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The next chapter in Europe-Russia relations

Dirk Wiese, Germany's parliamentary envoy to Russia, explains why keeping lines of communication open between Europe and Russia is key

Read this interview in German.

How should we best approach Russia – with dialogue or directness?

These two approaches are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary. I don't consider it helpful to hastily label someone a 'Russia expert' or 'foreign-policy hawk'. By annexing Crimea in violation of international law and destabilising eastern Ukraine, Russia openly challenged the foundation of European security and went against the *détente* policy of Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr. This deeply shook the mutual trust underpinning the partnership. In broad agreement with its international partners, the European Union showed in words and sanctions that any policy aimed at violently rewriting Europe's borders is not fit for the 21st century.

However, pressure has always been combined with offers of dialogue to Russia. We must continue to talk to Russia and look for islands of cooperation – not only to solve conflicts like those in Syria and Ukraine, but also to prevent our societies from becoming alienated from each other.

I am convinced that closer contact and exchanges between people from Germany and Russia, especially the younger generation, can help. I say this in view of the end of Vladimir Putin's term in office in 2024 and the political generation that is coming of age in Russia. Readiness to talk must nonetheless rest on reciprocity. Perhaps the EU could seek closer relations with the Eurasian Economic Union as a way of counterbalancing China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiative.

Ukraine has repeatedly expressed its wish to align itself with the West. How might Germany and the EU satisfy that desire without straining

relations with Russia?

Time and again, the people of Ukraine have expressed their wish for democracy and the rule of law, and freedom and good governance – often waving the EU flag. We all want to bring Ukraine closer to European structures. But peace must first return to Ukraine.

We continue to work hard in the Normandy format, which brings together senior representatives from Germany, Russia, Ukraine and France, to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine. A UN mission in Donbass could help stabilise the situation and ensure implementation of the Minsk agreements.

However, we are a long way off from that and Ukraine must also undertake serious reforms. The country can only have a future in the EU after it has modernised its political, social and economic system, addressed corruption issues and when investors are provided with legal certainty. We are seriously supporting Ukraine in all these respects. In terms of Russia, the crisis in Ukraine led to a turning point in our relations. However, it is clear that Europe can only obtain long-term security with rather than without Russia – just as Russia can only have permanent security working with, rather than against, Europe.

Leaving aside politics for a moment, how do we ensure that European and Russian citizens do not become alienated from each other?

We need to make them talk, talk and talk, and bring people together as much as possible. There need to be more exchanges and contacts between both groups, especially the younger generations. That's the only way to counteract entrenched prejudices and create islands for cooperation. There are already many youth and cultural initiatives, collaborations between universities and scientists, and city partnerships such as those between Cologne and Volgograd, and Lüdenscheid and Taganrog.

The German-Russian Year of Municipal and Regional Partnerships is approaching its end and the Year of Scientific and Educational Partnerships was just agreed on. A greater focus is also being placed on student exchanges. The International Hanseatic Days will take place in the Russian city of Pskov in 2019 and in my hometown of Brilon in 2020. These present excellent opportunities to talk to rather than about each other.

Can the upcoming football World Cup help create a new climate of cooperation?

Major sporting events like football World Cups provide the

opportunity for lots of people to meet, exchange and celebrate together – and overcome their prejudices. We experienced that in Germany in 2006. I welcome the many initiatives the German Football Association is organising in the run-up to the championship, such as the under-18 Russia v Germany international friendly that was just held in Volgograd, and how Thomas Hitzlsperger came out in protest at Russia's anti-gay propaganda laws.

At the same time, we must view the current political situation realistically and not set our hopes too high. Just consider what happened in Sochi, and the alarming refusals of entry to journalists. Ensuring free and critical reporting is particularly important, and the German federal government is strongly pushing for that.

Your duties as an envoy include not just Russia, but also the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Cooperation with Uzbekistan was considered to be nearly impossible because of its closed regime. Has that changed under the new presidency?

Since taking office in December 2016, the new Uzbek president Schavkat Mirsiyoyev has pursued ambitious reforms and opened up the country. Mirsiyoyev's major goals include strengthening parliament, liberalising the economy and reforming the justice system. Germany is supporting Uzbekistan's reform efforts by sending experts and promoting the exchange of experiences with its experts who come here on study trips. The positive results can already be seen in our bilateral relations because German businesses are more interested in the country. The volume of trade between Germany and Uzbekistan grew approximately 30 per cent in one year, a result of Uzbek government efforts to improve framework economic conditions.

President Mirsiyoyev is also keen on strengthening relations with neighbouring countries. His initiative for central Asian presidents to meet in Astana in Kazakhstan in March marked an important step towards closer regional cooperation. Uzbekistan aims to develop relations with Afghanistan as well. We view these as positive developments and are campaigning both bilaterally and within the EU for further progress on human rights and civil society issues.

Armenian civil society has gone into the streets and forced the minister-president to resign. What is behind the protests? How will they affect European-Armenian relations?

I am following the events in Armenia very closely and am relieved by the peaceful, non-violent approach of the political forces. I encourage them to continue to let level-headedness prevail. Opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan's election as minister-president offers hope for a new

beginning, but he must remain true to his promises. The next few months will reveal Armenia's true commitment to democracy, the rule of law and its respect for human rights.

I hope that further developments will satisfy Armenians' expectations in terms of changes to the parliamentary system. Germany wants to accompany Armenia down that reform path both bilaterally and within the EU. The comprehensive agreement signed by the EU and Armenia last autumn offers an excellent framework for that. It should quickly be put into practice after ratification.

Since the Minsk process, Belarus has assumed the role of negotiating between conflicting parties in Eastern Europe. What are the possibilities for additional cooperation with Belarus?

As host, Belarus played an important role during the tricky negotiations to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine. I welcome the Belarus government's readiness to constructively engage in efforts to stabilise the region.

Through its special relationship with Russia on the one hand and its good connections to the other states in the EU's Eastern Partnership on the other – so Ukraine, the Republic of Moldavia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan – Belarus will surely continue playing an important role in the region.

Fortunately, relations between Belarus and the EU have greatly improved and intensified in recent years, even if many critical issues remain – freedom of assembly and the press for instance, and capital punishment of course. It is in our interest to consolidate this dialogue and cooperate with Belarus even more in the coming years, in order to precisely reach consensus on such critical points.



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Dirk Wiese has been a member of the German Bundestag since 2013 and acts, since 2018, as the Federal Government's coordinator for inter-societal cooperation with Russia, Central Asia and the Eastern Partnership countries.