

Staatsräson: Empty Signifier or Meaningful Norm?

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Following the shocking Hamas atrocities against the state of Israel and its people on 7th October 2023, German state representatives keep voicing unwavering support for Israel: “(A)t this moment there is only one place for Germany. The place beside Israel. That’s what we mean by saying: Israel’s security is German *Staatsräson*”¹⁾, Chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasised in the German Bundestag, confirming “full solidarity with the people of Israel” and [emphasising](#) “that Germany stands unwaveringly on Israel’s side.”

As this public claim leads beyond solidarity, which other states have also expressed in light of the Hamas atrocities, many wonder what – if anything – the Chancellor’s reference to the norm actually means *beyond* uttering moral support? For example, does it imply that, if and when required by Israel, troops of the German Bundeswehr will be dispatched to fight side by side with the Israel Defence Force? On public news channels in Germany and abroad, Scholz and his government have remained somewhat elusive at times even offering contradicting answers to the effect of ‘it won’t come to that’ (Habeck) vs. ‘even with military support’ (Baerbock).

What does the norm mean then?

The following draws on norm research in International Relations (IR) to identify potential behavioural instructions from the norm’s meanings-in-use in history, media, and science. Accordingly, *Staatsräson* is considered as a fundamental norm with broad moral reach, little specification of behavioural instructions, and therefore, the expectation of a high degree of contestation. To generate behavioural instructions, the best-case scenario would centre on facilitating engaged public debate.²⁾ In the absence of constructive dialogue, the worst-case scenario would be objection and/or resentment.³⁾ To identify the norm’s meaning and effect, IR norms research studies a norm’s enactment by groups of affected stakeholders. Based on the ethnographic method of ‘following the conflict’ to sites of contestation (i.e. media, policy documents or academic writings) meanings are identified, mapped, and evaluated.

Meanings-in-use: What Does History Say?

Defined as “the maxim for state action, the laws of motion for the state”⁴⁾ *Staatsräson* is a contested maxim. Its intermittent ‘use’ over the centuries has not been straight-forward. Therefore, it is helpful to retrace the norm’s quality taking shape through actual ‘use’. For example, in a comment on “politics without morals” Münkler recalls the use of “emergency powers” by warlords in besieged Florence

in the 14th century. Here, a historical interpretation of the norm's meanings-in-use points to Machiavelli's political theory which "entails the core of what was to become *Staatsräson* in later times, or – when in disapproval – Machiavellism, namely, the subsumption of all ethical values under the survival of the state and the benefit of the fatherland."⁵⁾ However, over time, the two maxims of Machiavellism and *Staatsräson* came to mean different things. While Machiavellism became the description of politics that developed against the background of inefficient moral norms, *Staatsräson* represented the attempt to replace the obsolete goal of facilitating moral life politically on the grounds of stability and self-preservation of the state.⁶⁾

So where does this take us with regard to the norm's present behavioural instructions?

More recently, the norm was famously invoked by Chancellor Angela Merkel before the Knesset in 2008:⁷⁾ "This historical German responsibility is part of the matter of state ('*Staatsräson*') of my country. This means, that for me as German Federal Chancellor Israel's security is never negotiable. And if this is the case, then *these cannot be empty words* in the moment of truth."⁸⁾ Notably, on that occasion, the norm was not interpreted to mean that it carried any obligation for military support such as dispatching German troops to Israel's defence.⁹⁾ Despite Merkel's appeal to fill the statement with meaning, some 15 years on, this has not been achieved. In the absence of clear behavioural instructions, a norm remains an empty signifier, leaving room for speculation. This concern was detectable by former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's reaction cautioning that Merkel's statement was an "emotionally comprehensible, yet foolish view which could have serious consequences".¹⁰⁾

This observation notwithstanding, the norm has been revived several times thereby adding substance to Germany's special responsibility to "pay off a historical debt, to compensate victims of the Holocaust and protect the state representing them in exchange for rehabilitation and recognition of Germany as a "good" state".¹¹⁾ Two lines of interpretation prevail in the academic discussion: on the one hand, it is viewed as "motivated by the strategic attempt of the German government to 'whitewash' its Nazi past", on the other, it is emphasized as "the sense of guilt and moral obligation as driving a commitment to reconciliation".¹²⁾

In the present context, the prevailing ambiguousness of the norm creates a degree of uncertainty which undermines the German government's security discourse in so far as it actually generates a context of uncertainty, given the absence of clear behavioural instructions for implementing *Staatsräson*. For "the potential political impact of norms, considering that they are a social phenomenon which carries specific contextualised meanings (...) is prone to create contestation at best and conflict at worst when dealt with out-of-context."¹³⁾ This perception of uncertainty is enhanced by [discussions about contested compliance](#) – including on behalf of the German government – with international humanitarian human rights law.

“What does *Staatsräson* actually mean”¹⁴⁾ then?

Meaning-in-use: What do the Media Say?

As Steinke notes, “These days, it conveys a sense of utter commitment for people to speak about *Staatsräson* which supposedly means that Germany stands in full support of Israel’s security. Almost like a constitutional principle.”¹⁵⁾ This interpretation is derived from a public statement on 26 October 2023 where Chancellor Scholz presented the German government’s [position](#) that “Israel is a democratic State with humanitarian principles that guide it and therefore you can be sure that the Israeli army will observe the rules arising from international law in its conduct. I have no doubt about that.” Against the backdrop of this statement, *Staatsräson* is a matter of belief, it certainly is “not a constitutional principle” as Steinke notes. And yet, “*Staatsräson* sounds hymnic, you can practically hear the tenor horns.”¹⁶⁾ The point is echoed by a growing number of [media reports](#). Headlines such as “Israel: the difficulty with matter of state”, or “German matter of state: what does it actually mean?”¹⁷⁾ reflect this general puzzlement.

And the German government’s [website notes](#): “It is the maxim, according to which the Federal Government acts. Especially in this difficult situation, it was important for Federal Chancellor Scholz to emphasise this during a meeting with Israel’s President Benjamin Netanyahu, once again.” As ZDF, Germany’s second main publicly-financed TV station, [notes](#): “(N)o comment of any of the German parties without this particular statement, these days. But there is no longer an agreement about what it precisely means.” As Marietta Auer [explains](#), *Staatsräson* actually means that the survival of one’s own state is valued above all. The interesting aspect in its current use, she says, is that here the survival of another state is made into the survival of one’s own state.

The following addresses the imbalance in the norm’s prescribed task (*i.e.*, enhance and maintain *security*) and its actually perceived message (*i.e.*, *insecurity* about its meaning).

Meanings-in-Use: What does Science Say?

Given that a norm’s meaning is constituted through everyday practice, iterated interactions about a norm’s meaning are ‘cue-giving’. Through this activity, the norm’s active meanings are shaped and the recognition of the norm’s meanings rises. This has an effect on the perception of a norm as – literally – meaningful. If the meaning is shared by the majority using the norm, it becomes powerful and is considered legitimate. This layer of social construction of a norm matters for all types of norms notwithstanding whether they are politically agreed or legally grafted into treaties or constitutions.

Politicians have been asked what particular type of engagement with or for the state of Israel is implied by reference *Staatsräson* (*i.e.* financial aid, economic aid,

military support). So far, these questions have generated mostly elusive replies. The answers matter, however, especially as people are struggling to identify and understand the norm's meaning not only inside Germany's increasingly multicultural society but also abroad. Without going into too much detail due to limitations of space a random account of social media posts for example on *BlueSky* or *Twitter/X* demonstrates a general cluelessness about the German government's strategy from an international context, when noting, for example, that "Germany lost the plot" or asking: "What is the matter with Germany?"

So far, German voting behaviour at the UN ranks among the few public 'cues' offered with regard to the norm's meaning. Yet, for implementation to have a lasting effect among designated norm-followers, it is vital to proceed in a mutually recognised procedure. In the best-case scenario, contestations evolve among respectful contestants with an interest in mutually elucidating learning, by contrast, in the worst-case scenario, contestations will lead to polarisation and enhanced political conflict. In liberal democracies, a scenario of balanced contestation is the preferred procedure. This would entail 'reactive contestation' (*i.e.*, opposition to the norm's implementation) as well as 'proactive contestation' (*i.e.*, constructive engagement with a view to implementing the norm). To be successful, this procedure requires guidance such as an invitation to dialogue in local settings where the norm is discussed. In the absence of constitutionally defined meanings, enacting the norm requires a better understanding of its societal embeddedness and moral roots.

*To go beyond a statement of solidarity and enable a general disposition of moral support, more detail about the norm's meaning is necessary.*¹⁸⁾

Meanings-in-use: An Invitation to Dialogue

A norm with few behavioural instructions and broad moral underpinning generates contestation, and this is necessary and desirable.¹⁹⁾ Given the ambiguousness of the norm, the leading question is 'What are the behavioural instructions carried by the norm?' A recent post on *Verfassungsblog* centres on the finding of a "narrowing down of discursive options" (German: *Diskursverengung*) as an effect of the current use of *Staatsräson* in Germany. This constraining effect of *Staatsräson* is considered as a threat for "early career researchers" without tenure, like the author, who therefore chose to write under a pseudonym.²⁰⁾

The German government's public statements and their claim to stand by Israel based on the maxim of *Staatsräson* were addressed to German 'citizens' including residents who aim to obtain German citizenship. So far, apart from public statements of unwavering support, there is little to go by with regard to how the norm's meanings are going to develop and to which effect. A norm without behavioural instructions is hard to implement and will generate resentment and deep contestation in the worst-case scenario. One constitutional change stands out: in Saxony-Anhalt, one of Germany's 16 *Länder*, obtaining German citizenship now requires the applicant's "written commitment to Israel's right to existence and to condemn any actions directed against that existence". The commitment is explicitly [linked](#) to German

Staatsräson. It will be interesting to see whether this move will state an example for others to follow, or, whether it will generate the opposite effect.

As the rough sketch of public engagements suggests, the general public is non-the-wiser. This state of bemusement is enhanced when speaking to observers from abroad. Against this background, it is arguable whether any instructions to act according to the maxim can, in fact, be successful. As this post suggests, quite the opposite may be the case. For only a contested norm can ever be perceived as a legitimate norm. In fact, critical dialogue enabling 'proactive' contestation is necessary in order to generate and reveal behavioural instructions. Currently prevailing non-dialogical forms of communication such as 'open letter writing' or 'text-biting' on social/media are counterproductive for this purpose. They contribute to hardening the situation of uncertainty and ignorance, thereby paving the ground for novel hidden narratives about *Staatsräson*. The advice for those with the responsibility to act upon and with an interest in actively upholding the norm would therefore be to embrace an invitation to public dialogue.

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