

Germany is locked in a toxic love affair with Putin and Xi
Daniel Johnson - The Telegraph

Over the past 75 years, the Germans have rebuilt Europe in their own image. With its coalition politics, mercantile economics, green ideology and woke culture, the EU is in many ways the Federal Republic writ large.



Xi Scholz - © Kay Nietfeld/Shutterstock

So why is Germany, which likes to proclaim its liberal values and European virtues, locked in a toxic love affair with Russian and Chinese autocrats?

The reception in Berlin for King Charles and Queen Camilla earlier this month was genuinely warm. Germans admire the British monarchy and most might even welcome an end to the EU's vindictive treatment of the UK since Brexit.

German MPs appreciated the King's speech to the Bundestag and applauded when he said that the UK and Germany had together shown "vital leadership" over Ukraine.

The reality in Berlin, however, is less reassuring. In Ukraine, the King's host, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, was seen as so pro-Russian that a year ago he was told that he was persona non grata (six months later he did go to Kyiv). Yet Germany's unloved head of state is not unrepresentative.

*As the bloodiest war in Europe since 1945 continues to rage in Ukraine, the Continent's biggest economy remains unwilling to confront the **twin menace of Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China.***



Xi Putin - Vladimir Astapkovich/AFP© Provided by The Telegraph

Despite the genocidal nature of this war, Russophilia is still a fact of life in Germany. Public support for Ukraine's fight for survival is falling: half the country no longer supports sending arms and four out of five think it is more important to end the war quickly than for Ukraine to win.

German trade with Russia almost halved by volume in 2022, but the value of imports actually rose by 6.5 per cent. This means that last year Germany alone contributed more than £30 billion to Putin's war chest.

Despite all his bold talk of a Zeitenwende – an epochal shift – Chancellor Olaf Scholz has failed to deliver a robust response to Russian aggression. This year, like last year and probably next year too, German spending on defence will fall short of the NATO minimum, 2 per cent of GDP.

Under pressure from Washington and London, Berlin's new defence minister, Boris Pistorius, [has sent small numbers of Leopard 2 tanks to Kyiv](#). He has persuaded his coalition partners to enshrine the 2 per cent target in writing. But he has barely begun to repair the pitiful state of the German military.

Even though Germany remains wholly dependent on the United States for its defence, anti-Americanism has surged. Extremes of both Left and Right play on popular fears of being dragged into war.

Ubiquitous in the media, the neo-Stalinist demagogue Sahra Wagenknecht has made waves with her "Manifesto for Peace", demanding a halt to arms deliveries to Ukraine, an end to sanctions on Russia and talks with Putin.

If Scholz is so far resisting the siren song of Wagenknecht and the chorus of Russia's useful idiots in academia and the arts, the German Chancellor is only too ready to give in to the blandishments of Beijing.

Last November, Scholz led a large business delegation to China, the first Western leader to meet Xi Jinping since the UN condemned the genocidal persecution of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Yet he barely raised this or other awkward subjects, such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, with his host. Instead, [Scholz begged the Chinese President to ask the Kremlin to end the war in Ukraine.](#)

Good luck with that. Last month, Xi's summit with Putin made it abundantly clear that China will continue to give tacit support for Russian aggression. Autocrats like Xi don't take instructions from salesmen like Scholz.

Last Thursday, [Emmanuel Macron arrived in Beijing](#), following in the footsteps of Scholz. The French President reassured Xi that France, like Germany, has no intention of "decoupling" from China.



Xi Macron - Jacques Witt/AFP© Provided by The Telegraph

Next week, the German Foreign Minister will also visit China. No doubt Annalena Baerbock, as a Green, will outdo Scholz and Macron in virtue signaling on human rights.

But from a Chinese perspective her visit, like theirs, will merely emphasize the fact that Xi has paid neither an economic nor a diplomatic price for his brutality. If China were to carry out its threat to invade Taiwan, it would have little to fear from a Europe where Berlin sets the tone.

So why does Germany still have such a toxic relationship with autocracy? The short answer is: because that was the price of German reunification.

The question might seem provocative, even insulting, given the Federal Republic's proud record of support for democracy and human rights.

Except among neo-Nazi fringe groups, there is no nostalgia for the Third Reich. But many former East Germans feel that they are second-class citizens and some yearn for the certainties of the Communist era.

Russian military, political and cultural domination is a recent German memory. For them, the Soviet occupation only ended a generation ago.

The fact that the Federal Republic was able to absorb East Germany without violence was seen as a miracle, made possible by Mikhail Gorbachev's reluctance to use military force.

The quid pro quo came with the disastrous Ostpolitik of Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel, which left Germany dependent on Russian energy and virtually defenceless.

*Katja Hoyer's new history of the German Democratic Republic, *Beyond the Wall*, explains that Stalin wanted not a divided Germany but a neutral, demilitarized one.*

The Cold War happened because the West would not settle for German neutrality. The Berlin Wall, the visible manifestation of that struggle, fell as soon as the Russians gave up on Stalin's ambitions, accepting that Germany and with it Central Europe would belong to the West.

But some Russians have never been reconciled to the loss of Ukraine. Unlike the Germans, the Poles know what is at stake there. A century ago, Marshal Pilsudski said: "Without an independent Ukraine, there cannot be an independent Poland."

President Zelensky visited Britain last year and Poland last week, but has yet to visit Germany. If and when he does, he will certainly remind the Germans once again that Putin has in effect resurrected the Berlin Wall in Ukraine.



Scholz's levels of support for Zelensky have attracted criticism - Alexey Furman/Getty Images Europe© Provided by The Telegraph

Yet there are plenty of Germans who think Zelensky should do a deal – any deal – with Putin, even if it left the Russians in possession of large parts of his country. After all, they think, that is what Germany endured for 40 years.

The flaws in such parallels may be obvious, but memories of a traumatic past can be quite selective. Having occupied and devastated Europe until it was forced to submit to unconditional surrender, Germany had no choice but to accept the division of its land and people.

By contrast, Ukrainians are fighting in self-defence, not against but with the support of the West. Hence Ukraine, rightly, still has a choice.

What Berlin sees as business as usual looks from Moscow or Beijing more like meek acquiescence in the authoritarian imperative – defined by the ancient Greek historian Thucydides thus: “Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

Scholz implies that Germany cannot afford to deter Russia. Yet the country he leads raised a record €1 trillion (£877 billion) in taxes last year. Poland, with an economy one sixth the size of Germany’s, now has a larger and better equipped military.

It is high time for Scholz to end Germany’s toxic relationship with autocracy. Instead of deluding himself that dependency on China will end any better than reliance on Russia, he should at least double his €100 billion fund for modernizing the military.

And Scholz could redeem his credibility as a leader by transforming Germany into Europe’s arsenal of democracy.