

Russia and Europe: Friends, Foes or None of the Above?

In the context of the 165th Bergedorf Round Table in St. Petersburg Nora Müller, Executive Director International Affairs at Körber Foundation, spoke with Judy Dempsey, Nonresident Senior Fellow and Editor-in-Chief of Strategic Europe at the Carnegie Europe und Andrey Kortunov, Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) about Russian-European relations.

Nora Müller: So hello from St. Petersburg, where we are holding our 165th Bergedorf Round Table in collaboration with the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) on the topic: "Friends, Foes or None of the Above? Russia and Europe in the New Age of Uncertainty". Now, the participants of this Bergedorf Round Table are about 35 senior policy makers and experts from Russia, from several European countries, NATO member states and the United States.

My name is Nora Müller. I am the Executive Director of the International Affairs Department at Körber Foundation. And I'm very happy to have Judy Dempsey, Editor-in-Chief of Strategic Europe at Carnegie Europe, with me and Andrey Kortunov, who is the Director General of RIAC, the Russian International Affairs Council.

Now, we talked a lot about the status quo of the relations between Russia and Europe and I would like to start off by asking you, Judy, what was your one main take away from the discussion today?

Judy Dempsey: The complete lack of trust and the lack of trust feeds into the title of this very important event, "Friends, Foes or None of the Above?". In some ways we're friends, I wouldn't say we're foes, but I realized during the course of the discussion that not only was the trust absent, but the narratives were entirely different. And the more we discussed this, the more I realized that the Europeans are particularly weak in defining what they want as regards to their own projection of soft power. They're extremely weak in terms of what kind of relationship they want with Russia.

And on the Russian side, I saw not so much this time a sense of victimhood, but a sense of "we're going to play your game now". I got the sense that some of the Russian participants were saying: "Well you can do this, you Europeans, you can go around imposing your values, your soft power. We're going to adopt things as well, so don't you tell us what to do, were going to do it too." So it gets back into what Andrey brought up originally, the competition. There is a competition and this is a competition that cannot be won.

Nora Müller: Andrey, Judy mentioned the lack of trust that has come up in our discussion today, and also the diverging narratives. Do you think it's really all about just diverging narratives or is it also about divergence of interests eventually?

Andrey Kortunov: Well, I think that interests, at least partially, depend on your narratives and on the values that you stick to. So you cannot say: "Let's discuss interests, let's forget about everything else." It's not like that, or at least in my view. However, definitely I think that there should be a way out, because narratives can hardly be reconciled at this stage. We should look beyond narratives, we should probably look into the future and probably we should be more specific. I think it's interesting that when [the participants] got down to something really, really concrete like modalities of the Middle East settlement, I think the discussion became much more productive, because people started discussing very particular issues.

Nora Müller: Do you think it has to get much worse before at some point it may get better, as some of the participants argued?

Judy Dempsey: Well, I hope it doesn't get worse because it's bad enough, frankly. If this continues, I think the conflict will be played out in the lands between, in Eastern Europe, and it's highly vulnerable and it's highly unstable now. Whether we look at Belarus, Moldova, Georgia is still alright, which way Armenia is going to go. The lands between are struggling to complete the transformation of this post-Soviet phase and they find it extremely difficult, because of how Russia perceives this part of their western borders, and indeed how the Europeans see this part of their Eastern borders. I think some of the participants said: "It will only get worse before it gets better." Well, those stuck in the middle will carry the brunt of this.

Nora Müller: Andrey, my sense was we had very little consensus on how to interact with these countries in the middle. From the European participants there was the argument made that these countries are of course masters of their own destiny and they are sovereign to make their own decisions as to which alliance they want to be part of. On the other hand, there was also the argument of some form of guaranteed neutrality that could do the trick. What is your take on that?

Andrey Kortunov: Well, my personal take is that it is not the real problem. It is important and it is a symptom of a bigger problem and the bigger problem in my opinion is our common inability, maybe unwillingness, to integrate Russia into the Euro-Atlantic security and development systems because a sphere of influences only the second best option. The best option is to become a legitimate player in this new set of coordinates and that's exactly what we failed to do over the last 25 years; let's face it.

Nora Müller: Judy ...

Judy Dempsey: Can I come in ...

Nora Müller: Sure.

Judy Dempsey: This is a huge political and psychological problem for the Europeans. The Europeans are not united over what relationship they want with Russia; they're highly suspicious about integrating Russia because they feel this is the beginning of the end of the Euro-Atlantic structures.

Deep down in the European psyche, especially in the Baltic states but even in the West European states, is the feeling that from the Russian point of view Russia may want to be integrated but the goal is to end the transatlantic relationship and this relationship with America.

Nora Müller: So what's the way out? Is the way out a new Helsinki? Is it a Paris II? Do we need a whole new set of rules, Andrey?

Andrey Kortunov: These days they have a fashionable adjective which is called "hybrid." There are hybrid regimes, you know, hybrid wars, hybrid economic models, and usually it has a kind of derogatory meaning; but there are some good hybrid things, let's say hybrid cars.

Nora Müller: Yes.

Andrey Kortunov: I think that what we have in Europe, if we are lucky, we will have a hybrid security system, which means that at certain levels we will unfortunately have to stick to the old Cold War practices. There will be two security systems, the East and the West, but we can stabilize the situation; maybe we can agree on confidence building measures and some transparency, but it will not be integrated.

Of course, at least not in the foreseeable future, but I speak about hybrid because there are not just problems of the 20th century but there are common issues. The new security agenda, which includes let's say migration, terrorism, climate change, cyber, and we should not forget about that. At this second level we should try to build common European regimes including Russia. It will be difficult, of course suspicions will be there. I'll see a lot of frustrations on the way but I think it is still possible not to limit ourselves to just replicating the Cold War pattern or a Cold War light or whatever it is, but also to maintain some opportunities for common approaches to common challenges and threats.

Nora Müller: What would such a new security architecture mean for a country like Ukraine?

Andrey Kortunov: Well, definitely Ukraine should be present at both levels. I think that the level of the Cold War ... you know a lot will depend on what the Western goals toward Ukraine are and what the West is really, willing, and capable of offering Ukraine.

We heard today many statements that probably Ukraine will have to leave with neutral status and the first step in my personal view would be to look at what we can do with the Minsk agreements; if we cannot implement the Minsk agreements in full let us single out, let's say the first two points, which are: cease-fire and a withdrawal of heavy weapons from the frontline. Why? You know these two points were not implemented because there was, and there is, no enforcement mechanism.

So I know I get back to the idea of a more robust peacekeeping force, maybe mandated by the United Nations Security Council, maybe operated with

some assistance from OAC or other institutions, but we have to start from somewhere.

Nora Müller: So Judy, is compartmentalizing Minsk II, is that the way to go?

Judy Dempsey: This relationship between us and them, Russia and Europe, won't improve unless we see some kind of resolution to the Ukraine crisis. The Ukraine crisis is the key to putting in any kind of future security arrangements from Belarus down to Georgia or Moldova. It's just impossible to think of neutrality, Greek neutrality, anything unless the Ukraine issue is tackled and it's going to demand an enormous imagination and political will. I'm not so sure you would get the mandate from the UN and I don't think there's an appetite really for UN white helmets, or whatever you call them, it won't happen but I much prefer an enforced OSCE. It's a lot of countries, 57, it should be in Russia's interest to have stable borders, that would take time but it needs a real political push from the main leaders in Europe and, of course, from Kiev and Moscow to do this.

Minsk cannot be implemented if we don't push it further now, nothing will happen until after the elections in Germany, but even then you could just muddle through; and muddling through has its own inbuilt further instability.

Nora Müller: What was your sense? Where did you see most potential for a Russian-European collaboration in the Middle East? Is it Syria? Is it Libya? Is it counter-terrorism?

Judy Dempsey: Syria has to be dealt with first. I was quite impressed with the discussion on the Middle East and a little bit reassured because the Russians are leaving aside the whole situation of Assad. There's a real attempt in Astana to bring as many parties as possible to the table and I was speaking to one of the specialists involved in Astana, the Russian Morozov and it was clear that you need some kind of inclusive negotiations; the main players have to be included and we cannot wait for President Donald Trump to change his mind or do this or do that or the other. The instability is going to spread, that's on Syria. I do see a little bit of hope there.

On Libya: Libya is a huge security threat and a stabilization threat and of course it's going to threaten Europeans even more because of the huge number of migrants coming up into Libya and the whole push-out factor. This is where it would be very interesting, from the diplomatic point of view, if the Russians and maybe the Americans worked together on this, which you'd have to bring in the Saudis and the Iranians, and the Europeans would have to do serious development aid stabilization. They've been very bad on this but this is what they could do because they aren't going to have any hard power at their disposal and they don't want to get into this.

Nora Müller: I have a very final question for you Andrey. Referring to Robert Kagan, who said that Europe is from Venus, the US is from Mars, Russia may be from Jupiter but certainly not from the Death Star. What was the deeper meaning of this statement?

Andrey Kortunov: Well, Jupiter first of all, is further away from the sun, so it's pretty cold there. Second it's a big planet so the power of gravity is strong; so life is tough on Jupiter. I think it's more difficult than it is, arguably, on Mars or Venus; so I think that affects the attitudes. It affects how Russians see our solar system. We see it from a distance, life is hard but fortunately short, as they say in Russia, so life is really hard and I think that sometimes we fail to see what others see; that it is not just about competition, it's about cooperation. It's not just about a rigid legal arrangement, sometimes it's about trust. It's not just about who gets what but it's about public politics. I think that we do not enjoy life as you do in Europe and arguably they do in the United States. I think sometimes we overdramatize our problems and we consider ourselves to be more unique than we are in reality, but we belong to the same solar system and this is what unites us and that is something that should bring us together, at least on most important matters. That's how I read it.

Nora Müller: That's a wonderful note to end on. Judy, Andrey, thank you very much for this. It is talking with each other rather than about each other at Körber Foundation and we look forward to continuing this conversation.