



## ARTICLE

# Why there will be no Helsinki II – and why confidence building with Putin’s Russia is a bad idea

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**Abstract** Over the last 10 years, Russia under Putin has turned into an illiberal empire that is determined to weaken the West as a precondition for its own survival. This fact is still not fully appreciated by those Western leaders who believe that a return to cooperation with Russia is both necessary and possible. Germany’s Social Democrats are particularly prominent among these leaders. They intend to use Germany’s 2016 presidency of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe to lay the groundwork for a step-by-step confidence-building effort, eventually leading to a new European security architecture. Such hopes are utterly futile. They are based on old illusions about *détente* and *Ostpolitik*. Moreover, they are understood by the Kremlin to be signs of weakness and appeasement. Instead of answering every Russian act of aggression with new offers for talks, the West should prepare for a long confrontation with Russia, maintain unity, and strengthen defence and deterrence.

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*Renewing the dialogue, rebuilding confidence, re-establishing security.*  
Motto of the German OSCE presidency (OSCE 2016).

## Introduction

When Germany took over the presidency of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in January 2016, its ambitions were high. For months, German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier had been doing an interesting double act of simultaneously raising the stakes and dampening exaggerated expectations (Auswärtiges Amt 2015). But one thing was clear: Germany's presidency was going to become a text-book example of soft power working to solve hard security problems. It would also help to boost the image of the German Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands)—the troubled junior partner in the coalition with Chancellor Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union).

The idea looked simple enough: without officially watering down the West's rejection of Russia's violation of basic European principles through the annexation of Crimea and its 'involvement' in Eastern Ukraine, a new effort would be made to return to confidence building. Step by step, lost trust would be re-established in a three-pronged approach. First, there would be pragmatic cooperation on issues of global relevance, such as nuclear non-proliferation, fighting terrorism and stabilising the Middle East. This element, of course, would not be tied to the OSCE and would happen under US leadership—but it would nevertheless be essential to what was to follow. In parallel, the OSCE would help to solidify the ceasefire under the Minsk II agreement. And this, it was hoped, could eventually lead to a lasting peaceful solution to the war in Ukraine. Alongside this, the EU would reach out to the Eurasian Union in some kind of structured cooperation. This was considered a particularly smart move by many in Berlin and Brussels, who believed it would allow the EU to improve relations with Russia while officially upholding the boycott that is in place as a result of Russia's aggression since 2014. Then, at an unspecified future date, a process could be established to create, together with Russia, a new rules-based system in Europe—possibly even something deserving of the title 'New European Security Architecture'. Hence, a 'new Helsinki' would be the final outcome. Some of these elements, especially the pattern of looking for ways to rebuild confidence with Russia by simply sidelining the Ukraine topic and looking at the Eurasian Union as a potential partner, had already been proposed by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini in a semi-official paper in early 2015 (Foreign Affairs Council 2015).

The rationale for these actions was twofold. First, there was the concern that any further escalation between Russia and the West, whether over Ukraine or any other problem, must be prevented—lest it lead to an increasing risk of all-out war. Second, it was thought that cooperation with Russia on many issues is badly needed and that the current stand-off between the West and Russia is therefore untenable.

## What part of ‘no’ don’t we understand?

Alas, by mid-2016, and halfway into Germany’s OSCE presidency, very little has been achieved. Minister Steinmeier himself is visibly frustrated, but that only seems to reinforce his dogged determination not to give up. The only field in which there has been any progress (although this may only be in the eye of the beholder) is in the Middle Eastern dossier with Syria and Iran. Otherwise, the deadlock is visible on many fronts. First of all, Minsk II is in limbo. None of the strategic elements of the ceasefire negotiated in February 2015 looks closer to being implemented, more than a year after its conclusion. The number of incidents may be significantly lower than in early 2015, but the ceasefire is being violated on a daily basis, with an increasing tendency, and in 90 % of all cases by rebel forces and Russians.<sup>1</sup> On none of the other important points has there been any palpable progress: not in the withdrawal of foreign troops (i.e. Russians) from the Donbas, not in the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front line, not in re-establishing Ukrainian control of the eastern border, nor in carrying out internationally observed, free elections in the Donbas. Consequently, EU sanctions against Russia are being upheld, albeit with grumbling from Italy, Austria, Hungary, Greece and certain other member states (Kanter 2015). So far, it has been Chancellor Merkel who has kept the sanctions in place, despite these misgivings. Her firmness vis-à-vis Russia is in stark contrast to the attitudes of both of the smaller coalition partners in Berlin—the Social Democrats and the Bavarian Christian Social Union (Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern).

What is more, cooperation with the Eurasian Union is not in sight—largely because that organisation is in no way comparable to the EU, and most Central European members of the EU would hardly approve.

## An error wrapped in a fantasy inside a delusion

Consequently, a sense of frustration and disappointment is palpable in the corridors of Berlin and Brussels. And yet, none of this should come as a surprise. The plan for slow confidence building was built on false premises. The first and foremost of these is a fundamental misperception of the character of Putin’s Russia. Second, a fundamental error has been made in assessing the nature of both the current conflict between Russia and the West, and the one between Russia and its neighbourhood, above all Ukraine. And third, these two mistakes have led to an erroneous assumption about what is achievable, and desirable, in Europe.

On the characteristics of Russia under Putin, much has been written in recent years. The issue concerns Russia’s centralised power structure, which is focused on Putin,

<sup>1</sup> Although the OSCE is committed to blaming ‘both sides’ for violations in their daily reports, Western diplomats are ready to admit in private conversations that those violations almost always come from the Russian/rebel side.

but also the amalgam between the state administration, the justice system, the armed services, business, organised crime and right-wing ideologues (Gessen 2013). There is also a huge volume of literature on Putin's attempts to recreate the Russian Empire (Lucas 2014). Putin's list of priorities has been widely discussed and focuses on staying in power for as long as possible, which is why, from his viewpoint, a Russian Maidan has to be prevented. In turn, this is why no successful democracy can be allowed to exist within Russia's neighbourhood, which thus leads to the manifest intention to weaken NATO and the EU (Freudenstein 2015).

Herein lies the second error of the confidence-building plan: the nature of Russia's conflict with the West. Steinmeier and many of his colleagues in other EU member states, as well as his comrades among the Social Democrats and, to be honest, many European conservatives as well, are still pretending that we are living in some kind of bad dream. They hope that Putin will either suddenly wake up and realise the damage he is doing to Europe and his own country or that he and the people around him will at least slowly begin to understand the issue—with the help of a sympathetic West which admits its own mistakes in getting to where we are. What all these actors are incapable of seeing is that instead, this conflict has largely mutated into a zero-sum game, not only in the eyes of Putin himself, but in those of virtually the entire Russian elite.

Another good example of the character of East–West delusions is the debate around the positioning of troops on NATO's eastern flank. The proper reaction to Russian aggression, and the one most abhorred by the confidence builders, would be a permanent deployment of significant numbers of new troops, such as one or several brigades. This is precisely what Poland, Romania and the Baltic states are hoping for. But there is no consensus for this move among NATO's 28 member states. This is why the best that they will get at the July 2016 Warsaw Summit is a boost to rotational deployment. Militarily, this may or may not make up for permanent 'boots on the ground', but politically the allies' refusal to build bases sends exactly the wrong signal to Moscow. The real rationale for 'persistent' instead of 'permanent' deployment is purportedly the dogged determination of leading NATO members to stick to the unilateral declaration added to the NATO–Russia Founding Act.<sup>2</sup> In this text, the West pledges not to deploy significant numbers of troops to former Warsaw Pact countries. This is supposed to signal to Russia how much we would appreciate a return to normality. Alas, it is read in Moscow as another sign of Western weakness and indecision.

Now, according to what we know, a 'return to the status quo ante' is impossible with Putin's Russia—that much is even admitted by the 'confidence builders', and is being emphasised by the Russians themselves all the time (Trenin 2016; Kortunov 2016). Steinmeier and his colleagues, however, still cling to the fantasy that a situation can and must be achieved in which Russia's security demands are met while the post–Cold War values of a Europe 'whole and free' are upheld. But this is impossible. Anything

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<sup>2</sup> Whether Chancellor Merkel's apparent endorsement of this determination represents her convictions or is the result of a compromise with the Social Democrats, is an open question. But the result is the same in either case.

that would come close to satisfying Russia would be equivalent to recognising spheres of influence, and therefore telling Eastern Europeans that they have to live in a state of diminished sovereignty because they are, unfortunately, living in the wrong place at the wrong time: that is, they are neighbours of Putin's Russia. Moreover, the West would have to refrain from any attempts to support democracy beyond the eastern borders of the EU, forget about the enlargement of either the EU or NATO, and recognise Russia's right to support every tyrant allied to Moscow throughout the rest of the world. None of this is acceptable if the West wants to remain faithful to its fundamental values in any significant way. To make it abundantly clear: Putin demands nothing less than giving up the spirit of the Paris Charter of 1990, even the spirit of Helsinki in 1975, and returning to a very specific interpretation of Yalta in 1945.

However, even if there was such a comprehensive deal, it is very doubtful whether the relative stability of the Cold War could be recreated with Russia under Putin. One of the Russian president's trademarks of recent years has been his incalculability—which is also proof of the strong personalisation of Russia's power structure. If, as many observers claim, the violation of internationally agreed rules has become an element of identity for the new Russia, then no 'grand bargain' will ever survive over a longer period of time with a Russia that rejects the very idea of rules.

Of course, against this backdrop, one might still argue that there is no harm in at least trying to reach an equitable deal with Russia because, as the saying goes, talking is better than shooting. The first problem with this truism is that by the time it is uttered, the shooting has usually been going on for quite a while, just not by the West—as demonstrated by the situation in Donbas. So the alternative is not war or peace, but different degrees of violence at best. But the second and more important danger is that the obsession with negotiating deals is the wrong message to send to Moscow. If every Russian act of aggression is answered with an appeal to 'both sides' to 'exercise restraint', with a 'de-escalating move' and an offer of talks, Putin will draw the conclusion that he can just continue to shred the rules of post-Cold War Europe, as we have seen. Arguably, it was not Steinmeier's calls for de-escalation that saved Mariupol and the other East Ukrainian cities from assault by Russian and rebel forces in the autumn of 2014 and early 2015, but the West's imposition of sanctions and Russia's fear that even more might follow. Moreover, the obsession with talking in the face of Russian aggression also sends a devastating signal to all democrats in Eastern Europe: it corroborates their fear that a 'Russia first' attitude still reigns in Western Europe, that the West does not stand up for its proclaimed values and that their own attempts to defy Russia's imperial claims are doomed to fail.

However, if it is so clear that there will be neither a return to Cold War stability nor a grand bargain for a new European security architecture (because both would be totally incompatible with our values, and very probably unsustainable for Putin's Russia anyway)—then we need to answer the question of why so many European politicians are still deluding themselves.

## The phantom pain of Ostpolitik

Many factors come to mind when trying to explain the blindness to the facts of the confidence builders all over Western Europe, and in parts of Washington as well. Depending on the individual case, there is fear of military confrontation as well as disinterest in supporting democracy in Eastern Europe, and there is profit seeking as well as a genuine admiration for Russia and even Putin—or various combinations of the above. Russian influence is often a factor, but it is only one among many. Even Germany's Christian Democrats are not immune to the aversion to conflict and preference for dialogue inherent in Western democracy. But in the case of the German SPD, there is one particular motivation: in order to understand German Foreign Minister Steinmeier's inability to grasp the basic realities of Putin's Russia and the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, one has to reach back into the twentieth century and look at the strategic concept of *Ostpolitik*. This strategy began as 'change through rapprochement' (*Wandel durch Annäherung*) in 1963 and reached its heyday in the late 1960s and the early 1970s under Chancellor Willy Brandt.

Under this strategy, recognition of the status quo between the blocs, including the partition of post-war Germany, was to become the precondition for overcoming this status quo. Trade and civil society connections would facilitate the process. In other words, especially in its early phase, *Ostpolitik* was a kind of peaceful regime-change strategy. Of course, none of this was possible without the US-led détente, within which the concept was quickly embedded. In a way, the same principle used in the case of Germany was applied to East–West relations in general. This reached its climax in 1975, with the Helsinki Final Act. *Ostpolitik* was not only an important foreign policy initiative from post-war West Germany, but was, above all, German Social Democracy's only contribution to world politics in the second half of the twentieth century. This goes a long way to explaining the zeal with which Social Democrats in the twenty-first century have dealt with Russia, including its increasing aggression under Putin since 2007. It was during Gerhard Schröder's chancellorship that the idea of a 'modernisation partnership' between the West and Russia was born. In essence, this was nothing but an extension of 'change through rapprochement': Russia would, step by step and encouraged by incentives of economic, technological and cultural cooperation, adopt standards such as the rule of law, checks and balances, pluralist democracy and, eventually, a truly cooperative foreign and security policy.

There are three fundamental problems with this approach. The first two become obvious when looking at *Ostpolitik*'s track record in its later stages, in the early 1980s. German Social Democracy made two fateful mistakes at the time. In 1980 and 1981, it sided with the Polish Communists during the imposition of martial law against the Solidarity (*Solidarność*) trade union, which had become a pro-democracy movement. Like dissident groups in other Warsaw Pact countries, Solidarity openly and deliberately invoked the principles of the Helsinki Final Act. In that situation, and lamely appealing to realpolitik, the SPD forsook the original regime-change idea of *Ostpolitik*, and declared Solidarity a danger to world peace. Its position was in sharp contrast to that of Mitterrand's France, Thatcher's Britain and Reagan's US, all of whom did their utmost to condemn General Jaruzelski's crack-down, enact sanctions against his regime and support the Polish

opposition in every way possible. In other words, when *Ostpolitik* finally showed results, German Social Democrats behaved like the sorcerer's apprentice, desperately trying to undo what they themselves had started.

Second, détente was always accompanied by the upholding of deterrence, and so was *Ostpolitik*, initially (Techau 2016). By the early 1980s, however, the SPD under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt had been rocked by a 'peace movement' opposed to the deployment of the intermediate range nuclear weapons that mainstream politicians considered indispensable to maintaining deterrence. As a result, Schmidt's party refused to follow the logic of deterrence alongside dialogue any longer, opted for unilateral disarmament, and began a decade-long cycle of appeasement and irresponsibility in foreign and security policy.

The third problem with this approach, which became apparent in the late 2000s, is what the 'modernisation partnership' with Putin's Russia has achieved. Not only has this partnership not contributed to moving Russia closer to democracy and the rule of law, but it has had the opposite effect. Russia is using the increased economic and societal ties brought about by this relationship to boost its own influence in the West through hybrid methods such as corruption and information warfare. The amalgam of Russian business, state structures, intelligence services and even organised crime has, in many EU member states, successfully penetrated society. Slovakia and the Czech Republic are cases in point. Instead of us 'Westernising' Russia, Russia has corrupted us.

These issues are not the fault of German Social Democrats alone, but they bear a good part of the responsibility. What can be seen here is a very peculiar obsession with past successes, a failure to fully face the truth about where the SPD went against its own principles and wishful thinking about the grim reality of doing business with Russia under Putin.

## What is to be done?

What is the alternative to the doomed approach of trying to return to a cooperative relationship with Putin's Russia, let alone a new grand bargain? The answer is that there will be—there has to be—a long stand-off. The other alternative would be the end of the West as we know it. Putin is now betting that the West will not last in its current form, and he is trying to give a helping hand to its end with his hybrid methods and support for extremist parties in the EU. Our best bet is to hope that Putin and his system will go before he succeeds, while preventing all-out war (through maintaining and actually rebuilding deterrence). Hence, a long confrontation lies ahead of us.

Meanwhile, there will and should be areas of cooperation, mostly in the context of the UN, and on topics such as nuclear proliferation, fighting Islamic State and other fields of common interest which still exist. But this will be limited to specific topics and will not develop into comprehensive cooperation on global security—if only for the simple reason that Putin's Russia is diametrically opposed to the West on so many questions of global democracy and the rule of law.

One other field in which there should be more cooperation is extending the mechanisms for fast emergency communication in case of military incidents, especially at sea and in the air. This may be the only valid rationale for reviving the NATO–Russia Council, because on all other points it will only serve to confirm that we agree to disagree.

As to the OSCE, the contact group on Ukraine and the observer mission in Donbas should not be suspended by the West, but their dwindling relevance should be clearly acknowledged. No strengthening of OSCE structures will help to paper over the existing cracks between the West and Ukraine on the one hand and Russia on the other. The idea of making Russia, the aggressor, part of the institutional framework meant to solve the confrontation, was a bad one to begin with.

Most importantly, and building on the NATO summits of Wales in 2014 and the upcoming one in Warsaw in 2016, the West will have to further strengthen its defences in order to reconstruct military deterrence. Of all the policy elements that have been lost in the last 25 years, the spirit of deterrence is one of the most important—a fact that the confidence builders have not sufficiently appreciated, to put it mildly.

Finally, Germany—and this goes well beyond Social Democracy—must let go of the habit of promoting a very unhealthy German–Russian bilateralism. This concerns ‘hard’ issues, such as energy security: the Nord Stream II pipeline project is politically devastating for energy solidarity in Europe. In Central Europe it evokes justified fears of a Rapallo-like German–Russian deal behind their backs and against the interests of countries such as Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states. It also concerns ‘soft’ issues, such as the many formal and informal communication formats Germany and Russia have developed over the last 25 years. These have miraculously survived even the boldest Russian aggression against the fundamental values of post–Cold War Europe, and crack-downs on civil society and Western non-governmental organisations in Russia itself. In fact, the confidence builders consider conferences such as the St Petersburg Dialogue to be even more necessary ‘in times of crisis’. But as long as it is only Germans talking to Russians, these events send precisely the wrong signal to Central Europeans (see above) and to the Russian side, which must have the impression that Germany can still somehow be prised away from its Western allies into some kind of special relationship with Russia. Hence, this format should be either enlarged to include participants from Central Europe, Eastern Europe and the US, or scrapped altogether.

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