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The party politics of national role contestation: Germany's 'traffic light' coalition and the Russian war against Ukraine

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Abstract Addressing the German Bundestag in February 2022, Chancellor Scholz described the implications of Russia's war against Ukraine as a *Zeitenwende* ('watershed') in international politics. Since then, Germany saw unprecedented changes in its foreign and security policy, overturning established policies and long-held beliefs. While these have been the subject of academic studies and political commentary, less attention has been paid to the domestic contestation of Germany's national role in the wake of the *Zeitenwende*. Building on work in role theory and party politics, this article analyses the partisan contestation of German foreign policy role conceptions during the traffic light coalition of SPD, Greens, and Liberals (2021–2024). The article provides evidence of both horizontal and vertical role contestation. The former takes place between government and opposition but also among the governing parties. The latter relates to contestation within political parties, from the public, but also—as a novel form of vertical role contestation—between the regional and federal level. Taken together, the article identifies considerable national role contestation below the surface of an apparent cross-party foreign policy consensus.

Introduction

The Russian aggression against Ukraine forced the German 'traffic light' coalition of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals, inaugurated in December 2021 and disbanded in November 2024, to revisit its foreign policy orientation and to redefine Germany's national role in the context of severe challenges to the European and Western security architecture. The *Zeitenwende* ('watershed'), as Chancellor Olaf Scholz termed it in a special address to the German Bundestag (Bundestag 2022a; see also Scholz 2023), three days after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, became the political catchphrase under which announced (and supposed) changes in German foreign policy and role conceptions have been subsumed. Accordingly, the *Zeitenwende* has been the subject of numerous studies that explored the contents of the declared and implemented changes, ideational shifts among decision-makers, and long-term implications for Germany's foreign policy (Blumenau 2022; Bunde 2022; 2025; Driedger 2022; Matlé 2023; Mello 2024; Riemann and Löfflmann 2023). These studies also resonated with recent efforts to identify international and domestic drivers of foreign policy change (Chrysosgelos 2021; Joly and Haesebrouck 1991).

What has received comparably less attention, however, is the *domestic contestation* of Germany's national role conception in the wake of the *Zeitenwende*. In his *Foreign Affairs* article, Chancellor Scholz asserted that Germany sought to become 'the guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be' (Scholz 2023, 22). This statement is notable for two reasons. First, in the context of the entire article, it indicates a conscious departure from Germany's traditional role conception as a 'civilian power' (Maull 1990; Harnisch and Maull 2001), which has remained the touchstone for German foreign policy debates (Brummer and Kießling 2019; Geis 2013), despite a lessening imprint in security policy, especially when examining the long-term trends in parliamentary debates about military deployments of the Bundeswehr (Mello 2019). Second, Scholz's statement also explicitly refers to *role expectations* of relevant others ('altercasting'), which must not necessarily be congruent with a state's own role conception (Harnisch 2011; Breuning 2023; see also Oppermann 2024). Not just since the Russian war against Ukraine, it has become clear that many of Germany's European and transatlantic allies expect the country to assume a more assertive leadership role in European security, in line with its economic and political clout. Yet such expectations were often met with reluctance on the side of German decision-makers (Destradi 2023; Gaskarth and Oppermann 2021).

In line with the broader aims of this special issue on party contestation of foreign policy (Chrysogelos and Greene 2024), this article asks: *how have political parties contested Germany's foreign policy role in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine?* Addressing this question, the article thus contributes to the first research aim outlined in the introductory article by Chrysogelos and Greene (2024), regarding party-political arguments used in relation to the war between Russia and Ukraine. Following the substantive focus of the special issue, the article regards the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a 'powerful prism' through which the domestic contestation of Germany's foreign policy identity and role conceptions can be studied.¹ Applying the framework on domestic role contestation put forth by Cristian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo (Kaarbo and Cantir 2016; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b), the article shows evidence of both *horizontal* (elites vs elites) and *vertical* (elites vs the public) role contestation in German domestic politics. This was most visible among Chancellor Scholz's Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens, led by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Vice Chancellor and Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action Robert Habeck, but also among the Liberals led by Christian Lindner, Liberal Party Leader, and Finance Minister until his ousting in November 2024, which brought the three-party coalition to an end. Throughout their time in government, all three parties and their bases needed to adjust their policy priorities and revisit core beliefs regarding Germany's national role conception and foreign policy orientation, and these processes revealed substantial differences that caused friction among the coalition and affected the way the *Zeitenwende* was implemented. But contestation also extended to the relations between the parties and the public at large. Moreover, the electoral success of the newly formed

¹ On German parties' positions on military missions, see also Stremming (2025) in this special issue.

Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) in regional elections in the Eastern *Länder* Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia in the fall of 2024 allowed the party to put pressure on CDU and SPD to adapt their positions regarding military support for Ukraine and the planned deployment of the United States' medium-range missiles on German soil. I argue that this constitutes an unprecedented form of vertical role contestation. The findings of this article challenge assumptions of unitary foreign policy roles (such as 'civilian power' or 'faithful ally') because the look into domestic politics shows that the *interpretation* of such role conceptions often remains contested among political parties and their members. The results further highlight the importance of coalition politics in parliamentary democracies (Kaarbo 2013; Oppermann and Brummer 2020).

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections. The next section defines key concepts, introduces the theoretical framework, and spells out the research design. This is followed by a first empirical section on government involvement and policy profiles of the SPD, Greens, and Liberals, before they entered government in December 2021. The third section examines evidence of horizontal and vertical role contestation during the coalition under Chancellor Scholz, until the breakup of the coalition in November 2024. The final section concludes and provides a brief outlook.

***Zivilmacht* no more? Contesting national role conceptions in Germany**

In the wake of Hanns Maull's (1990) influential article on Germany (and Japan) as 'civilian powers', a large body of research has addressed the question, at different points in time, whether the civilian power role conception, with its emphasis on multilateralism and UN institutions, scepticism regarding the utility of using military force, as well as democracy and a rules-based international order remained valid to describe the foreign policy identity of the Federal Republic or whether a 'normalisation' had occurred in German foreign policy (Böller 2022; Brummer and Kießling 2019; Brummer and Oppermann 2016; Geis 2013; Hellmann 2002; Koenig 2020; Maull 2014; Mello 2019; Oppermann 2012). However, most of these studies have focused on the adequateness of the role conception 'civilian power' to describe the aims and output of Germany's contemporary foreign and security policy. Less emphasis has been placed on the domestic contestation of this role.

Exceptions with a particular focus on the civilian power role conception include Oppermann (2019) and Koenig (2020). Kai Oppermann compares role contestation within the SPD-Green coalition under Gerhard Schröder with the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition under Angela Merkel. Among others, Oppermann's study identifies a lack of consensus about how to interpret the civilian power role conception, which led to policy divergences. Nicole Koenig (2020, 92) examines the conflicts in Libya and Syria (2011–2015), during the Merkel II and III cabinets, detecting a 'gradual departure' from the civilian power role and a turn towards more assertive leadership. Others have assessed domestic contestation of German foreign policy outside the civilian power framework. For instance, Ostermann and Stahl (2022) analyze populist radical-right ideology on foreign policy with the rhetoric and voting behaviour of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), while Wagner, Constantin Wurthmann, and

Thomeczek (2023) explore voter attitudes on a new party led by Sahra Wagenknecht.² What is missing is a study of the domestic role contestation of foreign policy in the traffic light coalition.

In essence, *contestation* can be seen as ‘disagreement over policy that results from a plurality of views’ (Wagner 2020, 38). In turn, *roles*, in the broadest sense, are commonly defined as ‘social positions’ based on ‘ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organized group’ (Harnisch 2011, 26). For the purposes of this article, I understand *role contestation* as disagreement over the appropriate foreign policy role for a state. For reasons of scope, the analysis will be limited to *domestic role contestation*, which means that alter expectations and ‘altercasting’ will not be addressed in the present article (on this, see Oppermann 2024). This analytical focus also means that questions of international order and their impact on role conceptions are outside the scope of the article (see Grossman, Schortgen, and Friedrichs 2022).

Following the framework put forth by Cristian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b; Kaarbo and Cantir 2016), I distinguish between *horizontal* and *vertical* role contestation in the domestic arena. Horizontal role contestation takes place between elites, for instance, in parliamentary assemblies, between political parties, but also across bureaucratic agencies and within multiparty coalitions and the parties themselves (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b). In this article, the focus lies on party-political role contestation as expressed in parliamentary speeches in the German Bundestag and on contestation within the traffic light coalition and its constituent parties. This is complemented by an analysis of vertical role contestation, which describes dynamics that occur between elites and the broader public, where ‘public’ can encompass sentiments as expressed in public opinion surveys, but also by advocacy groups and members of civil society. Extending the analysis of vertical role contestation to dynamics between the regional and federal level, this article makes a conceptual contribution because this type of contestation has formerly been restricted to elite-public interactions. I argue that in the context of a federal republic, it is suitable to broaden the concept of vertical contestation to also include challenges across different levels of a polity, as witnessed when the BSW successfully inserted foreign policy positions into coalition agreements in Brandenburg and Thuringia.

In terms of method, Cantir and Kaarbo have rightly noted that ‘[t]here is no unified database of keywords that would identify roles in the process of content analysis. Authors commonly identify roles inductively, based on close readings of the text’ (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b, 19). In this spirit, the present article explores party-political role contestation during the traffic light coalition (2021–2024) on the basis of a broad range of primary and secondary sources. This includes qualitative assessments of the election manifestos of the three coalition parties, parliamentary debates (covering the first two years of the Russia-Ukraine war), initiatives by advocacy groups and civil society, public opinion data, and other primary and secondary sources. The results of these assessments are summarised in separate empirical sections on the (1) foreign policy preferences of the coalition parties, (2) indications of horizontal role

² Notably, Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek (2023) published their study before the *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* (BSW) was formed as a new political party in January 2024.

contestation, and (3) vertical role contestation. Details on the sources used are provided in the respective sections below.

Moreover, when examining parliamentary debates, it is important to note that not all political contestation over foreign policy amounts to role contestation in a narrow sense. In fact, it is often difficult to distinguish the former from the latter. Frequently, political debates are about the minutiae of specific policy proposals, rather than overarching conceptions of state. As Gaskarth (2016, 113) notes in his analysis of horizontal role contestation in the British House of Commons, the attribution of foreign policy role conceptions often requires ‘*some interpretive effort*’ (emphasis added) because roles are rarely directly mentioned by speakers and commentators. Nonetheless, multiple instances of parliamentary debates on the same topic clearly allow for the identification of common themes and lines of argumentation, which often reveal the preferred foreign policy role of the respective speaker or parliamentary group. Moreover, political documents like election manifestos aim to transcend day-to-day politics and, instead, formulate a party’s broader ideas and long-term goals. This often also conveys the party’s preferred foreign policy role conception. This is why the first empirical section provides an analysis of the parties’ manifestos, because these were formulated before it was known that the parties would eventually form a coalition government.³ The assessment of the manifestos also allows for a comparison with the eventual coalition agreement of late 2021.

As mentioned above, the substantive focus of this article lies on questions on the use of military force abroad. In the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, this has prompted fierce debates about whether and to which extent Germany should support Ukraine militarily, what risks the country was willing to take, and how it should adapt its own defence posture in terms of funding and equipping the Bundeswehr. This has also led to ‘guns versus butter’ debates about military spending in relation to social spending.⁴ While foreign policy role conceptions such as *civilian power*, *faithful ally*, *regional leader*, or *defender of international law* involve multiple substantive dimensions (Gaskarth 2016; Harnisch and Maull 2001; Holsti 1970; Massie, Paquin, and Leclair 2023), a key distinguishing criterion is how a state approaches the use of force. In Germany, due to the ‘burdens of the past’ and the history of two world wars, Nazi atrocities and the Holocaust, this has remained the fulcrum around which political debates on foreign policy have evolved (Geis 2013; Mello 2021; Peters 2001). These debates helped to shape guiding principles of German foreign policy, including *multilateralism* (‘never alone’) and *antimilitarism* (‘never again war’ and ‘never again Auschwitz’), which occasionally conflicted with one another, especially on questions of multilateral military interventions (Gaskarth and Oppermann 2021; Stengel 2020), for instance during the debates on NATO’s military intervention in Kosovo (as discussed below). Political parties, individual leaders, and analysts have interpreted these principles in

³ In fact, the outcome of the federal election in September 2021 came as a surprise to many observers. Most polls had suggested a head-to-head race between CDU/CSU and Greens, but within the last few months the SPD overtook both. For comprehensive polling results throughout 2021, see: <https://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/archiv/2021.htm>.

⁴ For instance, in the context of the Munich Security Conference, see: <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/institute/events/guns-vs-butter-in-the-21st-century-msc-2024/>.

different ways, which suggests that it may be more accurate to think of role conceptions as the terrain of *political contestation*, rather than ascribing a static foreign policy culture that is supposed to remain unchanged (Hofmann 2021; Rathbun 2004). Against the background of Germany's historical experience, the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law) places severe constraints on the use of the *Bundeswehr* (armed forces) and its involvement in military operations abroad. To resolve what had been conceived as constitutional ambiguity regarding the conditions under which German governments would be allowed to deploy armed forces to military missions, the constitutional court argued that the *Bundeswehr* is essentially a 'parliamentary army' that requires parliamentary approval before it can be deployed to missions that potentially involve the use of force (Mello and Peters 2018; Wagner 2017).

Foreign policy preferences of the traffic-light coalition

When they negotiated their coalition agreement in late 2021, the three parties had to establish consensus, or at least a broad understanding, on policy issues that had long been contested between them and among their own bases. The following sections provide a synopsis of the foreign policy profiles of the SPD, Greens, and Liberals as they came into government. Emphasis rests on prior government experience, ministries held, positions on core foreign policy issues, especially the use of force, and portfolios in the new government.

Social democrats (SPD)

Since reunification, the SPD has almost continuously been in government. First, there was the red-green coalition under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, and later the SPD worked with Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU in three grand coalition governments. During the red-green government, crucial foreign policy decisions were made, which culminated in contentious parliamentary debates. The first of these was about involvement in NATO's Kosovo intervention in 1999, followed by the decision to participate in the US-led intervention in Afghanistan. However, the red-green government prominently abstained from the US-led Iraq War coalition. During the grand coalition governments, emphasis lay on the extensive Afghanistan involvement, and later, from 2015 onwards, also on participation in the anti-Daesh coalition in Syria and Iraq. The SPD election manifesto in 2021 had emphasised traditional social democratic values, such as cooperation, multilateralism, European and international solidarity, and the striving for peace. On the latter, the manifesto included the self-conception of the SPD as 'the German peace party' (*die Friedenspartei in Deutschland*) (SPD 2021b, 61). Remarkably, the 2021 document still underscored the well-established SPD position vis-à-vis Russia, that 'peace in Europe cannot exist *against* but only *with* Russia' (SPD 2021b, 59; own translation and emphasis), highlighting the role of diplomacy and dialogue and placing hopes on the Minsk process. Besides, the text included no mention of the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Notably, the manifesto did not take a firm stance on the controversial issues of armed drones and nuclear sharing. Both topics were left open, as the text emphasised the importance of 'broad societal

debates' and 'deliberation' before these matters should be decided upon (SPD 2021b, 63; own translation). In the Scholz government, the SPD held eight ministries, of which the Chancellery, economic cooperation and development, and defence have most foreign policy relevance. The latter was initially headed by Christine Lambrecht, who eventually stepped down amidst accusations regarding her ministerial leadership and various well-publicised blunders. In January 2023, she was succeeded by Boris Pistorius, who swiftly became the country's most popular politician—a remarkable feat given that the defence ministry is typically seen as a 'career killer' with its bureaucratic infighting and organisational complexity (von der 2023).

Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen)

The Greens joined the Bundestag in 1983. Apart from the traffic light coalition, their only time in federal government had been the red-green coalition, with Joschka Fischer as Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor. This coincided with the controversial decision on NATO's military intervention in Kosovo. This nearly tore apart the Greens, who had until then been a strictly pacifist party. While prominent *Realos* (pragmatic realists) like Fischer argued that the disillusioning experience of inaction in Rwanda and Bosnia created a 'right and duty to humanitarian intervention' in Kosovo, as Fischer formulated it in his memoir (Fischer 2008, 117, own translation), many of the *Fundis* (fundamentalists) saw this as warmongering ('*Kriegshetzer*') and militarisation of foreign policy. The two positions clashed at a party congress in Bielefeld in May 1999. Fischer was hit with a paint bag that burst his eardrum, but he still gave a speech to defend the government's policies against criticism. He expressly referred to two principles that guided him: '*Nie wieder Krieg, nie wieder Auschwitz*' (never again war, never again Auschwitz) from which he derived the duty to intervene in light of attempted genocide in former Yugoslavia (Fischer 1999). While intraparty contestation flared up again with the involvement in Afghanistan, by then there were few among the party's leading members who adopted a position of strict pacifism. The Greens' foreign policy values resonate with the SPD, for instance, when it comes to multilateral cooperation, the international rules-based order, and the role of the European Union as a 'peace power' (*Friedensmacht*, the same phrase used by the SPD). Yet, in their 2021 election manifesto, the Greens took a decidedly more assertive stance towards Russia and China, whose 'authoritarian striving for hegemony' they sought to address (Grüne 2021, 218).⁵ Regarding Russia, they explicitly called for an end to Nord Stream 2, because the pipeline was to counteract climate protection, endanger the interests of the European Union, and threaten stability in Ukraine (Grüne 2021, 230). Similar to the SPD, the Greens emphasised that their goal was a 'nuclear-weapons free world' (Grüne 2021, 249) but they suggested a 'broad societal debate' about 'outdated' deterrence doctrines (Grüne 2021, 250). While the Greens in their manifesto rejected any use of armed drones for 'extra-legal killing' and acts that 'violate international law', they acknowledged the armed forces' need for self-protection and the potential utility of drones for such

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from party documents and parliamentary debates are based on the author's own translation of the original German documents.

purposes (Grüne 2021, 253). Finally, the Greens aspired to adopt a *feminist foreign policy* once in office. In line with UN Resolution 1325 on 'Women, Peace and Security', they wanted to reorient Germany's foreign policy to place due emphasis on gender equity and human security (Grüne 2021, 247). In the 2021 coalition, the Greens held four ministries, including foreign affairs (under Baerbock) and economic affairs and climate protection (Habeck) as ministries with foreign policy relevance. Habeck is also Vice Chancellor. Notably, Habeck was the first German politician to call for 'defensive' weapons deliveries to Ukraine, already before the Russian full-scale invasion in May 2021, following a visit to the Ukrainian frontline (DLF 2021). Foreign Minister Baerbock, on the other hand, raised the profile of her ministry, as the first German government member to visit Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv after the outbreak of the war (in May 2022) and to pledge support in bringing to justice the perpetrators of Russian war crimes (Bundesregierung 2019).

Liberals

Since reunification, the FDP has governed two times: as part of a coalition with the CDU/CSU under Merkel and during the traffic light coalition. During the Merkel II cabinet, the most contentious foreign policy decision was Germany's abstention on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya in March 2011 (BBC 2011). The FDP's Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, who was primarily responsible for the decision, justified the abstention with scepticism about military interference in Libya, as he worried about a debate on 'how many soldiers' Germany would deploy if the government had approved the UNSC resolution (Bundesregierung 2011). At the time, this abstention had been almost unanimously criticised as a major foreign policy blunder (Oppermann and Spencer 2016). However, the political assessment of the UNSC vote evidently changed as time passed, and many of the risks and dangers that had been outlined by the German government and others materialised in Libya (Harnisch 2015). In its 2021 election manifesto, the FDP emphasised, among consensual points like the strengthening of multilateralism, the centrality of NATO and effective deterrence and defensive capabilities. This included a pledge to increase defence spending, in line with stated NATO goals. Regarding relations with Russia, the FDP took a similarly assertive stance as the Greens, highlighting Vladimir Putin's 'immediate responsibility' for Russia's increasing authoritarianism (FDP 2021, 53). Concerning Nord Stream 2, the FDP urged for a 'moratorium' to stop the completion of the pipeline until Russian human rights violations had been addressed (FDP 2021, 49). Finally, the FDP advocated the creation of a 'national security council' (*Nationaler Sicherheitsrat*), similar to the institution in the United States, to provide for a more unified foreign and security policy with faster decision-making processes (FDP 2021, 51). In the traffic light coalition, the FDP held four ministries but none of these had a foreign policy portfolio. This came as a surprise because of the FDP's longstanding tradition and its usual emphasis on foreign affairs in the party's election manifestos (the FDP held the ministry for nearly 20 years, from 1969 through 1998). Yet, FDP Party Leader Lindner had announced that his preferences would lie in the area of finance and economics, rather than foreign affairs (Zeit 2021). Though not on the ministerial level,

Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, chairperson of the Bundestag's defence committee, became the most vocal foreign and security policy spokesperson of the FPD under the current coalition, expressing firm support for Ukraine and becoming one of the most outspoken advocates of weapons deliveries.

The 2021 coalition agreement

Presented in December 2021, the coalition agreement '*Mehr Fortschritt wagen*' (as in 'daring more progress', reminiscent of Willy Brandt's slogan *Mehr Demokratie wagen*) underlined a comprehensive understanding of security with emphasis on crisis prevention and civilian crisis management (Regierungsvertrag 2024, 108). Published evidently *before* Russia's war against Ukraine, the document had been written under the impression of the Afghanistan intervention and the evacuation mission that followed upon the haphazard withdrawal of Western forces in mid-2021. This had led to calls for parliamentary enquiries into the circumstances of the evacuation and an assessment of Germany's civilian and military engagement in Afghanistan since 2001. Though neither party had mentioned the Afghanistan mission in its election platform, the agreement explicitly stated that the government parties were committed to enact such parliamentary enquiries once in office (Regierungsvertrag 2024, 119). The agreement included further consequential points in relation to foreign and security policy. For instance, the document stated that the acquisition of armed drones 'would be made possible' if certain ethical and security considerations were met (Regierungsvertrag 2024, 118). In October 2021, an SPD working group had put forth a report that paved the way for the arming of drones within circumscribed limits (SPD. 2021a) and the Greens, while remaining critical, had acknowledged that drones could potentially enhance the security of Bundeswehr personnel (Grüne 2021, 253). Moreover, the coalition agreement lined out that the government agreed to procure a replacement fighter jet for the ageing Tornado aircrafts. As a 'dual-capable aircraft', the Tornado allows Germany to participate in NATO's nuclear sharing policy. The coalition agreement said that Germany would acquire a replacement, but it was left open whether this should be the US-made F-35A, as was later announced in Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech, or an alternative fighter aircraft. Given the financial implications of such a commitment, it was surprising that Scholz shortcut the deliberation on which fighter aircraft to procure. The agreement further acknowledged that the armed forces required 'more efficient and effective' structures and that these would be assessed together with an eye towards personnel, matériel, and financial aspects. What was missing, however, was a clear statement regarding NATO's 2006 agreement that member states would commit at least 2% of their GDP on defence spending (Regierungsvertrag 2024, 118). Despite recent increases, Germany had in 2021 still spent only about 1.4% of its GDP on defence (SIPRI. 2023).⁶ The fact that the agreement was written before the Russian aggression shows a cautious positioning vis-à-vis Russia. While the coalition demanded an 'immediate stop' to all [Russian] 'attempts at destabilising Ukraine', the

⁶ In 2024, the 2% goal was reached for the first time since its announcement.

violence in Eastern Ukraine, and the illegal annexation of Crimea, pointing to the Minsk agreement as the 'path towards a peaceful solution to the conflict', the parties referred to the relationship with Russia rather euphemistically as 'deep and diverse' (Regierungsvertrag 2024, 122). Moreover, the coalition agreement saw no mention of the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Because of its geopolitical implications and for environmental reasons, the Greens had been vocal critics of the pipeline, urging in their election manifesto for the project to be stopped (Grüne 2021, 24). However, such positions did not enter the coalition agreement and the SPD position that the pipeline was a 'purely economic enterprise'. as Scholz had repeatedly declared, prevailed for the time being (SZ 2021). Notably, the coalition treaty adopted the Greens' proposal to pursue a *feminist foreign policy* in order 'to strengthen the rights, resources, and representation of women and girls worldwide and to foster societal diversity' (Regierungsvertrag 2024, 114). Finally, the coalition agreement mentioned that the government would put forth a 'comprehensive' National Security Strategy within the first year of assuming office (ibid.).

Role contestation in the wake of the *Zeitenwende*

This section examines indicators of horizontal and vertical contestation of Germany's foreign policy role under the traffic light coalition (2021–2024). In line with the framework by Cantir and Kaarbo (2016b), I understand *horizontal role contestation* as disagreement between political elites over foreign policy role conceptions. This definition equally covers contestation (1) between government and opposition, (2) within a governing coalition, as well as (3) within the parties themselves. These dimensions are addressed in this order in the next section. This is followed by the analysis of *vertical role contestation*, which encompasses dynamics that happen between elites and the broader public, which can include attitudes as expressed in public opinion surveys, but also initiatives led by advocacy groups and members of civil society. This means that vertical role contestation can potentially involve a vast area of activities, a comprehensive analysis of which is elusive for the scope of this article. Instead, the article (1) addresses two 'open letter' initiatives that were launched in the context of debates surrounding weapons deliveries, (2) reviews studies on public attitudes towards the war, also with a differentiation by political affiliation, and (3) examines political contestation 'from below', namely the successful attempts by the BSW to challenge foreign policy through the regional level. I argue that in the German context, where foreign policy issues became highly politicised, vertical contestation entails challenges from the regional level of the *Länder* to the federal level, which resonates in spirit with the concept of 'vertical' contestation, though the framework by Cantir and Kaarbo (2016a) limits this concept to elite-public interactions.

During the first two years since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the German Bundestag saw 19 plenary debates and 30 motions that were related to the war.⁷ This included three motions with broad cross-party

⁷ The search was conducted with the parliamentary documentation system (<https://dip.bundestag.de>), searching for the keywords *Ukraine* and *Krieg* and limiting the results to parliamentary debates on foreign policy and international relations. The count does not include parliamentary question time and other verbal exchanges.

support from the government coalition of SPD, Greens, and FDP, as well as the CDU/CSU as the largest opposition faction.⁸ However, the CDU/CSU also submitted 17 motions on its own accord, none of which received a parliamentary majority. The far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), which an administrative court classified as harbouring ‘anti-constitutional endeavours’ (Verfassungsschutz 2024), submitted five motions, while the far-left *Die Linke* submitted three motions. None of these received a majority. In December 2023, the *Linke* lost its status as a parliamentary faction because 10 of its members left for the new group *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* (BSW), which was founded as a new political party in January 2024. Because of their small size, neither *Linke* nor BSW had the right to submit parliamentary motions during the observed timeframe.

Horizontal role contestation

On 27 February 2022, days after Russia’s invasion, the Bundestag convened for a special session. Describing Russia’s attack on Ukraine as a historical *Zeitenwende* (‘watershed’), Chancellor Scholz announced sweeping changes in German foreign policy, including weapons deliveries to Ukraine, considerable increases in defence spending (including a one-time surplus budget of €100 billion), the procurement of new military capabilities, the initiation of new European defence projects, and the strengthening of deployments on NATO’s eastern border (Bundestag 2022a, 1350–1355).

Scholz’s government address and subsequent statements indicated a conscious departure from Germany’s traditional role conception as a ‘civilian power’ (Maull 1990). While his speech tapped into familiar themes commonly associated with the role conception of a civilian power, such as the emphasis on multilateralism, international institutions, and the rules-based order, there was a notable turn towards hard security and deterrence thinking, for instance, when he underlined that Germany was ‘willing, together with its allies, to defend every square meter of NATO territory’ (Bundestag 2022a, 1352). Notably, Scholz ended long-standing foreign policy debates, including the question of whether armed drones should be procured, whether and how the country should continue to take part in NATO’s nuclear sharing, whether there could be exceptions to the principle that weapons should not be delivered into conflict zones, and discussions surrounding the right level of defence spending in light of NATO’s 2% goal (Blumenau 2022; Mello 2024).

Initially, the Bundestag showed unity in supporting the measures Scholz announced in his *Zeitenwende* speech but the opposition soon seized the opportunity to contest the government’s foreign policy course. The leader of the largest opposition faction, CDU/CSU, Friedrich Merz, expressly thanked Scholz for his address, highlighting that the conservatives would support the government on the points outlined (Bundestag 2022a, 1355). But Merz also argued that ‘German foreign and security policy is in shambles’ since the Russian war against Ukraine (Bundestag 2022a, 1357). He pointed out what he

⁸ Together, the governing SPD, Greens, FDP, and the opposition CDU/CSU held 611 out of 733 seats in the Bundestag (as of November 2024). Motions can be submitted by parliamentary factions (which require a size of at least 5 percent of the members of parliament).

saw as flaws of normative foreign policy conceptions—challenging the Greens’ feminist foreign policy—saying that ‘morality alone will not make the world around us peaceful’ (ibid.). He further highlighted the need for discussion of the planned ‘surplus budget’ of €100 billion, which was not a ‘budget’ but simply ‘new debts’ that required a constitutional amendment because of the debt brake in the German *Grundgesetz* (GG, Art. 109).⁹ Merz’s speech reflected traditional conservative beliefs regarding the use of force and military security, highlighting that ‘disarmament leads to less rather than more security’ (2022a, 1357)—a remarkable contrast to social democratic conceptions. Similarly, Alexander Dobrindt of the CSU underlined that the idea of ‘peace through trade and economic interdependence’ had not worked (a quip against ‘change through trade’, which had long animated SPD foreign policy). For him, this meant that the Bundeswehr must receive more funding and capabilities to ensure the country’s ‘defensive capability’, also through nuclear sharing within NATO (2022a, 1367).

Throughout the two years since the outbreak of the war, the CDU/CSU regularly submitted motions to prod the governing coalition towards course changes to increase the effectiveness of sanctions against Russian institutions and leaders, to establish a special tribunal to hold Russian leaders accountable, and to further assist Ukraine in its aspiration to become an EU member state, but especially in its military struggle against the Russian invasion. The question of allowing the delivery of heavy weaponry like howitzers, tanks, and cruise missiles into Ukraine became a particularly contentious point in many parliamentary debates. Before February 2022, there had been a tacit cross-party consensus in German politics that the country would not, at least in principle, deliver lethal weapons into conflict zones (exceptions notwithstanding). But this changed with the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the latter’s urgent requests for military assistance. The conservatives seized the opportunity and regularly pushed for more than what the Scholz government was willing to do. In June 2022, the debate surrounded the delivery of Gepard anti-aircraft tanks, where Defence Minister Lambrecht went to great lengths to justify why the Gepard was not categorised as a tank and could thus be delivered, whereas the Marder infantry fighting vehicle was considered to be a tank and could thus *not* be delivered because, according to Lambrecht, no other country had yet delivered Western-built tanks to Ukraine. Therefore, Germany ‘should not go it alone’ on this matter (*‘Es darf und wird auch in dieser Frage keine deutschen Alleingänge geben’*), referring to the ‘never alone’ dictum of German foreign policy, mentioned above (Bundestag 2022d, 4303). However, the German government did eventually decide to deliver both types of vehicles, albeit months later. Similar dynamics evolved around the question of delivering Leopard battle tanks and Taurus cruise missiles (Bundestag 2023a, 2023b), though the latter were explicitly ruled out by the Chancellor because of

⁹ In June 2022, a constitutional amendment was agreed upon and subsequently ratified in the second chamber, introducing a new clause into the *Grundgesetz* to allow for a one-time additional debt of €100 billion to strengthen alliance and defence capabilities (GG, Art. 87a). However, the purpose of this debt became the subject of intense political contestation between the SPD and Greens, on the one hand, and the opposition CDU/CSU, on the other hand. Eventually, the latter succeeded in circumscribing the purpose to furthering large-scale procurement projects and NATO capabilities.

their long range and the associated risk of escalation with Germany becoming a war party or being perceived as such by Russia. Scholz argued that Taurus missiles required the involvement of German soldiers, inside or outside of Ukraine, and this was a line that he 'as Chancellor did not want to cross' (Bundestag 2024b, 19981).

The opposition parties on the far ends of the political spectrum rejected the government's foreign policy course and particularly the delivery of weapons to Ukraine. The co-chair of the AfD, Alice Weidel, acknowledged that Russia's aggression against Ukraine violated international law but immediately pointed at what she regarded as 'false promises of the West' that had led to this situation. Moreover, according to Weidel, the 'historical failure of the West' had been 'denying Russia great power status' and thus 'offending Russia'. Weidel also accused the coalition government (and its predecessors) of engaging in 'ideological experiments', under which she subsumed the feminist foreign policy that Baerbock had recently announced, calling for 'geopolitical soberness' instead (Bundestag 2022a, 1360–1361). During one of the debates about Taurus cruise missiles, AfD co-chair Tino Chrupalla argued that delivering Taurus meant 'prolonging the war'. In that context, Chrupalla labelled members of the CDU, FDP, and Greens 'warmongers' who were trying to 'blackmail' Chancellor Scholz so that Germany would become a war party (Bundestag 2024c, 20089).

The *Linke* highlighted that it agreed with the coalition's assessment of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Co-chair Amira Mohamed Ali acknowledged that her party had wrongly estimated the Russian government's intentions regarding Ukraine and especially Putin's 'great power fantasies', which needed to be stopped. At the same time, she flat-out rejected weapons deliveries to Ukraine and also turned against the announced plans to increase defence spending, which amounted to sheer 'militarisation' of foreign policy that the *Linke* could not support (Bundestag 2022a, 1363–1364). Similar arguments were made at later points, for instance, when Zaklin Nastic pointed at increased weapons deliveries and the training of Ukrainian soldiers on German territory, which the *Linke* regarded as escalatory moves by the governing coalition that could eventually lead to nuclear war with Russia (Bundestag 2022c, 3183).¹⁰ To *Linke* co-chair Dietmar Bartsch, the government policy of providing increasingly more weapons rested on a flawed logic that was refuted by the conflict dynamics on the ground. According to Bartsch, it was simply not possible to attain a military victory against a nuclear power, and the government should realise this (Bundestag 2023a, 9417–9418).

Weapons deliveries also remained a contentious point *within* the governing coalition, where this conflict showed in disagreements between the SPD and the Greens. Like many among the Greens, Foreign Minister Baerbock had been an early (and vocal) advocate of supplying Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, but Chancellor Scholz had called her to order in the summer of 2022 and thus managed to stifle the debate for some time (Pausch and Stark 2023). For the Greens, though, the Russian aggression against Ukraine had changed the political landscape and with it also the appropriate role conception for German

¹⁰ Both Mohamed Ali and Nastic left the *Linke* in December 2023 to join the new BSW party.

foreign policy. This differentiated them from many in the SPD, where reluctance and a culture of restraint remained prevalent. In her speech three days after the invasion, Foreign Minister Baerbock highlighted her understanding, referring to the traditional principle of *restraint* in Germany's foreign policy and calling for what amounted to nothing less than a foreign policy role change:

Perhaps it is the case that today Germany is leaving behind a form of special and unique restraint in its foreign and security policy. The rules we have set ourselves for this must not absolve us of our responsibility. If our world is different, then our policy must also be different. (Bundestag 2022a, 1359, own translation)

Vielleicht ist es so, dass Deutschland am heutigen Tag eine Form besonderer und alleinstehender Zurückhaltung in der Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik hinter sich lässt. Die Regeln, die wir uns dafür gegeben haben, dürfen uns nicht aus unserer Verantwortung nehmen. Wenn unsere Welt eine andere ist, dann muss auch unsere Politik eine andere sein. (Bundestag 2022a, 1359)

Vice Chancellor Habeck explicitly addressed the ideational roots of the Greens, arguing that while he respects a position of 'unconditional pacifism'—especially in light of the historical atrocities committed by Germans in Ukraine, Russia, Poland, and Belarus, among others— he still regards such principled pacifism as wrong because not delivering weapons and not aiding Ukraine would not stop the violence but rather let the country be overrun by an aggressor and leave the population to its fate (Bundestag 2022a, 1369). Jürgen Trittin, former minister under the red-green coalition and self-described 'old leftist' of the Greens, referred to the times of the Vietnam War, when the political left had supported weapons deliveries by China and the Soviet Union to aid the Vietnamese in their struggle against the United States. In hindsight, Trittin argued that it had been right to provide these weapons and that they eventually helped to end the war, as they did in other conflicts (Bundestag 2022c, 3188).

As mentioned above, the Liberals had no ministry with foreign policy relevance and hence kept a low profile on debates about weapons deliveries, siding on major points with their coalition partners. The exception remained Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, who continuously used her position as chairperson of the defence committee to push Chancellor Scholz and the SPD towards a more assertive stance in supporting Ukraine, also in military terms. Strack-Zimmermann also pointed to the shortsighted policy during the Merkel governments, for instance, when the German government had ignored all warning signs after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Bundestag 2022b, 2733). Concerning weapons deliveries, and specifically the motion on providing Taurus cruise missiles, it was remarkable that Strack-Zimmermann sided with the opposition CDU/CSU and voted in favour of their motion, against her own party and government. Unlike, for instance, in the British House of Commons, such 'rebel' votes are rare in the Bundestag. For Strack-Zimmermann, it was a 'tragedy' that instead of simply deciding in favour of the delivery of this weapon, the Bundestag held 'never-ending discussions' while Russia was using this time to lay mines in occupied territory in Ukraine

(Bundestag 2024a, 19631). This was another clear indication of inter-coalition contestation.

Finally, horizontal role contestation also occurred *within* the coalition parties themselves. This was most pronounced within the SPD and to a much lesser extent inside the FDP, where Strack-Zimmermann's position was a notable outlier to the rest of her party. When Scholz gave the *Zeitenwende* speech at the outset of the war, it appeared that many within his own SPD, especially the left wing of the party, were surprised by the scope of the announced foreign policy changes. Nonetheless, the party leadership did not publicly question the course Scholz had set out. For instance, Saskia Esken, SPD co-chair, pointed out that although the foreign policy principle of never sending weapons into conflict zones was 'deeply tied to our historical responsibility', there was a 'tragic necessity' and 'moral requirement' of providing Ukraine with weapons for self-defence purposes (Bundestag 2022a, 1373). Two years into the war, critical voices were heard more often among the SPD. Ralf Stegner, a member of the foreign affairs committee, lamented that many were solely speaking about 'how best to fight a war' rather than how it could be ended, while also complaining that diplomatic initiatives were being ridiculed 'as pacifistic, as appeasement, or as Putin-friendliness' (Bundestag 2024a, 19608). A few weeks later, Rolf Mützenich, parliamentary chairman of the SPD and long-time foreign policy expert, strengthened this point, suggesting that it 'were about time' to think about how to 'freeze the war and later end it' (Bundestag 2024c, 20088). While these comments predictably raised the ire of the opposition and among many of the Greens and FDP, they conveyed drastically different conceptions on the use of force and on lessons from history. Yet, these statements seemed to resonate with an SPD party base that had felt alienated by the new foreign policy course that Scholz had steered the party into. The talk of 'ending the war' (irrespective of how realistic such a goal was) resonated with sizable segments of the public, as will be discussed below. Finally, the extent to which there was political contestation inside the SPD about the country's foreign policy role became apparent when Michael Roth, chairperson of the Bundestag's foreign affairs committee, was not re-elected into the SPD party executive in December 2023. Months later he announced that he would leave politics after his current term. Roth had been among the most vocal supporters of Ukraine and had vigorously argued for weapons deliveries to aid the country in its defence against Russia but he felt increasingly isolated within his own party, not least because of his firm support for Ukraine (Lehmann 2024).

Vertical role contestation

In April 2022, an open letter initiated by Alice Schwarzer, publisher of the feminist journal EMMA, sparked a public debate about the pros and cons of weapons deliveries. The letter was signed by 28 intellectuals, artists, and celebrities who warned of the danger of Germany becoming a war party through its delivery of heavy weaponry to Ukraine and the associated risk of escalating the conflict into a third world war. The signatories urged Chancellor Scholz to do whatever possible 'to reach a ceasefire and a compromise that both sides could accept'. According to the organisers, the letter had received about

500,000 signatures by February 2023. In the eyes of the signatories, there was an ‘unbearable disproportion’ between the justified resistance against an aggressor and the amount of destruction and human suffering among the Ukrainian population.¹¹ In the Bundestag, Zaklin Nastic of the *Linke*, later BSW, explicitly referred to this letter, urging the government to ‘take the justified concerns of the population seriously’ (Bundestag 2022c, 3183). Schwarzer followed up with a ‘manifesto for peace’ petition and a political rally that she co-organised with Sahra Wagenknecht, then still a member of the *Linke*.¹² The rally event at the Brandenburg Gate on 25 February 2023, one year into the war, attracted about 25,000 participants and ample media attention. The Schwarzer-Wagenknecht initiative drew a host of criticism because it treated aggressor and victim in the same way, did not spell out how negotiations were supposed to work reliably with Putin’s Russia, failed to distance itself from far-right sympathisers, and also because Wagenknecht had notoriously insisted that Russia would never think about attacking Ukraine (Carstens and Schuller 2024; Tagesschau 2023). In a television show a few days before the invasion she had complained about the ‘the aggressiveness with which an invasion is being talked up by the Americans’ and argued boldly that ‘Russia [...] has no interest in invading Ukraine’ (own translation).¹³

The Schwarzer-Wagenknecht initiative prompted another open letter on 4 May 2022, initiated by publicist and former Green parliamentarian Ralf Fücks and supported by numerous intellectuals, scientists, and artists who called upon Chancellor Scholz to provide Ukraine with all the weapons needed to resist the Russian invasion, denying Russia the financial means to continue the war, and to give Ukraine an EU perspective. At the time of writing, the petition had raised almost 100,000 signatures.¹⁴ The second letter clearly received less publicity than the ‘manifesto for peace’ initiative, though it was supported by numerous academics with regional expertise on Ukraine and Central and Eastern Europe. Together, the letters showed that weapons deliveries remained a highly contentious issue in German politics, much more so than in other European countries. These sentiments informed and affected the parliamentary debate in the Bundestag and the considerations of the governing coalition.

Analyses of public attitudes confirmed impressions from parliamentary debates and open letter initiatives. Based on a representative survey conducted in February 2023, Wetzels et al. (2023, 5) found that 26% of respondents were ‘greatly concerned’ that Russia could initiate an attack on Germany. The study also identified a direct relation between fear of war and support for weapons deliveries: respondents with high fear showed considerably less support for the delivery of weaponry (2023, 6). Not surprisingly, the study showed pronounced differences based on party-political affiliation: 48.2% of AfD voters

¹¹ The letter is available at: <https://www.emma.de/artikel/offener-brief-bundeskanzler-scholz-339463> (last accessed November 11, 2024).

¹² The petition can be accessed here: <https://www.change.org/p/manifest-f%C3%BCr-frieden> (last accessed November 11, 2024).

¹³ The original statement was: ‘Die Aggressivität mit der von amerikanischer Seite ein Einmarsch geradezu herbeigerechnet wird [...] Russland [...] hat faktisch keine Interesse in die Ukraine einzumarschieren’ See Anne Will, 20.02.2022, <https://daserste.ndr.de/annewill/>.

¹⁴ The petition can be accessed here: <https://www.change.org/p/die-sache-der-ukraine-ist-auch-unsere-sache> (last accessed November 11, 2024).

rejected all forms of weapons support, whereas 47.8% of the voters of the Linke favoured the delivery of 'defensive' weapons (17.2% were against any weapons deliveries). Among voters from the SPD, Greens, FDP, and CDU/CSU, responses were similar, though Green voters clearly had the highest share of respondents who favoured the delivery of a broad range of weapons (50.9%), including missiles and fighter jets, whereas this group hovered around 40% for respondents associated with the other parties (Wetzels et al. 2023, 5).

Mader and Schoen (2023) analysed survey data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) from before the Russian full-scale invasion (2017–2021) and afterwards (in May and October 2022) to examine whether there had been changes in public opinion. Their results showed, on the one hand, strengthened support for increases in military spending – a finding that held irrespective of political affiliation but was particularly pronounced for the three coalition parties and the CDU/CSU (Mader and Schoen 2023, 16). But Mader and Schoen also stated that because of the apparent stability of public attitudes despite Scholz's pronounced *Zeitenwende*, there was 'no mandate for a fundamental change in Germany's foreign and security policy orientation' (2023, 19). Their conclusions quite accurately foresaw how domestic politics seems to have replaced foreign policy considerations throughout the two years since the pronouncement of the foreign policy watershed:

[...] the electoral incentives from stability in public opinion make fundamental policy change a risky, even unreasonable strategy from a political point of view. Therefore, any pressure for change emanating from the international situation could soon be neutralized by domestic, electoral considerations. (Mader and Schoen 2023, 19)

Finally, scepticism towards the government's foreign policy among sizable shares of the public became tangible when regional elections were held in several East German *Länder* in September 2024, where the AfD turned out victorious in Thuringia and ended up in second place in Brandenburg and Saxony, while the BSW gained the third-most votes in all three states. The election results led to complicated coalition negotiations because all other parties had ruled out coalitions with the far-right AfD due to its anti-constitutional endeavours. It became apparent that majority coalitions required the involvement of the BSW, and Sahra Wagenknecht thus seized this opportunity to put pressure on the federal government and its military support for Ukraine and the planned deployment of US medium-range missiles on German soil. While both of these policy issues clearly fell outside the scope of regional politics, Wagenknecht successfully centred her electoral campaign on them, capitalising on public fears and frustrations. Remarkably, in what can only be interpreted as an anticipatory move, the regional leaders of the CDU and SPD, Michael Kretschmer (CDU), Mario Vogt (CDU), and Dietmar Woidke (SPD), soon published a guest contribution to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, where they abandoned their party positions and went a long way towards Wagenknecht, arguing for 'a cease-fire and negotiations' between Ukraine and Russia, where Germany should adopt a foreign policy role as 'mediator'. The guest contribution further included a critical comment on the deployment of US missiles, arguing for broader debate and explanation and emphasising the importance of diplomacy (Kretschmer, Voigt, and Woidke 2024). A few weeks later, the

Brandenburg SPD issued a joint statement with the BSW that ‘weapons deliveries will not end the war in Ukraine’ and that the missile deployments were ‘seen critically’ by the parties involved (RBB 2024). These initiatives paved the way for governing coalitions with BSW involvement in Brandenburg and Thuringia, while the CDU could not reach an agreement with the BSW in Saxony and instead formed a minority government with the SPD. The Brandenburg coalition agreement repeated the positions from the SPD/BSW joint statement. In Thuringia, the preamble to the coalition agreement included language that indicated that the parties held different views regarding weapons deliveries to Ukraine while emphasising a common desire for a ‘diplomatic solution’; however, it did not specify how this could be achieved (Regierungsvertrag 2024, 6).

These developments underscore the BSW’s significant and successful use of vertical contestation to reshape the political landscape and influence the SPD and CDU’s foreign policy stances. By leveraging public discontent over Germany’s military support for Ukraine and the proposed missile deployments, the BSW not only advanced its own agenda but also compelled established parties to adopt more cautious and critical positions on these issues. This dynamic has had a tangible impact on conceptions of Germany’s foreign policy identity, highlighting the BSW’s growing role in influencing the national debate and redefining the boundaries of permissible foreign policy discourse, also in light of the February 2025 general elections.

Conclusions

German foreign policy has undergone significant change since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Established truisms such as never to send weapons into conflict zones, to follow a culture of restraint and an antimilitarist orientation, and to foster understanding through economic cooperation were rapidly called into question in the context of the Russian aggression against neighbouring Ukraine. The *Zeitenwende* (‘watershed’) that Chancellor Scholz had announced just days after the Russian invasion became synonymous with foreign policy reorientation in Germany. Observers detected ‘a clear break with convention’ (Blumenau 2022, 1913), a ‘far-reaching overhaul of German foreign policy beliefs’ (Bunde 2022, 2), and ‘an *international orientation change* in German foreign policy’ (Mello 2024, 11, original emphasis). To be sure, it was also pointed out that many pronounced changes had not materialised or had been watered down (Matlé 2023). Moreover, bureaucratic routines and administrative procedures had not been adapted to the urgency of the situation, causing delay and obstruction (Masala 2023).

Contributing to the broader aims of this special issue on party contestation of foreign policy in the new global (dis)order (Chryssogelos and Greene 2024), this article asked *how political parties contested Germany’s foreign policy role in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine*. In contrast to perspectives that maintain a unitary actor assumption in foreign policy, the article unpacked domestic politics to show evidence of *horizontal* and *vertical role contestation* (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b). The former took place primarily between, on the one hand, the governing coalition of SPD, Greens, and FDP, and on the other hand, the largest opposition faction, the CDU/CSU, which continuously prodded the

Chancellor in his Ukraine policy. On the far ends of the political spectrum, the AfD and the *Linke*, later joined by the *Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht* (BSW), respectively challenged the country's foreign policy orientation, rejecting military support for Ukraine, criticising increased defence spending (*Linke*) and objecting to the new feminist foreign policy (a point on which AfD and BSW agreed). But the article also showed substantial role contestation among the governing parties themselves, especially between the Chancellor's rather reluctant SPD and the more assertive Greens, who demanded the delivery of heavy weaponry such as Leopard battle tanks and Taurus cruise missiles. The second dimension, vertical role contestation, was assessed by examining two open letter initiatives that served to highlight the dimensions of a debate that evolved around the delivery of 'heavy weapons' such as battle tanks and cruise missiles. Moreover, the BSW used its position as a potential coalition partner in Brandenburg, Thuringia, and Saxony to demand foreign policy concessions from the SPD and CDU, which indirectly also put pressure on the federal level and thus challenged the government's adopted foreign policy role. This article argued that the BSW tactic of going through regional institutions to place pressure on the federal level should be understood as a novel form of *vertical role contestation* that goes beyond the framework developed by Cantir and Kaarbo (2016a). In principle, such role challenges are conceivable also outside the German context, in other federal systems. Taken together, the article identified *substantial contestation of Germany's foreign policy role* below the surface of an apparent cross-party foreign policy consensus. The assessment of party politics helps explain why the *Zeitenwende* was not implemented as swiftly and broadly as some observers expected (or had hoped for), and it laid bare core points of contention in German politics, which are bound to reverberate in future debates on the country's foreign policy role.

The chosen approach is not without limitations. One point is the attribution of role conceptions on the basis of parliamentary speeches and party-political documents that are typically engaged with day-to-day politics and specific policy proposals, rather than abstract foreign policy role conceptions. This is a valid concern (see Gaskarth 2016; Kaarbo and Cantir 2016). Arguably, the analysis of many successive parliamentary debates on the Russian war against Ukraine enabled the identification of common themes and lines of argumentation, which can also help to reveal the preferred foreign policy role of the respective speaker and parliamentary group. This is also why the article complemented the parliamentary sources with an analysis of the parties' election manifestos and the coalition agreement. These documents are written to stand above daily politics and to formulate a party's larger ideas and long-term aspirations. A second limitation originates from the scope of the material and the documentation of the results. Even though the time period of study involved only two years (2022–2024), the number of motions and individual parliamentary speeches exceeds several hundred observations. This means that the discussion in the article had to be selective and thus incomplete. Nonetheless, an effort was made to cover repeated lines of argumentation and to document the structure of the debates.

It remains to be seen how discussions on the use of force and supporting Ukraine will continue. Coinciding with the re-election of Donald Trump in the United States, the German traffic light coalition came to an end on 6 November 2024, when Chancellor Scholz decided to oust Finance Minister

Lindner due to repeated disagreements about the federal budget and the sanctity of the constitutional 'debt brake', also in light of providing Ukraine with financial and military support. As discussed above, the results from public opinion polls (Mader and Schoen 2023; Wetzels et al. 2023) suggest that electoral considerations may pose an obstacle to further policy change, and the perception of a war-averse public may lead to a reorientation backwards, towards the established civilian power role that Germany is accustomed to.

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