

# *Germany's Ostpolitik & Russia's Near Abroad Policy: Values, Interests & Beyond*

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## **Abstract**

*The paper analyzes the Ostpolitik of Germany and the near abroad policy of Russia, both of which are the key countries in shaping developments within the EU–Russia common neighborhood. The author argues that a number of German initiatives have acted as a spur for projects aimed at engaging Russia in pan-European affairs, citing the example of former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's plea for a European Security Treaty, following which Germany proposed the Meseberg Initiative, which created a Russian – EU security dialogue towards the joint resolution of the conflict in Transnistria.*

*The author then draws a comparison between the policies of the two countries, concluding that the German foreign policy machinery – unlike the Russian – contains a number of semi-official institutions that are widely used for formulating policy changes and delivering new messages to other countries. Berlin has undertaken the rather serious challenge posed by the Russian-led projects aimed at reintegrating the largest post-Soviet states, and appears to be willing to act more pro-actively and take maximum advantage of the key Russian weakness, namely the complete lack of a normative appeal in its policies toward its neighbors.*

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Explanations of disconnections and miscommunications between Russia and the key EU member states in the post-Soviet region vary and depend upon actors' pre-existing (dis)positions. As seen from the European perspective, the key problem is the politicized and even ideologized grand project that Moscow is pursuing in the area it has dubbed its "near abroad", and the bargaining for spheres-of-influence. Yet in Moscow's eyes, the situation is exactly the opposite: it is the EU that is imposing its ideological vision on Russia's neighbors, while Russia itself is driven by the pursuance of mutual gains based on the compatibility of material interests with its closest Eurasian partners.

Both explications seem to oversimplify the situation. The question of why Russia and the EU (member states) have so far failed to develop joint approaches to their common neighborhood is very much related to another question, namely how consistent and coherent the policies of Russia and the EU (member states) are. It is within this context that I will compare Russia's near abroad policy and Germany's *Ostpolitik*. This comparison is justified by Berlin's crucial role in shaping the policies of the entire EU towards its Eurasian neighbors.

I will argue first that Germany's eastern policy is split between two major platforms – one is normative

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(value-based), and the other is interest-based. The first platform is much more homogenous due to the structure of the value discourse, which relies on a set of norms more or less uniformly accepted by its proponents (democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, free election, independent judiciary, etc.) This is not the case of the interest-based discourse, which, as always happens as soon as realist interpretations encounter specific policy prescriptions, is split between two factions. One argues that it is in Germany's best interests to prioritize its relations with Russia (even at the expense of attention to its neighbors' problems), while the other faction claims that priority must be given to the opposite strategy, that is, halting the construction of Germany's *Ostpolitik* through the prism of the "Russia first" approach.

Secondly, a similar split between "pragmatics" and "ideologues" is to some extent part of Russia's discourse on the near abroad. Yet Russia's version of a value-based policy – mostly exemplified by different versions of civilizational discourse – only serves to alienate it from both Europe and most of its neighbors. As far as the proponents of an interest-based vision of Russia's policy are

concerned, their alleged realism is vulnerable in two senses: it seems unable to properly conceptualize and operationalize Russian interests in the neighboring areas, and underestimates the potential for conflict between interest-based policies pursued by competing actors.

### **Germany, Russia and the EU-Russia Common Neighborhood**

Germany and Russia are the key countries whose policies shape developments within the EU–Russia common neighborhood. A number of German initiatives have acted as a spur for projects aimed at engaging Russia in pan-European affairs. In response to Dmitry Medvedev’s plea for a European Security Treaty, Berlin came up with the Meseberg Initiative, which sought to link the Russian–EU security dialogue toward the joint resolution of the conflict in Transnistria. It was Berlin’s idea to launch a program known as the EU–Russia Partnership for Modernization. Berlin also is the driving force behind the development of the concept of the “trialogue” – a (still unrealized) policy forum for governments and public policy groups from Germany, Poland and Russia. Should these concepts and ideas be implemented, they would without a doubt drastically improve the political climate in the EU–Russia common neighborhood.

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Yet unfortunately this is not the case. The return of Vladimir Putin to his third presidency has increased alienation in bilateral relations and sparked disillusionment and reduced interest in fostering cooperation from the German side.<sup>1</sup> What Russia and Germany share is unfulfilled (or perhaps simply unrealistic) expectations. Indeed, intensive discourse on Russia’s European vocation has not been fruitful in the way that many in Berlin (or Brussels) expected. Trade and economic interdependence, especially in the energy sector, does not automatically translate to political cooperation, as anticipated by the Kremlin. Berlin’s understanding of Russia’s possible contribution to the stabilization of some regions in Eurasia does not extend to accepting Russia’s spheres of interests. This may sound quite pessimistic, but skepticism is exactly the feeling that dominates the current German debate on Russia. Germany has lost confidence in Russian leadership, which has emptied the “strategic partnership” of meaning.

<sup>1</sup> Stefan Meister: *An Alienated Partnership. German – Russian Relations after Putin’s Return. Helsinki: the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, FIIA Briefing Paper 105, May 2012, p.2.*

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### *The German political class is frustrated by the lack of positive news from Moscow.*

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Many German experts believe that Moscow is losing Berlin as its key advocate in Europe. The German political class is frustrated by the lack of positive news from Moscow. Russia is not a personal priority for Chancellor Angela Merkel or President Joachim Gauck, who are reluctant to engage in talks with the Kremlin. For most German companies, Gazprom as a business partner is viewed as inflexible as the Kremlin is for diplomats. Many areas declared as components of bilateral relations are in reality simulacra – this is the case with the “legal dialogue” between Russia and Germany, as well as with the “dialogue between civil societies”, neither of which make any sense unless Russia wants to learn from European experiences. Wishful thinking does not work, and this has to be recognized by all parties. Perhaps, instead of a strategic partnership, Russia and Germany should take a strategic pause in their relations.

#### **Germany: Divergent Approaches to the East**

In Germany there is a split between value-based and interest-based communities; the challenge for the federal government is to find a balance between them.

The **value-based** camp posits that Germany’s priorities lie in the political domain, and Berlin must more be more robust in raising the issues of democracy and human rights when talking to the Kremlin. The resilience of such an approach is explained by the eagerness of the German diplomacy after the reunification “to break from a realpolitik conception of foreign policy as a pursuit of national interest based on power, and to embrace instead ideals built on multilateral cooperation and institution-building” which gave Germany a “post-sovereign identity”<sup>2</sup>. Adhering to a set of European values was for decades the key priority of Germany’s foreign policy, while the concept of national interest was marginalized as having unwelcome connotations with Germany’s *Sonderweg*.

Proponents of **interest-driven** *Ostpolitik*, on the contrary, claim that an interest-based framework is the most instrumental for understanding both developments within the post-Soviet area and the policies of other major powers (China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, the United States) across Eurasia. However, the *Realpolitik* camp does not speak with a single voice. Within the interest-based group of experts there is a split between supporters of a “Russia first” policy, and their opponents who deem that it is in Germany’s national interests to foster cooperation with other post-Soviet

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Erb. *German Foreign Policy. Navigating a New Era.* Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003. p.3.

countries. These are two different manifestations of German national interests.

Advocates of the “Russia first” policy are certain that Germany benefits a great deal from Russia’s energy supplies, and that the only problem in bilateral relations is unfortunate but salvageable miscommunication. This group – represented for example, by Alexander Rahr, are reluctant to publicly discuss the most problematic issues of governance in Russia (corruption, lack of state – civil society dialogue, etc.), and prefer to focus on pragmatic issues (trade, investments, and security).

Those preferring to focus on Russia’s neighbors challenge these assumptions. As Stefan Meister, one of the

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key proponents of this approach in Germany, put it, the German goal in Eurasia is to transport energy resources from the Caspian Sea to Europe, skipping Russia’s brinkmanship. The South Caucasus plays the key role in implementing this project. Yet Germany, in Meister’s view, keeps a low profile in South Caucasus, and Ger-

man actions here are too focused on Russia, which prevents Berlin from developing a policy of its own aimed, among other priorities, at emancipating the common neighborhood states from Russian domination. In Meister’s opinion, Germany is capable of playing a much-needed role of a speaker and a lobbyist for the Caucasian countries at the EU level – perhaps the same way as France plays the role of an advocate of Mediterra-

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The realist logic entails an inevitable differentiation between the countries of the South Caucasus. Armenia is viewed as isolated and too dependent upon Russia both economically and militarily, and lacks a strong and viable economic appeal. Georgia has discredited itself in the West and cannot be considered as an effective security partner. In Meister’s view, the most important Caucasian country is Azerbaijan, possessing vast resources in the Caspian Sea and open to constructively engage with Europe.<sup>3</sup> Azerbaijan deserves a special

3 Stefan Meister. *Mehr Verantwortung, bitte. Warum die EU*

partnership with the EU, since it is the key to Europe's access to Central Asian energy resources and to the success of South Energy Corridor.<sup>4</sup>

For realists, humanitarian or ethical issues are important only if they do not impede cooperation in the most lucrative economic spheres. In their view, the EU must "export security, stability and economic prosperity rather than democracy to its Southern and Eastern neighbors".<sup>5</sup> Thus, there was too much focus by the EU on the Yulia Timoshenko affair, which ultimately brought EU policies toward Ukraine to a dead end. In fact, German realists reduce the normative and political issues to economic calculations – pretty much the same way as their Russian colleagues do, looking at the EU mostly through the prism of financial interests.

Yet a Russia committed to the corporate logic of profit-making does not become closer to Germany – quite the contrary. The key complaint many German experts address to Moscow is that it "does not see the post-Soviet conflicts as a threat to its security, but as a means to maintain its influence".<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it is Moscow

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*eine koherente Südkaukasus-Strategie braucht, Internationale Politik, November – Dezember 2010, pp. 97-101.*

<sup>4</sup> Stefan Meister. *Recalibrating Germany's and EU's Policy in the South Caucasus*. Berlin: DGAPAnalyse, N 2, July 2010. p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Tanja Borzel and Vera Hullen. *Good Governance and Bad Neighbors? The Limits of the Transformative Power of Europe*. Berlin: Free University, KFG Working Paper N 35, December 2011. p.17.

<sup>6</sup> Stefan Meister. *A New Start for Russian – EU Security Policy?*

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that supports the two break-away Georgian territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, hinders negotiations on Transnistria by insisting to keep its troops there until a final solution to the conflict can be found, and supplies Armenia with weaponry that undermines international mediation efforts in the conflict on Nagorno-Karabakh.

These hot points reveal the degree of politicization and securitization inherent in the German realist discourse. Its proponents openly state that there are political motives behind energy transportation projects skipping Russia and Iran<sup>7</sup>. Meister suggests that Berlin ought to be ready for a clash with Russia in conflicts like Transnistria.

Opponents of the "Russia first" approach seem to offer a rather cohesive version of alternative to the current German diplomacy in Eurasia. Yet one of the key problems for this type of discourse is its eagerness to combine the model of Germany as a trade state with substantial norma-

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Berlin: Stiftung Genshagen, *Genshagener Papiere*, N 7, July 2011. p.17.

<sup>7</sup> Meister and Vietor. *Op.cit.* p.346.

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tive orientation as exemplified, for example, in appeals to foster Ukrainian reforms.<sup>8</sup> German realist experts call the EU to commit itself more strongly in the Caucasus “beyond the development of energy relations”<sup>9</sup> and thus get involved in transferring good governance practices and fostering communication with non-governmental organizations. Yet this normativity is of a very limited, selective and utilitarian sort: it applies on a country-specific basis and resists excessive generalizations.

Another problem is that the realist logic seems to indirectly justify precisely the policies of Russia which it lambasts: in Meister’s opinion, the hypothetical resolution of post-Soviet conflicts would lead to a loss of Russia’s power in the entire region<sup>10</sup>. This is exactly how Russian adherents of *Realpolitik* think, and this is exactly what hinders the win-win solutions in the common neighborhood area.

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8 Stefan Meister. *Nach der Wahl ist vor der Wahl: Die Ukraine vor der Parlamentswahl. Deutsche Beratergruppe Newsletter, Ausgabe 30, Oktober 2012.*

9 Stefan Meister and Marcel Vietor. *Southern Gas Corridor and South Caucasus...* p.351.

10 Stefan Meister. *A New Start...* p.17.

## **Russia: Self-ascribed Values, Uncertain Interests**

Though Russian discourse is also split along the values vs. interests lines, the content of key arguments looks drastically different.

**Value-based approaches** - The Western normativity is often portrayed as inimical to Russia. As Vadim Tsymbursky argued<sup>11</sup>, “the stronger the economic self-sufficiency of Russia grows, the more likely it will be an object of destructive force projection under the guise of human rights, minority rights, or Central Asian drug-dealers right”. This quotation, which deliberately mocks the European normative signifiers, is illustrative of Russia’s anticipated marginalization in the Western normative order, its unalienable otherness and consequent loss of its subjectivity in a world dominated by “the wealthy West”.

Yet Russia not only displays its irritation as to the European liberal discourse, but is eager to articulate its own value-based approaches that are more ideological than normative. Thus, Eurasianism is dubbed an “ideology” which presupposes Russia’s turning towards its Asian neighbors on the basis of allegedly common worldviews. This is a good example of such a narrative: “China won’t prefer Russian railways to sea transport-

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11 Vadim Tsymbursky. *Eto tvoi posledniy geokulturniy vybor, Rossiya? “Polis” journal portal, available at <http://www.politstudies.ru/universum/esse/7zmb.htm#14>*

tation routes only because it is faster and cheaper; Chechens won't stop *jihad* only because it is more lucrative to do business in Russia; Islamic investments won't go to Russia only because of the chance to make profit. Russia has to make its own – independent from Europe and the United States - civilizational choice to shape its policies for decades to come”.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike European normativity, the Russian mix of civilizational and ideological discourses does not entail institutional effects and thus essentially remains in the sphere of rhetorical exercises. Russian value discourse is a set of self-perceptions rather than an agenda to be shared by – or within - a certain community of states. This discourse is not only Russia-focused, but also overtly exclusive (as opposed to European normative inclusiveness). Thus, the head of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies – funded by the government – claims that the Russians are only those who share Orthodox ideals of clemency and integrity. Russia's tsarist regime was, in his interpretation, an authentic form of democracy worth of restoration. He obviously favors “Russian nationalism's mission to keep the light of Jesus in the soul and bring it to others”, and dubs Russia's “loss” of Kiev, Sebastopol and Chernigov as “absurd”<sup>13</sup>. It is obvious what kind

12 Yaroslava Zabello et al. *Tsivilizatsionny vybor Rossii, Otechestvennie Zapiski*, N 5, 2003. Available at <http://www.strana-oz.ru/2003/5/civilizatsionny-vybor-rossii>

13 Piotr Mutatuli and Leonid Reshetnikov. *Rossiia, vstan' i vozvysiaisia! Problemy natsionalnoi strategii*, N 2 (11), 2012.

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of repercussions in Russia's “near abroad” countries these revisionist and retrograde statements may entail. One can't but agree with Sergey Karaganov's regrets about Russia's inability and unwillingness to live as all others and, therefore, to become a normal country.<sup>14</sup>

What complicates the situation is that some of seemingly ideological departures practiced by the Kremlin represent what might be deemed “fake discourses” since they often lack authenticity and intellectual rigor. Thus, Vladimir Yakunin, the head of Russian Railways and a sharp challenger of the Western hegemony, has recently welcomed opening Russian transportation infrastructure to NATO cargo. This U-turn clearly illustrates the fact that post-political pragmatism always trumps ideological or pseudo-ideologized schemes as soon as the elite's material interests are concerned.

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Pp. 12-26. Available at [http://www.riss.ru/upload/tfi/138/05\\_Myultatulu,%20Reshetnikov.pdf](http://www.riss.ru/upload/tfi/138/05_Myultatulu,%20Reshetnikov.pdf)

14 Sergey Karaganov. *Sila ot bessilia. «Russia in Global Politics» portal*, October 14, 2012, available at <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Sila-ot-bessiliya-15666>



*Interest-based approaches-* It is typical to assume that Russia's foreign policy approach has a realist background. While the EU stresses that the development of common values is essential as a basis for successful cooperation, Russia puts a great deal of emphasis on the importance of interests and spheres of influence. The concept of multipolarity, the core element of Russian foreign policy philosophy, is of realist pedigree. Other realist concepts, like balance-of-power, or "concert of great powers" are not acknowledged publicly, but do play their roles in the Russian diplomatic and expert circles.

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Arguably, Russia relies on a defensive version of realism, with survival – rather than power maximization – at its core. In the Kremlin's world outlook, there is always a place for Self – Other distinctions, including the artificially constructed enemies as incarnations of radical alterity. The Kremlin views unipolarity not as a purely structural phenomenon, but as a direct effect of the U.S. force-based policies.

Yet the key problem with the Russian realism is that the concept of national interests remains vague and fuzzy. National interest is one of the most politicized concepts in international

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relations vocabulary, for two reasons. First, the conceptualization of national interests is a discursive process that involves many "floating signifiers" open to dissimilar interpretations, and thus necessarily involves debates between different political platforms. Secondly, the content of national interest can't be derived from objective factors lying beyond political debate (such as geography, for example) and thus is directly linked to – if not defined by – the deeply political (though changeable) distinctions between friends and enemies. Thinking in terms of national interests thus usually implies political choices between different alternatives.

On each of the two accounts Russia's understanding of national interest looks deficient. The hegemonic discourse of the Kremlin tries to depoliticize the concept of national interests by deriving them from geographical, cultural, historical or civilizational matters, which in the Kremlin-sponsored discourse feature as "evident" and requiring no debate. In the meantime, the Kremlin's technocratic mentality prevents it from developing normative relations of friendship – especially with neighboring countries. Russia, in fact, has never displayed a sense of deep respect for

its neighbors, despite political rhetoric. Pro-Kremlin experts see Russia's neighborhood as consisting of states overloaded by historical and even psychological complexes<sup>15</sup>, lacking political subjectivity and sovereign qualities, economically unviable and prone to anti-Russian nationalism.<sup>16</sup> This makes them, as the head of the CIS Study Section of the Russian Diplomatic Academy has declared, objects of malign influence and pressure from Europe, which Russia has to block off.<sup>17</sup>

Such thinking reveals a further difficulty with the Kremlin's realist discourse. National interest can be justifiably viewed as "a set of objectives designed to enhance the material utility and ideational values of the polity"<sup>18</sup>. It is the lack of a value-based ingredient in Russian interest discourse that makes it incomplete, superficial and under-conceptualized. Many experts suggest that Russia's adherence to *Realpolitik* entails the underestimation of non-material ("soft") instruments of power. This incapaci-

15 Sergey Bukharin, Nikolai Rakitianskiy. *Psikhologopolitologicheskii analiz fenomena limitrofizatsii Polshi, Problemy natsionalnoi strategii*, N 1, 2010, available at [http://www.riss.ru/upload/tfi/108/Buharin,%20Rakityanskiy\\_2010\\_1.pdf](http://www.riss.ru/upload/tfi/108/Buharin,%20Rakityanskiy_2010_1.pdf)

16 Alexander Sytin. *Aktualnye problemy novoi arkhitektury bezopasnosti na post-Sovetskom prostranstve, Problemy natsionalnoi strategii*, N 1, 2009, available at [http://www.riss.ru/upload/tfi/107/Sytin\\_1\\_2009.pdf](http://www.riss.ru/upload/tfi/107/Sytin_1_2009.pdf)

17 Sergey Zhiltsov. *Politicheskie protsessy na Ukraine: itogi i vyzovy dlia Rossii, Problemy natsional'noi strategii*, N 4 (9), 2011, available at [http://www.riss.ru/upload/tfi/133/07\\_Pocciya-Bypauna%20\(nodborpa\).pdf](http://www.riss.ru/upload/tfi/133/07_Pocciya-Bypauna%20(nodborpa).pdf)

18 Stephen Krasner. *Power, the State, and Sovereignty. Essays on international relations*. London & New York: Routledge, 2009. p.6.

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tates Russian diplomacy as soon as it faces situations shaped by the issues of values and identities – thus, Moscow interprets normative sympathies to Europe in many post-Soviet states as the effects of hegemonic imposition of Western geo-cultural instruments of domination.

What is interesting for this analysis is not the predominance of realist thinking in Russia's foreign policy making, but the discontinuity, interruptions and ruptures within the realist logic. The chief problem, therefore, is not that the Kremlin adheres to a *Realpolitik* type of thinking, but that it does so inconclusively and ineffectively. Moscow pursues realist agenda without comprehensive debate, and deep conceptualization of national interests that are always politically constructed and involve hard political choices. This is something that does not fit into a largely technocratic and depoliticized world outlook of the ruling regime. Should Russia be genuinely concerned about building its foreign policy upon solid foundation of national interests, it would most likely come to the conclusion that cooperative relations with Chisinau – and, concomitantly, with Bucharest and Berlin – will

open much better prospects for Russia in Europe than politically and economically sponsoring Transnistria, a break-away and unrecognized Moldovan territory with energy debts. Perhaps, deeper debate would make clear that Russia's national interests would be better served by friendly relations with Georgia than by supporting its separatist regions. Equally, it would be completely in line with the realist logic to rethink Russian policies in South Caucasus and put greater emphasis on economically beneficial cooperation with oil-rich Azerbaijan, as opposed to investing Russian resources in providing security for Armenia.

The Russian version of interest-based international politics illuminates one more problem: the Kremlin seems to idealize interest-based foreign policy as a means for avoiding conflicts between states. Yet the pursuance of interests ("possession goals") – as opposed to norms ("milieu goals", to refer to the distinction made by Arnold Wolfers) – contains deep conflictual potential. The case of Ukraine appears to be very illustrative in this respect: the EU adherence to an explicitly normative policy toward President Viktor Yanukovich (i.e. discontinuation of association process due to Yulia Timoshenko's imprisonment) was beneficial for Moscow's policy of pressurizing Ukraine and pushing it to the Eurasian Union. And, on the contrary, the possible strengthening of realistic – i.e. business interest-

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based – attitudes to Ukraine in Germany and the EU in general would pave the way for intensifying competition between the EU and Russia for this country's future orientation.

By the same token, even void of normative content, the EU–Russia interest-based relations can be extremely troublesome. "Russia is irritated by Europe's backing for "selective projects" (above all, the Nabucco and Trans-Caspian pipelines); the European Commission's unclear position on long-term contracts; the marked opposition in some political circles to export pipelines under construction by Gazprom... and, most important, by EU's efforts to diversify its gas supplies"<sup>19</sup>. What the Kremlin misses in this debate is that normative consensus – either negated or underestimated by Moscow - can serve as an effective means to reduce transactional costs by enhancing mutual trust and avoiding detrimental competition between partners.

<sup>19</sup> Tatiana Mitrova. *New Approaches in Russian Foreign Energy Policy – East and West*, in Kristin Linke and Marcel Vietor (eds.) *Prospects of a Triangular Relationship? Energy Relations between the EU, Russia and Turkey*. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & DGAP, April 2010. p.20.

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Yet does Russia have its own interest-based “grand project” at all? As Konstantin Kosachev, the head of “Rossotrudnichestvo” (a Foreign Ministry-subordinated agency for humanitarian cooperation) admits, for Russia’s reintegrationist policy the key stimulus was not domestic (with the exception of a “moral obligation” toward its “compatriots” living abroad) but external, namely the escalating activity of other major players in the post-Soviet region aimed to integrate it in military and political alliances<sup>20</sup>. What this high-ranking Russian foreign policy maker frankly admitted is the lack of authenticity of Moscow’s interests in the CIS, and an ostensibly reactive character of Russia’s policies in neighboring countries.

Another pro-Kremlin speaker, Fyodor Lukianov, echoed this logic, characterizing Putin’s foreign policy motivation as “fending off external pressure”. Putin, in this assessment, does not believe in strategies and prefers a reactionary type of action, which leads to avoiding or procrastinating with hard political decisions.

20 Konstantin Kosachiov. *Ne rybu, a udochku*. “Russia in Global Politics” portal, October 4, 2012, available at <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Ne-rybu-a-udochku-15642>

Thus, Putin’s successes are only possible as failures of his opponents.<sup>21</sup> This policy style hardly corresponds to the principles of foreign policy realism.

## Conclusions

In this paper I have examined normative and interest-based gaps between Russia and Germany in their approaches to the common EU–Russia neighborhood, as well as demonstrating the deficiency of the Russian versions of both realist and ideological narratives. Challenged by mass-scale protest movements from inside and the growing criticism from outside, the Kremlin has drastically simplified its key arguments, reducing them to a “black-and-white” worldview. Russian officialdom much more openly than before has declared its unwillingness to take into due account European normative arguments and to use normative justifications for explaining its policies for European audiences. The Kremlin and its speakers, in fact, are gradually detaching themselves from the European discursive contexts. Arguably, the rise of German voices challenging the Russia-biased foreign policy of Berlin is a reaction to Russia’s self-isolation from the European normative order and concomitant communicative ruptures in bilateral relations.

21 Fiodor Lukianov. *Otets dostroi*. “Russia in Global Politics” portal, October 1, 2012, available at <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Otetc-dostroi-15672>

But the repercussions of this increasingly one-dimensional discourse stretch beyond Russia's relations with Europe. The Kremlin's estrangement and alienation from Europe is in sharp contrast with much more variegated and multi-faced discourses developed by those Russian neighbors that feel attached – in one way or another – to Western institutions, either due to security reasons (Azerbaijan, Georgia), commercial interests (Kazakhstan) or because of their pro-European identity dynamics (Moldova, Ukraine). These countries' discourses look more nuanced and rich in content than the Russian dominant discourse which reflects Russia's dissatisfaction with institutions that it considers alien (NATO and the EU), as well as those of which it is a part (OCSE, Council of Europe, and even UN). This is to a large extent due to Russia's assertion of its own specificity and even exceptionality, allegedly irreducible to the experiences of other countries.

Some Russian foreign policy experts, having borrowed constructivist ideas of discursive identity-making, have reached a false conclusion that it is feasible to change perceptions without altering the substance of its policy. Such a simplistic attitude is heavily influenced by the wide spread of domestic PR technologies. This is exactly what characterizes Russia's policies in its "near abroad". But the key problems of Russian foreign policy are grounded not in its poor im-

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age and misperceptions in the West or elsewhere, but with the content of the policy itself. Russian foreign policy so far has failed to find its niche in world politics. Unlike European versions of realism, its Russian counter-parts ignore the impact of domestic factors on foreign policy – the key factor that became a matter of sharp concern all across Europe in the aftermath of mass-scale protest movements in Russia against Putin's presidency. The Kremlin's version of *Realpolitik* seems not only impractical, but also inconsistent: Russia is reluctant to accept a junior position vis-à-vis its principal counter-parts from Europe, but is fully conscious of their economic and financial superiority. Nor does Russia's regular recourse to the idea of equality match *Realpolitik* premises.

As far as Germany's policy in the common neighborhood is concerned, it is gradually becoming more interest-oriented, and the focus of these interests shift away from Russia, which opens new opportunities for common neighborhood countries. In par-

ticular, parliamentary elections held in Georgia and Ukraine in October 2012 gave Germany a perfect chance to reconsider its policies toward these countries and more robustly engage them in cooperation with the EU. Yet the new German pragmatism is country-specific and does not extend to countries like Belarus that remain marked as dictatorial regimes and are thus politically isolated.

In spite of the debt crisis within the EU, Germany is maintaining a high level of engagement with its *Ostpolitik* partners. German foreign policy machinery – unlike the Russian one – contains a number of semi-official institutions that are widely used for formulating policy changes and delivering new messages to other countries (the EU–Moldova Forum held at DGAP in October 2012, a series of panel discussions hosted by major German think tanks, a number of public policy events sponsored by the German–Russian Exchange, and so on). Germany took seriously the challenge posed by the Russian-led projects of reintegrating the largest post-Soviet states, and appears to be willing to act more pro-actively and take maximum advantage of the key Russian weakness: the complete lack of a normative appeal in its policies toward its neighbors.