



Twenty Years of German-Russian Relations through the Prism of the Schlangenbad Talks

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- The German-Russian Schlangenbad Talks, organized annually since 1998, have become a reliable trend indicator of the current state of Western-Russian relations. The study provides a differentiated picture of the past twenty years of discussions, capturing specific trends and argumentation patterns between the German and Russian political and academic elites.
- In the last two decades multiple crises and conflicts have been traditionally followed by periods of cooperation and rapprochement. Yet the Ukraine crisis seemed to have interrupted this trend. While the eruptive crises in recent years were quite visible on the surface, there was also a not-so-apparent underlying trend towards alienation on both sides. In this sense, the Ukraine crisis could be interpreted as a culmination of previously unresolved tensions and deep-rooted disagreements.
- In view of the early hopes for a common »European house« on the basis of shared values, the disillusionment on both sides was all the deeper. While the German side harbored growing concerns about Russia's anti-democratic drift, ever increasing criticism produced feelings of exclusion and marginalization on the Russian side and reinforced the sense of geopolitical competition.
- Further complicating the exchange were the differing views upon the practical configuration of German-Russian cooperation. While the German side favored all-encompassing institutional solutions, the Russian side criticized this approach as unproductive, since the perceived overconcentration on human rights and internal political developments supposedly prevented cooperation in areas of vital interests. Yet limited pragmatic cooperation void of any normative basis would also be problematic, because it would lack any strategic orientation beyond short-term and singular pay-offs.



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Summary

The past two decades of Western-Russian relations reveal a turbulent picture: with early hopes and expectations of a common future based on shared values and interests, later replaced by mutual disappointment in light of multiple crises, disagreements, and misunderstandings. These developments were accurately captured in the agendas of and the discussions at the Schlangenbad Talks (»Schlangenbader Gespräche«), which have become a reliable trend indicator of the current state of Western-Russian relations. First held in 1998, the Schlangenbad Talks are a series of German-Russian bilateral conferences jointly organized by Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) and the Moscow office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), in cooperation with the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEWO) and the Moscow office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. The annual event brings together around 50 high-ranking participants from politics, academia, military, private sector, and journalism.

The paper is based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of all available textual protocols (1999–2016) from the past 18 conferences. With over 500 pages of written text, these protocols provide a unique documentation of central developments and challenges in German-Russian relations over the past 20 years. By taking a closer look at the debates, the study aims at providing a differentiated picture of past discussions, thus allowing for a critical evaluation of the inconsistencies and divergences as a lesson for the future. Capturing specific trends and argumentation patterns between the German and Russian political and academic elites at the high-level meeting in Schlangenbad can enhance our understanding of the general course of discussions between Russia and the West.

The analysis has revealed a wave-shaped trend in the development of Russian-Western relations. Over the past two decades, conflicts and crises – different in level and scope – have traditionally been followed by attempts at promoting closer cooperation and mutual understanding. Given how crisis-intensive this period has been, this might appear surprising, but a closer look at the developments revealed several factors that have contributed to the possibility or perceived desirability of such »resets«. In some cases, it was the changing domestic political context in Russia or in key Western states – most

prominently the 2008 elections of Dmitri Medvedev and Barack Obama – that facilitated rapprochement. Apart from such endogenous changes in the overall player configurations, there were also exogenous events that at different times stimulated the realization of the need for closer relations. The search for common interests on a wide variety of issues – ranging from non-proliferation and disarmament to drug and human trafficking and economic cooperation – allowed the focus to shift from underlying disagreements to common threats and challenges. A specific version of such shared threats demanding common responses was the fight against »common enemies« mostly found in international (Islamist) terrorism. However, despite the short-term successes, such rapprochement attempts usually remained superficial, because they did not result from a comprehensive discussion about the roots of the conflicts.

In this sense, it is important to take a closer look at the varying self- and mutual perceptions, in order to trace the specific differences and similarities in opinions and reveal the underlying misunderstandings and unresolved tensions.

Russia's gradual regime transformation has produced a moral dilemma on the German side. This dilemma manifested itself in the growing discomfort of building a strategic partnership with a state that was increasingly demonstrating non-democratic tendencies. The early reaction to this shift involved a deal of wishful thinking – German participants seemingly willing to give the Russian side the benefit of the doubt and brushing off problematic developments as temporary drawbacks on the overall »right« path. Yet because these drawbacks seemed to demonstrate a character that was more permanent than temporary in nature, communication became more critical. This criticism was often expressed – intentionally or unintentionally – in a patronizing manner. What the German side saw or framed as well-meant concern for the stability and prosperity of an important partner, the Russian side increasingly perceived as ill-intentioned hypocrisy.

The fact that cooperation was often made conditional on Russia's reform successes complicated relations. Moreover, it stood in conflict with the earlier proclaimed »change through trade« principle, which was based on the idea that democratization and liberalization were the expected effect of, not a precondition for intensified



exchange. With the German side increasingly questioning Russia's willingness to uphold its earlier – voluntary–normative commitments, Russia began questioning the overall sensibility of the common European path and voicing its willingness to finally turn to the more promising »East« instead. The sense of exclusion and marginalization on the Russian side – genuine or not – was gradually transforming into a sense of competition and rivalry with the West.

Further complicating relations was the fact that not only had Russia been changing over the years, but that Germany was also changing – becoming more deeply embedded in increasingly complex European and transatlantic institutional structures. Here again, differences in perceptions were quite visible: while Germany viewed itself as part of the integrated Europe, Russian participants pointed to the growing irrelevance of and disintegration tendencies within the European Union (EU). Similarly, while German participants stressed the significance of Europe's transatlantic security ties within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), their Russian counterparts remained mistrustful of the Alliance and criticized the destabilizing effects of its perceived »expansionism».

Thus, it was not only the discrepancies in self- and mutual perceptions that revealed the deep-rooted differences in opinions among the Russian and German participants, but also the more general understanding of international order. Russia was growing increasingly vocal in its criticism of what it saw as dominance by the United States (US) in the unipolar post-Cold War world order. Germany, on the other hand, was and saw itself as an integral part of the transatlantic security system and had no real reason to oppose it. Although both sides agreed in their critical assessment of US unilateralism – especially regarding the 2003 Iraq War – the reasons for discontent were different: what the German side primarily saw as destabilization of the rule- and norm-based system, the Russian side primarily perceived as a disturbance of the balance of power.

Hence, Russia seemed to be dissatisfied not with the structure or the underlying principles of international order, but rather with its own role in it. In this regard, certain parallels between the power-based worldviews of Russia and the US could be observed. While for Europe, legalization and the safety net of legally binding

norms and agreements presented an attempt at »turning weakness into strength« through creating »civilized« safeguards against power-driven anarchy, the US and Russia both tended to view international law as »a refuge for the weak«.

References to international norms and rules were used both on the Russian side and the Western side in order to accuse the other of hypocrisy and double standards, while presenting themselves as the champions of a rule-based order. Twenty years' worth of discussions eventually suggested that it was not primarily the inherent contestability and contestedness of international legal regulations, but the misuse of legalist argumentation for the justification of particularistic political interests that lay at the heart of major disagreements.

The discussions of the broader context and abstract principles of cooperation (or rivalry) consequently led to the question about the practical configuration of mutual relations. Debates on this topic evolved around two main issue areas. The first dealt with the level of cooperation or interaction: bilateral or multilateral. German participants largely supported the idea that in the context of European integration the nation state had lost its relevance in the international system, and therefore German foreign policy could not be detached from the EU. The Russian delegation, on the other hand, warned that this approach could lead to a waste of leadership potential on the part of influential and powerful states. This determined Russia's preference for bilateralism, as opposed to multilateralism, which was advocated by the German side.

The second issue concerned the specific structures and the degree of institutional binding between Russia and the West. Here, preferences have ranged from full integration within institutional structures with a shared normative basis, mostly favored by German participants, to a more pragmatic, project-based approach. The latter was especially preferred by the Russian participants, who argued that the search for all-encompassing normative or institutional solutions might be too ambitious and even counterproductive, because persistent conflicts in some fields threatened to obstruct successful collaboration in others. In this sense, the prior illusion of a common path and common vision had called into question the whole scope and foundation of mutual relations once it appeared to have shattered.



The analysis has shown that in the past, multiple crises in Russian-Western relations have often been followed by periods of rapprochement and cooperation. Yet the Ukraine crisis appeared to have interrupted this trend, with no new detente in sight three years after the outbreak of the conflict. In a sense, the Ukraine crisis could be interpreted as a culmination of previously unresolved tensions and deep-rooted disagreements. In light of this, it appears all the more important to avoid mistakes that have been made in the past, which to a significant part – as the analysis has demonstrated – lay in the communication between Russia and Germany or Europe/the West. Ultimately, this points to the need for critical self-reflection.

1. Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, there was hope that relations between the East and the West would transform into friendly and mutually beneficial cooperation. Russia, the main successor state of the Soviet Union, was to be fully integrated into European structures and become a »normal European country« by pursuing a course of democratic reform and economic liberalization. In Russia, both the political elites and society held positive – and at times somewhat romanticized – views of Europe and there seemed to be a broad public consensus about the country's European development path. However, it became increasingly obvious that neither Russia's integration into European structures nor even cooperative and friendly relations between Russia and the West could be taken for granted. Instead, multiple conflicts – up to the level of military confrontation – emerged, which posed a serious threat to European security and long-established principles of the international order.

These basic trends were well reflected at the Schlangenbad Talks, which since their founding in 1998 have served as a reliable trend indicator of the current state of Western-Russian relations. The Schlangenbad Talks are a series of German-Russian bilateral conferences that address current issues in foreign policy and security. The event is jointly organized by the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) and the Moscow office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, in cooperation with the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEKO) and the Moscow office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Past cooperation partners have included the

Unity for Russia Foundation and the Moscow State Institute for International Relations (MGIMO). This annual gathering of around 50 high-ranking participants from politics, academia, military, private sector, and journalism has been held since 1998 – when it started as a one-time workshop dedicated to the first anniversary of the NATO-Russia Act. Given the continuity of the format and the participation of high-level representatives from both Russia and Germany, the Schlangenbad Talks present a unique opportunity to observe and trace over time the main trends, sources of disagreements, as well as potentials for cooperation in German-Russian relations.

At the core of this study lies the qualitative and quantitative analyses of over 500 pages of all available protocol texts from 1999 to 2016. Indeed, this methodology and the textual sources possess certain limitations, which should be critically addressed at this point. The protocols were prepared by different teams of student assistants at PRIF and represent an analytical documentation summarizing the most salient issues and main lines of argumentation, rather than verbal protocols. As a result, the records of the proceedings differ in length and scope.

Despite these limitations, a detailed recapitulation and analysis of the debates at the annual high-ranking Schlangenbad Talks allow the capturing of specific trends and argumentation patterns that are not only characteristic of the specific context in Schlangenbad, but are also observable in the more general Russian-German and Russian-Western debates. Thus, the aim of the paper is to provide a differentiated picture of past discussions and enable a critical evaluation of the inconsistencies and divergences as a lesson for the future.

2. Highs and Lows: Crises and the Prospects of Cooperation

2.1 Twenty Years of Western-Russian Relations – Twenty Years of Crisis?

The analysis of the debates at the Schlangenbad Talks over the past 19 years reveals a history of crises and conflicts. Some were more visible, while others were subtler; some seemed to have been overcome quickly, while others reverberated for years. These highs and lows were also captured in the conference agendas, with topics ranging from common challenges – such as international



terrorism and the management of the global economic crisis of 2008/2009 – to the various conflicts of interests and opinions.

Already the first meetings in Schlangenbad took place in the context of an event that had a major effect on the relations between Russia and the West: the NATO-led military intervention in Kosovo. While many Western observers shared the view that the intervention was a normative necessity for the prevention of genocide, the Russian side decisively criticized »Western interventionism« that violated the principle of non-interference, one of the central provisions of international law.

A brief overview of the following years shows that periods of rapprochement and cooperation in Russian-Western relations were repeatedly interrupted by new low points. The year 2003 marked the US-led war in Iraq, which violated international law and caused a deep divide within the West itself. The following year witnessed the enlargement of both NATO and the EU, which extended membership to the Baltic States and other Eastern European countries and was viewed with skepticism by Russia. The outbreaks of the so-called color revolutions in the post-Soviet space soon afterwards demonstrated the destabilizing potential of the shared Eastern European neighborhood, where the Russian and the European vectors of integration were not seen as mutually reinforcing, but rather as conflicting – at times incompatible – alternatives. What followed were discussions of possible NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, as well as the conflict over the planned missile defense in Eastern Europe. While the aforementioned disagreements in the years after Iraq remained fairly low level, the next escalation of conflict took place already in August 2008. The Russian military intervention in Georgia and its support for the breakaway provinces of South-Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as the Western accusations – rather one-sided from the Russian perspective – intensified the deep loss of trust between Russia and the West, which initially surfaced with the war in Kosovo.

This history of conflicts finally culminated with the events in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea in spring 2014. The long-term effects of the Ukraine crisis – upon the country itself, the relations between Russia and the West, and on the international order as a whole – cannot be fully understood and forecast yet. It is clear, however, that building cooperative relations has become much more

complicated both for Western countries and Russia – especially with the war in Eastern Ukraine drifting into the state of frozen conflict and the status of Crimea remaining unresolved. Adding to the already complex situation, since fall 2015 both Russia and several Western countries have also become involved in the ongoing war in Syria, where interests and views on appropriate strategies differ radically.

Hence, looking back at two decades of Russian-Western relations as presented through the lens of Schlangenbad Talks and taking into consideration the current tense situation, it can appear questionable whether there were any periods of rapprochement and cooperation at all. However, this conclusion would be too negative and would ignore the fact that there were multiple well-functioning projects, vital shared interests, and efforts on both sides to build friendly and stable relations.

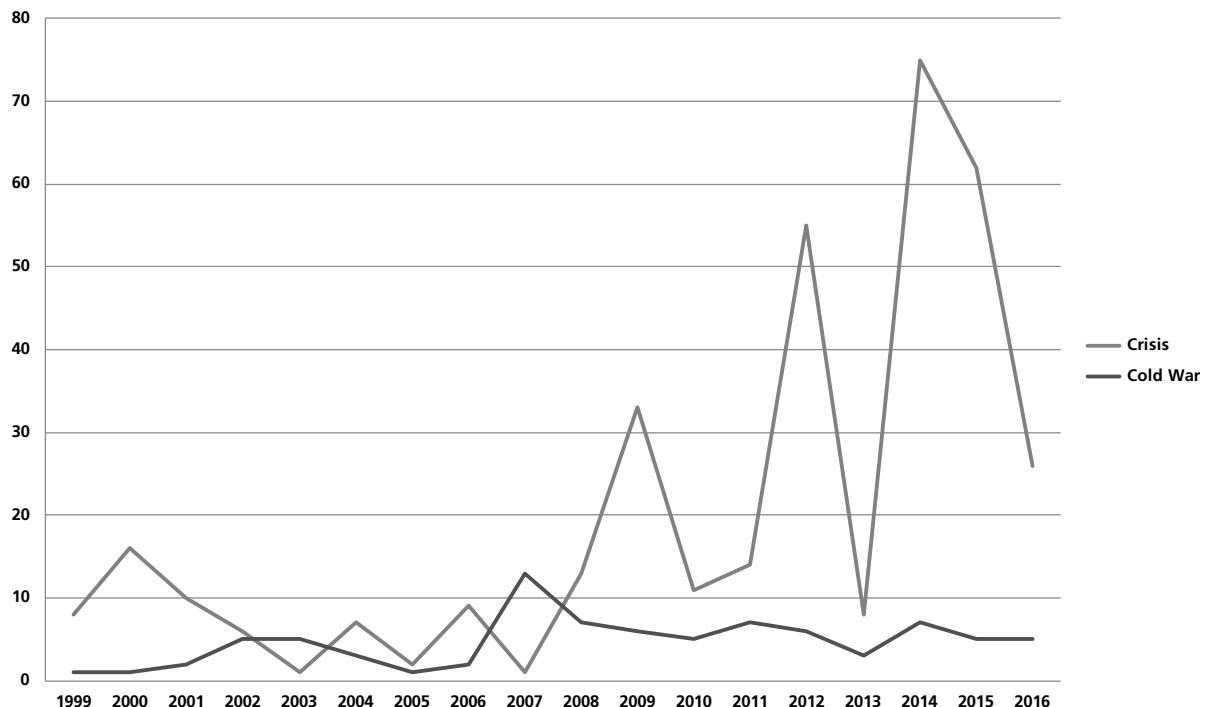
Somewhat surprisingly, years of sharp rhetorical confrontation were often followed by rapprochement and debates oriented towards cooperation and mutual understanding. Even after the 1999 Kosovo intervention, Klaus-Peter Klaiber – then NATO Assistant Secretary General – stated in 2001 that the disagreements with Russia had been overcome and that relations had reached the pre-crisis level as early as summer 1999 (2001: 10)¹. While this statement by a NATO official could be viewed as an attempt at distracting attention from the new schism, the same year Igor Bratichkov from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also spoke of well-functioning German-Russian relations (2001: 4).

Another striking example is the handling of the war in Georgia in 2008. Even at the following 2009 conference, Western criticism of Russia's military intervention and the risk of further violent escalation in the immediate European neighborhood were not really at the center of debate. What is more, already in 2011 two Schlangenbad panels had been dedicated to the possibility of NATO membership for Russia, as proposed by former German Minister of Defense Volker Rühe. This proposal even included shared military structures, such as a joint missile defense system. Although most participants – both German and Russian – doubted the feasibility of such plans at least in the medium term, the discussion alone

1. For all protocol texts, see the official homepage of the conference: <http://www.schlangenbader-gespraeche.de/>.



Figure 1: References to the Terms »Crisis« and »Cold War« (1999–2016)



showed that the level of tensions in Western-Russian relations had significantly, albeit temporarily decreased. However, as illustrated in Graph 1 – which shows the changing frequencies of the term »crisis« – the overall tendency pointed towards a more conflict-prone environment of German-Russian relations: be it »crisis« between the two parties themselves, or external »crises« that had an impact on mutual relations.

2.2 Changing Context

Even though phases of rapprochement proved to be only temporary, how was it possible to overcome the crises and return to cooperation-oriented dialogue so quickly? A closer look at the debates reveals that at least a part of the answer lay in the domestic developments in Russia or major Western countries. The Russian-Georgian War, for instance, coincided with two other very important events: the election of Dmitri Medvedev as president in Russia (even though the election took place before the intervention in Georgia), and shortly thereafter of Barack Obama in the US. Both were expected by a majority of participants to have a positive effect on the Western-Russian relations. On the one hand, the

end of Vladimir Putin's rule – for the time being at least – and the election of a candidate who was perceived as more liberal and Western-oriented stirred up hope for better relations in the future. The same held true for Obama's announcements of a more pragmatic foreign policy, including vis-à-vis Russia. So at the time of the 2009 Schlangenbad Talks, there was a broadly shared expectation among the participants that the low point in Western-Russian relations would finally be overcome and the much-discussed »reset« would become possible. A minor military confrontation at the outskirts of Europe, one could cynically note, was not important enough to disrupt this generally positive atmosphere.

2.3 The Eternal Search for Common Interests

Another aspect contributing to rapprochement after crisis was the search for shared interests – or even common enemies. Most German participants expressed the opinion that Russia was important for Europe, so there was no alternative to cooperation. However, it was primarily the Russian participants who repeatedly reminded the audience of the necessity to cooperate and warned about the possible dangers of bilateral conflicts – espe-



cially at times of more outspoken Western criticism of Russian foreign or domestic policies.

The shared interests mentioned above included a broad variety of issues. For instance, cooperation in the field of economic relations was a popular topic, which has also proven to be strikingly crisis-proof. Even at times of confrontation, business relations remained pragmatically oriented towards cooperation. Accordingly, representatives of the German business community in Schlangenbad occasionally criticized the inability of politicians and diplomats to finally overcome their differences – something that both German and Russian entrepreneurs had long achieved in their day-to-day cooperation.

A specific aspect of economic cooperation was linked to Russia's importance for Europe's energy security. Already at the 2001 conference, Alexey Miller – then Deputy Minister of Energy of the Russian Federation – stressed that there was no alternative to Russia as the main energy exporter for Europe, which made dialogue and partnership a necessity (2001: 7). Later, however, discussions repeatedly showed that such interdependence could also lead to significant conflicts – for instance, in the aftermath of the so-called gas conflicts between Russia and transit countries in 2006 and 2009. At the 2006 meeting, the majority of both Russian and German participants agreed that Russia had to become more reliable and criticized the policies of the state monopolist Gazprom. Energy cooperation has remained on the agenda of Schlangenbad over the years – which, if nothing else, serves to demonstrate the existence of a certain level of mutual dependencies in the energy sphere.

Another possible field of cooperation frequently referred to by the participants was security-related issues, such as drug and human trafficking, arms trade, cybercrime, and illegal migration. It was argued that in today's globalized world, these challenges could not be properly addressed on the national level alone, but that international cooperation and coordination of efforts were urgently needed. Specific cooperation projects proposed in Schlangenbad included continued collaboration in the field of non-proliferation and arms control. As Harald Müller from PRIF and several of his Russian colleagues criticized in 2008, major achievements in this field dated as far back as the Cold War era and negotiations seemed to have lost momentum in the recent years – although the risks of proliferation and an arms race were inherent-

ly tied to the vital security interests of both Russia and Western countries (2008: 19ff).

The fight against international terrorism represented another popular field of security-related cooperation that was repeatedly discussed – and indeed at times did produce some positive effects on Western-Russian relations. When Russia joined the US-led »War on Terror« after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and offered support for the intervention in Afghanistan, debates at the following Schlangenbad Talks in April 2002 mirrored this atmosphere of rapprochement between Russia and the West. The title of the first panel even suggested that the anti-terror coalition could become a »nucleus of a new international order« – which would this time include Russia as a partner state.

The positive effect did not last long, coming to an abrupt end with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, the idea that the fight against a common enemy could contribute to friendly relations and outweigh minor conflicts between the partners did not entirely lose its prominence. The issue even gained additional relevance after 2011, when multiple crises in the Middle East, the civil war in Syria, the spread of ISIS, increased migration, and terrorist attacks in Western countries urgently called for a response.

The – at times emotional – discussions on the prospects of a common fight against terrorism suggested, however, that it was not at all clear whether this area formed a basis for rapprochement or, on the contrary, further conflict between Russia and the West. Already in 2005, a separate panel was dedicated to »double standards« in regard to appropriate definitions and instruments in the fight against terrorism. In the context of the US-led anti-terror coalition on the one side and the war in Chechnya on the other, Russian participants complained that while Russia showed willingness to support Western efforts after 9/11, the West in return demonstrated no understanding for Russia's fight against terrorism. Ambassador Günter Joetze's reply that suppression of rebellion could not be legitimized by the »fight against terrorism« revealed the difficulties of agreeing upon a common definition of what exactly the sides wanted to fight against (2005: 21).

Years later, discussions on Syria were characterized by similar disagreements, when the idea of a »common en-

emy» – in the form of »international (Islamist) terrorism« – already failed at the stage of defining this particular »enemy«. Thus, at the 2016 Schlangenbad conference Rainer Hermann from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* sharply criticized Russia for attacks on »the moderate opposition« (2016: 17), while Russian participants accused the West of arming Islamist terrorists.

Two decades of Schlangenbad Talks have witnessed many turning points and crises in Western-Russian relations. The frequency of the notion of »crisis« in the protocol texts (Graph 1) demonstrates a wave-shaped curve illustrating the fact that years of conflict have frequently been followed by a more optimistic outlook and a cooperative stance on both sides. As discussed above, these phases of rapprochement often did not, however, result from a comprehensive discussion of the roots of conflict, but rather originated in changes of context or deliberate efforts at shifting the focus to less conflictual spheres.

2.4 No Return to the Cold War

Whenever there was a crisis in the relations between Russia and the West, participants spoke of a »historical« event, »the deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War«, and at times even speculated about the beginning of a new era of confrontation. In 2007, Vyacheslav Nikonov – President of the Unity for Russia Foundation – stated that despite functioning cooperation in some areas, Russian-Western relations after the Cold War had never reached a »normal temperature« to begin with and diagnosed a state of permanent confrontation (2007: 4). As the quantitative analysis shows, the term »Cold War« has been used at least once every year in Schlangenbad, and increasingly so since 2007 (Graph 1). A closer look at the context in which the term was used, however, reveals that there was a broad consensus that going back to the state of the Cold War was unacceptable both for Russian and German delegations. At the same time, the risk of renewed permanent conflict was viewed as low. As MP Rolf Mützenich (SPD) pointed out at the 2007 meeting, there were decisive differences between the »real« Cold War and the present situation. First of all, since Russia and Western countries faced similar challenges »from the outside«, which threatened shared security or economic interests, cooperation was now seen as a necessity. Secondly, despite recurrent conflicts (of interests), there was no ideological component that

could make confrontation a purpose in itself (2007: 6). These arguments were repeated year after year, and even after the Ukraine crisis, the general orientation towards cooperation – or at least coexistence – rather than confrontation was rarely questioned. For instance, although a panel at the 2016 conference suggested a »Re-Ideologization of the East-West Conflict« and was designed to discuss the differences in values between Russia and Western countries, the failure on both sides to identify these supposedly different normative orientations indeed demonstrated the absence of a clear ideological divide.

Thus, the emotional reactions to crises among Schlangenbad participants and references to the dangers of a new Cold War could instead be interpreted positively: conflicting interests and opposite positions on major events in international politics were not perceived as »normal«, but rather as a »problem« that needed to be solved and overcome.

3. The Transformations of Self- and Mutual Perceptions

The perceptions of crises and the possible ways of addressing them were inseparably linked to the changes in the ways the actors perceived themselves and each other. While it is impossible to assess the causal relationship between recurring conflicts and self- and mutual perceptions, the textual analysis suggests that these have at the very least been mutually influencing. This section will trace the development of the views on Russia and the »West« along specific turning points. The aim is to highlight the differences and similarities in opinions, underlying misunderstandings, and unresolved tensions.

3.1 Russia's Long Transition to (Un)Certainty?

A brief look at the word cloud generated from the texts of all available Schlangenbad protocols reveals a striking trend. Russia appears to have been at the very center of attention, effectively eclipsing all other themes and subjects. This impression is not entirely correct, because the sum of references to the cumulative »West« was at least on par with mentions of Russia – yet it is not completely false, either. Despite the fact that there have only been three thematic panels specifically dedicated to Russia's



domestic politics, the issue has surfaced in the discussions much more frequently. Similar to the trajectory of Russia's political transition, the perceptions and opinions about the country have been neither stable, linear, nor indeed unanimous.

Figure 2: Word cloud generated from the texts of Schlangenbad protocols (1999–2016), English translation of the German terms



Unlike the common public belief asserting Russia's gradual slide from a more democratic towards a more authoritarian political order, the discussions in Schlangenbad demonstrated a more variable pattern. Concerns about the vectors of Russia's internal development were voiced early on. In 2000, Christian Pauls from the German Foreign Ministry problematized growing state control over the media, concentration of power in the Kremlin and strengthening of the power vertical (2000: 3). And as early as 2003, Egon Bahr – former Minister of the German Federal Government – shared his conviction that there would be no »Western-style« democracy in Russia as long as Vladimir Putin remained in power (2003: 13). Yet despite this early criticism, what apparently mattered more to Russia's Western counterparts was the fact – or belief – that Russia was on its way towards democracy.

This journey seemed to have slowed down around 2004, followed by an announced preference for a dif-

ferent, »Russia-specific« path in the same general direction around 2006–2008, until eventually the sensibility of the final destination – namely democracy and liberal political order – was increasingly questioned in the aftermath of the conflict in Ukraine. Thus in 2004, Sergey Kortunov – then Director of the Russian Committee for Foreign Policy Planning – admitted that Europe had every right to hold high expectations of Russia, because it belonged to the European family, after all (2004: 10). Yet in 2007, Vyacheslav Nikonov announced that while the state of Russian democracy was not ideal, Russia had no need for »Western instructions« (2007: 5). And almost a decade later, Alexey Miller from the European University in St Petersburg welcomed Russia's »emancipation« from Europe and its self-identification as a »Eurasian« state as a positive development (2016: 24).

The external perception of Russia's transformation, both objective and subjective, also changed accordingly, although the belief in a common European path – or at least the hope in Russia's European orientation – seemed to have lasted longer on the German side. Yet in 2016 in the middle of a heated, albeit not particularly productive, debate about universal and traditional values, Karsten Voigt – former Coordinator of German-North American Cooperation at the German Foreign Office – suggested that Russia should eventually decide for itself whether it wanted »to be part of Eastern Europe or Western Asia«, obviously hinting not at the preferred geographic designation, but at Russia's political and value orientation.

3.1.1 Quo vadis Russia? Regime Transformation and the German Moral Dilemma

The topic of states' domestic affairs is *per se* a delicate and difficult one, because it naturally puts the scrutinized side at a disadvantage. In Schlangenbad, the patronizing attitude of the West towards a »democratizing« Russia – whether intentional or unintentional – has never been explicitly pronounced, yet it did seem implicitly present in the comments of many German participants. At the early meetings, Ottokar Hahn – then EU Ambassador to the Russian Federation – named support for the transformation process as one of the EU's strategic priorities in its dealings with Russia (1999: 3). Perhaps in order to avoid the impression of trying to speak from a position of moral superiority, thus antagonizing the Russian



counterparts, Germany's interest in Russia's successful democratic transition has often been framed in pragmatic terms – i.e., as a wish for building a relationship with a stable, reliable, and prospering partner.

At the same time, some German participants often let slip or directly stated that the scope of cooperation depended on the degree of Russia's commitment to democratic reforms, thus making relations conditional on Russia's successful implementation of the transformation agenda. The sincerity and sensibility of these demands was received with skepticism on the Russian side. For instance, Vladimir Lukin – then Russian Commissioner for Human Rights – critically observed that the EU in particular and the West in general did not seem hindered by the lack of democratic progress in its dealings with Central Asian states (2007: 30). Whether such self-induced conditionality actually had the potential for becoming an obstacle to bilateral relations, it did produce a moral dilemma on the German side. This dilemma was manifested in the growing discomfort over building up a strategic partnership with a state that was increasingly demonstrating non-democratic tendencies. The hopes were high and the disappointment was higher still.

The analysis revealed multiple ways the German side attempted to overcome this moral discomfort. One involved a certain amount of wishful thinking. Whether this attitude was based on the willingness to give Russia the benefit of the doubt, or reflected a true conviction that despite certain drawbacks Russia's political system was indeed developing in the »right« direction is hard to say. It is indeed easy to highlight the faults of such an approach in retrospect. Yet its naïveté aside, it suffered from the same inherent arrogance that the Russian side had been complaining about for years. For example, in 2004 Ernst-Otto Czempiel from PRIF called for more acceptance of and understanding for Russia, while referring to it as a country on an »earlier development stage« (2004: 8). Although under current circumstances, such a statement would most probably be perceived as an insult, this particular formula has often been taken up by Russian participants themselves in reaction to critical assessments of the country's internal developments. The references to Russia's relative »youth« in terms of state and institution building resembled a justification rather than a genuinely held belief, but these were not uncommon. More surprisingly, assertions that the Russian population was – due to historical, cultural, geographical, or

other objective or subjective reasons – either not ready for a genuinely democratic political order or unwilling to invest in it were voiced at different times by both Kremlin-friendly pundits (such as Vyacheslav Nikonov) and members of the Russian political opposition (such as Vladimir Ryzhkov).

Another approach to dealing with Russia's non-democratic slide involved outspoken criticism. This often, and rather unsurprisingly, led to debates about the constructive and not-so-constructive functions, goals, fairness, and acceptability of mutual critique. As previously mentioned, episodic critical concerns about specific trends in Russia's domestic politics and developments have been voiced by German participants since the early years of the conference. Yet the deeply felt frustrations over the growing problematization of Russia's regime dynamics first surfaced clearly in 2004. At that time, Karsten Voigt presented an extensive reflection on the problems and moral pits of building a strategic partnership with an increasingly authoritarian Russia (2004: 3). This speech prompted a harsh reaction from Vyacheslav Nikonov, who suggested that should such considerations and assumptions truly reflect the attitudes of the German federal government, the Russian-German relations were destined to eventually reach a dead end (2004: 8). Yet many German participants repeatedly stressed that open and well-meant criticism was not an *obstacle* for, but precisely a necessary *attribute* of true cooperation and partnership. As Manfred Sapper – Editor-in-chief of the journal *Osteuropa* – pointed out in 2013, the German side did not view criticism as an instrument of pressure, but as a »moral duty« (2013: 5). Heike Dörrenbächer – then Managing Director of the German Association of East European Studies – also questioned the artificial division into »Russia-friendly« and »Russia-critical«, often used in the public debate in Germany (2013: 10), because it was exactly the duty of a »friend« to openly voice criticism when observing worrying developments in the partner country.

3.1.2 Criticizing Criticism: Russian Reactions to External Scrutiny

Just as the German side developed multiple ways of reacting to Russia's »reverse transition«, Russian participants also demonstrated different ways of reacting to such criticism.



One involved ironical dismissal and was mostly characteristic of the early years of the meetings – when belief in a common development path still appeared strong on both sides. Thus at one of the early conferences, Nikonov asserted that Western criticism of Russia's political system was exaggerated and called Russia a »boring, normal country« (2004: 16). Likewise, Sergey Kortunov referred to Vladimir Putin as the »biggest democrat in Russia« (2004: 10) – an appraisal that could have been an homage to Gerhard Schröder's famous description of Putin as a »flawless democrat« had it not been pronounced half a year earlier.

Dismissal was later substituted for verbal retaliations. Although early criticism of Russia's democratic credentials did not meet considerable objections on the part of Russian participants – whether because it was initially not treated as a grave insult, or was accepted good-naturedly – later it increasingly provoked accusations of disrespect and meddling in internal affairs. Western criticism of Russia's human rights and democratic record has often been countered by accusations of instrumentalizing the human rights agenda with the goal of marginalizing and ostracizing Russia. What the German side saw – or framed – as well-meant concern was increasingly perceived as ill-intentioned hypocrisy. Starting in the second half of the 2000s, the Russian side began stressing the inapplicability of Western political models for the very »distinctive« Russian case. The exact characteristics of this distinctiveness remained underspecified, yet demands for more acknowledgement and understanding for Russia's specificity were becoming ever louder. In 2013, Irina Kobrinskaya from IMEMO identified a »tolerance crisis« on the part of the West (2013: 8), while other speakers called on Europe to finally learn to accept Russia »the way it is«. However, this particular »way« Russia truly »is« – beyond rhetorical rebuttals and empty political slogans – was becoming increasingly blurry. For instance, a panel at the 2016 conference specifically dedicated to the discussion of differences and similarities of values between Russia and the West, clearly demonstrated the failure to grasp the meaning of the frequently invoked »traditional values«. Just as Irina Busygina from MGIMO warned in the beginning of the discussion (2016: 21), the debate about abstract values was intense and polarizing in form, yet hollow in substance. Despite multiple attempts at pinpointing the distinctions between »European«, »Western«, »Russia-specific«, »traditional«, and »universal values«,

their meaning remained unclarified and undefined. This particular discussion also revealed the internal contradictions of the official Russian argumentation, which has traditionally criticized the Western monopolization of the international value discourse, yet tended to present traditional values as a particularistic alternative to Western normative universalism, thus reinforcing the universalist-particularistic dichotomy.

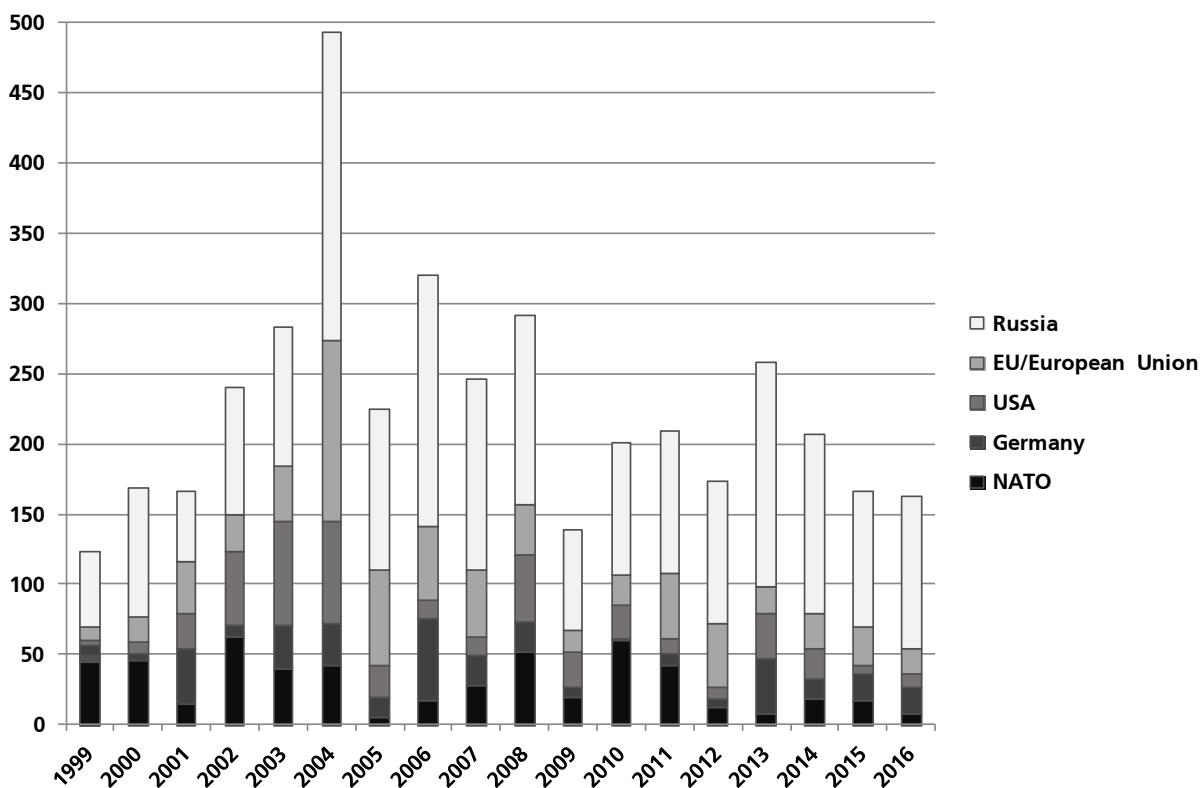
Sergey Karaganov from the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow seemed to take a completely different approach to Western criticism and repeatedly hinted that Russia was willing to turn away from the disintegrating West and in the direction of the promising East. At times, it appeared that these suggestions were designed to frighten Europe – and they often produced reflex actions: reinstating broadly understood common values, common interests, and a common path. Yet in the last few years, the conviction has grown stronger that the ultimate choice of direction and orientation was for Russia and Russia alone to make.

3.2 The Fragmented West

As mentioned previously, a look at the quantitative analysis of the Schlangenbad protocols at first sight reveals some astounding asymmetries in the representation of Russia and the West. While »Russia« has been mentioned approximately 2,000 times, the »EU« landed on second place with around 680 mentions, followed by »NATO« with approximately 550, the »USA« with around 490, and »Germany« with only 350 mentions. It is indeed striking that Germany did not seem to be featured as a prominent theme at a conference primarily dedicated to *German-Russian* relations.

These trends have not gone completely unnoticed by the participants either. At the end of the 2005 meeting, Russian participants pointed to the above-mentioned asymmetry and complained that the critical attention throughout the years had been primarily focused on Russia. The following year, organizers tried to address this concern – as was specifically highlighted by Hans-Joachim Spanger in his opening speech – and included a panel dedicated to the policies of the German »grand« coalition. Similarly, two years later Vladimir Lukin voiced his concerns about the disproportionate concentration on Russia and its internal problems (2007: 7). In order

Figure 3: References to Russia and the ›West‹ (absolute numbers), 1999–2016



to somewhat correct this imbalance that time, the organizers offered an opportunity to evaluate the Western – and specifically German – state building efforts in Afghanistan.

Yet despite this repeatedly pronounced dissatisfaction, the textual analysis reveals that Russia and the West as a collective actor actually enjoyed approximately the same amount of attention (Graph 2). It might not have been the lack of scrutiny, but the fragmented representation that contributed to the impression of the imbalance.

This diffused focus on the »West« – which as a term was mentioned approximately 250 times – is not surprising. Throughout the years, German participants have been repeatedly stressing the country's European and transatlantic orientation as the underlying basis of Germany's foreign policy. For many German participants, this has been a self-evident maxim – for the Russian side, however, this often signified an attempt at shamefully hiding one's own power (or alternatively lack thereof) and national interests behind multilateral institutional struc-

tures. Nonetheless, at times Russian participants themselves referred to some amorphous collective West – as a homogeneous and unified entity. Yet at other times, the Russian side seemed to be keen on stressing the inherent lack of common purpose within NATO, for instance, or heterogeneity and lack of consensus within the EU.

3.2.1 The European Union: From »Political Dwarf« to Geopolitical Competitor

The EU has at different times stood at the center of the discussions, yet perceptions differed not only between the German and Russian speakers, but also among them.

As early as 1999, Ottokar Hahn pointed toward Russia's »false« perception of Europe (1999: 2). He specifically mentioned that Russian experts and politicians did not view the EU as a political actor, overemphasizing the economic dimension and even considering eventual disintegration, or alternatively stagnation, as possible scenarios of the EU's further development (1999: 3). None-



theless, only a year later Alexander Dynkin from IMEMO outlined »the prospect of full EU membership« as one of Russia's strategic goals in its relations with the EU (2000: 8). This was quite an ambitious objective even at that time, but one unquestionably sending a normative »declaration of intent«. This signal, however, was received rather cautiously on the other side. While it appeared clear to everyone that Russia's membership in the EU was a remote theoretical possibility at best, the cold response to such – honest or not entirely so – aspirations eventually produced an increasing sense of exclusion and marginalization.

In 2000, Alexander Golovin from the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed his regret that Russia and the West had missed the opportunity for closer cooperation, because Russia had been denied an integration perspective from the outset (2000: 4). A few years later, Nikonov echoed the sentiment and asserted that Europe's failure to include Russia had resulted in disillusionment and a feeling of marginalization on Russia's part (2003: 16).

The sense of exclusion on Russia's part was gradually transforming into a sense of competition and rivalry. In the run-up to the EU's Eastern enlargement in 2004, the Russian side did not try to hide its concerns over the potential growth of anti-Russian sentiments within the EU after the admission of the new Eastern European member states, but signaled an adherence to pragmatic acceptance. However, it was the debate about Ukraine's inevitable choice between joining the Customs Union promoted by Russia and signing the Association Agreement with the EU in 2011 that best revealed the growing tensions. Represented by Alexander Grushko – then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation – the Russian side seemed to favor a trilateral solution, encompassing deeper cooperation between the EU and the Customs Union with Ukraine as its member (2011: 21). Patricia Flor from the German Foreign Ministry insisted, however, that Ukraine's membership in the Customs Union would exclude the possibility of a free trade zone between the EU and Ukraine and would in the long run threaten Ukraine's EU membership perspective (2011: 21). Despite multiple calls for abandoning the »either ... or« logic, the debate did not produce any solution to the deep-seated problem. Few observers and practitioners seemed to anticipate that only a few years later this unresolved issue would eventually trigger the deepest crisis in Russian-Western relations since the end of the Cold War.

While the Russian side was gradually growing to see the EU as a geopolitical competitor, the German side did not tire of stressing that the EU first and foremost represented a community of values, a stabilizing force, and a promoter of good governance and the rule of law. This was particularly emphasized by Gernot Erler, Minister of State at the German Foreign Office, in the panel dedicated to the German EU presidency in 2007. The speaker painted a rather idealistic picture of the EU's foreign policy, which allegedly distanced itself from traditional influence mechanisms, but aimed at promoting security and prosperity through the communication and dissemination of best practices (2007: 25f). Yet almost ten years later, the political developments in European capitals and the growing anti-European and right-wing sentiments in Europe left the participants wondering what the common European values actually stood for.

Quite surprisingly, the intensification of the EU's institutionalization in the area of foreign policy has in a way been inversely correlated with discussions about its foreign policy subjectivity. While German participants increasingly stressed European solidarity and Germany's inherent entanglement within the EU's organizational and institutional structures, Russian participants seemed to prioritize bilateral as opposed to multilateral relations and occasionally predicted the growing crisis and the eventual irrelevance of the EU as a foreign policy actor.

3.2.2 NATO: The Eternal Rival

It was indeed NATO and not the EU that was seen as the main foreign policy and security actor on the European space. While the German side seemed to struggle in terms of defining NATO's new purpose – beyond a closed security and military alliance – Russia's perception of NATO has remained mistrustful and cautious throughout the years. The Western military intervention in Yugoslavia seemed to have triggered the first open crisis of trust – if there was much trust to begin with – with Sergey Karaganov and Alexey Pushkov, then Director of Foreign Affairs at Russian Public Television (ORT), asserting that there could be no return to *status quo ante* (1999: 8, 11). While the trauma ran deep, only a few years later a NATO-Russia alliance and even Russian membership in NATO were discussed in 2002 and 2011 respectively. Russia's representatives repeatedly stressed that effective dialogue and cooperation between Russia



and NATO should and could only be based on mutual respect and equality between the partners. Though this was not stated directly, it appeared likely that for the Russian side »equality« meant co-decision. On the other hand, the German side was equally reluctant to spell out that there would and could be no equality in the NATO-Russia constellation, if equality presupposed Russia gaining the right of veto over NATO's internal decisions.

Unlike the EU's Eastern enlargement – which was met with reserved acceptance on the Russian side – the NATO enlargement only served to deepen mistrust, about which Russian participants were already quite vocal. Whether the Western counterparts did not truly comprehend or did not really care about these concerns is now a matter of speculation. Yet in the aftermath of the Bucharest summit in 2008, the German side seemed to acknowledge that a potential membership perspective for Ukraine and Georgia, while normatively desirable, could have a destabilizing effect – particularly in view of Russia's discontent. Although Brigadier General Klaus Wittmann underlined that the wish for membership came from the countries themselves – thus dismissing accusations of a new NATO »expansion« (2009: 10) – Karaganov identified the »gray zone« between NATO and Russia, namely Georgia and Ukraine, as the main security problem on the European continent where the threat of war was not unrealistic (2009: 8). Despite the fact that serious discussions about Georgia's and Ukraine's NATO membership prospects had ceased almost a decade ago, it took the military conflict in Ukraine for the German side to – rather belatedly – remind Russia about the principle of free choice of alliance, although it did not sound particularly convincing under the circumstances.

On a slightly more positive note: in the non-crisis years, the debate about NATO-Russia relations used to revolve around the identification of common threats and the search for common interests. Transnational terrorism, non-proliferation, drug trafficking, conflict prevention, as well as conflict management have traditionally been named as key areas for practical collaboration. Nonetheless, the pragmatic approach focused on cooperation where possible and dialogue in all other areas was too weak to withstand the burden of the current conflicts. The institutions – such as the NATO-Russia Council – that were painstakingly built to promote trust and prevent crises were the first to be shut down in the aftermath of

the events in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, much to the dismay of both the German and the Russian side.

3.2.3 The US: The Elephant in the Room

Finally, the US, which featured much more prominently in the debates than Germany and the EU, seemed to represent a kind of »significant other« for both the Russian and the German sides. The perceptions of the Russian participants revealed no surprises. The US has been viewed as a ruthless and hypocritical hegemon, a destabilizing force, and a sort of self-proclaimed world policeman without a mandate. In this constellation, Europe was sometimes presented as a US underling incapable of taking care of its own security and thus relying on the military alliance with the US. In response to Gernot Erler's demand that Russia should respect Europe's decision and wish to preserve good transatlantic relations (2001: 11), Colonel General Valeriy Manilov suggested that without Russia's support Europe would eventually become subject to Washington-imposed dictate (2001: 12). This perception was especially visible in the underlying tendency among Russian participants to equate the negatively connoted NATO with the US.

The views of the German side revealed more interesting nuances. Thus the US unilateral action in Iraq in 2003 seemed to have marked a certain crisis of self-identification in the West. The military campaign, the Bush Doctrine, as well as the restrictions on domestic democratic freedoms in the wake of the War on Terror were not only met with criticism, but also revealed a sense of cluelessness. German participants seemed to be grappling with a moral dilemma with regard to the obvious norm violations on the part of its strategic partner and main security guarantor. Yet despite criticism of US actions – which the German side did not feel reluctant to voice – the need for partnership and cooperation with the US has never been questioned.

On the Russian side, the US was at times used as a sort of lightning rod – for discharging accumulated frustrations about the dysfunctional Western-Russian relations or as a contrast to the allegedly well-functioning German-Russian cooperation. It was probably the perceptions of the US, in particular, which best revealed the deep-seated Cold War stereotypes and the ever-present bloc mentality on both sides.



The mutual perceptions have thus shown both change and continuity: change in terms of the growing disappointment and disillusionment on both sides; continuity in the persistent stereotypes. Both sides were eager to demand critical self-reflection from the other, but neither appeared truly ready to practice it.

4. Understandings of International Order: The Power of Rules and the Rule of the Powerful

4.1 International Order and International Disorder

It was not only the discrepancies in self- and mutual perceptions that revealed the deep-rooted misunderstandings and differences in opinion, but also the more general views of international order, its basis and structure. Perhaps the simplest way of grasping the basic perceptions of order is through studying what the German and the Russian sides conceived of as »disorder«.

In this sense, the discussion of the US War on Terror and the Iraq War in 2003 offered the first insightful look at the diverging »worldviews«. While both sides agreed in their critical assessment of US unilateralism, the reasons for discontent seemed to differ – perhaps not substantially, but nonetheless tellingly. While the Russian observers and politicians appeared more concerned about growing US dominance in world affairs, their German counterparts were more focused on the potential consequences the behavior of the US could have on international law and the rule-based international order. Germany's concerns were genuine, yet the speakers had to admit that there was little Germany – or Europe, divided in its position on the US intervention – could do about the breach of norm by the US. On the other hand, Vladimir Lukin accused the United States of trying to solve modern problems with methods originating in the 18th century (2003: 5) – few could have foreseen that a decade later Russia would be facing the same accusations in relation to Ukraine – while Valeriy Manilov viewed American hegemony as a threat to world order and stability (2003: 8).

What the German side primarily saw as destabilization of the rule- and norm-based system was perceived as a disturbance of the balance of power on the Russian side.

4.2 Multipolarity vs. Unipolarity?

The question of multipolarity as an alternative to post-bipolar unipolarity has been intensively discussed – primarily on the initiative of the Russian side. In 2000, Alexander Golovin had already expressed his conviction that only a multipolar world order could guarantee stability in world affairs and regretted that the Western »expansionist« policy – which the Russian side concluded from the NATO enlargement plans and the military campaign in Yugoslavia – only contributed to the solidification of the unipolar moment. He also noted that Russia viewed itself as the only »resistance fighter« against US domination (2000: 4).

Although the German participants rarely voiced any definite opinion on the matter, the differences in views seemed to revolve around Russia's growing discomfort with the US-led unipolar world order, while Germany – being an integral part of the transatlantic security system – had no real reason to oppose it. Thus, in the aftermath of the intervention in Iraq Valeriy Manilov suggested that preventing unipolarity was the main priority – which he believed Russia and Germany to be fully capable of (2003: 8). The German side on the other hand had little motivation or indeed wish for challenging the established hegemony of the US in a fruitless attempt at building an »opposite pole« – an idea that »border[ed] on idiocy« in the eyes of Egon Bahr (2003: 6). A year later, Andrey Zagorskiy observed that both Europe and Russia were too weak to try to pose as equals to the US and suggested that Russia had to choose whether it wanted to take up the role as a junior partner to the US (2004: 12) – a role that European NATO allies seemed to be content with.

For Russia, such a subjugated role seemed unacceptable, and in later years the suggestion alone would be perceived as insulting. Thus, in 2009 Alexander Grushko diplomatically complained about NATO-centrism, implying US-centrism in the European security architecture (2009: 5), while Timofey Bordachev from HSE underlined that Russia would never join an organization in which another state assumed the leading role (2009: 6).

With Europe unwilling and/or unable to »emancipate« itself from the beneficial security arrangements with the US, Russia began searching for potential allies in its quest for multipolarity in other parts of the world. The discussions about BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization (SCO) in 2008 showed that in the eyes of multiple spectators, these groupings indeed had the ambition and perhaps even the potential for becoming significant actors in an emerging multipolar world order. Yet the debates also revealed that the groups themselves were extremely heterogeneous and the participating states possessed few common goals and common interests beyond pursuing »independent foreign policies« – something Alexander Nikonov saw as their main advantage (2008: 10). In this context »independent« apparently meant independence from the West – or more precisely: from the US. Apart from that, it remained largely unclear which common basis or what kind of characteristics – economic, military, cultural or ideological – made the new »poles« into separate centers of power capable of balancing against the »West«.

4.3 Rule- versus Power-Based International Order

Another – and probably more salient – line of disagreements in the understanding of the real or preferred nature of world order concerned the role of international rules and norms. In this regard, the discussion about Russia's reluctance to ratify the European Energy Charter was symptomatic. While Alexey Miller, then Deputy Minister of Energy, and Alexander Vasilenko from Lukoil highlighted the pragmatic aspects of cooperation weighing the pros and cons of joining the Charter for the Russian side (2001: 7), many German participants – although not necessarily the representatives of the business community – emphasized its primary aim at establishing regulated procedures on the European energy markets. For the German side, the Charter symbolized a »civilized alternative to the Second Great Game« (2001: 8), while for Russia it presented more of an unnecessary burden with uncertain benefits. Seeing the lack of fascination on the Russian side, Gernot Erler asked whether Russia perhaps felt more comfortable pursuing a competitive geopolitically oriented policy void of legally binding procedures and regulations (2001: 9).

This rhetorical question seemed to have gotten to the very core of mutual misunderstandings regarding the perceptions of world order. Egon Bahr underlined that the legalization of security relations through the principles of the non-use of force and inviolability of borders stood at the center of the modern European security

system (2001:11). For European states, it presented an attempt at turning weakness into strength. Unlike the US, which was strong and powerful enough to promote its interests in a rule-free world, Europe needed the security of legally binding guarantees. In this sense, Bahr saw certain parallels between the worldviews of Russia and the US and asked whether Russia was truly ready and/or willing to join a system that »substituted the right of the stronger with the strength of the law« (2001: 11).

This was not the first and not the last time Russia would be compared to the US – these comparisons however were rarely meant as a compliment. Thus, Sergey Medvedev from the George C. Marshall Center in Garmisch-Partenkirchen made use of Robert Kagan's famous assertion that »the Americans [were] from Mars and Europeans [were] from Venus« to add that »Russians also [came] from Mars« (2004: 22f). The implication was clear: while Russia publicly criticized the US's power politics and disregard for international law, it was not power politics or norm breaches that were the main problem – rather, the US being able to get away with them as the sole superpower. It also suggested that the source of Russia's dissatisfaction was not the structure or underlying principles of international order – rather, Russia's role in it.

This role has been transforming over the last two decades. But while many Russian participants seemed to take Russia's ever-strengthening great power claim positively and/or for granted, Russia's growing assertiveness on the international arena seemed to disquiet the German side. For instance, Dietrich Sperling, former Secretary of State, reminded that both Russia and Germany had gone through the experience of losing their hegemonic status, but Russia appeared to be unable to overcome and accept the loss (2003: 18). In the following years, what German observers came to see as a growing post-imperial syndrome and power-based behavior on Russia's part was in turn regarded as a return to independent and self-conscious foreign policy on the Russian side. Later, Mikhail Delyagin from the Centre for Problems of Globalization and Integration (RAS) in Moscow even suggested that Russia's willingness to »finally stand up for its own interests« produced a kind of »cultural shock« in the West – which had become accustomed to a marginalized and weak Russia (2007: 8).



Despite this suggested focus on and preoccupation with power, in their official communication Russia's representatives have often painted Russia as a defender of the rule- and law-based international system. Thus, during the controversial debate about the strengths and limitations of international law, Mark Entin from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations referred to China and Russia as the only champions of traditional international law based upon the principle of non-interference (2016: 14). Yet while Russian participants repeatedly demanded non-interference in Russia's own internal affairs and abhorred all attempts at external pressure, it appeared that the same rules did not necessarily apply to those states which Russia considered part of its sphere of influence. This inconsistency was first pointed out by Karsten Voigt, who observed in 2004 that Russia was willing to criticize US unilateralism and condemn the country's hegemonic behavior, but demonstrated similar practices and ambitions in the post-Soviet space (2004: 7). It was also not entirely clear how Russia's long-promoted legalist narrative prioritizing non-interference and non-intervention corresponded with Russia's justification of Crimea's right to self-determination in 2014. Yet as Rüdiger von Fritsch, German Ambassador to the Russian Federation, pointed out two years after the events, international law never really played a prominent role in the Russian government's Crimean argumentation, but was only invoked post factum in order to provide a legal justification for the political decision (2016: 13).

Indeed, the German side rarely tried to hide the fact that it did not quite buy into Russia's episodic utilization of legalist rhetoric. In 2003, Gunther Hellman from Goethe University Frankfurt pointed out that while Germany attributed much value to legalization in international relations, Russia primarily saw references to legal rules and regulations as a »refuge for the weak« (2003: 7). Yet neither was the Russian side truly convinced of Germany's seemingly selfless promotion of the rule of law and human rights – especially abroad. Thus, in a telling discussion about international development assistance in 2014, Heidemarie Wiezorek-Zeul – former German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development – asserted that international assistance was not about power projection or securing spheres of influence, but about reducing human suffering worldwide (2014: 25). In response, Konstantin Kosachev – then Head of Rossotrudnichestvo – mentioned that Western assistance was not entirely separated from pragmatic utilitarian interests either (2014: 26).

Both sides often employed references to international norms and rules in order to accuse the other of hypocrisy and double standards. Thus, during the discussion about the Kosovo campaign Alexey Pushkov remarked that according to Western logic, the conflict in Cyprus or the Turkish oppression of the Kurdish population provided enough grounds for intervention, yet in those cases NATO refrained from action (1999: 10). A year later Walter Kolbow – then Parliamentary Secretary of State at the German Federal Ministry of Defense – pointed out that Russia's criticism of NATO's military campaign in Kosovo appeared hypocritical in light of Russia's own military actions in Chechnya (2000: 2). Later, in the aftermath of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, Vladimir Nazarov – Deputy Secretary of the Russian Security Council – insisted that the Kosovo precedent served as an example for the unrecognized republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (2010: 27). It remained unclear how the Kosovo case – which Russia itself claimed to be illegal – could justify the legality of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's Russia-supported self-determination. In this regard, Stefan Kadelbach from Goethe University Frankfurt pointed out that »[international] law could not emerge from unlawful practice« (2016: 13), meaning that one party's non-compliance with international norms did not provide the other party with any lawful grounds for similar disregard for the law.

Extensive use of »whataboutism« was amplified by both sides' inability to critically address the inconsistencies of one's own position or reflect upon one's own norm breaches. The German side was reluctant to admit that the Kosovo intervention was illegal from the strictly international law perspective, or that the NATO-led Libya intervention exceeded the UN mandate. In fact, shortly after the adoption of Resolution 1973 in 2011, the German participants lamented Germany's abstention at the UN Security Council, while Alexander Grushko mentioned the unclear legal footing of the campaign and warned about the potential negative consequences it could have for Libya and the region as a whole (2011: 17). Unfortunately, Grushko did not elaborate on why Russia abstained – effectively allowing the intervention to happen – if it had foreseen the predicted disastrous outcome. Instead, the Libyan case – alongside Kosovo and Iraq – provided additional ammunition in Russia's rhetorical arsenal against the Western-promoted erosion of international legal principles and norms, and for justifying Russia's own breaches of international law.



In 2016, Tatyana Romanova from St. Petersburg State University asked if the differences in opinions ultimately boiled down to the fact that Europe was traditionally more set on following the spirit of the law, while Russia had more regard for the word of the law (2016: 15). Twenty years' worth of discussions on these very issues suggested that it was not primarily the inherent and existent contestedness and contestability of international legal regulations, but the misuse of legalist argumentation for the justification of particularistic political interests that lay at the heart of the problems and disagreements.

5. Towards the Practical Configuration of Relations

The discussions of the broader context and abstract principles of mutual relations consequently led to the question of how these principles could be applied in more practical terms. The concrete configuration of German-Russian cooperation was frequently discussed at Schlangenbad, but this issue was no less controversial.

Relations between Germany and Russia are embedded in a complex international environment and thus are prone to inconsistencies and contradictions. These issues have also often been at the center of debate at the Schlangenbad Talks, where discussions evolved around two main questions. The first dealt with the level on which German-Russian relations should be organized. While German participants primarily supported the idea that in times of European integration the nation state has lost its relevance in the international system and therefore German politics equaled a common European position, the Russian delegation warned that this approach could lead to wasted potential. The second issue concerned the specific structures of cooperation between Russia and the West. Here, alternatives ranged from full integration within institutional structures – which would include a shared normative basis – to a more pragmatic, project-based approach.

5.1 A Special Relationship? Russian-German Relations in the Context of the Western-Russian Divide

One factor that repeatedly led to contradictions and misunderstandings was the German embeddedness within the collective »West«. Consequently, German partic-

ipants attempted to not only speak on behalf of the German state, but also collective organizations, such as NATO. Over the years and in the process of increasingly deep integration within the EU, the European dimension and the representation of a common policy towards Russia also became more relevant. Already in 2004, MP Erich Fritz acknowledged that there was a special quality to German-Russian relations, which were based on mutual understanding and trust, but noted that in the context of EU integration there could be no exclusive bilateral relations (2004: 15f). Therefore, Russia's foreign policy should primarily focus on building dialogue and cooperation with the EU as a whole. Hans-Dieter Lucas from the German Federal Foreign Office reiterated this argument in 2015 and stated that the German position towards Russia could only be viewed as part of a common European policy, and that Russia would have to deal with all 28 member states – especially on important questions such as the European sanctions in the context of the Ukraine crisis (2015: 4).

Overall, the terms »German«, »Western«, and »European« have often been used synonymously by both Russian and German participants. However, a closer look at the debates in Schlangenbad over the years shows that there have been many inconsistencies and contradictions in the German position. While the Western or European dimension certainly played an important role – both in terms of self-identification and legal status (with Germany being a member of NATO and the EU) – there still remained a genuinely German identity as well as a national policy, which did not always coincide with the policies of even close Western allies.

The establishment of the Petersburg Dialog in 2001 – as a high-level German-Russian conference – pointed in the same direction as the occasionally contradictory statements by German representatives regarding the relevance of a shared European position for German policy vis-à-vis Russia. Thus, especially in the first years of the Schlangenbad Talks several German participants criticized the new development in German political strategy of »hiding behind the EU« instead of working on one's own positions and using the potentials of decade-long relations with international partners.

The Russian position on the issue appeared to be more coherent and did not change much over the years. Most of the Russian participants doubted that bilateral rela-



tions were irrelevant and that the German insistence on a shared European position was an effective way of organizing relations. As Aleksey Gromyko from the Institute of Europe (RAS) warned in 2015, this could lead to politics of the lowest common denominator, which would reduce the benefits of cooperation not only for Russia, but also for Germany (2015: 8).

5.2 »Small« and »Large« States and Their Place in the International Order

A question closely linked to this discussion concerns relations between »small« and »large« states in the international system in general. As several Russian participants argued, close relations between Russia and Germany were not only natural due to the long and closely intertwined common history of the two countries. Germany and Russia also represented two »large« countries with regard to their technological and military capacities and economic power, so that their interests should be of significant importance in global politics.

While there was general consensus that Germany and Russia were indeed »large« states, views differed on how to deal with the »smaller« neighbors – for instance, within the EU. The German position was primarily guided by the »one member, one vote« principle, according to which all member states were considered equals – regardless of the size of their economies or military capacities. As some Russian participants indicated, this position was not necessarily wrong from a normative point of view, but was certainly rather idealistic. It could hardly be denied that important decisions within the EU were taken in Berlin and Paris, not necessarily in Brussels, and certainly not in Bratislava or Lisbon.

The topic of »small« and »large« states and their role in international politics was also discussed from a more theoretical point of view. In 2015, one conference panel was dedicated to the presentation of an extensive research project, »A Twenty-First Century Concert of Powers«, which was conducted by an international group of researchers and coordinated by PRIF. The study acknowledged the fact that powerful nation states still played a major role in international relations and assumed there were certain lessons that could be drawn from the Concert of Powers formulated in 19th-century Europe. Although Harald Müller stressed that great

powers were expected to pursue cooperative and friendly policies towards their smaller neighbors, they still had a special responsibility for international peace (2015: 22). Thus, it is the coordination of their interests that was seen as the key requirement for a peaceful international system.

The project's findings coincided in some ways with the view held by many Russian participants that cooperation opportunities would be best taken advantage of and shared threats only effectively managed, if there were close relations between »important« states – of which Russia was one and Germany should be another. The »leadership potential« of such key players in the international system should not be wasted, as Irina Kobrinskaya insisted, by letting »small« states and their particular interests dictate the rules of the game, as it increasingly happened within the EU, for instance (2015: 9).

Rhetorically, most German participants rejected the notion of German leadership within the EU as well as the concept of an international order based on power instead of principles of equality between states. The fact that in the course of the Ukraine crisis, however, discussions mainly evolved around the historic low point in Russian-Western relations and the prospects of their future economic or security cooperation – while the situation in Ukraine and specific strategies of crisis management were touched upon only briefly – pointed to a certain preoccupation with building relations with »important« states first on the German part as well.

5.3 »Change Through Trade?« Political Conflicts and Day-to-Day Cooperation

Also striking were the differences in positions between the representatives from politics and business. Some representatives from the German business community argued alongside the Russian position that economic relations between the two countries were reliable, mutually beneficial, and had been functioning well for decades – despite periods of political conflict. Under the slogan »Wandel durch Handel« (Change through Trade), they promoted the idea that the Russian society and political system would become more democratic and »European«, if there were dialogue and exchange. They also doubted the positive effects or the sensibili-



ty of permanent criticism vis-à-vis Russia, which had not necessarily proven successful in the past. Additionally, in their view, German politics should be guided by German national interest, which lay in strong trade relations – for instance, in the field of energy security. For these reasons, they suggested that while supporting human rights and European norms, it would be wrong to harm economic relations with Russia, breaking apart one of the few realms where cooperation worked. After all, functioning practical cooperation could increase mutual trust and in the long run improve political relations between countries.

Yet the Yukos Affair called into question the possibility of separating the economic and political realms. Although Russian participants urged their Western counterparts not to let one case that had nothing to do with foreign investors endanger well-functioning cooperation projects, trust in Russian institutions and the rule of law was damaged. Conflicts also became visible in the debates on energy cooperation between Russia and Europe. As pointed out in 2006, customers in Europe managed relations with the Russian energy monopolist Gazprom on the basis of individual contracts and there were no EU-wide rules that would apply to all national companies; and many representatives from the German business community indeed stressed the past successes and promising prospects for business in Russia. However, as Vladimir Milov from the Institute of Energy Policy critically noted, it would be a mistake to assume that German companies could negotiate with Gazprom, without producing significant political consequences for the EU as a whole (2006: 15). Eastern European countries, in particular, were increasingly mistrustful of the cordial relations between German companies and Russia, and it would be dangerous to continue ignoring their criticism – as the Russian-Ukrainian »gas conflict« and the resulting energy crisis had demonstrated in the winter of 2006. This pointed to the discrepancy between well-sounding political principles – a common position of all 28 EU member states – and their practical application, which often proved to be much more complex and prone to inconsistencies.

In general, there was a broad consensus that functioning political relations should be based on mutual understanding and interdependence between societies as a whole. As Dmitri Lubinski from the Russian Ministry of

Foreign Affairs pointed out, not only were economic relations important building blocks of stable and friendly relations, but also exchange in the spheres of education, science, and culture (2004: 16). It was a positive signal to the political elites in both countries that there actually is well-functioning cooperation in these areas despite political conflict. German participants generally shared this view, but as Herta Däubler-Gmelin and Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul repeatedly reminded participants, contacts on the level of civil society were increasingly threatened by recent political developments in Russia – the installation of an authoritarian political system and the restriction of freedoms (for example, see 2013: 9; 2014: 24).

5.4 Shared Values and Institutional Solutions or Pragmatic Cooperation

Another aspect of the question of how to organize relations between Germany and Russia concerned the scope and instruments of cooperation. Here again, there was no consensus both between the German and the Russian participants and within the two delegations. When the Schlangenbad Talks were established in 1998, Germany and Russia were embedded in an extensive institutional framework, being members of the OSCE and the Council of Europe. Yet over the course of years it turned out that the existing multilateral arrangements were not always able to effectively prevent conflict. One question resulting from this observation concerned the necessity of additional institutions on the European continent that could provide a more stable basis for Western-Russian relations. At the same time, some participants doubted that the creation of new multilateral institutions was in fact possible and even desirable – at least in the short term – and suggested that a less ambitious, project-based approach in spheres of coinciding interests presented a better option.

In this context, the role of institutions and multilateral organizations in international politics was discussed in general. Alexander Grushko reminded participants in 2011 that international politics were still based on national decision-making, emphasizing the bilateral dimension of Russian-Western relations (2011: 8). Former Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Igor Ivanov criticized international institutions, such as the UN and NATO, as large bureaucratic structures that were too



slow to react to urgent challenges of today's globalized world (2011: 6). From his point of view, the phases of rapprochement in Russian-Western relations should not be »wasted« in the search for all-encompassing institutional solutions, but pragmatic, project-based cooperation – which was already successfully functioning in many areas – should be strengthened. Rolf Mützenich, on the other hand, spoke in favor of institutional solutions because their mechanisms ensured democratic and inclusive decision-making processes (2011: 10).

Still the position shared by most Russian participants was that cooperation between Russia and Europe should above all be based on national interests, since the search for common values might be too ambitious and could prevent functioning relations in the near future. In 2008, MP Sergey Markov spoke in favor of integration with Europe in different »spaces«, such as economy, education, or humanitarian relief (2008: 8); and Alexander Grushko later criticized that it was exactly the EU's insistence on an all-encompassing and legally binding agreement that derailed negotiations on the new EU-Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (2012: 15).

Such statements on the Russian side implied that cooperation did not necessarily have to be »political«, presupposing that Germany and Europe should not give too much attention to domestic political developments and the state of human and civil rights in Russia. This position became more and more common over the years – in line with increasing German or European/Western disappointment with the lack of reform in Russia. The normative dimension of cooperation was being perceived increasingly critically, and a look beyond Europe actually revealed that such a position was not exclusive to Russia. Thus, when presenting the perspectives of the SCO at the 2008 conference, Jianrong Zhang from the Center for SCO Studies in Shanghai praised the »Shanghai spirit« of cooperation: pursuit of common interests and »respect for the cooperation partner's traditions«, meaning non-interference in domestic affairs (2008: 29). In contrast, German participants were rather skeptical about the idea of purely pragmatic cooperation – both for reasons of German/European normative self-understanding and the expected effects on Russia. Thus, MP Andreas Schockenhoff stated in 2007 that although Western partners were quite interested in friendly relations with Russia, they were not willing

to cooperate with a country openly opposing their core values (2007: 4).

Somewhat paradoxically, Russian participants at times also argued in favor of all-encompassing institutional solutions for the European-Russian relations – just not in the existing form. This became especially visible in the extensive debate on Dmitri Medvedev's proposal for a European security treaty in 2008. At the core of the plan lay the idea of a new European security mechanism based on principles negotiated between all European countries and adapted to meet the shared security threats. Most Russian participants supported this strategy and criticized that the present institutional landscape dating back to the Cold War era only perpetuated the European divide.

The German side, however, remained reluctant on this issue. Although Medvedev's proposal was largely seen in a positive light – because it enabled the revitalization of dialogue between Russia and the West – the desire for a completely new setup was met with skepticism. For instance, Rolf Mützenich suggested increasing cooperation within existing organizations such as the OSCE instead – which actually was already taking place within the Corfu Process – and focusing on the improvement of relations and mutual trust. The institutional arrangements in Europe and already negotiated principles of cooperation were thus seen as sufficient, and it was their implementation that needed to be improved (2010: 7).

The fact that this approach was not unproblematic either was clearly demonstrated in 2011 in the course of a rather unusual discussion. Based on a newspaper article coauthored by the former German Minister of Defense Volker Rühe, several conference panels were dedicated to the possibility of NATO membership for Russia. After years of conflictual debates on the role of NATO, such an approach appeared to be a radical attempt to »think outside of the box« – initiated by the organizers' positive agenda-setting. However, the discussions proved that at the given time this proposal was not much more than a thought experiment: both Russian and German delegations saw little possibility of or even necessity for a Russian membership in NATO. Hence, particularly in security-related questions, the debates at Schlangenbad mirrored the status quo of institutional architecture in the European region, which has remained almost unchanged for decades.



5.5 German-Russian Relations After Ukraine: No More Business as Usual?

The fragility of this status quo was demonstrated painfully with the events in Eastern Ukraine and on the Crimean Peninsula in spring 2014. What followed was arguably the deepest and most prolonged crisis in Western-Russian relations, which also permanently changed the course of the debates at Schlangenbad. At the same time, the manner in which the conflict and its effects on Russian-Western relations were interpreted reflected many of the unresolved issues and persistent misunderstandings that have been discussed earlier in this paper. Thus, the Ukraine crisis could be seen not only as an isolated event, but also as a culmination of a decade-long process of disagreements and mutual disappointments.

One main question was whether relations between Russia and the West could at least return to the pre-crisis level of cooperation and whether mutual trust could be restored. While in previous years, periods of crises were shortly followed by rapprochement, the debates in the three consecutive years after the outbreak of the conflict suggested that the situation might be different this time.

One could argue that an obvious strategy to overcome the effects of the Ukraine conflict would be by resolving the crisis itself. However, the prospects of productive and cooperative crisis management with the participation of Russia and Western countries seemed to be very limited. This was, first and foremost, due to the irreconcilable positions on the causes of the crisis and consequently the diverging proposals for appropriate conflict resolution strategies. As Alexandre Dynkin observed in 2014 – just a few weeks after the annexation of Crimea – there existed two subjective views on the situation: one Russian, the other Western (2014: 3). However, this self-reflective insight did not contribute to a more conciliatory stance on the part of most Russian participants, who blamed the US for inciting unrest in Ukraine and forcefully promoting regime change. The result was a country deeply divided along ethnic and social lines and an increasingly nationalistic government that did not represent the interests of all its citizens. Needless to say, the German participants held a very different view and identified Russia's foreign policy and imperialistic ambitions in the region as the main roots of the conflict. Although Jens Paulus from the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Matthias Platzeck, Chairman of the German-Russian

Forum, called for a rhetorical de-escalation and stressed the importance of Western-Russian cooperation – for the sake of Ukraine (2014: 9) – harsh rhetoric persisted not only in 2014, but also at the following two conferences. Thus, the conditions for agreeing on a common strategy remained anything but favorable.

After the same accusations had been exchanged at the consecutive conference and no significant progress in terms of conflict resolution in Ukraine could be identified, the need to return to some kind of functioning Western-Russian relations *despite* ongoing confrontation in this particular field became increasingly obvious. This argument was additionally supported by pressing challenges like international Islamist terrorism, the civil war in Syria, and the resulting migration crisis in Europe, which gained relevance during the same period.

The Russian position on the issue was clear: one conflict, even if it was a significant one, should not prevent cooperation in areas where it had been functioning well for years. By making a return to cooperation dependent on a complete resolution of the Ukraine crisis, the West would not only go against its own (and Russian) interests. It would also be outright irresponsible to weaken common efforts of important international players on issues such as non-proliferation or the fight against crime and terrorism because this would have a direct and negative effect on international peace and security.

This line of argumentation somewhat corresponded to the debates on the desirability of all-encompassing institutional solutions as a basis for Western-Russian cooperation discussed above. Here, most Russian participants shared the view that waiting for a rosy future in which all disagreements would be magically resolved and cooperation would finally begin was not only naive, but also dangerous, as it ignored the immediate common challenges.

For the German side, however, continued cooperation with Russia presented (yet another) moral dilemma. On the one hand, Russia's role in the Ukraine crisis and the current status of the Crimean Peninsula were seen as unacceptable, making a return to »business as usual« impossible. As Hans-Dieter Lucas stressed repeatedly in 2015, cooperation with Russia would only be possible again after the »full implementation of Minsk II« (for example, see 2015: 4). Then, Russian objections to this



position – which appeared to put the full responsibility for the peace process on Russia by ignoring, for instance, the role of the Ukrainian government – went largely unheeded. Yet already one year later, the course of debate was somewhat different.

In 2016, neither the Russian nor the German side – nor anyone in Ukraine, as Olexandr Chalyi, former Deputy Foreign Minister of Ukraine, pointed out (2016: 5f) – seemed to believe that the Minsk Agreement could actually be implemented. While most participants acknowledged that the document had contributed to a reduction of violence, new ideas and strategies for conflict management were now required – and this entailed the necessity of at least some degree of dialogue and compromise with Russia. The moral dilemma on the German side was not necessarily tied to the conflict in Ukraine, but also stretched to other areas. Thus in 2016, Wolfgang Eichwede from Bremen University sharply criticized the Russian government's policies in Syria and the uncooperative stance that it took vis-à-vis the West, but at the same time stressed the fact that »both sides needed each other« and that there could be no alternative to cooperation and, in the long run, resolution of disagreements (2016: 26). So despite the general position on the part of German participants that the annexation of Crimea and the situation in Eastern Ukraine could not be accepted, many statements pointed to a certain readiness to engage in dialogue and cooperation with Russia – simply due to a lack of alternatives.

The deep crisis in Western-Russian relations after the 2014 events in Ukraine presented the greatest challenge to European security since the end of the Cold War and at the same time revealed many unresolved issues that have been neglected or ignored in previous decades. At the moment, it is impossible to predict whether the return to prior levels of cooperation will be possible. What is clear is that the crisis has led to a great loss of trust on both sides, so that probably for the first time in the last 25 years, the catch phrase »there is no security in Europa against, only with Russia« is no longer considered unconditional. As for the Russian side, a loss of consensus can be observed on whether Russia is a European country that seeks to align its actions with European and Western partners. Three years after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of violence in Eastern Ukraine, a solution to the situation thus seems further away than ever.

6. Lessons Learned(?) Looking Back and Looking Forward

At the 2007 conference, Vladimir Lukin observed that the development of Western-Russian relations was occurring along a »wave-like« trajectory – with alternating periods of highs and lows (2007: 6). The agendas and discussions at the Schlangenbad Talks serve as a perfect illustration of this trend. The analysis of the protocols has revealed that the multiple crises, conflicts, misunderstandings, and misperceptions – different in level and scope, but nonetheless affecting the relationship between Russia and the West in one way or the other – have been followed by periods of cooperation. Yet the Ukraine crisis seemed to have interrupted this trend – with no new detente in sight three years after the outbreak of the conflict.

Looking back at two decades of Russian-Western relations through the prism of the Schlangenbad Talks, one could already identify a downward trend: despite the recurring periods of rapprochement, conflicts and crises seemed to have intensified beginning in the second half of the 2000s. In this sense, the Ukraine crisis could be interpreted as a culmination of previously unresolved tensions and deep-rooted disagreements. Although most of them have been present for years, the resulting loss of trust seriously called into question the prospects and even the desirability of partnership between Russia and the West. Whether a return to pre-crisis »normality« would be possible in the future remains an open question at the present time.

While the eruptive crises in recent years were quite visible on the surface, there was also a not-so-apparent underlying trend towards alienation on both sides. The German side harbored growing concerns about Russia's anti-democratic drift, which called into question the common values and norms previously taken for granted. Russia's authoritarian consolidation coincided with its growing foreign policy assertiveness – which in light of Germany's historical experiences had been perceived as even more worrying. This resulted in intensified scrutiny and criticism, which on Russia's part was increasingly viewed as an attempt at marginalizing Russia. The feelings of exclusion and perceived lack of acceptance – genuine or not – eventually reinforced the sense of geopolitical competition with the West. In view of the early hopes for a common »European house« on the basis of



shared values and the proclaimed goal of building a true partnership, the disappointment and disillusionment on both sides was all the deeper.

The analysis of the debates at Schlangenbad presented in this paper revealed multiple rhetorical discrepancies and inconsistencies that have substantially obstructed German-Russian relations in the past:

- There seemed to be incompatible understandings of world order on the Russian and German sides. While in the German interpretation, international law was viewed as an integral part of a rule-based international system – a safeguard against power-driven anarchy in world affairs – Russia was increasingly demonstrating a utilitarian view of normative and legal regulations, selectively employing them when it saw fit.
- Russia's critical stance towards US unilateralism, Western »expansionism«, and disregard for international law contradicted Russia's own self-perception as an entitled great power pursuing »legitimate« interests in its envisioned sphere of influence. At the same time, the German side was equally reluctant to critically reflect on the Western history of norm breaches, which included the NATO-led intervention in Kosovo or the exceeded UN mandate in Libya.
- The intensive and at times emotional debates about the acceptability of criticism have revealed the difficulties of building a strategic partnership – which should ideally be based on equality, mutual acceptance, and respect – in the situation where one side is expected to reach a specific level of development as well as institutional and political configuration, which the other side had supposedly already successfully achieved.
- At the same time, it was not necessarily and not primarily Western delusions about Russia's eventual and inevitable democratization and liberalization that served as a foundation for this kind of »inequality«, but Russia's own previous commitments to the very values and norms it later began perceiving as being forced upon it by the West.
- Nonetheless, the fact that the German side had on more than one occasion made cooperation conditional on Russia's judged progress on the path of democratic reforms contradicted its own »change through

trade« approach, where political transformation was supposed to be an outcome of intensive exchange, not a precondition for it.

- While the German side favored all-encompassing institutional solutions when it came to the practical configuration of relations, most Russian participants criticized this approach as unproductive and even potentially dangerous, since the perceived overconcentration on human rights and internal political developments supposedly prevented cooperation in areas of vital interests. In this sense, the prior illusion of a common path and common vision called into question the entire scope and foundation of mutual relations once it appeared to have been abandoned.
- While in previous years, post-crisis rapprochement could be achieved through the effort or the perceived necessity to cooperate in areas of shared interest, this approach only managed to ease tensions temporarily. The underlying conflicts remained unresolved and rapprochement appeared superficial at best. Thus, successful pragmatic cooperation void of any normative basis could also be problematic, because it would lack any strategic orientation beyond short-term and singular pay-offs.

With relations between Russia and the West currently at a long unseen low, the vision of a common path seems all but abandoned. At the same time, the contours of this »path« are becoming increasingly undefined. Russia still struggles with deciding on its fundamental political and normative orientation. Moreover, the idea that Western states have reached an ideal state of political and societal development – which not only serves as a model to other, less developed countries, but also allows the West to »assist« them on their way towards this final goal – has increasingly been called into question in recent years. The rise of populist political movements and parties, events such as Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump as president of the US pose a serious challenge to Western states' long-established self-perceptions.

In light of this, it appears all the more important to avoid the mistakes that have been made in the past, which to significant part – as the analysis has demonstrated – lay in the communication between Russia and Germany or Europe/the West. Ultimately, this points to the necessity of critical self-reflection.



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