



EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

Contact Group on Russia-West Relations

11-12 October 2018

Note from the 6th Meeting of the Group¹

On 11th and 12th October 2018 the European Leadership Network convened the Contact Group on Russia-West Relations in Rome, Italy for its sixth meeting. The ELN wishes to thank Contact Group member Nathalie Tocci and her colleagues at the Istituto Affari Internazionali for their generous support in organizing this meeting.

The Contact Group brings together individuals who can impact national and European policymaking and public debate and who shape or manage the consequences of present developments in Russia – West relations. Its aims are bridge building, networking, better mutual understanding and the generation of ideas for Europe's future, including on overcoming the differences between Russia and the West.

This note summarises the main themes of the discussion.

What does Europe's new political climate imply for Russia – West relations?: Insights from Italy.

For this opening dialogue an official from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was invited to join the discussion and offer some introductory remarks. He gave an insightful overview of the shifting political landscape in Italy, and what this might imply for the country's relationship with Russia. The official outlined how certain elements within Italy's political system are pushing for a more lenient stance towards Russia, and admitted that Italy's position is influenced by the fact that it is not a neighbour of Russia's and it has economic and energy interests with Russia. In particular, he highlighted that some within the Italian political class express understanding for the Russian sphere of interest narrative, e.g. with regards to Ukraine and Georgia. This was met by pushback from some members of the group, who wondered if Italy did not recognise the legitimate interests of Ukraine and Georgia. At the same time, he

¹ This note was prepared by the European Leadership Network and does not necessarily represent the views of any individual Contact Group member or any member of the European Leadership Network.

predicted that despite the “pro-Russian” and anti-sanction rhetoric the issue is not seen as crucial enough in Rome to challenge the rest of the EU or US/NATO over it.

The situation in Europe and its consequences for Russia-rest of Europe relations

More than one participant noted that Russia is rarely at the centre of European politics now - the EU-Russia relationship is overshadowed by other issues, including Brexit, internal polarization of the EU and the relationship with the US. Thinking in terms of “pro-Russian” and “anti-Russian” camps can lead to oversimplified conclusions: one needs to look inside each EU country to identify the interests and positions of specific groups. Also, given other challenges, there may be not enough push to change the EU policy on Russia in whichever direction: tougher or “softer” approach.

The group discussed the current political climate in the United Kingdom, and how relations with Russia have been affected by Brexit and the Skripal case. British politics have become increasingly polarised. The worst case scenario for the United Kingdom is one in which the government finds itself paralysed on the domestic front and isolated in international affairs. Interestingly, in this volatile climate, the one thing that has had a unifying effect is the position towards Russia. There is now full acceptance across the UK polity that the Russian intelligence services were behind the assassination attempts on Mr Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury. This is already having an impact on policy, including in support for a British ‘Magnitsky amendment’.

The group discussed the prospects of another ‘reset’ in the Russia-West relationship, with several non-Russian members arguing that such an initiative is neither feasible nor desirable at present. Some members suggested that what is needed is a fundamental rethink on all levels, which may not lead to a ‘reset’, but rather to a more distanced relationship. There was broad agreement that a key priority in this situation is the gradual rebuilding of trust between Russia and the West.

The resilience of Russian political system: how well understood is Russia?

There were striking similarities in the assessments of the Russian members of the group in this session. There was a broad consensus that the basics of the political regime in Russia is stable, not just in the immediate term but over the several years to come. There seems, however, to be a growing sentiment in the population that things are going in the wrong direction (pension reform protests, regional elections results), and President Putin is no longer immune from criticism. There’s also growing sentiment that there is a limit to how far foreign and security policy can be pushed at the expense of domestic issues and the economy.

In particular, one Russian member of the group noted that the Russian public is tired of the focus on Syria and Ukraine and there is little appetite for new “external adventures”

- even if some non-Russian Group members worried about the Azov Sea situation and Ukrainian election cycle. Compromise with the West on security issues, especially on Donbass, is unlikely, as this can be perceived as humiliation. Accordingly, a key question going forward is how President Putin will sustain support for Russia's foreign policy.

It was added that the rapprochement with the West is generally seen in Russia as having failed, and that the West has failed to make good on its commitments to Russia. This broad public understanding gives some in the foreign policy establishment an argument for 'strategic patience': Russia needs to wait for Western unity to collapse. This being said, the way the Skripal case has played out, internationally as well as in the media, seems to have been much to Russia's disadvantage.

Reversing West - Russia mutual alienation in the security sphere

As a case study, the Group considered the ELN's ongoing Track 2.0 dialogue between former military, officials and experts on NATO-Russia deterrence stability. The challenges included: the dominant role of history and divergent views about the past, which make discussions about the present and future difficult; limited ability of all participants to move beyond their own entrenched positions; problems with engaging current decision-makers in any Track 1.5 settings, and difficulty to reach the governments and international organizations with the results of discussions and influence them.

Several members of the group, both from Russia and the rest of Europe, made the case that the two sides clearly have competing interests as well as competing worldviews, so expectations need to be modest. What can be done is reducing the risks of accidental conflict and building mutual trust. Several members of the group advised against 'focusing only on areas of agreement' between the two sides, noting that this is a slippery slope towards 'business as usual'. The differences between Russia and the rest of Europe today are fundamental, and it is important that they be addressed. The group agreed that for this to be possible, it is essential that channels of communications remain open.

Future of the Group

The group was delighted to welcome a new participant: **Riina Kaljurand**, adviser to the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who is joining the group in Merle Maigre's place. Group members are also encouraged to suggest additional participants for the next meeting, particularly from the European and national parliaments.

There was wide enthusiasm for the next meeting of the Contact Group planned in 2019. The Group agreed to next reconvene in **St Petersburg, Russia on April 25-26, 2019.**

The ELN has reached out to **St. Petersburg State University** for cooperation in organising the meeting, and will keep the group updated on the progress.

Since the original funding for the Contact Group only covers this one further meeting, the group discussed the value of the group and whether to apply for **further funding** for 2019-2020 (which would also allow the Group to be enlarged). All participants agreed that the Group was valuable both to their own work and to the wider debate on Russia-West relations.

The ELN will prepare a bid to the Carnegie Corporation in December-January framework which, if successful, would allow the group to continue operating. **Based on the initial informal outreach, the Carnegie Corporation seems interested in the continuation of our activities.** Based on the discussions in Rome, we will report that all Contact Group members assess positively the value of the meetings and would continue their engagement. Please let us know if it is not the case.

We also invite Group members to bring to our attention any additional sources of funding or sponsors, and any possible additional members (especially from Germany).

The Group also discussed the possibility of issuing a public statement in support of Russia-West dialogue based on the draft provided by Adam Thomson. During the discussion several comments were offered. **Revised version of the statement will be distributed soon to all Group members.**

Contact: Axel Hellman, ELN Policy Fellow, axelh@europeanleadershipnetwork.org.