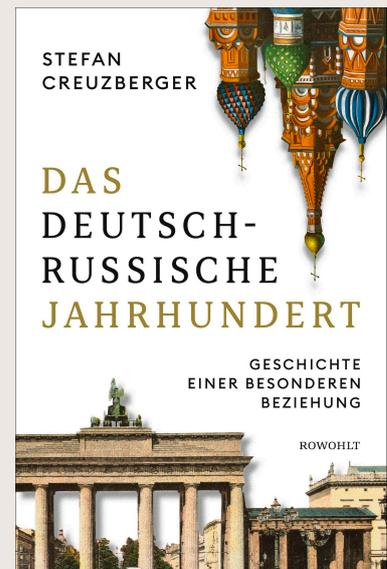


Stefan Creuzberger

## THE GERMAN-RUSSIAN CENTURY – History of a Special Relationship

*Das deutsch-russische Jahrhundert*

- German-Russian relations are a key factor of world politics.
- A fascinating analysis of this tense relationship which makes the situation of today's relationship understandable.
- Nominated for the German Non-Fiction Prize 2022!



March 2022 · 672 pages

### **Cold proximity: how German-Russian relations shaped the 20th century.**

Germany and Russia – there are almost no other states in the world whose relations have been shaped anywhere near as profoundly by revolution and turmoil, by terror and violence, as well as isolation and rapprochement during the last 100 years. Time and again, these three mutual realities dictate world events and have an effect to this day. This is all the more true now, at a time when bilateral relations are not at their best. And this raises the question: what will the current century bring for German-Russian relations?

Stefan Creuzberger writes about the tension-filled history of an epoch chequered with dramatic ruptures, reconciliations and changes. His analysis aims to help readers interested in history gain an insightful understanding of the complex overall context of the fascinating relationship between Germans and Russians.

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## Stefan Kreuzberger, *The German-Russian Century.* *History of a special relationship.*

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English sample translation (contents and the last chapter V) by Brian Poole

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### THE GERMAN-RUSSIAN CENTURY. A BALANCE SHEET WITH OPTIONS

Retrospectively, the German-Russian century—a era marked by revolution and upheaval, by terror and violence, but finally by establishing borders and mutual understanding—clearly reveals just how much fear and admiration, how much enmity yet close friendship, have always determined the mutual perception of Germans and Russians. It puts into perspective the political, diplomatic, and journalistic prophecies of doom, which—in view of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, the Navalny conflict, and Putin’s incessant political barbs against Germany—currently consider bilateral relations to be in their deepest crisis. The widespread spirit of optimism during the early 1990s, borne by the euphoria of German unification and the end of the Cold War, has now vanished on both sides. Moreover, as time has passed, the memory of what had decisively determined bilateral relations for decades *before* this epochal watershed is now fading.

#### The arc of tension

The long 20<sup>th</sup> century was in many respects a German-Russian century. In 1917, imperial Germany became the birthplace of the October Revolution, whose ideological radicalism and demand for world revolution shook the established order of states to their foundations. Though unaware of the implications, the Germans thus indirectly contributed to the emergence of the East-West conflict that began with Lenin’s overthrow of Tsarist Petrograd. The Weimar Republic also played its part in consolidating the young Soviet power, whose political survival was by no means assured at first. With the Treaty of Rapallo, the two pariahs of the international power system came together in 1922. They established diplomatic relations, which had a signal effect: For the first time, the largely outlawed Soviet regime was recognised by a Western capitalist state. Other countries would soon follow.

But Rapallo also established a special German-Soviet relationship that extended to political, economic, and military spheres. Since the Germans had the reputation of being a “restless great power”<sup>1</sup> teetering between East and West in foreign policy, their immediate neighbours, still under the impression of the recent world war, did not place much trust in German predictability. A distinct “Rapallo fear” began to spread, and it was to resurface time and again throughout the entire German-Russian century. The Russian side, on the other hand, always cited Rapallo as a successful example of pragmatism: an example of the possibility of coexisting peacefully despite political and ideological differences. It was no coincidence that, decades later, the Soviet supporters of the Moscow Treaty of 1970 interpreted Willy Brandt’s New *Ostpolitik* entirely in this sense. Admittedly, such a view ignored what the Soviets then commonly understood as peaceful coexistence. In the 1920s, they repeatedly subjected the much-vaunted “spirit of Rapallo” to considerable stress tests: On several occasions they tried to bring about the political overthrow of the Weimar Republic, despite the flourishing neighbourly relations. The torch of the Bolshevik revolution was to be carried into the world via the birthplace of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Highly industrialised Germany, with its large communist party membership, was thus intended to play not only a symbolic but—far more than that—an important strategic bridging function.

All revolutionary hopes were dashed with the political “seizure of power” by the National Socialists in 1933. This brought two ideologically incompatible regimes face to face with each other, and yet both dictators had something in common: a ruthless willingness to use excessive force. Nor did they hesitate to enter into temporary tactical alliances, provided it was to their advantage. Once again, Germans and Russians dominated the international political scene: With its secret supplementary protocol, the Hitler-Stalin Pact made it easier for Adolf Hitler to put his long-cherished war plans into action at the end of August 1939, without having to face a

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<sup>1</sup> Poidevin, *Unruhige Großmacht. Deutschland und die Welt im 20. Jahrhundert*. Freiburg/Br. 1985.

military threat simultaneously on two fronts, one involving the USSR. Stalin cooperated, and, from 1939/40 onwards with German approval, he expanded the Soviet hegemonic sphere in Eastern Europe while the Nazi campaign advanced in the West.

Thus began, ultimately with Germany's help, the Soviet Union's inexorable rise to world-power status. Only the German invasion on 22 June 1941, which was directed with concentrated force and mercilessness against a former alliance partner, seemed to abruptly interrupt this development, temporarily leading the Stalinist empire to the abyss. The military clash between the two dictators burned itself deeply into the collective memory of Germans and Russians. But the German-Soviet battlefield also determined the fate of the other peoples and states of Eastern Europe to a much greater extent than in the First World War; sometimes they even disappeared from the political map. Entire large regions became *Bloodlands*<sup>2</sup>, sinking into the maelstrom of violence in an ideological war of extermination. The Soviet defenders dominated the war by 1943/44 at the latest. For the first time since Lenin, who had wanted to help the Soviet regime achieve an international breakthrough with a world revolution but had failed, the USSR now had new opportunities in world politics. After defeating the Wehrmacht and the German occupiers, the USSR was able to use military expansion to spread socialism to other countries, albeit on a regional basis.

Hitler's defeat led Stalin's Red Army into the centre of Europe in 1945, which, for the time being, deprived the Germans of their role as actors. Following their unconditional surrender, they were no longer an acting subject, but rather the political object of the actions and negotiations of the allied victors, above all the USSR and the USA. Both had emerged from the world war as superpowers. They shaped the post-war order, which was to take on a bipolar character by 1947 at the latest, not least because of the irreconcilable differences of opinion on the so-called German question. Germany was divided, but even in this passive state it still dominated international attention in the constant confrontation with the USSR: Along the borders of the resurgent East-West conflict in Europe, Germany had become the training ground for the Cold War, where two highly armed military blocs faced each other for four decades.

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During these four decades, the German-Russian century followed a trilateral path, shaped overwhelmingly by the political interplay between Moscow, East Berlin, and Bonn. East Germany was systematically Sovietised, a process that reached its first culmination on 7 October 1949 with the founding of the Stalinist GDR. In direct opposition to it, the constitutionally free and democratic Federal Republic formed itself into a reliable bulwark of anticommunism on the side of its protecting power, the USA. Though it may sound odd, Stalin's repressive policies in the GDR and in other Eastern Bloc states actually facilitated the political, economic, and military integration of the young Bonn Republic into the West. In any case, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was able to complacently observe the high degree of national sovereignty that the Western powers had transferred back to his constituent state already in 1955. From such a position of consolidated alliance membership, which thereafter formed the *raison d'état* of his country's foreign policy, Adenauer and his successors in the Chancellery had greater room for manoeuvring.

In order to make the fate of German division more bearable during the Cold War, which could only be achieved with Moscow, the Germans began to develop their own political initiatives towards the USSR and the GDR in close consultation with their alliance partners. The establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1955, but also the Social Democrats' New Eastern Policy after 1969, which the coalition government of Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the Liberal Party (FDP) continued uninterrupted after 1982, are exemplary of this. Thanks largely to the expertise that grew out of these diverse contacts with Russia, Bonn's government circles acquired the role of trustworthy mediators between West and East within the alliance. This was

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York, 2010.

particularly effective from the 1970s onwards, when Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt cultivated good relations with CPSU General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, and it again became effective towards the end of the 1980s, after Helmut Kohl finally succeeded in establishing a closer relationship of trust with Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev. West German chancellors shuttled back and forth between Moscow and Washington. In politically frosty times, they explained each other's positions to those in power when the Kremlin and the White House did not understand each other—or did not want to understand each other.

Despite the fact that the GDR was one of the USSR's most important allies within the Warsaw Pact and thus largely behaved loyally, at no time did the East Berlin leadership have comparable room for manoeuvring within the trilateral German-German-Soviet network of relations, or with Moscow and Washington. This would have presupposed the Kremlin's willingness to endow the East German frontline state with considerably expanded rights of sovereignty. But for quite some time, the Soviet understanding of a satellite state's sovereignty made no provision for such independence, least of all for the GDR, which was in constant and direct competition with the capitalist system of the Federal Republic. And even when the conditions of perestroika after 1985 would have theoretically offered the opportunity, the political ideas of the Soviet reformers could no longer be reconciled with those of the GDR's backward-looking, stubborn old SED<sup>3</sup> elites. Indeed, cracks in the "brotherly alliance" began to appear earlier. They deepened when Gorbachev saw the economically attractive and cooperative Federal Republic as an important support for his plan to internally and externally restructure the USSR.

On the whole, there were repeated situations in which Soviet self-interests led Moscow to give preference to the Federal Republic in its relations with the two German states. This was the case in 1955 and in 1970. The establishment of diplomatic relations with Bonn as well as the Moscow Non-Violence Treaty, which was to become an example for further international détente in the 1970s, were given far greater importance in the Kremlin than the political concerns of the SED leadership. In the end, the SED had to grudgingly accept that the Soviet negotiators were unable to extract any concessions from the West German side in the interests of East Berlin, such as the recognition of the GDR under international law. Moreover, Moscow instrumentalized East Berlin directly in order to obtain Bonn's consent to agreements.

The situation was hardly different towards the end of this trilateral history of relations when the peaceful resolution of the four-decade-old German question overcame one of its main obstacles to ending the East-West conflict—a conflict that had been smouldering since 1917 and had again flared up beginning in 1947 with the Cold War. Logically, the GDR had only a minor role to play in this process. The international preconditions for Germany's unity in 1990 were essentially created by the two superpowers, the USSR and the USA, together with the Federal Republic of Germany.

Once confrontation between the Western and Eastern Blocs had been overcome, and after the largely nonviolent self-dissolution of the USSR in December 1991, the ensuing turning point promised, at least initially, to be an era of understanding and peaceful cooperation for Europe. Certainly, there were immense problems and challenges to overcome, mainly due to the legacy of the defunct Eastern Bloc, which made painful transformation processes necessary. With regard to Russia, the Germans in particular showed no lack of engagement, cooperation, and partnership—out of gratitude for unity and their sense of historical responsibility. Last but not least, the weapons arsenals and the geopolitical importance of their Eastern European neighbour—still suffering from the loss of its former role as a superpower—induced all German chancellors since 1990 to take Russia's security interests seriously after the collapse of the USSR, and to anchor the central Russian state in the West as permanently as possible. The chancellors did so with greatly varying intensity, each in their own special way, but without ever turning away from the Western alliance or, much less, embarking on a "Rapallo course" that oscillated between East and West.

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<sup>3</sup> The GDR's Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*).

## What Now, German-Russian Century?

Despite efforts that have been crowned with success, the bilateral relationship at the end of the German-Russian century is not in good shape. The Kremlin is now using political practices and rhetoric that bring back memories of the Cold War's frostiest era. For some time now, Vladimir Putin has been systematically flouting the generally accepted rules of orderly diplomatic interaction. He is staging foreign-policy solo acts—the annexation of Crimea, in violation of international law, and the war in eastern Ukraine—in an attempt to restore his country's imperial greatness. At the same time, the Russian president is systematically modernising his weapons arsenal, including nuclear weapons, and he doesn't shrink from using cyberwar tactics. Russia has thus once again become a serious military threat.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, in recent years the Bundeswehr has been neglected to such an extent that it is scarcely able to defend itself, and Germany remains unwilling to spend two percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) annually on defence, despite its political declarations of intent in 2014 at the NATO summit in Wales.<sup>5</sup> For that reason, the Germans ought to make decisive improvements to their security policy.

In view of such realities, there can be no simple return to previous phases of German-Russian normality, at least for the time being. The "Modernisation Partnership" practised by Germany since 2007 is dead. The assumption that Russia would allow itself to be moved towards democratisation and the rule of law under Putin has proven to be false. The Kremlin elite is pursuing a completely different policy. It continuously strives to systematically disorientate its own population with misinformation about Germany and Western Europe, even to instil fear and terror. And yet no attempt should be made to steer Russia towards democratisation in the Western sense or to patronise it in any other way. The decision about their political future rests solely with the Russians themselves.

Nowadays, there are more and more voices, especially in the camp of the Social Democrats, who are advocating for Willy Brandt's once-practised policy of dialogue towards the East in order to initiate a new détente between Russia and the West. But at present there is little to suggest that such considerations will lead to positive results. This applies even less to the ingratiating of political representatives of The Left party (*Die Linke*) or the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Certainly, the dialogue between the political elites of both countries must not be allowed to break down. But it has to be conducted in a self-confident manner and should not overlook one thing: Putin runs his state with an authoritarian hand. In this logic, he sees himself as far superior to countries with a democratic constitution, such as the Federal Republic of Germany. For Putin, these countries are weak in leadership and decision-making, which explains his contempt for democracy. In this overestimation of himself, however, he fails to recognise Germany's influential position within NATO and the European Union. And this position could prove an advantage or a disadvantage for his rule, depending on the decisiveness with which the German government acts within the Western-alliance structures in the future. When, in 2014, at the height of the Ukraine crisis, Chancellor Merkel became the driving force in the EU for the sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation, her decisiveness may have surprised Vladimir Putin, although at closer glance these consequences were already apparent.

This course should be maintained unwaveringly as long as the Russian president shows no flexibility and no understanding. In order to stress the importance of this resolve, and in order to ensure that those responsible in the economy remain as uniformly committed to this course as possible, state aid from German or European sources would have to be provided for those industries that are heavily involved in business with Russia. This is the only way to prevent minister presidents of structurally weak federal states like Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, which are bearing the brunt of the current sanctions policy, from trying to undermine the German Federal Government's and the European Union's policy on Russia.

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver Thränert, "Sicherheit im Atomzeitalter: Atempause oder Zeitenwende," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 June 2021, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> See the article "Nato gibt mehr Geld aus," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12 June 2021.

Under no circumstances can the violation of international law be tacitly accepted or rewarded by irresponsible concessions. This would send the wrong signals if we want to be taken seriously as Putin's negotiating partner. Above all, it is important not to succumb to Moscow's threatening gestures without resistance, or to allow ourselves to be weakened within the Alliance and the EU by Russian attempts at division. Demonstrating firmness and remaining defensible: these are the highest priorities, for which there are eloquent examples in the history of German-Soviet relations during the Cold War. We need only recall the first Berlin crisis in 1948/49 or the Soviet-Berlin ultimatum between 1958 and 1961, which culminated in the construction of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961. One should also mention the NATO double decision of 1979, to which the acting Chancellor Helmut Schmidt made a decisive contribution. The West remained steadfast overall and successfully resisted the provocations of the Soviet power at that time.

German policy towards Russia should, on the one hand, remain bilateral with regard to direct talks between Berlin and Moscow. On the other hand, it should take on a coordinating role within the Western alliance in order to bring about a unified policy towards Russian state power, and in order to be able to confront the Kremlin in a united manner. This presupposes a clear definition of one's own Russian-policy interests and goals. Moreover, it requires an explicit statement regarding the limits of what is reasonable, but also regarding the consequences for Russian violations. Hasty political reactions, such as the Franco-German Russia Initiative at the EU summit on 24 June 2021, tend to be counterproductive. Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron's unexpected proposal to offer President Putin the prospect of a summit at the highest level without any advance concessions was met with firm rejection, not only by the Eastern European member states of the Community. Merkel and Macron would have been well advised to include the 27 EU member states early on in their deliberations, instead of giving them the impression of Franco-German know-it-all-ism.<sup>6</sup> For some alliance partners who were taken by surprise, the recent failure of this diplomatic foray will have awakened unpleasant reminiscences of the once dreamed-of "Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis" in 2003, when, in the midst of the Iraq war, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and France's President Jacques Chirac demonstrated conspicuous closeness to Putin's Russia.

At present, however, there are more signs that Western countries within the European Union and NATO are inclined to speak to Russia with a united voice—witness the joint declarations adopted in early summer of 2021, not only during the G7 meeting in Cornwall, but also at the Brussels summits of the North Atlantic Council, in addition to the declarations of the EU and the USA.<sup>7</sup> Such declarations undoubtedly point in the right direction, even if certain residual uncertainties remain: At present, they are well-meaning intentions. Only political practice will reveal to what extent they actually prove valuable.

In this context, the German government ought to have self-critically reconsidered the question of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline—an issue that has been simmering for some time. This is all the more true ever since President Putin threatened—after the completion of the first stretch of the pipeline at the beginning of June 2021—to make further gas transit through Ukraine to Europe dependent on whether Kiev ceases to use the transit revenues for its defence budget. On the surface, it looks as if the resulting disagreements within the Western alliance, especially between Berlin and Washington, have been settled. These were on the verge of triggering severe US sanctions because the White House, under President Trump, was desperate to prevent the completion of the German-Russian pipeline project. In contrast, his successor in office, Joe Biden, reached a compromise with Chancellor Angela Merkel at the end of July 2021 in the spirit of transatlantic partnership. Should Vladimir Putin abuse the Baltic Sea gas route as a political weapon against Ukraine or other Eastern

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<sup>6</sup> See "Deutsch-französischer Vorstoß zu Russland entzweit die EU," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25 June 2021; Thomas Gutschker, "Europa zuckt mit den Schultern," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25 June 2021; "Vorstoß für EU-Gipfel mit Putin gescheitert," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 June 2021, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Brussels Summit Communiqué. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels, 14 June 2021, available online at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm).

Europeans, the German government would impose national sanctions against Russia and initiate European ones, in addition to other measures.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from this, the expansion of German-Russian energy relations is afflicted with a major environmental policy flaw that seems downright paradoxical: Russian natural gas may in some respects bolster the German government's climate-policy efforts, namely, to reduce national carbon dioxide emissions. But at what price? The Kremlin has also embarked on a strategy, designed to last until 2035, of covering 50 percent or more of its own country's growing energy needs with coal, which is particularly harmful to the climate.<sup>9</sup>

Calling on Germany to act decisively in regard to the Russian Federation does not mean advocating an ill-considered exchange of blows that would only escalate the current crisis unnecessarily. And it is certainly not intended to revive the Cold War era. Rather, future policy toward Russia should always be linked to making the Kremlin aware of the advantages and disadvantages of cooperating with or turning away from Germany and the West. This, too, is reflected in the experiences of the past German-Russian century. In the end, the flourishing economic cooperation always benefited both sides. Even if Moscow seems to ignore it today, a prolonged course of confrontation will ultimately shift the balance to Russia's disadvantage because the Russian economic model is not sustainable. In the three decades following the end of the Soviet Union, no sustainable economic infrastructure has been built; exporting energy and raw materials alone cannot help overcome such inadequacies. Moreover, challenges are piling up, both with regard to climate change and in the fight against the current Corona pandemic, and such challenges cannot be overcome by going it alone. The ruling Russian elite is currently trying to compensate for this. They are playing the Chinese card, striving for special relations with the economically superior neighbour. But they fail to realise that Russia would only be a junior partner in such a relationship. In view of the overall intensification of global competition, not to mention Beijing's rigorous policy of interests, in the long run Russia would be better off returning to multilateral economic cooperation with the far more predictable Germans and the democratic West. For the German-Russian century has also revealed this: Alliances with authoritarian regimes have always been temporary marriages of convenience.

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A lot of ground gained in the meantime can be lost in the field of scientific and cultural exchange. It is probably still the Germans who play the most active role here. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) currently maintains the world's largest funding programme with Russia. But the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the German Research Foundation also see themselves as bridge-builders, keeping in touch with Russian academics and students and enabling them to maintain contact with the European and non-Russian world. The same applies to the Joint Commission for Research into the Recent History of German-Russian Relations, not to mention the cultural diplomacy mission of the Goethe Institute in Moscow—the largest institution of its kind in the world.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, German policy towards Russia should bear one thing in mind: Nothing lasts forever. Who would have believed more than three decades ago that the Eastern bloc and the Soviet empire would leave the political stage in such short order? In this respect, it seems sensible not to limit efforts towards Russia to Vladimir Putin and his leadership team. Rather, wherever possible, it is also important to develop contacts with political circles and personalities who are open to a cosmopolitan, civil-society dialogue. For they are the potential bearers of hope, and thus contact persons for a post-Putin era. Of course, such contacts are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain since the Kremlin afflicts not just organisations, but also its own citizens with a constant sense of

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<sup>8</sup> Reinhard, *Putins Ohrfeige*, p. 10; *Hypothek*, p. 76; Vesper/Leithäuser, *Russland*, p. 2; Merkel, *Einigung zu Nord Stream*, p. 1; *Berlin wendet Sanktionen*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Götz, *Energiestrategie*, p. 8–12; *Statistik*, p. 15–17. On Russia's coal strategy to the year 2035, see: *Pravitel'stvo Rossijskoj Federacii* (Russian).

<sup>10</sup> Fritsch, *Botschafter*, p. 139; DAAD-Ländersachstand; DAAD-*Außenstellenbericht*, p. 168–179.

insecurity whenever they cultivate too many ties to Western institutions. Now they also run the risk of being stigmatised as foreign agents, which can result in severe penalties.<sup>11</sup> At the end of May 2021, the Russian authorities summarily banned three organisations that viewed themselves as completely committed to maintaining bilateral contacts with civil societies: the Centre for Liberal Modernity (LibMod), the German-Russian Exchange (DRA), and the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE). This illustrates all too well how complicated the situation has become. The German side reacted immediately by suspending the Petersburg Dialogue, launched in 2001 by President Vladimir Putin and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, until further notice.<sup>12</sup> But, unimpressed, the Kremlin followed suit and had the renowned human rights organisation Memorial banned by court decision on 28 December 2021.

Once again, in the face of such developments we should look for alternatives to promote the willingness to engage in dialogue in the spirit of international understanding and encounters in mutual respect. The 2018 World Cup in Russia is a good example of the power that such encounters can unleash beyond the realm of big politics. Getting to know each other better at such levels seems to be a good way of reducing mutual prejudices arising out of growing populism, digital disinformation, and fake news. Germany and the EU should at least consider significantly simplifying or even abolishing visa regulations for Russians. There have been considerations of this kind before. However, they were no longer pursued in 2014 in the wake of Putin's aggressive Ukraine policy. Thus, at the end of this review, all that remains is the hope that the political actors will not rely on violence and increasing divisions, but instead commit themselves to trust, understanding, and cooperation in order to revive, in the not-too-distant future, the positive traditions of German-Russian relations.

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<sup>11</sup> Holm, *Wiederkehr*, p. 11; *Russland: "Ausländische Agenten"*.

<sup>12</sup> *Petersburger Dialog*, p. 1; *Unerwünschte Verständigung*, p. 3.