

# **How Can a Dialogue be Restarted with Russia?**

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This brief article will try to answer the question of how to re-enter a dialogue with Russia after the conflict in Ukraine, as requested by the editors of this journal. As Germany will hold the chairmanship of the OSCE in 2016, once again the challenge of the relations between Russia and the West is going to be crucial for the OSCE “deliverables”: indeed, Russia is the key player in an organization functioning on the basis of consensus between its 57 participating states. Without Russian cooperation, it would be impossible to have any progress on arms control and confidence- and security-building measures, as in the CFE treaty, which is dead since Russia has terminated its participation in March 2015. A renewed arms race is taking place in Europe in a cold-war like atmosphere. Progress on the protracted conflicts in the Caucasus, Moldova and Ukraine – in which the OSCE has responsibilities as a facilitator or a monitor – would depend upon Moscow’s willingness to cooperate.

Firstly, in answering the question mentioned above, one should be cautious concerning the qualification of “after conflict” with regard to Ukraine. In spite of the paramount efforts made by Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande within the “Normandy format” – with their colleagues Putin and Poroshenko –, the 5 September 2014 Minsk protocol and its 12 February 2015 “package of measures for implementation” have until now not brought about any sustainable peace as there is still an obvious lack of confidence between Kyiv, Moscow and the de facto leaders in the Donbas. It seems clear to me that the German OSCE Chair is going to spend repetitive efforts in pushing the sides to implement, in good faith, a ceasefire followed by weapons withdrawals under OSCE observers’ control and the decentralization process in the Donetsk and Luhansk districts, based upon a revised Ukrainian Constitution, in supporting the monitoring by ODIHR and other organizations of local elections and a modern border management by Ukraine and Russia under OSCE observation... Unfortunately, it is too early to ascertain that 2016 will be an “after Ukrainian conflict” year.

That having been said, it does not mean that the time has not come for envisaging a dialogue “reset” between Moscow and the West, to refer to a word used by Hillary Clinton in 2009 in announcing a process that has quickly faded away. In the long run, geopolitics and the economy command sustainable cooperation between the European Union and its Eurasian eastern neighbour: both the EU and Russia, the latter as a holder of a permanent UN Security Council seat, have to face immediate Middle East challenges such as ISIS terror in Iraq and Syria and its spillover effects throughout the Mediterranean and even inside Europe, the unprecedented flow of refugees, uncertainties deriving from NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and the consequences thereof for Central Asia, the Iran nuclear accord follow-up and its effect on relations between Tehran and the Sunni states. Nuclear and ballistic proliferation in North-East Asia is another common concern. In the perilous world of today, Europe cannot avoid trying to have a concerted approach with Russia on these multifaceted threats or challenges which have to be faced in nearly the same way by Russia. The role played by Russia together with the US in the making of the Iran deal is a good example of a positive outcome in fighting against nuclear proliferation through co-operation with Moscow among other partners. A kind of lowest common denominator rapprochement between Russia and the West on Syria seems to be envisaged.

On the economic side, it is obvious that confident relations between gas purchasers and producers – such as guarantees that a Russian ratification of the 1991 European energy charter treaty could bring – are needed for the benefit of both sides in a domain where long-term huge investments and joint ventures could be considered, taking into account European commitments in the fight against the undesired consequences of the foreseen climatic change. Otherwise European purchasers would look for other more secure sources of supply and Russia would be more dependent upon China, the world’s second economic power which could have one hidden agenda on un-populated Eastern Siberia and its growing Chinese migrants and investments.

In the very long run, new challenges could be envisaged in a cooperative mode: One example is the Arctic, where Europe could have interests in alternative maritime transport routes along the Russian/ Siberian coasts (the north-east way) – but Russia has contested territorial demands; or a railway network from China to Europe through Russia (a new silk road) facilitating speedier Eurasian trade. But these long-term perspectives could only be envisaged by Europeans if there is a serious commitment on the Russian side to provide guarantees and legal certainty to Western investors.

In any case, there are obvious prerequisites for such a resetting and long-term prospects: in particular, it is up to Russia to behave with the former USSR republics in a “normal” and soft-power way – trade, investments, language, culture – rather than trying to restore imperial links through military and economic pressures and threats that contradict the spirit and the letter of the OSCE commitments between its participating States. A positive signal would be to provide evidence of its goodwill in playing an active part in settling the issue of Ukraine, in accordance with the Minsk protocol. If it sounds clear that Russia and its people will not renounce Crimea in spite of its blatant violation of public international law – unprecedented since the 1975 Helsinki Charter –, at least Europe should expect from Moscow a reliable commitment by putting effective pressure upon the de facto leaders in the Donbas in order to end the violence, withdraw its military and weapons and restart normal relations with Ukraine. That would make it possible to phase out the EU’s targeted sanctions and Russian trade counter-measures. Consequently, Ukraine would not be forced to choose between Europe and Russia and, on the contrary, this border country could play a role as a bridge between Russia and Europe. That means that the EU Eastern Partnership could be revisited as it should no longer be wrongly interpreted in Moscow as a defiant action against Russia and its Eurasian Economic Community. There could be complementarities between the EU free trade zone and its associated partners in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus and the Eurasian Economic Community in order to avoid any trade distortion which is detrimental to both sides. One should not repeat the errors made by the Bush Administration in its attempts to enlarge NATO towards Georgia and Ukraine giving further rise to Russian nationalistic concerns of a so-called encirclement fuelled by the 1991 USSR trauma of falling apart, the 2004 and 2005 “roses” and “orange” revolutions and the US anti-missile bases in Eastern Europe. The West should take into account the fact that many Russians have been outraged by the way in which their country had been seen during Yeltsin’s presidency and they consider that Russia should again be recognized as a great power to be respected. In that regard, and even though the Kremlin is controlling most of the Russian electronic media, Putin’s high popularity rate, in spite of an economic recession spurred by a combination of Western sanctions and the sinking prices of oil and minerals could be explained by his capacity to make the Russian voice listened to once again in the West. His dominant popularity has put on the back burner those opposing voices outraged by voting manipulation during the 2009 presidential elections followed by repressive measures against civil society, independent media and non-governmental organizations.

But, on the other hand, in order to be respected as a relevant stakeholder in international governance rather than as a trouble maker means being a responsible actor, for instance with regard to the Ukrainian dossier among other topics of mutual grievances : Georgia, Moldova, trade irritants, gas price manipulation.... In that respect, Moscow could contribute to east-west confidence-building in ending its cold-war style propaganda against the so-called CIA/Nazi coalition in Kiev and other conspiracy theories fuelled by Kremlin-financed media.


Obviously, given the role that they are jointly playing on conflict resolution in and around Ukraine, Germany and France are well placed to engage with Russia. In 2002–2003, Germany, France and Russia shared the

same approach against the US military intervention in Iraq and its disastrous consequences. That recent past illustrates that, on key issues, consensus is not out of reach. The three dimensions of the OSCE offer one valuable forum among others – bilateral, trilateral – Russia, Germany, and France, EU-Russia, UN Security Council, even perhaps, but at a later stage, a NATO-Russia partnership for opening confident dialogues with Russia. I would suggest some avenues which are not exhaustive: on political and security co-operation, why not open an inclusive dialogue with Russia on the possibility of a new common approach to arms control<sup>1</sup> and confidence- and security-building measures? on economic and environmental dimensions, updated “green” east-west energetic and trade transportation and communication networks could be a topic of joint interest; and on human rights and freedom of expression and the media, among many difficult issues – such as media and political pluralism, the right of assembly and association, Courts’ independence... – ways and means for countering fake information and conspiracy theories fuelling hatred and misunderstandings among part of a poorly informed general public could be discussed. Given the multiple gaps of today, there is no need to expect an immediate outcome; but at least it would be worthwhile to try to avoid additional East-West misunderstandings and grievances that could further destabilize our dangerous world.



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1 A panel of eminent persons “on European security as a common approach”, chaired by Ambassador Ischinger, has been tasked to make proposals to the OSCE ministerial council in Belgrade in December 2015



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