

Vienna Conference Discusses Future of EU-Russian Relationship

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Vienna, Austria - The future of the Russian-European Union relationship was the subject of a discussion attended by approximately 120 guests.

“The Imperative of an EU-Russia Strategic Reset” was organized by UPF-Austria on Feb. 26, 2015, in cooperation with the International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES).

For several years UPF has tried to encourage dialogue between the European Union, Europe, Russia and the rest of Eurasia through a series of conferences. The first took place in April 2012 in Moscow and was titled “Peace and Security in Multicultural Societies.” This was followed in October 2012 by “Europe and Russia—Partners in a Globalized World” in Vienna, and in December 2013 by “Eurasia and Europe: Cooperating for a Culture of Peace and Human Development” in Paris. More recently, a conference entitled “Eurasia-Europe Dialogue for Peace” took place in December 2014 in Chisinau, the capital of the former Soviet republic of Moldova.

Peter Haider, president of UPF-Austria, welcomed the guests to the latest conference and reminded them that Russia and Europe geographically are neighbors and have been connected in various fields for many centuries. Recent disagreements in relation to Ukraine should be seen as a challenge to restart a spirit of showing interest in each other based on a relationship of trust.

Professor Anis Bajrektarevic of IFIMES Vienna, who organized the speakers and masterminded the topic, asked the following question: “The Lonely Superpower [the United States] vs. the Bear of Permafrost [Russia], with the World’s Last Cosmopolitan [European Union] in between. Is the ongoing calamity at the eastern flank of the EU a conflict, recalibration, imperialism in a hurry, exaggerated anti-Russian xenophobia or a scream of confrontational nostalgia?”

Just 20 years ago, the distance between Moscow and NATO troops stationed in Central Europe (e.g., Berlin) was over 1,600 kilometers (close to 1,000 miles). Today the distance from St. Petersburg to NATO troops is only 120 kilometers (less than 75 miles). “Is this the time to sleep or to worry?” Professor Bajrektarevic asked. He also related that recently Richard N. Haass, the president of the US Council on Foreign Relations, said, “Russia no longer represents anything that appeals to anyone other than ethnic Russians, and as a result, the geopolitical troubles it can cause will remain on Europe’s periphery, without touching the continent’s core.” Professor Bajrektarevic asked, “Is that really so?”

He asked: Is there any intellectually appealing call originating from Russia? A lonely champion of antifascism and (pan-)Slavism? Have Slavism, identity, secularism and antifascism been abandoned in Eastern Europe—confused perhaps by mixed signals from austerity-tired Southern Europe and über-performing Central Europe?

For the EU, Ukraine is (though important) an item of the European Neighborhood Policy, and for the US it is a geopolitical pivot. For Russia it is all this plus emotional attachment. Without Ukraine, how much is Russia Christian and European? Is the EU a subject or a hostage (like Ukraine) of the mega-geopolitical drama whose main play is in the Asian-Pacific Theater? What is the objective here—the final goal-score (territorial gain) or the altered style of the game (new emotional charge added to international relations)? “What is a road map, an exit, a future perspective—relaxation or escalation? Hegemony, hege-money, or a global (post-dollar) honeymoon?” Professor Bajrektarevic asked.

H.E. Anwar S. Azimov, a former Russian ambassador to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and currently ambassador-at-large in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, gave a detailed insight into the changing EU-Russia relationship from a Russian perspective. He asserted that the European Union and Russia cannot possibly live without each other; thus, establishing a common space is a cardinal strategic task. Russia and the EU are natural allies, besides being strategic partners. This is indeed true, as more than 50 percent of Russia's trade occurs with the EU, Ambassador Azimov said.

Then he turned his focus on the Ukrainian crisis, giving Russia's views on the issue. Russia, he says, was never against Ukraine joining the European Union, but it was against letting this move harm the economic and defense-related interests of Russia. He added that Russia in this case is simply a mediator in the conflict which sympathizes with the people of southeast Ukraine. As for Crimea, he said, the referendum and the accession that followed were just a matter of historical justice. At the same time, he called Western sanctions against Russia counterproductive and emphasized the willingness of his country to generously participate in funding for the reconstruction of the post-conflict Ukraine. He praised the balanced efforts of OSCE officials, who he said played a crucial and objective role in the monitoring process of peace; a role that the EU was not and still is not ready to play.

An alternative point of view was presented by Dr. Walter Schwimmer, former secretary general of the Council of Europe, who quoted from the Declaration of Minsk of February 12, 2015: "Leaders remain committed to the vision of a joint humanitarian and economic space from the Atlantic to the Pacific based upon full respect for international law and the OSCE principles." He declared at the very beginning of his speech that although his personal vision has always been that Russia would become a part of Europe, he believes that Russia has not yet finished its transformation after the communist dictatorship. He said that, aside from any strategic and geopolitical ideas, Russia is an indispensable part of European culture and identity. Hence, when he made the provocative and pioneering hypothesis of Russia applying for EU membership, he argued that the EU would have no grounds to reject it.

What the two men jointly agreed upon is that the European Union and Russia have not yet found a coherent model for dealing with each other constructively and that this fact is a loss for both parties.

The panel discussion was followed by a buffet which included Russian food. Lively interactions among the guests continued.