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## ABSTRACT

While Germany's response to the Russo-Ukrainian war continues to be intensely scrutinised, with much attention focusing on the *Zeitenwende* debate and Berlin's reluctance to pull its weight in NATO, we know little about how Germany anticipated the outbreak of war. The picture that has emerged is one of significant surprise among German policymakers when Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Germany's foreign intelligence service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*, BND) has been criticised for failing to issue strong warnings, whereas BND officials have argued that their warnings went unheeded. This article contributes to discussions of what intelligence producers and policymakers could have been expected to know by exploring how selected external experts in Germany warned about a Russian attack on Ukraine. By reconstructing open expert assessments of the emerging crisis between 1 November 2021 and 23 February 2022, this article finds that researchers in German think tanks and academia provided a steady flow of timely, accurate and convincing warnings. The findings suggest that external experts are especially well positioned to uncover structural vulnerabilities that threatening actors can exploit, discuss politically inconvenient trends, and offer actionable warnings. This adds to discussions of how external expertise can support intelligence production and crisis decision-making.

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## 1. Introduction

Taking up the reins of government on 8 December 2021, Germany's first ever three-party coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals was confronted with warnings about large-scale renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine, which constituted the biggest threat to European security in decades.<sup>1</sup> This occurred at a time when policymakers, bureaucrats and expert observers were still coming to terms with another foreign policy shock that the previous government (Chancellor Angela Merkel's fourth and final Cabinet) had faced on its way out: the rapid fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021. While Germany's botched Afghanistan evacuation and the lack of preparedness have been relatively well documented<sup>2</sup> and led to a parliamentary inquiry which recently published an interim report,<sup>3</sup> we know less about how Berlin anticipated and prepared for a Russian attack on Ukraine that eventually materialised on 24 February 2022. This article contributes to discussions of what German policymakers could have been expected to know and prepare for by exploring how selected external experts, who were commenting on the evolving crisis in public debates in Germany, warned about a Russian attack on Ukraine during those crucial weeks preceding the invasion. In addition to unpacking which aspects they warned about when considering this contingency, I evaluate how timely, accurately and convincingly they warned about future harm. To

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investigate this, I systematically analyse outputs on Russia and/or Ukraine by selected external experts between 1 November 2021 and 23 February 2022. To better understand the context in which these experts assessed mounting tensions and provided knowledge claims, I also draw on interviews with external experts and policymakers.

Germany's actual responses to the escalation of tensions have been closely scrutinised. At the time, there had been a fair share of commentary (including sharp criticism) in the news media about the delivery of helmets in lieu of weapons as well as Berlin's late halting of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany. In this context, expert observers described Germany in late January 2022 as 'Putin's Trojan Horse in NATO'.<sup>4</sup> We also know that communication prior to Russia's full-scale war was not Berlin's strong suit, and there is little doubt that this contributed to a collective deterrence failure by NATO and the EU.<sup>5</sup> Chancellor Olaf Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech three days after the invasion and subsequent developments in German foreign and security policy have been much analysed, too. In addition to investigating the rhetoric and action side of *Zeitenwende*,<sup>6</sup> scholars have started identifying more general lessons that can be learned from Germany's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> Seasoned journalists covering eastern Europe or German politics have also offered detailed accounts of Berlin's crisis decision-making and policy towards Russia and Ukraine prior to the invasion.<sup>8</sup>

The picture that has emerged is one of significant surprise among policymakers about Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference five days earlier, Chancellor Scholz argued: 'If we take him [Putin] at his word, we have no reason to look optimistically to the future; I refuse doing that'.<sup>9</sup> While this was a high-level message expressing hope that a diplomatic solution could still be found, Berlin's messaging suggested overall that a Russian invasion would not happen and that this contingency had not been given sufficient consideration. The degree and spread of surprise among Germany's political elite can be exemplified by finance minister Christian Lindner's reaction on 24 February 2022 that 'Putin has exposed himself as a liar',<sup>10</sup> or Bavarian state premier Markus Söder's comment that 'Putin has deceived and lied to everyone'.<sup>11</sup> Foreign policy bureaucrats in Berlin also experienced surprise and have mentioned that the shock was much bigger than when Kabul fell: while they saw the latter event coming, they believed that the high costs would prevent Moscow from openly invading Ukraine (interviews 3, 4, 5, 10).

It is beyond the scope of this article to uncover the full extent of government-level surprise and the reasons for it, as well as where in the intelligence-policy interface mistakes might have been made, and whether and how this affected Berlin's preparedness for the outbreak of war in February 2022. Yet, the following aspects need mentioning to contextualise my research; they inform the rationale of this article and can guide future research. Firstly, much of the evidence that has emerged points to limited receptivity among German policymakers to warnings about a large-scale Russian attack on Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> According to those external experts who were interviewed for this study and who were at times consulted by policymakers, there was little governmental interest in discussing such a scenario (interviews 1, 8, 9). Some intelligence consumers have reflected with hindsight that they had not been sufficiently receptive to early warnings coming from eastern Europe (interviews 3, 5) or were taking disclosed Anglo-American intelligence assessments with a pinch of salt due to not knowing the sources (interview 4). Secondly, questions remain as to the timeliness and convincingness of warnings by Germany's foreign intelligence service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*, BND). BND chief Bruno Kahl stated in retrospect that his service was confident in its assessment that Russia would launch a large-scale invasion of Ukraine a fortnight before it happened.<sup>13</sup> In addition to warning the government, the BND briefed the *Bundestag's* defence committee on 16 February that Russia was militarily ready to attack Ukraine anytime, but that the order to do so had not yet been given.<sup>14</sup> As such, the BND warned later than other Western intelligence services about changes in Russia's capability and seemed less confident about Putin's intention, making it harder for them to warn persuasively that the risk would materialise. Overall, as a team of *Spiegel* journalists put it on 18 February when evaluating the likelihood of an escalation, the mood was that 'while the Americans and Brits engage in massive scaremongering, the Germans

and the French are seeking concrete solutions'.<sup>15</sup> BND chief Kahl argued that he was supporting such efforts with urgent talks for which he arrived in Kyiv in the evening of 23 February. At that point, the German embassy had not yet been closed down – the ambassador and her team were called home late on 23 February.<sup>16</sup> The next day, Kahl reportedly helped to close things up at the embassy before fleeing in a 40-hour drive, prompting speculations that he himself had been caught off guard about the timing of Russia's invasion.<sup>17</sup> In a parliamentary hearing in October 2022, Kahl spoke of a 'rupture' about which the BND had 'warned for years': they had assessed Putin's intention correctly by reporting 'that Putin will, like previously in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, Crimea and in Donbas, continue to use military force to achieve his political goals'.<sup>18</sup> It remained unclear in the hearing whether these were mostly strategic warnings about future risk or whether warnings included predictions of when and where exactly such a risk could materialise. Kahl concluded that while the BND knew what was coming, their warnings had 'been brushed off as fearmongering and pomposity' as the 'public discourse has been ignoring real threats for the past decades'.<sup>19</sup> Months later, Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck criticised the BND for providing late warnings and false early estimates about Moscow's intentions,<sup>20</sup> but the accusations have not been publicly echoed by other government members. It therefore remains to be evaluated whether the BND failed to collect available intelligence or whether this was mishandled later in the assessment process, or whether decision-makers ignored well-evidenced estimative intelligence, including tactical warnings.

A key point to include when assessing whether Berlin lacked knowledge of the probability of a Russian attack on Ukraine is an investigation of how external experts in Germany warned about this. An answer to the research question, as developed in this article, can inform follow-up questions, such as: if external experts offered credible warnings, did policymakers miss them? If relevant warnings were missed, what can experts do differently to better get through to policymakers? And (why) should policymakers be expected to listen to external experts when facing crises?

Some scholarly claims have emerged related to expert warnings about a Russian war on Ukraine in the winter of 2021–22. For instance, it has been suggested, but without drawing on evidence, that warnings by German-based/speaking researchers with Russia/eastern Europe expertise were ignored by Berlin.<sup>21</sup> Further, it has been argued that many, if not most, think tank analysts and academics failed to anticipate a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, but the empirical discussion focused on selected English-language outputs and not on the German context.<sup>22</sup> This article contributes to these debates and the literature on the role of external experts in crisis anticipation and response. [Section 2](#) discusses how external experts can inform crisis decision-making and what can be realistically expected of them when evaluating their performance as (conscious or unconscious) producers of warnings. [Section 3](#) explains how the data has been collected and analysed. [Section 4](#) reconstructs warnings produced by selected think tanks analysts and academics during the period under study. [Section 5](#) evaluates the timeliness, accuracy and convincingness of those warnings while considering context-specific factors that might have affected whether and how experts warned. The concluding section discusses the value that expert warnings can add to both intelligence practice and decision-making.

## **2. Warning in support of crisis response: what role for external experts and how to evaluate their performance?**

Scholars have been emphasising how external experts can contribute to anticipatory foreign policy and have suggested that there is significant scope for improving their engagement within the intelligence-policy nexus.<sup>23</sup> This includes discussions of how the academic-practitioner divide in intelligence can be bridged,<sup>24</sup> how external experts have warned about war,<sup>25</sup> and how knowledge claims by NGOs have influenced media coverage of conflict and foreign policies.<sup>26</sup> Scholars have also explored how the news media have been connecting political leaders and domestic audiences in foreign policy discourses and how this has affected the 'audience costs' that constituents may impose on leaders for failed policies.<sup>27</sup> Since the COVID-19 pandemic, increased attention has

been paid to how research can inform policy debates and improve crisis decision-making.<sup>28</sup> Looking at the role of external experts in the prevention of violent conflict, scholars have highlighted the need for more anticipatory analysis to inform coherent and effective foreign policymaking.<sup>29</sup> Others have called for more reflexivity in the collection and analysis of conflict data and better interactions between researchers and practitioners.<sup>30</sup> More light has been shed on the value of armed conflict databases and other forms of conflict monitoring and analysis by think tanks – e.g., the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute or the International Institute for Strategic Studies – for early warning in selected European countries (e.g., Germany and the Netherlands).<sup>31</sup> A recent think tank report reviewed various conflict early warning systems (CEWS) by NGOs and research institutes in addition to those used by governments,<sup>32</sup> and it has been argued that CEWS now have ‘a hinterland in intelligence practices’.<sup>33</sup> Overall, it is assumed that external expertise is increasingly complementing traditional intelligence.<sup>34</sup> Looking at how International Relations scholars seek to forecast developments and influence policy, the verdict has been more damning: it has been argued that while an increasing number of scholars offer predictions, they consistently avoid doing so about concrete situations.<sup>35</sup> Others have argued that scholarly methods, such as process tracing, can improve intelligence estimates and foreign policymaking.<sup>36</sup>

External experts do not perform an official warning function in support of decision-making as intelligence producers do. But they often use sound analytical processes to assess threats and risks, which allows them to warn about likely harmful developments and the consequences.<sup>37</sup> Various groups fall under non-governmental experts, such as analysts in think tanks and NGOs, academics, professional journalists, as well as citizen journalists and freelance experts who produce knowledge via blog posts, databases etc.<sup>38</sup> As Robert Dover suggests, we can define external experts in the intelligence (and foreign policy) setting as individuals who have relevant subject knowledge, experience and motivation. The latter aspect helps to determine how reliable their assessments and/or advice are.<sup>39</sup>

We have seen emerging research on the role of external expertise in intelligence and foreign policymaking in Germany.<sup>40</sup> The German context differs significantly from the Anglo-American one where external experts tend to be better integrated into policy circles, among others through secondments, closer networks and communication channels, or the possibility of participant observation for research purposes.<sup>41</sup> Expert advice in the U.S. and UK is more regularly sought (e.g., academics giving evidence to parliament), which provides experts with better insights into what policymakers need and want to know. Overall, this contributes to communication between policymakers and external experts about warning judgements being more of a two-way-street, somewhat similar to exchanges between intelligence officials and policymakers, making it easier for all parties to ask the right questions.<sup>42</sup> In Germany, such exchanges became more frequent immediately prior to and after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, but interest in substantial exchanges with external experts has reportedly waned again among policymakers (interviews 7, 8).

This article contributes to a growing body of literature on post-mortem investigations of foreign policy crises in Europe, with increased attention to the role of external experts alongside intelligence analysts in knowledge production.<sup>43</sup> A recent study has proposed to ‘broaden the term estimative intelligence to contain forecasts by different experts who through various channels and products support decision-making’.<sup>44</sup> Estimative intelligence is forward-looking and includes threat and risk assessments as well as warnings of both a strategic and tactical nature. Its aim is to uncover what will likely happen next, and ideally also when and where, and what the consequences would be.<sup>45</sup> I draw on the understanding by Guttman et al. that ‘a warning should, as a minimum, include a knowledge claim about future harm, but could also include political relevance and action claims’.<sup>46</sup> For the purpose of my research it should be added that this is not limited to original warnings but can imply drawing attention to warnings by others. When seeking to evaluate the performance of intelligence producers and external experts for the provision of warnings, Ikani et al. suggest that the same expectations apply to both groups: timeliness, accuracy and convincingness.<sup>47</sup> While the first two are self-explanatory, convincingness can be defined as ‘*the demonstrated ability to (1) persuade*

*policymakers that past and present events and trends are of strategic consequence and to (2) judge the probability and harm of likely future developments in clear and accessible terms*'.<sup>48</sup> Much depends here on how a warning is communicated and how credible the evidence is. Further, Ikani et al. argue that reflexivity is an underlying criterion for good performance: this revolves around open-mindedness and includes attention to weak signals, the avoidance of blind spots, a willingness to learn (also intra-crisis) and to question one's own assumptions, and efforts to overcome biases.<sup>49</sup> We can learn much about the importance of reflexivity from Cynthia Grabo, e.g., related to the anticipation of discontinuities and ability to think objectively.<sup>50</sup> Ikani et al. also identify various context-specific factors that can affect the performance of intelligence analysts and external experts alike. These relate to the political environment, pre-existing analytical capabilities and case-specific diagnostic difficulties.<sup>51</sup>

While these are helpful theoretical expectations that guide my analysis, one needs to keep in mind that external experts have not necessarily been trained to formulate warnings, that they may in some ways be more/less constrained than intelligence analysts, and that this can affect whether and how they warn. For instance, are they more affected by shortfalls in analytical capabilities? Are both groups of knowledge producers similarly affected by case-specific diagnostic difficulties? And is it easier for external experts to report inconvenient facts or express dissenting opinions as they are less constrained by the political environment? I argue that external experts are often – due to their specific geographic or thematic expertise – in a strong position to not only assess the capability and intent of a threat group but also context-specific structural vulnerabilities and opportunities that the latter can exploit. This is in my view an important third element for threat and risk assessments.<sup>52</sup> In the case under study, this means that experts should have been able to shed light on how Moscow would factor in political developments and broader domestic constraints in Germany and France, among others, or divisions among NATO and EU members, or Ukrainian vulnerabilities, or public opinion in Russia. Further, I suggest that external experts are well positioned to provide actionable warnings, more so than intelligence producers. They warn in the public sphere, for instance through media commentary. This lends more weight to their estimates and recommendations and gives them an opportunity to shape public discourse, which can put pressure on the government. [Section 5](#) will explore these issues in greater depth and revisit the adequacy of the theoretical expectations.

### 3. Methods

Post-mortem investigations of preparedness for foreign policy crises are epistemically challenging, specifically when discussing whether harmful events were preventable.<sup>53</sup> We engage in such evaluations with the benefit of hindsight but need to address the problem of hindsight bias. For instance, for this study I interviewed four policymakers and six external experts (see Annex 3) to ask whether and how they had anticipated Russian large-scale aggression against Ukraine and how surprised they were on 24 February 2022. I also conducted these interviews to get a better sense of contextual factors that might have affected knowledge production and use, among others. The anonymised interview findings are here used as background information. Hindsight bias could have been at play, among other biases.<sup>54</sup>

To compensate for this, I have reconstructed warnings by external experts during those crucial months before Russia invaded Ukraine. I focused on two groups of external experts: researchers who were employed by (or affiliated with or invited to write for) German think tanks/research institutes, as well as individual academics. I selected the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) and the *Zentrum Liberale Moderne* (LibMod).<sup>55</sup> SWP and DGAP have long-standing area (Russia, eastern Europe) and thematic expertise (security and defence). Both ZOiS and LibMod were relatively new, having been established in 2016 and 2017 respectively. They differ in their approach – e.g., ZoIS is more scholarly-oriented and LibMod more advocacy-focused – but both were established in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. I selected four academics to keep the

data collection and analysis manageable. I chose from a larger pool of academics, prioritising those who contributed to public debates prominently, whose assessments/advice were documented in written form (and not just video/audio outputs), who had in-depth subject knowledge and substantial experience and who were motivated to understand the crisis. I further aimed for a mixture of area, thematic and disciplinary expertise, as explained in Annex 2. Two of them also wrote for LibMod in addition to regularly warning elsewhere, so there is some overlap between the two groups.

To reconstruct warnings by think tank analysts, I first went through the publication archives of the four institutes. I systematically gathered outputs on Russia and/or Ukraine and identified those who had prominently commented on the evolving crisis, namely six experts for SWP, seven for DGAP and four for ZOI. I conducted an additional web search for those names and the keywords 'Russia OR Ukraine' (in German) for the timeframe 1 November 2021 to 23 February 2022. This broadened my search significantly and helped to include more media contributions alongside reports and commentaries. Given that LibMod was drawing on a large pool (30+) of Russia and Ukraine experts, I could not conduct an additional web-based search for all individuals. I gathered a total of 220 outputs for the research institutes. I conducted a web-based search for the four academics (their names plus same keywords and timeframe), yielding a total of 105 outputs. For the subsequent analysis, I excluded outputs behind a paywall and academic publications, except for short (2-page) commentaries – which exist in some open-access academic journals.<sup>56</sup> I also excluded outputs that were not of direct relevance to understanding the emerging crisis or that were in languages other than German or English. Annexes 1 and 2 show the cleaned data. In the end, I excluded video and audio outputs due to lack of space, but I left them in the table to give the reader an idea of available expert commentary at the time.

In the next section, the warnings are reconstructed chronologically within two phases: one from 1 November 2021 to 16 December 2021 and one from 17 December 2021 to 23 February 2022. The start date was chosen as the following developments had raised alarm among experts by then. Firstly, Moscow's rhetoric on Ukraine had hardened. For instance, Vladimir Putin's July 2021 essay, in which he argued that Russia and Ukraine had always shared a common history and belonged together, had been interpreted as a justification to attack Ukraine (interviews 1, 2, 5).<sup>57</sup> Secondly, following Russia's Zapad exercise with Belarus in mid-September 2021, a renewed and unusual build-up of Russian troops and equipment near the Ukrainian border had been detected. Drawing on social media feeds, commercial satellite imagery, anonymous accounts by U.S. government officials and expert assessments, Washington Post journalists were among the first to report about the extent of Russian troop movements in late October 2021.<sup>58</sup> Further relevant developments occurred during phase 1. For instance, Moscow appeared no longer interested in diplomatic solutions and was perceived as undermining them. One example in mid-November 2021 was Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's leaking of confidential correspondence with his German and French counterparts when preparing Normandy format discussions.<sup>59</sup> In late November, US and Ukrainian experts warned that a large-scale Russian attack on Ukraine was a 'very real possibility'.<sup>60</sup> On 3 December, the Washington Post drew on downgraded U.S. intelligence when reporting that Russia was planning a large-scale military offensive against Ukraine.<sup>61</sup> On 9 December Putin argued that the war in Donbas looked like genocide, further hardening his rhetoric.<sup>62</sup> It was reported on 11 December that Russia had blocked off almost 70 per cent of the Sea of Azov around Crimea.<sup>63</sup>

On 17 December, the crisis entered in my view a next stage, when the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published the draft US-Russia and NATO-Russia agreements.<sup>64</sup> Most expert observers agreed that the proposals were intended for rejection and that Moscow would not back down. Russia's messaging in the second half of December also suggested that Moscow was not serious about negotiation and de-escalation. For instance, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed on 21 December that 'reserves of an unidentified chemical component' had been found in Donbass and that a 'provocation' was being prepared by Kyiv with Washington's support.<sup>65</sup> On 23 December 2021, Putin gave his annual news conference, in which he blamed the U.S. and NATO for threatening Russia and argued that Moscow's actions would not depend on negotiations 'but rather on unconditional

guarantees for Russia's security today and in the historical perspective'. Putin emphasised that these guarantees would need to be given immediately and that Ukraine belongs to Russia.<sup>66</sup> This was accompanied by evidence in late December that Russia's military build-up continued.<sup>67</sup> I lack the space to discuss how the crisis accelerated further during this phase, and the other contributions to this special issue have shed light on this. Presenting the findings along these two phases helps to distinguish between early and later warnings and should improve readability.

#### **4. Reconstructing warnings by external experts prior to Russia's war on Ukraine**

This section summarises all warnings that the analysed documents contained. While I am limiting the overview to warnings as previously defined (knowledge claims about future harm that can include political relevance and action claims), the empirical material, as listed in Annexes 1 and 2, also included situational awareness as well as threat and risk assessments. As an example of the former, one expert analysed public opinion in Russia and concluded that most Russians blamed the West for the escalation of tensions.<sup>68</sup> Regarding the latter, numerous experts were shedding light on Russia's capabilities as well as structural vulnerabilities and opportunities. They further discussed Putin's intention and the likelihood of large-scale aggression. As situational awareness and threat/risk assessments inform warnings, it is worthwhile highlighting the value that external expertise can also add in this regard. The remainder of this section presents the warnings chronologically and separately for the two groups of experts during phase 1 and 2. To place the reader in the context in which the warnings were produced, the present tense is used.

##### **4.1. Warnings by selected think tank analysts (phase 1)**

Engaging with Ukrainian frustrations and commenting on changing relations between Kyiv and Berlin over the previous two years, SWP's André Härtel warns the incoming German government in early November 2021 against a Russia-centric approach to the crisis in which Ukraine would be insufficiently protected against renewed Russian aggression.<sup>69</sup>

In mid-November, DGAP's Stefan Meister argues that Germany does not want to see the reality of Putin's politics, thus failing to understand the game the Kremlin plays. Moscow may well gain in this geopolitical game, among others by exploiting the EU's weaknesses. It has its eyes squarely set on Ukraine when seeking to maintain and expand its sphere of influence.<sup>70</sup> Jan Behrends (LibMod) writes that both the migration crisis on the Belarus-Poland border as well as the Russian military build-up on its border with Ukraine are highly dangerous situations that could escalate anytime.<sup>71</sup> Behrends discusses new heights in repression in Russia, which serve the purpose of mobilising the Russian population for the conflict with the West and argues that these domestic developments are a prelude to external aggression against Ukraine. He draws on U.S. warnings about a Russian invasion of Ukraine and lessons from history, among others. He criticises Berlin's passivity and naivety and argues for a foreign policy reset, in which a strategy of containing Russia and better supporting Ukraine could help to mitigate the conflict.<sup>72</sup>

In late November, Härtel warns that Russia's renewed military build-up on the Ukrainian border is more than sabre-rattling and that the West should take the possibility of large-scale renewed Russian military aggression against Ukraine seriously. He argues that those analysts and policymakers who do not see this as an imminent threat should get out of their comfort zone by accepting that the situation is escalating at high speed and by engaging with the 'extreme scenario of a Russian invasion in parts of Ukraine'.<sup>73</sup> He reiterates that while certain elements in the conflict are unpredictable, Russia pursues the goal of fully controlling Ukraine and that expert observers and politicians should discuss the consequences of Russia's readiness to escalate the conflict. Härtel foresees the possibility of a Russian invasion in various stages and in different parts of Ukraine, starting with Donbas. To deter this, he calls for the preparation of sanctions that would include the halt of Nord Stream 2 and for an EU presence in the Black Sea and an EU military training mission in Ukraine.<sup>74</sup>



Discussing German and French Russia policy in late November, SWP's Susan Stewart and co-author Céline Marangé warn indirectly about future harm: as long as Russia continues its course of domestic repression and external aggression, and Berlin and Paris do not change course either, 'Franco-German initiatives to productively engage the Kremlin seem doomed to failure'.<sup>75</sup>

On 1 December, Olha Skrypyuk (LibMod) discusses Russia's increased military presence and repression in Crimea, among others against members of the Crimea Platform. She warns that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine does not only affect the immediate region but also European and global security due to Russia's geopolitical ambitions and attempts to increase tensions elsewhere.<sup>76</sup>

On 7 December, Edward Lucas (LibMod) refers to disclosed U.S. intelligence about an imminent Russian attack on Ukraine and echoes these warnings, arguing that Putin has created the conflict with the aim of controlling Ukraine and the objective of changing the existing European security order. He warns the West against joining Putin's game and bowing to his demands.<sup>77</sup> That same day, DGAP's Stefan Meister warns that the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline increases the threat of Russian aggression against Ukraine as it weakens the latter's bargaining position.<sup>78</sup> Commenting on the challenges the new German government faces vis-à-vis Russia, Meister warns on 8 December that Moscow sees Berlin no longer as a partner but as a vulnerable adversary which it intends to weaken further. Berlin would therefore need to signal to Moscow its readiness to assume geopolitical responsibility and a leadership position in EU foreign policy. In the same piece, LibMod's Marielouise Beck warns similarly that the Kremlin seeks to exploit German and European vulnerabilities.<sup>79</sup>

On 14 December, Mykhailo Samus (LibMod) argues that Russia is ready to seek renewed military aggression against Ukraine and that this could likely start from multiple locations (Belarus, Crimea, Donbas and Transnistria). Such an attack would be part of Putin's plan to achieve de-escalation through (short-term) escalation. Analysing Russia's military build-up and overall preparedness in detail, he concludes that the threat is real but that it will be harder for Moscow to successfully implement such an offensive given that Ukraine is better prepared than before. He warns that large-scale military conflict between Russia and Ukraine would have catastrophic consequences for Ukraine, Europe, and Russia. The effectiveness of Putin's plan will depend on how susceptible to blackmail and manipulation Western leaders are, and 'any flirt with the Kremlin will have negative consequences'. Samus calls for a combination of strong diplomatic and economic resistance against Putin's blackmail together with efforts to strengthen Ukraine's defensive capabilities. Unless it recognises that military aggression against Ukraine will be too costly, Moscow will keep up and intensify the threat.<sup>80</sup> In an interview for LibMod on 14 December, Sergey Lagodinsky warns that Putin's use of the term genocide in reference to the war in Donbas is highly alarming, as another indicator (like in the context of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war) that the threat of Russian military aggression is real.<sup>81</sup>

On 16 December, SWP's Dumitru Minzarari argues that recent signals sent by the Kremlin have shed more light on its intention, namely that it would attack Ukraine militarily unless its demands for guarantees that NATO will never admit Ukraine are met and unless Kyiv implements Moscow's version of the Minsk agreements. He explains that these calculations are informed 'by the Kremlin's perception that both the EU and the US are irresolute', risk-averse and strategically timid, generating 'little appetite in the West to confront Russia on Ukraine, beyond economic sanctions'. Yet, he assesses the risk of a large-scale conventional invasion as very small as 'Russia is not yet ready for a total breakup with the West'.<sup>82</sup>

#### **4.2. Warnings by selected academics (phase 1)**

On 12 November, when discussing the Kremlin's ban of human rights organisation Memorial, Jan Behrends<sup>83</sup> (Leibniz-Centre for Contemporary History & European University Viadrina) warns that internal repression and external aggression are two sides of the same coin, and that the West has no influence on domestic Russian affairs. The regime's radicalisation can be observed not only at home

but also through its meddling in the crisis on the Poland-Belarus border, in the airspace above the Baltic and Black Sea, and elsewhere outside of Russia. He argues that Berlin has been ignoring Moscow's repression and attempts at destabilising open societies for two decades. Germany and Europe will pay a high price if Berlin continues the failed Russia policy of the Merkel years.<sup>84</sup> Andreas Umland (Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies & National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy) argues that Moscow's involvement in the crisis on the Poland-Belarus border is likely part of 'simultaneous hybrid attacks that are meant to increase tensions within the West in general, and perhaps also in particular to divert attention from other malign activities by Moscow'.<sup>85</sup>

On 15 November, Carlo Masala (Bundeswehr University Munich) warns of Putin's partly successful attempts at dividing and destabilising the EU, among others by backing Belarus in the migration crisis and escalating the conflict with Ukraine. He argues that Moscow has escalation dominance and exploits strategic vacuums by creating problems that overwhelm NATO – especially those that polarise Western societies, such as migration or armed conflict. He considers it likely that Russia will invade Ukraine and that Putin is factoring in that the U.S. and Europe will never engage in direct military confrontation with Russia. At present, Europe lacks power and imagination to solve the crisis, and Berlin lacks readiness to engage in effective deterrence. Masala calls for a tough approach including countermeasures to demonstrate that the West cannot be blackmailed by Moscow.<sup>86</sup>

On 7 December, Behrends warns that Berlin and Europe are unprepared for the major military conflict they are facing, and that the Normandy format is doomed to fail. He argues that those who give in to Russia's 'coercive demands' will soon experience further blackmail.<sup>87</sup>

On 12 December, Umland warns against appeasing Russia and any bad compromise resulting from this – and that the right lessons should be learnt from previous Russian aggression against Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. He argues that Russia is interested in the Donbas as a means of destabilising all of Ukraine. As such, Moscow would not contend itself with a compromise regarding Donbas but would want more.<sup>88</sup>

On 16 December, Behrends argues that Germany's refusal to export weapons to Ukraine and grasp the reality on the ground strengthens Russia's position of military superiority and that the lack of credible deterrence makes the prospect of a Russian war against Ukraine more likely.<sup>89</sup>

#### **4.3. Warnings by selected think tank analysts (phase 2)**

Following Moscow's publication of the draft agreements for security guarantees with the U.S. and NATO, Ralf Fücks (LibMod) writes on 21 December that there is no doubt that Moscow aims for a revision of the post-Cold War European order, including U.S. withdrawal from Europe and the prevention of democratic change in Russia's neighbourhood. He warns against any form of appeasement and the acceptance of Russian manoeuvres that would undermine NATO and European security policy. At the same time, if the U.S. and NATO reject Russia's propositions, the danger of Russian military aggression against Ukraine (or even a takeover) will grow.<sup>90</sup> The same day, Gustav Gressel (LibMod) warns that Russia is already able to attack Ukraine successfully, while not yet ready to occupy Ukrainian territory long-term. Drawing on open-source information about Russian troop movements, Gressel states that U.S. estimates seem accurate and that Russia should be in a position to launch a large-scale invasion and hold significant territory in January-February 2022. He argues that Moscow underestimates Kyiv's will to resist such an attack, which will likely lead to Russian miscalculations, and that the Russian public seems to support the possibility of war with Ukraine. Another enabling factor for a Russian invasion of Ukraine is the military indecisiveness of Western allies. Gressel argues that Putin will expect to encounter little resistance in Ukraine and will not back down if he does – heightened repression in Russia and in the occupied Ukrainian territories will be likely consequences. He concludes that harm can only be prevented through a combination of strength and military deterrence and the earlier, the better.<sup>91</sup> SWP's Sabine Fischer warns on 22 December that the risk of escalation remains high as Moscow's demands will inevitably be declined by Washington. This puts the Kremlin under pressure to act, raising the risk of renewed

Russian military aggression against Ukraine for which Western allies and Ukraine need to be well prepared.<sup>92</sup>

On 3 January 2022, Andrij Klymenko (LibMod) warns about Russia's militarisation of Crimea, resulting in a strong military-industrial base there and increasing Russia's capacity to launch further military attacks on Ukraine, including via the Black Sea and Sea of Azov.<sup>93</sup>

On 6 January, Stefan Meister (DGAP) warns that Moscow will try to divide the German government and especially Chancellor Scholz and Foreign Minister Baerbock due to their different approaches to the crisis. Berlin needs to take a more unified and determined stance to strengthen the EU's sanctions policy. He considers Russian military aggression against Ukraine likely as Moscow won't back down unless its demands are met.<sup>94</sup>

On 9 January, SWP's Markus Kaim warns that Europe is becoming marginalised as a player in international security and that its self-inflicted helplessness in the conflict is being exploited by Putin.<sup>95</sup>

On 12 January, Meister writes for ZOiS that the Kremlin has made it clear that there could be war in Europe unless the European security order is being renegotiated on Russian terms.<sup>96</sup> The same day, DGAP's Sławomir Sierakowski argues that Russia's ultimatum to the West is a pretext for an invasion of Ukraine and that Putin seeks to destroy 25 years of European security policy by targeting Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and even the Baltic states. Relatedly, Moscow's dispatch of 2500 troops to Kazakhstan to put down the unrest there (which it didn't do in similar uprisings in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan) shows that Putin seeks to restore the Russian empire with a new sense of urgency.<sup>97</sup>

Analysing Putin's 23 December press conference and intentions, Andreas Umland (LibMod) warns on 14 January that Moscow will increase its military engagement in eastern Europe and wage war on Ukraine if the demands for security guarantees are not met. He argues that if NATO bows to Russian demands of not offering membership to Ukraine and Georgia, the threat should be countered by starting EU membership talks with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova and that Germany and France could take a lead role here.<sup>98</sup>

Following concerted cyber-attacks against Ukraine, DGAP's Valentin Weber warns on 19 January that countermeasures may happen too late, and that Germany and the EU should do what they can to speed up cyber-defence assistance to Ukraine.<sup>99</sup>

On 24 January, Petro Burkovskiy (LibMod) warns that the Kremlin is using diplomacy as a weapon to divide the West and deflect from its true intentions. More specifically, Putin is using negotiations with Washington to undermine trust between U.S. and European allies, to show that it can resist Western sanctions and to deter the U.S. and NATO from arming eastern European states as well as Finland and Sweden. He concludes that a diplomatic solution is unlikely.<sup>100</sup> The same day, discussing U.S. President Biden's public prediction that Russia will invade Ukraine and his admission of insufficient unity among NATO members, DGAP's Sławomir Sierakowski expresses his concern about this message ('Biden has revealed his weak hand') and calls for extreme and credible deterrence. He argues that Moscow will indeed go ahead as Washington and Berlin are only signalling limited sanctions in the case of a small-scale invasion. Instead, they should communicate to Putin that the costs of an invasion would be 'truly unbearable' as he will not be deterred by anything else.<sup>101</sup> On 25 January, SWP's Margarete Klein argues that Moscow seeks to polarise European debates and impede the development of a common European and Transatlantic crisis response. She discusses various scenarios and considers it most likely that Moscow will opt for an open invasion in Donbas, not to annex it but to push for its independence. Other likely scenarios are attempts to create a corridor between Donbas and Crimea or occupying Ukraine's Black Sea coast and/or further territory.<sup>102</sup>

On 2 February, Igor Mitchnik (LibMod) warns that the conflict is about to escalate, likely in the form of small to medium-sized hybrid attacks on Ukraine, which could include increased exchanges of fire along the contact line and within border regions, attacks against critical infrastructure and disinformation.<sup>103</sup> On 3 February, LibMod reprints an open letter by Russian journalists, academics and human rights activists in which they refer to 'alarming information about a possible Russian

invasion of Ukraine' and voice their protest against domestic repression and external aggression.<sup>104</sup> On 4 February, DGAP's Sławomir Sierakowski draws on substantial evidence to warn as follows: 'the facts point to both the inevitability and the futility of war. Putin must attack because he will lose face if he doesn't. (...) He also knows that this is his last, best chance'. While Sierakowski wonders what Russia could possibly gain from renewed large-scale attacks against Ukraine, he concludes that Russia will only end where it is stopped.<sup>105</sup>

On 7 February, Andreas Brunnbauer (LibMod) warns that Russia's draft treaties are a pretext to justify an escalation of the conflict and that a Russian invasion of Ukraine is likely. This could either mean a full invasion or more limited attacks, e.g., to secure territory in Donbas or build a corridor to Crimea.<sup>106</sup> The West needs to prepare itself well for the scenario of a Russian attack, among others through harsh sanctions and the provision of military assistance to Ukraine.

On 14 February, Gwendolyn Sasse (ZOiS) evaluates the threat of a Russian attack on Ukraine as 'real': while the current crisis might initially have been triggered by Russian sabre-rattling, the situation could now spiral out of control. Berlin needs to take a clear stand and is expected to assume a leadership role within the EU to counter the Kremlin's threat of dividing both NATO and the EU.<sup>107</sup> On 15 February, Sasse warns that the threat of a Russian war on Ukraine is by no means averted, as evidenced by Russia's ongoing massive military presence. She suggests that Moscow is likely buying time with the claim of troop reduction on the Ukrainian border and negotiation tactics.<sup>108</sup> The same day, Jan Behrends warns that primarily Ukraine and in addition the Black Sea, the Baltic States and Poland are threatened by Russia's military build-up. He argues that it is high time for Berlin to act more responsibly by containing and deterring Russia, rather than appeasing it.<sup>109</sup> While arguing that declassified U.S. intelligence reports should not be overrated, DGAP's Sarah Pagung considers a dramatic escalation likely.<sup>110</sup> The same day, Pagung warns that it may well be Putin's aim to take Kyiv and set up a new regime in Ukraine.<sup>111</sup> In a meticulously researched evaluation of different scenarios based on open-source information, SWP's Margarete Klein warns on 16 February that the possibility of a large-scale Russian war on Ukraine must be taken seriously and that one needs to pay special attention to 'shifts in the Kremlin's cost-benefit calculation'.<sup>112</sup> According to her, the following activities suggest that an invasion beyond Donbas is likely and imminent: increased disinformation and cyberattacks, Russia's preparedness for high-intensity conflict (as evidenced in various exercises), and the expansion of Russia's military build-up with the addition of strategic enablers (among others) since late December 2021. She further argues that a limited invasion, e.g., to establish a corridor from Donbas to Crimea, may not be considered sufficient to stop Kyiv's pro-Western course and could even be seen as counterproductive by Moscow.<sup>113</sup>

On 18 February, DGAP's Stefan Meister shares U.S. assessments that Russia is able to launch a major attack on Ukraine, but it remains to be seen whether Putin will go down that route. He speculates about potential motives (e.g., 'maybe Putin wants to go down in history as the Russian leader who brought back Ukraine'). Meister also refers to preparations by Russia's financial system to weather the storm that harsh sanctions would cause and uses this as additional evidence of Moscow's readiness to go ahead. For him, a Russian attack from Donbas that would seek control of southern Ukraine down to Crimea is the most likely scenario. He warns that Putin is not solely interested in Donbas or parts of it but wants to control Ukraine in its entirety and keep it in Russia's sphere of influence. Meister concludes that Moscow is at present not interested in de-escalation.<sup>114</sup> The same day, SWP's Markus Kaim considers a Russian invasion likely. He argues that one is well advised to take Putin at his word, that diplomacy and de-escalation are over, and that one will see within days whether this means a small invasion in Donbas or an attempt at large-scale occupation.<sup>115</sup> SWP's Margaret Klein warns that Russia is trying to create "Ukraine fatigue" in the West' through various hybrid measures. These sow the seeds of uncertainty, among others by undermining Ukraine's economy or pushing the narrative of Washington being paranoid. Regarding the latter, Moscow announced a troop withdrawal while Scholz was visiting Moscow, but Klein argues that the troops that had been withdrawn could be back at the border in no time.<sup>116</sup>

On 21 February, Gwendolyn Sasse (ZOiS) considers a large-scale Russian attack on Ukraine 'more and more likely' but does not foresee this to happen before 25 February [when U.S. and Russian foreign ministers Anthony Blinken and Sergey Lavrov had planned to meet]. She interprets the fact that no Russian government representative attended the Munich Security Conference on 18–20 February as a clear signal that Moscow is no longer interested in negotiations with the West.<sup>117</sup> The same day, DGAP's Christian Mölling warns that the West will be facing permanent conflict with Russia over the coming decades, to unfold at different intensity and against various backdrops.<sup>118</sup> SWP's Sabine Fischer comments on Putin's summoning of Russia's top national security officials on 21 February as follows: 'we don't know how far they are going to go. But we should not rule out larger-scale invasion today/tomorrow. This is very very dangerous'.<sup>119</sup>

On 22 February, discussing Putin's speech the previous day, DGAP's Sarah Pagung warns about imminent war and that the West has limited ability to prevent this. She argues that while sanctions are indispensable and the EU should approve them now rather than after an invasion, they will temporarily bolster Putin's position at home.<sup>120</sup>

#### 4.4. Warnings by selected academics (phase 2)

On 11 January, Liana Fix (Körber-Stiftung & German Marshall Fund) and co-author Michael Kimmage warn that if Putin is unable to achieve a 'Finlandisation' or control of Ukraine, he will likely be 'alternating between the use of military force and threat of military force to compel the West to minimize its commitment to Ukraine and/or to eliminate the Ukrainian state's capacity to obstruct Russia's regional interests'. They argue that Moscow considers the current context as compelling and conducive and that 'an intervention now could be perceived as less costly than an intervention later'.<sup>121</sup> They consider it likely that Putin will seek to wage major rather than minor war on Ukraine. Further, 'Europe and the United States have already provided the answer to Moscow's most important calculation: the West will not fight and die for Ukraine'. Fix and Kimmage refer to Russia's own warning that it may 'be forced (...) to eliminate unacceptable threats' to its security.<sup>122</sup>

On 14 January, an open letter in the weekly *Die Zeit* signed by more than 70 individuals with expertise in Eastern Europe and/or security policy calls for a reset of Germany's Russia policy and for learning from past failures. Andreas Umland as the initiator warns that Germany's past and current behaviour has been facilitating rather than deterring Moscow's aggressive stance, and that further harm is imminent.<sup>123</sup> On 21 January, Umland warns that 'Germany's Nord Stream pipes promote war in Europe'.<sup>124</sup>

On 25 January, Fix refers to U.S. assessments that military escalation is the most likely scenario, while contrasting this with perceptions in Berlin and other European capitals 'that Russia is building up the military threat to gain concessions'.<sup>125</sup>

On 15 February, Behrends argues that Putin has never made a secret of his neo-imperial ambitions and that Russia has been pursuing its revisionist agenda openly. As such, Putin made it clear in his July 2021 essay that Ukraine is the next target. Behrends warns that Putin will push for Russia's hegemony in eastern Europe with military means and the West will likely be unable to deter him. He warns that Germany – unlike Poland or the Baltic States – is unprepared due to a crisis of perception.<sup>126</sup>

On 22 February, Fix warns that Putin is ready to use force and that a Russian invasion will likely go beyond Donbas and the neighbouring regions.<sup>127</sup> She argues elsewhere the same day that Moscow has all options for military escalation at its disposal and it will likely come to that as Putin is 'on a historical mission'.<sup>128</sup>

## 5. Evaluation of performance

Evaluating these warnings with the benefit of hindsight, we can conclude that the huge majority were highly accurate, convincing and delivered in a timely manner. The external experts surveyed

here converged in their assessment that Russia had the capability and intent to attack Ukraine for the purpose of controlling it and changing Europe's security order. They argued that the situation was no longer about sabre-rattling and that Moscow had put itself under pressure to act militarily. They highlighted how Russia was exploiting vulnerabilities, especially the weaknesses of the new German government, but also divisions within the EU and NATO. They pointed to high repression in Russia and how this was paving the way for external aggression. They further argued that the Kremlin was seeking to blackmail and manipulate the West into accepting its demands. To them, the threat was real as Moscow was ready to strike, escalation was possible anytime, and Russia possessed escalation dominance. They discussed the catastrophic consequences that large-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine would have. Overall, while external experts are not trained to conduct threat and risk assessments as intelligence producers are, they did a fine job, which prepared them to warn well.

While some experts warned throughout the whole period that Russian large-scale aggression was highly likely, others became more confident in such a judgement in January and February. Strategic warnings of a Russian attack were provided early on, and the warnings became more tactical over time. In December, one expert argued that an attack was imminent, and many warned from early January onwards that Russia would likely strike against Ukraine in January/February. Some experts suggested that Russia would attack Ukraine from multiple locations. Various scenarios were discussed, including hybrid attacks. Most experts agreed that Moscow sought to destabilise all of Ukraine and would therefore also attack beyond Donbas. There was consensus that Moscow would not back down unless its demands were met, and that the West should take Putin at his word. Yet, there was also uncertainty as to whether Moscow was ready for a break-up with the West: some argued that while an invasion was possible, the high costs would deter the Kremlin from openly attacking Ukraine.<sup>129</sup> While many of the experts who were interviewed for this study had warned about the contingency, most of them thought (or hoped) until the end that a large-scale invasion would be too costly for Moscow and would therefore not happen (interviews 1, 2, 6, 7, 9). There were some temporal gaps in expert warnings, for instance by the selected academics between mid-December 2021 and early January 2022, between late January and mid-February 2022 and at the end of phase 2. This is understandable – after all, commenting on the evolving crisis was not the main professional task of those experts.

Looking at convincingness in more depth, three elements that were present in most warnings aided in that respect: the use of credible evidence, a clear judgement of probability and harm, and an inclusion of action claims and/or political relevance claims. Examples of action claims were calls for strong deterrence, against any form of appeasement ('no more flirts with the Kremlin'), to learn lessons from past mistakes, and for a reset of Germany's Russia policy. The latter included calls for Berlin to get out of its comfort zone, act more responsibly and resolutely, lead on the EU's crisis response, push for early sanctions, halt Nord Stream 2, step up the support of Ukraine including military assistance, prepare itself for the contingency of a Russian attack, and help overcome the West's indecisiveness. Some experts were more optimistic than others that Berlin would engage in intra-crisis learning: Liana Fix argued on 23 December 2021 that '[u]nderestimating Russia's willingness to act militarily is not a mistake Germany will make twice'.<sup>130</sup> Overall, experts converged in their judgements about how the risk could materialise and how Berlin would need to act. They were by no means discouraged from telling an inconvenient truth and were outspoken in their critique of the government.<sup>131</sup> Overall, the political environment did not seem to hinder their performance, as can be the case for intelligence producers. The theoretical expectation that external experts are well positioned to provide actionable warnings and speak truth to power can be confirmed.

Instead, two other context-specific factors have affected external expert assessments: case-specific diagnostic challenges as well as limited capacities for knowledge production and transfer. It proved challenging to gauge whether Moscow would launch a full-scale war, a smaller-scale attack, or whether it was seeking to put pressure on Ukraine and the West. Umland suggested in late December 2021 that '[t]he Kremlin might also not know yet what exactly it will do and may only decide as things develop'.<sup>132</sup> Overall though, experts agreed that Putin should be taken at his word –

unlike in France, where assessments seemed to assume until the end that he was bluffing.<sup>133</sup> Yet, they found it challenging that so much depended on Putin,<sup>134</sup> wondered whether he might go rogue without consulting anyone,<sup>135</sup> and found it hard to understand decision-making procedures in Russia.<sup>136</sup> Experts displayed high reflexivity and expressed awareness of potential blind spots when seeking to assess Putin's intention.<sup>137</sup> They felt that unpredictability defined Russia's strategy and they were dealing with deception, e.g., Russia moving troops and material at night or claiming that it had withdrawn troops. Some experts found it difficult to trust U.S. assessments without knowing the sources. They struggled to understand Kyiv's behaviour and the different messages that were sent out by Kyiv and Washington.<sup>138</sup> This made it harder to assess whether a limited escalation in Donbas was the most likely scenario (as Ukrainian assessments by both governmental and external experts suggested)<sup>139</sup> or whether a large-scale invasion should be expected. Further, external experts lacked the capacities to monitor and comment on the evolving crisis to the extent that they would have liked. While they took as much time as they could to analyse the situation, they were tied down with other commitments and had to decline opportunities to offer estimates and advice (interviews 2, 6, 7, 9).

Area studies in German universities were in a dire state during the period under study (interviews 6, 7, 9). Various external experts specialising in eastern Europe had advised the government back in 2015 that the funds made available for research on eastern Europe following the annexation of Crimea should be used to strengthen area studies in German universities. This did not happen as the money was used to create ZOIS, meaning that area studies in German academia remained severely underfunded (interviews 6, 9). And the same dynamics have long affected academic research on security and defence (interviews 1, 8). While the selected academics lacked time and funding and had to find channels for knowledge transfer, they performed strongly, and so did the selected think tank analysts. Both groups of experts warned frequently and credibly, and their assessments should have helped raise awareness among policymakers that the risk would likely materialise.

## 6. Conclusion

This article contributed to discussions of how Germany anticipated Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It shed light on the role of external experts for German knowledge production in crisis situations, which has barely been studied. This article explored how two groups of external experts – those producing knowledge for German research institutes as well as individual academics – warned about a Russian attack on Ukraine between November 2021 and February 2022. Based on a systematic reconstruction of publicly available warnings, I found that both groups of experts performed strongly. They provided timely, accurate and convincing warnings – and consistently so during the period under study. While they encountered diagnostic difficulties, for instance when seeking to understand Putin's intention or Ukrainian assessments, they met those with high reflexivity. The findings also confirmed that external experts are well positioned to offer actionable warnings and uncover structural factors that threatening actors can exploit. The findings add to discussions of how external expertise can support intelligence assessments and crisis decision-making.<sup>140</sup> Intelligence production and anticipatory foreign policymaking in Germany could clearly benefit from a stronger inclusion of external expertise. It would be especially valuable for intelligence producers and consumers to widen the pool of experts to those who challenge conventional wisdom, pick up on weak signals, report politically inconvenient developments, and offer advice on how Berlin can better prepare itself for crises.

I asked the interviewees whether they thought that enough publicly available warnings had been produced. Almost all of them countered: 'what is enough?', which triggered a discussion of whether policymakers missed important warnings and what experts can do to cut through the noise and get through to policymakers. Future research could address these questions, by focusing on the lessons that can be identified from this experience and similar crises. Among others, could it be that policymakers mostly listened to those experts who assessed the crisis in a politically more

convenient manner, for instance by suggesting that Moscow would not attack Ukraine or that Berlin should stay on course with its Russia policy? One academic who, in contrast to the experts included here, commented on growing tensions in a more appeasing manner and who is well-connected to policymakers and the defence establishment is Johannes Varwick (University Halle-Wittenberg).<sup>141</sup> I did not cherry-pick by excluding experts from either group who came to different conclusions, but I excluded those academics who provided mostly oral commentary and next to no written assessments (this was the case for Varwick and others), or did not meet the other criteria (in-depth subject knowledge, substantial experience, motivation, prominent contribution to public debates).

Certain limitations need to be mentioned. Given the time constraints of external experts, especially those working on the Russo-Ukrainian war, many were unable to grant me an interview. In the end, I also lacked the space to integrate the rich interview data in depth and plan to do so in a follow-up study, which can hopefully also draw on additional interviews. My aim was to get the ball rolling by having a first conversation with those experts and policymakers who were intimately involved in monitoring and preparing for the crisis at the time. Due to space constraints, I was unable to include warnings by journalists. A quick search of press reports in selected high-quality newspapers (e.g., *Der Spiegel*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) for the period under study shows that many warnings had been produced by journalists, too. Also, Germany's public-service broadcasters draw on foreign correspondents whose assessments were highly regarded by those experts interviewed here (interviews 1, 2, 6). It would, among others, be interesting to explore how journalists and the two groups of experts studied here interacted in press interviews and challenged each other to think outside of the box.

While much attention related to the start of Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine and Germany's response has focused on the *Zeitenwende* debate and developments after the invasion, we still need to identify lessons from the early days of Berlin's crisis response. The post-mortem analysis conducted in this article has demonstrated that the new government was not lacking credible warnings.

## Notes

1. For Anglo-American warnings that had reportedly been communicated to Berlin by then, see: Banco et al., "Something Was Badly Wrong.": Röpcke, "Russlands Kriegspläne."
2. Gebauer and Hammerstein, "Germany's Escape from Afghanistan."
3. Deutscher Bundestag, "Zwischenbericht."
4. Bolzen et al., "Deutschland ist das."
5. Minzarari, "Failing to Deter Russia"; Driedger, "Did Germany Contribute."
6. e.g. Mader and Schoen, "No Zeitenwende (Yet)"; Mello, "Zeitenwende"; Masala, *Bedingt abwehrbereit*. See also the work of the "Action Group Zeitenwende" at the German Council on Foreign Relations. (last accessed February 15, 2024). <https://dgap.org/en/research/programs/alfred-von-oppenheim-center-future-europe/action-group-zeitenwende> .
7. e.g. Bunde, "Lessons (to Be) Learned?"; Schneckener, "Gestörter Empfang."
8. e.g. Lamby, *Ernstfall*; Adler, *Die Ukraine und wir*; Thumann, *Revanche*.
9. Volmer, "Ich Weigere Mich." [own translations, as all translations in this article].
10. Phoenix, "Christian Lindner Statement."
11. Quoted in: Schneckener, "Gestörter Empfang," 280.
12. For a detailed discussion, see e.g., Schneckener.
13. Deutsche Welle, "German Spy Chief."
14. Amann et al., "Was für Eskalation spricht."
15. Amann et al.
16. Quadbeck, "BND-Chef Kahl."
17. Der Spiegel, "BND-Präsident Kahl"; Quadbeck, "BND-Chef Kahl."
18. Deutscher Bundestag, "Nachrichtendienste warnen."
19. Deutscher Bundestag.
20. Die Welt, "Habeck beklagt Fehleinschätzungen."
21. e.g. Schneckener, "Gestörter Empfang," 286.
22. Driedger and Polianskii, "Utility-Based Predictions."
23. e.g. Dover, "Adding Value"; Meyer et al., *Estimative Intelligence*.



24. Arcos, Drumhiller, and Phythian, *Academic-Practitioner Divide*.
25. Meyer, Franco, and Otto, *Warning about War*.
26. Meyer, Sangar, and Michaels, "How Do Non-Governmental Organizations."
27. Miller, "Audience Costs."
28. Gleditsch, "One without the Other?"; Gleditsch, "This Research Has."
29. Bressan and Bergmaier, "From Conflict Early Warning."
30. Anderson et al., "Considering Practices."
31. Beaumais and Ramel, "Diplomats, Soldiers."
32. Sweijs and Teer, "Practices, Principles."
33. Bell, "Conflict Early Warning Systems."
34. Bressan and Bergmaier, "From Conflict Early Warning."
35. Fomin et al., "International Studies."
36. Bennett, "Using Process Tracing."
37. Gentry and Gordon, *Strategic Warning Intelligence*, 198; Meyer, Sangar, and Michaels, "How Do Non-Governmental Organizations"; Meyer, Franco, and Otto, *Warning about War*.
38. One example of the latter for the case under study is Konrad Muzyka's blog: <https://rochan-consulting.com> [last accessed 14/02/2024].
39. Dover, "Adding Value," 854.
40. e.g. Meyer, Franco, and Otto, *Warning about War*; Guttman and Michaels, "How Germany and the UK"; Michaels, "How Surprising Was," 167–71.
41. Dover, "Adding Value."
42. Grabo, *Handbook of Warning Intelligence*, 366–67.
43. Meyer, Franco, and Otto, *Warning about War*; Meyer et al., *Estimative Intelligence*; Ikani and Meyer, "The Underlying Causes"; Bressan and Bergmaier, "From Conflict Early Warning."
44. Guttman et al., "Introduction," 5.
45. Michaels, "How Surprising Was", 159; Guttman et al., "Introduction", 5.
46. Guttman et al., "Introduction", 5.
47. Ikani et al., "Expectations from Estimative Intelligence," 34.
48. Michaels, "How Surprising Was", 160 [emphasis in original].
49. Ikani et al., "Expectations from Estimative Intelligence", 33; Michaels, "How Surprising Was", 159.
50. Grabo, *Anticipating Surprise*, 39–40.
51. Ikani, Guttman, and Meyer, "An Analytical Framework," 205.
52. Michaels, "How Surprising Was," 161.
53. Meyer, "Can One 'Prove'"
54. Soest, "Why Do We Speak."
55. Others, such as the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) or the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), had different geographic/thematic foci at the time and did not contribute substantially to an understanding of the evolving crisis.
56. See, for instance: <https://laender-analysen.de> [last accessed 14/02/2023].
57. Putin, "Historical Unity."
58. Sonne, Dixon, and Stern, "Russian Troop Movements." See also: <https://rochan-consulting.com/russian-land-forces-movements-in-october/> [last accessed 14/02/2023].
59. Amiel, "Russia's Military Build-Up."
60. Pickrell, "A Russian Invasion."
61. Harris and Sonne, "Russia Planning Massive."
62. TASS News Agency, "Путин Заявил."
63. RFE/RL, "Ukraine Says."
64. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Press Release."
65. Crimea Realities, "Фейки о Химатаке На Донбассе."
66. President of Russia, "Annual News Conference."
67. McLeary, "Russian Buildup near Ukraine."
68. Wolkow, "Öffentliche Meinung in Russland."
69. Härtel, "Das deutsch-ukrainische Verhältnis."
70. Dempsey, "Judy Asks."
71. For a similar analysis, without a clear warning, see: Hartwich, "Mittäter oder Trittbrettfahrer?."
72. Behrends, "Warum die neue Koalition."
73. Härtel, "Russischer Truppenaufmarsch."
74. Härtel.
75. Marangé and Stewart, "Rench and German Approaches," 40.
76. Skrypnyk, "Eine Bedrohung."
77. Lucas, "Der Westen."

78. Meister, "Russia's Military Buildup."
79. Brüggemann, Kersting, and Klöckner, "Neue Bundesregierung."
80. Samus, "Putins Großmachtsucht."
81. von Twickel, "Die Eskalation."
82. Minzarari, "Russia's brinkmanship."
83. In addition, Behrends and Umland warn in their analyses for LibMod, as mentioned in the previous and next sections.
84. Behrends, "Memorial, das sind wir."
85. Utrikespolitiska institutet, "The Wider Implications."
86. N-TV, "Die Eskalation."
87. Behrends, "Die erste Krise."
88. Umland, "Beuteobjekt Ukraine."
89. Behrends, "Mehr Realität wagen."
90. Fücks, "Dialogue Yes, Appeasement No."
91. Gressel, "Der russische Aufmarsch."
92. Fischer, "Moskaus Verhandlungsoffensive."
93. Klymenko, "Sicherheitsrisiken."
94. Joana, "Experte zur Ukraine-Krise."
95. Kaim, "Ukraine-Konflikt."
96. Meister, "Was möchte Russland?."
97. Sierakowski, "Was Kasachstan."
98. Umland, "Gebt der Ukraine."
99. Weber, "The Need For."
100. Burkovskiy, "Russland stellt"
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102. Klein, "Ukraine-Konflikt."
103. Mitchnik, "Deutschland und der Westen."
104. LibMod, "Niemand bedroht uns."
105. Sierakowski, "The View from Kyiv."
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107. Emendörfer, "Ukraine-Konflikt mit Russland."
108. Tagesschau, "Ukraine."
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110. van Ackeren, "Ukraine am Abgrund."
111. Görmann, "Ukraine-Konflikt eskaliert."
112. Klein, "Russia's Military Buildup."
113. Klein.
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