



EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

Contact Group on Russia-West Relations

28-29 May 2020

Note from the 9th Meeting of the Group¹

On 28th and 29th May 2020 the European Leadership Network convened the Contact Group on Russia-West Relations via Zoom for its ninth 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 two new participants: **Valentina Martinez**, the head of International Relations of the People's Party (PP) in Spain, and **Catherine West**, Labour Member of the UK's Parliament who currently undertakes the role of Shadow Minister for Europe and the Americas and joined the Group in Stephen Kinnock's place.

The virtual meeting covered topics of central importance to the current state of relations between Russia and the West, including the implications of the COVID-19 on institutional and international collaboration, the potential for unintended military escalation amid low levels of trust and lack of direct communication channels, and the prospects for improvement in EU-Russia relations, as envisaged in President Macron's initiative. This note summarises the main themes of the discussion.

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.

Follow up points

1. The next meeting is provisionally set for 15 – 16 October 2020. Whether this will be another virtual meeting or in-person remains to be seen. Group discussion about the pandemic was better able to identify and agree on the unpredictability of future events than on an expected trajectory for the crisis.
2. We will refresh the format and subject matter of the next meeting to tackle some new topics (for example, China's implications for EU-Russia relations) and to bring in appropriate external participants.
3. The Group remains interested in engaging Brussels and/or possibly Moscow on improved EU-Russia relations. To this end, the Group will develop an agreed, shared narrative for use with both sides. We will keep an open mind on dates for engaging Brussels/Moscow. These steps flow from the Group's conclusion that, although efforts are very unlikely to be transformative, it is still worthwhile to explore potential Russia-West openings and new areas of selective engagement (including post-COVID issues).
4. All Contact Group participants are invited to contribute to the ELN's current initiative to respond to the pandemic. This involves time-limited campaigning with ELN network colleagues over the coming months to achieve three specific, politically feasible, high impact policy outcomes that could help to change the international atmosphere for pandemic response.
5. We want to expand the Contact Group's membership so that it grows to become a network. Current members are accordingly kindly requested to propose potential new members by the start of September from parliaments, business or the media who are likely to become influential for Russia-West relations.

Lack of leadership in the fight against COVID-19

At a time when global leadership is of paramount importance, national responses to COVID-19 have been fragmented and uncoordinated. The United States has taken actions that undermined international efforts to battle the pandemic, leaving the international community without a traditional global leader. In Russia, President Putin has been largely absent from the fight against the pandemic, transferring responsibility for the management of the outbreak to local authorities. This lack of leadership was also evident in selected EU countries, particularly in Italy and the United Kingdom. The G20 has also been missing in action. In contrast, the handling of the crisis enhanced the leadership status of China in particular. Contact Group members agreed that the management of the pandemic reopened an old debate about the merits of authoritarianism versus democracy.

The erosion of trust in leadership has been accompanied by growing inequality, inter-elite rivalries, segregation and social polarisation. As regards government support to those affected by COVID-19, one European Group member pointed out that the pandemic exposed the stark contrast between the European social welfare system and the gig economy, or the sharing economy, of the United States. Recalling the revolutions of 1848, our guest speaker suggested that COVID-19 presents a ‘revolutionary’ challenge in terms of a radical expansion of the boundaries of the possible. The remarks led to a discussion about the policy and socio-economic implications of the pandemic. While some participants argued that the crisis is going to accelerate some trends, others suggested that the post-COVID-19 world will be marked by a complete *reversal* of existing trends.

Pandemic and Russia-West relations: an opportunity for change?

There was a general consensus among Group members that the pandemic is unlikely to bring about improvement in Russia-West relations. Preconditions and a lack of trust on both sides make even an agreement to talk unlikely and provide little basis from which to build improvement. The group discussion touched upon the recent call by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov for a mutual freeze of military exercises amid COVID-19, which was rejected by NATO. Several Group members considered the mutual reduction of military exercises as a worthwhile idea and suggested this proposal could have been followed by a NATO call upon Russia to participate in the modernisation of the Vienna Document 2011. There was a general agreement that neither Russia nor NATO seem to think that the risks of unintended escalation are very high and that they are therefore reluctant to make any concessions. Group members concluded that it was worthwhile to explore potential openings and new areas of selective engagement. While this would be unlikely to transform the current state of Russia-West relations, selective engagement would constitute a positive step towards security de-escalation, risk reduction and confidence building.

Russia and the EU: Can Macron’s Russia initiative translate into European policy?

Group members discussed the current state of EU-Russia relations and the progress – or lack thereof – in implementing Macron’s Russia initiative, almost a year since the proposal was unveiled. There was a general consensus among Group members that neither the EU nor Russia are satisfied with the state of their current relations. Yet, neither side seems to be able to make progress to untangle these challenges.

For Macron’s initiative to translate into European policy, an EU-wide discussion and backing will be needed. The logical next step, when the pandemic ends, would be to bring this initiative to the EU level. At the same time, there was a disagreement about the likelihood of German support for Macron’s efforts. Some Group members argued that in light of deepening

Franco-German cooperation, coupled with the upcoming German EU Council Presidency, Berlin might move Macron's proposal forward or, alternatively, relaunch this initiative in another form. Another Group member expressed scepticism about the possibility of reaching an EU-wide consensus on Russia, arguing that Germany will be reluctant to bring the discussion about Russia to the EU Council for fear of triggering a revision of sanctions. Instead, the next step should be taken by a smaller coalition of interested parties.

Scepticism about the initiative is evident in Russia, too. As one Russian participant pointed out, even though Russia viewed Macron's initiative as a positive development overall, there was a lack of trust in Macron finding an EU-wide consensus.

Group discussion also centred on potential openings and enablers of progress in EU-Russia relations. As was suggested, growing Chinese assertiveness and discomfort with the US leadership might push Russia and Europe together. Upcoming presidential elections in Lithuania and Poland could bring about some progress too. Addressing post-COVID-19 challenges in eastern and southern neighbourhoods, where EU's and Russia's interests meet, presents new opportunities for dialogue.

Saving the Open Skies Treaty (OST)

Group discussion also centred on the erosion of the global arms control regime – both nuclear and conventional. Given the recent announcement of a U.S. withdrawal from the OST, different ways in which the Treaty could be saved were considered. Even if the United States withdraws, Group members agreed that remaining in the Treaty is valuable for both Russia and European member states. First, the OST is one of the few venues that allows direct military-to-military cooperation and dialogue between Russia and NATO member states. Second, as one participant explained, Russia conducts the majority of its flights over Europe (and Canada) and not over the United States. One Group member explained that Russian officials worry that following the U.S. withdrawal, the European member states will continue to provide their NATO Ally with satellite imagery from Russia. To save the Treaty, stronger political will is needed. The Conference of State Parties, which is to take place within 30 to 60 days following the withdrawal announcement, provides an opportunity for countries to show readiness to compromise. [Added note: The Conference of State Parties to the Treaty [took place](#) on Monday 6th July 2020]

A concern was raised that the discussion about the OST is taking place in small expert communities, while the general public lacks awareness about the merits of the Treaty or the compliance concerns that were raised by both the United States and Russia. Group members stressed the need to translate existing knowledge and expertise into tangible practical messaging that can reach and resonate with voters and, in turn, influence policy making.

Future of the Group

All participants agreed that the Contact Group was valuable both to their own work and to the wider debate on Russia-West relations. There was noticeable enthusiasm for the next meeting of the Group, provisionally scheduled for 15 – 16 October 2020. Given the uncertainty around COVID-related developments, it is yet to be decided whether the next meeting will be held in person or virtually. Group members expressed interest in both a new subject of discussion and in rethinking the format and external participants to engage with. There was a general interest in broadening the group's debate by, for example, devoting more attention to China's growing assertiveness and its implications for EU-Russia relations.

Group members were encouraged to identify additional participants for the next meeting, particularly representatives of national parliaments, businesspersons and journalists who are likely to exert influence on developments in Russia-West relations in their respective countries.

The Group members expressed their continued interest in engaging the new European Parliament and Commission on the case for a fresh EU approach to Russia. This idea was first suggested during the 7th meeting in St Petersburg and later revisited in Prague. In addition to EU institutions, the possibility of engaging with representatives of NATO was put forward. One Group member stressed the importance of not only focusing on the audience, but of first agreeing on the message the Group delegation would want to deliver in Brussels. It was proposed to dedicate the coming six months to horizon scanning, in order to identify a particular policy area of collective interest, and a common message the Group would collectively want to convey in Brussels. If Macron's Russia initiative moves forward, one of the participants proposed to consider organising the next Group delegation to Moscow rather than Brussels.

The ELN permanent staff presented the ELN's emerging 'Go-Big' initiative and invited Contact Group members to join this effort. Backed by the ELN's core team of permanent staff, senior associate fellows, and members of the University Consortium, the aim of this initiative is to mobilise all the ELN's networks in order to persuade key capitals to take at least one positive step in the coming months on security de-escalation, risk reduction or confidence building that would create better international conditions for pandemic response.

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