

**GERMAN-RUSSIAN INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE**

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Moscow, 3 December 2016

# **RUSSIA AND EUROPE IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY**

KÖRBER FOUNDATION  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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## Executive Summary

- The outcome of the US presidential elections has added new uncertainties to the relationship between Russia and the West. A substantial improvement of US-Russian relations is not to be expected. For Europe, the main lesson learned is to take on more responsibility in foreign and security policy. For Ukraine this implies that conflict resolution efforts in Eastern Ukraine are at risk of turning into a “leaderless process,” even more so in light of the upcoming elections in France and Germany.
- Existing mechanisms and platforms for managing European security could be used to reduce the risk of accidental confrontations, including the NATO-Russia Council’s Co-operative Airspace Initiative (CAI), the OSCE’s Vienna Document, and bilateral agreements.
- International integration projects in global trade are suffering from fragmentation in the wake of Brexit and US withdrawal from TPP. From a Russian perspective, refusing cooperation between the EU and the EEU was a form of European “self-negation.”
- The chances for cooperation in Syria and Afghanistan remain limited. From a Russian perspective, Syria could have descended into a “Libya scenario” without intervention. From a German viewpoint, the Syrian people’s right to determine their own future has to be respected. With regard to Afghanistan, participants considered the current level of stability as inadequate. Given the potential risk of a premature withdrawal of NATO-led forces, Russia might become more actively involved in Afghanistan in the future.

## A new US Administration: Implications for the Global Order

A Russian participant stated that it was false to assume that an alliance would inevitably develop between the new US president and the Russian leadership. It was not the case that “if Trump wins, Putin will win.” Moreover, Russia welcomed the defeat of Hillary Clinton, but not necessarily the victory of Donald Trump. From the Russian perspective, the surprising outcome demonstrated that the “liberal era” under the presidency of Barack Obama had been an anomaly rather than the new norm in international poli-

tics. Most Russian participants did not expect to see substantial improvements in US-Russian relations under the new US administration. Instead, they believed the trajectory of US-Russian relations would continue to move along the existing lines of reset, tensions, escalation and détente. Another Russian participant expressed concerns about isolationist tendencies and the implications for the international order if the US were to cease providing the essential global commons that it has supplied in the past, for instance, in the field

of non-proliferation, free-trade, and climate change mitigation.

A Russian participant considered that similarly surprising outcomes should be expected of the upcoming elections in Germany and France. This, in turn, assigned politicians in these countries an essential task: a focus on domestic, rather than international issues. Regarding the EU's sanctions policy towards Russia, a Russian participant noted that Germany was potentially at risk of becoming isolated.

From a European perspective, a German participant pointed out that it was inevitable that the European Union would take on more

**“IT IS INEVITABLE THAT EUROPE WILL TAKE ON MORE RESPONSIBILITY IN FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY.”**

responsibility in foreign and security policy. However, differing perceptions of threat, in particular, in Eastern and Southern EU member states, made it

difficult to develop a common understanding of a stronger European role. When a Russian participant posed the question as to whether the EU's declared intentions to invest in security and defense policy would result in a stronger European voice within NATO, or in alternative security and defense projects within the EU, a German participant suggested that NATO and the EU would develop integrated rather than competing strategies. Given Germany's declared willingness to take on more responsibility as well as a perceived lack of leadership from other EU capitals, the spotlight was now said to be shining even brighter on Berlin.

Even more uncertainty would arise if the new US president were to place less emphasis on conflict resolution in Eastern Ukraine or opt for a “grand bargain” with Russia.

A Russian participant assumed that the new US administration would be forced to spend more resources on China and the Asia-Pacific. Under these circumstances, the US would inevitably focus less on Europe. The responsibility to reduce tensions in the shared neighborhood, therefore, lay with Russia and Europe. A German participant added that in light of the upcoming elections in France and Germany, conflict resolution in Eastern Ukraine could turn into a “leaderless process.” Nevertheless, the “Normandy Format” and Minsk II remained indispensable. Downgrading or institutionalizing the format might become an option, but tangible positive results would be needed first.

## Prospects for International Integration Projects

German participants agreed that in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and the US presidential elections, the EU was in dire need of an honest debate about its future. As a security actor, the EU would suffer from the UK's departure: Not only would it lose an EU member with a veto right in the UN Security Council, but also a member with nuclear capabilities. Another German participant added that worsening relations with the UK – and London as a financial hub – were against the EU's own interests and doubted that it would be possible to develop a comparable economic center on the European continent.

**“FRAGMENTATION RATHER THAN INTEGRATION IS THE ORDER OF THE DAY IN GLOBAL TRADE.”**

A Russian participant stressed that in global trade, fragmentation rather than integration was the order of the day; this was said

to have the potential to lead to a re-composition of major global trading blocks. Given that the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) could have had adverse effects on trade diversion and investment in Russia, Russia was said to welcome the halt of the partnership. Furthermore, TPP was considered by some in Russia to be a new incarnation of the WTO, which potentially implied another long and complicated accession process. While most participants agreed that China's One Belt, One Road Initiative would benefit from the halt of TPP, a German participant argued that with a new US administration, China could reassess the situation and its investment costs. From a Russian perspective, it was hoped that the Belt and Road Initiative would add weight to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), although some of the proposed trade routes could potentially bypass the EEU. Russia should hence pursue a "policy of optionality" and diversify its trade options, for instance, by intensifying ties with ASEAN.

A Russian participant criticized the EU's lack of engagement: Since the EEU had been modeled on the EU, refusing cooperation was a form of European "self-negation." While a scenario of deep integration was considered unlikely at the moment, investment facilitation and reductions to non-tariff-barriers were possible options for cooperation between the EU and the EEU. A German participant noted that from a European perspective, it was unclear which form of economic integration with countries in the shared neighborhood would be tolerated by Russia. A Russian participant responded that predictable and institutionalized rules were needed to prevent states from having to choose between one of two blocs. Free trade agreements between the EU and the EEU were considered feasible, but inclusion in the EU's customs regulations

was regarded as undesirable. According to a Russian participant, it was very important to avoid generating the impression that Russian interests and concerns were being ignored or excluded from the EU's considerations on economic strategies in the neighborhood.

**"IT IS CRUCIAL FOR RUSSIA THAT ITS INTERESTS AND CONCERNS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD ARE NOT EXCLUDED OR IGNORED."**

The case of Serbia served as an example for a potential link between the two integration projects through Free Trade Agreements with both the EU and the EEU.

## Managing European Security

According to a Russian participant, the security situation in Europe was in a more dangerous situation than during the Cold War, given that mechanisms and rules to prevent accidental military incidents were lacking or dysfunctional. NATO and Russia found themselves in a circle of deteriorating relations, with each side responding with reciprocity to actions undertaken by the other side. This was said to not only be taking place in the Baltic Sea, but also in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, where the closeness of troops was a cause of concern. To stop this downwards spiral, a Russian participant suggested special security zones of military neutrality in Europe, covering the territory of both NATO and Russia. Another Russian participant proposed a scaling-down of rhetoric as well as implementing confidence-building measures. At the same time, the participant expressed surprise that a Russian proposal on the use of transponders by aircraft over the Baltic Sea had been met with skepticism by NATO.

A German participant responded that Russia and the West had very different views of the reasons behind the current security situation in Europe.

**“MECHANISMS AND RULES TO PREVENT MILITARY INCIDENTS ARE MISSING OR DYSFUNCTIONAL.”**

From a Western perspective, the annexation of Crimea and the Russian incursion into Eastern Ukraine remained unacceptable and were the point of departure for NATO’s renewed dual-track strategy of deterrence and dialogue.

According to a German participant, existing mechanisms and platforms could be used to reduce the risk of accidental confrontations, for instance, the NATO-Russia Council’s Cooperative Airspace Initiative (CAI) as well as the OSCE’s Vienna Document and bilateral agreements on preventing dangerous military activities. The participants agreed that dialogue on technicalities would have to be re-established first before talks on wider European security arrangements could be considered and discussed the potential of the OSCE as a platform for such talks. A German participant referred to former German Foreign Minister Steinmeier’s proposal for a new structured dialogue within the OSCE on arms control and expressed hope for Russian readiness to cooperate on these proposals.

**“RELYING ONLY ON THE MILITARY IS LIKE PLAYING CHESS WITH ONLY ONE PIECE.”**

A Russian participant argued that within the Russian leadership, the impetus to improve relations with the West had to come from political figures since the military leadership currently lacked incentive and are not key stakeholders. In addition, they are content with the current strategic balance as well as

bolstered by a perceived successful intervention in Syria. Relying only on the military, however, was compared to “playing chess with only one piece.”

## **Perspectives on Syria and Afghanistan**

Discussing possible common interests in Syria, a Russian participant stressed that a political, not a military solution was needed in the country. A German participant underlined that in light of Russia’s military intervention as well as European and US unwillingness to engage more actively in Syria, Russia would have to play a crucial role in determining the future of the country. He added that Russia’s military intervention in Syria had been counterproductive to reduce the numbers of refugees arriving in Europe.

A Russian participant explained the capture of Aleppo by the presence of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, which had to be prevented from becoming a systemic force in Syria’s political future. The participant also argued for a system of shared powers: Russia’s interest ultimately lay in stability, and this must not be tied to Assad permanently. However, without intervention, Syria might have descended into a “Libya scenario”: The ousting of Assad and subsequent infighting between rival factions could have led to a further increase in refugee numbers. Furthermore, Germany and Europe seemed to be losing their leverage with Turkey.

According to a Russian participant, US-Russian cooperation in Syria was still possible due to a number of overlapping interests: Both regard IS as the main security threat and share the primary concern of preventing Syria from disintegrating and being tak-

en over by extremists. Furthermore, neither the US nor Russia wanted to be held hostage by regional power ambitions. For these reasons, the US should not “outsource” the Syrian conflict to Russia.

According to another Russian participant, a roadmap for establishing peace and an orderly transition in Syria should include the following elements: Firstly, influence should be exercised over regional actors to ensure that they do not pursue a partition of Syria, as

**“WHAT WE NEED IS AN OSCE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST, INCLUDING ISRAEL AND IRAN.”**

this could lead to a similar chain reaction in Iraq. Secondly, incentives would have to be created, in particular, in the form of economic assistance, if Syrians were to remain part of a single political entity (similar to the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina). Thirdly, the implementation of a peace deal had to be guaranteed and enforced; for instance, this could be done through a joint position of the UN Security Council with the possibility of a peacekeeping mission under the new Secretary General. Fourthly, a dialogue format should be established to address questions of the protection of minority rights and wider regional security arrangements in the Middle East. Finally, the Russian participant suggested that in the long-term, a similar model to the OSCE would be needed for the Middle East that included Israel and Iran.

A German participant added that the EU had all the necessary infrastructure and capacity to support reconstruction, but is so far reluctant to become engaged. A Russian participant suggested that EU support for reconstruction could be made conditional on a halt to hostilities. Overall, the various international, regional and domestic stakeholders

should be brought on board through a concerted effort aimed at appealing to their interest in stability, in particular regarding ethnic and religious divides. A German participant doubted that external actors could exert leverage on the country’s future political order. Given that it was the Syrian people’s right and responsibility to determine their future, external actors would have to accept a potentially long and arduous transition process, at least as long as the West was unwilling to engage more actively in terms of political and military assistance and only offered reconstruction for Syria.

With regard to perspectives for Afghanistan, a German participant noted that this was the only operation where NATO could still bring about peace. A Russian participant criticized the lack of focus on preventing drug trafficking and pointed to severe consequences for public health in Russia. A German participant explained the difficulties in controlling trafficking routes as well as providing alternative economic incentives to poppy cultivation, none of which was included in the mission’s mandate.

Overall, the participants considered the current level of stability in Afghanistan as inadequate. A German participant inquired about the possibility of Russian participation in rebuilding infrastructure in Afghanistan. A Russian participant responded that so far, Russia has been reluctant to participate actively in the stabilization and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan, but would have to become more actively involved in Afghanistan in the future. However, the costs of stabilization would be too high for any in-

**“THE OPERATION IN AFGHANISTAN IS THE ONLY ONE THAT COULD STILL WIN PEACE.”**

dividual country to bear. From a Russian perspective, cooperation was considered possible with Germany and the EU, less so with NATO.

Economic development was considered by all participants as a prerequisite for stabilization. According to a Russian participant, China might become the most important economic actor in Afghanistan if the US reduced its engagement. Another Russian participant countered that China would be reluctant to invest significant resources as long as the prospects for stability remained fragile. In the long run, bringing China in as a security provider in Afghanistan through a concerted effort would be desirable. Cooperation with China could also be instrumental in influencing competing regional powers. According to one Russian participant, the main impediment to stability in Afghanistan lay not with domestic, but rather with external actors, mentioning Pakistan as an example.

On the surge of IS in Afghanistan, participants deemed these forces to be focused on domestic issues, rather than sharing the broader ideology and expansionist ambi-

tions of IS as a whole. Participants discussed whether some sections of the Taliban would have to be included in peace negotiations, but open questions remained about which groups could be addressed and how a national reconciliation process should be organized.

Finally, a German participant added that the main motivation for the West to engage in Afghanistan – the attacks of 9/11 – no longer served as a sufficient justification for continuing the mission. However, a premature withdrawal could lead to a failed state and potentially a partition of the country along a North-South divide. This would further negatively affect the regional dynamic and present enormous challenges to Russia, in particular. A Russian participant agreed that the presence of NATO's Resolute Support Mission was preferable to a withdrawal for the stability of the country, but responded that the US had invested too many resources in Afghanistan to abandon ship prematurely. However, the role of the US in Afghanistan was regarded in a much more negative light than Germany's role.

## **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 is distributed among the participants of the German-Russian International Dialogue as well as selected policy makers.

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