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**The SPD Peace Manifesto: A New Ostpolitik or an Intra-Party  
Debate within Germany's Social Democrats?**

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**Abstract.** *In June 2025, a group of prominent members of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) published a manifesto calling for fundamental rethinking of Europe's future security architecture. The document refers to the legacy of previous decades, particularly Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik, as a potential point of reference. This paper analyzes the manifesto's content, its reception by German political and expert communities, and the potential responses from both executive and legislative branches of German government, as well as the country's key international partners.*

**Keywords:** *Germany, Federal Republic of Germany, European Union, Russia, Ostpolitik, European security, SPD, Willy Brandt.*

**Introduction**

On June 10, 2025, major German media reported that a group of prominent Social Democratic Party (SPD) members – part of the so-called *Friedenskreise der SPD* (“SPD Peace Circles”)¹ –

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¹ The “SPD-Friedenskreise” (“SPD Peace Circles”), internal consultative platform within SPD, meets regularly to discuss issues related to peace and foreign policy. It consists of various working groups, networks and associations (Erhard-Eppler-Kreis, Willy-Brandt-Kreis, Johannes-Rau-Gesellschaft, SPD 60 plus, Mehr Diplomatie wagen, Demokratische Linke 21, Entspannungspolitik Jetzt!, Naturfreunde, and AK Frieden Bremen und Köln). Not a formal decision-making body, the Peace Circles serve as a discursive corrective within the party and play an active role in shaping alternative foreign policy perspectives, especially those inspired by Ostpolitik and détente diplomacy.

prepared a manifesto titled “Securing Peace in Europe through Defensive Capability, Arms Control and Mutual Understanding” (*Friedenssicherung in Europa durch Verteidigungsfähigkeit, Rüstungskontrolle und Verständigung*<sup>2</sup>). Published on June 11, the six-page document marked an attempt to relaunch not only an intra-party debate but also a broader public-political discussion in the Federal Republic of Germany about the future of Europe’s security architecture.

The manifesto was signed by over a hundred of party members, including sitting Bundestag deputies, former ministers and state parliament members, and figures from the expert community – particularly affiliated with Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The composition of signatories reflects the institutional and moral continuity of *SPD*’s left-wing pacifist tradition, including senior functionaries from Schröder and Merkel government eras.

The document appeared in the lead-up to July 2025 NATO summit, amid expectations of Germany increasing its defense spending, and just ahead of *SPD* party congress, set to elect new leadership and initiate discussions on a revised party platform. In this context, the manifesto represents not only an internal challenge but also a symbolic counterpoint to the government’s increasingly hardline foreign policy. In the coalition agreement of April 9, 2025, the policy statement by Chancellor Friedrich Merz on May 14, and public statements by leading government figures – Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul, Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, Head of Federal Chancellery Thorsten Frei – a clear course was laid out for a more rigid stance toward Russia and deepening of Germany’s transatlantic military partnerships. The robust anti-Russian consensus has also been widely promoted in major German media, creating a public discourse in which the manifesto stands out as a discordant voice.

The political climate in Germany was tense at the time of publication. In early June NATO signaled to Minister Pistorius that Germany’s to increase Bundeswehr’s personnel by 60000, enhance mobilization capabilities, and reaffirm its alliance commitments through 2029. The demands were accompanied by intensified federal rhetoric on defense and heated debates over the role of universities, tech sector, and civil society amid a new wave of militarization<sup>3</sup>.

The manifesto’s authors intentionally linked their initiative to key anniversaries in German and European history: the 55th anniversaries of Moscow (August 12, 1970) and Warsaw (December 7, 1970) treaties, 50th anniversary of Helsinki Final Act of CSCE (August 1, 1975). These references underline the authors’ attempt to anchor their proposal in the tradition of détente, arms control, and construction of a pan-European security order based on the principle of indivisibility.

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<sup>2</sup> Manifest. *Friedenssicherung in Europa durch Verteidigungsfähigkeit, Rüstungskontrolle und Verständigung*. SPD-Friedenskreise. URL: [https://augengeradeaus.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250611\\_Manifest\\_SPD-Friedenskreise\\_Friedenssicherung\\_in\\_Europa.pdf](https://augengeradeaus.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250611_Manifest_SPD-Friedenskreise_Friedenssicherung_in_Europa.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> In June 2025, a “Security Hackathon” (*Sicherheitshackathon*) took place in Munich, supported by German Ministry of Defense, NATO and defense sector companies. The event drew sharp criticism from parts of academic community, trade unions, and left-leaning student associations, who viewed it as an attempt to militarize civilian science and legitimize the arms industry through public relations in university settings. The criticism was focused on violation of so-called *Zivilklausel* (civil clause), a principle enshrined in the statutes of many German universities, mandating the exclusive use of research for peaceful and civilian purposes. Introduced in response to militarization of science in the 20th century, the clause symbolizes academic commitment to pacifist, humanistic values. Participation of universities in military-related activities, such as hackathons, is seen as a breach of ethical and legal norms of university autonomy.

## Key Provisions of the Manifesto and Its Political Framework

The manifesto opens with a formulation of its principal framework – both geopolitical and rooted in historical values. The authors refer to upcoming 80th anniversary of the Second World War and liberation from Nazism as the foundational point of world order, emphasizing its newly intensified vulnerability. Notably, the document avoids the conventional official rhetoric focused on “aggression” and “annexation”: the phrase “the Russian war against Ukraine” (*der russische Krieg gegen die Ukraine*) is presented without commonly adopted Western negative evaluative qualifiers, in a diplomatically cautious formulation open to interpretation<sup>4</sup>. This choice of language stands out against the backdrop of harsh media and governmental rhetoric. The authors demonstrate their intention to move beyond the binary logic of propaganda and antagonism.

Equally revealing is the inclusion of not only commemorative dates, but also personal figures of political orientation: John F. Kennedy, Willy Brandt, Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev. They are invoked as exemplars of responsible leadership capable of transforming global conflicts into negotiation processes – from Cuban Missile Crisis to arms limitation treaties. By this the manifesto constructs a counterpoint to today’s confrontational strategies and builds a bridge toward the doctrine of common security (*gemeinsame Sicherheit*). The authors present it as the only rational alternative to mutual escalation. Thus, the opening section of manifesto sets the tone for discussing war and peace not through a logic of force, but humanitarian and historical perspective. It abstains from accusatory rhetoric and proposes political and value-based code for a renewed dialogue.

The authors articulate their approach within the logic of moderate pacifism, combining strategic responsibility with commitment to dialogue and arms control. They emphasize that preservation of peace requires not only strength but also political will for negotiations, disarmament initiatives, and restoration of diplomatic channels. Recognizing the importance of military capability amid rising threats to European security, the manifesto opposes an automatic path toward militarization – that is, the reflexive buildup of arms in response to each perceived escalation of threat.

Special focus is on the idea of strengthening Europe’s responsibility for its own security. “Strategic autonomy” is not mentioned explicitly, but the authors underscore the need to develop independent defense and diplomatic capacities – without renouncing transatlantic commitments. Cautious, yet deliberate, alternative is proposed to the current course of building military capabilities under NATO’s umbrella. The authors stress that a reliable security architecture is only possible through adherence to international law and revitalization of existing institutions – above all, OSCE as a multilateral forum for dialogue, including crisis management and confidence-building regimes.

The idea of restoring dialogue with “other parts of Europe” is supported, with Russia mentioned indirectly. This wording allows for multiple interpretations: a politically cautious gesture or an

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<sup>4</sup> Memorandum on Peace and Security contains an additional reference that can be interpreted as critical of Russia. It uses the term *völkerrechtswidriger Angriff* (“attack in violation of international law”) when referring to the crisis in Ukraine. Although the overall language of the document is markedly moderate and deliberately avoids the accusatory tone typical of official rhetoric, this particular phrasing signals a legal and normative disapproval of Russia’s actions. The authors thus seek to maintain a balance between diplomatic nuance and adherence to international law.

attempt to avoid explicit recognition of the need to include Russia in the future European security framework. Nevertheless, it reintroduces the necessity of multilateral negotiation into the public discourse – based on acknowledgment of legitimate interests of all actors in the European space.

The key manifesto's component is a set of practical recommendations, reflecting the authors' ambition to reframe European security policy on the principles of diplomacy, deterrence, and strategic responsibility. The document underscores the urgent need to end hostilities in Ukraine while simultaneously safeguarding its legal rights and interests. It calls for restoration of dialogue channels with Russia and rejection of escalatory decisions, including the deployment of U.S. intermediate-range missiles in Europe. The authors raise the issue of budgetary reorientation in favor of combating poverty and climate change, while critically assessing the idea of fixing defense spending as percentage of GDP. Another emphasis is a call for nuclear disarmament and revival of arms control efforts ahead of 2026 NPT Review Conference. Particular attention is paid to the interests of Global South and prevention of the EU's military entanglement in conflicts in the Asia-Pacific region. The complete list of proposals is presented in the concluding section<sup>5</sup>.

The manifesto does not call for complete rejection of the Western security and military paradigm. Rather, in spirit of *Ostpolitik* continuity, it advocates a strategy of balance – based on diplomacy, international law, arms control. The authors support deliberate and responsible deterrence, paired with de-escalation, as opposed to its substitution by military mobilization, which is increasingly treated by German political establishment as the sole legitimate instrument of policy.

### **Political Context and Intraparty Response**

The manifesto sparked considerable resonance within German political landscape, primarily due to the composition of its signatories and political-semantic direction of the text. It was initiated by representatives of the left wing of *SPD*, among them Bundestag deputies Rolf Mützenich (former parliamentary group leader) and foreign policy expert Ralf Stegner, former party co-chair Norbert Walter-Borjans, former State Secretary Gernot Erler, honorary president of the Club of Rome Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, and others. Over 100 individuals endorsed the document: party apparatus members, representatives of regional branches, veterans of Social Democratic movement, researchers affiliated with *SPD*-aligned institutions, including Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Incumbent federal ministers and official party bodies did not participate in the initiative.

The party leaders – represented by co-chair Lars Klingbeil and parliamentary group chairman Matthias Miersch – publicly distanced from the manifesto, characterizing it as “the position of specific circles”. Defense Minister Boris Pistorius spoke out against it. The manifesto does not have any binding force within the party, but it triggered intense debate about the *SPD*'s foreign policy identity, particularly in preparations for the party's upcoming congress. Notably cautious was the position of co-chair Saskia Esken, who emphasized the importance of arms control without endorsing the document. Some *SPD* parliamentarians took a critical stance; others avoided direct

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<sup>5</sup> Manifest. Friedenssicherung in Europa... Op. Cit.

commentary, reflecting a continued internal tension between proponents of *Zeitenwende* course and those advocating a reinterpretation of *Ostpolitik* under new conditions.

The reaction from opposition parties and *SPD*'s coalition partners was predominantly negative, accompanied by sharp rhetoric. Representatives of *CDU/CSU* – led by Chancellor Friedrich Merz, Johann Wadephul, and Thorsten Frei – accused the manifesto's authors of attempting to revise the *Zeitenwende* doctrine and questioned the political appropriateness of the document. MP Roderich Kiesewetter challenged the signatories' ability to "draw lessons from Russian aggression" and interpreted the manifesto as a retreat from the line of solidarity with Ukraine.

Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, Member of the European Parliament from the Free Democratic Party (*FDP*), criticized the manifesto as idealistic and disconnected from the realities of Russia's aggressive foreign policy. Representatives of Alliance 90/The Greens also responded in a cautiously critical tone, emphasizing that, in their view, the document fails to provide a clear answer to the challenges facing European security and lacks concrete alternatives.

The reaction from left-wing forces was more fragmented. Within *Die Linke* (The Left), the manifesto was met with both words of support – for its attempt to revive diplomacy – and reproaches over its lack of specificity. The party leadership sought to distance itself from any perception of the manifesto as a competing course but acknowledged its relevance for internal party debate. The Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance expressed readiness to cooperate with the signatories, viewing the manifesto as evidence of fractures within the governing coalition.

Alternative for Germany (*AfD*) welcomed the document as an echo of positions it had advocated since the outset of the conflict. According to *AfD* representatives, the manifesto reflected a "sober perspective" on the situation – contrasting with the government's excessive emphasis on militarization and its abandonment of diplomatic efforts.

The reaction to the manifesto revealed not only the depth of internal divisions within *SPD*, but also the broader discursive polarization of German politics. Each political camp interpreted it primarily through the lens of its own fears rather than as an opportunity for strategic balance.

Numerous leading German media echoed concerns about the manifesto's "propaganda utility for Moscow," suggesting it could be interpreted as a "gift to the Kremlin" or as undermining Western unity on issues of security and support for Kyiv. Overall, journalists assessed the document as a challenge to the prevailing political narrative.

## **Perspectives and Significance of the Manifesto**

Despite its limited institutional influence, the publication of the manifesto was a significant intellectual and political event. The document affirmed the existence of an alternative line of thinking in the ruling coalition – inherited from *Ostpolitik* and tradition of détente, adapted to the contemporary configuration of threats. The authors emphasize the need for a combination of military capability and diplomatic dialogue, signaling that the rational language of diplomacy and strategic balance has not vanished from Germany's political culture.

Domestically, the manifesto may serve as a starting point for renewed discussion on the future architecture of European security. Expert community already perceives it as a discursive alternative to *Zeitenwende* concept. Its potential “audiences” in Europe include political and analytical circles in Austria, Hungary, and Slovakia, and certain members of the academic and civil society communities in Benelux countries, where remains a limited but persistent interest in less militarized scenarios for development of the EU and NATO.

The manifesto’s potential perception in the capitals of Germany’s key EU and NATO partners warrants particular attention. In Paris – where military support for Ukraine is coupled with a cautious stance on European strategic autonomy – the document may be seen as a signal of an alternative course in one of Germany’s leading parties, but not as a direct threat to Atlantic solidarity. However, due to the lack of coordination at the Élysée level, the manifesto is likely to be viewed as an internal party episode rather than a signal of any imminent foreign policy shift.

In London, the reaction is likely to be more cautious: any suggestion of a “resurrection of Ostpolitik” could be interpreted as a sign of potential softness in Berlin’s posture toward Moscow. In British expert community, the document may be noted as an interesting symptom of political pluralism in Germany – but nothing more.

In Poland, by contrast, the response will be predominantly negative. Warsaw traditionally views any attempt to restore dialogue with Moscow as a threat to regional stability and transatlantic unity. Even diplomatically calibrated formulations in the document may be interpreted as a signal of “Ukraine fatigue” and indication of a possible drift of the German establishment toward a policy of appeasement. This is especially relevant in the context of Poland’s sensitivity to historical narratives and the issue of trust in Germany as a strategic defense partner.

The states of Baltic-Scandinavian macro-region, due to their rigid stance on foreign and defense policy and heavily promoted Russian threat, will push the discourses found in the manifesto to the periphery. Nevertheless, this reactive political environment may, in the event of a shift in public sentiment, eventually take renewed interest in the currently archived voices of moderation.

Internationally, the manifesto is unlikely to be interpreted in the US or NATO as an institutional signal. Rather, it will be seen as an expression of Germany’s domestic political heterogeneity. At the same time, it reflects the existence of a discursive space for debate – an important factor given the dominant trend towards bloc loyalty and suppression of inter-coalitional critique.

For Russia, the document is of principle interest as an expression of alternative rationality in the milieu of German Social Democracy. It does not signify a change in Germany’s foreign policy, but confirms that the key party of ruling coalition may be open to reassessing the strategy of confrontation. These views should not be understood as a declaration of reversal, but rather as a signal of structural and value-based heterogeneity in German politics – an aspect worth taking into account in the long-term strategic outlook.

## Conclusion

The manifesto, initiated by a group of Social Democrats, is an attempt of rational correction of the prevailing logic of confrontation. It does not reject the military-political dimension of security but insists on its inseparable connection with arms control measures, diplomatic efforts, and restoration of a common European security architecture. In this sense, the manifesto constitutes an intellectual act of resistance to Berlin's clearly defined policy of militarized automatism.

Its institutional weight remains limited: the lack of support from party and government leadership, criticism from most coalition partners, testify to the boundaries of its immediate influence. At the same time, the mere publication of such a document preserves a space for debate and points back to the legacy of *Ostpolitik* as a potential source of renewal.

The symbolic and discursive significance of the manifesto may increase, if calls for a strategic reassessment of the current security configuration grow louder. In this context, close monitoring of intra-party dynamics within *SPD*, media reactions, and expert assessments in Germany and abroad may provide important cues for foreign policy forecasting. This is particularly relevant for Russia as a country interested in reducing the risks of confrontation on the European front and in establishing channels for political analysis amid a protracted crisis.

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