

Jeffrey SACHS: An Open Letter to Chancellor Friedrich MERZ

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By Jeffrey SACHS* – Berliner Zeitung

Economist and diplomat Jeffrey SACHS is calling on German Chancellor MERZ to begin immediate talks with Russian President Vladimir PUTIN about peace in Europe.

Chancellor MERZ,

When I wrote an open letter to you a half year ago, I urged Germany to pursue diplomacy with Russia rather than the normalization of war. Six months later, the situation in Europe is dramatically worse. Europe and Russia are slipping into open war. And in that drift, Chancellor, your responsibility is singular. No European leader — not in Paris, not in Warsaw, not in Rome — holds the position that Germany holds, or has the power that you personally hold, to interrupt this catastrophe. Will you try for peace?

You yourself, with Prime Minister MELONI and President MACRON, called in **January 2026** for Europe to restart relations with Russia and described Russia as „a European country.“ Yet you did not pursue diplomacy. With the future of Europe at stake, this is an extraordinary abdication of leadership. Have you, in your months as Chancellor, attempted one substantive dialogue with President PUTIN? Has your foreign minister attempted one substantive dialogue with Foreign Minister LAVROV? Real conversations, the kind that ended the Cold War. The answer, as far as the public record reveals, is no. Not once. And not for want of recognizing the urgency.

The past days have brought a dangerous acceleration that should focus every European mind. Both capitals are now under sustained attack: Ukrainian long-range drones have struck deep into Moscow, including civilian sites; Russian missile and drone strikes against Kyiv have greatly intensified. Ukrainian drones have crossed into the airspace of the Baltic states, raising the immediate prospect of an incident that could pull Europe directly into the war. A horrific Ukrainian strike on a boys' school in Lugansk has further eroded what little remains of restraint. And on **May 25**, Foreign Minister **Sergey LAVROV**, acting on instructions from President PUTIN, formally notified the United States Secretary of State that the Russian Armed Forces are now launching „systematic and sustained strikes“ on facilities and decision-making centers in Kyiv, and the Russian Foreign Ministry has advised that the United States and other countries „ensure the evacuation of their diplomatic personnel and other citizens from the capital of Ukraine.“ That message is the prologue to a major escalation. Diplomacy is more urgent than ever.

The way to defend Ukraine is not continued slaughter, but peace on terms that are agreeable to all parties. Instead, we face escalation, with more deaths, more destruction, and the real prospect of a war that expands beyond Ukraine. By calling for ever more weapons, ever greater war-fighting capacity, and ever louder demonstrations of „resolve,“ and by signaling that Germany is preparing for war rather than working to end it, you have allowed Berlin to become an accelerant rather than a brake to a European-wide war.

Germany's Responsibility: Six Particulars

Germany bears profound responsibility for the situation it now confronts. Before German policy can be reset toward peace, Germany's record must be confronted honestly. I set out below six serious failures of German foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia since German reunification in 1990.

First — the 2+4 Treaty and NATO's eastward expansion. On **12 September 1990**, in Moscow, Germany signed the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany — the „2+4 Treaty“ — that completed German reunification. That treaty was secured because **Mikhail GORBACHEV** was given solemn assurances, by **Hans-Dietrich GENSCHER**, by **Helmut KOHL**, by **James BAKER**, and by other Western leaders, that NATO would not move eastward. The declassified record — including the now-public memoranda assembled by the National Security Archive of George Washington University — is unambiguous: those assurances were given and were clearly meant at the time to apply beyond the territory of the former GDR to Eastern Europe. These assurances were reaffirmed through 1990 and 1991.

The 2+4 Treaty restricts the placement of NATO troops in the former GDR, and recalls the principles of the Helsinki Final Act, which emphasizes that no nation's security should come at the expense of another's. Does any serious person believe that the Soviet Union cared about Western troops on the territory of the former GDR but was indifferent to NATO armies in Warsaw, Vilnius, or Kyiv? Of course not.

The matter of NATO enlargement was discussed in detail and explicit assurances of non-enlargement to the East were given by Germany to the Soviet leaders — and then were broken. Germany was the principal beneficiary of those assurances, which were the quid pro quo for Germany's reunification. Yet as early as **1993**, German leaders began to promote the violation of those assurances.

*Second — Chancellor **MERKEL**'s own testimony.* In her memoirs, **Angela MERKEL** writes with striking candor that she understood at the time of the **2008** Bucharest Summit that inviting Ukraine and Georgia into NATO would be tantamount to a declaration of war on Russia. She knew Russia's red line. And yet she gave in to American pressure, accepting the compromise communiqué that Ukraine and Georgia „will become“ NATO members. That single sentence set in motion the catastrophes of **2014** and **2022**. **MERKEL**'s later candor is a gift to her successors: she has told you, plainly and in her own words, what was understood at the time. Germany should not now pretend otherwise.

*Third — the betrayal of the **February 21, 2014** agreement.* On **21 February 2014**, in Kyiv, Germany's then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, together with his Polish and French counterparts, brokered an agreement between President Yanukovich and the opposition. The agreement provided for a return to the **2004** constitution, the formation of a national-unity government, and early presidential elections. President **PUTIN** was consulted; the agreement was confirmed. It was a serious diplomatic achievement under conditions of intense violence. Yet within twenty-four hours Yanukovich was forcibly overthrown by a violent coup. Germany did not insist on the agreement it had just guaranteed. Instead, following the U.S. lead, Germany backed the new government, as if there had been no agreement in place. That decision persuaded Moscow that Western signatures could not be trusted.

*Fourth — **Minsk II**.* In **February 2015**, Chancellor **MERKEL** personally negotiated Minsk II in the Normandy Format and pledged Germany's political backing through the Declaration of Support adopted in Minsk on **12 February 2015**. For seven years, the key political provision — autonomy

for the Donbas regions within a sovereign Ukraine — was never implemented by Kyiv. Germany did not press Kyiv to implement the autonomy provision it had championed — and **MERKEL** later acknowledged that the agreement had been used as a holding action to allow Ukraine to rearm. President **HOLLANDE** said the same. The guarantee, in other words, was not a guarantee at all. It was a stratagem — once again at Washington’s behest. Once again, the message to Moscow was that Western signatures cannot be trusted.

Fifth — Nord Stream. On **7 February 2022**, in the East Room of the White House, President **BIDEN** announced — with then-Chancellor Olaf **SCHOLZ** standing beside him — that „if Russia invades... then there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it.“ Asked how, he replied, „I promise you, we will be able to do that.“ The pipelines were destroyed seven months later in an act of sabotage in the Baltic Sea. The available evidence — investigative reporting in the United States and Germany, the trail followed by the German federal prosecutor, and the public statements of former officials — points overwhelmingly to a joint Ukrainian-American operation. The German government has long known this. And yet Germany has permitted the public blame to fall on Russia, against the direct evidence, while an act of industrial sabotage against the German economy has gone unprosecuted and unanswered.

Sixth — the April 2022 Istanbul agreement that was within reach. Just weeks after Russia’s invasion in February 2022, Russian and Ukrainian negotiators converged in Istanbul on the terms of a peace agreement: Ukrainian neutrality outside NATO, multilateral security guarantees, agreed troop limits, and the political resolution of the Donbas and Crimea questions over time. The agreement was within days of signature. Former Israeli Prime Minister **Naftali BENNETT**, one of the mediators, has confirmed publicly that the deal was close and that the West — the United States and the United Kingdom in particular — moved to block it. Prime Minister **Boris JOHNSON**’s mission to Kyiv in April 2022 to instruct Ukraine not to sign is a matter of public record. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian and Russian lives, and the wider European order, have paid the price for that US–UK intervention. Germany has not raised its voice on this — even though Germany, more than any other European state has borne the economic consequences.

The Second Catastrophe: Germany’s Economic Self-Destruction

Your first concern must be peace. Yesterday’s message from Moscow tells us how late the hour is. But there is a second catastrophe unfolding alongside the first: the willful destruction of the German economy, with Berlin as both author and victim.

Germany’s industrial economy was built on trade with Russia. The destruction of Nord Stream and the subsequent severance of Germany’s trade relations with Russia have left Germany buying natural gas from the United States at prices several times higher than the Russian pipeline gas it replaced. This is industrial suicide. Germany’s chemical sector, its steel sector, its glass industry, its energy-intensive manufacturers — the very foundations of the Mittelstand — are losing international competitiveness day by day. Skilled jobs are draining out of the German economy. And the German taxpayer and the German consumer are making a transfer of national wealth from Germany to American gas producers at a scale unprecedented in postwar Europe.

On top of this, the German government is now pledging an enormous defence build-up — hundreds of billions of euros over the coming decade — to arm for a war that diplomacy can easily prevent. This is a profound misallocation of national resources. The fundamental challenge facing Germany in this decade is competitiveness in the digital age. Every euro

spent on tanks, missiles, and artillery shells is a euro not spent on Germany's AI capacity, its chip-design and chip-fabrication capability, its energy infrastructure, and the high-speed digital networks that Germany needs to remain a top global economy.

The hard reality, Mr. Chancellor, is that there is no security to be bought with these arms that diplomacy cannot buy at a tiny fraction of the cost, and there is no prosperity to be had without the digital and energy investments that this arms buildup will crowd out.

My Appeal

Chancellor **MERZ**, more than any other European leader, the question of whether Europe descends into general war, or returns to negotiation, and to economic sanity, rests with you. The hour is very late. Yesterday's formal message from Moscow to Washington says so explicitly. Please open a dialogue with President **PUTIN**. Please send your foreign minister to Moscow or invite Russia's Foreign Minister to Berlin. Please reopen the OSCE channels that Germany has allowed to atrophy. Please tell Kyiv to cease its strikes on civilian targets.

Most importantly, please tell the German public the truth: that a negotiated peace based on Ukrainian neutrality is the realistic path out of catastrophe, and that restoring a normal economic relationship with Russia is the realistic path out of Germany's industrial decline.

The terms of an acceptable agreement that Germany could propose are clear. The fighting would stop on an armistice line. All sides would renounce any future resort to violence on the question of borders. Ukraine would restore its neutrality, and NATO would permanently renounce further eastward enlargement.

Europe and Russia would restore economic relations and would stop the warmongering. The OSCE would once again become the central forum for European security, with the fundamental precept that European security is indivisible, not based on military blocs dividing Europe. **Alongside this peace, Germany would redirect its national resources toward the digital, AI, semiconductor, and energy investments that Germany's economic future demands.**

History will record what you do in the weeks ahead, and what you fail to do. So will the German public. So will the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Europe generally. It's time for diplomacy, Mr. Chancellor. The choice is yours to make.

Respectfully,

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