

Russia and Germany in Wider Europe

DYNAMICS OF RAPPROCHMENT AND ALIENATION

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The resumption of Vladimir Putin’s presidency and the strengthening of nationalist rhetoric during his presidential campaign significantly complicated Russia’s relations with the European Union and its major member states. Most pro-Kremlin observers assert that Russia – even if it wanted to – cannot integrate with the West: the latter’s major institutions – the EU and NATO – are in crisis and their future uncertain. Consequently, this leaves Moscow with two basic directions: fostering bilateral relations with individual Western states and pursuing a more robust policy in the post-Soviet region. Against this backdrop, the Kremlin is likely to keep treating the EU as a weak international actor, while expecting Germany to remain the most loyal to Russia among the EU’s member states.

Indeed, in light of the current crisis in the Eurozone, it is to be expected that Germany’s role in the in EU’s Common and Security Policy will further increase. Russia has every reason to rely on this key European country, whose special role among EU member states is based upon traditions of *Ostpolitik* and encompasses both geopolitical and normative components. In an attempt to iron out negative assessments of the “Putin 3.0” project in Europe, Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of *Russia in Global Affairs*, commented at a conference hosted in the German Bundestag that Putin is more interested in Europe, and Germany in particular, than Medvedev. Yet how does the seemingly pro-European discourse of the Kremlin resonate in Germany? In this memo, I address the issue of compatibility of Russian and German policies in a wider Europe, and try to identify both conceptual gaps between the two countries and possible areas of common concern.

The Russian–German Disconnect

Today’s German foreign policy debate is shaped by three key issues. First, the Germans deem that in the 21st century power has to do far less with military force than with a combination of economic strength, technological innovation, and “soft power” resources. Second, the Germans tend to reiterate that the EU is a democracy project, a sort of “republic of Europe,” open for trans-national civil society

engagement and sensitive to issues of democracy and human rights throughout the world. Third, Germany looks for more supranational integration, which ought to weaken the monopoly of states on solving financial and budgetary issues to their liking. The ideas of a supranational federation and “post-classical” nation-state are intrinsic parts of German public debate.

On all three accounts, Russian political premises radically differ. Moscow still believes that its strength derives from huge extractive resources and military potential. It continues to favor state-centric imagery of international relations. And it pays little attention to a variety of normative matters, intentionally marginalizing issues of democracy domestically and internationally.

Even when Russian and German international positions appear to formally coincide, the logics that drive the two countries, as well as the lessons that they learn from international crises, are markedly different. Both Russia and Germany are very supportive of the EU-Russia “partnership for modernization,” yet the very meaning of this concept is understood differently. A mix of post-political and authoritarian versions of modernization prevails in Russia and creates a discursive disconnect with Germans, who accentuate much more strongly the socio-political connotations of the concept. All debates on Russia’s modernization in Germany raise acute and troublesome issues for Moscow: rampant corruption as an inalienable mechanism of power relations, chronic ineffectiveness of state institutions, and a substantive deficit of state–civil society communication.

Another striking example of the political disconnect is Libya. Many political leaders and opinion makers in Moscow and Berlin appear to deplore their countries’ abstention votes on the United Nations resolution that gave start to the military campaign against the Qaddafi government, yet the reasons for criticism are wholly dissimilar. In Russia, the key point for debate concerns the material losses inflicted by its permissive stand (i.e., business contracts allegedly lost because of the regime change in Tripoli), which provoked a much more anti-Western position taken by Russian diplomacy in blocking outside humanitarian intervention in Syria. In Germany, the debate is focused on the prospects for a much closer integration of the country with Western institutions of security, and on finding a better combination of soft and hard power tools (in particular, as one German author claimed, Germany is by now “a civil power without civil courage”). Both countries deem that they were unprepared for tackling the Libyan conflict. But Russia is mostly concerned about carving out its individual strategy beyond the West, while Germany clearly sees the problem in its unfortunate detachment from the Western coalition. Both countries are eager to be “normal European powers,” but, again, in completely different ways: for Germany normalization means deeper embeddedness in the European normative order, while for Russia normalization presupposes the role of a great power with a distinct voice.

What has clear repercussions for German-Russian relations is Germany’s willingness to implement its leadership functions within coalitions of EU-member states, such as the “Weimar triangle” (Berlin–Paris–Warsaw) or the reinvigorated German–Polish nexus. This is what Berlin means by the idea of “more Europe for Germany,” which dominates the German foreign policy debate. With a softer approach towards Russia on the part of the current Polish government, cooperation

with Poland plays an increasingly important role in Germany's "Eastern policy." Yet Russia's role in this policy is far from certain: it can either be incorporated by means of such relatively new formats as the German-Polish-Russian "trialogue," or it can be left aside.

Against this backdrop, Putin's third presidential term represents a particular challenge to Germany. Until September 2011, German political elites informally yet markedly counted on the continuation of Dmitry Medvedev as Russian president. Moscow will undoubtedly continue to be Berlin's key economic partner – Germany remains dependent on Russian energy supplies – but Putin may be wrong to rely upon Germany's political support. German political discourse is becoming increasingly critical of the Kremlin and skeptical about a strategic partnership with Russia. While serving as prime minister, Putin already received a warning signal in summer 2011, when the German Quadriga Foundation withdrew a prize it awarded him under the pressure of angry public opinion. It was quite indicative that the German foreign minister issued an unusually harsh statement after the March 4 election: "I hope that Russia now, after the elections and with a clear view, will see that it stands on the wrong side of history."

Guido Westerwelle obviously had in mind Russia's intransigent position on Syria, but his words might as well be projected onto other fields of Russian foreign policy of interest to Germany, including the EU – Russia common neighborhood. The recent appointment of Russia's deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin, whose reputation in Europe is highly controversial, as presidential representative on Transdnistria symbolized Moscow's adherence to old approaches in the regional conflict. Just a few years ago, Moscow and Berlin agreed to tackle this conflict as the cornerstone of a wider dialogue on security in Europe within the framework of what was referred to as the Meseberg process. Yet the anticipated Russian-German cooperation on Transdnistria stalled because of insufficient Russian political influence and its inability to influence political changes in the breakaway territory.

The German expert community – especially the German Society for Foreign Politics, DGAP – increasingly raises the issue of reactivating German engagement with Eastern Partnership states, even if this threatens to ignite new tensions with Russia. Arguably, Germany will not accept the legitimacy of Russian ambitions in the so-called "near abroad" and will look for new openings for regional multilateral diplomacy. In practical terms, this means that Russian foreign policy will have to avoid focusing on a de facto division of spheres of influence, which in any case is today an unworkable political scheme, and search for more flexible forms of interaction with major European actors.

Any Hope for the Best?

The steady and inevitable differentiation among the states of the "common neighborhood" makes it impractical to try to carve out institutional solutions that embrace and integrate all or most post-Soviet states. This concerns both Russian and EU policy. Russia-led CIS institutions gradually seem to be ceding the way to the geographically and functionally more narrow Customs Union. The EU's Eastern Partnership program is de facto split into its "New Eastern Europe" and "South Caucasus" components (where, in both cases, diversity trumps uniformity). Neither

Russia nor Germany has answers to the growing regionalization within the common neighborhood area.

However, Germany's role as mediator in the complex set of Russia-EU relations in their common neighborhood has led to some practical results. First, there is a good record of Russian-German management of specific projects like the Nord Stream gas pipeline. Second, Germany mediated one of the most important positive changes in Russia's relations with its neighbors, the political rapprochement with Poland, as well as the establishment of a visa-free border crossing regime for residents of Russia's neighboring Kaliningrad exclave. This laid the foundations for a political "triangle" (Germany-Poland-Russia). Some Russian diplomats even expressed interest in participating in some of the Eastern Partnership projects, instead of criticizing this EU initiative.

Taking into account Germany's sensitivity to security issues stemming from the forthcoming withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan, it is very likely that Russia's decision to make its infrastructure – an airport in Ulyanovsk – available for NATO cargo transit will have a positive effect on Russia's security profile in Europe. Perhaps this move will help realize the cooperative approaches developed by the Euro-Atlantic Security Initiative, chaired by Igor Ivanov, Wolfgang Ischinger, and Sam Nunn.

There are some opportunities in the Russia-EU shared neighborhood for overlapping institutional tools and commitments to emerge. These contain elements of competition, but also of mutual readjustment and accommodation. Possibilities for the intensification of exchanges and communication in the common neighborhood are still open, as an effect of potential visa liberalization, Russia's WTO accession, and the proliferation of networking trans-/cross-border practices. This scenario generally corresponds to an idea of open regionalism. Instead of key actors searching for unilateral domination (for instance, in the form of "exclusive" energy projects like South Stream or Nabucco), they will look for wider regional frames of interaction that downplay borders and security concerns.

A positive effect of such a model would be the opportunity for common neighborhood states to adopt a strategy of selective integration, becoming closer to the EU in some domains and to Russia in others. This possibility is facilitated by the growing appeal of the concept of a "Europe of different speeds," which has also opened up possibilities for selective integration of non-members. This scenario will require more flexibility from Russian diplomacy, which will have to embrace a highly controversial and complicated milieu that incorporates both EU approaches and the practices of its individual members. Both symbolic-discursive and institutional changes in Russian conduct will be mandatory, but this process of learning and readjusting is the only antidote for the gradual shrinking of the area of the "common neighborhood."

Conclusions

The German political elite seem to want to take a pause in their relations with Russia. Recent enthusiasm for Russian modernization is gradually fading away, to be substituted by a new wave of skepticism about the legitimacy and effectiveness of Putin's new presidential tenure. At the same time, mass protest movements in Russia

and the spread of information technologies of social networking have clearly indicated that within Russia there is huge demand for the rule of law, transparency, and human rights protection – all those principles of governance for which Europe traditionally stands. This does not mean that a new Russian government will be more responsive to cooperation with Europe, but the window of opportunity is still open. Within the Partnership for Modernization framework, Russia implicitly recognized – even if in mild form – its acceptance of the principle of conditionality. In opening Russian territory to NATO military transit, Russia displayed its willingness to take into account financial arguments in tackling security issues of common concern. In implementing the visa-free agreement for Kaliningrad, Russia played down its old fears about carving out special solutions for particular regions of the federation.

Despite sharp intra-European problems, Germany will retain its interest and presence in most post-Soviet states, in particular Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan. Along with inevitable competition with Russia and attempts to balance Moscow's influence in these states, Germany's *Ostpolitik* can also open up new possibilities for closer interaction with Russia. Even if these possibilities are unintended results of their individual policies, Russia and Germany should still anticipate, identify, and properly use them.