

Are we family?

At Aspen Germany's 40th anniversary bash, Victoria Nuland hails the transatlantic partnership

Victoria Nuland's voice doesn't normally reach many European ears. Her position, though enormously important, lies beneath most Germans' recognition threshold. In February, however, she burst onto the front pages of newspapers and websites here with a remark on Ukraine policy that someone eavesdropped on: "F*** the EU!"



That was one good reason for her audience to listen attentively when the US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs spoke at a conference in Berlin in October (left) marking the Aspen Institute's 40th anniversary in Germany.

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Her keynote speech on "The Transatlantic Partnership at Stake" reflected on ties between Europe and the US in the framework of the conference's theme: "Do we still need each other?" "Now more than ever," was her answer, later she added: "We are family."

It wasn't long ago that John Kornblum, the former US Ambassador in Germany, raised eyebrows with the remark that "nations have no friends, only interests." In Berlin it was above all the Americans who assured the Europeans they were still needed, even "desperately," according to Chris Painter, the US State Department's Coordinator for Cyber Issues.

Those common interests were amply on display. "[Russian President Vladimir] Putin is challenging us. He is forcing us to decide once again who we are, what we want and what our contribution to our world order in the 21st century should be," said Norbert Röttgen, Chairman of the Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee.

"In Brussels there is a monument to the first founder of NATO and the European Union – that is Josef Stalin," said Elmar Brok, Chairman of the Euro-

pean Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs. "Putin is on the way to getting a second monument."

And Alexander Vershow, Deputy Secretary General of NATO, believes that "Putin has thrown away the international rule book."

Jürgen Hardt, the German government's Coordinator of Transatlantic Cooperation, went so far as to speculate that, in case of a Russian invasion of the Baltics, the Bundestag would approve German military involvement, even if "the public might be opposed to it." He added that he does not believe that Russia currently threatens NATO, however.

But disputes belong to family life too, and the German participants didn't hold back their criticism. Before and during the Iraq War the US side "lied and deceived," said Brok. That was the germ for subsequent mistrust. He said the consequence of that intervention in Iraq now exists under the name Islamic State. Turning to the NSA surveillance scandal that soured ties earlier this year, Brok said he believed the US would again find a balance between security and freedom, because the US is a democracy. "And

that's what distinguishes it from our neighbors to the east," he added.

Former German Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück, now chairman of the German-American Parliamentary Group of the Bundestag, appeared resentful at what he called a lack of (US) transparency in the TTIP negotiations. That made it difficult for German advocates of the planned free trade agreement to persuade the public of its advantages, he said.

For Eckart von Klaeden, a former junior minister in Angela Merkel's Chancellery and now head of external affairs at carmaker Daimler, the advantages are obvious. He reminded participants that in the early 1960s, France (followed by Germany) imposed a "chicken tax" on American poultry and that Washington retaliated in 1963 with a tax on potato starch, brandy, dextrin and light trucks. That hit Volkswagen and remains in effect. The German chancellor at the time, Konrad Adenauer, later said that half his correspondence with President Kennedy over Berlin, Laos and the Bay of Pigs Invasion was about chickens. Today, comparing prices for a Mercedes or an iPhone 6 in Germany and the US is an enlightening exercise, Klaeden said.

Italy's Deputy Minister of Economic Development, Carlo Calenda, made it easy for himself. Primarily "a lot of anti-Americanism" was behind public resistance to TTIP in Europe, he said. But that makes a debate over its content even more necessary.

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