



THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OPINION IN CHANGING THE DIRECTION OF GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY DURING THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CRISIS

¹ Nisa Rhafa Nabila

Department of International Relation, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Sunan Ampel State Islamic University Surabaya.

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Email: nisarhafan@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the changing dynamics of Germany's policy on arms deliveries to Ukraine, with a focus on the influence of public opinion and the media. Using theories of public opinion influence and constructivism in foreign policy, this study highlights how media coverage of the humanitarian crisis caused by the Russian invasion and pressure from NATO and EU allies shifted public attitudes and influenced German government decisions. Initially, German policy tended to be neutral and avoid direct engagement, but intensive coverage of the suffering of the Ukrainian people and the European solidarity narrative changed public perceptions. Growing public support for Ukraine created pressure for the government to shift from an anti-interventionist approach to a proactive policy, including sending military aid. This study identified limitations in the measurement of public opinion and the influence of media bias, as well as other limitations related to uncovered variables, such as energy interests and internal political factors. The results show the

important role of the media in shaping foreign policy through public opinion and regional solidarity.

Keywords: Foreign policy, public opinion, media, Germany, arms delivery, Ukraine, NATO, constructivism, humanitarian crisis, European solidarity

INTRODUCTION

Germany's foreign policy is highlighted as a paradox in the midst of the escalating Russia-Ukraine conflict. As a country with a strategic position and historical influence in Europe, Germany tends to avoid direct involvement in armed conflicts. On the one hand, Germany is known as a country that prioritizes a diplomatic approach. However, as the Russia-Ukraine conflict has escalated, Germany has taken decisive action and shown its favor to Ukraine. This raises many questions about Germany's consistency in its own policies.

Germany has been known for its cautious foreign policy in positioning itself during armed conflicts in Europe. This is influenced by Germany's post-World War II principles of "Civilian Power" or "Zivilmacht".¹ This principle revolves around the principle of "Never again war" which reflects Germany's commitment not to be directly involved in armed conflict in the form of military support, troops or non-troops, and also the responsibility to oppose acts of aggression or genocide.²

¹ Birgül Demirtaş and Mahmut Mazlum, "Civilian Powers and the Use of Force : The Evolution of Germany as a 'Realist Civilian Power,'" *Perceptions* 23, no. 1 (2018).

² Demirtaş and Mazlum. (2018). Pp 33-35



Indeed, the Civilian Power principle aims to ensure that Germany plays a positive role in the world without the use of national military power. It is also in line with Germany's goals to repair international trust, avoid isolation, and support global peace and stability through non-military means, which means prioritizing multilateral approaches. In line with the principles of Civil Power, "Never Alone" and "Politics before force", which prioritize diplomatic and multilateral approaches over military ones.³ This is supported by Germany being a member of NATO, which obliges it to commit to and support other member states if they face security threats.

It can be concluded that Germany tends to avoid direct involvement in armed conflict, even being very cautious. In line with Germany's Civilian Power principle, it tends to prioritize diplomatic solutions, economic sanctions, and humanitarian assistance as a form of handling when a conflict occurs. But recently, in the Ukraine-Russia conflict of 2022, it can be seen that Germany's actions have begun to fall out of line with its original principles. Germany took a step that had been avoided as much as possible, namely supplying weapons to Ukraine and providing military assistance in the form of non-soldiers such as logistics and intelligence.⁴ Of course, this raises questions in the minds of many regarding the cause of Germany's departure from its original principle of avoiding direct military involvement in a conflict. After being traced, it turned out that Germany's actions were also influenced by public opinion and pressure, which wanted to be more proactive in supporting Ukraine. This left Germany with a policy dilemma, between complying with public demands or being consistent with its principles.

This study aims to find out and analyze the causes of Germany's inconsistency with its foreign policy, which initially tends to be cautious, but there are exceptions in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. However, it will focus more on how public opinion and pressure have a significant influence.

The next section discusses the methods used in selecting the studies to develop the review, followed by section three which presents the main findings of the paper. Section four discusses the findings of the review. Finally, the Conclusion section is based on the results of all the findings.

METHOD

Based on the review in the Introduction section, it can be concluded that the question for the systematic review raised in this research is "How do public opinion and pressure affect Germany's consistency in its foreign policy in the Russia-Ukraine conflict?".

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because it can describe more deeply about the causes of Germany's inconsistent foreign policy in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The data for this research is drawn from a variety of relevant literature such as official documents, scientific journals, books, related news articles, and survey data conducted in Germany. To answer the review questions, secondary data sources can be searched in online data bases such as Google scholar, research Gate, and google search engine with the keywords: "Germany and Ukraine" or 'Germany in War' or 'Germany public opinion in Russia-Ukraine' or 'Public Survey in Germany'. By using the literature study technique, researchers can collect and analyze secondary data related to the influence of public opinion and pressure in Germany causing Germany's consistency dilemma in its foreign policy.

³ Tobias Bunde, "Lessons (to Be) Learned? Germany's Zeitenwende and European Security after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 3 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2092820>.

⁴ Dr. Stefan Meister. (2024). "Germany and Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine: The Third Year" DGAP external Publications. <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/germany-and-russias-war-aggression-against-ukraine-third-year>. Accessed on November 3, 2024



RESULT

Due to the tragedy of World Wars I and II, the German populace has historically tended to be pacifist toward military combat. Germany's cautious foreign policy in military conflicts has been influenced by this political culture. When the crisis between Russia and Ukraine first began, the German public was hesitant to get involved in providing military aid to Ukraine and tolerant of Russia's claims to Crimea; according to surveys, 54% of the public opposed sanctions against Russia. However, public opinion changed dramatically due to the ferocity of the conflict and extensive media coverage.

Despite ongoing diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the conflict, the German government has been indirectly obliged to respond with policies that align with the growing popular opinion in favor of Ukraine. Just 46% of Germans supported sending defensive weaponry, while 48% opposed it, according to a survey conducted in mid-March 2022 by the research institute Insa. However, an ARD study conducted in early May 2022 revealed that the sentiment had changed, with 57% of respondents in favor and only 36% against. According to Dimtec's Infratest study conducted for ARD in August 2022, 66% of participants were now in favor of delivering more heavy armaments, including as tanks and rocket launchers, to Ukraine. Just 28% opposed it.⁵

This significant shift demonstrated how much public opinion influenced German foreign policy, particularly in the country's response to the Russian threat to European security. The German government has always preferred diplomacy to direct military action. However, military equipment, including anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, was eventually delivered as a result of intense media coverage and growing public pressure in favor of Ukraine. After earlier hesitation because of military concerns, this culminated in July when the government authorized the delivery of Leopard 2 tanks.

This approach also took into consideration the complicated economic relationship between Germany and Russia. Even though Russia is only Germany's eleventh export market, Germany depends significantly on Russian energy sources like natural gas and crude oil. By entering rising markets like China and India, one can make up for the loss of the Russian market. However, the roughly 6,000 German businesses that employ hundreds of thousands of people in Russia may be impacted by investment restrictions or economic penalties.⁶ The economic and diplomatic obstacles Germany faces in changing its policies are made clear by this circumstance. Due to its highly developed industry, Germany requires a steady supply of natural resources, which are limited. The main fuels that Russia supplies in large quantities are coal, crude oil, and natural gas. In addition to creating a shortage of these fuels in Germany, cutting shipments would damage Russia's reputation.

Russia ranks 11th after nations like China, Poland, and Belgium, and just marginally higher than the Czech Republic, making it a minor destination for German exports. Germany will therefore not suffer greatly from losing the Russian market because exports to other rapidly expanding markets may make up for it. By entering other rising markets like China, Mexico, India, Brazil, and Indonesia, where their position is already strong, German businesses will undoubtedly be able to make up for their losses in Russia.

⁵ ISD Surveys: What do Germans think about Ukraine and Defence Policy?

https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/isd-surveys-what-do-germans-think-about-ukraine-defence-policy/#:~:text=Our%20survey%20results%20indicate%20that,for%20moral%20or%20humanitarian%20reasons

⁶ European Commission. EU stands with Ukraine. https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/information_for_people_fleeing_russias_invasion_of_ukraine_en.pdf



If economic sanctions are put in place, the two nations' strong capital relations should also be reduced. It is evident that capital flows from Germany to Russia are stronger than those in the other direction. Russian investments in Germany were valued at 3.2 billion euros in 2011, whereas cumulative German investments in Russia amounted to 18 billion euros.⁷ This indicates that Germany is a significant financial source for Russia and that the modernization of the Russian economy is aided by German high-quality goods. This indicates that 6,000 businesses could be able to conduct business in Germany and it is estimated that this employs 300,000 people. Russian businesses own interests in shipbuilding, tourism, fertilizer and chemical manufacturing, and the German energy industry. German banks will also lose money after lending 16.8 billion euros to Russian businesses.⁸

DISCUSSION

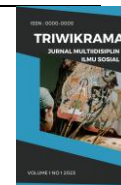
Particularly after the Russian invasion in 2022, there have been substantial shifts in German public opinion about the transfer of weapons to Ukraine in recent years. When it first started, most Germans opposed providing weapons to Ukraine. This was mostly due to concerns that supplying arms may intensify the conflict and push Germany closer to Russia. This public position was also impacted by historical considerations, namely Germany's propensity to refrain from armed action and the war's aftermath. This shift in opinion is largely influenced by the media and international pressure that reinforces the urgency to act in the face of Russian aggression. The media in Germany often reflects an international perspective that urges Germany to take tougher action against Russia. In addition, Germany's dependence on Russian gas has complicated the issue, with many citizens concerned about the economic impact of sanctions against Russia or a halt to energy imports. In conclusion, the change in German public opinion on sending weapons to Ukraine is the result of a mixture of historical factors, media influence, pressure from international allies, and changing perceptions of threats to European security.⁹

In recent years, German public opinion on sending arms to Ukraine has undergone significant changes, especially since the Russian invasion in 2022. Initially, the majority of the German public was against sending arms to Ukraine. The main reason for this was the fear that sending weapons could exacerbate the conflict and drag Germany into greater tensions with Russia. Historical factors also influenced this public stance, given past traumas from the war and Germany's tendency to avoid military involvement. However, as time passed and pressure from Western allies, including the United States and the United Kingdom, increased, as well as the brutality of the conflict in Ukraine, the views of the German public began to split. In 2022, opinion polls showed that support for sending weapons to Ukraine was increasing, although still divided. Around 45% were in favor of sending heavy weapons, while others were still concerned that this could increase the risk of the conflict spilling over into Western countries. The media and pressure from other countries, which emphasized how urgent it was to take action against Russian aggression, had a significant impact on this shift of viewpoint. Germany's media frequently presents a global viewpoint that calls on Germany to act more forcefully against Russia. The problem has also been made more complex by Germany's reliance on Russian gas,

⁷ European Commission. EU SOLIDARITY WITH UKRAINE. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/0244849d-5c5d-4353-8fd5-abc1a1bc8749_en

⁸ Anna Kwiatkowska-Drożdż and Konrad Popławski, "The German Reaction to the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict – Shock and Disbelief," no. 132 (n.d.).

⁹ JOHN VANDIVER, "German Public Loath to Help Arm Ukraine, Supports Policy Panned by Allies," *Stars and Stripes*, 2022, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2022-02-04/germany-weapons-ukraine-conflict-russia-4634095.html>.



since many residents are worried about the financial effects of sanctions on Russia or a suspension of energy supplies. In conclusion, a combination of historical circumstances, media influence, pressure from foreign allies, and shifting assessments of the risks to European security have led to the shift in German public opinion about the transfer of arms to Ukraine.¹⁰

By drawing attention to the humanitarian situation brought on by the Russian invasion and the pressure from the EU and NATO nations to help Ukraine, German media significantly contributed to the revision of Germany's "Arms Delivery to Ukraine" policy. Despite Germany's prior foreign policy of avoiding direct engagement in armed conflicts, the German media and the focus on human suffering in Ukraine helped change public opinion and led German policymakers to adopt a more proactive posture on military support to Ukraine. Germany was first hesitant to supply heavy weaponry to Ukraine for concern that it would be interpreted as an escalation that would incite a Russian response. Germany was first hesitant to supply heavy weaponry to Ukraine for concern that it would be interpreted as an escalation that would incite a Russian response. However, Germany was pushed to think about a more active approach by extensive coverage of civilian losses and pressure from NATO and EU nations to offer more substantial aid. In order to preserve regional stability and contain broader threats, NATO and the EU underlined the significance of providing Ukraine with military and humanitarian support so that it can defend itself.¹¹

The notion of public opinion impact in foreign policy may be used to examine how the media and public opinion affect German foreign policy in the research of "German Arms Shipping to Ukraine." This idea holds that, particularly in democracies, public opinion and societal views collectively have a significant influence on policy. According to the notion, public pressure on the government to take action will be greater when the media portrays a problem as a moral or humanitarian emergency. Germany's policy has shifted from military neutrality to a more aggressive stance, including armament supply to Ukraine, as a result of media coverage of the humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine and appeals for solidarity throughout Europe. Significantly shifting public opinion made it feasible for Germany, which had traditionally followed a policy of non-intervention in conflicts, to change its stance. The constructivism theory of international relations, which emphasizes how social norms and identity influence state attitudes, is likewise intimately tied to this arms-sending policy. Germany strengthened its commitment to European security and stability in response to pressure from NATO and EU members who shared Ukraine's backing. Changes in public opinion and governmental policy were significantly influenced by Germany's status as a member of a democratic European community and its emphasis on solidarity.¹²

Foreign policy studies that demonstrate how the media frequently plays a significant role in influencing public views by affecting how the public understands particular topics also lend credence to this thesis. The public's emotional reaction was sparked by German media's emphasis on the misery of the Ukrainian people, especially through pictures and accounts of civilian deaths. Political authorities in Germany, including Chancellor Olaf Scholz, were compelled by this to abandon long-standing regulations and authorize a more extensive military aid package. Scholz referred to this change as a "Zeitenwende," or historic turning moment, in

¹⁰ Marcel Fürstenau, "Germans Split over Weapons for Ukraine," *DW.Com*, 2022, <https://p.dw.com/p/4Ajxk>.

¹¹ David M. Herszenhorn and LiliHans von der Burchard Bayer, "Germany to Send Ukraine Weapons in Historic Shift on Military Aid," *Politico*, 2022.

¹² Nato, "Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government," *NATO*, 2022, Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government.



German foreign policy, highlighting the significance of popular opinion in reorienting policy during a crisis.¹³

Public opinion in Germany about arms shipments to Ukraine underwent a major shift driven by media influence and international pressure. Initially, the German public was more neutral due to its anti-interventionist history and concerns about energy dependence on Russia. However, German media amplified the urgency of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and calls to support Europe in the face of the Russian threat, which pushed public opinion in favor of military aid. Pressure from NATO and the EU further reinforced the perception that proactive action was necessary for European security. Overall, these changes reflect a combination of historical influences, media, and international pressure, which led to a change in German policy towards Ukraine.

CONCLUSION

Public opinion may be a potent domestic element in influencing government attitudes, as demonstrated by the instance of German foreign policy in the Russia-Ukraine war. Germany was first reluctant to offer military assistance to Ukraine because it has always refrained from military action on the grounds of the Civilian Power principle. However, the German public's opinion changed and they eventually supported military action as a result of mounting public pressure and media coverage of the humanitarian disaster in Ukraine. At the state level, internal variables like public opinion and moral perceptions can lead a state to alter its foreign policy in response to regional security challenges. This is demonstrated by the effect of public opinion, which is further supported by international pressure from NATO and EU analysis.

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¹³ Christoph Hasselbach, "Ukraine-Russia War Triggers Major German Policy Changes," *DW.Com*, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-russia-war-triggers-major-german-policy-changes/a-60950946>.



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