

**162ND BERGEDORF ROUND TABLE**

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Moscow, 10–12 July 2016

**RUSSIA AND  
EUROPE:  
ESCALATED  
ALIENATION?**

KÖRBER FOUNDATION  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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September 2016

## Executive Summary

- The crisis between Europe and Russia has solidified and become the new norm. Hopes of rapprochement were disappointed; instead, relations between Moscow and its European neighbors are developing towards a form of “escalated alienation.”
- Full implementation of the Minsk Agreement is becoming increasingly unlikely. In the short term, all parties could accept a situation in which the conflict in Ukraine froze in its present state. However, in the medium to long term, a further “frozen conflict” would pose a significant risk to European security.
- In light of profound disagreements between Russia and the West, fundamental debate about the European security order is neither purposeful nor opportune at the current time. Rather, tangible steps towards de-escalation are the order of the day.

## Russia and Europe: “Escalated Alienation”

The participants of the 162nd Bergedorf Round Table agreed that Russia and Europe were confronted by a substantial crisis of confidence. Some discussants even viewed the immediate situation as a new “low point in relations.” They maintained that the crisis was not only expressed through opposing narratives, but also through diverging values and interests. This view was followed up by a German participant who described the situation as “escalated alienation,” and a Russian participant who labeled the West’s promise of a “strategic partnership” as illusionary. Finally, the two sides were even said to lack a minimum level of mutual predictability.

Some participants stressed that both parties would have to address a number of historical differences before the existing conflict could be overcome, as these had contributed to the situation. Only then would it be pos-

sible to find paths out of the current crisis. Other discussants saw this route as unhelpful, as they feared it would merely result in both sides apportioning blame. Rather, it was time to recognize the status quo and deal with it as constructively as possible. Moreover, there was very little scope in today’s climate for rebuilding lasting trust; therefore, it was essential that neither side viewed the other merely in terms of a threat. This was said to be the only way of achieving the minimum goal of “peaceful coexistence.”

**“RUSSIA AND EUROPE  
EVEN LACK A MINIMUM  
LEVEL OF MUTUAL  
PREDICTABILITY.”**

## De-escalation: the Primary Objective in Ukraine

The Russian participants pointed out that the conflict in Ukraine was not the main reason behind the present-day crisis in Russian-European relations. Nevertheless, Ukraine demonstrated why there was very little prospect of seeing lasting improvements in Russian-European relations: considerable effort and substantial political capital would be needed to overcome the existing status quo. As such, rapprochement based on anything greater than

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the lowest common denominator – acute risk minimization and de-escalation – was highly unlikely at this time.

Moscow was said to lack the necessary political will and the strategic foundations with which to achieve progress in the peace process in eastern Ukraine.

Similarly, the Ukrainian government was described as unable to meet the criteria set out in the Minsk Agreement – in part because it had failed to garner sufficient domestic support. This problem was compounded by the fact that the Europeans faced numerous trouble spots in and around Europe, and this had noticeably reduced their willingness to work

towards a peaceful settlement in Ukraine. Finally, Europe was said to have failed to pursue its own initiatives with sufficient vigor, especially the attempts to place political conditions on visa facilitation for Ukrainians. One discussant emphasized that both sides were more interested in maintaining the status quo than promoting a long-term solution. Moreover, several Russian discussants refused to accept the European demand that Russia should take the first steps in implementing the Minsk Agreement and withdraw its troops from eastern Ukraine. The Russian participants continued by criticizing the “rigid European attitude towards Moscow” and arguing that it had been a mistake to prevent Russia from re-joining the G8. They also expressed resentment about Berlin’s failure to invite Putin to the German capital. A group of European discussants responded by calling for the EU and its member states to “shower” Russia with invitations to talks, particularly given the current tensions. They maintained that visa liberalization for Russian visitors to the EU could represent an important step in this direction. Nevertheless, other participants called for the resumption of comprehensive talks with Moscow to be linked to clear conditions, namely de-escalation in eastern Ukraine and the implementation of the Minsk Agreement.

This led one discussant to warn of renewed violence in eastern Ukraine as “low-intensi-



ty conflicts” could always develop into full-blown military hostilities. Once a situation such as this had started, the spiral of escalation would be hard to stop. Consequently, it was only through the implementation of the Minsk Agreement, the participant stressed, that further confrontation could be prevented.

### The Future of European Security

The participants expressed widely divergent opinions on the issue of a new European security architecture. Whereas Russian participants were in favor of reforming the existing order, European discussants were adamant that the validity and continuity of the rules set out in the Helsinki Final Act of the CSCE and the Charter of Paris should not be called into question. As such, a Russian participant’s point that the annexation of Crimea demonstrated that the “old” European security order was indeed dead received a harsh rebuke. Nevertheless, the Russian side contended that the rules and agreements that had been laid out after the Cold War had been interpreted and implemented differently. Whereas from the Euro-Atlantic perspective, the contemporary security architecture was aimed at guaranteeing a united, secure and stable Europe, in Moscow’s view, the West had dictated the

fundamental principles of the European security order and failed to take the country’s interests into account. Moreover, the West had regularly disregarded these very principles and, as such, undermined their effectiveness. This had been the case in Kosovo in 1999, in Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011.

The Russian participants continued by arguing that the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU threatened Russia’s security and stability. Moscow had not been surprised by the decision taken at the NATO summit in Warsaw to station 4000 alliance soldiers on a rotational basis in Poland and the Baltic countries and to deploy a missile defense system in Romania. Notwithstanding, “remilitarization in Europe,” they emphasized, embodied substantial potential for escalation. Some Russian participants demanded that instead of military upgrades and continual eastward expansion, the West should finally acknowledge Russia’s security needs. They also pointed out that the EU’s Association Agreement with Ukraine had forced the country to choose between Europe and Russia. Other discussants disagreed vehemently with this view, arguing that neither the EU nor NATO had “advertised” for new members. Rather, it

**“THE WEST CANNOT ACCEPT MOSCOW QUESTIONING FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE EUROPEAN SECURITY ORDER.”**



was the central and eastern European states that had actively sought EU membership.

The European participants stressed that the West would not accept Moscow questioning fundamental principles of the European security order, as doing so would amount to formal recognition of the annexation of Crimea. At the same time, it was not even clear which criteria could be used to develop a “new security architecture” and how a “new

CSCE Final Act” might look like in practice.

In this context, a participant stressed the differences between Russian and European notions of successful neighborhood policy,

particularly concerning Eastern Europe. The Europeans argued against dividing the region between Russia and the EU into spheres of influence, or treating it as a “buffer zone.” Regulatory models that foresaw “big” states deciding the fate of their “smaller” neighbors, they continued, belonged irrecoverably to the past and were inconceivable in the 21st century. Furthermore, limits should not be placed on the rights of states belonging to the Eastern Partnership to freely choose their own alliances. Other participants suggested that the “Finland Model” could provide a feasible solution for the countries between Russia and the West.

**“IN THE PAST, THE OSCE HAS MAINLY BEEN USED BY THE WEST ‘TO EXTINGUISH FIRES.’”**

One participant summed up the situation with the view that fundamental debate about the European security order was neither purposeful nor opportune in today’s political situation. Instead, concrete steps towards de-escalation were the order of the day. This included minimizing the risk of collisions between Russian and NATO aircraft and warships, such as during “snap exercises”. Properly informing the respective counterpart in advance about military maneuvers was viewed as essential if a minimum level of transparency, coordination of technical processes, and, thus, predictability, were to be guaranteed.

In the current situation, the primary objective had to be ensuring that dialogue could be continued and that the parties remained willing to talk. This required the deployment of all existing platforms for dialogue. In particular, greater importance would have to be attached to the OSCE; in the past, this organization had mainly been used by the West “to extinguish fires.” After all, if the OSCE were used appropriately in this context, it could develop into a long-term “bridge builder.” The same was said of the NATO-Russia Council, which particularly needed to be used in times of crisis. Finally, continued exchange at all times and levels was said to represent the best means of preventing unforeseen developments.



## Russia and Europe: How Much Cooperation is (Still) possible?

The participants viewed the chances of Russia and Europe developing a shared vision of the international system and the European security order as extremely low. Nevertheless, Moscow and the European capitals, it was argued, did at least occasionally have overlapping interests.

Russia and Europe were now confronted with a new security situation: numerous conflicts – such as in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan – were said to be contributing to instability and uncertainty on the European periphery. Although stability in the Middle East was in both Russia's and Europe's interests, the two sides still often acted against each other. This was said to apply above all to Syria. However, several participants reminded that as Russia had developed into an influential power in the Middle East, a long-term solution for Syria was now unimaginable without Moscow's participation.

Stability and reconstruction in Afghanistan, as well as the fight against international terrorism and organized crime, were further issues on which selective cooperation could be based. Joint projects between the Eurasian Economic Union and the EU were said to be possible in the fields of energy, transport, and the economy. However, fundamental differences between these organizations also stood in the path of wide-ranging cooperation.

Finally, several discussants cautioned against overestimating the influence of selective cooperation and the possible benefits it could have for future Russian-European relations. However, other participants countered that pragmatic cooperation, especially in "low politics," could indeed improve Russian-European relations in the long term.

**“A LONG-TERM SOLUTION FOR SYRIA IS NOW UNIMAGINABLE WITHOUT MOSCOW'S PARTICIPATION.”**

**HOSTS:** Dr. Thomas PAULSEN, Member of the Executive Board, Körber Foundation, Hamburg  
Ambassador Prof. Dr. Igor IVANOV, President, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC);  
fmr. Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow

**CHAIRS:** Nora MÜLLER, Executive Director International Affairs, Körber Foundation, Berlin  
Dr. Andrey KORTUNOV, Director General, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC),  
Moscow

#### LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Dr. Stefanie BABST, Head, Strategic Analysis  
Capability to the NATO Secretary General and  
Chairman of the Military Committee, North Atlantic  
Treaty Organization (NATO), Brussels

Dr. Vladimir BARANOVSKY, Member of the Board,  
Institute of World Economy and International  
Relations (IMEMO), Russian Academy of Sciences  
(RAS), Moscow

Marieluise BECK, MP, Member, Committee on  
Foreign Affairs; Deputy Chair, German-Ukrainian  
Parliamentary Friendship Group, German Bundestag,  
Berlin

Dr. Joachim BERTELE, Deputy Director General,  
Foreign Policy, Security Policy and Global Issues,  
Federal Chancellery, Berlin

Dr. Evgeny BUZHINSKY, Lieutenant-General (ret.);  
Chairman, Center for Political Analysis (PIR Center),  
Moscow

Ambassador Dr. Oleksandr CHALYI, President, Grant  
Thornton LLC; fmr. First Deputy Minister for Foreign  
Affairs of Ukraine, Kyiv

Dr. Sławomir DĘBSKI, Director, The Polish Institute  
of International Affairs (PISM), Warsaw

Dr. Lothar DITTMER, Chairman of the Executive  
Board, Körber Foundation, Hamburg

Ambassador James DOBBINS, Distinguished Chair,  
Diplomacy and Security, RAND Corporation,  
Arlington, VA

Prof. Dr. Alexander DYNKIN, Director, Institute  
of World Economy and International Relations  
(IMEMO), Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS),  
Moscow

Dr. Gernot ERLER, MP, Coordinator for Intersocietal  
Cooperation with Russia, Central Asia and the  
Eastern Partnership Countries, Federal Foreign  
Office; Special Representative of the Federal  
Government for the Chairmanship of the  
Organization for Security and Co-operation in  
Europe (OSCE), Berlin

Alexander GABUEV, Munich Young Leader 2011;  
Senior Associate and Chairman, Russia in the Asia-  
Pacific Program, Carnegie Moscow Center, Carnegie  
Endowment for International Peace, Moscow

Prof. Dr. Aleksey GROMYKO, Director, Institute of  
Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), Moscow

Eric GUJER, Editor-in-Chief, Neue Zürcher Zeitung  
(NZZ), Zurich

Christiane HOFFMANN, Deputy Head, Berlin Office,  
DER SPIEGEL, Berlin

Ambassador Prof. Dr. h.c. Wolfgang ISCHINGER,  
Chairman, Munich Security Conference, Munich

Ambassador Prof. Dr. Igor IVANOV, President, Russian  
International Affairs Council (RIAC); fmr. Minister of  
Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow

Kristina KALLAS, Acting Director, University of Tartu  
Narva College, Tartu

Dr. Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA, MP, Munich Young  
Leader 2014; Parliamentary State Secretary for the  
European Affairs of Latvia, Riga

Ute KOCHLOWSKI-KADJAIA, Managing Director,  
Eastern Europe Business Association of Germany,  
Berlin

Dr. Andrey KORTUNOV, Director General, Russian  
International Affairs Council (RIAC), Moscow

Dr. Konstantin KOSACHEV, Head, Committee on  
International Affairs, Council of the Federation,  
Moscow

Ambassador Sergey KOZLOV, Deputy Director, Middle  
East and North Africa Department (MENAD), Ministry  
of Foreign Affairs, Moscow

Alexander Graf LAMBSDORFF, MEP, Vice-President,  
European Parliament, Brussels

Michael Georg LINK, Director and Head, Office for  
Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR),  
Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
(OSCE), Warsaw

Prof. Dr. Yaroslav LISSOVOLIK, Chief Economist,  
Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), Moscow

Ambassador Prof. Dr. Vladimir LUKIN, fmr. Human Rights Ombudsman of the Russian Federation, Moscow

Fyodor LUKYANOV, Chairman, Council of Foreign and Defense Policy; Editor-in-Chief, Russia in Global Affairs, Moscow

Dr. Alan MENDOZA, Munich Young Leader 2011; Executive Director, The Henry Jackson Society, London

Prof. Dr. Marie MENDRAS, Professor, Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA), Sciences Po, Paris

Ambassador Alexey MESHKOV, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow

Nora MÜLLER, Executive Director International Affairs, Körber Foundation, Berlin

Dr. Thomas PAULSEN, Member of the Executive Board, Körber Foundation, Hamburg

Prof. Dr. Volker PERTHES, Executive Chairman and Director, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

Alexander RAHR, Project Manager “Russland kontrovers”, German-Russian Forum, Berlin

Dr. Norbert RÖTTGEN, MP, Chairman, Committee on Foreign Affairs, German Bundestag, Berlin

Prof. Dr. Karl SCHLÖGEL, Fellow, Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation, Munich

Brigadier General Reiner SCHWALB, Defence Attaché of the Federal Republic of Germany in the Russian Federation, Moscow

Ambassador Dr. Pyotr STEGNY, fmr. Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Israel, Turkey and Kuwait, Moscow

Prof. Dr. Dmitri TRENIN, Director, Carnegie Moscow Centre, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Moscow

Ambassador Vyacheslav TRUBNIKOV, Member of the Board, Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Russian Academy of Sciences; General of the Army, Moscow

Ambassador Rüdiger VON FRITSCH, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to the Russian Federation, Moscow

Gabriele WOJDELKO, Program Director Russia in Europe, Körber Foundation, Hamburg

Dr. Igor YURGENS, President, All-Russian Insurance Association, Moscow

Paul ZAJAC, Deputy Director, Policy Planning Staff, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, Paris

Marek ZIÓŁKOWSKI, Deputy Minister; Undersecretary of State, Eastern Policy and Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Warsaw

THE BERGEDORF ROUND TABLE

Initiator	Dr. Kurt A. Körber (†)
Coordinators	Dr. Thomas Paulsen Nora Müller
Program Managers	Christin Knüpfer Elisabeth von Hammerstein
Address	Körber Foundation Berlin Office Pariser Platz 4a 10117 Berlin Phone +49·30·20 62 67-60 Fax +49·30·20 62 67-67 E-mail ip@koerber-stiftung.de Twitter @KoerberIP @paulsen_thomas @MuellerNora facebook.com/KoerberStiftungInternationalAffairs www.bergedorfer-gespraechskreis.de

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Editor	Elisabeth von Hammerstein
Translation	Simon Phillips
Photos	Körber Foundation/Yurii Sergeev
Design	Das Herstellungsbüro, Hamburg

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Dr. Lothar Dittmer, Körber Foundation, Kehrwieder 12, 20457 Hamburg

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