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***Germany and Russia:
New paths ahead***

***Germany and Russia: A history of mutual
impulses, catastrophic tragedy and new
beginnings***

All current controversies between Russia and ‘the West’, between Russia and Germany, let us all too easily forget: Russia has hardly ever been closer to another European country than it has to Germany. Similarly, there are few countries to which Germany has been as close as it has been to Russia – in culture and science, in politics and economics. Germany and Russia share a history of mutual fertilization, of recurring impulses – some of which came from the West, others originating in the East. Our great German writers and composers are strongly present in the Russian canon of culture; impulses from Germany shaped Russia’s scientific landscape from the outset, both in the field of the humanities as much as in the natural sciences. The first department store founded by Germans was not opened in Köln or Königsberg – it was ‘Kunst & Albers’ in Vladivostok. More than 160 years ago, Siemens successfully covered Russia with the first network of

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Его Превосходительство господин Рюдигер Фрайхер фон Фрич – Чрезвычайный и Полномочный Посол Федеративной Республики Германия в России. Представленная статья является изложением его личных мыслей.

telegraph lines. Since the 1970s and throughout even the most tumultuous political times of the Cold War Russia has reliably supplied Germany with natural gas. Such examples remind us that economic relations, too, have repeatedly played an important role in our bilateral relationship. The same is true for the realm of culture: to this day, Russian literature and classical music continue to be highly regarded and respected across Germany. Rachmaninov and Skryabin, Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich are household names in Germany as are Tolstoy and Turgenev, Pushkin and Pasternak. This year, we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of the famous Bauhaus school of design and architecture – one of its great contributors was Vassily Kandinsky who had come to Germany as a student only to become a teacher there, too. And Alexander Gerst's stint as first German Commander of the International Space Station in 2018 would not have been possible without the groundbreaking Russian discoveries and developments in aerospace engineering.

Over centuries, Germans and Russians have cultivated a fascinating history of intensive exchanges and encounters and were repeatedly brought together, positively, in historical destiny. And we have equally lived through unspeakable tragedy: the catastrophes of the 20th Century, of the First and particularly the Second World War with the German assault on the Soviet Union and the resulting destruction and death that the Soviet Union and its peoples have suffered at the hands of Germans. It will be 80 years ago this year that this war started – with a diabolical alliance of Hitler and Stalin partitioning amongst them Central and Eastern Europe, subjugating its peoples and lands.

But it, too, marks our history, that even after darkest days and greatest suffering Germans and Russians succeeded at re-building ties and constructing – at first tolerable and eventually good – relations. Yes, even during the Cold War and in spite of a multitude of differences dividing our countries, also the Western part of Germany and the Soviet Union were able to identify common interests in the context of *Ostpolitik* and efforts at *détente*, embedding it in the Helsinki Final Act 1975. As the Iron Curtain fell, we witnessed an astonishing surge in bilateral encounters, contacts and projects in almost all areas of our relations ranging from dynamic business ties to civil society cooperation,

from cultural and science collaborations to joint initiatives in international politics.

A growing perception gap and conflicting interpretations of international order

And today? How come we ended up in such a difficult, yes, at times frustrating state of affairs, considering the heights we had taken German-Russian relations to since the 1990 s? There are numerous explanations – an important one certainly refers to the fact, that our respective experiences and analyses of what has happened in world affairs since the Cold War differ greatly and that, consequently, we have drawn very different lessons from these historical developments.

It will be thirty years this fall that the Berlin Wall fell, and with it the Iron Curtain disappeared. Peoples in Central and Central Eastern Europe obtained the freedom to decide on their destinies – the Germans, with unification, among them. And one by one, European peoples opted during this historical window of opportunity for defining their nations' paths in line with 'the Western model': rule of law and parliamentary democracy, a market-based economy and civic rights and liberties. Having been posted to Poland as a young diplomat in the late 1980 s, I vividly remember how strongly people longed for this. And exercising their right to self-determination, they also chose to join alliances and integration processes – be it NATO or the EU – a right agreed upon by all Europeans in the Helsinki Final Act and reconfirmed in the Paris Charta of 1990. We Germans hoped that this historical process would lead to a shared peaceful future with all European peoples, embedded in a world order beneficial to all. Germany therefore also actively promoted that Russia's particular interests, role and outlook had to be taken into account. This resulted, among other things, in the G7 being transformed into the G8, in NATO for the first time in history signing an agreement with a third country, the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and in the EU and Russia developing a variety of forms of exchange and cooperation: the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, regular summits and the much-acclaimed 'four common spaces'.

During my five years in this great country, countless discussions have taught me how differently the last thirty years have been perceived by so many in Russia. The end of the Soviet Union with the surrounding sense of uncertainty, insecurity and instability was not only experienced as a break-up, but as a form of defeat. This process was associated with the loss of a significant sphere of influence, a loss of territorial control and economic strength – and a challenge to concepts of national identity. The 1990s from this point of view epitomized the radical weakening of the former world power. Many believe that this did not just happen as a result of the socialist model having failed – but that it was somehow part of a ‘Western masterplan’ to encircle and infringe upon, dominate and bring down Russia – primarily understood as a result of longstanding efforts on the part of the United States. Many, to this day, struggle to acknowledge the genuine desire of peoples in Central and Eastern Europe to seek independence and self-determination according to the Western model.

Therefore, what has emerged over the last thirty years is not only a deepening gap of perceptions but a fundamental dispute about the question of how international relations should be organized. Given our history – and the lessons we have tried to draw from it – we cannot imagine a world order, based upon spheres of influence and *cordons sanitaires* that would either be well-functioning or just. We are convinced that the ‘big states’ have no greater right of say nor a right to tell ‘smaller states’ around them whether or not to search the security of an alliance and which one.

This all too often goes hand in hand with strongly conflicting interpretations of basic principles and norms of international politics, such as the prohibition of the use of force, respect for territorial integrity, the freedom of states to choose their own security arrangements and obligations to comply with fundamental civil and human rights standards. This is, what we mean, when speaking about a rules-based international order: ‘International law plus’ – not ‘international law minus’. At the very core, it is a conflict of legality vs. legitimacy. In many discussions, this becomes evident through the popularity of the ‘but-actually-somehow’ argument: ‘But you know, Ukraine actually somehow is different’, ‘Crimea somehow actually always was Rus-

sian...'. I am not trying to ridicule – such arguments have been advanced all too often and by too many. And it was always about the post-Soviet space, which is conceived of as a special political zone in which Russia should be allowed to legitimately claim privileged interests and rights. Yet, the question of what is legitimate in post-Soviet Eurasia remains fundamentally contested, reflecting broader divisions about the end of the Cold War. In short, interests are not synonymous to rights.

The fateful years of 2014–2015

Divisions grew over time and became increasingly visible in Russia's role in the context of the 'frozen conflicts' in Moldova and Georgia. They finally came to the forefront of international relations when the Ukrainian people chose to opt for a so-called Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the European Union in 2013. For many in Russia, an association of Ukraine with the European Union was tantamount to also losing the heart of the 'Rus' – and therefore constituted a violation of a self-proclaimed 'red line'. We know, what happened thereafter.

The aftermath of these events neatly reflected the perception gap that had developed since the 1990s: where Germany emphasized the importance of international law in protecting the inviolability of international borders in its strong condemnation of the annexation of Crimea and Russia's continued involvement in the conflict in Donbass, Russia appealed to notions of legitimacy, claiming its intervention served in part to uphold the rights of Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine. A so-called referendum, organized after a militarily supported takeover and without having consulted the Ukrainian authorities, the United Nations or the OSCE, supposedly 'legitimized' the breach of laws, rules and principles agreed upon over decades by the international community, including Russia, in the Paris Charta, the Helsinki Final Act and other cornerstone agreements.

Resolve, dialogue and cohesion

Apart from not resorting to the use of force in order to respond to the use of force – something not self-evident given Europe's history, –

the 'Western' reaction to the events in Ukraine consisted of three elements: resolve, dialogue and cohesion.

Resolve: a strong threefold political message was sent by adopting sanctions – as a political tool, not as punishment. Firstly, a show of unity and solidarity of jointly feeling bound by fundamentals that guarantee our living together in peace in Europe. Secondly, any further escalation would not be tolerated and, thirdly, what had been done needed to be redressed. The overwhelming condemnation of the annexation of Crimea by the United Nations General Assembly in 2014 demonstrated that this assessment was shared by the wider international community, far exceeding the group of states commonly understood to represent 'the West'.

And, by the way, sanctions – in contrast to what is often claimed – are not an instrument foreign to Russian foreign policy, as Russian-Turkish relations and the so-called 'counter-sanctions' with which Russia stopped most of the food imports from, among others, the European Union, have demonstrated.

In parallel to a clear and resolute response, Germany and her partners, particularly France, developed the essential second pillar of response to what had happened to Ukraine: unremitting efforts to resolve the conflict through dialogue, negotiation and mediation. This resulted in the painstakingly negotiated 'Minsk Agreement' in September 2014. To this day, this agreement and a catalogue of implementing measures agreed in February 2015 provide the basis for our ongoing efforts at crisis resolution. And while we are, regrettably, far from achieving a solution, all sides in this conflict insist that these agreements need to be implemented. Germany will not tire of working towards this goal.

Preserving the cooperative core of bilateral relations whilst maintaining a principled position on European security

The third element of reacting to the conflict of 2014 was to do everything within our power to stay engaged with Russia, to preserve what we can in terms of the rich bilateral relationship and to pragmatically build on these foundations whilst maintaining our principled stance on the unresolved conflict. At the core of these efforts lies a

wealth of economic ties and business projects, cultural and civil society activities, scientific cooperation and dynamic people-to-people ties between Germany and Russia. Good bilateral relations are a mosaic; many individual pieces need to be contributed and allocated by many different actors.

This is best shown when looking at the renewed strengthening of German–Russian economic relations: Germany continues to be Russia’s second largest trading partner behind China, with more than 4.600 companies actively engaged in the Russian economy and remains a far more important investor than Russia’s southern neighbor: in 2017 alone, German investment in Russia amounted to 470 billion USD whilst China invested 140 billion USD in Russia. Preliminary data for 2018 suggests that this gap is widening rather than narrowing. Trade and business, indeed, constitute two of the strongest bridges that connect us to Russia.

The desire to continue to work with Russia is also manifest in the various ‘cross-years’ which were successfully organized during recent years, ranging from the ‘Year of language and literature’ in 2014–2015 to a ‘Year of Youth Exchange’ the year after. As a result, youth exchange has gone up, more cities have established communal partnership relations – there are a total of 112 twin cities between Germany and Russia today; an impressive number of pupils continues to learn German in schools in Russia – 1.5 million at present! And the cultural exchange continues to be particularly lively – be it John Neumeier and the Hamburg Ballet working on a co-production with the Bolshoi Theatre or renowned Russian director Kirill Serebrennikov staging his productions in Stuttgart or Berlin. The exchange between Germany and Russia in the field of science is equally intensive. The number of scientific partnerships has increased over the last years. This is why we decided to dedicate 2018–2020 to a ‘German-Russian Year of University Cooperation and Science’. All this reflects a sincere interest in one another in both countries and on many levels. During my travels over the course of the last five years, I have been time and again overwhelmed by the extraordinarily high awareness of Germany and interest in our country throughout Russia.

However, trying to restore and rebuild our relations has been rendered increasingly difficult by events since 2014, which further overshadowed our ties and undermined trust. Be it the downing of passenger-jet MH17, Russia militarily backing the Assad regime in a war in Syria that drove millions of refugees to Europe and which had us even witness the use of chemical weapons against civilians, the nerve gas attack on Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury in March 2018, cyber-attacks in a number of our partner countries and in Germany itself in 2018 as well as the violation of the INF Treaty and recent escalations of tensions in and around the Straits of Kerch.

No doubt, the current situation leaves many of us deeply dissatisfied given the manifold ties that bind Germany and Russia – and also many shared interests with respect to shaping responses to global challenges. Yet, all efforts to stay together, to build on the positive achievements of the past, to further improve relations in so many fields will remain futile without a significant mitigation of the conflict Ukraine has become a victim of – ‘the elephant has to get out of the room’. Good proposals on how to do this are on the table and in order to implement these, it is not sufficient to just point fingers at Kiev. Russia bears a fundamental responsibility in this. We will not be able to fundamentally improve our relations as long as we do not agree – or do not agree again – on the rules and principles that apply to it.

A changed international setting: The return of ‘great power politics’

All this takes place against the background of a radically altered and quickly changing international situation, which is marked by three fundamental trends:

- The comeback of ‘great power politics’ and the return to a very transactional kind of unilateralism in some capitals. ‘Me first’ seems to have become the motto of our times.
- This has disconcerting consequences for the postwar architecture of international norms and multilateral institutions as well as humanity’s ability to address the great challenges of today such as climate change. Norms and principles that seemed to be cast in iron are more and more openly being contested or put into dysfunction.

- Moreover, international dynamics have significantly been affected by the re-positioning of the United States in global affairs.

I meet plenty of interlocutors in Russia who seem persuaded that these developments actually play into Russia's hands. And when the question is raised as to what an international order should look like under the conditions described, a typical answer would be: 'polycentric'. Depending on the anniversary in question, additional reference is then made to various historic landmark meetings which supposedly could serve as an example for today: in 2014, it was the Vienna Congress, in 2015 the Yalta Conference. Others might be added.

Well, what was the nature of such historic conferences? The 'big states' met and sorted out matters amongst themselves, defining alliances and telling their 'smaller neighbors' where to sit. We know how these historical episodes ended: in disarray and controversy, turf battles and, worst of all the catastrophes of two world wars in the 20 th century. Such world orders have utterly failed – as desirable as it may seem to be one of the few, who are to sort out matters in a polycentric way.

Germany's commitment to multilateralism and to European integration

As a so-called middle power and given our painful history, as Germans, we are convinced that a return to a concert of great powers, a revival of the policy instruments of the 19 th century, represents no promising recipe for a prosperous and peaceful 21 st century and cannot provide the answers we need to respond to the challenges of an age of globalization. The recipes of the past are not the appropriate answers to the complications of today, be it climate change, poverty or the proliferation of states with nuclear capabilities.

And the alternative is not, as is often suggested, polycentrism versus unilateralism. It is rather mono- or polycentrism versus multilateralism. This is the message passed on to us by history. The rights of Latvia or Luxemburg are not smaller than those of Russia or the United States. Sovereignty is not a question of size. For us the question of "Are we going to stick to the principle of multilateralism, which was the lesson we learned from the Second World War, even when multilatera-

lism is not always fun, but often difficult, slow and complicated?”, as Chancellor Merkel put it to the audience at this year’s Munich Security Conference, is clearly merely a rhetorical one. As Germans, we remain firmly convinced that it is best to repeatedly exchange perspectives, to look beyond our own interests and to see whether we can achieve solutions together – and to take the interests of all into consideration.

Now we know that the world is not an ideal place. International agreements and promises contained therein are fair enough but *per se* not sufficient. What we need is guarantees and safety belts. Ideally, we need a system in which whoever tries to violate the rules ends up hurting his own interests. Is this something out of the magic box of political theory? No, it exists out there and it is indeed working: it is called European integration. All past upheavals and current challenges notwithstanding, it has provided not only for prosperity, but first and foremost it has brought peace to a continent for close to seventy years that for centuries had been torn by conflicts.

The European Union therefore also is our point of departure when it comes to defining a joint common foreign and security policy. For Germany, a confident, united and successful Europe provides the best basis also for constructing good and promising relations with Russia. In our perspective, the European Union will undoubtedly take on a more prominent role in our engagement with Russia.

Our vision of the world is not shaped by zero-sum games but by our experiences of improving our security and prosperity through increasing our interdependence with others, not by building walls. Moreover, we believe that when treaties are reliably upheld, trust emerges – and trust remains the foundation and ‘glue’ of any international order.

Therefore, the big questions of our time ranging from climate change to artificial intelligence and the regulation of new weapon systems demand a sustainable multilateral response based on mutually agreed, binding rules rather than unilateralist short-termism. The multilateral embedding of foreign and security policy is therefore non-negotiable for us. Correspondingly, Foreign Minister Maas initiated discussions with partners on forming an ‘alliance of multilateralists’, uniting countries that defend existing rules together and continue to

develop them where this is necessary, that show solidarity when international law is trampled on, that are committed to climate protection as one of the greatest challenges facing humankind and that assume responsibility in international organizations together.

This is also the reason, why the transatlantic alliance will undoubtedly endure. Our shared interests with the United States simply remain infinitely greater; our commonalities have deeper roots and the success story of jointly defending our security for seventy years this year provides our relationship with a rock-solid foundation.

Common challenges, shared responsibilities: Paths ahead?

All the while it appears obvious that the overall new international setting does not only represent a challenge to Germany and to its European partners. The shifts in the global setting also raise a series of fundamental questions for Russia, concerning the country's vision for the future, its strategic and economic outlook. The developments of the last two years and the rise of tensions in relations with the United States have deflated some of the hopes for grand bargains to address fundamental questions of strategic stability, arms control and crisis resolution in Ukraine but also Syria. Instead, there are troubling signs of a hardening in respective positions in both Moscow and Washington D.C. Similarly, the jury is still out on what the consequences will likely be for Russia of a deepening rivalry between the United States and a rising, increasingly confident China.

Five years after the announcement of Russia's 'turn to the East', the prospects of a closer alignment and a deepening economic relationship with China are not only bright. Economic interdependencies are growing – which definitely is something good for both sides – whilst investment from China, as has been said earlier, and the degree of diversification of Russia's ties to China have yet to fulfill high Russian expectations. Governmental efforts to insulate the economic ties to China from the impact of US sanctions are ongoing but especially Chinese banks remain reluctant to engage with Russia for fear of repercussions in the US market. And some difficult questions related to China's rise and its consequences for Russia are yet to be addressed. For in-

stance, which role can Russian visions claim for itself in the context of Eurasian integration driven by the Chinese Belt-and-Road Initiative?

Europe's relations with a rising China are subject to manifold challenges, too. 'Protectionism', 'intellectual property rights violations', 'respect for norms and standards' and 'strategic take-overs' are some of today's catch-words. Now, if the world's leading economic block – which the EU continues to be – is faced with such difficulties, how will Russia address these challenges in the medium and longer run?

A revival of the shared vision for a Russia–Europe partnership?

Therefore, at the end of the day, is not perhaps Europe 'the best of natural partners' for Russia, given the vast amount of commonalities and interests we share as described above? We continue to hope that, once again, this conclusion will win the upper hand in Russia and that politics will start to work towards this ambition.

Yet, an easing of tensions with Russia is unlikely to be swift. Germany certainly will not stop to work for such a long-term perspective in our continuing dialogue and cooperation with Russia together with our partners in Europe – and during my five years in Russia I found much consensus among Russian experts. We are prepared for many incremental steps and know that it will require significant strategic patience and principled pragmatism. We are ready for that. We will continue to build on existing ties and strengthen them in business as much as in our cultural, science and civil society contacts with Russia.

As aforementioned, our policy towards Russia is based on dialogue and efforts at cohesion – and on resilience. We therefore will continue to invest in deterrence along the lines of the measures adopted at the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw. And we will work with our partners to strengthen our resilience on the national and at the European level for instance in the fields of energy security, hybrid threats and strategic communication and invest in fostering unity across the European Union. This does not contradict new joint efforts at rapprochement.

Across all relevant fora, Germany will always advocate that ultimately security from each other is not enough. Indeed, we have repeatedly underpinned our willingness for dialogue with concrete offers

for co-operative security, to reduce uncontrolled dynamics of escalation and to avoid misinterpretations of intentions. At the bilateral level, we have recently revived the German–Russian High Working Group on Security Policy to address the new common challenges of our times, from counter-terrorism and arms control concerns to joint efforts to salvage the Iran nuclear deal. At the level of NATO, we tirelessly argue in favor of a regular dialogue in the context of the NATO–Russia Council, ideally with the participation of a Russian Ambassador to NATO, and for making better use of other mechanisms for crisis communication (e.g. contacts between the NATO-SACEUR and the Russian General Staff). In the European Union, we argue for selective but united engagement based on the so-called Mogherini Principles, among other things, by supporting and reassuring our Eastern European partners. Similarly, we favor more dialogue on conventional and nuclear disarmament given the risks emanating from the erosion of the arms control architecture, in particular the impending collapse of the INF treaty and the uncertain future of the New START agreement. With respect to conventional arms control, Germany continues to support a relaunch in the context of the OSCE Structured Dialogue, as initiated by the then Foreign Minister Steinmeier in 2016. After all, a healthy relationship between ‘the rest of Europe’ and Russia, one that improves the well-being and security of all and that, at the same time, allows us all to better face the great challenges of today and tomorrow, has to be one rebuilt on a solid foundation of mutual trust.

A stable and secure Europe lies at the heart of Germany’s national interests. Simply freezing the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is not acceptable. Indeed, ideas of ‘peaceful co-existence’ as defined fifty years ago no longer fit current times characterized by globalization, interdependence and mutual vulnerability. In the same way that Russia repeatedly claims to seek security from ‘the West’, Germany, NATO and the European Union need security with *and* from Russia. The key question therefore is and continues to be how security and stability between Europe and Russia should be organized in the region. An answer to this challenging question does not lie in defining ‘a new security order’ for Europe or indeed for the globe, as it has been postulated by some, be it ‘polycentric’ or else. All rules and principles, which are

necessary for living together to everybody's advantage, have already been jointly formulated and enshrined in cornerstone agreements ranging from the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Declaration of 1990 to the NATO-Russia Founding Act. We simply all need to adhere to these agreements; we need to re-commit to a rules-based European security order. And we need to heal the fundamental breach of trust at its heart.

This, in turn, will enable us, Germans and Russians, Russians and other Europeans, to jointly pick up our work towards implementing the shared vision of a common space from Vladivostok to Lisbon. This is a vision we have not given up on – and we will not give up. We will then also be able to realize the full potential of greater cooperation between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union. There is no alternative to good relations between Russia and the rest of Europe. We have – and we Germans particularly feel this – a joint responsibility for the good future and for peace on this Eurasian landmass.