

DISCUSSION PAPER

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New Progressive Ostpolitik for Europe

Ambitious, But Not Naive

In 2020, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of Willy Brandt's historical gesture in Warsaw. The “Warsaw genuflection” has become a symbol of reconciliation and dialogue between the East and the West. Today, although the circumstances have changed significantly, we can see it as an inspiration for a new generation of *Ostpolitik*, especially with regard to what is happening within the EU, just outside its borders as well as in light of the brand new reality of transatlantic relations. To realize its global potential, the EU must start developing solid common foreign policy strategies and a consequent, goal-oriented eastern policy should be one of its pillars.

1. The *Ostpolitik* and Its Long-Lasting Legacy

The “Warsaw genuflection” was a symbol of reconciliation and dialogue between the East and the West. Twenty-five years after the World War II atrocities, relations between Poland and Germany were still tense and restrained, just like the general mood of the Cold War: Europe split into two areas of influence by the Iron Curtain, a strict separation of political, economic, military realities. At times, such as during the Cuba Missile Crisis of 1962, World War III seemed imminent. The years thereafter brought a fragile balance but no immediate progress toward solving the East-West conflict, dominated by the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Only towards the end of that decade, a global political climate of *détente* came about, pushed forward by new political leaders such as West Germany's Social Democratic Chancellor Willy Brandt.

Brandt's overarching political theme was “to dare more democracy”, and he also applied this approach to developing his *Ostpolitik*. Representing a new generation of foreign policy strategists, Egon Bahr and Willy Brandt started working on it as early as 1963, when at the Tutzing Academy they introduced a new paradigm, *Wandel durch Annäherung* – change through rapprochement: relaunching contacts with the East while maintaining strong ties

with Western Europe and the United States. This was nothing less than a sort of Copernican revolution that undermined the conservative Hallstein Doctrine, which considered the recognition of the German Democratic Republic by any other country an *acte peu amical*, which would lead to West Germany's withdrawing from any diplomatic contact with the countries in question. This new course was also a new level of political imagination within the context of the Cold War: the easing of strained relations by allowing people's encounters.

In practice, *Ostpolitik* meant taking a proactive approach in dealing with Moscow instead of merely acknowledging the existence of the Iron Curtain as *fait accompli*. It rejected a black-and-white thinking of foreign policy and opened up a dialogue with other countries of the Eastern Bloc, who were actors of strategic significance in the region, to means of soft power such as cultural and citizen diplomacy. But advocating for *détente*, *Ostpolitik* accepted no ideological compromises and remained true to the values of liberal democracy and newly rebuilt alliances in the West, in particular with France and the United States, a foundation for peace and prosperity in post-war Europe. It also saw the potential of Europe as a global player only when united. In other words, *Ostpolitik* wanted to reach far beyond West Germany's interest. In Brandt's understanding of the approach, laying the foundations for a lasting European peace order would have been incomplete if it engaged only with the entrenched Western allies.

Thinking ahead.

"Ostpolitik is one of the most successful progressive policies in modern history: it proved to have an everlasting impact not only for inner-German reconciliation, but also for easing the tension between the West and the Eastern Bloc, becoming one of the preconditions of European unification."

Therefore, *Ostpolitik* can arguably be considered as one of the most successful progressive policies in modern history. Initially criticized, it proved to have an everlasting impact not only for inner-German reconciliation, but also for easing the tension between the West and the Eastern Bloc. It became one of the preconditions of European unification. The 2004 enlargement was the biggest expansion of the EU in history and embraced seven countries of the former Eastern Bloc, plus Slovenia, one of the former Republics of Yugoslavia. Considered by many an act of "historical justice", this long process would have not been possible without choosing the way of cooperation instead of exclusion, and de-escalation instead of confrontation from an early stage - an important lesson for contemporary conflict management and public diplomacy.

2. The World Today: Fragmented and Uncertain

Brandt's legacy is firmly rooted in the golden age of European social democracy, his contemporaries including Bruno Kreisky in Vienna and Olof Palme in Stockholm. Their political courage and vision allowed Europe to take another turn, both in terms of domestic issues as well as foreign policy. Brandt's leadership was an essential prerequisite for cooling down the systemic conflict between East and West in Europe. But the world has significantly changed since then and some assumptions of his *Ostpolitik 1.0* are irrelevant today. Yet, we still can draw from the approach Brandt and Bahr developed: pragmatic, but principle-oriented.

Thinking of *Ostpolitik 2.0*, the fundamental change is a completely different global power dynamic. After the Soviet Union collapsed, there was no more ideological confrontation between communism and capitalism, nor direct military action between the East and West. Newly independent states have emerged in Central and Eastern Europe, each with its own specific interests. In the West, European cooperation has consolidated structurally and grown into a European Union of 27 countries, even as Brexit and the triggering of Article 7 procedures against Poland and Hungary have recently produced a serious crisis concerning European integration. Finally, the United States as Europe's main global ally is only now beginning to recover from its most turbulent presidential term in decades. Under Donald Trump's leadership, the United States recklessly compromised global security and undermined the transatlantic relationship.

Meanwhile, under Vladimir Putin's rule, Russia has become an authoritarian, oligarchic regime, destabilizing the region and interfering in the West. The situation in the country has only been aggravated: The regime is neither democratic nor liberal, unaccepting of political pluralism and cracking down on civic freedoms. In foreign policy, Putin's Russia is not a peacekeeping force, but a neo-imperial entity trying to strengthen its global sphere of influence by spreading misinformation, supporting illiberal leaders, performing annexations, destabilizing Eastern Europe, and leading a proxy war in Syria. Additionally, Russia is engaging in cyber warfare on the West through disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks. After the recent poisoning and subsequent jailing of opposition leader Alexey Navalny, relations with Russia have reached a new low. There is no commonality of values between Brussels and Moscow; the window of opportunity for a positive, future-oriented agenda with Russia is closed and will not open in the foreseeable future. Instead, there is a growing understanding that the West and Russia operate on very different assumptions and logics, difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile.

Moving on to the EU, formulating the Common Foreign and Security Policy has always been a challenge. Finding a common approach towards Russia is even harder with too many member states pursuing conflicting interests, the reconciliation of which proves extremely challenging. The most prominent example must be the

German-Russian investment in the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, bypassing German neighbors, isolating the country within Europe through distrust, all while raising many questions, not only about the EU's energy security but also of ethical nature. Another symptom of an ambivalent approach towards Moscow within the EU is Hungary's relationship with Russia. This is best embodied when Hungary's strategic nuclear power plant investments are juxtaposed with Poland's National Security Strategy (NSS), which officially labels Russia as the country's main threat. On top of that, a general crisis of European integration is looming. First, the unprecedented Brexit has reversed the decades-long trend of increasing European integration. Currently, the escalating dispute with Poland and Hungary over the rule of law has almost resulted in those countries sabotaging the new Multiannual Financial Framework and, even more importantly, the Recovery Plan for Europe, intended to repair the economic and social damage caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Within the EU, there seems to be fundamental disagreement over the purpose of the Union as well its underlying values. Unless this disagreement is solved, it will be difficult to persuade some member states to prioritize common interests over their national agendas.

“Eastern policy cannot be developed in a void: it needs to be embedded into the framework of existing alliances and neighborhood policies and a broader consensus of all EU states is required. The next *Ostpolitik* must be a European one.”

Last but not least, a possible new European eastern policy cannot be developed in a void. It needs to be embedded into the framework of existing alliances and neighborhood policies. The original *Ostpolitik* never assumed equidistance between East and West. Next to the normalization of relations with the Eastern Bloc, it embraced tightening relations with the West, both in Europe as well as with the United States. Meanwhile, the recent four years in transatlantic relations were unusually bumpy, with President Donald Trump calling the EU “a foe” and undermining common efforts towards mitigating climate change, supporting nonproliferation and arms control among others. For the EU, the advent of the new Biden administration offers an opportunity

to relaunch the dialogue with the US on foreign policy issues, especially with regard to containing Russia and stabilizing the European neighborhood. It will also be a good opportunity to resume the conversation on the future of NATO to finally make it “cohesive, capable, credible” and “prepared, fitter and well funded”, echoing the wishes of European leaders at the 2016 Munich Security Conference.

All this clearly demonstrates that formulating a successful eastern policy will by no means be an easy feat, and that this policy cannot be a one-man-show. Emmanuel Macron's Russia initiative has been based on the correct assumption that the EU should maintain its own dialogue with Moscow instead of delegating that task to NATO alone. However, the sluggish development of Macron's initiative clearly proves that a broader consensus and effective support by other EU states are required. The next *Ostpolitik* must be a European one.

3. Ideas in the Basket

Under these circumstances, a new approach in European foreign policy is needed. As an actor with global ambitions, the EU must develop a coherent strategy towards Russia, that does not contradict the relaunch of the transatlantic partnership. Progressive ideas are needed not only at the national level of individual member states, but should also feed into a coherent vision of Europe as a global player and a reliable partner for its neighborhood.

In this spirit, already in 2018, the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (SPD) called for a change of German strategy towards Russia. He suggested abandoning the soft approach towards Moscow exercised by his predecessors. Instead, he advocated for an updated German foreign policy recognizing that Russia's malign influence operations in the West require an urgent reality check and appropriate new measures. Maas also called for more engagement with the Central and Eastern European countries, acknowledging the strategic importance of that region in realizing this new strategy.

To prove his point, Maas joined the summit of Three Seas Initiative in Bucharest in September 2018, a format launched by Croatia and Poland for developing regional

cooperation on infrastructure and energy from the Baltic to the Mediterranean through the Black Sea. With this gesture, he intended to stress Germany's genuine interest in more cooperation with countries of the region and tried to prove the sincerity of German engagement toward that goal. The perception that this was indeed the case had been weakened by previous German engagements with Russia, e.g. on the controversial Nord Stream pipeline.

“The underlying principle of the new *Ostpolitik* should be that it is not exclusively a German project but a European initiative, with equal engagement of all member states as well as inclusion of the EU’s Eastern neighborhood.”

During this meeting Maas gave a speech in which he outlined the third and final pillar of his new approach – the Europeanization of foreign policy towards Russia: “A sovereign and strong Europe must speak with one voice on the world stage. We need, at long last, a common foreign and security policy that is worthy of the name. All too often, the principle of unanimity condemns us to a policy of the lowest common denominator [...] If our cohesion is undermined, then we will all lose out in the end. The same goes for Russia. As Europeans, we must defend the principles of the European peace and security order [...]. In other words, the underlying principle of the new *Ostpolitik* should be that it is not exclusively a German project but a European initiative, with equal engagement of all member states as well as inclusion of the EU’s Eastern neighborhood.

These elements: (1) a value-based approach to Russia, (2) engagement of the CEE region and (3) calling for more European integration in security and defence, evoke the spirit of Brandt’s strategy. They were therefore rightfully presented by Maas as a vision of a New *Ostpolitik* not only for Germany but also the EU. However, the implementation of this policy will encounter difficulties, in particular regarding the third element of developing a common European approach and consequent actions vis-à-vis Russia. Nevertheless, a first step towards a new progressive eastern policy has been made and is worth pursuing.

4. Towards a new progressive *Ostpolitik*

Originally, *Ostpolitik* was a multilevel strategy, striving at far more than just crossborder German reconciliation. It also paved the way for improving neighborhood relations in a divided Europe and, last but not least, engaging the Soviet Union. Today, even in a more fragmented world, the guiding principles Brandt and Bahr laid fifty years ago remain relevant. The approach emerging from the script delivered by Maas can help formulate a progressive way forward not only for Germany but also for Europe, built on solid normative foundations of ethical conduct, inclusion, responsibility and dialogue, instead of confrontation.

A new multidimensional *Ostpolitik* suitable for the 21st century must clearly focus on Russia, nevertheless developing parallelly resilient relations with the countries of Eastern Europe. First and most, however, it has to see the EU as an agenda-setter and a global political actor, able to develop and execute a consequent strategy both towards Russia, Eastern European countries as well as its Western allies.

A VALUE-BASED FOREIGN POLICY

While the old *Ostpolitik* was realist and pragmatic, its most profound legacy was the moral dimension. A value-based approach should also characterize the contemporary progressive policy towards Russia and Eastern Europe. This imperative translates into not accepting imperial motivations of Putin’s Russia: annexations in Ukraine or Georgia or support for recent actions by Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus. In this context, a new window of opportunity can open in the realm of transatlantic relations. With Joe Biden assuming office, there is a chance to neutralize past claims about the “brain dead NATO” or the “doomed EU”. A cohesive and strong EU in a resilient relationship with the US is only possible, when the transatlantic community of values is upheld and renewed. At the same time, whereas this change in the White House is an opportunity to re-establish trust in the US, the past experience also calls for reflecting more upon Europe’s own interests and its role in the world. There will be no simple return to the traditional post-war

constellation of (Western) Europe finding shelter under the US security umbrella. The “Pivot to Asia” in US foreign policy, the shift of focus away from Europe will remain a fundamental fact on the world stage in the Biden era.

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STRIVING FOR EUROPEAN UNITY

A successful European eastern policy requires a strong European Union. A progressive *Ostpolitik* should therefore aim at organizing and mobilizing European unity: on the one hand striving for internal integrity in order to achieve a meaningful impact, while on the other hand defining the benchmarks of a value-based foreign policy and its common goals. With its hybrid methods and traditionally skilled diplomacy, Vladimir Putin’s Russia is both strong and smart enough to neutralize all Western foreign policy efforts if the West is not sufficiently united. Therefore, a renewed outreach towards Russia should start with renegotiating areas of engagement as well as drawing red lines, reflecting also the perspective of Europe’s partners in the world. If the EU intends to achieve ambitious foreign policy goals, it has to solve the political crisis of its integration first. On the one hand, it has to reestablish its own value base, for example by clearly rejecting and sanctioning the rule-of-law breaches in Hungary and Poland. On the other hand, such highly polarizing investments putting economic gains of single member states above European solidarity like Nord Stream 2 should be avoided in the future.

ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, several states have regained or established their independence. Today, Eastern Europe cannot be lumped together as one regional entity. Instead, it is crucial to conceptualize

the post-Soviet space in all its complexity. Of course, tackling the situation in Ukraine, Belarus or Armenia – to name just a few recent difficult spots in the region – cannot proceed without addressing the Russian factor. Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand the situation in each country individually and to differentiate diligently between their respective interests and objectives. There is no one-size-fits-all approach for solving all current issues in this part of the world. The EU should strongly reaffirm its special responsibility for the countries of the European Partnership because by engaging with the West they expected safety assurances. It is both a moral responsibility and a commonsense strategy for the EU to revitalize the Eastern Partnership and support the defence of human rights and civil liberties in Belarus as well as to support Ukraine and Georgia in reforming and modernizing their public institutions. At the same time, the EU should avoid any patronizing tone and engage in those efforts as an equal partner. Despite all their differences and the temporary crisis of bilateral relations, Poland and Germany in particular could be the appropriate actors to push forward a constructive agenda, working closely with the EU’s eastern neighbours.

WANDEL DURCH ANNÄHERUNG: CHANGE THROUGH SOFT POWER

Despite all difficulties, the central feature of a new progressive eastern policy should be a principle-based dialogue, rooted in moral values. When official diplomacy is failing, open dialogue through other, even unorthodox channels is required. A constant exchange is needed on two levels. First, the focus must be on civil society: strengthening ties with the population, supporting human rights, free elections, and sovereignty. Civil society today is a far stronger political actor than it was fifty years ago and bottom-up cooperation can help civil society generate critical leverage in the future. Secondly, even if contemporary leaders and leading forces are unpopular in large parts of society, political dialogue with these actors is indispensable. This is another legacy of *Ostpolitik*. Brandt, too, had to negotiate with dictatorial leaders – and he did so even two years after Soviet tanks crushed the Prague Spring in 1968. Today, similarly, only a step-by-step approach based on ethics and morals has the potential to exercise pressure and effectively deliver positive changes.

The “Warsaw genuflection” of fifty years ago has become the epitome of groundbreaking shifts in policy making. Today, the world has changed but we again need a new generation of *Ostpolitik*, especially with regard to what is happening within the EU, just outside its borders and with respect to the brand new opportunities in trans-atlantic relations. The task is to combine the legacy of Brandt’s and Bahr’s value-based approach with progressive pragmatism and scale it up to become an integrated EU approach apt for the realities of the 21st century.

Therefore, steps toward a new progressive *Ostpolitik* must aim at enhancing European unity, rebuilding Western alliances, also within the NATO structures, and developing a differentiated approach at eye level with partner

countries in Eastern Europe. What is needed is a clear-eyed, common foreign policy strategy that champions dialogue but won’t compromise liberal European values. Importantly, the recent change in the White House might help to recalibrate strategies to contain Putin’s Russia and stabilize the region in the EU’s eastern neighborhood. Progressive Europeans, in all member states as well as in Brussels, should not miss this window of opportunity.

About

The project „50 Years Kniefall von Warschau: in search of a progressive *Ostpolitik*“ was launched in cooperation of Das Progressive Zentrum and The Foundation for the European Progressive Studies. The highlight of this initiative was an international roundtable held online, on December 8th, 2020 and hosting Aleksander Kwaśniewski, the former President of Poland; Kati Piri, MEP; Max Bergmann, Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress; Liana Fix, Head of International Politics, Körber-Stiftung. This paper draws from the conclusions of that debate.

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Das Progressive Zentrum (DPZ) is an independent, non-profit think-tank founded in 2007, devoted to establishing new networks of progressive

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