

# CONFERENCE REPORT

## 9th German-Nordic-Baltic Forum

### Foreign Policy in Times of Post-factual Communication



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Hamburg, 18-19 May 2017

The 9<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the German-Nordic-Baltic Forum took place in Hamburg on 18 and 19 May 2017, was organized by the Institut für Europäische Politik in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office and with support from the University of Hamburg. 42 experts from academia and think tanks as well as planners from national ministries and embassies convened in Hamburg to offer their perspective on “Foreign Policy in Times of Post-factual Communication”. Since its establishment in 2008, the annual Forum has aimed at providing a platform for debates between scholars and practitioners, being held in one of the represented countries on a rotating basis.

During the two days of the Forum participants focused on the following points of discussion:

- Digital Diplomacy – The Transformation of Foreign Policy?
- Hybrid Threats – Societal Resilience, Strategic Communication and the Russian Factor
- Fake News and Democracy (public opinion)
- Bratislava, Rome and beyond: Future EU-27

This year's Forum began with the traditional welcoming remarks offered by Professor Gabriele Clemens, Holder of Jean Monnet Chair for European Integration History and European Studies of the University of Hamburg, and Professor Mathias Jopp, Director of the Institut für Europäische Politik.

Following the opening remarks, the Forum continued with the **first panel** discussion, on the topic of **"Digital Diplomacy – the Transformation of Foreign Policy?"**. The discussion focused on the aspects of how social media and diplomacy fit together and how these new instruments enhance the toolkit of traditional diplomacy. All of the discussants agreed that the use of digital diplomacy, however, could never fully replace the tools of classic diplomacy, such as negotiations and searching for the right entry points between the respective negotiating parties. Digital diplomacy, though still lacking a coherent and concise definition, was said to amount to more than just making use of social media. One of the new aspects of diplomacy was said to be an increased interconnectivity, not only between diplomats but also between other groups, such as civil society actors. In digital diplomacy, diplomats receive a direct and timely response when they make use of new communication tools. In this respect, engaging with groups that do not necessarily share the same opinion was named as one of the biggest challenges. The discussants further agreed that digitalization offered great tools and fora to put views forward, yet actors would have no other choice but to earnestly participate in this process. It would thus be necessary to invest more in infrastructure, especially in establishing networks, but also in skills related to the effective use of new communication tools such as Twitter and Facebook. Moreover, the panelists saw the increased speed, the amount of information to be processed, as well as the danger of influencing people's opinions as major challenges.

The **second panel** dealt with **"Hybrid Threats – Societal Resilience, Strategic Communication and the Russian Factor"**. The discussants argued about how to address hybrid threats, which posed a danger that could come from any direction. Hybrid threats included the use of non-military means to achieve a strategic goal. With regard to Russia, hybrid threats were identified as attempts to address Russian-speaking minorities, especially in the Baltic states, and to create ambiguity. The discussants agreed on the importance of the issue, and on the need for stronger coordination on the European level in order to prepare for hybrid threats. To this end, a stronger European framework in the area of strategic communication was needed. The Baltic states further stressed the need to sufficiently explain the relevance of the issue to Western European countries.

One major issue in this respect was how to reach Russian minorities and to make sure that Russia would lose its influence, especially when it came to the propagation of fake news. One solution the discussants found to be of great importance was the establishment of more quality, Russian-speaking TV, which offered not only political, but also sufficiently attractive content. The discussants all agreed on the strengthening of societal resilience as an overarching, long-term goal. In this respect, restoring trust in authorities as well as in political institutions and politicians themselves was mentioned as being crucial. Confidence in legitimate sources should be stronger than trust in those that were not credible. To achieve this, people needed to be equipped with the skills to handle today's communication practices. Additionally, civil society actors should learn from each other; states should provide funds in order to establish networks for stronger coordination. All participants further agreed that blocking Russian TV channels, for instance, would not be a solution, as this would go against the rule of law.

Throughout the **third panel "Fake News and Democracy (public opinion)"**, panelists discussed the extent to which fake news threatened democracies. In this regard, the

discussants stressed that fake news as such was not necessarily a new phenomenon, as demonstrated for instance by the existence of manipulated photographs from the past. One of the biggest future challenges would be to distinguish between real news and fake news, especially since the speed as well as the reach of fake news has dramatically increased with the use of social media. Next to social media, instruments used especially by Russia included bots, increased hacking activities and 'big data' analysis. In the latter case, new business models were developed, for instance by Cambridge Analytica, which offered to target a specific group and persuade them to vote for certain parties. In this respect, democracies were said to be vulnerable. The panelists agreed that compliance in social networks as well as legal answers would have to be discussed. The use of mere counterpropaganda was not seen as an effective solution, as this approach could also backfire.

During the discussion with the audience attention was drawn to fake news, or "fabricated disinformation", being produced within the European Union. Thus, it would also be important to broaden the scope and also talk about fake news within European structures. Reacting to the question on how to deal with the issue of fake news and wrong information during election campaigns, the discussants agreed that de-masking statements made by parties and demonstrating that complex issues could not be solved with easy solutions would be of great importance. Concluding the panel, the discussants again stressed the importance of establishing a code of conduct for EU governments to fight against the spread of fake news.

The **fourth and last panel** on "*Bratislava, Rome and beyond: Future EU-27*" included various different aspects of European integration, namely internal and external communication, defense policies, the future of the European integration process, the establishment of a 'core Europe', as well as the impact of Brexit and the election in France.

With regard to communication, the Rome Declaration was named as a move in the right direction; however, the effectiveness in terms of who reads such declarations was questioned. Generally, a great deal of information about the EU could be found by citizens, yet, a lot of this information was rather technical in nature. Politicians as well as other actors talked too much about current problems, and should focus more on the fields in which the EU has a comparative advantage. Accordingly, the effectiveness of communication among EU members depended on the degree of listening and trying to understand the different positions. The idea of a code of conduct for communication was welcomed; however, a code of conduct should not take the form of yet another long and technical paper.

Regarding European defense issues, a lot of ideas have been brought forward, especially with the European Defense Action Plan. Implementing these ideas would now be the next challenging step. In this respect, geographical differences in terms of the priorities of certain issues, such as migration for Southern European countries and the Russian factor for Nordic and Baltic countries, should be taken into account. Due to the different prioritization of issues, the question of resources devoted to each of the topics would arise. Reaching an agreement on budget issues when EU countries were not cooperating could be challenging, especially with regard to the Visegrad countries who declared their own agenda.

Concerning the future of European integration, it was now the task of the Member States to move and to decide which one of the five scenarios laid out in the Commission's White paper on the future of Europe to put into practice. In terms of how the Union should

proceed, 'multi-speed Europe' was said to be more than just an instrument; the more the EU moved forward, the more it would shape its character. This was also a question of what kind of differentiation the Member States were ready to develop and to what extent this would require a change of the Treaties. As an example, the Eurozone was mentioned as many instruments, such as the European Financial Stability Facility or the European Stability Mechanism, were already incorporated outside the framework of the Treaties. In this respect, it was discussed how a deepening of the Eurozone would affect other Member States that would not form a part of it, especially as the Eurozone countries would always maintain a qualified majority. The German position in regard to this question was clear: The Eurozone should not be an exclusive club talking about different policy areas. In a broader sense this would mean that a 'core Europe' as such would not exist since Member States needed to always find a new consensus depending on the policy area. As a consequence, differentiated integration should be open for every Member State at all times.

In the discussion, the high-level experts and academics from the Nordics, Baltics and Germany agreed that it was necessary to clarify the Brexit terms first, before a new treaty could be closed, while there was a dependency between the financial agreement and the offer of a free trade agreement. It also became clear that the Nordic, and particularly the Baltic, states expected a German-French-led initiative for the further development of the EU-27.

The Forum concluded that overall digitalization and the use of new means of communication were things that every actor should actively engage in, since they would form an inevitable part of today's policy making. Furthermore, a consistent thread throughout all the discussions was that of European values. These values should be at the core of the discussion on challenges that the European Union is facing. The participants encouraged improved internal communication and coordination as means in order to raise awareness of fake news and how to educate people in this regard.