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Germany and Russia (March 13, 2006)

In the following piece, the director of the Russia/CIS research group at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (which advises the federal government on foreign policy issues) points to the close relationship that Germany and Russia have shared since 1990. Russia is an important energy supplier for Germany, and Germany, in turn, is Russia's most important European partner. German-Russian relations, however, are by no means problem-free.

Germany and Russia – “Strategic Partners”?

The two largest nations in Europe could never manage to be entirely indifferent toward each other, if only because of their dominant roles on the Eurasian continent. German-Russian relations were always shaped by contradictory feelings, whereby admiration, antipathy, fear, and romantic attraction mixed more than they alternated.¹

Germans and Russians fought together against Napoleon, divided Poland between themselves time and again, and then found themselves, in the wake of diplomatic intricacies, on opposing sides in the First World War, only to end up conspiring against the Western victors in the Rapallo Pact. Blinded by Hitler's blood and soil ideology, the Germans soon waged a war of annihilation against the Soviet Union and ultimately had to be liberated from their own regime by the Red Army – with atrocities on both sides. Victor's pride took the place of anti-German hatred. For many members of the Soviet armed forces, the GDR became the symbol of a friendly, new Germany. The Russian people, however, perceived the division of Germany as unnatural, and so, from a Russian perspective, German reunification was a conciliatory conclusion to a misguided development in relations between the two countries, a development that had been unfathomable not only to Germans but to Russians as well.

Fortunately, since 1990, these relations have developed in a pragmatic way. German-Russian relations distinguish themselves today by their considerable breadth. There is tradition in this – just remember the German immigration to Russia and the numerous German businessmen and

¹ See Gerd Koenen, *Der Russland-Komplex*. Munich, 2005, p. 15ff.

industrialists who operated in Russia before the First World War.² Based on the turnover of goods, Germany is Russia's most important trading partner and will remain as such until China surpasses it, presumably in a few years. Like Holland and Italy, Germany imports mostly crude oil and natural gas from Russia. As far as imports to Russia are concerned, Germany takes first place, with a generous margin, over all other European and non-European countries, and it is also Russia's main supplier of capital goods. For Germany, whose economic ties are primarily with the EU countries, Russia was tenth on the list for imports in the first half of 2005 and fourteenth for exports.³

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German-Russian relations have developed in such a dynamic fashion because many factors that can potentially disrupt relations between countries fail to apply in the case of Germany and Russia. There are no unresolved border issues, no ethnic-religious conflicts, and no rivalry for world domination on the international stage. The final resolution of the "looted art" question still lingers as a remnant of the Second World War – a tough issue but certainly not a "great conflict." Kaliningrad/Königsberg isn't a bone of contention between Germany and Russia either; rather, both countries share a common concern for the development of this region, whose peripheral location puts it at a disadvantage.

Despite the manifold encounters and cooperative efforts that bring Russians and Germans together, there is no uniform image of Russia in Germany. At economic conferences and high-level meetings, the good relations are emphasized, but in the media Russia is often viewed very critically. This criticism is not provoked by problems in the two countries' direct relations, but rather by the Russian state's treatment of its citizens and its western neighbors. For one thing, there is the dismantling of democracy, the weakening of parliamentarianism, the restrictions put on freedom of the press, the use of excessive force in Chechnya, and the pressure put on the CIS states of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which want to distance themselves from Moscow. In addition, there is support for the totalitarian Lukashenko regime in Belarus and for separatist forces in Transnistria, North Ossetia, and Abkhazia.⁴ For their part, Russians react very sensitively to reproaches of this kind; they accuse critics of not understanding the situation, and they feel misunderstood and patronized. This can be seen in exemplary fashion in the issue of Chechnya, where the Russian side sees itself as fighting international terrorism in alliance with the West and demands recognition for this in vain, without wanting to acknowledge the negative effects of the presence of Russian troops in Chechnya and the North Caucasus and [the

² See also Dittmar Dahmann and Carmen Scheide, eds., "... das einzige Land in Europa, das eine große Zukunft hat." *Deutsche Unternehmen und Unternehmer im Russischen Reich im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert*. Essen, 1998.

³ See Statistisches Bundesamt [German Federal Office of Statistics], Rangfolge der Handelspartner im Außenhandel 2004, www.bundesstatistik.de (1. February 2006).

⁴ On criticism of "Putin's System," see also Heinrich Vogel, "Rußland ohne Demokratie," *SWP-Studie* 38/2004, www.swp-berlin.org (1. February 2006); Eberhard Schneider, "Putins zweite Amtszeit," *SWP-Studie* 1/2006, www.swp-berlin.org (1. February 2006).

negative effects] of the regime that Moscow installed there.⁵ Although German-Russian talks rest on a broad foundation [of shared views], a rapprochement on these particular issues is not foreseeable.

[. . .]

Values and Interests

One consequence of the complex German-Russian relationship is that no simple formula can do it justice. The cliché of “friendship among peoples” [*Völkerfreundschaft*] was fundamentally debased by GDR practices, which is probably why Chancellor Angela Merkel refrained from using it during her first official visit with President [Vladimir] Putin in Moscow in January 2006. Instead, she reemphasized the “strategic partnership” with Russia that then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Putin had already agreed upon at the first German-Russian summit meeting in June 2000 in Berlin.⁶

In Russia, however, people can’t understand why they rank below [Germany’s] “American friends” and are offered “only” a partnership instead of a “friendship.” In Russia, the term “strategic partnership” is understood as an alliance based on common interests, and this leads to Russian-German misunderstandings. In Russian politics, strategic partners are those with whom goals are shared and important projects of mutual benefit are carried out. For this reason, Russia’s list of strategic partners is very long, and virtually every country on earth could appear on it. However, ever since the term “strategic partnership” was introduced into the EU Common Strategy on Russia in 1999, it has been understood in EU foreign policy discourse as both an alliance based on common interests and a partnership based on shared values.⁷ It is significant that the corresponding Russian Mid-Term Strategy (1999) on relations with the EU is limited to the formulation of common interests and makes no reference to shared values.

Despite the demonstrative friendship between Schröder and Putin, Germany’s Russia policy under Schröder seemed to want to limit itself to a partnership based only on mutual interests, since the German side avoided making public statements about its partner’s domestic affairs.⁸ The CDU/CSU and FDP opposition, however, steadfastly maintained that a partnership with

⁵ See Uwe Halbach, “Gewalt in Tschetschenien. Ein gemiedenes Problem internationaler Politik,” *SWP-Studie* 4/2004, www.swp-berlin.org (1. February 2006).

⁶ See Christian Meier and Heinz Timmermann, “Nach dem 11. September: Ein neues deutsch-russisches Verhältnis?” *SWP-Aktuell* 22/2001, p. 5, www.swp-berlin.org (1. February 2006).

⁷ See Rolf Schuette, “Interest and Values: A European Perspective,” *Carnegie Paper* 54/2004, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=16269&prog=zru> (1. February 2006). Text of the Common Strategy of the European Union on Russia: http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/ceeca/com_strat/russia_99.pdf (1. February 2006). The EU also occasionally refers to “strategic partnerships” in a limited sense, for example when it refers to strategic partnerships with the Mediterranean region, China, or all of Africa.

⁸ See Hannes Adomeit, Katrin Bastian, and Roland Götz, “Deutsche Rußlandpolitik unter Druck,” *SWP-Aktuell* 56/2004, www.swp-berlin.org (1. February 2006).

Russia could not thrive without a foundation of shared values.⁹

Shared values are an important element of any foreign and security policy that rests on the basis of cooperation. Former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell emphasized this in an article in *Izvestija*, where he indicated that aside from common interests and trust between political leaders, the ability of nations to cooperate is based on a convergence of the fundamental principles shared by their respective societies.¹⁰ This linking of values and interests also forms the basis of the notion that a market-based economic order can be guaranteed in Russia in the long term only if democratic values are recognized and practiced and a corresponding legal system exists. This legal system in turn provides the foundation for balanced economic development that is not based exclusively on the exportation of crude oil and natural gas. It is an essential prerequisite for the successful involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises, which depend on a functioning legal system. Germany also has a great interest in this. Therefore, there are good arguments for insisting on a dual approach to Russia, for making pragmatic agreements in the area of foreign and security policy (e.g., in the inclusion of Russia in efforts to resolve the Iran issue) but also for demanding progress in Russia's domestic affairs.

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Source: Roland Götz, "Deutschland und Russland – 'strategische Partner'?" ["Germany and Russia – 'Strategic Partners'?" *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, no. 11 (March 13, 2006), pp. 14-23.

Translation: Allison Brown

⁹ See Hans-Joachim Spanger, "Paradoxe Kontinuitäten. Die deutsche Russlandpolitik und die koalitionsären Farbenlehren," *HSFK-Report* 12/2005, pp.13 ff., www.hsfk.de (13. February 2006).

¹⁰ Guest article by Colin Powell in *Izvestija* on January 26, 2004, cited in Hans-Joachim Spanger, "Modernisierung contra Demokratisierung: Putins russischer Weg," *HSFK-Report* 12/2004, pp. 34ff., www.hsfk.de (1. February 2006).