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HALF-THROTTLE

Into the future with one foot in the past:
Why so many eastern Germans feel at odds
with the West thirty years after reunification

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In 1990, the US and USSR supported German reunification, but for different reasons. Today, Brussels and Berlin are butting heads with Washington and Moscow, again for different reasons. Michael Thumann sorts out the EU's trouble with Russia while Juliane Schäuble examines how the world could improve with a President Joe Biden

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When the GDR went bust in 1989, Chancellor Kohl promised "blossoming meadows." While much has improved, the country has not really grown together, and East Germans are now asking: Why should we even want to become like the West? Martin Machowecz, Sabine Rennefan, Wolfgang Engler and Stephan Kaufmann explore the eastern mindset

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There is still more to lay bare about the somewhat awkward German habit of stripping down in public; read Irish-born Killian Lannister's "exposé" in our series on *Zee Germans*

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Our special section *The Berlin Times* features the decades-long drama of the capital city's attempt to build an airport. Hannes Koch gives an overview from 30,000 feet while Lorenz Maroldt lands a few zingers.

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Forging ahead

A call for European leadership in times of turmoil

BY THEO SOMMER

No one looking back on the past decade can do so with satisfaction, let alone complacency. The world has become unstable. The international order created after World War II is breaking down; the global institutions established as part of that order are frail and ineffective. The COVID-19 pandemic has turned previously existing fault lines into frontlines. Troubles are piling up everywhere. In many places, cooperation is morphing into confrontation. US-China tensions have become the main axis of global politics; the rivalry between the two great powers will dominate the near future, regardless who is in the White House next January.

The European Union will have to adjust to the shifting geopolitical dispensation. No longer can it bank on the United States to provide global guidance and military protection. And it has to recognize that China, its primary economic partner, has grown into an assertive, some would say, aggressive challenger aspiring to world leadership.

Several states are testing Europe's unity: China with Xi Jinping's Silk Road Initiative and the "17+1" cooperation scheme in Eastern Europe and the Balkans; Russia with Vladimir Putin's assault on Ukraine and his attempt

to destabilize the Brussels community – a target shared by US President Donald Trump; and Turkey with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman imperialism.

At the same time, the Europeans see a plethora of threats and crises coming ever closer. The Syrian civil war has swept millions of refugees west. Rising tensions over Ankara's predatory hunt for undersea oil and gas in the Mediterranean conjure up the dire specter of a war between the two NATO members Turkey and Greece.

Europe can no longer bank on the United States to provide global guidance and military protection

Another flash point touching Europe's interest is Libya, riven by internal conflict, in which the UN-recognized government in Tripoli is supported by Turkey, while Russian mercenaries assist General Khalifa Haftar's regime in the east. French President Emmanuel Macron is trying to protect Total's oil interest in the desert country. He is also pushing the Lebanese toward meaningful reforms of their collapsed political system.

Together with 1,100 German soldiers, central African forces and 15,000 UN Blue Helmets, 5,000 French troops are battling in Mali against Islamist terrorism. The recent coup – at the hands of Malian forces trained by the French and Germans – sent ripples across the Sahel and beyond.

In the Far East, China's onslaught on the freedoms of Hong Kong and its saber rattling over Taiwan could, like Washington's elevation of the People's Republic to an adversarial rogue state,

set off an explosion in the South China Sea – a waterway of utmost importance to EU commerce.

Nearer to home, the fraudulent elections in Belarus triggered a popular uprising against the callous tyranny of Alexander Lukashenko. Its violent suppression by OMON police and the possibility that Russian troops might join the crackdown confronted the EU with another sticky problem, this one at its very border.

Given the darkening horizons, it is hardly surprising that calls for making Europe capable of global politics, *weltpolitikfähig* in German, have been raised ever more insistently. Ursula von der Leyen, before assuming the presidency of the European Commission, put it quite bluntly: "Soft power alone won't suffice today if we Europeans want to assert ourselves in the world. Europe must also learn the language of power."

Macron chimed in: "We must use the grammar of today, a grammar of the language of sovereignty"; he wants to "revive Europe as a political and strategic power." Many others agree that only in a united Europe can our several nations be strong.

Learning the language of power, von der Leyen explained, "for one thing means building up our muscles, where hitherto we were able to rely on others, for example in security policy. Furthermore, it means using the existing power more purposefully where European interests are concerned."

What has become of all these striking statements? Regrettably, they have not moved beyond mere sound bites.

Optimists speak of Europe's geopolitical awakening in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Europe is stirring, they say, recalling Jean Monet's dictum: "Europe will be forged in crises." In the EU's €750 billion (\$885 bil-

lion) economic recovery program, they see a "Hamiltonian moment" – a point in history when joint debt policy becomes the first chapter of a federal playbook. The deal allows the EU to borrow, tax and spend like an actual state.

It is indeed an important innovation enabling a strong economic convalescence and a more prosperous future. It does not, however, spell more unity among the 27 member states in foreign and security policy. The much touted strategic autonomy of the European Union remains hobbled by widely varying national stances on most foreign issues. There is no agreement on how to deal with Russia, China, Turkey, Africa or even the US. And the principle of unanimity regularly prevents joint action.

As long as the unanimity rule prevails and any small state can veto collective action, Europe will not be taken seriously in global politics. To be respected, it must speak with one voice – as it does in trade politics.

Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, is not alone in calling for the abandonment of the unanimity principle and the introduction of qualified majority voting. "It would be better," he argues, "to adopt a strong and substantial position by a majority rather

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BY GEMMA PÖRZGEN

Éminence grise

Putin has not yet chosen a course vis-à-vis Belarus, but all signs point to his continued support for Lukashenko

After the disputed presidential election in Belarus on Aug. 9, Vladimir Putin was one of the first to congratulate Alexander Lukashenko on his landslide win. Yet the Russian president was cautious at first, pursuing more of a wait-and-see approach as to which position the Kremlin should take.

"Putin congratulated Lukashenko on his victory, but the tone of his remarks was cool and formal," noted the Moscow-based sociologist Lev Gudkov. Even Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, chair of the right-wing nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, spoke of "election fraud," and Aleksey Pushkov, chair of the

Duma Foreign Affairs Committee, called it a lost election rather than a victory. Coverage of the protests in Belarus was surprisingly fair and was even debated in Russian state media.

Leaders in Moscow were most certainly surprised that the anti-Lukashenko protests continued peacefully for weeks rather than coming to a quick conclusion. Even as the nation's security forces used violence in a ruthless attempt to quell the protests, the demonstrations spread across the

entire country. Results included strikes at large state-operated companies and a genuinely popular people's movement against Lukashenko.

This clearly made an impression in Moscow, too, especially since the protests involved no anti-Russian sentiments, in contrast to the situation in Ukraine during the Maidan Uprising of 2014. Indeed, the Belarus opposition took great pains to ensure that the protest did not assume an anti-Russian character.

And yet Lukashenko remains in place as head of state in Belarus. He seems to be waiting out the protests while wearing them down through violent actions by the police. It seems that he can continue to count on the support of his security forces. His centralized power apparatus is showing no tangible cracks, and only a few high-ranking functionaries have withdrawn their allegiance.

Moscow is keeping a close eye on the situation. "Having Lukashenko remain in power is

the best option for Putin," argues the Belarusian political scientist Yauheni Preiherman from the Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations. He is convinced that "Putin is the kingmaker of the Belarusian political crisis."

Russia's president appears to be keeping all of his options open. While Lukashenko refuses to take any phone calls from European politicians such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, Putin has picked up the phone and signaled his readiness for dialogue. Among the solutions being considered are talks within the framework of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and a constitutional process in Belarus.

At the same time, however, Putin also announced in late August that he had organized a standby security force that could intervene in Belarus if the situation got out of control. Most experts nevertheless consider military intervention by Moscow to be highly unlikely. For the Kremlin, such a move would involve an incalculable risk of triggering a wave of anti-Russian resentment in Belarus. An invasion would not be welcome.

The foreign policy damage would also be significant and further isolate the Russian leadership on the international stage. Furthermore, an invasion of Belarus wouldn't earn Putin any points among his own people.

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BY MICHAEL THUMANN

There are Russians who see German hospitals as a salvation, and there are Russians who see them as a curse. The family of Alexei Navalny, Russia's foremost opposition leader, arranged for him to be treated at Berlin's Charité hospital after being subject to an apparent poison attack in August. The Russian government and its media empire have cast doubt upon the findings and diagnoses of his German doctors. The Navalny case is a burden to German-Russian relations, not due to Navalny, but rather to his government.

Navalny's struggle against the toxins is not unrelated to the style of Russian leadership that has also succeeded in poisoning the country's relationship to Germany. The list of unsolved attacks on opposition figures, critical journalists and NGO representatives in Russia is a long one:

- Five years ago, the prominent former vice-premier and liberal politician Boris Nemtsov was shot dead just outside the walls of the Kremlin.

- In the middle of Berlin's Little Tiergarten, not far from the German chancellery, a Chechen named Zelimkhan Khangoshvili was murdered in 2019, and the federal prosecutor general is investigating circles of "Russian state officials" as possible instigators.

- The German federal government holds Russian services responsible for the cyberattacks on the Bundestag, chancellery and foreign ministry.

The Russian government contests the accusations and refuses to cooperate in the investigations. In the case of Alexei Navalny, German doctors and investigators concluded that he had been drugged with a nerve agent formerly produced in the Soviet Union. The Russian government and the doctors in Omsk have since disputed the German findings and presented numerous alternative potential causes of Navalny's condition. Behind the competing accounts lies a deeper divide.

Germany and Russia live under diametrically oppositional systems. Germany functions by the rule of law, a system in which the government and all authorities are subjected to the same laws and to the same degree as its citizens. Russia is an authoritarian state that exploits the law and its monopoly on the use of force to dominate its citizens.



Two men walk into a room and bring all their politics with them: German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov

Getting to "da"

German-Russian relations are poisoned, but common interests persist

This significant contrast defines and encumbers relations between the two powers, which stand to worsen considerably if Russia were to intervene with force in Belarus. How can these two countries remain in discussions under such conditions?

It is a widely held misbelief that the Russian and German governments do not talk to one another. Countless visits between leaders of the two countries belie this notion of a diplomatic vacuum; it is often Germany that seeks out Russia. Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas were already in Moscow during this difficult year defined by the COVID-19 pandemic. They talk regularly on the phone with President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. In fact, they speak more frequently with

their Russian counterparts than Helmut Kohl once did with his friend Boris Yeltsin, and more often than Chancellor Gerhard Schröder used to call Putin two decades ago. But today, Russia and Germany converse in an entirely different way.

When Heiko Maas traveled to Moscow on Aug. 11, he spoke with Lavrov about a number of topics: the murder in Berlin, the cyberattacks on the German government, Ukraine, Syria, Belarus, Iran. In response to Maas' request for assistance in the investigation of the attack in Berlin, the Russian foreign minister responded with newly concocted counter-accusations. In the Little Tiergarten case, he argued, the Germans are obliged to show evidence that Russian state officials were involved; and as for the cyberattacks, Russia

has been hacked dozens of times this year "from the German segment of the internet." It was the first time that the Russians have raised such an accusation, and it sounded a whole lot like a tit-for-tat response.

This exchange provides a good summary of today's German-Russian dialogue. A reproach is levied, the accused is unresponsive to the concerns of the accuser, the accused invents accusations to distract from his failings, and trust is nowhere in sight. This, of course, stems from the contrast between rule by law and rule by force, as is on full display in the Navalny case.

But it also stems from the historical reversal of the roles of Russia and Germany in Europe – the second significant contrast between the two countries. After

World War II, the Soviet Union was effectively a conservative power seeking to maintain all that it had conquered or controlled. At that time, the Federal Republic of Germany was revisionist in that, although as of 1970 it accepted Germany's external borders, it did not formally accept the internal partition of the country. Today, Germany seeks to preserve the order established in 1990 along with the Charter of Paris, while Russia is engaged in persistent revolt against this order.

Moscow sees the conflicts in Ukraine and recently in Belarus as a geopolitical struggle over the new order. Putin often ties Russian revisionism to the suggestion that it would be desirable to establish a new order in the form of arrangements and agreements between the great powers à la Yalta 1945.

The Germans, however, counter by looking to replicate a different conference from that same year, the one in San Francisco where the UN Charter was drafted. Great power agreements vs. multilateralism – this is the third great contrast in vision between Moscow and Berlin.

Many observers talk of a new Cold War with Russia, but this is a misconception. Another Cold War is as unlikely as the establishment of new Western and Eastern blocs. The world is no longer dominated by two superpowers whose ideologies collide while each establishes a sphere of influence according to its own agenda. We live amid an unstructured conflict of global and regional powers. The world is mired in a period of chaos and disorder that lacks clear orientation.

This discombobulated state of affairs paradoxically harbors the opportunity for a future German-Russian discourse that comprises more than just accusations and counter-accusations. After all, Russia and Germany – and Eurasia and Europe – will need to find their bearings between the colliding giants of China and the US.

Beyond Europe, Berlin and Moscow share several further goals. Both would like to continue the nuclear deal with Iran that the US government broke and exited in 2018. At the end of August, Moscow and Berlin united in the UN Security Council to reject the dubious US request to trigger the snap-back mechanism of the Iran sanctions. Both Germany and Russia have no interest in an American-Chinese antagonism leading to a new "You're with us or against us" dichotomy.

And both also reject the principle of extraterritorial sanctions. For Russia and Germany, the US government's attempt to use sanctions to force countries and companies to toe the American line is an attack on their sovereignty. Accordingly, they both are resisting the ever-new rounds of US sanctions concerning the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

These US sanctions have forced Berlin and Moscow into a community of action. Even if many German politicians are questioning Nord Stream 2 in the wake of the attack on Navalny, neither Berlin nor Moscow is prepared to entirely abandon the natural gas relationship they have been cultivating for more than 50 years. Furthermore, Germany and Russia share a common interest in several disarmament treaties that US President Donald Trump is obliterating or that his country is abandoning. The Treaty on Open Skies is the latest agreement from which Trump is seeking to pull out. Germany and Russia want to preserve it.

There are ample topics on which Berlin and Moscow can converse and on which they share similar viewpoints. The German and Russian governments could expand upon these overlappings, in the UN Security Council, in the OSCE as well as on a bilateral basis.

But this is scarcely possible if Russia pushes the three structural differences between Moscow and Berlin to their breaking point: contempt for law vs. respect for law, revisionism vs. preservation, and great power agreements vs. multilateralism. If Russian government agencies bring their hunt for opposition leaders to the streets of Berlin or promote cyberattacks on the German government, it becomes very difficult to tackle global problems in cooperation with Moscow. And if the Russian government continues its attempt to create divisions within the EU, the German government will have to pursue the opposite strategy: to close the ranks of the EU vis-à-vis Moscow, including the use of sanctions.

Unfortunately, in recent history, these kinds of adversarial tiffs have occurred far too often. If nothing else, German-Russian relations are a story of willfully missed opportunities.

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TIMES PAST, TIMES PRESENT: In 1975 Theo Sommer (left) spoke about Germany's role vis-à-vis the two superpowers on *International Frühschoppen*, a German TV roundtable.

"Not too long ago, most of us assumed it was inevitable that Cold War tensions would erupt and result in a major nuclear explosion. But this was an unfounded assumption. And now, of course, we must admit that there is no utopian situation in which we can eschew the normal forms of behavior engaged in by the superpowers, such as rivalry, competition, conflicts of interests, attempts to double-cross one another and even take each other for a ride. This kind of behavior will never stop, and we in Europe can do little to change this. Instead, for ourselves – and for the sake of peace in general – it is much more important that the superpowers restrain themselves and that we try in pragmatic ways and via pragmatic common understandings to make peace more secure here in Europe, to quote Willy Brandt. This is the key task for the immediate future."

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than unanimously adopting a weak position with little substance." His stance is shared by many others, including German Chancellor Angel Merkel and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. But so far, no one has taken any concrete initiative.

At any rate, it is hard to see that such an initiative would be assured of success. More likely than not, the EU will remain condemned to make indignant statements about territorial encroachments, human rights violations and meddling in its internal affairs by foreign powers, calling them deeply concerning, deplorable and unacceptable, but basically limiting itself to lamentations and ineffective sanctions.

In these times of turmoil, that's not enough. To be taken seriously in the world, the EU will have to forge a foreign and security policy all of a piece. If necessary, a core Europe should forge ahead, as it did when creating the eurozone and the borderless

Schengen area, where no one is excluded, but the unwilling cannot put spokes into the wheel of the willing.

What could or should be the guidelines for a European foreign policy? The following ten are a start:

1. Hold up our own interests and values. To quote Joe Biden: "Hang tough, but keep talking."
2. Build bridges, not walls. Help defuse tensions and stave off confrontations.
3. Foster diplomacy, confidence building and compromise.
4. Press for new arms control and disarmament accords.
5. Redefine security beyond the realm of the military.
6. Take the lead in reforming flawed international institutions and revamp multilateralism.
7. Assist the prevention of another Great Depression à la 1929 as well as another global financial crisis à la 2007–2008.
8. Make the world safer against future pandemics like COVID-19.
9. Lay out the elementary prin-

ciples of a worldwide agreement on migration and asylum.

10. Set an example for policies to avert climate change.

One should not assume with complacency that the world will breeze through the crises to come. Leaders had better heed the warnings of the historian Margaret MacMillan: "How the world copes will depend on the strength of its institutions and, at crucial moments, on leadership. Weak and indecisive leaders may allow bad situations to get worse, as they did in 1914. Determined and ruthless ones can create wars, as they did in 1939. Wise and brave ones may guide the world through the storms."

Let us hope that the European Union can find and furnish enough such wise and brave leaders to shepherd us out of these harrowing times.

Theo Sommer
is the executive editor of *The German Times*.