

Russia–Europe dialogue continued in Austria

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Peter Haider, president of UPF Austria; Walter Schwimmer, past secretary-general of the Council of Europe; Anwar S. Asimov, former Russian ambassador to the BOSCEC Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe; and Prof. Anis Bajrektarevic, head of IFIMES Vienna

In the summer of 1961, soldiers began erecting a concrete wall (in places, merely a barbed wire fence) along the border between East Germany and West Germany. The communist East German government built it on the pretext of protecting its citizens from an influx of West German fascists; whereas, it actually served more as a prison wall preventing East Germans from crossing into freedom in West Germany.

The eventual destruction of that wall began on November 9, 1989, when the East German government announced that all its borders were now open. What ensued seems no less of an event than when the wall of Jericho “fell down flat” as a result of the Israelites obeying Joshua’s command, “Shout for the Lord has given you the city.” As tens of thousands of East Germans surged across the border, Germany seemed on the cusp of reunification. Yet, some nearly insurmountable obstacles remained.

Young people may find it hard to believe, but those nations that had encountered Germany in World War II -- a war that cost 50 million lives -- at first feared what might result from German reunification. A January 1990 poll showed that overall approval of unification was just 61 percent in France, 60 in the US, 45 in Britain and a mere 41 in Poland. (Today, Germany is Poland’s closest ally and key trading partner.) More favorable opinions of German unification soon developed in these nations, but the poll did not cover opinions in the nation that mattered most -- the nation that controlled 380,000 Soviet troops stationed on East German soil -- Russia.

One reason NATO came into existence was as an international military union to protect Europe from the USSR. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had begun to unravel, but Russia as the controlling power of the union was still militarily powerful and Russia’s interests had to be considered.

Thus, on the last day of January 1990, Mr. Hans-Dietrich Genscher, then West German foreign minister, announced that after unification “no expansion of NATO territory eastward” would occur. Genscher’s plan was later discussed at a meeting with Russian President Gorbachev, Russian Foreign Minister Shevardnadze; and the US equivalent of a foreign minister, James Baker. When Gorbachev stated that NATO expansion was unacceptable, Baker responded by saying, “We agree with that.” Reportedly, transcripts of meetings with Russian officials show other instances of verbal assurances, but no treaty was signed that guaranteed NATO would not expand eastward, toward Moscow. NATO has indeed expanded and tensions are high in Europe as a result.

In this context, UPF has held a series of conferences. The first “Peace and Security in a Multicultural Society” was in Moscow in April 2012. “Europe and Russia -- Partners in a Globalized World” was in Vienna in October 2012. “Eurasia and Europe: Cooperation in the Field of Culture Of Peace and Human Development” was in Paris in December 2013. “Europe– Eurasia: Dialogue for Peace” took place in Chisinau, Moldova.

The most recent conference

A discussion on a “Strategic Imperative Discharge: EU–Russia,” a collaborative initiative by UPF–Austria and the International Research Institute of the Middle East and the Balkans (IFIMES) attracted a hundred and twenty people. UPF is working to contribute to dialogue among Europeans, particularly in the European Union, Russia and Eurasia.

Peter Haider, president of UPF Austria, welcomed the guests and reminded the audience that Russia and Europe, being geographical neighbors, have developed deep ties through interaction over many centuries.

He suggested we look at the recent disagreements in relation to the Ukraine crisis as a challenge to restart a spirit of showing interest in each other based on a relationship of trust.



The event attracted 120 people from a variety of backgrounds

A provocative introduction

Prof. Anis Bajrektarevic, IFIMES Vienna, who deserves credit for organizing the speakers and formulating the topics, introduced the topic with the following statements: The lonely superpower (US) vs. the Bear in the permafrost (Russia), with the world's last cosmopolite (the EU) in between... Is the ongoing calamity at the eastern flank of the EU a conflict, recalibration, imperialism in a hurry, exaggerated anti-Russian xenophobia or confrontational nostalgic scream?

Just twenty years ago, the distance between Moscow and NATO troops in Central Europe (for example, Berlin) was over 1,600 km.

Today, troops are only 120 km from St. Petersburg. Is this time to sleep or to worry? "Russia no longer represents anything that appeals to anyone other than ethnic Russians; and as a result, the geopolitical troubles it can cause will remain on Europe's periphery, without touching the continent's core" was the line of argumentation recently used by Richard N. Haass, president of the US Council of Foreign Relations.

Is it really so? Does any intellectually appealing call originate from Russia, a lonely champion of antifascism and pan-Slavism?

For the EU, Ukraine (though important) is an item of the Neighborhood Policy. For the US, it is a geopolitical pivot. For Russia, it is all this, plus emotional attachment.

Without Ukraine, how much is Russia Christian and European? Is the EU a subject or a hostage (like Ukraine) of the mega-geopolitical drama whose main play is in the Asia-Pacific theater? What is the objective here, the final goal-score?

Is it territorial gain, or an altered style of play adding a new emotional charge to international relations?

What is a road map, an exit, a future perspective? Is it relaxation or escalation? Are we dealing with hegemony, hege-money or a global (post-dollar) honeymoon?

The view from Moscow

Mr. Anwar S. Azimov, former Russian ambassador to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and currently ambassador-at large in the Russian Federation's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, gave detailed insight into developments in the relationship between the EU and Russia from a Russian perspective. He asserted that EU and Russia cannot possibly live without each other; thus, establishing common space is a cardinal strategic task. Russia and EU are natural allies, besides strategic partners.

This is indeed true, as more than 50 percent of Russia's trade occurs with the EU.

He could not avoid turning his focus to the Ukrainian crisis to give an account of Russia's views on the issue. Russia, he said, was never against Ukraine joining the EU but was against this leading to harm coming to Russia's economic and defense interests. Russia, he said, is simply a mediator in the conflict; one that sympathizes with the people of southeast Ukraine. As for Crimea, the referendum and the acquisition that followed were just a matter of historical justice.

He made special reference to the counter-productivity of the Western sanctions on Russia and exerted the

willingness of his country to participate generously in a funding scheme for the reconstruction of post-conflict Ukraine. Finally, he praised the balanced efforts of OSCE officials, who played a crucial and objective role in monitoring the peace process; a role that the EU was not and still is not ready to play.

A counter-narrative

Dr. Walter Schwimmer, former secretary general of the Council of Europe, set a different tone to the debate. He quoted from the Declaration of Minsk of February 12, 2015 by the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany: “Leaders remain committed to the vision of a joint humanitarian and economic space from the Atlantic to the Pacific based upon full respect for international law and the OSCE principles.”

He declared at the beginning of his speech that although his personal vision has always been that Russia become a part of Europe, he believes that Russia has yet to complete its post-communist dictatorship transformation.

He illustrated the fact that Russia, beyond strategic and geopolitical ideas, is an indispensable part of European culture and identity. Hence, when he made the provocative and pioneering hypothesis of Russia applying for EU membership, he argued that the EU would have no grounds to reject it.

Following the lively discussion, the panelist and guest enjoyed a buffet, which included Russian food.