

GERMAN-RUSSIAN INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE

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RUSSIA AND THE EU: COOPERATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

KÖRBER FOUNDATION
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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Executive Summary

- EU-Russian relations require a new start. Future dialogue should focus on interests and explore against this backdrop the possibilities for cooperation.
- The OSCE has limited scope for influence. Russia and the EU disagree on how to interpret the OSCE's fundamental principles as laid out in the Charter of Paris.
- Russia and the EU are equally concerned about the instability of the Central Asian states. Nevertheless, strong engagement on the part of the EU in the region remains unlikely.

Germany and Russia

The participants agreed that relations between Europe and Russia required a new start because the Ukraine crisis had aggravated the political debate. Accordingly, rather than focusing on shared values or past breaches of trust, several participants encouraged the

“THE EU HAS A KEEN INTEREST IN ENSURING THAT RUSSIA IS REINTEGRATED INTO INTERNATIONAL STRUCTURES.”

concerned parties to formulate precisely their national interests and to use them to explore the possibilities for cooperation. In particular, the participants highlighted economic issues as an area of common interests that provided specific opportunities for cooperation. Nevertheless, they noted a potential for conflict when it came to relations with neighboring countries as well as on the future international order.

A German participant stated that the recent loss of trust had made it harder for Russia and the EU to discuss each other's national interests openly. Furthermore, Mos-

cow intended to become as independent from other countries as possible in international affairs. In this respect, the EU had a keen interest in ensuring Russia's integration into international structures again, as this would increase its “predictability.” A Russian participant expressed a lack of understanding as to why existing institutions such as the NATO-Russia Council were not being used more intensely or being revived, as they were primarily developed to encourage such predictability. Moreover, others stressed that while Russia seemed unpredictable to Europe, European policy remained just as unpredictable to Russia. One Russian participant stated that Russian military engagement was probably a substitute for the absence of domestic political reform.

The Future of the OSCE

Several participants maintained that full implementation of the second Minsk Agreement was unrealistic. In this context, Russian participants called for a discussion about the political process that would follow this agreement. However, when it came to the status of Crimea, the participants believed that there would be no agreement on this issue in the near future.

A German participant warned against excessive expectations of Germany's chairmanship of the OSCE in 2016, as the organization was said to lack the ability to take strong action. Furthermore, the OSCE's partner countries had diverse interests, and this meant that it would not be able to implement "crisis resolution". Instead, the participant argued, the OSCE should focus on "crisis mitigation." Against this backdrop, it remained unclear which importance Russia attached to the OSCE, as Russian foreign policy was

"THE OSCE CANNOT UNDERTAKE 'CRISIS RESOLUTION' AND INSTEAD SHOULD FOCUS ON 'CRISIS MITIGATION.'"

said to run counter to essential OSCE principles such as the inviolability of borders and respect for human rights. This led to the question as to whether cooperation would be possible on technical aspects if an agreement could not be reached on political issues. The Russian participants stressed that although Russia hoped for a successful German chairmanship, they still had doubts about the OSCE's usefulness due to the changes that had been made to the international order since the organization was founded in Helsinki in 1975. Accordingly, a new understanding of the purpose and application of the OSCE's ten principles was need-

ed, as these were now being interpreted and applied differently.

Several Russian participants contended that the EU was expressing *soft power* through its support for political parties and NGOs in Russia. This was reproached as targeted interference in Russia's internal affairs and as a violation of the Charter of Paris. German participants countered this criticism by arguing that *soft power* developed out of the attractiveness of a country's social model, and therefore could only be exercised when foreign communities expressed interest in that model. It was not understandable, they argued, why Russia felt threatened by the interests of its people. The Russian participants explained that this situation had come about through Russia's shortage of internal modernization. Still, they upheld their claim that Germany, in particular, was exercising influence in Russia. Germany, they argued, continued to exert *soft power* through institutions such as the Goethe Institute. Russia's support of the Front National, they added, could be interpreted as a demonstration of how interference could manifest itself through *soft power*, although the Russian government did not identify with the goals of the Front National. Notwithstanding, some German participants argued that Russian support for the Front National undermined the credibility of Russia's position towards Europe.

"SOFT POWER DEVELOPS OUT OF THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF A COUNTRY'S SOCIAL MODEL."

The Eurasian Economic Union and the EU

The Russian participants maintained that the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) were not in direct competition because – unlike the EU – the EEU had been consciously planned as an economic and not a political union. In addition, the EEU was said to be still in a process of institutional development, and the proof of its economic viability had yet to be determined. The economic interests of the EEU’s member states differed to a high degree, and no single member acted as the institution’s economic powerhouse. Nevertheless,

“THE EU AND THE EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION ARE NOT IN DIRECT COMPETITION.”

with the EU. On the contrary, the EU could serve as a model for the institution. Many EEU member states were said to explicitly wish for consultations with the EU on specific issues. This could contribute towards rapprochement between the two institutions.

Several German participants pointed out that the EU owed much of its economic success to the transfer of sovereignty to Brussels; this was not the case within the EEU. However, despite the political differences between the two projects, the German participants believed that technical cooperation between the two entities was certainly possible. Nevertheless, Russian participants noted that a joint economic project stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok would have to take into account China’s new Silk Road. This led the German side to clarify that the EU would view this form of a common economic area as a rival to the Transatlantic Trade and Invest-

Russia continued to ascribe great importance to the EEU. EEU membership was not intended to rule out relations

ment Partnership (TTIP) and, if the EU had to choose between the two, it would prioritize the treaty with the United States.

Russia and Europe in Central Asia

The Russian side expressed concern over a possible “spillover” of terrorism and cross-border crime from Central Asia to Russia. An organized political transformation within these countries was viewed as unrealistic because of the absence of strong institutions. This could lead to instability, which in turn would be worsened by the lack of concepts for sustainable economic development. In response, the German participants emphasized the low level of European interest in the region and explained that this had been the case at least since the military withdrawal from Afghanistan. Similarly, the EU was also concerned about the spread of terrorism and the growing number of Central Asian fighters broadening the ranks of the IS; despite this, the EU expected to play little more than an assistive role in the region in the near future. Instead, the German side argued, it would be up to Russia and China to provide an example of successful cooperation in the region.

“RUSSIA, THE EU AND CHINA SHOULD WORK TOGETHER TRILATERALLY IN CENTRAL ASIA.”

In this context, a Russian participant proposed trilateral cooperation in the region between Russia, the EU, and China, with Russia guaranteeing security, the EU promoting institutional change, and China building infrastructure. A German participant questioned this idea, as Central Asian states were still not interested in political transformation. As

an alternative, another Russian participant called for the joint creation of a secure transport corridor to Europe, which, the participant maintained, would reflect the interests of the Central Asian countries, the EU, Russia, and China.

Russian participants shared the analysis that the reason behind the tense security situation in the region was less about competition among external powers and more about their lack of interest in the region. Finally, the Russian side reminded that many aspects of the region still represented uncharted territory to both the EU and Russia.

Russia and Europe in the Middle East

German participants called for increased efforts to cut off IS from its resources and to provide an effective counter-narrative to the organization. They also viewed an agreement with Russia as vital in the fight against IS. In fact, an agreement was said to be essential if incidents such as the shooting down of a Russian aircraft by Turkey were to be prevented

“RUSSIA AND EUROPE MUST FIGHT TOGETHER AGAINST IS.”

in the future. Some participants argued that inclusive discussions along the lines of those taking place in Vienna represented a step in the right direction towards ending the war in Syria. Nevertheless, they would have to be open to representatives of the Assad regime; although the regime was part of the problem, it also had to be part of the solution. Finally, a Russian participant reminded that President Assad had been the only person able to guarantee con-

tinuity and stability in Syria before the crisis. Several German participants were critical of this view and maintained that it was not IS that were the primary cause of refugee flows, but Assad’s attacks on the Syrian population. Furthermore, supporting Assad, they argued, increased the risk of pushing Sunnis into the arms of IS.

A German participant stressed the importance of ensuring that any future vision for the region had to come primarily from the Arab states. Importantly, the Arab Spring was said to have demonstrated the limits of Western influence. Other participants disagreed. The Arab states, they argued, were unable to adopt this role currently because there were barely any “functioning” states in the region. Besides, attempts by the EU to stabilize the region through regional trade relations had failed. This meant that Russia and Europe were obliged to engage more vigorously in the region.

On the issue of cooperation between Russia and the EU, the absence of a single European position led Russian participants to call for EU member states to be more open about their national interests in the region. The German participants agreed, affirming that until now the EU had been unaware of the importance of committing itself more firmly to the region. This was particularly necessary because of the region’s proximity to Europe and due to the withdrawal of the US. Accordingly, massive investment was needed in strategy development. The German participants continued by stating that they were still unsure about the interests that Russia was pursuing in Syria.

“NOT IS, BUT ASSAD’S ATTACKS ON THE SYRIAN POPULATION ARE THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF REFUGEE FLOWS.”

Finally, a German participant noted that the fight against IS had been made more difficult because most regional actors did not perceive IS as their greatest enemy. Cooperation in the fight against IS was said to require a shared understanding of what needed to be achieved in Syria and of which local forces constituted appropriate allies. Additionally,

this was said to be essential if potential allies in the region were to be convinced to participate in a solution. Importantly, a Russian participant closed by arguing that the sharp differences in interests between Europe and Russia and those of regional players might still stand in the way of European and Russian participation in this process.

The German-Russian International Dialogue (GRID)

As part of the German-Russian International Dialogue (GRID), Russian and German politicians and experts come together twice a year to discuss questions of European security and EU-Russia relations in a confidential atmosphere. The aim is to enable a stable group of participants to continually share their experiences and to develop understandings about the perspectives for EU-Russia relations. Meetings alternate between Moscow and Berlin. The Körber Foundation runs the project together with the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).

This summary was written by Körber Foundation and contains a range of arguments that we view as relevant to the current policy debate. It will be sent to the participants of the German-Russian International Dialogue as well as to selected policy makers.

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