



EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

Contact Group on Russia-West Relations

25-26 April 2019

Note from the 7th Meeting of the Group¹

On 25th and 26th April 2019 the European Leadership Network convened the Contact Group on Russia-West Relations in St. Petersburg, Russia for its seventh meeting. The ELN wishes to thank the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) for their generous support in organising 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.

The meeting in St. Petersburg covered topics of central importance to the current state of relations between Russia and the West, including the situation with regard to the INF Treaty, the stabilisation of Russia-NATO relations, and both sides' geostrategic views of each other. While views differed, the value of vigorous and open discussion was reaffirmed. This note summarises the main themes of the discussion.

Ethics of moral conviction versus ethics of responsibility: the new relevance of the old political dilemma for Russia-West relations

For this opening dialogue a leading Russian academic was invited to join the discussion and offer some introductory remarks. Rooting his remarks in Max Weber's classic opposition of ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility, our guest speaker reflected on the meaning and importance of this dilemma and applied it to the current state of play in Russia-West relations and what it may imply in terms of policies and decision-making.

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.

The remarks led to a discussion among participants over the notion of shared responsibility for the current crisis in Russia-West relations. The Group discussed how the end of the Cold War had ushered in great expectations for the future of the relationship – expectations that have proved mutually disappointing. As often, Russian members pointed to issues like NATO's enlargement and the alliance's bombing of Kosovo as key reasons for the lost opportunity, whereas Western members of the Group suggested that Russia has proved unwilling to join mutual security structures and adhere to international norms. All members nonetheless agreed that the diminishing sense of shared responsibility for the dire state of the relationship is a troubling development which must be addressed.

Participants also agreed on the topic's direct relevance for the Contact Group as a forum for fostering dialogue and exchange and discuss shared responsibilities.

The demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty: implications for Russia-West relations

The 1987 INF treaty prohibits the US and Russia from possessing, testing and deploying ground-launched cruise and ballistic missiles (conventional or nuclear) of ranges between 500 and 5500 kilometres. It was the first agreement to eliminate an entire category of nuclear weapons, a category that was particularly destabilising due to short flight times and unpredictable flight patterns. It was also politically significant as it ushered in improved Soviet-West relations.

Russia and the US (supported by NATO member states) each accuse the other side of violating the treaty, and numerous rounds of discussion have failed to provide a breakthrough. On 2 February, the US announced its withdrawal and suspended its treaty obligations, meaning that on 2 August the treaty will cease to be in force. The demise of the INF treaty is another development in the crumbling of the Russia-US arms control architecture, with repercussions for potential extension of the last of the strategic arms control instrument in force, New START, which must be extended or expire in 2021.

One Russian member of the Group laid out the Russian perspective, highlighting that from the Kremlin's point of view the treaty was a Cold War relic that should be multilateralised but that the Russian leadership has done what it could to save the treaty, and that in the current climate, there is little left that it could do. Another meeting participant added that Russians tend to view the treaty as tilted against Russia, as the US has an advantage in air- and sea-launched cruise missiles not covered by the INF's scope. To many in the Russian security policy establishment, the "unfair" INF treaty has come to be seen as a sign of Gorbachev's weakness.

The US perspective, meanwhile, is quite different: there is a widespread assumption in Washington policy circles that the Russian objective has been to keep the United States constrained by the INF treaty, while Russia itself was building and deploying non-compliant precision strike missiles that could target vital European strategic and economic architecture (a Russian member of the Group pointed out that Russia never has admitted to possession of any non-compliant capabilities).

There was broad consensus among Group members that the INF treaty is in an extremely dire state with little prospect for improvement. It was strange that the international community was so calm about this. A key question is whether Europe can devise a framework for negotiations to try to preserve the benefits of the INF.

How can the Russia-NATO relationship be stabilised?

To a large extent, this session focused on the breakdown of communication lines between Russia and NATO, on military as well as on political levels. As the discussions highlighted, the current dynamics in the Russia-NATO relationship are symptomatic of broader problems in the Russia-West relationship.

It was noted that there are judgements, particularly on the NATO side, that inhibit NATO-Russia dialogue. This includes the belief that more systematic dialogue with Russia would reward Russian bad behaviour over Ukraine; that dialogue with Russia will threaten NATO unity (a belief that, as one member of the Group pointed out, ignores a powerful lesson from the Cold War – through which NATO had to stay united *because* it was talking to the Soviet Union); and that talking to the adversary confers undeserved status on the adversary or signals a softening of approach.

Several participants linked the discussion back to the one of the previous evening, noting that we need a sense of shared responsibility in the Russia-West relationship, and that we cannot get to that point unless we have a shared understanding. For this, dialogue is essential.

Russia and the rest of Europe: what are their geostrategic views of each other?

This session ties into an ongoing ELN project related to the Contact Group, which will lead to the publication of two policy briefs: one by Group member Sergey Utkin; and one by ELN Policy Fellow Axel Hellman. The discussion centered on whether there is a “European” view of Russia; whether there is a Russian view of “Europe”; and how those views may inform the respective sides’ strategy and policy towards one another.

One Group member posed the question of what Russia wants from the West, noting that from the Western side, there was a genuine interest in improving relations but that Russia seems intent on making the West its adversary. One Russian member noted that Russia

principally wants the West to “stop the pressure” against Russia, and noted that from the Kremlin’s perspective, Russia has been abused. It must now fight to keep its position and ability play its deserved role, as an important power, in shaping European security.

The discussion strongly indicated that the Russia-West relationship has reached a stalemate, with limited opportunity for new thinking or initiatives from either side. There was potential for tension or destabilisation of Europe-Russia relations stemming from countries on Russia’s borders. It also became clear that the perceived threat from Russia does not weigh as heavily on the minds of European citizens as other issues, such as terrorism, migration, the risk of an economic crisis or the spread of nationalism. It also became clear that the EU is divided when it comes to Russia (something which was also highlighted at the Group’s Rome meeting).

Despite the current stalemate, some areas for limited cooperation were highlighted. These include multilateral diplomacy, in particular with respect to the Iran nuclear deal, the conflict in Syria (to some extent), Eurasia as an emerging area for economic and security cooperation, and some continued trade despite the sanctions. The Group also highlighted the importance of societal exchange between Russia and the rest of Europe.

Side event at Saint Petersburg State University

This Contact Group meeting had a new component: a side event at Saint Petersburg State University. This meeting, which was public, brought together members of the Group with faculty from the University’s School of International Relations. The discussion focused on how best to promote dialogue between Russia and the West, and to avoid or correct mutual misperceptions. The ELN wishes to thank the University and faculty for its warm welcome, and RIAC for their help in organising the event.

Future of the Group

At our last gathering in Rome, all participants agreed that the Group was valuable both to their own work and to the wider debate on Russia-West relations. It was therefore decided that the ELN would bid to the Carnegie Corporation for continued funding of the Group. This bid appears likely to be successful, in which case the Group will continue to function through at least 2020. This prospect makes it possible to think of the Group as a more permanent framework and to consider gradually and organically expanding it.

Ideas were discussed for formalising the Group as a network of the ELN, which would allow it to become more operational and give members the opportunity to better connect with the ELN’s senior and junior networks. Participants also discussed how to raise the public profile of the Group and have a policy impact.

At the Group's meeting in Rome in October 2018, a draft public statement in support of Russia-West dialogue was considered and comments were offered. In St. Petersburg, the group revisited the statement and confirmed an interest in publishing a revised version of it. This will now be taken forward by email with Group Members.

Separately, some participants expressed interest in engaging the new European Parliament and Commission on the case for a fresh European Union approach to Russia and/or for regular meetings between Group members and relevant senior officials. Further steps were not ruled out, including a possible Group document for decisionmakers.

The group was delighted to welcome a new participant: **Mireille Clapot**, member of the French Parliament (LREM) and Vice President of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Another new member, **Inga Yumasheva**, member of the Russian parliament, was unfortunately unable to attend. Group members are encouraged to suggest additional participants for the next meeting, particularly from the European and national parliaments and with attention to increased geographical diversity.

There was wide enthusiasm for the next meeting of the Contact Group planned in the autumn of 2019. The meeting will likely take place in **Prague, Czech Republic in October 2019**.

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