How Can a Dialogue be Restarted with Russia?

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This brief article will try to answer the question of how to re-enter a dialogue with Russia after the conflict in Ukraine, as requested by the editors of this journal. As Germany will hold the chairmanship of the OSCE in 2016, once again the challenge of the relations between Russia and the West is going to be crucial for the OSCE “deliverables”: indeed, Russia is the key player in an organization functioning on the basis of consensus between its 57 participating states. Without Russian cooperation, it would be impossible to have any progress on arms control and confidence- and security-building measures, as in the CFE treaty, which is dead since Russia has terminated its participation in March 2015. A renewed arms race is taking place in Europe in a cold-war like atmosphere. Progress on the protracted conflicts in the Caucasus, Moldova and Ukraine – in which the OSCE has responsibilities as a facilitator or a monitor – would depend upon Moscow’s willingness to co-operate.

Firstly, in answering the question mentioned above, one should be cautious concerning the qualification of “after conflict” with regard to Ukraine. In spite of the paramount efforts made by Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande within the “Normandy format” – with their colleagues Putin and Poroshenko –, the 5 September 2014 Minsk protocol and its 12 February 2015 “package of measures for implementation” have until now not brought about any sustainable peace as there is still an obvious lack of confidence between Kyiv, Moscow and the de facto leaders in the Donbas. It seems clear to me that the German OSCE Chair is going to spend repetitive efforts in pushing the sides to implement, in good faith, a ceasefire followed by weapons withdrawals under OSCE observers’ control and the decentralization process in the Donetsk and Luhansk districts, based upon a revised Ukrainian Constitution, in supporting the monitoring by ODIHR and other organizations of local elections and a modern border management by Ukraine and Russia under OSCE observation... Unfortunately, it is too early to ascertain that 2016 will be an “after Ukrainian conflict” year.

That having been said, it does not mean that the time has not come for envisaging a dialogue “reset” between Moscow and the West, to refer to a word
used by Hillary Clinton in 2009 in announcing a process that has quickly faded away. In the long run, geopolitics and the economy command sustainable cooperation between the European Union and its Eurasian eastern neighbour: both the EU and Russia, the latter as a holder of a permanent UN Security Council seat, have to face immediate Middle East challenges such as ISIS terror in Iraq and Syria and its spillover effects throughout the Mediterranean and even inside Europe, the unprecedented flow of refugees, uncertainties deriving from NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and the consequences thereof for Central Asia, the Iran nuclear accord follow-up and its effect on relations between Tehran and the Sunni states. Nuclear and ballistic proliferation in North-East Asia is another common concern. In the perilous world of today, Europe cannot avoid trying to have a concerted approach with Russia on these multifaceted threats or challenges which have to be faced in nearly the same way by Russia. The role played by Russia together with the US in the making of the Iran deal is a good example of a positive outcome in fighting against nuclear proliferation through co-operation with Moscow among other partners. A kind of lowest common denominator rapprochement between Russia and the West on Syria seems to be envisaged.

On the economic side, it is obvious that confident relations between gas purchasers and producers – such as guarantees that a Russian ratification of the 1991 European energy charter treaty could bring – are needed for the benefit of both sides in a domain where long-term huge investments and joint ventures could be considered, taking into account European commitments in the fight against the undesired consequences of the foreseen climatic change. Otherwise European purchasers would look for other more secure sources of supply and Russia would be more dependent upon China, the world’s second economic power which could have one hidden agenda on un-populated Eastern Siberia and its growing Chinese migrants and investments. In the very long run, new challenges could be envisaged in a cooperative mode: One example is the Arctic, where Europe could have interests in alternative maritime transport routes along the Russian/Siberian coasts (the north-east way) – but Russia has contested territorial demands; or a railway network from China to Europe through Russia (a new silk road) facilitating speedier Eurasian trade. But these long-term perspectives could only be envisaged by Europeans if there is a serious commitment on the Russian side to provide guarantees and legal certainty to Western investors.

In any case, there are obvious prerequisites for such a resetting and long-term prospects: in particular, it is up to Russia to behave with the former USSR republics in a “normal” and soft-power way – trade, investments, language, culture – rather than trying to restore imperial links through military and economic pressures and threats that contradict the spirit and the letter of the OSCE