirmed the suspicion of an attempt-

ed poisoning with Novichok. The case intensified tensions between Germany and Russia. It is worth noting that among German experts the scenario of stopping the *Nord Stream 2* project was even considered to be a response to Russia's actions. However, given the progress of the pipeline's construction, the idea of stopping it did not go beyond the realm of theoretical considerations (Kosman 2022: 344-345).

Chancellor Angela Merkel's term officially ended on 8 December 2021, less than three months before the start of a full-scale war in Ukraine. However, the decision to leave was taken much earlier. In October 2018 Merkel announced that she would not seek re-election. One must therefore agree with her view (expressed in June 2022) that she was unable to act despite the impending aggression (Goldenberg, Walsh 2022). Russia withdrew from the Normandy format talks, perceiving that the other side lacked an equal partner offering a guarantee of long-term solutions. At the same time, the departure from the political scene of the "Empress of Europe" – as Arkadiusz Stempin described her (Stempin 2021) – gave credibility to the Russian assessment of the leadership crisis of the "collective West". The end of the Angela Merkel era, together with, among others, Britain's protracted exit from the EU (2016-2020), the rise of pro-Russian populist influence in France (e.g. the 2017 presidential election) or the dramatic American withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, lent credence to the Russian elites' perceptions. This misperception led them to the decision to launch a full-scale war in Ukraine.

As a result, the intensification of tensions in relations with the Russian Federation caused the international environment to shift to an even higher level of dynamism in February 2022. It entered a state of agitation marked by very high dynamics, a system organised around fundamental values. At the same time, in an extreme case, it poses the threat of direct armed conflict.

## Conclusions

When Angela Merkel took over as Chancellor, she inherited a developed and deepening relationship with Russia. The environment was stable, but the decision-making situation was already volatile. The Russian Federation was expanding its activities in Chechnya. In the years that followed, the threat level increased. The breakthrough years were 2008 and 2014. The war in Georgia exacerbated the situation. Not directly on Germany's border, but in the neighbouring region, an external threat emerged in the form of an aggressive power, that is Russia.

The indecisiveness of the Western political elite, including Germany, only made the situation worse. It can be argued that the Bucharest NATO summit (2008) is a typical example of 'indecision' resulting from misperception. As a result of the mistake, the aggressor was encouraged to go further.

A dual attitude can be discerned in the approach of Germany under Angela Merkel. On the one hand, there is a false awareness and a consequent over-realistic adaptation, i.e. an attempt to deal with a situation that does not exist in reality but only in the minds of selected social groups. Particularly susceptible to this were social democrats, entrepreneurs trading with Russia, and representatives of the Alternative for Germany. The second attitude consisted in active awareness, taking into account real events and making adjustments to changing circumstances. This is what the decision-making centre led by the German Chancellor tried to do. However, even Angela Merkel was inconsistent in her policy, repeatedly using half-measures and showing reluctance to impose sanctions in 2008. Her efforts gradually shifted from passive, unintentional accommodation to passive, intentional accommodation and finally to creative accommodation.

A breakthrough came only with the seizure of Crimea and the fighting in Donbas (with particular reference to the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner), which could be described as a serious external threat that caused the international environment to begin oscillating. Those changes led to decisive adjustments and to Chancellor Merkel becoming increasingly articulate. However, there are still resistant circles in German society that are marked by a false awareness. Their roots can be found in the long tradition of German-Russian contacts, which are multi-faceted. It should be clearly emphasised that the process of adaptation to Russia's aggressive stance was initiated by the political circles around Angela Merkel. It was delayed by business circles, which emphasised the crucial importance of the economic level in relations with the Russian Federation.

The validity of the article's concept, along with the evidence presented, is illustrated by the events since February 2022, which align with the next stage of an unstable international environment. This interpretation is supported by the widespread view of the ongoing war as a proxy conflict, where Ukrainians are resisting Russian aggression with Western support. Germany's position remains ambiguous and controversial despite claims of the invasion being a *Zeitenwende* (turning point) in German policy. It seems that a real breakthrough did not come until February 2022 when Russia's expansionist policies became plain to see. During Angela Merkel's tenure (2005-2021), only a portion of German society and political elites began to reflect and change, launch-

ing a process of adaptation. However, it was the full-scale war in Ukraine that made this adjustment irreversible. Therefore, it is essential to continue researching German attitudes toward Russia after 24 February 2022, using the theory of political adaptation.

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#### ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on an analysis of the German attitude towards Russia as an example of political adaptation. It aims to verify the hypothesis that the German attitude towards Russia is marked by a process of political adaptation, i.e. Germany tries to adapt to the changes in the regional environment and tries to influence its form. The author tries to answer the following question: what kind of strategies of political adaptation have been adopted between 2005 and 2021? The article is divided into several parts. In the first one, besides the introduction, the author discusses the concept of political adaptation. The second part focuses on the description of German-Russian relations before 2005. The following parts analyse the period between 2005 and 2021. The author identifies turning points in 2008 and 2014. The last chapter is a summary and prediction for the coming years. The article is based on official documents, speeches and political actions, press materials and analyses.*