Austria, Germany and their relations with Russia

7 June 2018
Diplomatic Academy of Vienna
Panel discussion report
by MAYA JANIK

Moderator
EMIL BRIX, Director of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna and former Austrian Ambassador to Moscow

Keynote speaker
Prof. HORST TELTSCHIK, foreign affairs consultant of late German chancellor Helmut Kohl and Chairman of the Munich Security Conference (1999-2008)

Speakers
Dr. WALTER SCHWIMMER, General Secretary of the Council of Europe (1999-2004) and co-founder of the DOC Research Institute
Prof. PETER W. SCHULZE, professor at the University of Göttingen and co-founder of the DOC Research Institute;
Dr. WERNER FASSLABEND, Austrian Minister of Defense (1990-2000)
KURT SEINITZ, Chief Editor Foreign Policy at Kronenzeitung, Vienna

Relations between Russia and the West remain at an all-time low, oscillating between stagnation and new waves of confrontation. Existing mechanisms of cooperation have proved ineffective, and current efforts to revive cooperation – especially at the highest diplomatic levels – are widely lacking. Mediated by a sense of mistrust and suspicion, both sides have become increasingly disillusioned with each other. Breaking the deadlock is aggravated by the fact that they remain fundamentally conflicted over key issues, including the root causes of the crisis and methods of dealing with the contentious issues of the moment.

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Following the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, Western allies have pursued a policy of consistent pressure towards Moscow and strengthened their capabilities of resilience. Surpassing the expectations of many, the European Union demonstrated a relatively robust unified front in implementing and maintaining its sanctions policy towards Russia. Nevertheless, beneath the surface of EU solidarity are national postures which vary in their approach towards Russia. Aside from countries which are fairly indifferent towards Moscow, there are those with drastically opposing approaches; at one end of the spectrum are those with close bilateral ties and a traditionally friendly posture towards Moscow, which advocate a thawing of currently icy relations, while on the other end are those – some carrying historical and political grievances – maintaining a more resolute stance towards Moscow.

The German government’s support of the Nord Stream II project in the face of vehement opposition from Eastern European countries as well as the decision of a few EU states, including Austria, not to expel Russian diplomats in response to the Skripal poisoning – despite Brussels’ appeal towards all EU member states to do so – brought out into the open the fact that, regardless of the strongest will and most dogged efforts to keep European solidarity afloat, national interests, bilateral ties, and historical experiences do matter as guiding factors in individual countries’ foreign policies.

The common concern in Brussels and a number of EU capitals is that following individual policies towards Russia that deviate from the European course would undermine the unified European front, rendering the EU’s policy of pressure towards Moscow ineffective in the long run.

But since it cannot be denied that national interests, longstanding bilateral ties, historical experiences, and geopolitical positions will continue to shape national foreign policies, the question should be how close bilateral ties between Russia and a few individual EU member states can be converted into something the EU as a whole can benefit from, without adversely provoking disunity within the European Union.

It is against this background that the 'Austria, Germany and their relations with Russia' roundtable, a joint event managed by the Vienna School of International Studies and the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, held on 7 June 2018 in Vienna at the premises of the Diplomatic Academy, was organised. The event brought Austria and Germany into the spotlight – both of which have traditionally cultivated close ties with Russia – asking whether or not and in what manner these two states can contribute constructively to a rapprochement between the EU and Russia. Before addressing this question, the panel analysed the roots and causes of the current crisis and examined the relationships of both Austria and Germany with Russia, against the backdrop of developments since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis.

The discussion was attended by Prof. Dr. h.c. Horst Teltschik, foreign affairs consultant to the late German chancellor Helmut Kohl and the chairman of the Munich Security Conference from 1999 to 2008, who gave the keynote speech; Dr. Walter Schwimmer, the general secretary of the Council of Europe from 1999 to 2004 and co-founder of the DOC Research Institute; Prof. Dr. Peter W. Schulze, professor at the University of Göttingen and co-founder of the DOC Research Institute;
Dr. Werner Fasslabend, the Austrian minister of defense from 1990 to 2000; and Kurt Seinitz, the chief editor for foreign policy at Kronenzeitung, Vienna. Emil Brix, the director of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna and the former Austrian ambassador to Moscow, moderated the panel.

**A contentious past – a dangerous present**

“Understanding and respecting the interests of the other side – especially in the sphere of security – is imperative for cooperative relations between Russia and the West”, was the main message of the roundtable that echoed through the festive hall of the Diplomatic Academy. The speakers of the panel agreed that the lack thereof has been one major factor that has contributed to the deterioration of Russia-West relations.

In his keynote speech, Horst Teltschik left no doubt that since the end of the Cold War, a number of profound mistakes have been made, many opportunities missed, and too few lessons learned. Teltschik’s account of the development of Russia-West relations before the end of the Cold War highlighted what is most concerning about the current crisis: It is the widely lacking conviction for engaging in dialogue and rebuilding shattered trust. As explained, despite tensions having been close to breaking point during the Cold War, both sides of the ‘Iron curtain’ kept communication lines open and were able to achieve concrete results, the best example of which was the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, which gave birth to the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe, CSCE – today the OSCE. The formula of the NATO Harmel report from 1967, according to which security and a policy of détente in East-West relations are complementary, rather than contradictory, must be applicable today as well, Teltschik reiterated.

Teltschik insisted that regardless of fundamental disagreements between both sides, efforts to improve relations must take place. As argued, the policy of détente during the Cold War illustrated that engaging in dialogue does not come at the cost of one’s vital interests.

Today, however, it seems that this spirit of cooperation has become increasingly marginalised. Confidence-building measures, arms control, and disarmament – all developed during the Cold War – are being replaced by military buildup on both sides and activities that risk escalating the situation, including unannounced military exercises and dangerous military maneuvers.

Teltschik pointed out that despite the mutual estrangement that has been gradually increasing over more than two decades, there have still been opportunities to reverse course, none of which have been sufficiently grasped. One such example was the idea to establish a common free trade zone from Vancouver to Vladivostok, initiated by then EU commissioner Romano Prodi. Other promising initiatives included the creation of an EU-Russia Political and Security Policy Committee, as suggested in the Meseberg Memorandum of 2010 but which, according to Peter Schulze, was not even seriously discussed.
Where it all went wrong – a lesson in history

Russia and Western allies remain divided over the reasons for the current crisis. Conflicting narratives tend to inflame the political debate, making it difficult to engage in pragmatic cooperation. The speakers on the panel agreed that mistakes have been made by both sides; evidently, an insistence on blaming the other side for everything that has gone wrong is anything but helpful to rebuilding trust.

The panel reflected on how the breakdown in relations did not just appear with the onset of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine but instead started not long after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As pointed out, one major factor which contributed to the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West, and which remains at the heart of current tensions, is that instead of implementing the elements of a peaceful and inclusive European order – as codified in the Paris Charter of 1990 – the West unilaterally expanded its institutions, while not taking Russia’s security interests into consideration. Peter Schulze drew attention to the fact that in the 1990s, when a new order was in the making, Russia was in deep economic crisis and so primarily focused on its domestic situation. At that time, the main task for Russian elites was to keep the country together and prevent it from degenerating into a failed state. This made Russia’s active participation in shaping international affairs close to impossible, hence it was largely non-existent as an international actor, Schulze recounted.

Horst Teltschik suggested that while the West was intervening militarily in Kosovo and Iraq without a mandate from the UN Security Council, as well as enlarging its military reach further eastwards, Russia’s security concerns with regard to Western expansion were dismissed as unfounded. At the same time, no serious efforts were undertaken to forge stronger ties with Russia.

Teltschik furthered the point by saying that similarly, when offering Ukraine membership, the EU did not sufficiently account for the importance Russia placed on maintaining influence in Ukraine, nor for the long-standing close ties that existed between the two countries.

Today, as Werner Fasslabend suggests, both Russia and the West have lost Ukraine. While with its intervention in Ukraine, Russia indeed achieved its goal of closing the country’s door to Western institutions, the special relationship with Ukraine that Russia once enjoyed now belongs to the past. What is more, as Fasslabend argued, Russia’s intervention in Eastern Ukraine strengthened Ukrainians’ sense of national identity and consciousness to a greater extent than ever before.

Austria as a bridge-builder between East and West

While the EU’s stance towards Russia has become increasingly resolute, especially since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, Vienna has maintained friendly relations with Moscow. It is important to remember though that this approach is not the result of recent changes in Austrian politics. Rather, it is closely connected to Austria’s longstanding relations with Russia, its constitutional neutrality, and its traditional role as a bridge-builder between the East and West. Therefore, as
Walter Schwimmer pointed out, engaging in dialogue with Russia, especially in difficult times, has been a consistent feature of Austrian foreign policy.

According to Kurt Seinitz, the key word which explains why Austria has managed to maintain good relations with Russia, even in times when it profoundly disagrees with its decisions and actions, is ‘respect’. Walter Schwimmer added that Austria has generally treated Russia with respect, and without excessive judgement and prejudice; in spite of circumstances, it has made efforts to try to understand.

Yet, as Kurt Seinitz emphasised, Austria’s posture is not merely a form of ingratiation, but the result of an expedient approach to foreign policy. Regrettably, Seinitz added, Austria’s policy towards Russia encounters, at times, a lack of understanding from other EU states which have a more critical posture and expect all EU states to sing from the same hymn sheet.

**Germany – the reluctant yet important player**

While Vienna has maintained good relations with Moscow since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, despite its deep historical, political, economic, and social links with Russia, Berlin has taken on a tough posture and has been one of the main drivers upholding the EU sanctions policy.

In his assessment of the German approach towards Russia, Peter Schulze did not mince his words. He insisted that Germany’s Russia policy is characterised by complete stagnation and is void of strategic thinking. Critical issues are not being addressed, and no serious effort has been undertaken to change the current state of play. The reason for this paralysis is, in Schulze’s view, the fact that Germany is yielding to the pressure of EU states that insist on a hard line towards Moscow.

Peter Schulze left no doubt that Germany can no longer remain in the back seat of the “European convoy”, in which states with an uncompromising attitude towards Russia sit behind the steering wheel and determine the direction of EU policy towards Russia. Instead, Schulze argued, Germany should use its position within the EU and its strong historical ties with Russia to stimulate an improvement in EU-Russia relations. Schulze is convinced that Germany must find a balance between backing an EU policy towards Russia pushed for by smaller EU states such as the Baltic countries, which expect Germany’s support, and further estrangement from Russia.

The argument that Germany should take on a more active role was acknowledged by all speakers. Ambassador Emil Brix noted that while Austria’s role as a bridge-builder is commendable, taking into account the role and influence that Germany yields within the EU, and the fact that it has considerably more leverage than Austria, stronger involvement from Germany in repairing relations between the EU and Russia could indeed have a restraining effect on already escalating tensions.
Looking ahead: Not all is lost yet

The consensus among the speakers was that engaging in dialogue with Russia is not merely a matter of choice, but one of necessity. Russia is part of Europe and ought to be treated as such, Walter Schwimmer insisted. Horst Teltschik argued against using the current crisis and disagreement between Russia and the West as an excuse for closing down lines of communication. Teltschik emphasised that it is precisely the existing divisions that necessitate engagement in dialogue. According to Schulze, what underlines the need for political rapprochement is the fact that the EU and Russia are in a state of inextricable interdependency; a primary example of this is the energy sector.

Is there any chance of de-escalating tensions and revitalising existing relations? Horst Teltschik is of the opinion that there are clear indications that Russia is indeed interested in restoring relations with Europe. To ensure his legacy after the end of this presidential term, which is his last one, President Putin must leave behind a country that is politically and economically stable, which is difficult to imagine without Russia’s engagement with Europe, Teltschik argued.

The panel agreed that Ukraine, which remains a divisive issue between Russia and Western allies, needs particular attention if the deadlock in relations is to be broken. As Werner Fasslabend pointed out, in view of the current situation, freezing the conflict in Eastern Ukraine might be the most effective option, since it could allow both for the commencement of a new phase in the future development of Ukraine and a breaking of the deadlock in Russia-West relations.

Werner Fasslabend left no doubt that when re-engaging in dialogue with Russia, Europe must remain committed to its core values and should not accept Russia’s unilateral expansionist politics. On the other hand, Fasslabend made clear, that whilst not compromising these principles and values, the EU’s policy of pressure must leave room for a normalising of relations.

The speakers agreed that the next move in repairing EU-Russia relations lies with EU states, which should bring forward new initiatives. In this regard, Walter Schwimmer expressed hope that during its presidency at the European Council in the second half of 2018, Austria would contribute to revitalising the dialogue between the EU and Russia. In this way, Austria would make use of its role as a bridge-builder, translating its close bilateral ties with Russia into a better understanding between the EU and Russia.

The panel ended on the optimistic note that there is no difference so vast that it cannot be bridged. Yet, as reiterated throughout the panel discussion, achieving any change will require respecting and recognising each other’s interests as a primary step in this arduous task. Ambassador Emil Brix closed the panel with a statement that described how building trust and confidence is key to restoring good relations between the European Union and Russia. Germany and Austria, Ambassador Brix argued, indeed can and should lead this process within the EU.