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# THE WEIMAR TRIANGLE AND THE FUTURE SECURITY ORDER IN EUROPE



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Probably no other sub-regional cooperation format in the European Union is burdened with as many unfulfilled expectations as the Weimar Triangle. Launched by France, Germany, and Poland shortly after the end of the Cold War, it was intended to help overcome the confrontation and division of the previous decades and give impetus to the European peace and integration process. But soon the initial high ambitions collided with the realities on the ground, be they political or practical, and the format largely failed to produce concrete results. However, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its far-reaching implications for the European security order appear to have reduced previous obstacles to cooperation between the major continental European powers—the incompatibility of French, German, and Polish threat perceptions, divergent approaches to the transatlantic bond, and different visions of European defence.

This was the starting point of a scenario-based workshop organised by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) and the Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF) in November 2023. The seminar showed that it is possible to develop a common-ground position, while respecting the interests, preferences and “red lines” of each of the Weimar Three. The developments since November, both in Ukraine and in the U.S., have added to the sense of urgency regarding the need for the Weimar countries to act together. **The meeting of the three Foreign Ministers in La Celle-Saint-Cloud on February 12th, 2024, confirmed their willingness to “give a new energy” to the cooperation,** with peace and security as part of the agenda.

The following conclusions and recommendations are derived by the authors of this report from the proceedings of the workshop and proposals discussed there.

***On the question of Ukraine and its future role in European security,*** there is a strong and persistent consensus at the expert level on the need and special responsibility of the Weimar countries to maintain and increase their military support for Ukraine, even and particularly if the United States significantly reduces its contributions to Ukraine. While stand-alone security guarantees (understood as obligations similar to NATO's Article 5) for Kyiv from the Weimar Triangle are not realistic and would not be credible, the Weimar Three could take various steps to increase and better coordinate critical support for Ukraine—**not only to provide Ukraine with the necessary means to win this war but also to give impetus for more engagement at the European level:**

- enhance the levels of support for Ukraine, including by increasing domestic defence industrial capacities and pushing such efforts at the EU level with urgency;
- formulate a **joint Weimar Triangle approach to the course of Ukraine's war against Russian invasion over the next 12 months** based on a shared understanding of the war situation, Ukraine's military needs, Russia's objectives, a readiness to respond to different contingencies of the war, and a strategy that matches the objectives for the preferred outcome of the war with the necessary means;
- increase and better coordinate crucial military assistance to Ukraine in the coming months, and announce a **Weimar Assistance Package** that addresses Ukraine's military needs rather than political restraints, including options such as expanding training for Ukrainian troops (also in Ukraine), steps to boost arms production levels, the “pooling” of existing national

plans for arms, equipment, and ammunition supplies, and potentially joint production and deliveries of weapons at a later stage;

- establish a **Weimar Consultation Mechanism with Ukraine**, open to other interested European states, to examine and prepare for contingencies and worst-case scenarios such as Ukraine's military setbacks or withdrawal of U.S. support, while managing expectations about the scope of the Weimar Three's feasible commitment to Ukraine;
- improve **strategic communications** to maintain the domestic strategic endurance needed to sustain the support, to build backing among non-allies and partners on Ukraine, and to signal strength, resolve, and cohesion to Russia;
- explore the short- and long-term implications of **Ukraine's accession talks and eventual EU membership** and the consequent integration into the Common Security and Defence Policy in all areas, particularly with regard to the defence technological and industrial base, the operational dimension and Article 42 (7) of the TEU;
- work together to **bring Ukraine closer to NATO membership** at the Alliance's next summit in Washington, D.C., in July 2024.

*As for the Weimar Three's future approach to Russia*, the discussion confirmed some persistent differences between France, Germany, and Poland in terms of domestic constraints and views of Russian internal instability as a cause for concern versus the opportunity for change. Yet, overall, the workshop identified broad commonalities that could serve as the basis for a joint approach by the Weimar Triangle towards Russia, such as the centrality of Ukraine's participation and consent in any kind of negotiations, the preference for a principled and conditional approach to any Russian diplomatic overtures, the shared restraint and understanding that Russia has to prove its credibility in a verifiable manner, and the consensus that no premature changes should be made to NATO's deterrence and defence posture. Consequently, the Weimar Triangle could consider the following measures:

- strengthen deterrence against Russia and bolster NATO's defence posture **by fully implementing the decisions taken at the NATO Summits in Madrid in 2022 and Vilnius in 2023**. To underline the reinvigorated Weimar Triangle, France, Germany, and Poland could jointly commit to making the necessary investments at the national level and filling the gaps in conventional military capabilities in line with the requirements of NATO's new operational plans and the New Force Model. The Weimar Three could **consider additional military deployments along the Eastern Flank** to further underscore their joint commitment to maintain a robust deterrence and defence posture. At the same time, the Weimar Triangle could reaffirm its will to strengthen precautions to limit the risk of involuntary escalation and a direct war between the Alliance and Russia by promoting and supporting adequate NATO-Russia military risk-reduction mechanisms (crisis hotlines, military-to-military dialogue);
- agree on and present to allies and partners a **Weimar vision for a set of guiding principles for a future strategy toward Russia**, based on a shared understanding of the serious and far-reaching nature of the threat posed by Russia, a commitment to refrain from unilateral outreach to Russia and the need to place Ukrainian agency at the centre of all actions regarding the course of the war and Ukraine's and Russia's role in European security;



- develop a **common Weimar approach to preconditions and red lines for engaging with potential Russian diplomatic initiatives**, including verifiable steps necessary for Russia to prove its goodwill and sincerity in any possible negotiations offers, as well as for precautionary measures in case Russia violates any future agreements (e.g., a snap-back mechanism for sanctions).

Given the currently unclear future course of the war in Ukraine and the uncertain role of the United States in European security in the coming months and years, consensus and cooperation among European nations, especially France, Germany, and Poland, are among the conditions for any meaningful strengthening of European security. Acknowledging the value of multilateral cooperation beyond the Weimar Triangle with other NATO allies and EU member states, there is space for the Weimar Three to play a more active role. Paris, Berlin, and Warsaw could therefore **seize the momentum and window of opportunity for the Weimar Triangle to emerge as an important European actor in foreign and security policy**. As a first step, by maintaining a substantial Weimar dialogue, based on the principle of equality among the three Weimar states, and by focusing on priority areas for short- and mid-term cooperation in the field of security, support for Ukraine, and applying pressure on Russia.

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE WEIMAR TRIANGLE—WHERE ARE WE COMING FROM?

There is probably no other sub-regional cooperation format in the European Union (EU) that is burdened with as many unmet expectations as the Weimar Triangle. Grouping France, Germany, and Poland, it was launched in 1991 as a response to the changed strategic situation in Europe in which the confrontation and division of the Cold War era were to be replaced with cooperation and respect, as envisaged in the Charter of Paris for a New Europe. Consequently, in the first years of its existence, “Weimar” was primarily seen as a tool to help Poland, the largest of the post-communist states and considered politically the most important, get on track towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

With Poland’s accession to NATO (1999) and the EU (2004), this task was accomplished, not without substantial assistance from France and Germany. The Weimar Triangle began to be seen as a potential “new engine” for Europe. Adding Poland to the Franco-German duo was often perceived as a promising way to forge a new avant-garde of European integration. Notably, cooperation in the field of defence was considered to be the primary area of trilateral collaboration.

Yet, despite the sometimes ambitious language of its political leaders, Weimar clearly lacked deliverables. In a display of a shared commitment to reinforcing European defence, France, Germany, and Poland jointly proposed in 2011 a set of reforms to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This idea was supported in 2013 by Spain and Italy, which turned the Weimar proposal into a “Weimar Plus” format. Yet, the United Kingdom’s opposition to the entire concept of the EU as a strategic actor caused this Weimar effort to stall. Next, the Weimar countries agreed to establish a joint EU Battlegroup, with Poland providing the bulk of the forces as the framework nation. It was activated in 2013, but—like all other EU battlegroups—saw no operational use, and the effort was never repeated. Weimar was also briefly involved in an international effort to defuse tensions in Ukraine at the time of the Revolution of Dignity. However, it was quickly replaced by the Normandy format and Minsk negotiations. Since 2015, Weimar has become less and less visible, be it at the political or expert level.

The reasons behind a distinct lack of results of Weimar cooperation in the security sphere were manifold: the incompatibility of French, German, and Polish threat perceptions, divergent approaches to the transatlantic bond, and different visions regarding European defence. While Poland had always been wary of a potential Russian threat, France and Germany regarded Russia as an attractive partner that needed to be supported on its path to eventual liberalisation. The French drive to make Europe autonomous from the U.S. was confronted with the Polish transatlantic outlook, which saw continued U.S. military engagement in Europe as a prerequisite for lasting peace in Europe. Finally, while Poland had been calling for investing into military capabilities, including for a high-intensity interstate war, France and Germany both focused on savings and cut their military assets, albeit not to the same extent. Neither the deterioration of the European security environment following the first phase of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 nor the transatlantic tensions during the presidency of Donald J. Trump in the U.S. have really pushed the three Weimar countries towards closer cooperation.

Dealing with the consequences of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, could serve as an incentive for closer Weimar cooperation in the foreign and security policy

domain. First, there is no longer any doubt in the three capitals that Russia poses a serious threat to peace in Europe. Even though the Weimar countries may still have differing views on the ultimate shape of the European security architecture, they are on the same page regarding the immediate political trajectory of Russia and the compelling need to counter it with robust defence and deterrence. Second, it has now become clear that the U.S., as the leader and catalyst of the international response to Russian aggression against Ukraine, has been indispensable for upholding peace in Europe, although its ability to remain militarily engaged in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific will be increasingly limited. Consequently, the notion of European autonomy or sovereignty has to be redefined. Third, the enormous challenge of providing military support to Ukraine revealed an uncomfortable truth about the state of European defence, both in terms of the readiness of the armed forces and the industrial capacity to sustain a prolonged war effort. All three Weimar countries are now seeking rapid increases in military expenditure and investment in new capabilities.

In view of these developments, there seems to be common ground for France, Germany, and Poland to try to reinvigorate the Weimar Triangle as a tool for pursuing joint initiatives. The three countries can seize the momentum and make a greater mark on European security than they have in the past decade. After 24 February 2022, the Weimar Three have been clearly put in the spotlight with regard to the strategic situation in Europe. Poland has emerged as a pivotal nation when it comes to security and defence on the Eastern Flank—or perhaps, the frontline—of NATO. Germany, with its promise of *Zeitenwende* has raised hopes that Berlin might finally assume the strategic responsibilities for maintaining peace in Europe that it has so long refused to reckon with and embrace. France, for its part, through its activities on NATO's Eastern Flank and support for Ukraine has been increasing its visibility in Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, neither Poland, nor Germany, or France alone will have enough leverage, political weight, or resources to rebuild the European security architecture after the end of hostilities in Ukraine. Only together, as the Weimar Triangle, and in close coordination with other partners, including the U.S., can the three countries increase the likelihood that a new, stable, and peaceful security order in Europe emerges from the rubble. This seems to be a worthy task for the Weimar Triangle.

## II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the two-day workshop, which took place under the Chatham House Rule in Warsaw in November 2023, was to **identify the challenges and opportunities for coordination and cooperation between the three major powers of continental Europe in selected areas of policy formulation towards Russia and Ukraine**. It deliberately did not cover the full range of the potential Weimar cooperation in the security domain. For example, the EU defence agenda, armament projects, and defence technological cooperation were not discussed. The workshop thus sought to serve as a platform for the exchange of different perspectives on specific strategic choices in order to better understand French, German, and Polish approaches to European security. It was also aimed to encourage the participants to engage in an open mutual exchange on the future of Europe's security architecture and the feasibility of a common approach of the Weimar Three.

For this purpose, five high-level experts each from France, Germany, and Poland were grouped into "national" teams and tasked with developing national positions in response to two prepared scenarios revolving around major strategic challenges facing our countries. These scenarios did not represent the organisers' most probable or preferred course of developments, but were designed to confront the participants with a challenge to which Weimar cooperation might be a response, or which would require the Weimar Three to consult and potentially act together. The experts were asked not to counter the scenarios, even if they considered them unlikely.

On the first day of the workshop, the national groups were presented with *Scenario I—The Future Approach towards Russia*, and on the second day with *Scenario II—Ukraine's Future Security and Role in Europe's Security Architecture*. After the presentation in the plenary, each national group worked on the scenarios in separate breakout sessions on the premise that they represented an informal group of trusted experts who were asked to advise their governments on the scenarios and formulate a national position based on their understanding of their respective country's priorities and interests. To inform their responses to the scenarios at hand and enable a comparison of the respective national point of views, both scenarios contained clusters of guiding questions.

Following the deliberations with their national peers in the breakout sessions, the groups reconvened in the plenary to present their results, identify key differences and commonalities, and discuss the prospects for a potential common Weimar Triangle approach. The conclusions on the policy options and next steps to revitalise the Weimar Triangle are presented in this report.

### III. SCENARIO I—THE FUTURE APPROACH TOWARDS RUSSIA<sup>1</sup>

It is mid-2025. Vladimir Putin has been dead for several weeks, but the Russian war against Ukraine continues as a war of attrition. The U.S. is now in the second term of Donald J. Trump, while Europe is struggling to maintain the interest and commitment of both political elites and the public to continue supporting Ukraine.

In Russia, a new Madame President is inaugurated, coming from a technocratic background and not directly linked to the decision to invade Ukraine. Russian society is predominately apathetic and does not question the new regime, but it is not certain whether the new president will be able to stabilise the situation in Russia in the long term, as mixed signals are coming from both the military and some factions in the system. The economy has clearly taken a significant downturn and the deep recession is taking a heavy toll on the average Russian. Putin's "pivot to the East" and to China has not brought the expected economic results. Overall, these developments are gradually undermining the Kremlin's position and the war is broadly seen as unwinnable. Some economists suggest that reviving cooperation with EU countries is necessary to avoid a collapse of the economy.

Among both European and American publics, the change in the Kremlin is immediately seen as an opportunity for diplomacy and a relatively easy way out of the widespread war-weariness. Some Western experts argue that the new Russian leadership could easily be toppled and plunge the country into even deeper chaos, posing serious security challenges for the entire transatlantic space, if it does not receive some form of outside support.

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#### *The Russian proposal*

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The new president announces her readiness to discuss the terms of an immediate ceasefire with Ukraine and the withdrawal of Russian forces from some parts of the frontline in Southern Ukraine (where the chances of holding positions were considered low anyway). In return, the new president calls on the EU, U.S., and their partners to lift sanctions, starting with the release of Russian Central Bank assets. The new president argues at a special meeting of the Valdai Club, that "*Russia and the West are not bound to be adversaries forever. We may, and we should, return to partnership and cooperation. This, however, must be based on a full understanding of Russia's security concerns. All we want is a stable and cooperative European security system, in which Russia is respected*".

This rhetoric is underscored by Russia's offer to begin strategic arms control talks with the United States and to develop a special regional security regime in Central and Eastern Europe. Moscow declares its willingness to discuss all aspects of its military posture in Europe, but only on the condition of reciprocity. Russia's new foreign minister argues that it would be necessary to "*undo all steps that brought Russia and the West to the brink of conflict*" to restore lasting peace in Europe. Next, Russia presents a set of proposals for NATO allies, which include:

- limits on troop deployments in areas adjacent to NATO/Russia/Belarus/Ukraine borders (on both sides of the border);

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<sup>1</sup> This is a summary of the scenario presented to the national teams during the workshop.

- a ban on “destabilising” missile deployments in Europe;
- a special restraint regime for multinational exercises;
- withdrawal of non-strategic nuclear weapons to national territories (with Russia offering to withdraw nuclear weapons from Belarus);
- revitalisation of the NATO-Russia Council, including a consultation mechanism that would allow any concerned state to request that a potentially escalating military activity be frozen.

Russia also suggests that, as a gesture of good will, NATO refrains from any decisions on its eastern enlargement for the duration of negotiations on its proposal.

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*Weimar steps in*

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The U.S. quickly engages in a dialogue on strategic arms control with Russia. President Trump signals that the U.S. is willing to consent to any arrangement on European security involving Russia, stating that “he does not care” about its merits unless it complicates U.S.-Russian strategic negotiations, which he sees as his potential legacy. The Trump administration signals to France and Germany that they could take the lead in coordinating the “European” response to Moscow’s proposal, but that they should consult closely with Poland and other interested countries. The UK appears reluctant to take a leading role as it is considering significantly reducing its military presence in Estonia due to serious financial constraints and political turmoil in Westminster. **The three Weimar countries decide to utilise the Weimar format in an effort to establish a common approach to Russia’s proposals, based on the shared assumption that they do not want to simply reject the Russian initiative.** They agree to develop a framework for a joint response to Russia and submit it for consideration by the EU, NATO members, and partners.



#### IV. SCENARIO I—OUTCOMES

The scenario on Russia's future role in Europe's security architecture confronted the three groups of national experts with a change in the Russian leadership in 2025 and an offer of dialogue by the new Russian president against the backdrop of an ongoing war in Ukraine, growing war-weariness throughout Europe and a significantly reduced commitment from the United States under the re-elected President Donald Trump.

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*“The greater the distance to Russia, the greater the concern for Russian stability”.*

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As a first step, the workshop sought to shed light on the respective national views on **Russia's internal stability**, the perceptions of the Russian threat in general and their implications for strategic considerations regarding Ukraine and the European security order. For both Germany and France, the stability of Russia following a change of power turned out to be of high concern, for fear of Russia descending into chaos and spreading further instability in Europe. Yet, while experts from both countries expressed a willingness to consider a dialogue with the new regime—provided certain preconditions were met—and not to reject outright offers of talks, the French and German participants advocated for a cautious approach. They warned against prematurely entering into a serious dialogue with a potentially unstable Russian regime (and thus legitimising it) and insisted on not responding to Russian proposals that were deemed unacceptable. They were cautious about the threat of falling for Russian ploys to reinforce their military position, disguised as dialogue initiatives. The Polish representatives argued that the fear of possible instability in Russia should not play a decisive role in designing the Western approach, let alone that Russia's stability should be defined as a goal of the West, especially since the likelihood of Russia actually sinking into chaos was considered low. Furthermore, the Polish team underlined that a change in leadership should not be confused with a change in Russia's foreign policy goals, as a new leader would likely emerge not from the opposition but from the current Russian elite.

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*Political systems and timing determine the role of domestic constraints.*

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Differences also emerged with regard to **domestic factors** and their influence on determining the national approaches to Russian initiatives. While the French political system, which grants the president comprehensive powers in foreign, security, and defence affairs, would likely put no particular domestic constraints on the government's decision-making, in Germany, war fatigue and public perception were deemed as potentially decisive factors in Berlin's reaction to Russian proposals. Among other things, the prospect of lifting some sanctions in response to seemingly conciliatory steps by Russia's new regime may be appealing to many in Germany. In addition, the upcoming German federal election in 2025 would likely impede any medium- and long-term considerations by the current government. Here, too, the Polish experts presented a very different approach. There would be no major business or political forces that would push for normalisation with Russia and pressure the Polish government into entering talks with Moscow. Although some sectors of the economy, such as agriculture, could benefit from an easing of sanctions against Russia, this is outweighed by the widespread

perception of a continuing Russian threat and a high level of suspicion of any Russian dialogue proposals.

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*No changes to NATO's military posture*

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Despite the national differences in the assessment of potential reactions to the Russian proposals, there is broad agreement on the **conditions** under which negotiations with Russia could take place. First, all three national groups stressed the need for **Ukraine's participation and consent** to any kind of discussion of the proposals and their implementation. Second, the French, German, and Polish teams advocated to maintain a **principled approach** and deemed core values such as Ukraine's right to join the EU and NATO as non-negotiable. Third, the Weimar Three experts agreed that **Russia would first have to take certain steps and demonstrate goodwill**. In this respect, however, the national teams had different ideas about how Russia should actually prove its credibility in a sustainable and verifiable manner. From the Polish perspective, implementing the Ukrainian peace formula—and particularly the withdrawal of all Russian troops from Ukrainian territory—would be the prerequisite for any kind of negotiations. Ideally, Russia should also commit to internal democratic reforms, though Polish experts deemed this highly unlikely. German experts would favour a gradual process with several steps, including a ceasefire (or at least verifiable steps towards a ceasefire), an undoing of Russia's annexations and credible efforts to resolve the security situation in the Black Sea as starting points for negotiations. German experts also suggested a snap-back mechanism on sanctions similar to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran: an automatic reintroduction of Western sanctions if Russia does not comply with the agreed terms. While France would also favour a ceasefire, experts regarded an immediate end to the targeting of civilians, demonstrating constructive behaviour in international institutions such as the OSCE, and adhering to the principles of the Charter of Paris as further trust-building steps that Russia would have to take to establish its credibility.

Moreover, the French, German, and Polish national experts stressed that **any change to NATO's deterrence and defence posture** represented a clear red line at this stage and was therefore non-negotiable, especially in the absence of a ceasefire. The Polish experts, in particular, underlined that for their country, which perceives itself as a NATO frontline state, no compromise on the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture would be acceptable until the decisions taken at the NATO Summits in Madrid in 2022 and Vilnius in 2023 had been fully implemented.

Prematurely opening **arms control negotiations** with Russia was another red line shared by the French, German, and Polish teams, until Russia had demonstrated its reliability by establishing a ceasefire, as well as by fully returning to and complying with the arms control regimes to which it had previously committed itself.

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*Slight disagreement on formats but no unilateral approach*

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On the question of the **preferred format or institutional framework for engagement with Russia**, the Weimar Three agreed that, given the shared commitment to place Ukrainian agency at the centre of all measures, no country would unilaterally seek bilateral negotiations



with Russia if a Weimar consensus and a Ukrainian buy-in could not be achieved. Given the circumstances, the participants acknowledged a window of opportunity for a joint Weimar Triangle approach, though in different variations. The French perspective attached particular importance to the participation of the European Union (Weimar Triangle + EU Representative) to lay the foundation for a discussion on the EU level. For Germany and Poland, the **reduced role of the United States under President Trump** would be a significant test. While German experts expressed concerns that a second Trump administration would no longer be a reliable partner for Europe and Berlin in particular, Polish experts even feared that the U.S. could then force an end to the war in Ukraine without taking into account European interests. Based on past experience, the Polish representatives shared a similar mistrust of a potential Franco-German outreach to Russia without Poland. Polish experts thus favoured a “Plus” format, i.e., the Weimar Three plus Ukraine, to engage with Russian proposals. This view was largely shared by the German group of experts, who saw the EU as too marginal in terms of its capacity to engage in a strategic dialogue with Russia, while other established institutions (e.g., OSCE, NATO-Russia Council) were not suited to play a significant role in dealing with a new Russian leadership.

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### *Conclusions*

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While the scenario discussion revealed persistent—and anticipated—differences in national views and political preferences on some issues (such as domestic constraints or the role of the EU), it also identified far-reaching commonalities that could serve as the basis for a joint approach by the Weimar Triangle towards Russia. The centrality of Ukraine’s participation and consent to any negotiations with Russia, the preference for a principled and conditional approach to any Russian diplomatic overtures, the shared understanding that Russia has to prove its credibility in a verifiable manner, and the consensus that no premature changes should be made to NATO’s defence and deterrence posture provide broad common ground between France, Germany, and Poland. Also, none of the country teams outright accepted any of the Russian proposals; all experts advocated for prudence and restraint in going forward with Russian dialogue initiatives as described in the scenario. In addition, experts from all of the Weimar countries assumed that there is potential for a revival of the Weimar Triangle in the context of the scenario, and ascribed to it an important role, especially with the “strategic absence” of the United States and disinterest from the United Kingdom.

## V. SCENARIO II—UKRAINE’S FUTURE SECURITY AND ROLE IN EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE<sup>2</sup>

It is July 2024. The Ukrainian counter-offensive in the south stalled at the end of 2023 and the conflict has turned into brutal positional warfare. Putin has made any peace talks with Ukraine conditional upon international recognition of Russia’s territorial gains and Moscow is clearly preparing for a long war of attrition with Ukraine. The winter of 2023/2024 brought further massive Russian missile attacks on Ukrainian cities and energy infrastructure.

The U.S. is preparing for the 2024 presidential election, with President Biden seeking his second term. He has been fiercely attacked by the Republicans for his policy of supporting Ukraine with “U.S. taxpayer’s money”. Recent opinion polls show that these reproaches are increasingly resonating with the American people, and that U.S. assistance to Ukraine is thus becoming less and less popular with the public.

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### *The Ukrainian proposal*

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Dissatisfied with the outcome of the NATO Summit in Washington, which produced neither an invitation for Ukraine to join the Alliance nor bilateral U.S. security guarantees, **President Zelensky, during a Weimar Plus meeting with the leaders of France, Germany, and Poland, publicly asks them to provide “iron-clad” security guarantees to Ukraine.** Zelensky argues that Ukraine has been defending the rest of Europe against Russian expansionism for more than two years, and now needs a “security shield” to rebuild its armed forces and fend off Russian attacks.

The Ukrainian side consequently presents the Weimar countries with a **proposal for a set of bilateral security guarantees to Ukraine**, coordinated under the umbrella of the Weimar Triangle. The Ukrainian proposal includes the following elements:

- The guarantees should be *iron-clad*, permanent, and legally binding in terms of an automatic response to Russian attacks, with specific “triggers” to be jointly established;
- The guarantees should be *implementable*—the Ukrainian side insists that its partners should determine in advance how they would prepare and implement military assistance to Ukraine;
- The guarantees would take effect *immediately*, before any ceasefire or peace agreement is reached, and would cover all territory under Ukrainian control, and in the future, also any other liberated territories;
- The guarantees should be accompanied by a long-term commitment to assist the Ukrainian side by providing weapons and ammunition, other equipment, and military training.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a summary of the scenario developed by Daniel Szeligowski (PISM) and presented to the national teams during the workshop.

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*Weimar steps in*

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The Weimar Triangle leaders decide to respond cooperatively to Ukraine's request. They instruct the relevant national bodies to work out concrete proposals that their countries could put on the table. **The three countries agree in principle to provide Ukraine with some kind of security commitments, rather than guarantees to Ukraine, under the Weimar umbrella**, and to this end they are willing to move beyond the language of the NATO Summit Communique (broadly following the Vilnius text) and the G7 Joint Declaration of Support to Ukraine. The scope and details of the Weimar offer are to be determined among the three countries.

U.S. President Biden welcomes the idea and stresses the need for Europe to take greater responsibility for supporting Ukraine, while noting that the U.S. cannot under the current domestic circumstances go beyond the already provided bilateral security assistance to Ukraine. Several European countries, including the United Kingdom, express interest in the new security mechanism.<sup>3</sup> If the Weimar Triangle countries are able to develop a common position on the language of security guarantees, they would consider joining it.

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<sup>3</sup> The scenario was developed before the details of the United Kingdom's plans for bilateral security agreements with Ukraine were made public in early 2024.

## VI. SCENARIO II—OUTCOMES

This near-term July 2024 scenario puts the Weimar Triangle countries directly in the spotlight because of the Ukrainian request for implementable security guarantees (as opposed to general statements of political support or assurances similar to the Budapest Memorandum), the difficult frontline situation, and the absence of U.S. leadership or NATO agreement on Ukraine membership. The three groups of experts were asked to consider a constructive response to the Ukrainian proposal, to weigh the expectations of the Ukrainian side against their perceptions of national security interests, and to examine the feasibility of providing military help to Kyiv.

Given the increasing likelihood of a situation in which Ukraine may urgently require more significant European military assistance in its fight against Russia, and in which the U.S. administration's capability to assist Kyiv may be increasingly limited, this workshop scenario can no longer be seen as far-fetched.

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*“We cannot lose Ukraine politically or militarily, but ...”.*

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The participants of the workshop strongly agreed on the **need for continued support of Ukraine by the three Weimar countries**, including in the military dimension. Abandoning Ukraine or “opting out” of their responsibility for backing the Ukrainian war effort was not seen as a reasonable option for any of the three countries, regardless of their geographical location. It was also seen as dramatically weakening their position vis-à-vis Russia. Overall, the importance of Ukraine for wider Euro-Atlantic security was acknowledged and underlined.

However, noting the gravity of any such decision, the participants were extremely cautious regarding the question of whether the Weimar countries alone should **explicitly commit themselves to Ukraine's defence beyond what has already been discussed** by Ukraine's partners like the G7. The German experts were of the opinion that while it would be possible to discuss strengthening assistance commitments to Ukraine, contemplating bilateral “security guarantees” would be a bridge too far for Berlin, and could in any case only be considered after the war—the same applies to NATO membership for Ukraine. As long as there was no end to the war, the German team advocated for increasing military assistance to help Ukraine defend itself against Russia, for example by setting up a special fund for Ukraine similar to that for the Bundeswehr, and by relocating more foreign defence industry production facilities to Ukraine. The Polish team was perhaps the most vocal in highlighting that Ukraine's membership in NATO and covering it with Article 5 guarantees underwritten by all Allies is the most credible option that could deter Russia from escalating against Ukraine in the future, unlike the Budapest Memorandum or any of the bilateral or “coalition of the willing” models for security guarantees. For Polish experts, Ukraine's accession to NATO, even while the war was still going on, was seen as a priority, as it would also provide the necessary protection for Ukraine's progress towards integration into the European Union. The French team proposed a different approach, in which the question of security guarantees to Ukraine would be considered in the context of the EU accession process and the future inclusion of Ukraine under the mutual aid and assistance obligation of Article 42 (7) of the Treaty on the EU. The French group also suggested that Ukraine could be covered by a gradually increasing framework of EU-related security guarantees, with France playing a leading role (also due

to its nuclear status). Overall, the Polish and French groups seemed to share the view that any security arrangements with Ukraine would have to be a temporary measure pending Ukraine's full integration into the EU and NATO.

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*Discussing the “boots on the ground” option*

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The German and Polish teams were most categorical in rejecting the option of providing security assistance that would involve “boots on the ground”, i.e., the **deployment or potential deployment of their armed forces** in a combat role on the territory of Ukraine. Although the experts agreed that this would have to be a part of providing truly actionable and credible security guarantees, both teams argued that this option was unlikely to be accepted by their respective political leaders and the public. However, while they agreed in principle that military deployments were out of the question, Polish and German experts still differed in some respects. The Polish group did not discuss the military feasibility of deployments, and highlighted that Poland as an immediate neighbour of Ukraine and a potential target for Russian aggression would need to proceed with extra caution even when discussing such options. In the case of Germany, it was highlighted that the Bundeswehr would not be able to meaningfully contribute to deploying any significant forces to Ukraine in the 2024 timeframe, even if such a decision were considered at the political level.

The French position seemed to reflect its tradition of interventionist security policy and also the greater freedom of manoeuvre and authority of the president in its political system. It was suggested that when faced with a grave emergency, such as the prospect of a **collapse of the Ukrainian military** under Russian assault, France may contemplate a range of conventional military options, including the delivery of emergency military assistance or even the provision of air support. With the exception of the nuclear dimension, there would be no *a priori* red lines for France, even if executing a particular military option would be limited by France's available military capabilities and require prior forward deployment of assets. At the same time, this option would only be activated in the case of a real and immediate risk of Ukrainian military collapse. The French team also concurred with others about the lack of readiness at the national level to deploy French forces into Ukraine.

During the subsequent discussion, members of the other teams suggested that if faced with such dramatic developments, their countries would not remain indifferent. Poland could consider measures such as supporting a “no-fly zone” or “no-attack zone” around major Ukrainian cities and critical infrastructure hubs, while Germany could contemplate forward deployments of forces on NATO countries' territory to provide “extended security” around and across their borders with Ukraine.

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*What can Weimar put on the table?*

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All three groups agreed that while the Ukrainian proposal as described in the scenario (providing “iron-clad” guarantees) would be difficult to accept by the Weimar Triangle alone, it would be possible to work jointly on Weimar proposals to meet at least partially the expectations of the Ukrainian side. The French team suggested exploring the option of a **dedicated consultation mechanism with Ukraine** to coordinate and better synchronise

the military assistance provided by the three countries, to facilitate intelligence sharing, in emergency situations. Ukraine could activate such a mechanism to request specific support and assistance to deal with the particular contingency, and the Weimar countries would pledge their speedy and cooperative (but not automatic) response.

The Polish group suggested that a new formula for providing military support to Ukraine could be developed by the three countries, building on their bilateral contacts and pledges to Ukraine. Among the new principles of such a **Weimar assistance package** could be the lifting of all political restrictions on the types of weapons provided to Ukraine and giving Kyiv a free hand to use them against Russia on all of its territory and in line with military necessity rather than political constraints. The pledge of assistance could also include a guarantee to open the countries' defence industries to the maximum extent for production in support of Ukraine's war effort and with the involvement of the Ukrainian arms industry.

All three teams agreed that increasing the efficiency and scope of training of Ukrainian forces could be part of the Weimar offer, with the Polish group noting that the potential presence of trainers and advisors within Ukraine could also be explored. Moreover, it was suggested that it would be possible for the three countries to increase their **maritime and overall security presence in the Black Sea** area together with other partners.

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#### *Questions about the feasibility and credibility of a Weimar-only approach*

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One of the most important questions in responding to the scenario, flagged by all the national teams, was the issue of the feasibility and credibility of the three Weimar countries offering security guarantees to Ukraine alone. The Polish group's insistence on NATO membership as the only reasonable option for Ukraine can be explained partially by the recognition of the crucial role of the United States. The German group explicitly stated that it would be difficult for Berlin to develop options without Washington's involvement. Even the French experts noted that any bilateral French security arrangements with Ukraine would not be sufficient, and that the coalition providing any kind of guarantees would also need to be larger than the Weimar Three, even though the Triangle could still provide the impetus for action as far as continental Europe is concerned. The **key role of the United States** was linked by the participants not only to the financial, military, and material resources at its disposal but also to the assumption that any far-reaching pledges of security guarantees to Ukraine would be immediately tested on the ground by Russia.

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#### *Conclusions*

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In response to the scenario, all three national groups recognised the necessity and responsibility of the Weimar countries to maintain and possibly increase their support to Ukraine, even under the conditions of reduced U.S. assistance during the election period and regardless of the lack of progress on Ukraine's NATO membership. This provides common ground for France, Germany, and Poland. At the same time, the participating experts were exceptionally wary of supporting commitments along the lines of stand-alone Weimar Triangle security guarantees to Kyiv, which could lead to their direct involvement in fighting Russia alongside Ukraine. This seems to reflect a realistic assessment of the "red lines" in the three national

discourses, the concern about the dangers of political posturing not backed by credible military planning, the general agreement about the centrality of the United States in providing support to Ukraine, as well as shared doubts about the credibility of guarantees given by the three countries alone. Each team's level of caution appeared to be related to their geographic proximity to Ukraine and Russia, with the Polish team being particularly wary of automatic security commitments or combat "boots on the ground" while stressing that Ukraine should be free of any constraints on the use of weapons supplied by the West, including to attack targets inside Russia. The tenor of the discussion changed when the question of how to deal with the worst-case scenario of an imminent Ukrainian military defeat was raised, and experts gave more speculative answers about how Poland, France, and Germany would react to such a contingency.



## VII. POLICY OPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Even though the discussions at the workshop focused on hypothetical scenarios, they pertain to critical elements of the future European security architecture, namely the place and role of Ukraine in it and the relationship between the West and Russia. Hence, the authors of this report believe that the results of the workshop exercise can have direct relevance for shaping the current agenda of the Weimar Triangle. The scenario-based approach proved that it is possible to develop a common Weimar position while respecting the interests, preferences, and “red lines” of each country, without resorting to mutual recriminations for past behaviour. The developments since November, both in Ukraine and in the U.S., have added to the sense of urgency regarding the need for the Weimar countries to act together. The following recommendations are derived by the authors of this report from the proceedings of the November workshop and the proposals discussed there.

In order to seize the above-mentioned **window of opportunity for the Weimar Triangle to re-emerge as an important European actor in foreign and security policy in general**, the three countries could consider:

- Building on Weimar Foreign Ministers’ February 2024 meeting, strengthening regular and substantive **Weimar dialogue formats at both the high political and expert/practitioner levels**. In particular, the dialogue should be based on an open and frank discussion of the three countries’ specific threat perceptions, interests and priorities, and aim to identify areas for joint trilateral action that could help advance the shared goals of France, Germany, and Poland on major strategic issues facing Europe;
- Jointly identifying and communicating **priority areas and specific objectives for short- and medium-term Weimar cooperation** for supporting Ukraine and containing Russia.

Given the shared understanding that Ukraine and its success in the war against Russian aggression are central to European security, **the Weimar countries should take practical steps to shift the military and other assistance to Ukraine into a higher gear. This implies a set of bold actions both at the national level** (increasing the domestic defence industrial capacity and opening it to Ukraine) and at the **European level** (pushing for the rapid adoption of effective EU instruments), especially if Europeans are to compensate for reduced arms supplies from the United States.

In implementing this overall objective, the Weimar Triangle countries could:

- Develop and communicate to allies and partners a **common strategic approach of the Weimar Triangle to the course of the war over the next 12 months**, with the goal of enabling Ukraine’s ultimate victory in its fight against Russia, while taking into account the situation on the ground and preparing for contingencies. To this end, the Weimar Triangle states would need to harmonise their respective understandings of the war situation, Ukraine’s needs, and Russia’s objectives; share information about their own assistance plans; and define, in close consultation with Ukraine, the realistic goals of the Weimar Triangle and the means necessary to achieve them;
- Urgently explore options for increasing and better coordinating crucial military assistance to Ukraine in the coming months, with the aim of announcing a **Weimar Military Assistance Package** to strengthen Ukraine’s military potential in a coordinated manner, and to send



a clear political signal of the joint commitment of the Triangle. The package could initially include “pooling” existing national plans for arms, equipment and ammunition supplies, training, and steps to boost arms production levels. It could later be expanded to include new elements, such as the joint production and delivery of weapons for Ukraine by the Weimar countries. Such assistance would accompany rather than replace support given through other mechanisms, and could be open to other countries;

- Scrutinise the idea of establishing a **Weimar Consultation Mechanism with Ukraine**, open to other interested European states, which would complement the security commitments provided to Ukraine bilaterally. In particular, such a mechanism should address contingency scenarios, including the possibility of major Russian military advances, or the inability of the United States to continue to provide military support, and prepare measures to be undertaken during any such crisis. At the same time, Poland, France, and Germany would have to manage expectations about **the extent** of the Weimar Three’s commitment to Ukraine. In dialogue with Ukraine, the Weimar Triangle should clearly and openly communicate the red lines and national limitations related to the nature and scope of the Weimar commitments;
- Improve and adapt **strategic communications** on the war in Ukraine: (1) to domestic publics to better explain the relevance of supporting Ukraine on its path to victory over Russia and to maintain the strategic endurance needed to continue support; (2) to countries outside the group of allies and partners on Ukraine, such as the Global South, to build support and counter Russian disinformation and false narratives; and (3) to Russia to signal strength, resolve, and cohesion;
- Explore **the implications of Ukrainian accession talks and eventual EU membership for European security and defence**. In particular, the issue of linking European and Ukrainian defence technological and industrial bases should be addressed with the aim of identifying how Ukraine can further benefit from both the short-term defence-industrial instruments recently established by the EU and from a long-term cooperation under the upcoming European Defence Industrial Strategy. In addition, the focus should be on developing practical steps to facilitate Ukraine’s integration into the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy in all areas, in particular with regard to strengthening the operational dimension of the CSDP. Finally, the practical implications of Ukraine’s accession for the interpretation and application of the mutual assistance clause under Article 42 (7) of the TEU should be examined;
- Prepare and work as the Weimar Triangle for the best possible outcome of the **NATO Summit in Washington, D.C.**, in July 2024, in terms of bringing Ukraine closer to NATO membership and increasing practical support to Ukraine through the NATO framework.

Based on the shared understanding of the threat posed by Russia to the European security order and **regarding the policy towards Russia**, the Weimar countries could:

- Further strengthen deterrence against Russia and bolster NATO’s defence posture by **fully implementing the decisions taken at the NATO summits in Madrid in 2022 and Vilnius in 2023, and perhaps going beyond them in a trilateral format**. To underline the reinvigorated Weimar Triangle, France, Germany, and Poland should make a joint, politically binding commitment to make the necessary investments at the national level and to fill the gaps in conventional military capabilities in line with the requirements of

NATO's new operational plans and the New Force Model. A joint Weimar initiative in the area of military cooperation, which would go beyond the commitments taken in NATO, such as additional military deployments along the Eastern Flank, could also signal the resolve to maintain a robust deterrence and defence posture. At the same time, Weimar could reaffirm its will and strengthen precautions to limit the risk of involuntary escalation and a direct war between the Alliance and Russia by promoting and supporting adequate **NATO-Russia military risk-reduction mechanisms** (crisis hotlines, military-to-military dialogue);

- Agree on and present to the allies and partners a **Weimar vision for a set of guiding principles for a long-term strategy toward Russia**, based on a shared understanding of the serious and far-reaching nature of the threat posed by Russia, a commitment to refrain from unilaterally reaching out to Russia, and the need to place Ukrainian agency at the centre of all actions regarding the course of the war and Ukraine's role in European security. This would be especially important in the context of the Russian narrative claiming that the Western policy of opposing Russia is increasingly fragile and bound to collapse, and the possible rise of pro-Russian political forces within European countries;
- Develop a **common Weimar approach to preconditions and red lines** for dealing with any potential Russian diplomatic initiatives or offers of negotiation, including the identification and establishment of verifiable steps necessary for Russia to prove its goodwill in its dialogue initiatives, or the prior development of precautionary measures (e.g., a snap-back mechanism for sanctions similar to the JCPOA) in case Russia violates future agreements.

## VIII. WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

The group of experts who participated in their personal capacity in the November 2023 workshop in Warsaw included, among others:

**Lt. Col. (GS) Torben Arnold**, Visiting Fellow, Research Division: International Security, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)

**Dr. Maria Domańska**, Senior Fellow, Russian Department, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)

**Lt. Gen. (ret.) Dr. Andrzej Fałkowski**, Senior Fellow, Casimir Pulaski Foundation

**Dr. Pia Fuhrhop**, Deputy Head, Research Division: International Security, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)

**Dr. Pierre Haroche**, Lecturer in International Relations & International Security, School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London

**François Heisbourg**, Special Adviser, Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS)

**Rafael Loss**, Coordinator for Pan-European Data Projects, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)

**Léo Péria-Peigné**, Research Fellow, Security Studies Center, French Institute of International Relations (IFRI)

**Marta Prochwicz-Jazowska**, Program Manager, Warsaw Office of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)

**Dr. Ulrich Speck**, Independent Foreign Policy Analyst and Advisor, columnist for Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)

**Dr. Marcin Terlikowski**, Deputy Head of Research, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)

**Gesine Weber**, Research Analyst and Fellow, Geostrategy Team, The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)



This report is based on a workshop organised by the Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF) and the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), in which experts from the Weimar Triangle states—France, Germany, and Poland—from think tanks and academia, but in many cases with former diplomatic or military careers, participated. They gathered in Warsaw in mid-November 2023 and were confronted with two separate scenarios related to the future of European security. The first scenario involved a hypothetical regime change in Russia. The second scenario concerned a Ukrainian plea for security guarantees from the three Weimar states in view of Ukraine's difficult situation on the front and dwindling support from the United States. The experts were grouped into “national” teams and tasked with developing the national responses, which were then presented and discussed in the plenary session.

After setting out the rationale for this exercise, this report summarises the two scenarios and recaps the reactions of the French, German, and Polish experts to these scenarios. This includes their observations on the frameworks for formulating and implementing their security and defence policies, the most likely national responses to contingencies involving Russia and Ukraine, and assessments of the prospects for a joint Weimar Triangle approach. Finally, based on these findings, the report proposes a series of actionable steps that can be taken by the Weimar countries to seize the momentum and use the Triangle as a mechanism for formulating and implementing policy towards Ukraine and Russia.

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