



EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

Contact Group on Russia-West Relations

24-25 October 2019

Note from the 8th Meeting of the Group¹

On 24th and 25th October 2019 the European Leadership Network convened the Contact Group on Russia-West Relations in Prague, Czech Republic, for its eight meeting. The ELN wishes to thank the Institute of International Relations Prague 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 will 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 Group was delighted to welcome three new participants: **Rihards Kols**, member of the Latvian Parliament and Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee; **Selin Sayek Böke**, Member of the Turkish Parliament; and **Mira Milosevich-Juaristi**, Senior Analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute in Spain.

The meeting in Prague covered topics of central importance to the current state of relations between Russia and the West, including prospects for selective engagement between the EU and Russia, mutual concerns over interference in domestic politics, and the Central European outlook on the current state of Russia-West relations. While views differed, sometimes strongly, the value of vigorous and open discussion was reaffirmed. This note summarises the main themes of the discussion.

The Czech vantage point: current Euro-Atlantic dynamics as viewed in Prague

To take advantage of its Czech vantage point, the Group considered Czech and Central European perspectives on international affairs in general and Russia-West relations in

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.

particular. For its opening discussion the Group was joined by senior Czech colleagues, who provided introductory remarks.

As a member of the Visegrad Group, the Czech Republic's relationships with Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are particularly important: our guests described the Visegrad Group as the Czechs' "comfort zone." That does not mean that Visegrad members are always in agreement: for example, the Czech Republic disagrees with Poland over foreign missiles on its territory and over Western sanctions on Russia. One guest also highlighted internal disagreements in the Czech foreign policy debate. While anti-Russian sentiments are common among older generations who experienced the Soviet 1968 invasion, this is gradually changing as these memories are fading. The Czech security services still consider Russia to be amongst the most serious security challenges facing the country, while the broader population is more concerned over terrorism. It was also underlined that there is no Czech consensus over the current situation in Ukraine.

In terms of the EU, the Czech public was described as the most Eurosceptic on the continent. As a result, Brexit is seen with regret, as the United Kingdom has often attempted to dilute European integration.

The Central European vantage point: what role do Central European states play in Russia-West relations?

If our first discussion was mainly about Czech debates, our next session was about the region's role in Russia-West relations. As the Group's previous meetings have primarily taken place in Russia and Western Europe, our Prague location offered an opportunity to broaden the Group's debate. Members agreed that this was timely and important, not least because another member of the Visegrad Group, Poland, wields significant influence over NATO policy when it comes to Russia. One member observed that for Poland, most foreign policy debates, such as over EU sanctions or relations with the US, are in fact over policy towards Russia by proxy.

We considered whether the Visegrad Group could become a real power in the EU on Russia. Russia sees at least Poland and the Baltic republics as the main European obstacles on the road to better relations with the United States. Without a thaw in Central European relations with Moscow, Russia-West rapprochement seems unlikely. On the one hand it is "impossible" for Russia to take Poland as a partner – relations are frozen. On the other hand, there is a perception that Russia treats Central European partners less as partners and more as objects for influencing NATO. Yet, whatever they may think, neither side can afford the time required for 'strategic patience'. So what steps could be taken by each side to overcome the differences?

It was underlined that we should not see Central Europe as either monolithic or static. Different regional states are pursuing different strategies. And it is important to separate

rhetoric from actual policy. The Czech Republic is hedging in various directions. There were very differing approaches across the region on, for example, energy cooperation and different levels of concern about cyber threats and 'information war'. If Russia was pursuing decoupling between Western and Eastern Europe, this was mirrored by Central Europe's disengagement from Russia, fuelled by divisions inside and between EU member states and a failure to get the rest of the EU to take the region's concerns about Russia more seriously.

As for ways forward, one Russian participant suggested that new initiatives under Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (such as the prisoner swaps with Russia) might make possible a breakthrough in Russia-West relations. However, another member of the Group with good insights into Ukrainian politics strongly disagreed, noting that Zelensky's aim is not to improve relations with Moscow but to stabilise the situation in eastern Ukraine.

Points were made about the corrosive effects of poisonous rhetoric, for example by Hungary on Ukraine or in a different context by Russia about "fascism" in the Baltic republics. A Russian participant argued that Russia should mend fences with awkward Central European partners, not engaging the Visegrad Group as such but treating each member sensitively and constructively. Suggestions were made about working for deconfliction, promoting regional arms control, reducing tensions, supporting the initiative of President Sauli Niinisto of Finland, working on German proposals for strategic stability, and engaging Russia-West Track 2 processes. Central Europe should strengthen its voice in Brussels, by offering positive proposals on, for example, visa free travel and cooperation on climate policy.

Prospects for EU-Russia engagement

As the discussion took place against the backdrop of the formation of a new European Commission, participants discussed whether the EU could make better use of the "selective engagement" articulated in its five guiding principles for Russia policy. French President Emmanuel Macron's recent call for a new EU approach towards Russia was a central topic of the discussion.

A French member of the Group outlined President Macron's initiative and highlighted that it is principally rooted in the belief that Russia is a part of Europe and therefore needs to be a part of a European security architecture. It is also based upon the recognition that Russia and the West have mutual interests in several areas and need to work together to protect and advance those interests.

One member of the Group, highly critical of President Macron's initiative, saw it merely as the latest iteration of a long-standing and misguided Western tradition to announce "resets" with Moscow without acknowledging or addressing the fundamental drivers of

the disagreements in the relationship. Another participant suggested that Macron's initiative was neither as transformative nor as misguided as it had been portrayed; rather, it is perhaps best understood as an attempt to diffuse tensions in Russia-West relations and build a platform from which dialogue can be expanded in the interest of stability. This view was supported by another French member of the Group, who argued that France was mainly trying to convey a message to Russia of a willingness to talk.

Against this background, it was suggested that cooperative measures with Russia should focus on selected areas of genuinely mutual concern (as opposed to the EU picking only the areas it wants to talk about). One member of the Group suggested that an area for cooperation should be the security situation in Moldova. Another member suggested that the Iran nuclear deal, to which both the EU and Russia remain committed in spite of the US withdrawal, should be a strong candidate for selective engagement.

The Group specifically identified two topics for further discussion. First, the EU must explore the extent to which it is able to improve relations with Russia without signalling a return to "business as usual" while the annexation of Crimea and war in Ukraine are unsolved. Second, while there was broad support for the idea that dialogue with Russia is vital, participants agreed that "dialogue for the sake of dialogue" is neither a policy nor a strategy. The Group therefore noted the importance of finding objectives of dialogue.

Mutual concerns over interference in domestic politics

Mutual concerns over interference in domestic politics have long been a thorn in Russia-West relations. Russia has long argued that Western states are interfering in its domestic affairs by sponsoring non-governmental organisations critical of the Kremlin; Russia, meanwhile, has interfered in numerous democratic elections in Western states, including but not limited to France and the US. Concerns have grown sharply worse. Given this downward spiral, the Group set out to discuss the prospects for improving dialogue between the two sides and reduce the risks of confrontation. It turned out to be a particularly rich and useful discussion.

Members naturally compared respective allegations of interference and the consequences of the other's perceived behaviour. For instance, one participant noted how Russia specifically exploits the freedoms to which Western societies are attached, such as freedom of speech. Russian members of the Group felt that Western countries readily employ similar measures without facing the same criticism as Russia does. Several members of the Group did, however, agree that interference is one of the most toxic issues in contemporary Russia-West relations and as a result, it is a problem for both sides to address.

Accordingly, the Group considered categories for defining interference, and how to distinguish it from (legitimate) political influence. Distinctions between overt and covert

activity and between legal and illegal behaviour seemed useful. Moreover, and most importantly, members considered some ways forward by discussing recommendations for steps that might be taken to reduce the tensions in this area. While this discussion was inconclusive, it could provide an important steppingstone for further Group engagement on this topic.

Future of the Group

At the Contact Group meeting in Rome in October 2018, 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 should bid for continued funding of the Group. This bid has been successful, which allows the Group to function through at least 2020 while further funding is secured. This makes it possible to think of the Group as a more permanent network and to consider gradually and organically expanding it. Accordingly, the ELN is interested in ways to enable the Group to function as a network, to become more operational in policy terms and to better connect with the ELN's senior and younger generation networks.

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. When the Group reconvened in St. Petersburg in April 2019, participants revisited the statement and confirmed an interest in publishing a revised version of it. Ahead of the meeting in Prague, the statement was published on the ELN website. This marks the first time members of the Group have taken a public position and is therefore an important moment in the Group's short history.

In St. Petersburg, some participants separately expressed interest in engaging the new European Parliament and Commission on the case for a fresh European Union approach to Russia and for periodic meetings between Group members and relevant senior officials. The Group revisited this idea in Prague, and pending funding and availability, will aim to organise a Group delegation with a small number of participants to Brussels in the spring of 2020.

There was wide enthusiasm for the next meeting of the Contact Group planned in the spring of 2020. The meeting will take place in **Yerevan, Armenia** on **May 14-15**.

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