

Time for a new Russia policy?

Perspectives by Andrey Kortunov and Liana Fix

- The German-Russian relationship has reached a low point. Andrey Kortunov is certain: the federal government has to take concrete measures to improve the relations.
- Liana Fix argues that the times for a special German-Russian relationship are over. Instead, German policy towards Russia must take on more responsibility on the international scene.



Photo: private

Andrey Kortunov

Room for manoeuvre For a new dynamic between Moscow and Berlin

Moscow and Berlin continue to sharply disagree on many international matters. After the Ukraine crisis, no ‘business as usual’ is possible in any foreseeable future. Russia lost Germany back in 1945 or even earlier. 73 years after the end of the Second World War and 28 years after reunification, the new generation of Germans owes Russians nothing. Germany is and will always be a disciplined member of NATO and of the EU. It will not take any initiatives that might look

risky, inappropriate or untimely to other members. To cut it short, there are absolutely no reasons to hope for any breakthrough in the German-Russian relationship.

Nevertheless, the Federal Republic is not just another European country. It has always been a driving force behind European integration, an articulated – and sometimes explicitly dissenting – voice in the North Atlantic Alliance. Is there another country that could be more interested in overcoming the new division of our common continent, in avoiding a nuclear and conventional arms race in Europe, in preventing nationalism, populism and unilateralism from getting the upper hand anywhere between Lisbon and Vladivostok?

All the other European capitals notwithstanding, it is Berlin which has the highest stakes in dealing with Moscow. The current change of the guard cannot produce a miracle in the relationship with the Kremlin, but it can help to reverse the dynamics.

There are a few proposals that are despite all difficulties not beyond the reach of the federal government. None of them alone will dig us out of the hole we are in, but they will make the sides of the hole less steep.

Firstly, Germany should take into consideration the establishment of a NATO-Russia group for crisis

management. We need urgent steps to secure ourselves against human errors, miscalculations, inadvertent escalations and other unfortunate developments. The NATO-Russia Council was designed for this purpose, but its current state does not look exceedingly optimistic. An ad-hoc mechanism is needed – not to replace the NATO-Russia Council, but to serve as a platform until the Council can operate at its full capacity.

Secondly, Germany should take on a more active role in the Ukraine conflict. Given the current downward trajectory of the US-Russian relationship, it looks very unlikely that the US-Russian bilateral dialogue could lead to an even limited progress in Donbass anytime soon. The time has come to reactivate the “Normandy format”, including its top political level. The pause in the Minsk process has been too long, and there is a growing danger that we will lose the only legitimate mechanism of managing the crisis in and around Ukraine.

Thirdly, the federal government should come up with a new energy plan for Europe. The European energy agenda almost completely degenerated to battles about North Stream-2. This could include explor-

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ing potential energy cooperation between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union, promoting energy efficiency and renewables’ development, moving to common energy standards, providing energy infrastructure safety, and many further ‘non-toxic’ dimensions.

Fourthly, Germany should offer more flexibility with regard to the sanctions regime. The four-year sanctions war between the West and Russia demonstrates the need to create a more nuanced, more calibrated set of economic incentives and disincentives for the other side to consider. This is not a suggestion that Germany should push for a complete lifting of sanctions tomorrow. Nevertheless, sanctions usually only work if the side imposing sanctions can expeditiously react to even minor changes in behavior of the other side.

Fifthly, the federal government should engage more strongly with the OSCE. The 2016 German OSCE chairmanship gave birth to the Structured Dialogue on current and future security challenges, which remains one of the most promising formats of East-West communications. Today, the OSCE still needs a lot

more German attention and German vision – a political investment definitely worth making. Also, Germany should get involved in preserving the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF-Treaty). If this bilateral agreement between Moscow and Washington

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collapses, European security will receive a colossal blow. For instance, Germany could offer to host a special US-Russian summit with the sole task of saving the INF Treaty.

Last, but not least, Germany traditionally played an important role for cooperation with Russia in research, education and culture, and has been accommodating a very sizeable Russian diaspora. To keep Russia as a part of Europe, Germany should lobby in Brussels for a liberalization of the Schengen regime or even visa-free travel for Russian students, scholars and civil society leaders.

Does any of these proposals look like a manifestation of an appeasement approach or compromise core values of German foreign policy? Would they divert too much attention and energy from other priorities or lead to difficult problems between Germany and its allies? If the answer is no, then these proposals should be within the room for maneuver for the federal government to reverse the dynamics in the relationship between Moscow and Berlin.



Liana Fix

No special relationship Germany must take on responsibility on the international scene

Relations between Germany and Russia are in a state of severe crisis. At latest since the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict, but even before, the relationship was under stress. The new federal government will have to face the challenge of finding ways to deal with the root causes of the crisis. The intuitive response in this situation would be to take steps for improving bilateral relations and to find a way out of the current impasse. However, the root of the problem reaches deeper than the bilateral level.

The new German foreign minister has already sketched out initial contours of his Russia policy: German policy towards the East should not include Russia alone, but also the Eastern European countries, the latter receiving more attention than it was the case in the past.

However, this position simply expresses the acknowledgement of a change that has taken place a while ago: the times for a special relationship between Germany and Russia, with Russia policy being treated as a merely bilateral affair, are over. An improvement of the German-Russian relationship without taking into account the European and global context is nowadays neither possible nor desirable.

After the end of the Cold War, relations between Germany and Russia could thrive in a biotope of more or less well-ordered international relations. The years 2000s allowed for far-reaching initiatives, from “strategic” to “modernisation partnerships”. Difficulties in relations with Russia could be outsourced either to the US or to Brussels. Although relations between Germany and Russia were not isolated from the European and international context, they have never been so inter-

woven with global politics and subject to its troubles since the end of the Cold War as they are nowadays.

In recent years the foreign policy agendas of both Germany and Russia have significantly widened: Russia has turned away from Europe as the main reference point of its foreign policy and has become a global player. The geographic area of Russian foreign policy – previously limited to Russia’s immediate neighbourhood – has expanded to the Middle East, Asia, Latin-America and Africa. German Russia policy, focused in the past on Russia itself and domestic policy, now has to take into consideration Russia’s extended foreign policy and to develop a stance towards Russian foreign policy in other parts of the world.

At the same time German foreign policy has committed itself to taking on more international responsibility. Germany’s leadership role in dealing with numerous crises on the European continent has tightened the links between Germany and its neighbours. However, this means that Germany now also has more responsibility in dealing with the fears and concerns in particular of its Eastern neighbours, for instance with regard to energy as well as security policy. Against this backdrop, the basis for a Russia policy defined by bilateral relations – be it in trade, energy or diplomacy – is no longer given.

Theoretically the extended foreign political agendas of Germany and Russia offer two options: they open new room either for cooperation – or for conflict. To date, the result is sobering. Russia has defined

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its new global role mainly in opposition to the West – both in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe. A policy of “compartmentalization” – i. e. to separate areas of agreement from those of disagreement – has reached its limits, for instance in Syria. The new volatile and confusing strategic context in which both Germany and Russia operate is wider, bigger and fraught with far more intricacies and challenges.

In this new strategic context, Germany’s Russia policy has to take on responsibility beyond its immediate neighbourhood – as in Ukraine – for international conflicts that involve Russia. This does not mean that relations between Germany and Russia fall prey, for instance, to difficulties in the US-Russian

relationship. Yet, staying out of the game cannot be an option for German foreign policy that aims for taking on more responsibility. How a responsible international Russia policy might look like is demonstrated right now by France's president: a clear stance towards Russia's policy in Syria and domestic meddling while at the same time continuing dialogue without sacrificing own interests.

The starting point for Germany should be a strong common European policy towards Russia. The road to Moscow does not lead through Berlin alone, but also through Brussels. Guidelines are provided by the five principles for a European policy towards Russia drafted by Federica Mogherini and agreed upon by all EU foreign ministers in March 2016: firstly, full implementation of the Minsk agreement; secondly, closer relations with Russia's neighbours; thirdly,

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strengthening European resilience against interference; fourthly, selective engagement with Russia for instance in combatting terrorism; fifthly, strengthening people-to-people contacts. These five guidelines have not lost any of their relevance today. However, their implementation requires new energy and political investment.

Implementing the Minsk agreement would not only require a revitalization of the “Normandy” negotiations but also widening the format and including European representatives. Equally important are better information about and a clear stance towards Russian interference and disinformation. A small working group within the European External Action Service dealing with strategic communication alone is not sufficient to ensure European resilience. Strengthening relations with Russia's neighbours is a permanent task, just as much as maintaining relations with Russia's civil society. Here, with potential visa facilitations the EU still has an ace up its sleeve.

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German-Russian International Dialogue

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